

THE BUDDHIST VIEW OF EFFORT AND ENERGY

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Many people who are ignorant of the Teaching and practice of Buddhism seem to think that all Buddhists do nothing but simply sit down totally removed from the realities of life. This article tries to define and identify the great energies that can be harnessed not only by the mind, but also in physical action, through a correct understanding of the Dhamma.

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– Ed.

The fifth and last colour of the Buddhist flag is orange, the colour of energy or tenacity. It could also be said to be the colour of both building up and maintaining. Building up is not so difficult as a rule. A start is often made on some undertaking or other with great zeal and enthusiasm, but after a time the novelty wears off and enthusiasm soon dwindles away again. People impulsively resolve to embark on a practice, but if it does not come up to their expectations soon enough or is slow to produce results, they are disheartened and simply give up. Then they accuse the practice or method of being ineffective or of having something wrong with it, whereas the cause of the failure is actually to be found in themselves, in a lack of energy, in insufficient diligence in Right Effort (Samma-Vayama). It is important to know that we cannot always force effort or energy, despite all our resolve. Energy can only arise if the right conditions are present. It is when the time is right that we must make use of the opportunity to continue the ongoing stream of ‘action’ (kamma) and ‘result’ (vipaka) in a positive sense. Thus the practice must not be abandoned too soon. It is better to make a proper, well-considered test first as to whether the path indicated is in agreement with the reality of life. This was something the Buddha recommended too: a critical investigation not only of other teachings, but also of that of the Buddha himself.

Inertia is a very marked feature of the present time, so it is important to know what energy is and how it can be developed. We must also know in what way energy can find expression, so that we can evolve a yardstick for it.

1. ordinary energy (pakati) and

2. energy that is developed or which exists as a result of meditation or mental development (bhavana).

Ordinary energy can easily be found in daily life. If we have enough of it, we shall more readily be able to acquire the energy that must be developed through meditation. The latter can be generated by, for example, the practice of contemplation of the body (kayanupassan), so that as we become filled with zeal and enthusiasm, there is no opportunity for sloth and torpor (thina-middha) to arise.

Of these two kinds of energy, ordinary energy can be coupled with sloth if the second form is not present. Ordinary energy in itself is not capable of banishing sloth and is even dominated by it to a large extent. Too much energy, on the other hand, gives rise to restlessness. Ordinary energy finds expression in good deeds such as dana (generosity) and sila (morality).

Another classification can be made into

1. physical energy (kayikaviriya) and
2. mental energy (cetasikaviriya).

By physical energy is meant, among other things, being able to sleep less, eat less (factors affecting the body) and to be energetic. This is particularly important in connection with the practice of meditation. Mental energy means keen attention and devotion to the practice of meditation.

How can energy be developed?

By energy or effort is also understood Right Effort, one of the components of the Noble Eightfold Path. What, then, is Right Effort? The effort to obtain prosperity, luxury, riches, fame and honour is described by the Buddha as empty and futile. Giving oneself over to this is wrong effort, which will bring about an unwholesome result, because it is not directed at letting go, but precisely at clinging, because it does not strive for the elimination of Suffering and the Cause of Suffering, for the Cessation of Suffering and the Path that leads to the Cessation of Suffering.

There are four forms of Right Effort:

1. the effort to overcome or repudiate evil and unwholesome acts that have arisen or are arising;
2. the effort to prevent the arising of evil and unwholesome acts that have not yet arisen;
3. the effort to stimulate the arising of wholesome acts that have not yet arisen;
4. the effort to multiply and cause to grow wholesome acts that have arisen.

By acts are meant here all the actions of body, speech and mind. It also means applying oneself to a positive attitude to life, a positive disposition, and getting to grips with the negative approach that finds expression in aversion, envy, ill-will and suchlike. Being disheartened or disappointed also comes under this heading.

If one addresses oneself to these four forms, energy will arise. However, it can fail to appear and negativity can persist despite our efforts in this direction. If this is the case, one can meditate on actions and their results and come to realize that this unfavourable situation in which one finds oneself cannot be blamed on others, but that it has come about as a result of what one has inherited from oneself. Actions done in the past have now come to fruition. We must on no account be disappointed about this, but continue to face up to reality. Disappointment will cause the negative stream of actions and results to continue.

The opposite of energy is the third factor of the five hindrances (nivarana) that one can experience in meditation. This is sloth and torpor. According to the Scriptures, this can be overcome in various ways, which may be summarized as follows:

- Contemplation of death, so that one spurs oneself on to practise in the knowledge that death can occur at any moment. If we want to arrive at better conditions of life, we must be prepared to work hard for them.
- Meditation on Sympathetic Joy (mudita): seeing that others experience joy through a positive approach and by living strictly in accordance with the Noble Teaching of the Buddha, so that we ourselves are spurred on to a positive approach.
- Finally, we will do well to realize that our present conditions of life give no cause for complaint: we have enough food and clothing, we can count on being taken good care of if we are sick and so on.

All these factors can stimulate energy if we take them as subjects for reflection.

How does energy find expression?

a. Daily life

In this modern age daily life is powerfully focussed on worldly, material attainments such as prosperity, riches, honour and fame. But for all that, people are not satisfied. The Buddha has already pointed out in this connection that nothing that is compounded is worth coveting. Yet man still pins his happiness on these external aspects, with the result that life is often very disorderly and full of many different forms of conscious and subconscious suffering arising from frustrations and dissatisfactions. Many people are hardly or not at all equal

to the confrontation with life and become completely overwrought at the least or most insignificant setback. This has the effect of undermining any real practice of the Teaching in daily life. How, then can one avoid it?

A first step towards improving the situation can be to be energetic in studying the Teaching and testing it in daily life. With the knowledge thus acquired it becomes possible to recognize the reality of life and understand elementary principles of the Dhamma such as the Four Noble Truths, not to the full perhaps, but the first step has then been taken towards developing energy for Right Effort, for a proper Morality and for the practice of Dana (generosity). By directing one's thoughts to the study of the basic principles and more detailed teachings, along with the elementary methods of practice associated with them, it is possible to calm the mind.

The next stage is the practice of simple meditation techniques such as Metta (Unselfish Love). By entering on the Path of Meditation we learn no longer to avoid and run away from the difficulties of life, but to meet them face to face, so that it is possible for our minds to become more stable and balance. It is through not running away from a hard confrontation in life that one grows to maturity not only on the worldly level, but also in mental development.

Energy manifests itself in daily life above all by steadfastness in the face of life and a growing feeling of responsibility. One realizes that one is the heir of one's own deeds and thus strives energetically for an improvement in the situation in which one finds oneself. The motivation to do good and cease to do evil becomes ever stronger and despite the difficulties one encounters, one will have enough energy to press on with Right Effort. Life will take a turn for the better through one's concern for stabilizing one's own mind, a mind that is directed inwards and not to external aspects outside itself.

A great and sometimes indispensable support in this is a good friendship (kalyanamitta), in the sense of a friendship in mental development, a companion on the Path on which one has entered, someone who can encourage one to keep one's attention on the Noble Dhamma. Others who spur us on to worldly matters in the negative sense are better avoided or at any rate approached critically. Thus good friendship does not just refer to our relationship with a (meditation) teacher, but applies to anyone who has knowledge of the Dhamma and centres his or her life on it.

A person who is energetic in daily life stands out because of his or her different attitude to life, which is focussed on the development of good qualities in relation to other beings (Metta, Dana, Sila) and a proper attitude to society. This does not mean that that person is apathetic as regards worldly success, but an energy directed at a higher aim will give it a different character, so that no pride, feeling of superiority or suchlike can arise.

b. Meditation practice

The proper energy must be developed in meditation practice if it is to be successful. One of the four bases for success given in the Scriptures is energy (viriyā). What are we to understand by energy in meditation practice?

First and foremost it is the attempt to realize the Four Kinds of Effort. At the same time it also means not being frightened or depressed by the terrible things that can happen in life and the difficulties we shall come up against. Energy also implies the readiness to continue to follow the Path of Meditation with great diligence and determination with the aim of achieving success after months or even only after years of practice. In the realization that everything that happens to us is the result of our own actions, we shall not be distracted by the ups and downs and temptations of life. Energy means being steadfast and persistent.

It is important in the practice of mental development to keep to daily practice as consistently as possible. If one too quickly gives in to the feeling that 'I shan't succeed today in any case' or continually postpones the time appointed in favour of all sorts of other things until it is put off altogether, one will gradually lose one's motivation. The lack of energy and the sloth and torpor that goes with it will gain the upper hand and undermine all one's efforts.

A final point may be made as a conclusion to this discussion of energy. One is readily inclined to expect that energy must be present in one form or another after the first effort. Beware of this! We cannot always bring the circumstances of our life into agreement with our will. Those circumstances are conditioned by actions we have performed in the past. What we can do here and now is make an effort and create favourable conditions for the future. Always remember:

Expectation brings disappointment!

Let us conclude with some practical advice. We have already seen that it is the confrontation with life that makes us mentally mature. Thus if possible, never sidestep such a confrontation without first having completely understood it. Only if we understand the reality of that confrontation, shall we be able to react to it in the right way. This is the way to mental stability. So practise meditation with mindfulness and clear comprehension. The Buddha said, 'Work out your own deliverance with complete watchfulness and earnestness'.

May this discussion lead many beings to develop the energy to tread the Path.