

Right Effort (4 of 5) Growing the Wholesome

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skillful, maintain, non-forgetting, fulfillment, stability, stable, steadiness, grow

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Welcome to this fourth talk on the four right efforts. Today's emphasis is on the fourth effort which is wholesome or skillful states of mind or qualities. This is actually a very important part of the Buddha's teaching that was not really appreciated by me and a number of other people for a few decades.

I had somehow become tuned into prioritizing the teachings on letting go. Sometimes it was indiscriminate letting go because it is very powerful, especially in meditation, to let go of everything. Sooner or later, everything needs to be let go – even the wholesome. But it is possible to overdo this and not support the growth, cultivation, or presence of beneficial states of mind and heart. If we allow them to be there, not just let go of them

or ignore them, we can actually promote or make it possible for them to grow. It is possible to become filled with well-being and really good qualities. I was amazed to discover how thoroughly saturated in states of joy, happiness, and tranquility the whole body and being can become when I started doing lots of meditation. I think the one that surprised me the most was equanimity. The equanimity was a clear, fully embodied way of being. It wasn't just some little policy in the mind to be equanimous.

The first right effort is to prevent the arising of unarisen unwholesome states. Those are states that have thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and motivations that are not healthy for you. If they are a common part of your life, then, within reason, make the behavioral changes and other changes that would prevent these unhealthy ways of being from arising. The second right effort is to abandon unwholesome states of mind that have come up. This is the letting go part. How to abandon them healthfully is important, but we are always using these four right efforts as a kind of perspective and analysis of what we're actually doing.

So if we're letting go, is the letting go itself done in a wholesome or unwholesome way? If letting go is being done with aversion, conceit, or with greed for something better, then it's not so wholesome, and it will kind of

backfire in some way. But it's a game changer if we're looking for how to do this in a wholesome way. It's a very different way of being with it. There's not so much self or conceit or greed involved. Slowly we begin to learn that there is an inner source of how to do things in wholesome ways, including letting go.

If all the conditions are right, we discover that letting go is one of the things that our heart wants to do. It's not like we have to let go. Instead, we enable the letting go that is already there and wants to happen.

The third right effort is to evoke, bring about, or recognize wholesome states that have not arisen yet. This also might involve behavioral changes. Stay close to things that inspire you or bring you gladness, happiness, and steadiness. Do the things that help you be more settled or stable in your life. Rushing around is not helpful. Doing things in a steady, stable manner is much more helpful.

And then the fourth right effort is to maintain the wholesome states that have arisen. This is dramatic compared to the second right effort, which is to abandon the unwholesome states that have arisen. So to maintain the good things that are going on. This can also be done with behavioral changes. If you feel happy and unusually settled and peaceful, maybe it is not the time to get lost

on the Web, or the news, or start doing something that is going to get you angry. Maybe there's a way to maintain the wholesome and keep it going. Be careful not to sacrifice it for some petty irritation.

Cultivating and maintaining the wholesome is highly emphasized by the Buddha. Because rather than simply one word on what to do for the first three (prevent, abandon, or evoke), for the fourth right effort there are a whole series of words. You get a sense of the importance, like maybe we're supposed to spend more time caring for the wholesome. This is how it goes:

Practitioners take up and take hold of their minds, take hold of themselves, and generate desire, endeavor, and initiate courageous effort for the maintenance, the non-forgetting, the frequent cultivation, the abundance, the development, and the fulfillment of wholesome mental qualities, states, and characteristics that have arisen.

Wow! That is quite a mouthful. Once something good has arisen in you, be careful. Don't lose it easily. Take time to maintain that because it is easy to get caught up in your desires, conceits, agendas, and fears, and rush around doing a lot. There are ways to maintain and keep it going. Again, it has to be done in a wholesome way. Not with expectations or demands, not with measuring

your success and failure or your self-worth by their presence. Not in a way that you would be distraught if it is not there and feel like somehow you are a bad person. There is a wholesome, free, generous, relaxed way to be with all these things. It has a sense of freedom in itself. To maintain it and be conscious, aware, and choiceful about what we do that affects our state of mind.

For the non-forgetting, don't forget it! Don't overlook it. Don't lose touch with it. It's so easy to lose touch and forget the healthy way of being in the world – of being attentive and here in a full way.

The next part uses dramatic language – “frequent cultivation, abundance, development, and fulfillment.” This idea of an abundance of good qualities and their fulfillment is inspiring language. It could seem exhausting like there's a lot to do, but it's not meant to be the kind of doing that is exhausting. It's a kind of doing that is fun, nice, and relaxing. The doing itself feels good.

The art of this whole practice of meditation and mindfulness is to discover how to do anything in a wholesome, healthy, beneficial way. That is the key to Buddhist practice. This practice involves practice, but how do we do the practice in a wholesome, nourishing, inspiring way? It's not automatic, but what we are

working toward is discovering how to do it so that we like doing it and it feels good.

We practice overcoming the strong urges in the mind like fear and desire that override the healthy way of doing things. Urges to do things in ways that are not wholesome or rushed might lead to becoming unstable, unsteady, tightly focused, or losing touch and forgetting about this wholesome way of being.

This idea of wholesomeness or wholesome states of being can set the bar too high if we rush to the idea that it has to be love and peace and dramatic spiritual feelings. The foundational idea that we want to remember is to start with and always come back to a wholesome sense of being stable here in the present moment – a physical embodied stability. When unwholesomeness takes over, it shifts and changes the physical body and how we live in the world and we are not so settled.

Wholesomeness arises out of a settled, stable body; a settled, steady mind; and a settled heart. So if that is the first step in evoking and maintaining the wholesome, maybe that's not so bad or so far out of reach. Maybe it's only 10% more stable or steady. But with that 10%, maybe we don't make as many mistakes or live under as much stress as we do other times. That steadiness,

stability, or sense of living a life that is unwavering is the soil in which the wholesome has a chance to emerge. The more stable, steady, and settled we are, the more the appearance or arising of wholesomeness happens by itself. We don't have to do it, we just have to recognize it and allow it. Not forget it and support it to grow. Don't be afraid, embarrassed, or ashamed of the goodness that's in you. Let it grow and let it become abundant.

Today, for homework, maybe set a timer for one or two times an hour and see if you can emphasize coming into a place of stability, steadiness, and settledness. Then do something from this place in an unwavering way and see if other wholesome qualities have a chance to follow in the wake of that stability. As if that stability opens the door and you see what other wholesome things want to come from you. You might be surprised by what is in there that wants to come out. Thank you very much.