



EVAM ME SUTTAM This is how I heard it

by Patrick Kearney

Week three: The four right exertions

§49. There are these four right exertions [*samma-ppdhānas*]. Which four? There is the case where a monk generates desire [*chandaṃ janeti*], endeavors [*vāyamati*], arouses persistence [*viriyam ārabhati*], upholds [*paṅgañhāti*] & exerts [*padahati*] his intent [*citta*] for the sake of the non-arising of evil [*pāpaka*], unskillful [*akusala*] qualities [*dhammas*] that have not yet arisen ... for the sake of the abandoning of evil, unskillful qualities that have arisen ... for the sake of the arising of skillful [*kusala*] qualities that have not yet arisen ... (and) for the maintenance, non-confusion, increase, plenitude, development, & culmination of skillful qualities that have arisen. These are the four right exertions. (S.XLIX.1)¹

Introduction

Last week we examined the four frames of reference (*satipatthānas*), illustrating “the principle of skilful *kamma*” in practice. Tonight we will look more at this principle, in the context of the four great exertions (*samma-ppdhānas*). We will begin by returning to the very idea of “skill,” and what underlies it; and from there proceed to looking at how the exertions weave together discernment (*paññā*) and concentration (*samādhi*), the four noble truths, and the noble eight- and tenfold path.

Skill

The reality of dependent co-arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) underlies the Buddha’s project of awakening. Reality is an infinite pattern of mutually dependent events, or *dhammas*. Among these events are mental qualities, the qualities of the mind that can either help or hinder the practice of liberation. All these mental qualities, or *dhammas*, are inconstant and contingent. They arise and cease according to specific patterns of conditionality – this/that conditionality (*idappaccayatā*). Because they arise and cease in specific, identifiable patterns, they can be worked with, *shaped*. But how are they to be shaped in such a way as to lead to awakening? This is the role of skill. And the idea of skill is intimately entwined with that of the four noble truths.

[I]n the process of developing a skill, two major assumptions are made: that there is a causal relationship between acts and their results, and that good results are better than bad. ... The Buddha noticed that this point of view provided two variables – causes and results, and favorable and unfavorable –

¹ Thanissaro Bhikkhu (Geoffrey DeGraff). *The wings to awakening: An anthology from the Pali canon*. Barre, Massachusetts: Dhamma Dana, 1996: 108.

that divided experience into four categories, which he later formulated as **the four noble truths** (*ariya-sacca*) ...²

Skilfulness is also entwined with the act of attention. For Ṭhānissaro, skilfulness requires attention to three things: (1) pre-existing conditions; (2) what we are doing in relation to these conditions; and (3) the results of our actions. This enables us to monitor our actions and change them accordingly.³

[T]he first lesson of skillfulness is that the essence of an action lies in the intention motivating it: an act motivated by the intention for greater skillfulness will give results different from those of an act motivated by greed, aversion, or delusion. Intention, in turn, is influenced by the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the act of attention to one's circumstances. The less an act of attention is clouded by delusion, the more clearly it will see things in appropriate terms.⁴

Skilfulness in practice also entails effort, striving and exertion, an active and deliberate *doing*. But this doing should be balanced so that it becomes effortless. Both balance and effortlessness can be compared to musical performance.

In terms of balance, just as an instrument should be neither too sharp nor too flat, so the mind needs to be balanced “between excessive energy and excessive stillness.” And just as an instrument can go flat, so energy must not be allowed to slacken and go flat. “The ‘rightness’ of right view and other factors of the path thus carries the connotation not only of being correct, but also of being ‘just right.’”⁵ (See §66, 86, 97, 161.)

In terms of effortlessness, the practitioner, like a skilled musician, “develops skill to the point where it becomes effortless, but the perfection of the skill does not negate the fact that it took a great deal of effort to reach that level of mastery.”⁶ (See §62.)

So when we look at skill, we are dealing with a variety of interconnected factors: the malleability of reality due to its dependently co-arisen nature; appropriate attention; effort and effortlessness. All of these themes appear in the four right exertions.

Appropriate attention

The four right exertions include both discernment (*paññā*) and effort (*virīya*). Why is discernment essential? Exertion is for the purpose of “the non-arising of evil, unskillful qualities that have not yet arisen ... the abandoning of evil, unskillful qualities that have arisen ... the arising of skillful qualities that have not yet arisen ... (and) the ... development & culmination of skillful qualities that have arisen.” So at the centre of the project is the ability to identify what is skilful and what is unskilful; and then to understand how to abandon the unskilful and cultivate the skilful. Both these involve discernment, functioning through

² Thanissaro. *Wings*: 7.

³ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 22.

⁴ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 23.

⁵ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 27.

⁶ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 27.

appropriate attention. The Buddha says: “A monk who attends appropriately abandons what is unskillful and develops what is skillful.”⁷ (See §96.)

This skill starts from the beginner’s level and goes all the way to awakening. The Buddha teaches exertion at the beginner’s stage in Kālāma Sutta, where he addresses a non-Buddhist audience – people who have not yet begun the path.

It is right, Kālāmas, for you to doubt, to be uncertain; uncertainty has arisen in a doubtful matter. Do not rely upon what has been acquired by repeated tradition (*anussava*); nor upon lineage (*paramparā*); nor upon rumour (*itikirā*); nor upon what is handed down in the teachings (*piṭaka*); nor upon logic (*takkahetu*); nor upon inference (*nayahetu*); nor upon a consideration of reasons (*ākāraparivitakka*); nor upon a delight in speculation (*ditṭhinijjhānakkhanti*); nor upon appearances (*bhavyrūpatā*); nor upon respect for your teacher (*samaṇo no garū ti*). Kālāmas, when you know for yourselves: “These things are unskillful (*akusala*); these things are blameable (*sāvajja*); these things are censured by the wise (*viññu-garahita*); undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm (*ahita*) and suffering (*dukkha*),” then abandon them.

How can we tell what is skillful and what is unskillful? For we are deluded, and cannot assume that we already know the difference. The Buddha suggests advice from “the wise,” but ultimately it’s a matter of appropriate attention (“When you know for yourselves ...”) Elsewhere, speaking of the mature practitioner, he says:

[§53] With regard to internal factors, I do not envision any other single factor so helpful as appropriate attention for a monk who is a learner, who has not attained the goal but remains intent on the unexcelled security from bondage. A monk who attends appropriately abandons what is unskillful and develops what is skillful. [Iti.16]

[§54] With regard to external factors, I do not envision any other single factor like friendship with admirable people in being so helpful for a monk who is a learner, who has not attained the goal but remains intent on the unexcelled security from bondage. A monk who is a friend with admirable people abandons what is unskillful and develops what is skillful. [Iti.17]⁸

Internally, we need to learn skill in attention – appropriate attention (*yoniso manasikāra*). Externally, we need social support in terms of “the wise” or “admirable friends,” people who can guide us through their speech and action. Discernment, in other words, is learned from our inner experience and from our social environment. Both must be shaped for that purpose.

Discerning

Our capacity to abandon the unskillful and develop the skillful depends in the first instance in our ability to recognise the presence or absence of a “blemish” within us. In Anangaṇa Sutta (M5) we are presented with four types of person in two pairs: (A1) blemished, who does not know s/he is blemished; (A2) blemished, who knows s/he is blemished; (B1) unblemished, who does not know s/he is unblemished; and (B2) unblemished, who knows she is unblemished. Of each pair, the first, who

⁷ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 113.

⁸ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 113.

does not know what is going on, is inferior to the second, who does know. This clearly shows the importance of discernment in the exertions.

§57. Sāriputta: Imagine a bronze bowl brought back from a shop or a smith all covered with dust & dirt, that the owners would neither use nor clean, but would throw away in the dust. Wouldn't that bronze bowl eventually become even more dirty & defiled with time?

Mahā Moggallāna: Yes, my friend.

Sāriputta: In the same way, when an individual with an internal blemish does not discern, as it actually is, that "I have an internal blemish," it can be expected of him that he will not generate desire, endeavor, or arouse persistence for the abandoning of that blemish. He will die with passion, aversion, delusion – blemished & with a mind defiled ...

We need to be able to recognise the presence of a blemish. But we also need to recognise the *absence* of a blemish, a more subtle act of attention.

Sāriputta: ... Now imagine a bronze bowl brought back from a shop or a smith all clean & pure, that the owners would neither use nor clean, but would throw away in the dust. Wouldn't that bronze bowl eventually become dirty & defiled with time?

Mahā Moggallāna: Yes, my friend.

Sāriputta: In the same way, when an individual with no internal blemish does not discern, as it actually is, that "I have no internal blemish," it can be expected of him that he will attend to the theme of beauty. As he attends to the theme of beauty, passion will despoil his mind. He will die with passion, aversion, delusion – blemished & with a mind defiled.⁹

Does the absence of blemish refer to a state of original innocence? But given normal life conditions, any such state of innocence will be lost, just as a bowl lying in the dust will become "dirty & defiled with time." We must *do* something, and continue to do it. Perhaps the point here is that a failure to recognise the absence of blemish leads to our taking that state for granted, identifying with it, and so becoming lost in the beauty of it. Lost in beauty – even spiritual beauty – attachment arises and grows strong. And discerning the absence of blemish in any given situation requires more sensitivity than simply seeing presence.

Doing

It's not enough to recognise a blemish – an unskilful mental quality. We have to *do* something about it. We saw last week the importance of "ardency" (*ātāpa*) in frames of reference (*satipaṭṭhāna*) practice. "Ardency" in the frames of reference corresponds to the four right exertions. Elsewhere (for example, Sangīti Sutta, D33) the Buddha speaks of the four exertions as the exertion to guard (*saṃvara-ppdhāna*), the exertion to abandon (*pahāna-ppdhāna*), the exertion to develop (*bhāvanā-ppdhāna*), and the exertion to maintain (*anurakkhaṇa-ppdhāna*).

⁹ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 115-16.

[§50] And what is the exertion to *guard*? There is the case where a monk, on seeing a form with the eye, does not grasp at any theme or variations by which – if he were to dwell without restraint over the faculty of the eye – evil, unskillful qualities such as greed [*abhijjhā*] or distress [*domanassa*] might assail him. He practices with restraint. He guards the faculty of the eye. He achieves restraint with regard to the faculty of the eye. (Similarly with the ear, nose, tongue, body, & intellect.) This is called the exertion to guard.

If this sounds familiar, then consider that in the first stage of frames of reference practice, the meditator is described as “putting aside greed [*abhijjhā*] & distress [*domanassa*] with reference to the world.” We find the same relationship with the world in both the right exertions and the frames of reference. In both, mindfulness lies at the centre of the project.

And what is the exertion to *abandon*? There is the case where a monk does not acquiesce to a thought of sensuality that has arisen [in him]. He abandons it, destroys it, dispels it, wipes it out of existence. He does not acquiesce to a thought of ill will ... harmfulness ... any evil, unskillful qualities that have arisen [in him]. He abandons them, destroys them, dispels them, wipes them out of existence. This is called the exertion to abandon.

We can see the energy required to satisfy this exertion. The practitioner “destroys,” “dispels” and “wipes out of existence” any “evil, unskillful qualities.” Here the practitioner is working on abandoning the five hindrances, the first list of mental qualities to appear in the fourth frame of reference. Again, mindfulness is central; but with a different flavour to the practice, one of purposeful and intense striving.

And what is the exertion to *develop*? There is the case where a monk develops [*bhāvanā*] the *mindfulness* factor of awakening dependent on seclusion ... dispassion ... cessation, resulting in letting go. He develops the *investigation of qualities* factor of awakening ... the *persistence* factor of awakening ... the *rapture* factor of awakening ... the *serenity* factor of awakening ... the *concentration* factor of awakening dependent on seclusion ... dispassion ... cessation, resulting in letting go. This is called the exertion to develop.

These seven factors of awakening are the other central list in the fourth frame of reference. Here the emphasis is on the positive aspect of “development” (*bhāvanā*), remembering that *bhāvanā* is the Pāli word routinely translated as “meditation.” Meditation *is* the cultivation of the factors of awakening. Further, the persistence factor of awakening is the same as the four right exertions. The exertions themselves must be cultivated. Here we can see the shift from the what to the how we spoke of last week. We exert ourselves to cultivate the skilful; but right exertion is itself skilful, so we exert ourselves to skilfully cultivate exertion itself. **How** do we exert ourselves?

And what is the exertion to *maintain*? There is the case where a monk maintains a favourable theme of concentration [*samādhi-nimitta*] – the skeleton perception, the worm-eaten perception, the livid perception, the festering perceptions, the falling-

apart perception, the bloated perception. This is called the exertion to maintain.
[A.IV.14]¹⁰

This final exertion is linked to the cultivation of concentration (*samādhi*). While the themes mentioned here are all concerned with the charnel ground contemplations as laid out in Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the same principle applies to any theme of meditation. Here we can see how the four right exertions are linked to concentration as much as discernment. The steady work of maintaining exertion develops concentration – which of course is also a factor of awakening. See how the lists intersect.

Different strategies for different circumstances

How is exertion to be made in the changing circumstances of the practice? For it is not enough to simply identify the skilful and unskilful; we must know what to do about it, *how* to cultivate the skilful and abandon the unskilful.

So skilfulness is applied to the cultivation of right exertion. In broad terms, sometimes it's enough to just be mindful of an unskilful quality; sometimes we must make a conscious effort to get rid of it.¹¹ (See §58-59.) So Ṭhānissaro rejects what he sees as doctrinaire approaches to the problem of effort, such as the “polar extremes of constant exertion to the point of exhaustion and its opposite, a knee-jerk fear of ‘efforting.’”¹² The Buddha examines this point in Devadaha Sutta (M101), in the context of a discussion with Nigaṇṭhas (Jains) who specialised in painful exertion. Here the Buddha asks, how can we succeed in our exertion?

§59. And how is striving fruitful, how is exertion fruitful? There is the case where a monk, when not loaded down, does not load himself down with pain, nor does he reject pleasure that accords with the Dhamma, although he is not infatuated with that pleasure. He discerns that [1] “When I exert a [mental] fabrication against this cause of stress, then from the fabrication of *exertion* there is dispassion (fading away). [2] When I look on with equanimity at that cause of stress, then from the development of *equanimity* there is dispassion.” So he [1] exerts a mental fabrication against the [first] cause of stress ... and [2] develops equanimity with regard to the [second] cause of stress. ... Thus the stress [coming from any cause of the first sort] is abolished ... & the stress [coming from any cause of the second sort] is abolished.

This represents a two-fold approach to the problem of exertion, bound up with the problem of pleasure. The Buddha gives the simile of a man in love with a woman, “his mind ensnared with intense desire & passion.” When he sees her chatting and joking with another man, he feels pain. So he abandons his desire and passion, the cause of his pain, rather than trying to force the woman to abandon such conversations. He is no longer upset by seeing her with others. He can allow her to be free.

The abandonment of “desire & passion” that cause pain corresponds to the first cause of stress, abandoned through exerting “a ... fabrication against this cause of

¹⁰ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 108-9.

¹¹ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 106-7.

¹² Thanissaro. *Wings*: 107.

stress.” The absence of pain when seeing the loved one after abandoning emotional ensnarement corresponds to the second cause of stress, abandoned through equanimity.

If we are hopelessly ensnared in a situation that gives us emotional pain, we need to do something about it, something sufficiently forceful and strong to pull us out of our condition. We need to make an intense effort to change our emotional state; to “exert a fabrication (*sankhāra*).” Once we do this, our relationship to the situation has changed. We can now simply witness it, allowing it the freedom to unfold. This would have been impossible at first; now it is appropriate. So we have two distinct but related strategies of attention.

Furthermore, the monk notices this: “When I live according to my pleasure, unskillful mental qualities increase in me & skillful qualities decline. When I exert myself with stress & pain, though, unskillful qualities decline in me & skillful qualities increase. Why don’t I exert myself with stress & pain?” So he exerts himself with stress & pain, and while he is exerting himself with stress & pain, unskillful qualities decline in him, & skillful qualities increase. Then at a later time he would no longer exert himself with stress & pain. Why is that? Because he has attained the goal for which he was exerting himself with stress & pain. ...¹³

Attention is linked to pleasure. If, living according to pleasure, we discern the growth of the unskillful and the decline of the skillful, then we should not live according to pleasure, but subject ourselves to painful training – *if* we can see that the result of this policy is decline in the unskillful and increase in the skillful. And if this policy is, indeed, successful, then there must come the time when we can abandon painful training and live according to pleasure. Only now our sense of pleasure itself has changed. What gave pleasure before does not now; what gives pleasure now is not what gave pleasure before. So exertion and pleasure are necessarily intertwined, and pleasure itself is subject to reshaping.

This approach to pleasure and pain is based on the Buddha’s experience of his mistakes made in the early days of his practice. In *Mahāsaccaka Sutta* (M36) he recalled his time before awakening, when he was a *bodhisatta* practising austerities. He made a supreme effort to “beat down, constrain, and crush” his mind with awareness, and in this way developed strong concentration. But his practice was stuck. Something else was needed.

For although tireless energy was aroused in me and unremitting mindfulness was established, my body was overwrought and agitated because I was exhausted by the painful striving.

The question he then asked himself was, “Why am I afraid of pleasure?” His fear came from the assumption that pleasure was always unskillful, but once he realised that pleasure could also be skillful, his strategy of attention could change. He cultivated appropriate attention, which enabled him to develop the kind of concentration that made his mind fit for discernment, and awakening. We could say that he discovered there’s more than one way to exert, and this flexibility in approach is fundamental to *right* exertion.

¹³ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 117-18.

Skill – not childlike awareness

Right exertion develops skill, and skill takes us to a place beyond skill, to unbinding (*nibbāna*). One implication of this fact is that awakening does not involve a return to a supposedly pure state of childhood. Awakening requires growth and development, beyond the state of the normal adult, but including it. Thānissaro comments:

[T]he goal of the practice is not an effort to return to a supposedly pure state of childlike awareness prior to social conditionings. ... [§61] According to Buddhist analysis, the state of a child's mind is one, not of purity, but of ignorance filled with the potential for many unskilled qualities. These qualities show themselves in seemingly innocent ways simply because the infant's intellectual and physical powers are weak. ... As one modern teacher has stated, the childlike mind is the source for the round of rebirth. If it were truly pure and fully aware, it would not be susceptible to unskillful social conditioning. Thus the way to purity lies, not in renouncing one's developed intellectual powers, but in developing those powers to higher levels of mastery and skill. This explains why right exertion is a necessary part of the practice.¹⁴

This is discussed in *Samaṇamaṇḍikā Sutta* (M78), which begins with a visit on the part of Pañcakaṅga the carpenter to Uggāhamāna, a student of Muṇḍikā the contemplative (the “shaven contemplative” – probably a Jain). Uggāhamāna teaches Pañcakaṅga the nature of an awakened one.

[§61] I describe an individual endowed with four qualities as being consummate in what is skillful, foremost in what is skillful, an invincible contemplative attained to the highest attainments. Which four? There is the case where he does no evil action with his body, speaks no evil speech, resolves on no evil resolve, and maintains himself with no evil means of livelihood.

Pañcakaṅga later asks the Buddha about Uggāhamāna's teaching, and he rejects it with the following argument:

In that case, then according to Uggāhamāna's words a stupid baby boy, lying on its back, is consummate in what is skillful, foremost in what is skillful, an invincible contemplative attained to the highest attainments. For even the thought “body” does not occur to a stupid baby boy lying on its back, so from where would it do any evil action with its body, aside from a little kicking? Even the thought “speech” does not occur to it, so from where would it speak any evil speech, aside from a little crying? Even the thought “resolve” does not occur to it, so from where would it resolve on any evil resolve, aside from a little bad temper? Even the thought “livelihood” does not occur to it, so from where would it maintain itself with any evil means of livelihood, aside from its mother's milk?

Clearly the Buddha regards awakening as something that comes *after* training, and *after* normal psychological development. It is not something already given. The Buddha goes on to describe as “being consummate in what is skillful, foremost in what is skillful, an invincible contemplative attained to the highest attainments” one who has ten qualities, those of the tenfold path, the ultimate fulfillment of the eightfold path of the trainee.

¹⁴ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 107-8.

He is endowed with the right view of one beyond training, the right resolve of one beyond training, the right speech ... the right action ... the right livelihood ... the right effort ... the right mindfulness ... the right concentration ... the right knowledge [*sammā ñāṇa*] ... the right release [*sammā vimutti*] of one beyond training.

Before then, the Buddha explains the skills that result in the movement from “a stupid baby boy lying on its back” to the qualities of “one beyond training.” These are in four sections dealing with two qualities: “habits” (*sīla*) and “resolves” (*samkappa*). Each of these is considered in terms of skilful and unskilful, making four categories in all. And each category has the pattern of the four truths: *x*; the arising of *x*; the cessation of *x*; and the path that leads to the cessation of *x*.

He should know from experience that “These are unskillful habits,” I say. He should know from experience that “That is the cause of unskillful habits,” I say. He should know from experience that “Here unskillful habits cease without remainder,” I say. He should know from experience that “This sort of practice is the practice leading to the cessation of unskillful habits,” I say.

Similarly with skilful habits, unskilful resolves and skilful resolves. Note that all of these depend on “experience.” What must be cultivated is a sensitive and sophisticated understanding, and this does not arise without cause. And of course, the main source of experience is practice, the path of the fourth truth, which leads to the cessation of both the skilful and the unskilful – “beyond training.” Training leads to the cessation of training.

And what sort of practice is the practice leading to the cessation of unskillful habits? There is the case where a monk generates desire, endeavors, arouses persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the sake of the non-arising of evil, unskillful qualities that have not yet arisen ... for the sake of the abandoning of evil, unskillful qualities that have arisen ... for the sake of the arising of skillful qualities that have not yet arisen ... (and) for the maintenance, non-confusion, increase, plenitude, development, & culmination of skillful qualities that have arisen. This sort of practice is the practice leading to the cessation of unskillful habits. ... leading to the cessation of skillful habits ... leading to the cessation of unskillful resolves ... leading to the cessation of skillful resolves¹⁵

Conclusion

The four right exertions conform to a model – that of dependent co-arising and the four noble truths. They are one part of this broader pattern. Reality is contingent, and can be shaped. We can move ourselves and our experienced world from stress (*dukkha*) to unbinding (*nibbāna*). The question is, how? The answer to this question is found in the path.

This path necessarily includes the role of *doing*, of active striving, exertion. The four right exertions elaborate this aspect of the path. They correspond to the path factor of right effort (*sammā vāyāma*). They include both “what” and “how.” *What* we must do is strive; *how* we must strive is in such a way that the unskilful declines and the skilful increases.

¹⁵ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 119-23.

The peak of striving is striving without striving, or effortless effort.

§62. A deva: Tell me, dear sir, how you crossed over the flood.

The Buddha: I crossed over the flood without pushing forward, without staying in place.

The deva: But how did you cross over the flood without pushing forward, without staying in place?

The Buddha: When I pushed forward, I was whirled about. When I stayed in place, I sank. And so I crossed over the flood without pushing forward, without staying in place.¹⁶ [S.I.1]

This represents the peak of mindfulness and concentration, which we will look at next week.

¹⁶ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 123.