

# Right Effort (1 of 5) Avoiding the Unwholesome

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## **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

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Hello, everyone. Today, we'll begin a new five-part series: right effort. I've been appreciating lately a renewed understanding of right effort and its importance.

The word effort for me at one point was probably something I didn't care for or worse. I interpreted effort as being a strain, like when you're making effort, you have to apply more effort than is needed. You do something with more force, which causes strain or tiredness. I'm a person who enjoys doing things. I enjoy doing physical work. Mental work I enjoy doing. The doing of it, I don't think of as effort. So historically, I didn't have much of a relationship to this sixth factor of

the Eightfold Path because the word effort was being used.

I heard a teacher talk about right effort being right engagement. Then I had a better feeling for it – that this is what you engage in. Sometimes it's called right endeavor. I interpret that to mean this is the right activity. So what's the right activity? What's the right mental activity that we're involved in when we meditate? These alternatives to effort – engagement, endeavoring, activity – protect me from straining and making a forceful effort. But I'll use the term right effort.

Perhaps this series should come with a big warning: these teachings might cause over-efforting. Hopefully, with that warning, we don't interpret them that way. But there is something in the Buddha's teachings on right effort that is very determined and clear like this is what we do. There is an emphatic nature to the teachings. We understand that there is intentionality, resolve, and even a commitment to staying present.

I love the word commitment because apparently, it comes from the same Latin root as “mitten,” to hand or to touch. So to touch something, to stay in touch – make that commitment to stay in touch with your breathing, to stay there with the experience.

In the teachings of right effort, there are four right efforts. Many years ago, I heard that there was a meditation practitioner who heard these teachings and came up with an alternative or an example. She said, “Oh, I kayak in the open ocean in Alaska, and this is exactly the effort we have to make there. When you’re kayaking in the ocean, stay out of danger.” So that’s the first right effort: make the effort to stay out of danger. The second effort is if you’re in danger, get out of the danger. The third effort for a kayaker, who can be in potentially dangerous situations, is to learn good kayaking skills. The fourth effort is to maintain them, keep them going.

In Buddhist terminology, the danger is unwholesome states of mind. Unwholesome activities of the mind in and of themselves are afflictive. We don’t always see that they’re afflictive. For example, resentment hurts the one who is resentful probably more than the person they’re resentful toward. But we don’t see that because we’re so focused on the object of resentment. In mindfulness practice, we turn the attention around 180 degrees, and we start seeing and feeling the cost of resentment: “Oh, this is actually painful for me.” The unwholesome mind state always hurts the person who has it, but we don’t often know that. It’s afflictive. It’s called being in danger. So avoid being in danger, avoid unwholesome states of mind.

The second right effort is if an unwholesome state of mind arises, let go of it. The language is to abandon it, and I'll talk more about that tomorrow. The third right effort, the skill part, is to learn skills – evoke wholesome states of mind. Generosity, goodness, mindfulness, equanimity, patience – there is a whole slew of things that we can call upon, develop, and strengthen. The Ten Pāramī, for example, the Seven Factors of Awakening. Bring them on, evoke them, learn those skills, and then maintain them. But in this fourth right effort, it's more than just maintaining them, it's to expand them, grow them, and help them to flourish within us.

So, avoid, abandon, evoke, and maintain are the four kinds of endeavors, engagements, and activities we're doing with the mind. It requires mindfulness of really recognizing what's going on in the mind and the skill, the ability, the wisdom, to see the difference between mental states, activities, and thoughts that are afflictive to ourselves, that somehow undermine or debilitate us, and those that benefit us. This includes being able to navigate the strong lawyers in the mind or the strong debate champions in the mind that can argue the case for why we should be resentful (the person deserves me to be resentful, or angry, spiteful, or greedy).

We can get enamored in the world of the unwholesome so we don't see and feel how detrimental it is to ourselves. People who don't know that there's a much

better alternative in the wholesome – better ways to take care of ourselves and protect ourselves – will often feel that they are justified or required to continue down the route of the unwholesome. But it's not required.

It takes some people a long time to appreciate how much they're undermining themselves. They're at a dead end that doesn't go anywhere. Sometimes we have to redo the same unwholesome behavior many times before it finally dawns on us that it is not working or not working well enough or not working in a way that's helpful.

So, the first right effort is to avoid having unwholesome states of mind arise. These include greed, hate, delusion, envy, conceit, covetousness, contempt, cynicism, insolence, all kinds of things. How do we avoid them?

First, as we become more mindful of ourselves – what's happening, really staying in touch with ourselves – we started recognizing when unwholesome states of mind are now present. There's a heightened sensitivity to seeing when a stressful state arises. Then we can let go of it, which is the second right effort.

We also start recognizing the behavioral things we do that might be the condition for these unwholesome states to arise. For instance, if you are addicted to

something on the Web – you have a certain kind of drive – then maybe stay away from websites that support that addiction. Otherwise, the drive gets stronger and stronger, and you get pulled into its vortex. Or, maybe you walk down a street with many stores and start thinking about all the things you want to buy, and you find yourself in a store buying things. If you tend to buy things impulsively, then maybe don't walk down that street or take the long way around the block.

If there are certain people for whom you find yourself having increasingly unwholesome states arise, then be very careful how you are with that person. Maybe always show up well rested, well fed, and well hydrated. Show up in a good state of mind so you can withstand the atmosphere of someone who often gets you angry. Or limit how much time you spend with that person. If you notice that half an hour or an hour is okay, but more than that you get grumpy and things start going downhill, then be careful – monitor yourself, monitor your behavior.

Make sure you get enough sleep. Be sure you get the basic healthy things you need for yourself. Exercise, whatever it takes, so that you are protecting yourself from the arising of unwholesome states of mind.

And might I say also one of those things is to meditate. Meditating every day can protect you from getting swept away or caught up in unwholesome states of mind.

On the one hand, there's mindfulness and then there's the right effort to avoid unwholesome states to arise. And that avoidance involves using your intelligence. It does involve planning, considering, and reflecting, how is it that these unwholesome states arise in me? What behaviors, what conditions, and in what context does this happen? What can I do to change my behavior and how I live to protect it?

A wise Dharma life is one that reflects, in a healthy and beneficial way, the kind of behavior we're doing and what behaviorally can be changed. If we're only relying on mindfulness without changing our behavior, we're probably not giving ourselves the full opportunity of what this practice can do.

You might, over this next day, consider right effort: the effort to avoid the arising of unwholesome, unskillful, unbeneficial states of mind, activities of mind. Plan ahead now. Think about the rest of the day for a few minutes. What do you think would be a good way to go about your day to optimize that avoidance? What are the contexts and conditions that bring it about? What can you change behaviorally for this day so there's less chance for unwholesome states to arise?

It might be as simple as if you're going someplace, give yourself extra time to get there, so there's less chance that you feel hurried or angry at the traffic. The extra time might bring some ease to the whole endeavor. Giving yourself lots of time to do what you have to do is one way to practice this avoidance.

Thank you, and tomorrow we'll talk about the second right effort.