

Wise Effort is one of the steps the enobling 8-fold path to awakening and enlightenment. It's significant to me that the Buddha thought Wise Effort was significant enough to include it as one of the 8 steps.

*The thought manifests as the word;
The word manifests as the deed
The deed develops into habit
And habit hardens into character.*

*So watch the thought and its ways with care
And let it spring from love,
Born out of concern for all beings.
- Buddha*

Sylvia Boorstein considers wise effort “the unsung hero of the enobling 8-fold path.”

Every tradition teaches some form of Wise Effort; wise effort is what provides us with a moral compass, it helps us crack the code of what wise, conscious living would look like, guidance in how to think, feel, behave, through the ups and downs of our days, the sufferings and the joys.

In our tradition, wise effort is taught as basically letting go of the unwholesome and cultivating the wholesome. Traditionally taught in four steps: when there is no unwholesome, to not let any arise. When there is unwholesome, to let it go. When there is wholesome, to recognize it. Where there is no wholesome, to cultivate it. Decreasing unwholesome, increasing wholesome. This could sound like a simple practice, but even the Buddha taught, sometimes when we are really hooked by something unwholesome, we have to pull it up by the roots, throw it on the ground and stomp it to death. And when we are determined to increase the wholesome, we should practice as though our hair were on fire. Wise effort can be a fierce effort.

*Abandon what is unskillful. One can abandon the unskillful. If it were not possible, I would not ask you to do so.
- Buddha*

Wise effort is all about abandoning the unskillful and cultivating the skillful through awareness and choice.

How do we know what is wholesome or unwholesome? Every tradition has its lists. The lists move us from theory and philosophy to practical, concrete precepts and rules to the wisdom of our own internalized experience of what works, and what doesn't work to keep the mind clear and the heart open. What's important is to experience for ourselves that killing and stealing do not work very well, let alone lead to enlightenment, and that compassion and generosity do work very well, and indeed do lead to enlightenment. When an experience is internalized, this grudge doesn't feel good, or me knowing I'm doing something unwholesome doesn't feel good, and this wholesome - gratitude, trust, integrity - does feel good, then we're more likely to keep letting go

of the unwholesome and cultivate the wholesome, on our own, not out of should's, because we are guided by the inner light of our own true nature.

In the first part of the metta sutta, the Buddha taught wise effort as the pre-requisite for loving kindness practice:

*This is what should be done
By one who is skilled in goodness,
And who knows the path of peace:
Let them be able and upright,
Straightforward and gentle in speech.
Humble and not conceited,
Contented and easily satisfied.
Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways.
Peaceful and calm, and wise and skillful,
Not proud and demanding in nature.
Let them not do the slightest thing
That the wise would later reprove.*

*[repeat]
Let them not do the slightest thing
That the wise would later reprove.*

*Then....
Wishing: In gladness and in safety,
May all beings be at ease.
and the whole list of beings that follows.*

Given that part of the instruction is to not do the slightest thing that the wise would later reprove, how to know when we're doing wise effort and how do we know when we're off?

Mindfulness: notice reflect discern, with compassion

Because sometimes anger could be destructive and sometimes it could be a signal to wake up to come injustice or oppression. Sometimes anger is the first step out of indifference.

Compassion is considered one of the two wings of the dharma, and increasingly very mindful folks are teaching about the need for self-compassion, to not let our compassion for others lead to burn out for ourselves.

I think what we've been learning in the last few weeks, about the unconditioned, the true nature of our non-self, can be a guide. Does what we're doing bring us closer to that open spaciousness of awareness and acceptance, or does it close us down and obscure that state of being?

Rick suggests taking the fruit as the path. We pro-actively and diligently cultivate the BVs and paramitas to bring us along and achieve those wholesome states. Loving kindness, compassion, joy, equanimity, generosity, patience, perseverance, etc.

We can:

Come into presence, creating the conditions to be aware of whether we are engaged in wise effort, and have allowing, acceptance, compassion, if we're not.

We can set our intention to return to the practices of wise effort – trustworthiness, energy, determination – again and again, to be ardent, diligent, resolute as well as mindful.

We can experiment with choices of behaviors and moment by moment decisions. Julia Butterfly Hill: Every moment is a choice; every choice has an impact. We act, and discern the effect of our actions, on ourselves and on others. What contracts or closes is usually unskillful; what opens and expands is usually skillful.

Relationships: this creates safety and trust; this creates fear and mistrust
Parents raising kids: this helps them believe in and trust themselves; this does not.
Managing people at work: this opens process; this does not

We discern: What blocks trying? What wise effort dissolves the blocks to trying?

We can stop second darting, reacting to our reactions, telling ourselves stories that take us farther and farther from the simplicity of our true nature.

We discern: What blocks taking in the good? What wise effort dissolves that?

I heard a lovely phrase from a friend last week: we need to “stop harshing on our high.”

We discern: What encourages clinging to something or the refusal to surrender to what is? What wise effort relaxes the grip?

Always, opening to the grace of the universe supporting our efforts.

We are all connected to everyone and everything in the universe. Therefore, everything one does as an individual affects the whole. All thoughts, words, images, prayers, blessings, and deeds are listened to by all that is.

- Serge Kahili King

Groups of four: 3 minutes, What practice of wise effort would you like to implement more, either letting go of something habitual but unskillful, or cultivating something skillful into a new more automatic habit; what blocks; what dissolves.

De-brief

To wrap up the last four weeks: when we can work skillfully with the suffering inherent in the human condition, we can find joy, ease and well-being in our growing capacities to do so. When we can comprehend the impermanence of all things arising and falling away and arising again, we can come into a deep gratitude for the abundant enough-ness of being alive at all, with the 10,000 joys and the 10,000 sorrows of the human experience. When we can open our awareness to the vast spaciousness of the unconditioned, we can discover the natural benevolence of our own true nature – our Buddha Nature.

As our felt sense of who we truly are re-emerges from the spaciousness of simply being (nothing to do, nowhere to go, no one to be) into a personal sense of self again (but I do have things to do! There are places I'm expected to show up and be responsible! I am somebody!), we practice Wise Effort to continue to radically let go of habitual patterns of behaving the world that simply aren't in alignment with our true nature and intentionally pro-actively practice the skillful means that will actually help us create the life we want for ourselves and our loved ones, born out of concern for all human beings.

Closing meditation

There is a natural and inviolable tendency in things to bloom into whatever they truly are in the core of their being. All we have to do is align ourselves with what wants to happen naturally and put in the effort that is our part in helping it happen.

- David Richo