

The Four Right Exertions

The four activities included in this set show how effort can be applied to developing skillful qualities in the mind. The basic formula runs as follows:

There is the case where a monk generates desire, endeavors, arouses persistence, upholds and exerts his intent:

- for the sake of the non-arising of evil, unskillful qualities that have not yet arisen...
- for the sake of the abandoning of evil, unskillful qualities that have arisen...
- for the sake of the arising of skillful qualities that have not yet arisen...(and)
- for the maintenance, non-confusion, increase, plenitude, development, and culmination of skillful qualities that have arisen.

These four aspects of effort are also termed guarding, abandoning, developing, and maintaining [§50 See original article cited at end of this excerpt]. All four play a necessary role in bringing the mind to Awakening, although in some cases they are simply four sides to a single process.

The abandoning of unskillful mental qualities can frequently be accomplished simply by focusing on the development of skillful ones, such as mindfulness. The same principle can also act in reverse: in the skillful eradication of unskillful qualities, the skillfulness of the eradication is in and of itself the development of mindful discernment.

As we will see when we deal with the seven factors for Awakening [II/G], the act of nourishing a factor for Awakening can in some cases simultaneously starve a hindrance, while the conscious starving of a hindrance can foster a factor for Awakening. Ultimately, though, right exertion requires more than simply abstaining from what is unskillful, for it must apply the basic factors of skillfulness — mindfulness and discernment — to gain an understanding of how even skillfulness can be transcended [§61].

Perhaps the most surprising element in right exertion is the role played by desire, which is usually associated with the craving that acts as a cause of suffering. We will treat this topic in more detail under the bases for success [II/D], and simply note here that the Buddha recognized that desire can be either skillful or unskillful, and that he freely admitted that skillful desire is a necessary factor in the path to the end of suffering and stress.

The most important point in developing right exertion is to realize that the effort to abandon unskillful qualities and to develop skillful qualities must be skillful itself. Unskillful efforts at eradicating unskillful states, even if well intended, can often exacerbate problems instead of solving them.

Treating hatred with hatred, for instance, is less effective than treating it with the kind of understanding developed in the second stage of frames-of-reference meditation [II/B], which sees into causes and effects, and learns how to manipulate causes properly so as to get the desired effects.

For this reason, the basic formula for right exertion includes, both implicitly and explicitly, other factors of the path to ensure that the effort is skillfully applied. Three of the qualities that activate the mind in these exertions — desire, persistence, and intent — are also members of the bases of power [II/D], where they function as dominant factors in the attainment of concentration.

The ability to discriminate between skillful and unskillful qualities, implicit in all of these exertions, requires a certain level of mindfulness and discernment. The skillful qualities that are mentioned most prominently as worthy of development are the seven factors for Awakening, which include mindfulness, analysis of mental qualities, and the factors of jhāna, all of which must be reinvested in the process of right exertion to bring it to higher levels of finesse.

Passage §51 gives an idea of right exertion's range of application by listing seven ways in which unskillful qualities can be abandoned: seeing, restraining, using, tolerating, avoiding, destroying, and developing. The passage is deliberately vague as to which types of unskillful qualities respond to which type of treatment, for this is a point that each meditator must discover in practice for him- or herself. This emphasis on personal exploration is crucial to the practice of right effort, for it encourages one to be sensitive to what can be discovered with one's own mindfulness and discernment.

The same point applies to the question of how much effort must be applied to the practice. The Buddha notes that some meditators will have to undergo painful and slow practice, while others will find that their practice is painful and quick, pleasant and slow, or pleasant and quick [§§84-85]. Thus each has to adjust the effort applied to the practice accordingly.

This need for differing levels of effort depends not only on the individual, but also on the situation. In some cases, simply watching an unskillful quality with equanimity will be enough to make it go away; in other cases, one has to exert a conscious effort to get rid of it [§§58-59].

Thus, through observation, one will realize that skillful effort has no room for doctrinaire approaches. The polar extremes of constant exertion to the point of exhaustion and its opposite, a knee-jerk fear of "efforting," are both misguided here, as is the seemingly "middle" way of moderation in all things.

The true middle way means tuning one's efforts to one's abilities and to the task at hand [§86]. In some cases, this entails an all-out effort; in others, simple watchfulness. The ability to sense what kind and what level of effort is appropriate in any given situation is an important element in developing the basic requirements for skill — mindfulness and discernment — by putting them to use.

We have already noted that right exertion is equivalent to the factor of ardency in frames-of-reference meditation [II/B].

In the first stage of that practice, right exertion functions by keeping the mind with its frame of reference and by warding off unskillful mental qualities that would make it abandon that frame.

In the second stage, the function of exertion becomes more refined: warding off the tendency to get involved with "what" is arising and passing away, and keeping the mind applied to its task of manipulating, observing, and mastering the **process** of origination and passing away as one steers the mind to the stillness of jhāna.

In the third stage, the function of exertion becomes finer yet, as it maintains a basic "empty" or radically phenomenological awareness of the frame of reference in order to bring the mind to the state of non-fashioning appropriate for the process of Awakening. The equipoise of this state — beyond the categories of effort or non-effort — explains the paradox expressed in §62, which states that the mind crosses the flood of rebirth by neither "pushing forward" nor "staying in place," an equipoise that embodies the ultimate skillfulness of right exertion in bringing the mind to a point beyond skill.

Implicit in this discussion of the effort involved in mastering skill to the point of its own transcendence is the fact that the goal of the practice is not an effort to return to a supposedly pure state of childlike awareness prior to social conditionings. Passage §61 makes this fact explicit.

According to Buddhist analysis, the state of a child's mind is one, not of purity, but of ignorance filled with the potential for many unskilled qualities. These qualities show themselves in seemingly innocent ways simply because the infant's intellectual and physical powers are weak. Once those powers are strengthened, the mind's potentials become manifest.

As one modern teacher has stated, the childlike mind is the source for the round of rebirth. If it were truly pure and fully aware, it would not be susceptible to unskillful social conditioning. Thus the way to purity lies, not in renouncing one's developed intellectual powers, but in developing those powers to higher levels of mastery and skill. This explains why right exertion is a necessary part of the practice.

Source: "Wings to Awakening: Part II", by Thanissaro Bhikkhu (Geoffrey DeGraff). *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/wings/part2.html> . ["The Four Right Exertions" was excerpted from the original article, cited above, by Alexander Peck.]

©1996 Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

The text of this page ("Wings to Awakening: Part II", by Thanissaro Bhikkhu) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/). To view a copy of the license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>. Documents linked from this page may be subject to other restrictions. Sixth revised edition, 2011. Transcribed from a file provided by the author. Last revised for Access to Insight on 30 November 2013.