

Last week we looked at the perfection of *kshanti*, which we translated in the broadest sense as ‘forbearance’. This week we move on to energy (*Vīrya* in Sanskrit, sometimes more fully translated as ‘energy in the pursuit of the good’). For the purposes of a *bodhisattva* practising the Six Perfections, ‘the good’ amounts to what we sometimes call ‘the Will to Enlightenment’. Sangharakshita, in his book ‘A Survey of Buddhism’ (p485), describes the *bodhisattva*’s approach to this sort of energy:

...However great, from the relative point of view, the bodhisattva’s exertions may be, he never thinks of himself as making any exertions. Hence in all his undertakings he acts without haste and without delay, neither exhilarated by success nor depressed by failure; under all circumstances he is serene, cheerful and optimistic. His energy is unflagging. Even after the most heroic exertions he feels no fatigue, no desire for rest. To him exertion and rest are one.

As for all of the Six Perfections, we can also take a practical emphasis and consider what we, as unawakened beings, might do in order to orient ourselves in the direction of this particular perfection. Fundamentally, *vīrya* is about effort and motivation. As motivation is maintained more by our emotions than our reason, there’s an interdependence on **faith** (in the Buddhist sense of the word, i.e. confidence or trust); this is what drives our ‘emotional dynamo’.

Buddhist life isn’t an easy option!

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.

How our energy can be hampered

Sangharakshita finds it useful to look at the factors that can hamper or reduce our natural energy, and the approaches we might take to remedy them. Firstly, our energy might be **blocked**. In order to 'unblock' it, we might need to take more physical exercise (if the issue is physical) or, if the blockage is more of an emotional nature, we might need to engage in more direct and meaningful communication, to help that emotional energy to flow again. Secondly, we might be **wasting** our energy, suggesting that we need to reduce our distractions, as well as our negative emotions (of which more shortly). Lastly, our energy might be relatively **crude or unrefined**, in which case we might benefit from meditation, contact with the arts (in whatever form we respond to) and, once again, honest communication.

A practical model: the four Right Efforts

A more traditional model of how we might practically train our energies (which also appears in the famous Noble Eightfold Path) is that of the **Four Right Efforts**. 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, and are represented in overview in the diagram on the next page. Let's consider each of them in a little detail; the first two have a generally negative tone and the second two a more positive one.

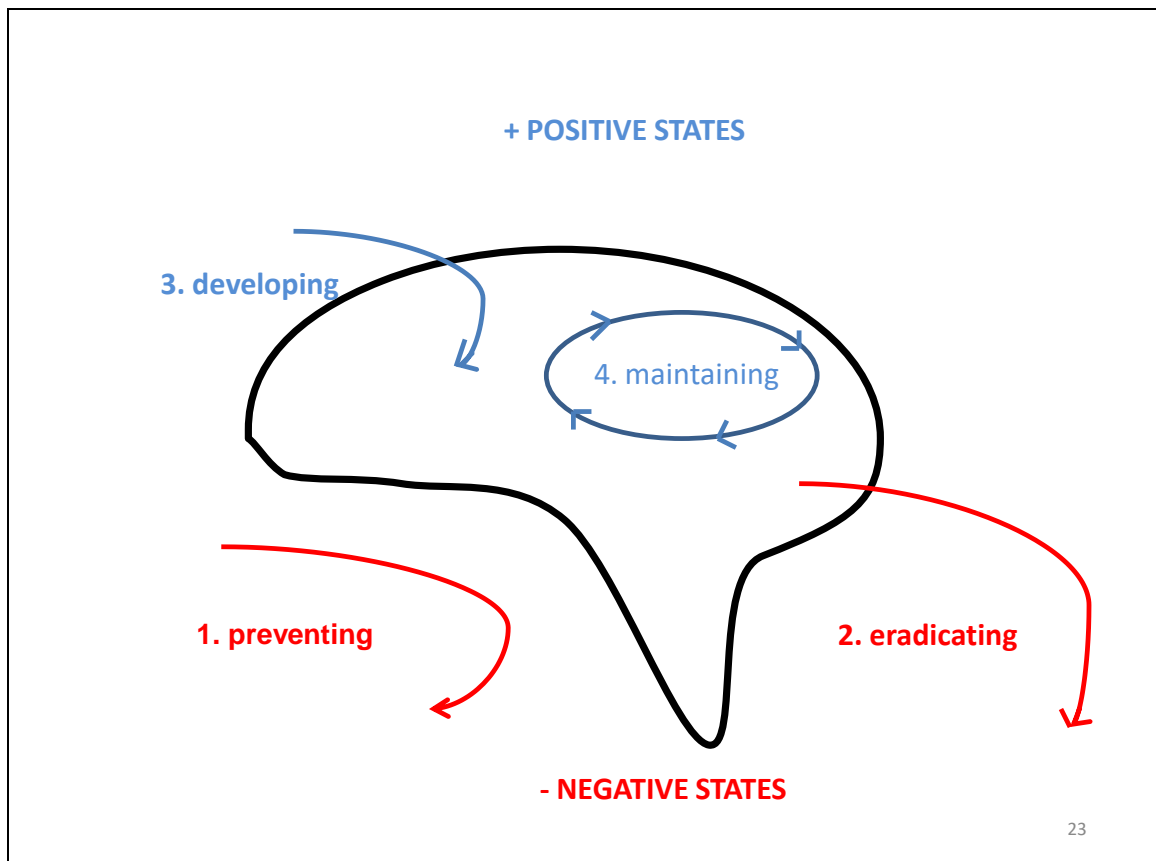
Firstly, we can act to *prevent* the arising of unarisen, unskillful mental states. Here, we try to protect our minds from developing new emotions and thoughts that are unhelpful. As such states always enter our minds through the senses (as we have noted on the Buddhism Foundation course), a practice 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). These are the foundations of all of our unskillful states of mind, and can be listed as: (1) desire for sense experience, (2) ill will, (3) chaotic 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 our conditions, and responding to them without becoming intoxicated with the 'highs' or depressed by the 'lows').

Lastly, we can work to *maintain* arisen, skilful 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 our ethics, having a creative approach to our meditation and continuing to study and reflect upon the core teachings of the Buddha.



The Four Right Efforts