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Going Further with Buddhism

Week 6 – Perfect Effort



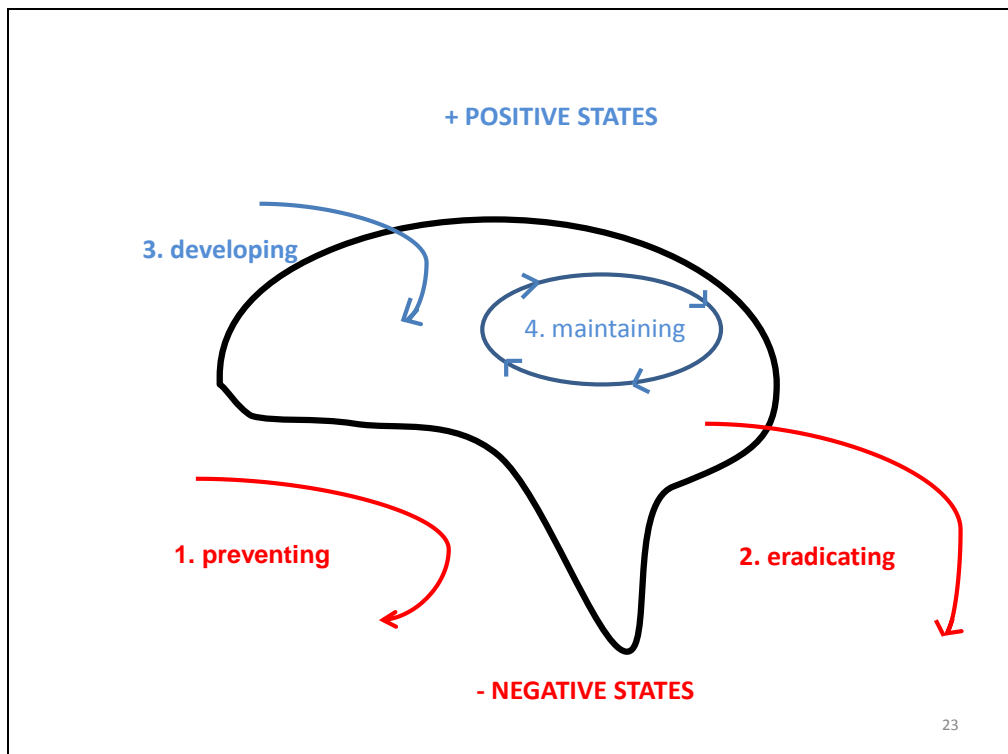
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We have spent the last 5 weeks looking at the Path of Vision, through which we gain glimpses of a greater reality, and the first 4 ‘limbs’ of the Path of Transformation, which involves re-orienting our lives towards that reality. In this final week we shall be considering Perfect Effort, thus completing our very rapid tour of the Noble Eightfold Path.

We have already remarked that Buddhism is not a cosy, theoretical philosophy. As Sangharakshita says, it is for people who are prepared to make an effort, to work on themselves. This, after all, is the reason for the practice of meditation. We need to make this effort – ideally, Perfect Effort – because it is in our nature to ‘slacken off’. One metaphor for this tendency is that, however keen we might be to move towards Perfect Vision, we remain very much subject to the ‘gravitational pull of the conditioned’. As the mundane world has such a large part in our makeup, this gravitational pull can be very strong, and therefore requires a lot of effort to resist. We shall be discussing the **Four Exertions** as a model for how we can organise and apply this effort. However, it must be emphasised that the starting point is that we know ourselves better, in particular our habitual **mental states**.

In outline, the Four Exertions provide a method by which we can gradually steer these mental states in a more skilful direction, progressively reducing negative states and cultivating positive ones. This approach can be applied to meditation in particular (see **Kamalashila**’s book ‘Meditation – the Buddhist Way of Tranquillity and Insight’), but also to life in general!

The diagram below attempts to summarise them (the ‘brain’ shape is meant to represent the mind!). Here, the Four Exertions can be imagined as setting up the conditions for various mental states to move towards or away from our minds (or just stay within them):



The first Exertion is a ‘negative’ one, inasmuch as it involves **preventing the arising of unarisen unskillful mental states**. If we accept that most of our mental states have their immediate source in the senses (including, in Buddhist thinking, the mind), then we can try to be selective about what enters through them. This technique is known as ‘guarding the doors of the senses’. We can exercise choice over giving our attention to sensory stimuli that have the potential to affect us emotionally – just a few everyday examples are conversations, television programmes, advertising and newspaper stories.

The second Exertion involves **eradicating arisen unskillful mental states**. Here, a traditional formulation may be helpful. The **Five Hindrances** describe our mental tendencies, which will depend on our general psychological makeup, but also what is happening to us at a particular time. In meditation we often find that our distraction is due to one or more of these hindrances, and this realisation can be valuable. The five hindrances can be listed as:

1. craving for material things;
2. hatred;
3. restlessness and anxiety (too much undirected energy);
4. sloth and torpor (too little applied energy);
5. doubt and indecision (in the sense of refusing to ‘come off the fence’).

It can be very helpful to try to identify which of these we are subject to, either at any particular moment in our meditation, or more habitually in our lives in general.

Thirdly, moving on to the ‘positive’ exertions, we make an effort 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, notably including the *Metta Bhavana* and the associated ‘sublime abodes’ (see the handout on

Perfect Emotion) are invaluable in this undertaking. Sangharakshita has a lot more to say about meditation and the *dhyanas* in 'The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path'. We don't have the time to discuss the detail of this area, but it's important to note that states of **calm and pacification** in our meditation are the starting point for deeper states of **insight**.

Finally, we can make the effort 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 having as regular a meditation 'slot' as we can manage, and keeping up our attention to the observance of the Precepts.

The descriptions of the Four Right Efforts above clearly have a fairly practical emphasis. However, according to Sangharakshita, they can also be described in terms of the **Higher Evolution**, a theory that is a keystone of his interpretation of the Dharma for a western audience. The Higher Evolution is the continuation of the evolution of our species, but takes place within individuals rather than groups, has a spiritual rather than a biological emphasis, and involves deliberate **effort** rather than natural selection.

We have only done any sort of justice on this course to 6 out of the 8 limbs of the Noble Eightfold Path. However, for completeness, we should at least give a definition of the remaining two limbs, which take their place in the 'meditation' portion of the simpler Threefold Path. **Perfect Awareness** concerns developing **mindfulness**, not just during meditation, but in our everyday lives – we can be much more aware of mundane things, of ourselves, other people and Reality itself. **Perfect Samadhi** is the culmination of the Noble Eightfold Path – it entails nothing less than our very being moving increasingly in harmony toward the true nature of things – that same true nature which we glimpsed through Perfect Vision at the beginning of our 'tour'.

To conclude, we have now reached the end of our very rapid survey of the Noble Eightfold Path. Hopefully, it has given you a reasonably good understanding of one of the key formulations of 'basic Buddhism'. More importantly, you might feel that it has helped to inspire you to make the Three Jewels closer to the centre of your own life, and given you a set of practical techniques to enable you to do so.

We hope to meet you again before too long. You might like to think about the level 3 Buddhism course (also on Tuesdays), Sangha Night (on Mondays), or the various ways in which you might be able to help at the Buddhist Centre.