

What Is Right Effort?

There are four ways of exerting ourselves in line with the Dhamma.

1. *Make a persistent effort to abandon whatever evil there is in your conduct.* For example, if you have given yourself over to drinking to the point where you have become alcoholic, spoiling your work, wasting your money and yourself, creating problems in your family, this is classed as a kind of evil. Or, if you have given yourself over to gambling to the point where you have lost all sense of proportion, blindly gambling your money away, creating trouble for yourself and others, this too is classed as a kind of evil. Or, if you have let yourself become promiscuous, going from partner to partner beyond the bounds of propriety, this can be damaging to your spouse and children, wasting your money, ruining your reputation, and so is classed as a kind of evil, too. Or, if you have been associating with the wrong kind of people, troublemakers and debauched types who will pull you down to their level, this will cause you to lose your money, your reputation, and whatever virtue you may have. Thus, each of these activities is classed as an evil — a doorway to ruin and to the lower realms — so you should make a persistent effort to abandon each of them completely.

2. *Make a persistent effort to prevent evil from arising; and use restraint to put a halt to whatever evil may be in the process of arising.* An example would be when greedy desires that go against the principles of fairness appear within you. For instance, suppose you have a ten-acre plot of land that you have not utilized fully, and yet you go infringing on other people's property. This is classed as greedy desire, a path to trouble and suffering for yourself and others. Now, this does not mean that you are not allowed to eat and live, or that you are not allowed to work and search for wealth. Actually, those who have the enterprise to make whatever land or wealth they own to bear fruit, or even increasing its fruit, were praised by the Buddha as "*utthana-sampada*," enterprising, industrious people who will gain a full measure of welfare in this lifetime. Greedy desires, here, mean any desires that go beyond our proper limits and infringe on other people. This sort of desire is bound to cause harm and so is classed as a kind of evil. When such a desire arises in the heart, you should use restraint to put a halt to it. This is what is meant by preventing evil from arising.

Another example is anger, arising from either good or bad intentions that, when unfulfilled, lead to feelings of irritation and dissatisfaction. Such feelings should be stilled. Do not let them flare up and spread, for anger is something you do not like in other people, and they do not like it in you. Thus, it is classed as a kind of evil. You should exert restraint and keep your mind on a steady and even keel. Your anger will not then have a chance to grow and will gradually fade away. This is what is meant by making a persistent effort to keep evil from taking root and sprouting branches.

Or take delusion (*moha*) — knowledge that does not fit the truth: You should not jump to conclusions. Restrain yourself from making snap judgments so that you can first examine and consider things carefully. For instance, sometimes you understand right to be wrong, and wrong to be right: This is delusion. When right looks wrong to you, your thoughts, words, and deeds are bound to be wrong, out of line with the truth, and so can cause you to slip into ways that are evil. When wrong looks right to you, your thoughts, words, and deeds are also bound to be wrong and out of line with the truth. Suppose that a black crow looks white to you; or an albino buffalo, black: When people who see the truth meet up with you, disputes can result. This is thus a form of evil. Or suppose that you have good intentions but act out of delusion: If you happen to do wrong — for example, giving food to monks at times when they are not allowed to eat, all because of your own ignorance and delusion — you will end up causing harm. Therefore, you should be careful to observe events and situations, searching for knowledge so as to keep your thoughts and opinions in line. Delusion then won't have a chance to arise. This is classed as making an effort to exercise restraint so that evil won't arise.

As for whatever evil you have already abandoned, do not let it return. Cut off the evil behind you and fend off the evil before you. Evil will thus have a chance to fade away.

3. *Make a persistent effort to give rise to the good within yourself.* For example:

a. *Saddha-sampada*: Be a person of mature conviction — *conviction in the principle of cause and effect*; conviction that if we do good, we will have to meet with good; if we do evil, we will have to meet with evil. Whether or not other people are aware of our actions, the goodness we do is a form of wealth that will stay with us throughout time.

b. *Sila-sampada*: Be a person of mature virtue, whose words and deeds are in proper order, whose behaviour is in line with the principles of honesty leading to purity. These are truly human values that we should foster within ourselves.

c. *Caga-sampada*: Be magnanimous and generous in making donations and offerings to others, finding reward in the fruits of generosity. For example, we may give material objects so as to support the comfort and convenience of others in general: The fruits of our generosity are bound to find their way back to us. Or, we may be magnanimous in ways that do not involve material objects. For instance, when other people mistreat or insult us through thoughtlessness or carelessness, we forgive them and do not let our thoughts dwell on their faults and errors. This is called the gift of forgiveness (*abhaya-dana*) or the gift of justice (*dhamma-dana*). It brings the highest rewards.

d. *Pañña-sampada*: Be a person of mature discernment, whose thinking is circumspect and whose sense of reason is in line with the truth.

All four of these qualities are classed as forms of goodness. If they haven't yet arisen within you, you should give rise to them. They will reward you with well-being in body and mind.

4. *Make a persistent effort to maintain the good in both of its aspects: cause and effect.* In other words, keep up whatever good you have been doing; and as for the results — mental comfort, ease and light-heartedness — maintain that sense of ease so that it can develop and grow, just as a mother hen guards her eggs until they turn into baby chicks with feathers, tails, sharp beaks, and strong wings, able to fend for themselves.

The results of the good we have done, if we care for them well, are bound to develop until they take us to higher levels of attainment. For instance, when our hearts have had their full measure of mundane happiness, so that we develop a sense of enough, we're bound to search for other forms of happiness in the area of the Dhamma, developing our virtue, concentration, and discernment to full maturity so as to gain release from all suffering and stress, meeting with the peerless ease described in the phrase,

Nibbanam paramam sukham:

Nibbana is the ultimate ease, invariable and unchanging.

When we have done good in full measure and have maintained it well until it is firmly established within us, we should then make the effort to use that good with discretion so as to benefit people in general. In short: Do what is good, maintain what is good, and have a sense of how to use what is good — in keeping with time, place, and situation — so as to give rise to the greatest benefit and happiness. Whoever can do all of this ranks as a person established in Right Effort.

Source: Adapted from "The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind", by Ajaan Lee Dhammardharo, translated from the Thai by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 1 December 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/thai/lee/pathtopeace.html>