

In the last two weeks we've been looking at the 'pair' of faculties, faith and wisdom. We've seen how we need to cultivate them individually as components of our spiritual lives, but also need to beware of allowing either one of them to become developed in a one-sided way, without the counterbalancing benefits of the other. We'll now begin to look at the second pair of faculties, energy and concentration – beginning with energy (*Virya* in Sanskrit, sometimes also translated as 'vigour' in English).

Perhaps the first point to make is that it's very significant that energy (or effort) should be seen as part of the Buddhist interpretation of the spiritual path at all. There is a popular view of Buddhism in the West that its practitioners are predominantly gentle, retiring, possibly even a little passive. In reality this is a serious misconception – the spiritual life, if lived seriously, is definitely not an easy option. As Sangharakshita says, "The spiritual life is not an armchair life .... Buddhism is for people who are prepared to make an effort, who are prepared to try". This argument is supported over and over again by traditional texts from all the Buddhist schools which stress how testing the spiritual life can be. At the same time, its rewards are huge, as long as the person following the spiritual path is prepared to make an effort and try. We must, so to speak, be prepared to get up again every time we fall down. Therefore, we can say that energy is a general requirement for all aspects of the spiritual life. What's more, Sangharakshita talks of two aspects of energy – one 'objective' and the other 'subjective'. The *objective* (or, we might say, 'social') aspect involves doing things to help others, usually in a practical sense. This work may involve a considerable amount of effort, whether physical, intellectual or emotional, and may also be difficult or inconvenient.

The *subjective* (or 'personal') aspect of energy concerns making an effort to work on our own mental conditions. This aspect appears in the famous model of the **Noble Eightfold Path**, in which it features as Right Effort. One of the best known of the Buddha's teachings on Right Effort breaks it into the **Four Right Efforts** (or Four Exertions). These are exercises that we should apply to our minds, in order to steer them systematically away from unskillful mental states and towards more skillful ones. (As we already know, Buddhism tends to avoid the labels 'bad' and 'good', so the notions of 'unskillful' and 'skillful' can instead be used to indicate things, or practices, that are towards the unhelpful or helpful ends of a scale.) Let's now look at each of the Four Right Efforts.

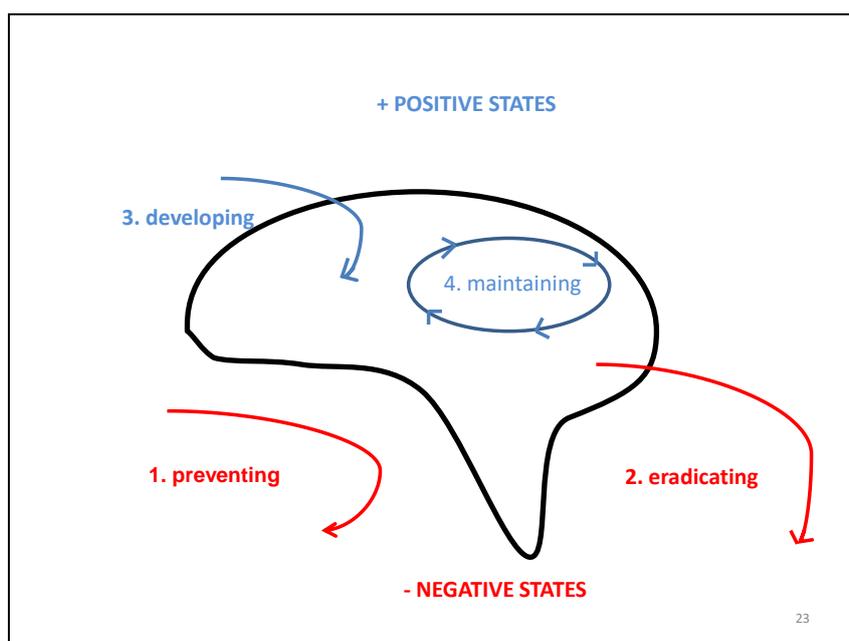
Firstly, we can act to *prevent* the arising of unarisen unskillful mental states. Here, we try to protect our minds from developing new emotions and thoughts that are unhelpful. As such states always enter our minds through the senses (as we have noted on earlier Buddhism courses), a practice we can use to help prevent this happening is called **guarding the gates of the senses**. We

make an effort not to react automatically to stimuli that reach us through seeing, hearing, reading, feeling (etc.), trying to not to manifest either attraction or aversion, or to take on messages that distort the truth of how things really are. This last point is a hugely important one in our time, when electronic media are so powerful and ever-present in our lives.

Secondly, we work to *eradicate* arisen unskillful mental states – in other words, emotions, thoughts, habits and tendencies that we realise we already possess, but which are unhelpful. Here, the teaching of the **Five Hindrances** is very helpful (this is often taught in relation to meditation, but can just as easily apply to life in general). The 5 hindrances are: (1) desire for sensual pleasure, (2) hatred, (3) high energy states (restlessness and anxiety), (4) low energy states, and (5) doubt and indecision. In our efforts to remove unskillful mental states, it can be really useful to try to identify which of these we are subject to, either in our meditation, or more habitually in our lives in general.

Thirdly, we try to *develop* unarisen skillful mental states. In other words, we make a point of deliberately cultivating those experiences that have a positive quality. The various meditation techniques of the Buddhist tradition are very effective in this undertaking. These include (1) the *mettā bhāvanā* and the closely associated practices of cultivating (2) *compassion* (the response of kindness to the suffering in the world), (3) *unselfish joy* (when kindness meets others' happiness or success) and (4) *equanimity* (recognising the inevitable effects on our lives of conditions and responding to them without becoming intoxicated with the 'highs' or depressed by the 'lows').

Lastly, we can work to *maintain* arisen skillful mental states. As it is so easy to lose momentum in our spiritual practice, it is important that we establish good habits, like keeping up our attention to the observance of the precepts, having a creative approach to our meditation and continuing to study and absorb the core teachings of the Buddha.



The Four Right Efforts