

## On Right Effort

In this article, I would like to discuss **Right Effort**, the sixth component of **the Noble Eightfold Path**.

Throughout history, humans have exerted effort in countless ways. In our individual lives, we too constantly strive in various aspects. Many of us are conditioned to associate effort with moral judgment. However, the reasons behind our efforts, how we exert them, and their outcomes vary greatly.

So, what does **Right Effort** mean in Buddhism?

From a Buddhist perspective, **Right Effort** is the effort that leads to liberation from suffering. As you know, the essence of all the Buddha's teachings is to free beings from suffering.

### The Four Aspects of Right Effort

Traditionally, the Buddha defined Right Effort in four aspects:

1. **Preventing** unwholesome qualities from arising.
2. **Abandoning** unwholesome qualities that have already arisen.
3. **Cultivating** wholesome qualities that have not yet arisen.
4. **Sustaining and developing** wholesome qualities that have already arisen.

The Buddha explained it as follows:

*"There is the case where one generates desire, endeavours, activates persistence, upholds, and exerts intent for the sake of the non-arising of evil, unskillful qualities that have not yet arisen.*

*One generates desire, endeavours, activates persistence, upholds, and exerts intent for the sake of the abandonment of evil, unskillful qualities that have arisen.*

*One generates desire, endeavours, activates persistence, upholds, and exerts intent for the sake of the arising of skilful qualities that have not yet arisen.*

*One generates desire, endeavours, activates persistence, upholds, and exerts intent for the maintenance, non-confusion, increase, plenitude, development, and culmination of skilful qualities that have arisen.*

*This is called Right Effort." (SN 45:8)*

The Buddha further emphasised:

*"Abandon what is unskillful. It is possible to abandon what is unskillful. If it were not possible, I would not tell you to do so. But because it is possible, I say to you: 'Abandon what is unskillful.'*

*If abandoning what is unskillful led to harm and suffering, I would not instruct you to abandon it.*

*But because abandoning the unskillful leads to benefit and happiness, I say: 'Abandon what is unskillful.'*

*Develop what is skilful. It is possible to develop what is skilful. If it were not possible, I would not tell you to do so. But because it is possible, I say: 'Develop what is skilful.'*

*If developing what is skilful led to harm and suffering, I would not instruct you to develop it. But because developing the skilful leads to benefit and happiness, I say: 'Develop what is skilful.'"*  
(AN 2:19)

In simple terms, **Right Effort** means striving to cultivate wholesome qualities in our actions—through body, speech, and mind. Practically, this includes diligently following the **precepts** taught by the Buddha, as they help free us and others from suffering. It also means making an effort to actualise the **Noble Eightfold Path**, which is the Buddha's fundamental guidance for spiritual development.

The Buddha explained:

*"One tries to abandon wrong view and to develop right view—this is one's Right Effort. The same applies to right resolve, right speech, right action, and right livelihood." (MN 117)*

## **How Much Effort is Needed?**

A common question that arises is: **Should we exert maximum effort?** Is it always better to push harder?

The answer is: **Not necessarily.**

If effort is excessive, it can lead to exhaustion and frustration, which is not what the Buddha recommended.

During the Buddha's time, there was a monk named Sona, who practiced with extreme effort but saw little progress. Frustrated, he even considered abandoning the spiritual life. Understanding his struggle, the Buddha gave him a simile based on Sona's past experience as a musician:

*"Sona, when the strings of your guitar were too tight, was it in tune and playable?"*

*"No, Lord."*

*"And when the strings were too loose, was it in tune and playable?"*

*"No, Lord."*

*"But when the strings were neither too tight nor too loose, but tuned just right, was your guitar in tune and playable?"*

*"Yes, Lord."*

*"In the same way, Sona, overexertion leads to restlessness, while too little effort leads to laziness. Thus, you should determine the right balance for your persistence..." (AN 6:55)*

## **Conclusion: The Two Key Aspects of Right Effort**

From the Buddha's teachings, we can conclude that **Right Effort has two essential aspects:**

1. **Direction** – Effort should be applied toward wholesome qualities, as outlined in the Noble Eightfold Path.
2. **Balance** – Effort should be neither excessive nor too lax but **just right**, like tuning the strings of a musical instrument.

Since the Buddha's teachings are meant for **practice, not mere theory**, we should apply this wisdom both in meditation and in daily life.

In reality, walking the **Middle Way** is not always easy. For example, many people struggle with maintaining a balanced diet. This is why the Buddha encouraged mindfulness even in simple acts like eating—knowing the right amount to consume.

At times, we may make mistakes, but we should not be overly judgmental or fall into guilt. Instead, **acknowledging our human limitations with kindness is also part of Right Effort**. Through ongoing **self-reflection and meditation**, we can cultivate mindfulness, which will serve as our inner guide—helping us fine-tune the "strings" of our body-mind so that we can play the beautiful melody of life.

With Anumodana  
Bhante Anuttara