

Bhante Sanathavihari

Right Effort: Understanding an Often Overlooked Mental Discipline on the Eightfold Path

Week One: “Wholesome Effort”

November 5, 2022



Hello. My name is Sanathavihari Bhikkhu. I am a Theravada monk within the Sri Lankan lineage at Sarathchandra Buddhist Center. I am a Mexican American monk. I grew up in and around the LA area, both in Koreatown and in the San Fernando Valley. I also served for nine years in the United States Air Force.

Ever since I became a monk, I’ve focused on spreading dhamma to the Spanish-speaking community, both here in the United States and in places like Mexico and Spain and all around the world, both by going to those countries and conducting meditation retreats and by translating books and creating introductory books to Buddhism.

So that’s a little bit about me. But we’re here today to learn about *samma-vayama*, right effort, or, as my teacher the late Bhante Punnaji would say, harmonious exercise. In my personal experience, *samma-vayama*, or right effort, doesn’t really get as much time in the spotlight as the other steps of the noble eightfold path.

Within the Western context, at least for many of us that come from the West, when we come to Buddhism, we think of meditation, particularly a certain type of meditation. We think of sitting on the cushion, which is a very important part of the path. But what I want to do here in this first video is put everything in this context of the noble eightfold path and then show how *samma-vayama* actually enriches all the other factors of the path. It’s not that *samma-vayama* is more important, but it is just as important as all the other parts, so we need to understand it and practice it. It’s going to support all our previous practices.

This practice is also known as the *cattari samma-padhana*, which means the four wholesome strivings or the four wholesome efforts. This consists of *sanvara*, which means sense restraint, or to guard the senses, including the mind. We have six senses in the dhamma, which are the eye,

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the ear, the nose, the mouth, the body, and the mind. The mind is the sixth faculty because it has its own mental objects.

We’re going to be focusing a lot on these mental objects, or these dhammas, these experiences or thoughts or mental states. I’m going to be a little bit loose with the terminology just because I know that there are many different ways to translate some of these terms. I’m going to try to paint a constellation of terms, and then you can triangulate what I’m trying to get at.

We’ll talk about the first of the wholesome efforts, *sanvara*, which means protecting your mind from unwholesome states arising before they’re there. Then we’re going to talk about *pahana*, which means elimination or removal. Here, we’ll get into our meditation practice of developing wholesome states in order to counteract or replace unwholesome states.

Throughout this practice, we’ll be focusing on cultivating thoughts and feelings, and we’re going to be focusing on the taste: the taste of experience, the taste of the dhammas, and the taste of the *vitakkas* (thoughts). We’re going to be focusing on *piti*, or joy; *passaddhi*, or tranquility; and *sukha*, or happiness, because happiness has a very important role in the development of our meditation.

Then, we’ll get into the practice of *bhavana*. Many of us know *bhavana* as the practice of meditation. Here, we’re going to be focusing on cultivating wholesome states, particularly the seven factors of awakening, in order to overcome unwholesome mental states, which are the *panca-nivarana*, the five hindrances or the five obstacles. In this part, we’re going to be working on *satipatthana*, or the practice of *vipassana*, or insight meditation. Then, in that same lesson, we’re going to incorporate maintenance, *anurakkhana*, to keep the practice going. Here I’m

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going to share some of my personal experience and what’s helped me in the development of *samma-vayama* and developing and cultivating wholesome states in the mind.

When we think about the noble eightfold path, we can think about it in many ways. The way I like to think about it is in terms of *sila*, *samadhi*, and *panna*. *Sila* means behavior. I like to call it the purification of behavior. *Samadhi* is the purification of the mind in the sense that it’s the taste of the mind or the mood of the mind, feelings, or emotions. And *panna* is the purification of wisdom, which is comprehension or penetrative understanding of reality.

Samma-vayama fits within *samadhi* training, or the calming of the mind. *Sama* means wholesome, complete, and *dhi* is a state of mind, a unification of mind, a stillness of mind, a tranquility of mind. We’re going to be focusing here on working with our thoughts and the pattern of our thoughts, cultivating wholesome thoughts that lead to wholesome ways of thinking, wholesome motivation, and a wholesome interpretation of experiences.

This is going to help us out with the rest of our meditation. It’s going to enrich our practice of *samma-sati*, right mindfulness, which is *satipatthana*, mindfulness practice. It’s also going to enrich our practice of *samma-samadhi* and the attainment of the first through fourth *jhanas*.

This practice is also going to help us with our behavior because we have to remember one very important thing. In the first two verses of the *Dhammapada*, the Buddha says that *mano*, or thinking, creates our experience, *dhamma*. *Dhamma* can mean experience, state, or thought. There are many ways we can talk about *dhamma*. If we think unwholesomely, then it leads to *dukkha*, or suffering, unsatisfactoriness, and pain. But if we think skillfully, we can get *sukha*. *Sukha* means happiness, and not only regular happiness, but blameless happiness.

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I'd like to connect this with a very famous saying of the Buddha. When his cousin Ananda asked him, “Bhante, can you make this very brief and tell me what the dhamma is about? What is what we today call Buddhism about?,” the Buddha said these famous words:

*Sabbapapassa akaranam ku salassa
upasampada sacittapariyodapanam
etam buddhana sasanam.*

Sabbapapassa akaranam means to avoid all evil, to avoid harming, to avoid unwholesomeness. This is very important, and it's going to help us with our behavior. This connects back to the first verse of the *Dhammapada*, which is to change our thinking. To avoid doing bad doesn't only mean in body and in speech because there are three karmas in Buddhism, and one of them is mental, so we also have to avoid unwholesome mental actions. We have to avoid unwholesome ways of thinking that lead to dukkha, or suffering. This is the first part of this series. We're going to practice *indriya sanvara*, guarding the senses, and *pahana*, eliminating unwholesome states.

Ku salassa upasampada means taking in what's good or developing wholesome states in the mind. This connects with the second verse of the *Dhammapada*, where it says, “If one thinks wholesomely, happiness, *sukha*, comes to them.” This is connected to the second step, which is *pahana*, because we're going to replace the unwholesome with the wholesome. It's also connected to the third and fourth steps, which are *bhavana*, or meditation, actively generating wholesome states in the mind, and *anurakkhana*, or maintaining wholesome states in the mind. It is within this context that we're going to be learning how to apply *samma-vayama* to the greater understanding and to the greater practice of the dhamma.

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Another thing I wanted to share today is the importance of the feeling. When we cultivate these thoughts, although I might be using the word thoughts or states or dhammas, I want you to focus on the experiential taste or the flavor of the experience. So when we generate wholesome states of mind, it doesn't only mean a cognitive thought but the whole, complete experience.

I want you to tap into *passaddhi*, which means relaxation or tranquility. I want you to tap into *piti*, which means joy or mental rapture, and *sukha*, which means happiness, and develop these blameless pleasures that we can indulge in. After the Buddha gave up self-mortification, he remembered when he was a little boy and he practiced jhana, and he realized that he shouldn't be scared of the blameless pleasure that arises from jhana or any pleasure that arises from wholesomeness. That means the practice of dhamma.

So when I talk about thoughts today, try not to limit it to just a conceptual, intellectual understanding of thoughts but an experiential understanding as well. I'm just using “thoughts” as a category to put experience into.

Now, I want to give you a taste of what we're going to be focusing on in the next upcoming video, which is on sanvara. Sanvara means to protect or to guard the senses, all six senses. I'm going to be sharing how I go about this and what I've learned through other monks and the suttas about the importance of guarding the senses. That's it for this week, and I hope to see you next week. Thank you.