**Right Effort**

Offered by Jeff Benoit to the CT DTO on March 26, 2022

Notes to self below are given within these symbols <notes to self> and were not spoken.

<My purpose in giving this talk – convey understanding of right effort that is beneficial to the practice of listeners, provide a positive enjoyable experience of the talk, water positive seeds in them.>

Intro

I am happy and honored to have this opportunity to discuss the Right Effort element of the Buddha’s eight-fold path with you. I hope to relay both a good understanding of effort and generating right effort in yourself, and the benefits of right effort to you and those around you.

Right Effort or Right Diligence, is one element of the Buddhist Eight-fold path that leads to the end of suffering. The Eight-fold path leading to the cessation of suffering is the Fourth Noble Truth. The First Noble Truth is that there is suffering, there is dis-ease or displacement from things being right in the world. Suffering is ‘noble’ in that we can use it to have insight to find the way out of suffering and move towards peace and equanimity. The Second Noble Truth is that there are causes of the suffering, causes of the displacement from things being right in the world. The Third Noble Truth is the end of suffering; that there is the possibility to end suffering and the dis-ease in life; there is hope. And the Fourth Noble Truth is the Eight-Fold Path that leads to the cessation of suffering, the cessation of dis-ease. In addition to Right Effort, the other elements of the Eight-Fold Path are : Right View, Right Thought, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration, Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood.

As has been mentioned in the other talks on an element of the eightfold path, all elements are empty of a separate self. They all ‘interare’ with the other elements of the eight-fold path and interare with the entire cosmos.

So what is Right Effort or Right Diligence? We know that to do something, to take an action, takes effort. For instance, if I wish to lift this weight, I have to extend effort. <Lift the small weight>

And to lift this weight <Lift larger weight>, I have to extend more effort. But more effort of what kind? In this case just physical. In this instance the decision to do it was not difficult, but was a decision, a conscious desire.

What of ringing a bowl? This requires effort.

<ring bowl and take two breaths>

For me, much more goes on internally to leading up to ringing the bowl. I wish to do it carefully and well and am in front of people, kind people, but perhaps I am still worried of not doing it well or being embarrassed. Ringing a bell takes courage and commitment and a desire to do it.

<ring bell again>

So, I think we can see there are phases to effort; generating a thought or desire to do the effort, developing this to an intention, and then actually beginning to take the action and to follow through and complete the action.

For ringing a bell or playing a musical instrument, a commitment to do it once will not lead to skillfulness. There must be diligence to continue, to repeat, to go on with the practice. And the joy of making sounds skillfully for your benefit and the benefit of others nourishes us as we practice.

<ring bell, smile>

So our effort to perform Buddhist practice is also like this. There are initial decisions, there is development of diligence and sustaining a practice, gradually developing skillfulness in body and mind in the practice; and there are the fruits of the practice in ourselves and reflected in those around us that nourish our practice. So, in this example of learning to invite the bell, moving forward diligently on the path of practice is Right Effort.

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I had the opportunity to speak with three wise people on a zoom call earlier this month on the topic of right diligence as exercised in their practice and how they achieved this beneficial condition. Here are a couple notes from that discussion.

In the opening of sutra’s, it often says; I heard this once in the Jetta grove. Now in our modern age we may repeat wisdom with the introduction that ‘I heard this once in the DTO Zoom meeting….’ 😊

Advice for developing and growing a personal Buddhist practice:

* A daily practice does not have to be long. Even 15 minutes meditation 3 or 4 times a week can be a good start for a consistent practice.
* Be flexible with yourself. If you are not a morning person it is ok to meditate in the afternoon or evening.
* A timer from an app can be helpful especially in the beginning. There are some apps that give rewards and badges that could be a positive motivator also.
* For some, particularly with an active mind, walking meditations inside or outside can be very beneficial.
* Listening to chanting or a dharma talk can also be very beneficial for those with a busy mind, and those without a busy mind also!
* The benefits of regular practice will return to help nourish and sustain you in that practice.
* And of course, a sangha, companions on the spiritual path help to water the seeds of a beneficial practice.

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I would like to also briefly address a couple obstacles to right effort and resulting right action.

One is illustrated by my experience at my first big Buddhist retreat.

I attended the Thich Nhat Hahn (TNH) retreat held at Omega Institute in NY in October 1997. It was beautiful and wonderful to be there with TNH and the Plum Village monastics and the fellow practitioners. I wanted to practice and not miss anything, but I began to be very tired getting up for every early meditation. I became too tired and got sick. I had an internal conflict of feeling so tired that I desperately needed to rest but that to be a ‘good’ practitioner, I should do everything and not miss anything. I heard one day the idea that it is ok to take care of ourselves so that we can be healthy and happy in the practice. And if that meant that I needed to miss the meditation one day to sleep-in and recover, that was ok. The ‘lute string’ of my practice had been too taught. This was my first lesson in right effort and finding a middle way. The middle way that would allow me to sustain my practice and water more positive seeds in myself and thereby in others. I was overjoyed.

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One significant obstacle to right effort can be fear – fear of not being able to succeed, lack of confidence, fear of other’s opinions.

Fear of failure, of disapproval can be a strong negative force preventing us from starting an action that could benefit ourselves and others. In the Buddhist tradition, when overcome by fear or other strong emotion, we are taught to stop and take some slow deep breaths. While breathing we just recognize and name that emotion as a good first step that can remove some of its power and allow us to relax and be able to move forward calmly again. Sometimes this simple exercise is enough to move past a fear or strong emotion.

We can also build a reserve of positivity. We can do walking meditation, listen to dharma talks and chants, talk with friends on the spiritual path, and take refuge in the sangha or in a retreat. This positive reserve of mindful energy can help to lessen fear and increase equanimity and help generate calm courage to move forward.

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I would like to now discuss the Buddha’s direct teaching on Right Effort.

<**go to slides of Right Effort from Bhikkhu Bodhi and the related Right Effort discussion slides**>

<Step through the four different types of effort for preventing negative seeds from arising, calming and transforming negative seeds that have already arisen, causing positive seeds to arise, and sustaining positive elements that have already arisen. Spend some time on each of these and reference/relay some of TNH’s lessons on these points.>

**Story to go with slide on watering positive seeds:**

I recently spent a day at Blue Cliff Monastery for the 49th day ceremony in remembrance of TNH. While there, I was buoyed by the wonderful atmosphere, the monastics and spirit of kindness and understanding that comes from everyone. My positive seeds were definitely watered. One small action I took out of that well of practice energy was to visit the office person who had helped me to understand the day and be able to attend and to thank her for that. My short visit with her where I expressed my sincere gratitude to her for her help, and just to visit and be with her for a couple minutes, had a very positive effect on her and on me. This was not a big effort, but it was a right effort 😊

After Slides -

**Meditation exercise.**

Three bells to settle….

Bring to mind someone you know well, someone who may not recognize all the positive aspects they manifest that bring joy and benefits to others.

It can be small things, like the way they sometimes offer kind words or help to someone.

Bring to mind one of these positive aspect of that person… perhaps something they may not recognize fully in themselves. …

Envision how you may be able to water this positive seed in them with words of recognition perhaps some loving words of encouragement …

Picture how you may be able to speak to them, to offer your input to them simply as a gift, .. with no attachment to outcome. …

Come back to focus on your breath… and notice the feeling of love.. and bodhichitta for the other person,… and how thinking of offering them a gift of watering a positive seed has also watered a positive seed in you…

Carry forward this thinking, this feeling into your day... and water seeds of joy and self confidence in those around you. ….

Three gentle bells.

**A sangha vow from Lyn Fine – see slide**

**Closing Words**

Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to share some thoughts on Right Effort and how we can use this element of the eight-fold path to benefit ourselves and those around us.

< three bells>

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**Extra items if flow and time allows**

**(there was not time for this item, but a very important observation to me):**

From the traditional wording of the Heart Sutra:

… No ill-being, no cause of ill-being, no end of ill-being, and no path.

No understanding and no attainment.

Because there is no attainment, the Bodhisattvas, grounded in Perfect

Understanding, find no obstacles for their minds. Having no obstacles, they

overcome fear, liberating themselves forever from illusion, realizing perfect

Nirvana. All Buddhas in the past, present, and future, thanks to this Perfect

Understanding, arrive at full, right, and universal Enlightenment.

With ‘no attainment.’ no focus on attainment, no fear of not achieving attainment, one is free to just practice the way. With practice of the way free from fear, one has an open field of possibilities for progress free of obstacles. Similarly for generating the will, the volition towards right effort, one can just ease into, become the goal, the decision and commitment to water the positive seeds, to move forward with beneficial actions, with watering positive seeds in self and others.

Post talk comment, as best as I can recall it, from Konrad who inherently understood this unspoken point: there is effortless effort, calmness and non-attachment to outcome that frees us to take positive actions without fear.

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Some references:

Breathe, You Are Alive! The Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing, By Thich Nhat Hanh - Thich Nhat Hanh on cultivating joy. - A Book Excerpt on Joy, <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/18439/breathe-you-are-alive>

TNH talk on Noble Eightfold path: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=toVNeTrwbtc>

The Art of Transforming Suffering, PART TWO. BY THICH NHAT HANH. NEW HAMLET, PLUM VILLAGE NOVEMBER 1, 2012 <https://www.mindfulnessbell.org/archive>

In The Buddha’s Words, An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon. Edited and introduced by Bhikkhu Bodhi (this is also available online in pdf. Note page numbers differ in the online version.)

The Noble Eightfold Path, The Buddha’s practical instructions to reach the end of suffering by Walpola Sri Rahula. <https://tricycle.org/magazine/noble-eightfold-path/> -

Sangha Vows developed by Lyn Fine and Community of Mindfulness NY Metro <https://www.mindfulnessbell.org/archive/tag/watering+positive+seeds>