

UNITED WISDOM

Right Effort in Buddhist Practice

Freedom and Action

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A-03-N01 · EN

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Epigraph

> *we should be positively good*

Henry S. Olcott, The Buddhist Catechism, question 148, a fragment of his own exposition. This is the catechism author's explanation, rather than a verbatim report of the Buddha's speech.

What this article is about

A person decides to speak more attentively with someone close to them and now counts their mistakes after every meeting. Reviewing takes more and more time, yet the next conversation begins with the same haste. Effort has certainly been expended. Its direction remains unclear: preventing a sharp remark, ending a quarrel already under way, learning to listen, or preserving a way of communicating that has already been found. The same word hides different tasks, each requiring different actions.

Buddhist right effort invites us to consider precisely this direction of work. In the selected texts, it belongs to a path of liberation, rather than naming every kind of diligence. We will read the four tasks of effort in SN 45:8, the account of Soṇa in AN 6:55, and two passages from Olcott's historical catechism. We will then offer a separate, limited contemporary trial. It helps name the object of an action; it does not reproduce the monastic path, measure spiritual standing, or promise a pleasant state.

I. Effort Takes Its Meaning from the Path

Great energy can be devoted to something harmful. A person can persist in demanding another's agreement, carefully prepare a false accusation, or steadily fulfil an unjust demand. The amount of work does not itself answer the question of its quality. Right effort therefore cannot be understood as praise of intensity. We must first establish which direction a particular source regards as right and why it proposes sustaining that direction.

In SN 45:8, An Analysis of the Path, effort is named as one of eight factors. Alongside it are understanding, intention, speech, action, livelihood, mindfulness, and concentration. This list does not allow one factor to become an independent productivity programme. The examination of skilful and unskilful qualities belongs to this religious framework. Our everyday example only helps pose a limited question about direction, while keeping the purposes distinct.

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Imagine someone who wants to prepare better for a shared undertaking. They might clarify an agreement or make a useful list. They might also demand a daily report to ensure that the other participant does not act differently. Both approaches can look like good organisation. A substantive distinction requires attention to what happens to help, the other person's right to respond, and the possibility of revising a mistaken assumption. Diligently carrying out a chosen approach does not yet make it justified.

Nor does the ancient text give a reader the right to sort everyone around them immediately into good and bad people. Its work with qualities is not a final verdict on a person. In a contemporary situation, we can discuss a particular lie, threat, or broken agreement. Explaining everything through another's supposed inner depravity would be an additional assertion for which a brief observation provides insufficient grounds. It is especially important not to let that assertion replace discussion of facts and responsibility.

The first distinction thus comes before choosing an exercise: effort has an object and a basis for evaluation. If that basis is unknown, it should be clarified in the text or with someone competent in the tradition. For an ordinary shared task, an agreed purpose and observable consequences can provide a starting point. Neither the source nor our editorial trial gives one person unlimited authority to determine another's inner life under the guise of caring about the right direction.

II. The Four Tasks Do Not Replace One Another

SN 45:8 distinguishes four directions: preventing unskilful qualities not yet present, abandoning those already present, bringing forth skilful qualities not yet present, and sustaining and developing those already present. This compact distinction belongs to the text's account of the path. Below, we use it as a prompt to name an everyday task more carefully. Similar wording does not mean that our agreements, skills, or feelings correspond fully to the ancient categories.

A person often chooses one familiar way of working and applies it everywhere. They know how to notice a mistake, so they analyse yesterday's mistake again. They know how to plan ahead, so they plan even when something already needs repairing. Yet preventing a recurrence and restoring a broken agreement are different actions. Likewise, stopping rudeness does not mean learning to express disagreement clearly. The space that has been opened still needs something to fill it.

Imagine four questions before a single conversation. What condition usually helps a sharp response begin? What should happen if a sharp remark has already been made? What other way of responding has not yet been learned? How can a useful approach be preserved when the conversation goes more calmly? The answers may connect, but none exhausts the others.

Removing an unnecessary distraction, stopping a remark, preparing a precise request, and agreeing on a later check are different moves, rather than four names for one effort.

The distinction also helps avoid a mistaken criterion of success. If the task was to learn a new action, the absence of unpleasant feelings does not yet show that it has been learned. If a violation already under way needed to stop, clear understanding of its causes does not replace stopping it. And if a useful form of help is being sustained, constantly increasing the workload may destroy that very form. A check must concern the chosen object; otherwise, energy goes into an indicator that does not answer the original question.

It is not necessary to work in all four directions at once. In a small episode, one can be selected while the others remain on the map as questions. This keeps the task manageable and makes it possible to see what actually changed. If circumstances call for different work, the initial choice can be revised. Such flexibility does not make the ancient teaching arbitrary: it belongs to our limited editorial trial, which does not present itself as the full discipline of Buddhist practice.

III. Prevention Does Not Mean Prohibiting Everything

Prevention concerns what has not yet happened. It requires noticing conditions in which an unwanted action becomes a plausible possibility and choosing an available change. In an ordinary situation, someone knows that they answer difficult letters hastily between meetings. They can leave the reply for an agreed time or first clarify the question. This is work with the circumstances of one action, rather than proof of a universal law about the causes of irritation.

An attempt at prevention can turn into a wish to remove every irritant from life. A person demands that nobody disagree, ask unexpected questions, or communicate unpleasant information. They gain a more convenient setting but transfer its entire cost to others. Preventing their own sharp remark becomes a restriction on other people's participation. Naming a spiritual task does not remove the question of who owns the decisions and which rights the other participants retain.

A much smaller object can be chosen. Before a conversation, someone notices that they are about to check messages, find documents, and listen to an explanation simultaneously. They remove just one optional distraction, after making sure that they will not miss something genuinely urgent. The conversation remains open: the other participant can object or alter the proposal. The conditional point of this scene is to prepare one's own participation without creating a sterile environment in which nobody else has the right to be inconvenient.

There is also a difference between preventing an act and promising to prevent every inner experience. An article cannot guarantee that a thought, irritation, or fear will never arise again. For our trial, clarifying an available next step is enough. A person can notice a sharp thought

without sending a sharp letter. Their account need not claim that the whole reaction has disappeared. Experience and action are connected, but they are not the same event.

Finally, prevention needs a boundary. If it requires constant checking of oneself and others, it is useful to return to the original object: which particular action did we want to prevent? Perhaps a clearer agreement, a different deadline, or ending the trial itself is needed. The possibility of preparing conditions does not create an obligation to eliminate all uncertainty in advance. Participation in life inevitably leaves events that a person does not yet know about and does not control.

IV. Abandoning What Has Arisen Is Separate Work

Once an action has happened, a good plan for tomorrow is insufficient. Someone interrupted another person; an accusatory message has been sent; promised help was not provided. What may be needed now is stopping an action that continues, acknowledging the particular violation, and making an available repair. These steps cannot be replaced by an account of how carefully the person intends to prepare in future. Future preparation matters, but the recipient is already in changed circumstances and may need an answer now.

Abandoning what has arisen also cannot be reduced to immediately suppressing a feeling. In our hypothetical scene, a participant is still angry but stops insulting the other person and returns to the subject of the disagreement. This behavioural change can be named without declaring that all anger has disappeared. The other participant has the right not to continue the conversation. An inner experience does not justify a threat, and giving up a threat does not require first proving an impeccable state of mind to the listener.

Sometimes a person continues an unpleasant episode after its outward ending: composing another reply, imagining another accusation, seeking further confirmation that they were right. For ordinary observation, it is useful to distinguish necessary reconstruction of the facts from repetition that no longer helps the chosen undertaking. We do not establish the cause of an experience or its treatment through this scene. We can only ask what work the next repetition performs and which next action remains available.

Stopping a harmful action does not cancel its consequences through words about a new beginning. If a promise was broken, an explanation or practical help may still be owed. If another person has decided to step away, that decision does not become an obstacle to our spiritual work. Giving up the former approach includes willingness to hear about consequences that do not disappear with an intention to change. Otherwise, work on oneself quietly becomes a demand that others immediately confirm its success.

Abandoning can be small and unobtrusive: leaving a humiliating sentence unfinished, correcting information passed on in error, or ending an argument at an agreed boundary. Its

value is not measured by how dramatic it looks. Yet not every departure from a conversation can be declared right abandonment in advance. Sometimes it helps stop harm; sometimes it leaves a commitment unfulfilled. Distinguishing these possibilities requires examining the particular undertaking, the cost of stopping, and the possibility of telling participants exactly what changed.

V. Developing the Good Needs Positive Content

The absence of rudeness does not yet produce a clear answer. Stopping a mistake opens space but does not always say what should fill it. A person can stop interrupting and still not understand what was said. They can stop accusing without naming their request. Developing an available good action therefore has an object of its own. It concerns a capacity or form of participation that is still missing, rather than only the disappearance of obstructive behaviour.

In question 148 of the catechism, Olcott emphasises the active side of moral work. We are reading his own explanation, written for a particular historical audience. It does not replace the early text on the four efforts or represent every Buddhist school. For our question, the important idea is positive content: restricting what is bad does not by itself describe the good that remains to be done.

In a hypothetical shared task, the new action might be a clarifying question. Previously, a person either agreed or argued with a first impression. Now they try to reconstruct the proposal: what needs doing, by when, and what help is expected? This approach does not promise agreement. It makes the subject of disagreement understandable and can sometimes reveal that the parties were discussing different things. The new action is assessed by this limited function, rather than by its ability to remove every conflict.

Learning a positive action may require instruction, time, and several attempts. An initial formulation can be unclear, a question too broad, or the moment poorly chosen. These are reasons to refine the approach, rather than automatically increase pressure. The other participant does not have to become practice material. One can ask for their consent to a brief trial, choose an independent task, or study a suitable source before the next conversation. Developing one's own capacity retains the conditions of shared participation.

It must also remain possible to discover that the proposed action is unsuitable now. Help may be unrequested; clarification may repeat an answer already given; advice may intrude into an area requiring different expertise. An intention to do good does not remove these distinctions. Positive content becomes concrete through the needs of the undertaking and its participants, rather than through someone's certainty that all their care must be useful. Sometimes the best available help begins by asking whether it is needed.

VI. Sustaining Does Not Mean Constantly Intensifying

Sustaining concerns what has already come into being. In an ordinary scene, participants have found a convenient way to distribute a small task: a clear deadline, an accessible channel for questions, and a brief check of the result. They can preserve these conditions instead of adding a new requirement after every successful occasion. Development does not always take the form of more actions. Sometimes it means enabling an established arrangement to withstand actual changes in workload and remain understandable to everyone involved.

Sustaining also differs from trying to fix a pleasant feeling permanently in place. One conversation went calmly, but the next may be difficult. For our trial, it is useful to ask which particular actions helped clarity: being allowed to finish speaking, a precise question, an acknowledged deadline. They can be repeated or changed. The article does not propose reproducing an entire inner experience on demand. A good form of participation can remain even when the mood differs from that of the previous evening.

There is a risk of turning an established form into a new compulsory ritual. Someone has become accustomed to making a note first and now considers every conversation without a note wrong. Yet the note was a means for a particular task. Perhaps today the information is already clear, time is short, or the other person prefers another approach. Preserving a function can involve changing a form. This is an editorial distinction in a contemporary example; it is not declared a rule for changing every historical religious discipline according to personal convenience.

Ordinary conditions matter for sustaining a useful action: available time, a clear division of work, and the possibility of reporting a difficulty. When helping requires constantly giving up one's own commitments, its former extent may become unmanageable. Discussing a different extent then belongs to responsibility for continuing. Sustaining a relationship does not mean silently promising unlimited resources. Knowing the actual possibilities is more useful to another person than relying on help that the provider can no longer sustain.

This task can also have an unremarkable result: nothing substantial needs changing today. If an approach performs its function and participants understand its conditions, it can simply continue. A constant search for improvement can distract from the work itself. Yet preservation also needs the possibility of reconsideration: a new circumstance has arisen, a deadline changed, or a former agreement become inconvenient. Attention then concerns changed conditions, rather than defending a form as evidence of one's moral attainment.

VII. Adjusting Effort Is Not a Search for Painlessness

In AN 6:55, the account of Soṇa, strings that are too tight or too loose provide an image for adjusting persistence. Soṇa is already diligent but seeks another way to continue. The account belongs to a religious narrative and ends in liberation; it is not a verified recipe for everyday difficulties. We take from it a limited question about proportionate effort, retaining the distinction between our task and the monk's goal.

The image can easily become advice always to choose what is most comfortable. Yet difficult work can remain difficult even when its method is reasonable. An unpleasant feeling does not itself mean an action is unnecessary; intense strain does not mean it is useful. In an ordinary situation, the object, conditions, and observable consequences are needed. Adjusting preparation for a conversation might mean reducing unnecessary repetition or, conversely, giving time to a question previously skipped.

The narrative begins with bodily injury following excessive practice, as well as the Buddha's miraculous abilities. These details are neither instructions to repeat the injury nor claims about a verified extraordinary event. A contemporary reader is not invited to test endurance at the expense of their condition. Health questions require appropriate help and expertise. The religious meaning of effort does not make every form of distress a necessary stage or give an article the authority to prescribe someone's practice regime.

In a hypothetical editorial trial, adjustment is simpler. Someone chooses a small action, defines its endpoint in advance, and then checks whether the needed clarification was obtained. If repetition provides no new information, they can stop. If a substantial commitment becomes apparent, it needs separate attention. The amount of work is tied to the task, rather than to a public comparison of participants' endurance. A neighbour who worked longer is not thereby more ethical or mature.

There is no requirement to find an ideal midpoint once and for all. Different days and undertakings have different conditions. Sometimes there is time for reading, sometimes one question is needed, and sometimes participation should be postponed. Our use of the strings image remains an analogy about choosing a method. It does not measure awakening, confirm the historical effectiveness of a practice, or permit assessment of another's inner life by how effortless they look from outside.

VIII. Wanting to Act and Attachment to an Indicator

The definition of effort in SN 45:8 includes active intention to develop the needed direction. The popular formula that Buddhism requires immediately ceasing to want anything therefore does not convey this selected passage. Different directions are distinguished here within the path. We do not reduce all Buddhist work with desire to one everyday category or replace it with a promise that merely wishing for something good ensures a good result.

In a contemporary scene, someone wants to listen more attentively. That intention itself can remain. But then they demand that the other person immediately notice the change, praise them, and acknowledge a successful conversation. The object has shifted: instead of participating, they seek a testimonial about the quality of their participation. This shift can be examined without passing judgment on the whole person. It is useful to ask which action the conversation now needs and which confirmation they are seeking for their own image.

Giving up a demand for praise does not mean being forbidden to enjoy gratitude. Someone can value a warm response without making it a condition of helping. They are also entitled to need clear feedback when shared work depends on it. Gratitude, checking a result, and confirmation of spiritual worth are different requests. Distinguishing them makes it easier to name a legitimate need for information without treating every expectation of a response as a moral weakness.

The difference between attending to consequences and depending on a convenient indicator also matters. If help does not reach its recipient, that needs checking. Results cannot be declared wholly irrelevant merely because spiritual language was chosen. One can lack control over all consequences and still notice what can be corrected. Our example preserves this responsibility: evaluating direction serves action, rather than constructing a closed account of one's own rightness regardless of the outcome.

An intention becomes more precise when it can be expressed without a demand about another's inner response. I want to understand the proposal; I am prepared to do this part; I intend to stop responding in this way. Another person may disagree with the assessment or choose a different format. Preserving their possibility of responding belongs to the concrete conditions of our trial. We do not thereby claim that every historical Buddhist text describes consent in the same contemporary language.

IX. A Historical Explanation Has Its Own Limits

In question 273, Olcott briefly connects the four great efforts with moral growth. This is a useful example of a historical explanation for beginners, but it compresses distinctions more fully visible in the early text. A compressed account does not cancel the four tasks. Reading requires restoring its place: the catechism represents its author and his educational project, rather than a verbatim record of the Buddha's speech or the sole voice of the entire tradition.

Adjacent answers contain assertions about intuitive knowledge, unusual powers, the structure of the world, and the teaching's agreement with science. Their presence does not mean they have been confirmed. Our article does not use them to explain a reader's experience. Reading a work carefully means seeing the limitations of the selected evidence as well. A brief suitable phrase does not turn all of the author's neighbouring judgments into reliable grounds for a contemporary practical decision.

The answer about the four efforts uses historical language about suppressing animal desires. We do not apply that label to a person or propose fighting oneself as an unworthy being. Our trial concerns a particular action and its direction. A rude remark can be acknowledged as harmful without declaring the whole experience inhuman. This clarification allows responsibility to be discussed concretely without using a spiritual text to humiliate oneself or another participant.

There is also a difference between a monastic account and a layperson's situation. The catechism places its questions about the four efforts near the schedule and tasks of a bhikkhu. Our reader may have a family, a job, and quite different commitments. The article does not propose automatically transferring that schedule. Someone who wants to practise within a particular tradition needs its own explanations and suitable instruction. A hypothetical everyday trial has a smaller scope and explicitly stated origins.

Comparing sources therefore does not mean looking for a convenient phrase to support advice already decided upon. The early text helps distinguish directions; the historical catechism stresses active content; the account of Soṇa raises the question of adjusting persistence. Their forms and scope remain different. Our contemporary bridge follows the reading and belongs to the editors. It can be discussed, refined, or rejected without turning a reader's choice into a dispute about the value of the entire Buddhist tradition.

X. The Criterion of Effort Remains Tied to the Task

Let us return to the person who counted mistakes after every conversation. More questions are now available. What helped the mistake begin? How can continuing harm stop? Which new action needs to be learned? What is already useful and needs support? Instead of a general demand to try harder, a map of directions appears. It gives no final answer about the person, but makes the chosen work distinguishable and allows one to notice when one kind of effort replaces another.

Such a map can also be used without undertaking an exercise. While reading a source, someone notes what its author calls good, which conditions are assumed, and which goal is being discussed. They may discover disagreement with their own habitual interpretation. That is a normal part of reading. There is no requirement to turn the whole text immediately into personal advice. Sometimes a useful outcome is a new question to discuss with someone competent in the particular tradition.

If a contemporary trial is chosen, its criterion should remain narrow. Was one action and its function named? Is it clearer whether prevention, stopping, development, or sustaining is needed? Has information about consequences become available? These questions do not require calm, praise, or a sense of spiritual progress. Nor do they confirm a religious attainment. A particular clarification in an everyday situation is not completion of the path described by the sources we have read.

It may emerge that the original object was poorly chosen. Someone thought they needed greater patience, but the agreement turned out to be unclear. They intended to sustain a previous arrangement, but the workload changed. Such a discovery need not mean failure. It permits unnecessary work to stop and attention to return to the undertaking's conditions. Yet discovering a mistake does not cancel an existing commitment; its content and the way it can be changed need to be stated separately to participants.

Right effort in these texts retains ethical and religious direction. It cannot be replaced by a cult of busyness or constant checking of one's mood. For our limited application, it is enough to connect the object, action, and consequences more attentively, without claiming ownership of another's life. Work then remains concrete: what should be prevented, abandoned, developed, and sustained in this episode? The answer may be small, but it is already more precise than an unlimited demand always to try harder.

What this means in practice

For a voluntary trial, choose one small, reversible task that does not concern treatment, safety, an urgent commitment, or assessment of another's spiritual life. Preparing a clear question about an ordinary shared undertaking is one possibility. You are entitled not to undertake the trial and to keep to reading. If another person is involved, explain its small object beforehand and preserve their ability to decline or suggest another approach.

Name a particular action, then choose one direction: preventing an unwanted recurrence, stopping an action under way, learning a missing approach, or sustaining something already useful. Do not undertake four exercises at once. Record what will count as the observable result of the chosen step: a question formulated, repetition stopped, conditions of help clarified. A feeling of calm and another person's gratitude are not required as evidence of success.

After the step, distinguish observation from explanation. What actually happened? What remains unknown? Which commitment remains? The expected narrow result is a more precise naming of the task and the action's function. It does not guarantee agreement, moral perfection, or a change of inner state. If the need for a different action emerges, the initial choice can be revised.

Stop the trial if substantial distress, coercion, risk, or a violation of an agreement occurs. Consider needed help and health questions separately with appropriate expertise. You can return to a previous safe way of participating, report a difficulty, or simply end the note. This editorial trial is not an instruction for attaining Buddhist liberation and does not give permission to test oneself or others without limits.

Key quotation

> *grow in goodness*

Henry S. Olcott, The Buddhist Catechism, question 273, the closing fragment of his own answer about the four great efforts. The full answer uses historical language whose limitations have been examined above.

Connections between traditions

Sources Read	Connection	Substantial Boundary
SN 45:8 ↔ Olcott, questions 148 and 273	Work includes developing the good, rather than only giving up the bad.	An early religious text and a historical educational catechism have different origins; Olcott's account does not replace the canon.
SN 45:8 ↔ AN 6:55	The direction of effort can be considered alongside its proportion.	A definition of a path factor and the account of Soṇa are neither an everyday experiment nor medical advice.
The four directions ↔ a contemporary voluntary trial	The work needed for a particular action can be clarified.	Our exercise belongs to the editors and does not reproduce full Buddhist practice.

These are limited comparisons within the Buddhist sources read and their contemporary discussion. They do not prove that all religions share their goals or that teachings have identical origins.

Primary sources

• SN 45:8. Magga-Vibhaṅga Sutta, An Analysis of the Path, dhammatalks.org version. The complete main text and notes were read; the four directions of effort remain within the context of the path. No direct quotations are reproduced.

• AN 6:55. Soṇa Sutta, About Soṇa, dhammatalks.org version. The full main narrative, ending, and note were read. Miraculous details and liberation are not treated as verified outcomes of a contemporary exercise; there are no direct quotations.

• Henry S. Olcott. The Buddhist Catechism, corrected 44th edition, 1915, Project Gutenberg 30216. Metadata, prefaces, and selected questions 109–148 and 269–278. Only two fragments of his own exposition are quoted, excluding embedded Dhammapada quotations.

Tags

right effort, Buddhism, eightfold path, SN 45:8, AN 6:55, Soṇa, Henry Olcott, Buddhist catechism, persistence, intention, skilful, unskilful, prevention, abandonment, development, sustaining, proportion, moral action, attention, habit, help, responsibility, agreement, voluntary trial, boundaries, source reading, monastic practice, layperson, liberation, consequences

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