

Right Effort

Introduction to the readings for January 9 class

Suttas 78, 2, 5, 15, 21, 53

It is for you to make strong effort; the Buddhas only tell you how.

Dhammapada 276

The Dharma is for the industrious, not for the lazy.

Anguttara IV. 229

The Buddha encouraged action more than belief. Teachings were given to encourage living wisely and cultivating the mind. This is particularly true for the central concepts of faith, karma and of the path. Faith provides confidence in our potential and capacity to improve our lives. Teachings on karma show which actions are beneficial and which are not. The path guides us toward those specific skillful actions that are considered to bring the highest benefit and lead toward awakening. As a call to action, Buddhism requires effort. It is striking how much effort is emphasized in the suttas. When the Buddha was pleased with the progress of some monks he urged them on, saying, “arouse still more energy to attain the unattained” (MN 118.4). In teaching the cultivation of right effort, the Buddha gave instruction to do so with zeal, energy, exertion, and striving (MN 141.29). Given the importance of effort, it is not surprising that a variety of near synonyms appear regularly in the suttas, some of which are connected to the qualities and practices cultivated along the path:

Viriya: (the state of a hero; *vira*) translated as energy, vigor, effort, persistence.

One of the seven factors of awakening and one of the five faculties.

Vāyamā: effort. *Samma vāyamā* or right effort is part of the Eightfold Path.

Padhāna: endeavor, exertions, striving. *Samma-Padhāna* or the [four] right exertions (avoiding and abandoning the unskillful, cultivating and maintaining the skillful)

Atappa: ardor, ardency, effort used in the instruction for mindfulness practice.

Appamada: vigilance, heedfulness, energetic mindfulness.

Throughout the Middle Length Discourses effort is directed toward a wide range of actions or practices. Frequently in the suttas these are organized under the categories of the four right efforts which are themselves dependent on being able to distinguish between what is wholesome/skillful and what is unwholesome/unskillful. The readings this month present different aspects of what is wholesome and unwholesome.

Doing no evil,

Engaging in what's skillful,

And purifying one's mind:

This is the teachings of the buddhas.

Dhammapada 183