

# Right Effort (5 of 5) Desire for Right Effort

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## **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

unwholesome, wholesome, mindfulness, beneficial, confidence, stressful, ease, freedom, mindful, attachment, resistance, prioritize, sacrifice, discerning, wisdom, calm, nonreactive, kindness, compassion, pleasure, delight, joy, warning sign, reference point, investigation, freedom

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For the last talk on right effort, I would like to emphasize how incredibly important this topic is for anyone doing Buddhist practice. All Buddhist practice could be summarized as the practice of discovering what right effort is, refining and purifying effort so the effort is completely wholesome with no attachments, no pressure, and no resistance in it, and there is freedom, ease, and peacefulness in the efforts we make.

In some ways, finding the right effort is a constant adjustment that we make as we find our way. Over time it becomes second nature, just like riding a bicycle

becomes second nature after a while, even though we have to swerve this way and that, and make different kinds of effort depending on the road we are riding on. When we are driving on a freeway, we might conventionally think we're going straight down a lane, but there are many small movements left and right – we are constantly making adjustments. Doing this has become so automatic that it is second nature.

It is the same way with effort in practice. As we understand the difference between wholesome and unwholesome effort, and between wholesome and unwholesome mental states, and we are able to see them for what they are, we see that the unwholesome states drain us, diminish us, stress us, and are painful, while the wholesome ones do the opposite. This is a powerful insight. It is powerful to really see this.

Then we need confidence. Real confidence is an important thing: confidence that it is not worthwhile to engage in that which is unwholesome, or to engage in unwholesome ways. If you want to live well, don't make unwholesome, debilitating, and stressful efforts. Have confidence in the wholesome. It is hard to find that confidence. In a funny way, many of us have confidence in the unwholesome, as if that is how we will be saved, take care of ourselves, and fulfill our responsibilities. But in fact, confidence in the unwholesome does the opposite.

As practice develops, we have more confidence in the wholesome. To go more to the heart of it, our confidence in the unwholesome withers away, so we do not prioritize it anymore. Then we are left with the wholesome. We prioritize that instead. As we value the wholesome, we make space for it, we allow for it, and we are not willing to sacrifice it. We don't give it up for the unwholesome or the stressful. The idea that it is important to stay close to what is wholesome and beneficial is an important part of Buddhist practice.

What are some of the wholesome states that we stay close to? One is simply being mindful, staying present. Another is as simple as being discerning and connected, to allow wisdom to operate. One is being nonreactive. Others are having some degree of calm, kindness, and compassion. One wholesome state might be to have a sense of pleasure, delight, or joy.

There are 32 different flavors of joy that can arise in practice, and we begin to make room and be available for the sense of well-being that can be here. As we feel the well-being, it is a reference point and a support that can highlight when we might lose it because of something unwholesome. The sense of well-being gives us an early warning sign, "Uh oh, I'm going to lose this."

Don't hold on to the wholesome – the holding on is unwholesome. We are always investigating. A wholesome way of investigating is very simple, asking: What is it? Is it wholesome or unwholesome? Is it stressful or unstressful? Is it beneficial? Is it easeful?

Any effort at all, including the effort to investigate, the effort to be mindful, the effort to let go, the effort to stay with the wholesome – that effort has to be under the lens and the frame of reference of right effort. It is a powerful protection for us that the very way in which we practice Buddhism is not stressful for us or detrimental to us.

Right effort is also a powerful way of discovering what freedom is. In the end, it is a kind of freedom to be able to live with right effort, with ease and choice, staying close to that place where the effort itself is almost effortless or easy, and does not carry the weight and distress of conceit and self.

In the Eightfold Path, right effort is the sixth factor, and the seventh is mindfulness. How they are related in the list is very important. Once we understand right effort, then the mindfulness we develop gets stronger and can give us more information in order to practice right effort. In the heightened awareness that we develop, we are more attentive to the subtleties with which right effort and wrong effort operate within us.

Mindfulness is also protected by right effort. Usually we teach people mindfulness without teaching them right effort first. For some people it takes a long time – a long period of time, in my own practice – to discover how to be mindful in a useful, healthy, wholesome way. But if we are taught right effort first, and we really know what that is, then when we start doing mindfulness practice, we look at mindfulness through the lens of right effort. We ask: is how I am practicing mindfulness right effort? Am I practicing with greed or with aversion? Am I straining? Am I pushing? Am I being assertive in a way that is not wholesome? Or am I engaged in a way that brings ease, peace, and dedication to what I'm doing?

In the background of all this, when the Buddha described each of the four kinds of right effort, he also talked about generating desire. Here, he was referring to wholesome desire. This is one of the gifts or treasures of right effort: to learn how desires can be wholesome and beneficial, with no compulsion and no stress whatsoever in the desire. These desires themselves are beneficial for us.

Human beings constantly have desires. Some of them are unconscious – we do not really see we have the desire, and we don't call it desire. For example, I am lifting up my arm to be a little bit more emphatic as I speak. In that desire to move my arm, there is a desire

to be emphatic, to make a stronger point. That movement is almost second nature, so I can do it without thinking about it, and even without consciously intending it. But there is a desire. There are desires all the time. Human beings are kind of a stream of desires, if you look at it.

As we become more aware of these desires and of the choices we make, we begin to allow those desires to flow out of the wholesome place. We are cultivating the wholesome. We are becoming the wholesome. We are transforming ourselves to be available to be filled with goodness, filled with the wholesome and the beneficial.

Then this miracle happens: the desires we have come out of that wholesome place. The desires no longer seem as if they're necessarily even *my* desires, because any identification or attribution of self gets in the way of the wholesomeness. At the same time, we are tracking the desires in order to really know that they are wholesome and beneficial. We are tracking the impact they have on the world around us, so that they are beneficial for other people as well.

To generate healthy desire. To prevent the arising of the unwholesome. To care for ourselves enough to live a careful life, not a careless life where the unwholesome begins to take over. When we recognize that the unwholesome is in us, in a careful loving way we try to

put it down or abandon it, or at least not believe in it or go along with it. We value the wholesome, the helpful, the beneficial, and we make space for it. We make ourselves available for it. We recognize it and support it. We generate the desire to maintain it, to stay close to it, and to not lose it easily once it is there.

Generating wholesome desire is done with ease, with non-attachment, non-clinging, and non-resistance. The desire and the effort are unattached. It is a great treasure to find our way to this. I hope that this has given you something to look at, consider, and practice with. I know some of this teaching might be difficult and challenging, and you might have questions about it, or it might seem like too much. But instead of dwelling on that, see if you can frame it and understand it as something that inspires you, that helps you feel more prepared for practice, more ready and receptive, more inspired, and more confident: “Yes. This is a key. This is important. This is valuable.”

This will be your homework for the next couple of days: to reconsider the topic of right effort, to the point where you can discover some degree of confidence and inspiration, so that you feel a sense of readiness and preparedness. If you have a chance, talk to friends about right effort, and journal about it. Listen to these talks again. Read about right effort. Thank you very much.