

The Eightfold Path
The Sixth Factor: Right Effort

Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration are the factors of the path focused on our inner activities, what we do with our minds and hearts. This is distinct from the emphasis on verbal and physical activities in the three preceding factors: Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. Attention to and care with our outward actions prepare us to do the same for our inner, mental actions. What guides this care is the intention to avoid what causes harm and to engage in what is beneficial.

The Buddhist tradition often calls those activities that cause harm 'unskillful' and those that are beneficial 'skillful'. The use of these terms highlight that we can cultivate our actions to have greater benefit. Using the words skillful and unskillful avoids the moralistic judgments that 'good' and 'bad' often imply, and the absoluteness of 'right' and 'wrong'. Skillfulness suggests 'helpfulness'; things unskillful are not helpful. When one is walking the Eightfold Path, skillful activities are those that help us move closer to peace and freedom. Those that are unskillful take us in the other direction, toward suffering and servitude.

Distinguishing mental actions that are skillful from those that are not is at the heart of Right Effort. Here mental actions are the thoughts, impulses, feelings, and states that arise and persist dependent on our intentions and reactions. Only by recognizing whether or not these are helpful and beneficial can we usefully choose which thoughts, impulses, feelings or states to cultivate and which ones to not cultivate and where we want to put our efforts. In practicing Right Effort we exercise this choice to support the path of liberation.

Right Effort involves four different ways to apply our self. We can (1) prevent, (2) overcome, (3) arouse, or (3) maintain our inner thoughts, feelings and states. Far from being uniquely Buddhist practices, these four are common throughout human life. For example, when we avoid stress by giving ourselves ample time for an activity we are practicing 'preventing'; when we relax our impatience while waiting for a red light to turn green we are practicing a form of 'overcoming'; when we cultivate appreciation of a child we are practicing 'arousing'; and when we stay calm in difficult circumstances we are practicing 'maintaining'.

In the practice of Right Effort we utilize these four efforts to safeguard and develop the quality of our mind and heart. The quality of our inner life is our most important asset; it well deserves our care.. When we see clearly that unskillful mental states decrease the quality of our inner life, it is natural to want to either prevent this from occurring or, if they are already occurring, to find a way to stop them. And when we know we can do something that will increase the quality of our inner life, it is healthy to do so. In this way the quality of our inner life can be improved.

Preventing, the first of the four Right Efforts, involves avoiding and restraining. Avoiding means to not put oneself in a situation where unskillful mind states are triggered. For example, if one has an addiction, it is best to stay clear of temptation. If one tends to become angry when around angry people, perhaps it is best to avoid those people. This effort to avoid is built on the understanding that we are better off without unskillful mental states and behavior.

Restraining is the practice of not giving in to unskillful reactions and desires. It requires first recognizing impulses and thoughts of greed, ill-will, and delusion when they arise, and then holding them in check so we neither act on them nor feed them with more mental involvement.

Better than restraining unskillful states is overcoming them, the second of the Right Efforts. At times, this can happen through simply letting go of the mental activity. Other times it can occur through acquiring a good understanding of that which we want to overcome. Sometimes, insight into the conditions that give rise to the unskillful states can show us the underlying attachments to let go of.

The third Right Effort is to arouse skillful mental states, thoughts, and intentions. These are qualities that are not only helpful on the path of liberation, they are also enjoyable in themselves. Particularly useful are the seven factors of awakening: mindfulness, investigation, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. Also helpful are loving-kindness, compassion, and appreciative joy. Some of these states arise as a consequence of meditation practice and some can be purposefully cultivated with other activities.

Once skillful states have arisen, the job of the fourth Right Effort is to maintain them. This includes recognizing when skillful states are present as well as applying the first Right Effort of preventing unskillful states from arising. Continuing the practices which give rise to skillful states is also a way to maintain them.

Right effort includes attention to the manner in which we make effort. The kind of effort required varies depending on the circumstances. Sometimes it is appropriate to make heroic effort, other times what is needed is an extremely light touch. Sometimes the purpose of our efforts is beneficial but how we exert ourselves to attain this goal is not. For example one can be too aggressive or too hesitant, too self-aggrandizing or too self-deprecating in the way we apply ourselves.

Our efforts in Buddhist practice can be delightful when the effort is free of greed, aversion, and fear. At times effort can feel almost effortless and satisfying for its own sake. Certainly it can be inspiring to know one's efforts are dedicated to walking the Eightfold Path, to bringing greater peace and freedom into this world.