

Right Effort (2 of 5) Abandoning the Unwholesome

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Eightfold Path, *chanda*, desire, *virīya*, effort, wholesome, courageous, *pahāna*, abandon, arouse

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This week, we're talking about the Buddha's teachings on right effort, the sixth factor of the Eightfold Path. In the classic description of each of the path factors, right effort has the longest description. There is a lot of repetition in it.

There are four right efforts. Each effort is worded similarly with some variation to it. This repetition of the same words has an impact as we read or listen to it. There is an emphasis being made. Each effort has a series of words that describe the kind of effort to be made. We'll talk about the different efforts that the text describes.

Each of the four right efforts is supposed to be done with desire. The Pali word is *chanda*, a rather innocent

word for desire that sometimes is used for appropriate desires, sometimes for inappropriate desires or painful ones. It's a broad word, without any ethical or other kinds of valence implied except in the context in which it's used.

It is used for wholesome things, and one of the wholesome engagements is right effort. So to learn how to have *chanda*, to have desire, which is itself right effort, which is itself without any afflictive tendencies, and which has wholesomeness as part of it, which is skillful, nourishing, and supportive for us. It is the art of discovering and investigating how we have desires so they come from a place within that's not, for instance, afraid, greedy, angry, hostile, or aversive. That is not related to conceit: "I have to make the effort here so I can be the most perfect, effortful person in my Buddhist community."

To begin taking desire seriously enough that it deserves attention. Let's look at this desire, what does it mean to have desire? – rather than having a simplistic understanding: "I'm just supposed to let go of desires, let go of everything." There is a time and place for that kind of approach, but to have that be the broad swath of what we do with our life is not really what the Buddha was teaching.

The Buddha talked about having desire for the practice, for the path of liberation. So to discover how to hold desire in a way that is inspiring for you, that it comes from a place of goodness and rightness, and doesn't add stress to your life. If anything, it reduces stress. You're happy to have this desire, rather than having one more thing to do: "I have a long to-do list, and now I'm supposed to do this too?" It's not like that. It's something more like: "Oh, I'm so lucky. I'm so fortunate to have this. This is a great thing."

In a sense, one of the great aspects of the four right efforts is that it's a way of being with everything we can possibly do. No matter what we're doing, we're looking at it from this point of view – "Is how I'm doing something and what is motivating it wholesome or unwholesome? Is it helpful or unhelpful?" And then, to have desire for the healthy, wholesome way of doing it, rather than being involved with the unhealthy, unwholesome way.

How is that desire? Are you in a hurry with desire? – "I have so many things to do; I'm in a hurry." If you are in a hurry and trying to fill your life, can you tap into the healthy form of desire?

One of the paradoxes of really strong desire, such as neediness, craving, and thirsting to do things, is that even if we do it out of fear (e.g., fear of missing out), it

diminishes the wholesome. Sometimes the wholesome within us gets eclipsed entirely by all the desires we have. But if we find how to have wholesome desires in a place where there is time and space, then the wholesome can well up. The way in which we do something can be fulfilling in and of itself, and we don't need to find fulfillment in accomplishing a lot of things. We find our fulfillment in the moment of doing something.

Each of the four right efforts talks about taking up and taking hold of the mind with desire. The way that right effort is often translated, I often felt tired by the time I finished reading it. Here is a common translation. This is also the part of the four right efforts that is the same for each. It says, "One makes effort, arouses energy, exerts the mind, and strives." That seems like a lot of work.

I want to read you a different translation, one that I've made. Some of the original Pali is left out in this English translation.

One takes up and takes hold of the mind,
So here, one begins by being present for one's own mind, one's own inner life. One's inner life, the mind, is important to engage and be attentive to.

*One takes up and takes hold of the mind, and
generates desire,*

So one arouses, one gives birth, to desire. There is a conscious intention here to look for desire that is appropriate and healthy, as if it was a beautiful piece of art you would like to look on.

One takes up and takes hold of the mind, and generates desire, initiates courageous effort

The word “initiates” is there in the original. The Pali word for courageous effort is *virīya*, which is a very powerful word. Sometimes it means power or strength. I think maybe in Tibetan Buddhism, it’s sometimes translated as courageous effort. A person who is a warrior is sometimes called a word that’s related to *virīya*. I like the term courageous effort. Sometimes we have to have some courage to be present and here for ourselves. It’s bringing some strength to it.

One takes up and takes hold of the mind, and generates desire, initiates courageous effort for the non-arising of unwholesome states of mind.

So that’s the first right effort.

Now, I want to introduce the second right effort, which goes:

One takes up and takes hold of the mind, and generates desire, initiates courageous effort for abandoning unwholesome states of mind.

Pahāna (abandon) is a powerful word. It's different than just letting go. Letting go has more of a sense of letting go of it for the moment. Abandoning is letting go that is done with wisdom, commitment, clarity, and fullness: "This, I'm going to put down. This, I'm not going to be involved in anymore." Of course, mostly it comes back. But there is a kind of definitiveness, fullness, or seriousness: "This, I will abandon. This, I won't do anymore."

Here again, we have this idea of living in a conscious, mindful way that comes when we take hold of the mind, take hold of our attention, take hold of being here in the present moment. Take it up, be here, so that when we're doing something, we do it wholeheartedly. And here, this right effort is to generate the desire to wholeheartedly abandon whatever we're doing that is afflictive, that harms you, maybe harms others as well.

It is not at all easy to abandon and let it go. To say it so simply can be confusing or even stressful. But we're talking about having a healthy desire for this. Taking the time to find that with a definitiveness, a clearness: "I think I want to be finished with this. I've been critical of others in an aversive, annoying way. I'm done with it. I've done this for so long. It's not good for them; it's not good for me. I want to abandon this aversive nature that I have – this criticalness, this cynicism, this resentment I have. I've been caught in a very difficult addiction. I

don't want to undermine or underestimate the difficulty of it, but still, I've had enough. The desire is here to abandon it."

Once that clear desire is there to abandon it, then we can engage in the process of doing so. This might not just be a snap of our fingers and then we do it. We practice the rest of the Eightfold Path so that we can find a way to do it.

The second of the right efforts is to arouse, give birth to, generate the desire. Find the desire; find a way to desire that you enjoy. It does require you to take some time to get to know what that kind of desire might be. Maybe it's a desire you arouse when you're relaxed and at ease – having a cup of tea or looking out the window. Maybe you can be in touch with that kind of healthy desire at the end of a sitting of meditation.

This is not an obligation to let go of unwholesome desires or unwholesome mind states. It's not a statement that you're a terrible person if you have unwholesome states of mind. Rather, it's discovering something wonderful inside, a wonderful desire that cares for yourself, that wants to engage in a process of bringing these to an end, so they can be abandoned, put down once and for all.

Maybe that is done in small steps. Maybe it's done gradually over time. If you know you have afflictive, unhealthy mind states and desires that you don't want to live by, but you are often caught in, maybe a goal for today is not to abandon them entirely, but to discover the *desire* to abandon them. So, whenever the unhealthy mind state arises, take the time to find a healthy desire, one that you like and enjoy having in relationship to the things that you'd like to abandon. By doing that, you might be able to lessen its frequency or intensity today by 10%. And what would that look like? Turn down the volume a little as opposed to being caught up in the idea it should be all or nothing.

I hope you enjoy your desires. Take time today to look at them and explore them. Maybe enjoy the desire to abandon or to be done with some of the unhealthy, unsupportive states of mind that you might live with. Maybe you'll enjoy doing them 10% less.

Tomorrow, we'll start the discussion about the third right effort, which is related to wholesome mind states. Thank you