**The Noble Eightfold Path: Right Effort**

October 18, 2018  
  
Right Effort – samma vayamo - is the sixth of the eight path factors in [the Noble Eightfold Path](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/dhamma/sacca/sacca4/index.html). May I share another of Aoyama Roshi’s reflections to illustrate Right Effort *(from p.82)*?

*Recently I was touched by the poem “Cleaning Rag” by the poet and scholar of children’s literature Michiro Mado (b.1909):  
When I came back home on a rainy day,*

*A cleaning rag was waiting for me in the entrance hall.*

*“I’m a cleaning rag,” it said, with a friendly look,*

*Though it hadn’t wanted to become one.  
Until quite recently it had been a shirt.It was as soft as my skin.  
Maybe in America or somewhere   
It had been a cotton flower,   
Smiling in the sun and the wind.…  
  
When it is a shirt, it should be a shirt for all it is worth; when it is a cleaning rag, it should work as hard as it can as a cleaning rag. This is what it means to perform one’s role in life. This is true endeavor, a life spent following the Way.*  
The right application of effort to Buddhist training is a bit of a paradox. As Rev. Master Daizui McPhillamy has said: *If we do not try to make some changes in our lives, what is the point of undertaking training in the first place? But letting go of things such as “trying” is itself one of the changes that we need to make! What are we to do?*Those of you who play guitar will appreciate the Buddha’s teaching on this. If we are going to play a piece of music on a guitar, we want it to be in tune.  
  
As Ven Sona was meditating in seclusion [after doing walking meditation until the skin of his soles was split & bleeding], this train of thought arose in his awareness: "Of the Blessed One's disciples who have aroused their persistence, I am one, but my mind is not released from the effluents through lack of clinging/sustenance. Now, my family has enough wealth that it would be possible to enjoy wealth & make merit. What if I were to disavow the training, return to the lower life, enjoy wealth, & make merit?"

Then the Blessed One, as soon as he perceived with his awareness the train of thought in Ven. Sona's awareness — as a strong man might stretch out his bent arm or bend his outstretched arm — disappeared from Vulture Peak Mountain, appeared in the Cool Wood right in front of Ven. Sona, and sat down on a prepared seat. Ven. Sona, after bowing down to the Blessed One, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, the Blessed One said to him, "Just now, as you were meditating in seclusion, didn't this train of thought appear to your awareness: 'Of the Blessed One's disciples who have aroused their persistence, I am one, but my mind is not released from the effluents... What if I were to disavow the training, return to the lower life, enjoy wealth, & make merit?'"

"Yes, lord."

"Now what do you think, Sona. Before, when you were a house-dweller, were you skilled at playing the vina?"

"Yes, lord."

"And what do you think: when the strings of your vina were too taut, was your vina in tune & playable?"

"No, lord."

"And what do you think: when the strings of your vina were too loose, was your vina in tune & playable?"

"No, lord."

"And what do you think: when the strings of your vina were neither too taut nor too loose, but tuned (lit: 'established') to be right on pitch, was your vina in tune & playable?"

"Yes, lord."

"In the same way, Sona, over-aroused persistence leads to restlessness, overly slack persistence leads to laziness. Thus you should determine the right pitch for your persistence, attune ('penetrate,' 'ferret out') the pitch of the [five] faculties [to that], and there pick up your theme."

"Yes, lord," Ven. Sona answered the Blessed One. Then, having given this exhortation to Ven. Sona, the Blessed One — as a strong man might stretch out his bent arm or bend his outstretched arm — disappeared from the Cool Wood and appeared on Vulture Peak Mountain.

So after that, Ven. Sona determined the right pitch for his persistence, attuned the pitch of the [five] faculties [to that], and there picked up his theme. Dwelling alone, secluded, heedful, ardent, & resolute, he in no long time reached & remained in the supreme goal of the holy life for which clansmen rightly go forth from home into homelessness, knowing & realizing it for himself in the here & now. He knew: "Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for the sake of this world." And thus Ven. Sona became another one of the arahants. [AN 6.55](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an06/an06.055.than.html)  
**The definition (the four Right Exertions):** "And what, monks, is right effort?  
There is the case where a monk generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts **his intent for the sake of the** **non-arising of evil, unskillful qualities that have not yet arisen.** In other words, keep unskillful actions from arising – cease from evil (don’t even think about it!).

He generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts **his** **intent for the sake of** **the abandonment of evil, unskillful qualities that have arisen**. In other words, let go of unskillful actions that have arisen – cease from evil (go against the grain of habit!).

He generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts **his** **intent for the sake of the arising of skillful qualities that have not yet arisen**. In other words, encourage and develop skillful actions causing them to arise – do only good!

He generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts **his** **intent for the maintenance, non-confusion, increase, plenitude, development, &** **culmination of skillful qualities that have arisen**. In other words, keep and deepen skillful actions that already have arisen – do good for others/purify your heart (practice as if your hair is on fire!)  
  
This, monks, is called right effort." SN 45.

not yet arisen arisen  
 unskillful action 1 2  
 skillful action 3 4

*We read in Zen texts about “effortless effort” or the “goal of goallessness”, and sometimes that sounds like all we need to do is “what comes naturally”. And in a sense that is true, but what is needed is not the “what comes naturally” to our self, for this would simply be to indulge impulsiveness. Instead,* ***we need to do what comes naturally to our Unborn Buddha Nature.*** *And finding that is what training is all about. This situation is actually not as much of a paradox as it seems, because there are different sorts of effort.   
  
The one which we are used to is one in which “we” are in control: we have a goal or ideal and direct our behavior in ways which we think will achieve it.   
  
There are difficulties with this in several places.   
  
There’s really no “me” in the first place;   
  
Secondly, goals and ideals may be nice thoughts, but they are lousy descriptions of how the world really works; the same is true for my ideas about what will achieve change; and finally, whatever “we” may be, we don’t seem to be wise enough to direct or control a life. With all of these difficulties, is it any wonder that our attempts to “reform ourselves” generally end up somewhere other than where we hoped they would?*

The difference between looking at ourselves and “going against the grain” and **self-help.**But there is another type of effort entirely. It is more “willingness” than “will”. It is the willingness to let go of things moment-by-moment: ideas, opinions, wants, fears, ideals, judgments, … everything.   
  
It is the willingness at all times to learn, to be open to seeing new ways, as Dogen Zenji put it “to be disturbed by the Truth”.   
  
  
  
  
And it is the willingness to do whatever comes next. “Doing what comes next” is more a matter of honesty and courage than of will. The honesty is that of looking straight at what lies before us, at what is shown to us simply and clearly by the Unborn at all times.   
  
And this involves trust: trust that a wise and compassionate Buddha Nature really does exist, trust that It can do Its work without us having to control or direct anything, and trust that we can perceive Its teachings directly from the experience of our senses without analyzing, fearing, judging, or worrying about what we perceive.   
  
This goes back to the 4 Right Exertions: *The courage is that of doing what is obviously to be done and of abstaining from what is obviously to be abstained from.*   
  
This, then, is the “effortless effort”. No “I” is involved, no ideals, no thinking or planning of how, no control, no direction. The work is that of the Unborn; the direction is that of the Unborn; the trust is placed in the Unborn. And, simply there are things which are to be done, and things which are to be abstained from.

Effort is also one of the 6 Paramitas – those attitudes of mind or ways of acting that “…bring us to the other shore…” It is Virya – or Effort – or Energy. Virya literally means “…resolute effort that does not permit itself to be diverted by anything…”.   
  
It’s NOT about “…dancing as fast as you can…”. It’s not about force of will. It’s not about late nights, early mornings, no weekends or vacations.

“…resolute effort that does not permit itself to be diverted by anything…”   
It’s constant, on-going.  
It’s moment-by-moment.  
It’s seeing clearly.  
It’s not rooted in expectations or judgments.  
It’s letting go of the extraneous (and everything is extraneous!)

Does this sound familiar? Virya, effort, is maintaining a high level of persistent training.

It – Virya (and meditation) - is built on the 3 previous paramitas: generosity, the Precepts (morality), and patience.  
  
It is – Virya (and meditation) – a means of transforming our basic human tendency toward selfishness.