



Vision and Transformation: The Buddha's Eightfold Path

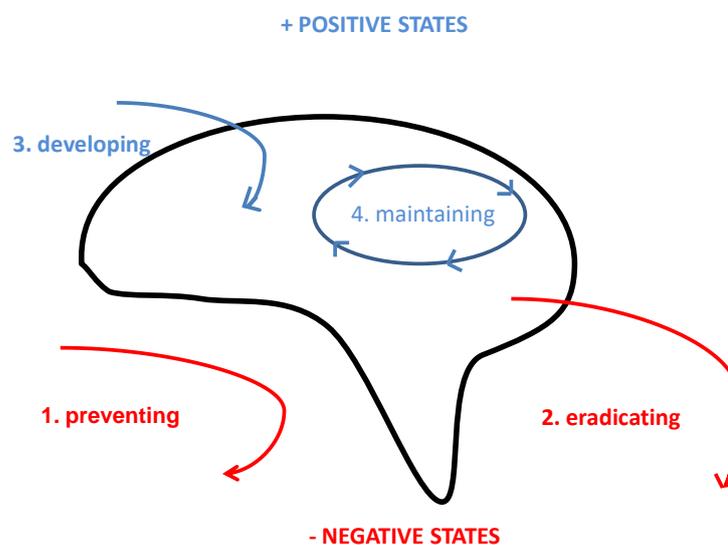


Week 5 – Perfect Effort

We have spent the last four weeks looking at the Path of Vision, through which we gain glimpses of a greater reality, and the first 4 'limbs' of the Path of Transformation, which involves re-orienting our lives towards that reality. This week we shall be considering Perfect Effort, the first of the 'limbs' corresponding to the meditation portion of the Threefold Path model.

We have already remarked that Buddhism is not a cosy, theoretical philosophy. As Sangharakshita says, it is for people who are prepared to make an effort, to work on themselves. This, after all, is the reason for the practice of meditation. We need to make this effort – ideally, Perfect Effort – because it is in our nature to 'slacken off'. One metaphor for this tendency is that, however keen we might be to move towards Perfect Vision, we remain very much subject to the 'gravitational pull of the conditioned'. As the mundane world has such a large part in our makeup, this gravitational pull can be very strong, and therefore requires a lot of effort to resist. We shall be discussing the **Four Exertions** as a model for how we can organise and apply this effort. However, it must be emphasised that the starting point is that we know ourselves better, in particular our habitual **mental states**.

In outline, the Four Exertions provide a method by which we can gradually steer these mental states in a more skilful direction, progressively reducing negative states and cultivating positive ones. This approach can be applied to meditation in particular (see Kamalashila's book 'Buddhist Meditation: Tranquillity, Imagination and Insight'), but also to life in general!



23

The diagram above maps out the Four Exertions in a way that can hopefully be quite easily remembered, representing them as processes within (and outside) our minds. (As it's difficult to represent the mind as a shape, I've used a kind of 'brain' shape as a rough approximation!)

1. The first Exertion is a 'negative' one, inasmuch as it involves **preventing the arising of un-arisen unskillful mental states**. If we accept that most of our mental states have their immediate source in the senses (including, in Buddhist thinking, the mind), then we can try to be selective about what enters through them. This technique is known as 'guarding the doors of the senses'. We can exercise choice over giving our attention to sensory stimuli, usually in the form of information input, that have the potential to affect us emotionally – just a few everyday examples are conversations, television programmes, advertising and (of course!) the time that we spend online.
2. The second Exertion involves **eradicating arisen unskillful mental states**. Here, a traditional formulation may be helpful. The **Five Hindrances** describe our mental tendencies, which will depend partly on our general psychological makeup, but also what is happening to us at a particular time (an example of the Law of Dependent Arising & Cessation). In meditation we often find that our distraction is due to one or more of these hindrances, and this realisation can be valuable. The five hindrances can be listed as:
 - I. craving for material things;
 - II. hatred;
 - III. too much undirected energy, in the form of both restlessness and anxiety;
 - IV. too little applied energy, both physical and mental;
 - V. doubt and indecision (in the sense of refusing to 'come off the fence').

It can be very helpful to try to identify which of these we are subject to, either at any particular moment in our meditation, or more habitually in our lives in general.

3. Thirdly, moving on to the 'positive' exertions, we make an effort to **develop un-arisen skillful mental states**. In other words, we make a point of deliberately cultivating those experiences that have a positive quality. The various meditation techniques of the Buddhist tradition, notably including the Metta Bhavana and the associated 'sublime abodes' (see the handout on Perfect Emotion) are invaluable in this undertaking. Sangharakshita has a lot more to say about meditation and the *dhyanas* (successive levels of more and more refined awareness) in 'The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path'. We don't have the time on this course to discuss the detail of this area, but it's important to note that states of calm and pacification in our meditation are always the starting point for deeper states of insight.

4. Finally, we can make the effort to **maintain arisen skilful mental states**. As it is so easy to lose momentum in our spiritual practice, it is important that we establish good habits, like having as regular a meditation habit as we can manage, keeping up our attention to the observance of the precepts and ongoing study of the Dharma.

The descriptions of the Four Right Efforts above clearly have a fairly practical emphasis. However, according to Sangharakshita, they can also be seen as an essential part of the **Higher Evolution**, a theory that is a keystone of his interpretation of the Dharma for a western audience. The Higher Evolution is seen as the continuation of the evolution of our species, but it takes place within individuals rather than groups, has a spiritual rather than a biological emphasis, and involves deliberate **effort** rather than natural selection. The teaching of the Higher Evolution effectively describes how the human race, having travelled as far as it has through the biological process of selection, now faces the challenge of reaching towards its true, universal potential in terms of Awakening to the reality of the universe.