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# Freedom through Cumulative Moral Cultivation: Heroic Willpower (*Vīrya*)

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# Freedom through Cumulative Moral Cultivation: Heroic Willpower (*Vīrya*)

Jonathan C. Gold<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Although abstract speculation on “freedom of the will” is hard to find in premodern Buddhist writings, this is not for Buddhists’ lack of attention to responsibility and effortful moral acts. This paper studies early teachings on the *dharmas* called “effort” (*vyāyāma*) and “heroic willpower” (*vīrya*), which are key to such quintessential Buddhist lists as the Eightfold Path, the Four Right Endeavors, and the Perfections cultivated by a bodhisattva. A look at effortful action as treated in traditional Buddhist texts helps to show why the western philosophical preoccupation with “free will” is not self-evidently worthwhile from a practical or moral perspective. Effort on the Buddhist path accumulates into moral strength through numerous and different kinds of enactments at the level of individual mental events. The goal of this model of practice is that one arrives at the ability to transcend the busy, messy

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work of having to *decide* to act morally—one’s virtue becomes spontaneous. This structure suggests that not only is the capacity for moral choice not a necessary precondition of effective practice or moral significance; it may get in the way.

### Introduction

To the surprise of many modern interpreters, premodern Buddhists do not seem to have addressed free will as a philosophical problem. While some have taken this as evidence that Buddhists simply avoided a badly formed conceptual cul-de-sac, others have taken up the question on behalf of Buddhists, posing extensions or explanations of Buddhist doctrines that describe Buddhists as reflecting one or another kind of incompatibilist or compatibilist, libertarian or determinist. This field of inquiry has advanced considerably in sophistication and precision in recent years (Repetti *Buddhist*).

Yet, the fact that Buddhists have not addressed the issue of free will as framed by western thinkers does not mean that Buddhist texts do not provide ample analytical material on the topic of will. On the contrary, one of the stages in the Eightfold Path is Right Effort, and one of the six (or ten) perfections of a bodhisattva is “strength” or “willpower” (*vīrya*). These concepts are richly defined, yet they have received little attention in this context. Most comparative philosophy looks for answers to familiar questions in foreign traditions. An alternative model, adopted here, is to discover the contingency of one’s own perspectives by noticing how differently other traditions pose and frame their topics. A look at effortful action as treated in traditional Buddhist texts helps to show why the western philosophical preoccupation with “free will” is not self-evidently worthwhile from a practical or moral perspective.

The Buddha's teaching, the *Dharma*,<sup>2</sup> is often expressed in well-known lists such as the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path—lists of entities called *dharmas*, components of reality. Traditions of disciplined analysis of *dharmas*, collating the Buddha's lists and clarifying the meaning and function of their many components, are called “Abhidharma” traditions, analyzing as they do the true *Dharma* in search of the highest understanding of the *dharmas*. Modern students of Buddhist thought are often unduly biased against *dharma* analysis by their acquaintance with the philosophy of Nāgārjuna. Nāgārjuna, taking up a theme in the Mahāyāna scriptures, famously criticized Abhidharma authors for having reified the *dharmas* of the Buddha's teachings into a fundamental ontology of independent, self-existent entities (e.g., Siderits & Katsura). Nāgārjuna argued that nothing could possibly be properly independent or self-existent. Everything, he showed, depends upon other things not only for its existence, but for its very conceivability. In this line, Nāgārjuna propounded a wonderful, incomparable series of skeptical arguments, and his writings promote a Buddhist perspective with subtlety and wit.

Yet while much of Abhidharma is concerned with isolating and describing the most basic components of the teachings, not all Abhidharma philosophers had necessarily fallen into the trap of claiming that the *dharmas* are independent, self-existent entities. We do not need to throw out the baby with the bathwater. It is certainly possible to find utility in the analysis of the *dharmas* that are components of the Buddha's teachings—the elements in the lists—without mistakenly imagining that these elements constitute a fundamental ontology. Let us proceed, then, without assuming this mistake—and choose either to imagine

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<sup>2</sup> This paper makes use of sources from both Pāli and Sanskrit scriptures, but I use the well-known Sanskrit words *Dharma* and *dharma* throughout except when citing a translation.

ourselves Abhidharma philosophers who refrain from reification or essentialization of *dharmas*, or who have been purified by Nāgārjuna's critique.<sup>3</sup>

What, then, is Abhidharma philosophy—*dharma* analysis—without essentialization? It is simply analysis of the meaning of the various components of Buddhist teachings. Say we are looking at the Eightfold Path. The question might arise, what are the various entities here?

1. Right View
2. Right Intention
3. Right Speech
4. Right Action
5. Right Livelihood
6. Right Effort
7. Right Mindfulness
8. Right Concentration

If we are not looking for their invariable essences, we can admit that the *dharmas* listed in the Eightfold Path are complex. The Buddha defined Right Speech, for instance, in contrast to several different kinds of morally deleterious speech: Not lying, not engaging in divisive or abusive speech, and not engaging in idle chatter.<sup>4</sup> These rules limit and shape speech to make it “right,” while still allowing for many speech acts, in a wide variety. As long as one is careful to be speaking truly, speaking with soothing and conciliatory words, and speaking with a purpose, it is possible to consider it Right Speech to engage in such diverse speech acts as

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<sup>3</sup> My intent is not to defend a particular Abhidharma tradition, only to engage in doctrinal analysis in an Abhidharma mode.

<sup>4</sup> SN 45.8: “And what is right speech? Abstaining from lying, abstaining from divisive speech, abstaining from abusive speech, abstaining from idle chatter: This, monks, is called right speech.” (Ṭhānissaro 1338)

providing directions to the market, advising a friend, or analyzing the *Dharma*.

Let's linger a moment to notice that Right Speech is characterized in the negative—*via negativa*. Certain kinds of speech are forbidden, but none are required. Under such a definition, silence may be considered in some contexts to be a form of “Right Speech.” This conveniently allows it to be said that a monk in concentrative equipoise could be following the path. Yet this is a strange idea; keeping silent is often a good thing to do, but it is not really *speech*. And while it would appear that a disciplined, meditating monk ought to be an ideal path-follower, it is odd to think that silence could be the *paradigm case* of a *dharma* called “Right Speech.” The mistake here, I suggest, is to think that the *dharma* element necessarily *has* a paradigm case; “Right Speech” is a term defined by a border drawn with a description of what is *outside* the limit, without naming what is *inside*.

Students of Buddhist epistemology will notice a parallel, in this description, with Dignāga's doctrine of *apoha*—the explanation of how concepts are formed, via “exclusion” (Siderits, Tillemans & Chakrabarti). Perhaps Dignāga came to his theoretical understanding of concepts while contemplating some of the Buddha's *dharma* descriptions. Whatever the case may be, it stands to reason that there need be no singular essence to the *dharma* “Right Speech.” That does not, of course, prevent Right Speech from serving as a guide to practice for Buddhist followers. On the contrary, the fact that Right Speech includes many kinds of speech, and even includes silence, allows the *dharma* to serve as a guide for lay people and monks in a variety of situations on the path of practice.

As with Right Speech, Right Effort is a complex *dharma*, which provides instruction for Buddhist practitioners in a diverse array of states and activities. Effort is itself multiple—it is not one thing but a

combination of many things—and it is invoked in several different forms and with several distinct purposes for practitioners on different stages of the Buddhist path. In what follows, then, we will examine the ways effort is described across the teachings, in the hope that it will illuminate something about the complex concept of will in Buddhism that direct searches for “free will” have neglected to note.

### The Four Kinds of Effort in the Right Endeavors

Let us begin with the early scriptures’ standard exposition of Right Effort (*sammā-vyāma/samyag-vyāyāma*), which is to assimilate it to another list called the Four Right Endeavors (*samma-ppadhāna/samyak-prahāna*):<sup>5</sup>

The monk [1] generates the desire to act, strives, initiates strength, takes hold of the mind, endeavors for the sake of the non-arising of bad, unskillful *dhammas* that have not arisen; [2] generates the desire to act, strives, initiates strength, takes hold of the mind, endeavors for the sake of the abandoning bad unskillful *dhammas* that have arisen; [3] generates the desire to act, strives, initiates strength, takes hold of the mind, endeavors for the sake of the aris-

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<sup>5</sup> For example, SN 45.8: “And what, monks, is right effort? (i) 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. (ii) He generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the sake of the abandonment of evil, unskillful qualities that have arisen. (iii) He generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the sake of the arising of skillful qualities that have not yet arisen. (iv) 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: This, monks, is called right effort.” (Thānissaro 1339)

ing of skillful *dhammas* that have not yet arisen; [4] generates the desire to act, strives, initiates strength, takes hold of the mind, endeavors for the sake of establishing, of not losing, of increase, of abundance, of development, of fulfillment of skillful *dhammas* that have arisen.<sup>6</sup>

The Buddha is careful to distinguish between what we might call exertion or effortful activity per se, and the *action goals* that one exerts oneself to achieve. Each of these is fourfold. For each of four kinds of actions that are the proper goals of effort, the Buddha repeats a list of four distinct activities that express effort itself:

The Monk's Four Effortful Activities

1. He generates the desire to act (Pāli *chandaṃ janeti*, Skt. *chandaṃ janayati*)
2. He strives (*vāyamati*, *vyayacchate*)
3. He initiates strength (*viriyam ārabhati*, *vīryam ārabhati*)
4. He takes hold of the mind (*cittaṃ paggaṇhāti*, *cittaṃ praḡrhnāti*)

These four activities together seem to express the meaning of effort or endeavor, though not yet *right* effort or *right* endeavor. What is the rela-

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<sup>6</sup> This is Gethin's (69) translation, except: I've changed "*bhikkhu*" to "monk"; "generates purpose" to "generates the desire to act" and "takes hold of his mind" to "takes hold of the mind" for stylistic reasons. This translation is based upon the Pāli. The parallel Sanskrit passage from the Āgamas does not repeat the list of all four effortful activities each time; it only repeats "generates the desire to act" (*chandaṃ janayati*). See Gethin (69-72) for a compelling discussion of the rather mysterious fact that the Sanskrit uses the term *prahāṇa* ("abandoning") where the topic is clearly "endeavor." I take this opportunity to acknowledge, with gratitude, the deep benefit that I have found from Gethin's work. Many of the details and themes I take up here are indebted to his treatments, including the notion of *dharma*, the varied uses for a *dharma* concept at different stages on the path, and the interconnected nature of the *dharma* lists. Gethin is of course not responsible for how my work builds upon (he might say obscures) his.

tion between these four activities? Do they combine to *make* effort, or are they simply distinct kinds of effort? It is not difficult to imagine engaging in at least some of them separately. The second, “he strives,” is the least precise and I would agree it might be occurring whenever one enacts any of the other three. But the others seem to be quite different mental activities. One can generate a desire to act without initiating strength or taking hold of the mind. I believe the best sense is made if we read the four terms as sequential stages of endeavor: A monk (1) “generates the desire to act,” by (for instance) placing before his awareness an understanding of the benefits or reasons that might motivate a given action, which then (2) ignites an initial yearning or striving, which (3) builds into strength (*vīryam*) only after amassing a certain degree of stability and force, so that finally, it is that strength, an accumulation of striving power, that makes it possible for him to (4) take mental control and stimulate the intended action.

This psychologically subtle articulation of distinct stages in the exertion of effort describes the effort that goes into performing a difficult action as not a single exertion, but as the accumulated result of multiple, differentiated engagements. What brings about the intended action is not a single impulse, but the collected strength that has been cultivated by numerous exertions—or, perhaps, the combined force of a string of exertions with a final last exertion. Although there is a natural progression through the four exertion types, my reading does not imply that the four effortful activities necessarily occur one after the other, like dominos, each knocking over the next as it falls. Instead, I am positing that generating the desire to act will not always work to condition striving the first time it is applied; that, in turn, striving *multiple times* might be required to initiate strength; and that *initiating* strength might itself require many exertions in order to *amass* sufficient strength to harness the mind. The flow seems to move forward, but not exclusively, and I am reading it as accruing causal force cumulatively.

This minute description of distinct stages in a monk's efforts, then, provides a kind of toolbox for directing intention so as to bring about effective action. If you are trying to control the mind directly but don't have the strength to do so, you may be wasting your time; you might do better to step back and generate a motivational image that is sufficient to stimulate striving. On the other hand, if you already have the strength necessary to act, you might be wasting effort by lingering on your motivation. Awareness of one's own mind's capacities and needs with respect to each kind of effortful action would therefore constitute skill in cultivating effort.

Such a practical discussion contrasts quite starkly with modern concerns with "freedom of the will." In a sense, the whole complex represents a quintessential description of the exercise of will—it is how one can control one's mind by strength of will (*vīryam*). Yet the need to pop the hood on effort so as to describe these kinds of ordinarily subconscious or minimally conscious processes is grounded in the Buddhist premise that most of the time we are acting on impulses and are *not* properly in control of our minds (even when we make a powerful effort). Usually, it is unskillful, bad desires that are placed before our motivational striving, so that our efforts are misdirected. This means that what moderns think of, conventionally, as "free will" is *never* as it appears. Subconscious causes govern our behavior, so the idea of an agent who acts freely must be an illusion.

The question of whether we can "freely" control the mind *once we pop the hood*, then, has come to the fore in contemporary conversations over free will in Buddhism. Yet even for the suggested method here, there is a manipulative aspect to the practice; we trick ourselves, through a kind of motivational therapy, to want to do what is beneficial, when ordinarily we might not. Here the complex causal structure of the

mind is still part and parcel of *samsāra*; it is just taking advantage of the Buddha's teaching, the *Dharma*, to transform itself toward liberation. But what constitutes strength of will here, and more generally liberation for Buddhists, is not freedom of an individual or personal will; it is the freedom to act "right," which is to say, in accord with the *Dharma*.<sup>7</sup>

### Moral Action as Mental Control

When we turn to the Buddha's analysis of the four action goals of these subtle efforts, the moral nature of endeavor—what makes it "right" endeavor—comes to the fore. To be concise, effort on the path is effort to "do the right thing." In a Buddhist worldview, events are characterized as either skillful and good, unskillful and bad, or neutral. Now, nothing needs to be done, or ought to be done, about a neutral state. Everything else in our experience, however, down to the minute contents of our mental states, has been explained by the Buddha as being positive or negative. This provides a natural binary of "right things" to "do" in any given scenario: Accept the good or reject the bad. Yet in the discussion of effort, the Buddha does not stop with these two. Zooming in on each of these states, he notes that, in fact, what needs to happen is quite different when qualities are not yet arisen, as opposed to when they have already come about. When an unwholesome state is unarisen, one must prevent it from arising. When it is already arisen, one must abandon it. When a wholesome state is unarisen, one must bring it about. When it is

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<sup>7</sup> Repetti ("Agentless" 202-203) pleasingly argues that Buddhist free actions may be called "*dharma*-responsive" rather than "reason-responsive," as traditional free will advocates might require. This is a useful observation, and I would add the further point that *dharma* is ultimately natural law in a moral key, known and taught by Buddhas but not made up by them. Thus, pure *dharma*-responsiveness is always just "doing the right thing"—as I will argue below, that is, perfected *vīrya*.

already arisen, one must make it grow. Although all four actions could rightly be described as “doing the right thing,” because the four goals are quite different, there is no single activity that suffices to enact them all.

<u>Four Action Goals</u>	<u>Four Categories of <i>dharmas</i></u>
1. Non-arising	Unarisen, bad and unskillful <i>dharmas</i>
2. Abandoning	Arisen, bad and unskillful <i>dharmas</i>
3. Arising	Unarisen, good and skillful <i>dharmas</i>
4. Maintenance	Arisen, good and skillful <i>dharmas</i>

The four categories of *dharmas* described here make up a neat, abstract, exclusive and comprehensive set. Yet they each delineate a wide array of quite specific and differentiated activities. The Buddha slotted in examples of practices on the Buddhist path that enact each of the four endeavors in one *Aṅguttaranikāya* passage (Gethin 73-74), thereby indicating exemplary methods for cultivating each form of Right Effort or, at least, identifying and illuminating the kinds of activity that are delineated under each category. The four practices the Buddha associated with the four endeavors are as follows:

<u>Endeavor</u>	<u>Object for practice</u>
1. Restraining	The sense doors
2. Abandoning	Thoughts of desire, hatred and cruelty
3. Developing	Factors of awakening
4. Protecting	The image in contemplating ugliness

Attention to these practices reveals that effort is required to bring about any particularly difficult activity in the *Dharma*, and that effortful action is always what we might call mentally directional—it is positive or negative toward a given state of mind, and always works against a specific direction and type of resistance.

Some have argued that this list is progressive, and that one cultivates each of the four endeavors here sequentially, through the use of these four methods of practice (Gethin 74). It seems to me that this works vaguely, but we must be careful not to read too much into this ordering. In fact, while the first three seem to follow other presentations of the path (as we will see below), the pattern breaks down with the fourth endeavor. The fourth practice listed, the concentration contemplating ugliness, is primarily a method for overcoming sensual desire. In this practice, the monk thinks through the parts of his body (hairs, nails, bile, phlegm, etc.) and notes their ugliness. Paired with the charnel ground contemplations, where he visualizes corpses in various states of decay, this practice helps the monk overcome mental grasping after any physical body that might otherwise be distractingly attractive. This means that protecting the image of ugliness (the *fourth* endeavor here) is a standard subsidiary to the *second* endeavor, the abandonment of thoughts of desire. So, the fourth cannot be taken to belong sequentially *after* the other three. The fourth endeavor ought to encourage us to think of the four methods as interconnected and mutually supportive.

Now, as a counter-argument it might be proposed that, because the fourth practice is used to overcome attachment to *one's own* body as well as the bodies of others, it can lead to the perception of no-self, and in that case its culmination would be the highest possible attainment after all. In response, I would only note that one could launch a similar argument that any of these practices, fully perfected, might issue in full awakening.

More interesting for our purposes, I think, is the selection of the ugliness contemplation as something that one particularly needs to “protect” with *effort*. This suggests that, although the ugliness contemplations are beneficial, the images they require you to invoke are *difficult to maintain*—presumably, because they are repulsive and frightening. You

need to protect them because any flagging of effort will make them disappear. Consider the effortful activity when you imagine trying to *maintain* and *deepen* a state where you are visualizing something repulsive and frightening. Now consider the effort required to actively *abandon* an engaging thought of desire or hatred. These efforts are directionally contrary. One is, we might say, a *mind-positive* effort—trying to keep up something the mind is already doing—and the other is a *mind-negative*. Given that practically any beneficial *dharma* could have been used to exemplify a quality that should be protected, the fact that the ugliness contemplation is selected here makes this point particularly forcefully. The selection of exemplary practices helps us see how the Right Endeavors list summarizes and synthesizes effortful action into an extremely simple set of instructions. It is “do the right thing,” as long as we understand that everything that can be *done* is occurring in a very minute scale of *mental acts*, each of which always consists in reacting to a given observed mental state with a mental *yes* or a mental *no*.

Of course, Right Effort as “do the right thing” in the mind implies that effort is intertwined with other aspects of the path. To enact the proper effortful engagement, one needs to have not just the ability to see the mind (Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration), but also an understanding of the difference between right and wrong—that is, one needs Right View.

What this means, then, is that moral action is action that moves the mind in the proper way. If it fails to work—which will be common, because the mind is difficult to tame—we have a case of what modern philosophers call “weakness of will” (Stroud). Effort, sincerely made, fails, and you end up acting (mentally) in a way that you know is, all things considered, for the worse. Weakness of will is simply not a conceptual problem in Buddhism; it is the norm, which is to say, it is the main *practical* problem. That leaves the question of what happens when

effort *succeeds*—that is, when the *yes* translates into action, or the *no* prevents it. Presumably, this occurs because of an accumulated strength or willpower, which is sufficient to harness the mind.

The question posed from the conceptual frame of western “freedom of the will,” then, would be whether such a cumulative causal sequence constitutes a “free” action. Yet this question is orthogonal to the Buddhist’s practical and moral question of whether one is far enough on the path of cultivation to be “free” of the patterned negative mental states that prevent one from doing what is right.

### **Kinds of Effort on the Path**

Even if the four kinds of effort do not themselves constitute a strict sequential order, we can learn a good deal about the Buddhist understanding of effort by noticing where and how exertion appears in the stages of the path. To begin, it is clear that “restraint” applied to “the sense doors”—the first of the four types—is situated early on the traditional Buddhist path of practice. This is evident if we examine the standard sequential order of the path according to early Buddhism.

The path is most often described in the *dharma* list of the Eightfold Path, but for a complete and detailed sequential order I prefer to use the outline below. It is my own sketch, containing one line for each stage in the common *sūta* passage that Johannes Bronkhorst calls “the most general presentation of the Buddhist path,” which appears “perhaps twenty or thirty times in the discourses preserved in Pāli” (Bronkhorst 176):

1. A Buddha appears in the world, teaching.
2. After contemplating the Buddha’s teachings, one renounces lay life, which leads to:

3. No killing, no stealing, and celibacy;
4. No lying, no malicious speech, no divisive speech, no harsh speech, no gossip, *Dharma*;
5. Contentment with robes and almsfood; “noble virtue” → “blameless bliss”;
6. Restraint of the eye faculty, etc. → “unsullied bliss”;
7. Acting in full awareness while moving, flexing, standing, sitting, etc.;
8. → “noble mindfulness and full awareness,” finds a place to sit;
9. Establishes mindfulness before him and abandons the five hindrances;
10. Enters and abides in the first stage of meditation;
11. Enters and abides in the second stage of meditation;
12. Enters and abides in the third stage of meditation;
13. Enters and abides in the fourth stage of meditation;
14. Directs the purified mind to the abandoning of the taints → sees the Four Noble Truths;
15. Mind is liberated from the three taints; birth and death are conquered.<sup>8</sup>

There are many exceptions to this pattern in the early literature, but typically: The practitioner renounces home and family (2) only after having encountered a Buddha (1), and immediately adopts moral restraint in action (3) and speech (4). After a time, the new monk<sup>9</sup> becomes content with the life of a renunciant and feels a distinctive kind of joy in

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<sup>8</sup> The translation terms here reflect the translation by Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi (272ff), as cited by Bronkhorst (176-177).

<sup>9</sup> Although the Buddha’s early community contained nuns, this oft-repeated sūta passage, like many of the Buddha’s teachings, has the Buddha referring to a male monk. One of the many variants on this path would be needed for it to be followed by a woman.

moral purity called “blameless bliss” as a result of the virtuous behavior he has cultivated (5). It is at this point that the disciple begins the training called “restraint of the sense faculties” (6)—the first of the four practices the Buddha associates with right endeavor or Right Effort. Notice that it is this practice and the next, acting in full awareness while moving, etc. (7), that, respectively, lead to the “noble mindfulness and full awareness” which qualify him to *sit down to meditate* (8) *for the first time* in the path sequence. He then practices mindfulness meditation leading to freedom from the five hindrances (9), which opens up the four concentrated meditation stages (*jhāna*) in sequence (10-13). Finally, he uses the mind purified by the fourth meditation stage to see the four noble truths and attain liberation (14-15).

Although the path begins with various moral cultivations, *effort* in moral cultivation only begins with the practice of “restraint of the senses.” This fits with our analysis that sees Right Effort on the path as concerned with controlling the mind directly. It also fits with how, on the Eightfold Path, Right Effort is generally considered, together with Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration, as the part of the path focused on meditative cultivation. It is preceded by the more general moral cultivations of Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. Notice as well that Right Effort is *followed* by Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. In the path sequence above, these three stages of the Eightfold Path are represented by the efforts of the restraint practice actually *generating* the “noble mindfulness” that is then used, together with “full awareness,” to keep sitting meditation practice on track, which leads in turn to the advanced meditative states.

Before we examine these connections between effort, mindfulness and concentration on the path, let us look a bit more closely at the practice of restraint of the sense faculties:

And how does a monk guard the doors to his sense faculties? 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 or distress 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. (AN 4.37: Ṭhānissaro 1564)

This formula is standardly repeated with regard to all five senses and the mind. The struggle here is quite explicit and vivid. Too much distraction can lead to uncontrolled, evil, unskillful thoughts. Monks are supposed to keep their eyes pointing downward, lest an attractive object of sensual desire should wander into their visual field. And the Buddha prohibited monks from attending musical and dance performances. But the practice of restraining the senses acknowledges that sometimes the eye, the ear, etc., and the mind are susceptible to images arising without invitation. It is, then, about control of the faculty of the eye *after* the monk has seen a visual form. It is therefore about restraining the mind, and preventing something potentially compromising from capturing attention, and leading to greed or distress. Yes, be careful what you look at, but even more so, once you've seen something (or thought of something), prevent yourself from grasping after it.

In the previous stages of the path, the monk has cultivated a high degree of moral purity by disconnecting himself from social obligations and refraining from negative actions and speech, and this leads to “blameless bliss.” The further restraint of the senses, now, issues in a yet more refined state called “unsullied bliss.” Notice how the psychological benefit (“bliss”) is inseparable from an enriched moral standing. Guarding the senses prevents evil, unskillful thoughts, which frees one from negative mental states and purifies the mind. This, in itself, is blissful.

Basic Buddhism teaches that suffering arises from craving, viz. “not getting what one wants.” The monk who is able to intervene in his own mind before a sensation generates a desire, or even a conceptualization, is able to stay free from the subtle suffering caused by craving after a passing car, person, outfit, or sandwich, and maintains thereby a rare and refined state of pleasant composure.

So, there is a psychological benefit—but it is not *only* psychological. Practices on the path are the surest ways to benefit both oneself and others. After all, for countless lifetimes, we have blindly followed after the desires that grow from our senses. To practice the *Dharma* is to align ourselves with the Buddha’s *dharma*s as articulated in lists, but also with *dharma* in the more ancient sense of a natural, moral order. One is *doing the right thing* in the sense that it is the best way to behave; it is the behavior cultivated and recommended by all Buddhas for all time. This is why, wherever an action recommended requires effort, the *dharma* that is the object of the action is described as evil *and* unwholesome, or good *and* skillful. This is how the *Dharma* always works in Buddhism: It is “good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end” (AN 3.65).

As the path advances, the Buddha’s discussions of effort are intertwined with mindfulness and concentration. Surely the *locus classicus* for mindfulness practice in the early sūtra literature is the *Foundations of Mindfulness Sūtra*, in which the Buddha provides detailed instructions in how to cultivate mindfulness by contemplating four attentional objects: body, feelings, mind, and *dharma*s. For each of these four items, the Buddha repeats the following formula:

[A] monk dwells contemplating [the body in the body], ardent, clearly comprehending, and mindful, having subdued longing and dejection in regard to the world. (Bodhi 281-2)

There is much of interest here. For instance, the idea of “having subdued longing and dejection in regard to the world” seems to fit well with our earlier observation that mastery of “restraint of the senses”—the initial cultivation of effort—ought to issue in the ability to prevent the arising of desire and aversion. The monk’s “dwelling” in this practice is then a combination of three things: mindfulness (itself, presumably already cultivated through the initial form of effort), clear comprehension, and *ardency*. With *ardency*, we have another form of effort. In fact, when “ardency” is taken as its own topic, it is glossed with the Four Right Endeavors, so it may be taken as just another term for effort. But it is not the same *direction* of effort as was the cultivation of restraint. The following analogy is a compelling example of the ardency that is applied in the practice of mindfulness of the body focusing on the breath:

Just as a skilled lathe-worker or his apprentice, when making a long turn, understands: ‘I make a long turn’; or, when making a short turn, understands: ‘I make a short turn’; so too, breathing in long, a monk understands: ‘I breathe in long’. (Bodhi 282)

Here the exercise of maintaining mindfulness is compared to a skilled craftsman, whose attention never strays from the work before him. This is effort expended in holding oneself in position—so, technically, it resembles the ugliness cultivations in that one must prevent the fading of a mental state. Yet what is supported here is not a mental state that causes resistance, but only the tendency of the mind to wander. Ardency might be taken to be a form of restraint, because it is focused on the non-arising of different mental states. But it might just be the continuing strength gathered and expanded for the development of mindfulness.

Mindfulness practice culminates in the purification of the mind that comes from the elimination of the five hindrances, and issues in the

attainment of the concentrated mental states. A text describing this same transition through the terminology of the Eightfold Path appears in MN 117. Here, instead of “clear comprehension” of the object of mindfulness, the Buddha speaks of “Right View.” But again, the combination of mindfulness and effort with a clear awareness of the object of attention issues in concentration. The Buddha even says that the three terms—view, effort, and mindfulness—“run and circle” around the object on which concentration is being developed:

One makes an effort for the abandoning of wrong view & for entering into right view: This is one’s right effort. One is mindful to abandon wrong view & to enter & remain in right view: This is one’s right mindfulness.[2] Thus these three qualities—right view, right effort, & right mindfulness—run & circle around right view. (MN 117, Ṭhānissaro 799)

Right View provides the direction, and Right Effort and Right Mindfulness provide the activity that cultivates Right Concentration.

Whereas effort paired with mindfulness yields concentration, effort paired with concentration yields supernatural powers. The *dharma* list of four bases of success (*iddhi-pāda/ṛddhi-pāda*)—the qualities that are the basis for the supernormal powers of enlightened beings (and that allow Buddhas to appear in multiple places, walk on water and swim in land, etc.)—is glossed as the combined operation of concentration, on a particular kind of object, together with, once again, effort (Gethin 81-87). Here, due to the presence of heightened concentration, effort is also stabilized and perfected. This means that, rather than merely “initiating strength,” the monk may simply apply the *dharma* of “strength” or “will-power”—*vīrya*.

With this, we can identify the main, key locations and applications of effort on the early Buddhist path of practice, which provides practical and moral guidance for the monk. From the perspective of effort, the path looks something like this:

1. Effort (cultivation of restraint) → Mindfulness
2. Mindfulness + Effort (ardor) → Concentration
3. Concentration + Effort (strength) → The Supernormal Powers and Liberation

These stages of the cultivation of effort do, in fact, parallel the first three (but not the fourth) kinds of cultivation of Right Endeavor. The second, the ardor that cultivates concentration through mindfulness, may be taken as in some sense parallel to the practice of “abandoning” desire, hatred and cruelty; and the third, the strength that accompanies the final concentration leading to final awakening, may be taken as parallel to the practice of “development” of the Factors of Awakening. These three stages may also be taken to parallel stages 6, 9, and 14 in the detailed path sequence listed above, or the *dhammas* of Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration in the Eightfold Path.

When we read the path in this way, we find that: Mindfulness is just a special kind of strength or willpower *made up* of the effortful exertions in restraint of the senses that prepare one for the four foundations of mindfulness meditation. Then, concentration is a special kind of strength or willpower that is generated by the foundations of mindfulness practice. And the supernormal powers of enlightened beings are a special kind of strength as well.

Not only does the Buddha’s path take effort; its achievements are, more than anything else, achievements of effort and achievements *made up of effort*. No wonder the Buddha’s final exhortation to his disciples was to “reach consummation through heedfulness.” Here the whole path is

reduced to one term, “heedfulness” (*appamāda*), which is elsewhere described as the root of the path, and as cultivated centrally by means of the restraint of the senses (AN 10:15 and SN 35:97, Ṭhānissaro 1899-1900 and 1231-1232). The Buddhist path is made of willpower.

### **Conclusion: Willpower (*Vīrya*) as the Perfection of Effort**

Effort appears in multiple places on the path. It is used in various modes and degrees for a wide range of distinct if not strictly contradictory purposes. When it is effective, it is an accumulation of many distinct events. All of this suggests to me that effort, like Right Speech, may be a useful *dharma* but cannot be described positively as any single thing. In one passage the Buddha says that strength is like a king’s troops—and he lists many kinds of troops, including elephant-riders, cavalry, foot soldiers with shields, archers, and so on (AN 7:63 Ṭhānissaro 1796). We have only touched upon the many terms that reflect a Buddhist approach to willpower: heedfulness, endeavor, ardor, strength, striving, grasping the mind, and so on. This variety makes it difficult to identify any single locus for what we might call “will.” Yet what appears on the surface as a single, personal will—what Gandhi called an “indomitable will”—with the ability to do the right thing in any scenario comes from having the strength of a full roster of troops, so to speak, well trained and ready at hand.

The great Theravāda Abhidharma commentator Buddhaghosa cites the following as an exemplary story about the elder Mahatissa’s mastery of restraint of the sense faculties:

Once that Elder went from Mount Cetiya to Anuradhapura, to gather alms. In a certain family the daughter-in-law had quarreled with her husband, and adorned and beauti-

fied like a heavenly maiden, she left Anuradhapura early in the morning, and went away to stay with some relatives. On the way she saw the Elder, and, as her mind was perverted, she gave a loud laugh. The Elder looked to see what was the matter; he acquired, at the sight of her teeth (-bones), the notion of repulsiveness (impurity), and thereby reached Arahatsip. . . The husband who ran after her on same road, saw the Elder, and asked him whether he had by any chance seen a woman. The Elder replied:

“Whether what went along here  
Was a man or a woman, I do not know.  
But a collection of bones is moving  
Now along this main road.” (Conze 79-80)

Apparently, the Elder Mahatissa had been practicing the ugliness cultivations, so he was well equipped to intervene in his mind, before allowing his perception of a moving form to be transformed into the conception of a desirable girl. He has clearly perfected the skill—he becomes an *arhat* through it. But what was the perfection of effort here? Was he expert in the restraint that prevented his senses from issuing in a desirable conceptualization? Or, was he expert in the maintenance of the contemplation of ugliness, so that it was always present in his mind, even when an attractive visual object appeared?

It is difficult to say that he had mastered only one or the other of these practices. His ostensible ignorance about whether it was a girl who passed by or just a skeleton suggests that he had built up sufficient strength of restraint to prevent even an awareness of attractiveness from arising. But if he is not even aware of a potentially attractive person entering his visual field, is this still something we want to consider “will”? His moral power is so strong he’s no longer really exerting any

effort—or, we might say, the apparent successful “effort” of restraint is the culmination of countless previous effortful cultivations.

The cultivations of effort on the path are concerned with generating motivation and initiating strength so that one can indirectly bring about a positive result. Freedom, in this model of practice, arrives with the ability to transcend the busy, messy work of having to *decide* to act morally—one’s virtue becomes spontaneous—but this is only achieved by means of a long, slow accumulation of virtuous choices. Once one has cultivated sufficient moral strength (*vīrya*), there might well be *no chance* one will do the *wrong* thing. The goal of the path from the perspective of effort is complete mental control. This suggests that to whatever degree you *need* to exert effort, you are morally compromised in the sense of having at least the potential to succumb to weakness of will. It is, for this reason, only the potential for failure that might allow for real, morally significant “choice” in any given mental moment. The perfection of effort, then, is freedom from negative acts. Perfect willpower means never failing to do the right thing. In a Buddhist worldview, not only is the capacity for moral choice not a necessary precondition of moral significance or responsibility, it gets in the way. The desire to exercise individual “free will” is, in this view, part of what keeps us mired in *samsara*.

### Abbreviations

AN        *Āṅguttara Nikāya*

MN        *Majjhima Nikāya*

SN        *Sutta Nipāta*

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