

Chapter 10

Wise striving

Discussion points

- Attenuating unskillful qualities and strengthening skillful qualities
- Four dimensions of wise striving
- Need for mindfulness
- “Fire-fighting” methods
- Need for maintaining balance

The sixth factor in the noble eightfold path is wise striving (usually termed as right effort), viz. an effort to attenuate unskillful qualities and to strengthen skillful qualities. This classification is based entirely on the impact that these qualities have on us. The qualities like greed, anger, irritability, recklessness, cruelty, restlessness, envy, hatred, laziness, rigidity, pride etc., which increase our unhappiness, are unskillful (unwholesome) and those like generosity, kindness, humility, appreciative joy, equanimity, tranquility, flexibility, compassion etc., which increase our happiness, are skillful (wholesome). A person imbued with wise view would thus be naturally motivated to do so.

Wise striving can also be seen in terms of effort to strengthen the above mentioned factors of the noble eightfold path and to abandon their opposites:

"One tries to abandon wrong view and to enter into right view: This is one's right effort.."

"One tries to abandon wrong resolve and to enter into right resolve: This is one's right effort.."

"One tries to abandon wrong speech and to enter into right speech: This is one's right effort.."

"One tries to abandon wrong action and to enter into right action: This is one's right effort.."

"One tries to abandon wrong livelihood and to enter into right livelihood: This is one's right effort."⁵⁷

⁵⁷ MN 117, Mahācattārisaka sutta

Further, in another discourse, the Buddha mentions four dimensions of wise striving, viz. the striving by restraint, striving by abandonment, striving by development, and the striving by protection.⁵⁸

The striving by restraint implies not allowing the senses to grasp the sense objects and thus defile the mind. Thus, for example, if we are unrestrained the eyes are tempted to crave for pleasant objects and create aversion to unpleasant objects. Thus greed or aversion arises, both unskillful qualities. For example, while strolling in a mall we hear some titillating music and if we are not on guard, we get immediately carried away by it, thus increasing craving. If we are restrained, we listen to the music, but do not get carried away by it, thus guarding against arising of unskillful state of craving. Let us visualize the situation while we are eating food in a restaurant. If not restrained, we shout at the waiter if the food doesn't taste good and get upset. An unskillful state of aversion has arisen. However, if we are on guard, we can take appropriate action – like calling the waiter and asking him for replacement - but without getting upset.

What does this 'being on guard' mean practically? It implies being mindful of the feeling that arises when any sense comes in contact with its sense object. As explained in [Chapter 6](#) the nature of response to these feelings determines whether the mind will be defiled or not. Being on guard implies, we do not react to these feelings – we are just aware of their nature as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. This non-reactive attitude emerges from wise view which informs us that all such feelings are inherently evanescent and so wisdom lies in not allowing these to regulate our life. Thus we respond to the feelings wisely, rather than reactively, and prevent the mind from getting defiled. In this manner we guard against increase in unskillful qualities.

The second dimension is that of 'striving by abandonment'. This refers to the situation when some unwholesome mental state has arisen; the effort done to abandon this state quickly is striving for abandonment. The Buddha suggests a number of methods to dispel the arisen unwholesome mental states. The most efficacious is that of mindful, non-reactive, non-judgmental observation of the arisen state. Thus if anger arises, we just make a mental note, 'anger has arisen', accept this fact and allow the anger to cease naturally. This, of course, needs wise mindfulness which, being the next factor of the eightfold noble path, we shall discuss in the next chapter.

When the mindfulness is not very strong, and/or the external stimulus is very intense, it may not be possible to 'observe' the arisen mental state objectively. To meet such eventuality, numerous methods are suggested to prevent the proliferation of the

⁵⁸ AN 4.14 Samvarasuttam

arisen mental state which might result in extremely unwholesome vocal or bodily actions⁵⁹ ; most of the unpremeditated crimes of violence often happen due to uncontrolled rage and sexual offences due to uncontrolled lust.

One such 'fire-fighting' method is to willfully replace the unwholesome thought by some wholesome thought. Thus the thoughts of anger at a person may be replaced by thinking about his good qualities, the manner in which he might have been helpful in the past. Reflection on impermanence is helpful in dispelling craving, and reflection on the non-beautiful⁶⁰ nature of human body is the antidote to lust. Another suggestion is to reflect on the dangers in these unwholesome mental states, the fact that unless checked these could result in grave unhappiness. The wise view of the Law of Karma – any unwholesome state would necessarily lead to unhappiness - is very helpful in doing so. Third approach is to try to forget the unwholesome thought – this could for example, be done by shifting attention to the breathing process, making it deep or rapid if necessary so that all attention shifts from the thought to the breathing process and the mental agitation is calmed down. If none of the above work, the Buddha recommends a rather forceful approach⁵⁹:

...[if] there still arise in him evil, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate, with delusion, then, with his teeth clenched and his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth, he should beat down, constrain, and crush mind with mind.

The third dimension is striving to develop the wholesome qualities that have not arisen. The practice of insight meditation, i.e. non-reactive observation of whatever is happening in the body-mind complex gradually attenuates the unwholesome qualities and thus gives an opportunity for the wholesome qualities, which lie dormant due to the 'weight' of defilements, to manifest. As greed reduces, it results in manifestation of generosity; reduction in aversion creates the mental space for manifestation of loving kindness; reduction in fear and attachment to self-view strengthens wise speech, wise actions and wise livelihood. The key to this practice is the cultivation of the seventh factor of the noble eight fold path, viz. wise mindfulness and the insight into impermanence of all conditioned phenomena. The insight into impermanence can be cultivated in daily life too – for the evidence is so glaringly present everywhere. The leaves falling in autumn stripping the trees naked, and the fresh leaves mysteriously popping up in spring and greening them again; the weather changing moment by moment, from furious heat of summer to the wet air of monsoon, followed by the icy coldness in winter to the pleasant weather of spring and back again to the hot summer; the continual waxing and waning of moon; the powerful wrestler getting crippled by Parkinson disease, the great orator unable

⁵⁹ MN20, Vitakkasaṅḥāna sutta

⁶⁰ This implies reflecting on the constituents of human body concealed by the skin-cover , viz. like bones, flesh, various organs, blood, urines, feces etc. none of which has any beauty.

to speak; the wealthy tycoon now a fugitive running from one country to another to avoid arrest; the unending spectacle of health, disease, youth, old age, death and birth of sentient beings - all are constant reminders of impermanence – only if we were to pay attention ! As this insight strengthens, the most wholesome of all qualities, equanimity, is strengthened⁶¹ and one can live peacefully even amidst the crests and troughs of changing conditions.

The fourth aspect of wise striving is to maintain and consolidate the wholesome qualities already present. The practice of non-reactive observation of these qualities as and when they arise during meditation (or during daily life) is the key. In the absence of such observation, there is a possibility of ‘spiritual pride’ arising, i.e. thoughts like ‘I am very Truthful’, ‘I am very kind and compassionate’ etc. which are sure to obliterate these wholesome attributes due to the ‘delusion’ of self-view.

There is also a mundane, but very significant aspect of wise striving, especially relevant for modern youth. We find that youth who have been brought up in so-called ‘conservative’ families in small cities, towns or villages, get into confusion when they come for higher education to metropolitan cities about what habits to give up and what to inculcate. Following (likely) dialogue between two hostellers, one from a remote village (let me call him V) and another from a posh colony of a metro (M), tries to capture this dilemma:

M: Hello V, how are things? Going out over the weekend?

V: Not really, lot of assignments to complete.

M: Oh, that's Ok Man! and he offers him a cigarette.

V: Thanks! But I don't smoke.

M: What? Come on dude Grow up! You are now a Man, not a schoolboy! Experience the life to the full and then decide what to do and what not to do?

V: Your cigarette seems to have a strange smelling smoke?

M: Oh! so how do you know that ! Have been smoking ...ha ha... and putting up a show!

⁶¹ especially in one with wise view , and a clear comprehension of the law of karma

V: Not really...my roommate also smokes and it doesn't smell so awful!

M: It is a smoke for grownups...not like the ordinary cigarettes sold on shops, meant for schoolboys!

V: You mean.....

M: Yes... it is cannabis... gives you a kick... a spiritual experience man .. an altered state of consciousness ...the scientists call it !

V: thinking...should I give it a try.....altered state of consciousness...seems interesting

V is wondering what to do, since he is now doubtful whether smoking cannabis is really all that bad.... His old understanding is being questioned and he may not be able to 'guard' himself from acquiring this 'unwholesome' habit.

Such situations are often faced by youth , especially those living in hostels, which result in their giving up 'wholesome' habits like regular studying, early sleeping and rising, etc. and acquiring 'unwholesome' habits like smoking and drinking, wasting time in surfing internet etc. Wise striving here would mean being clear about what is wholesome, worth 'guarding and consolidating' and what is 'unwholesome', which should be 'abandoned'.

Maintaining balance during striving is an important aspect of wise striving. If overlooked the striving becomes unwise and a cause of unhappiness, imbued with the 'delusion' of self-view: 'I will not allow unwholesome states to arise; let me see how these arise?' The Buddha brings out the need for balance with the beautiful simile of a lute while addressing a monk Soṇa who was 'over-striving' to remove the defilements⁶²:

'Tell me Soṇa, in the past when you lived at home, weren't you skilled at the lute?'

'Yes Bhante.'

'What do you think Soṇa? When its strings are too tight, was your lute well-tuned and easy to play?'

'No Bhante.'

'When the strings were too loose, was your lute well-tuned and easy to play?'

⁶² AN 6.55 Soṇa Sutta

'No Bhante.'

'But Soṇa, when its strings were neither too tight nor too loose but adjusted to a balanced pitch, was your lute well-tuned and easy to play?'

'Yes Bhante.'

'So too, Soṇa, if energy is aroused too forcefully this leads to restlessness, and if the energy is too lax this leads to laziness. Therefore Soṇa, resolve on a balance of energy....'

Maintaining this balance is an essential aspect of wise striving.

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