Reviewing Right Effort

Buddhism emphasizes the development of the concepts found in the Four Noble Truths through the mental discipline provided by Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration, the first three of the Seven Awakening Factors. I believe this emphasis on training the mind represents a significant contribution to human evolution that is lacking in traditions such as Christianity, Judaism and Islam. There are sects within what is called the “Abrahamic” religions that actively cultivate the dedicated training of the mind that is essential for actually realizing the potential for Awakening, God-consciousness, or being One with Allah, but those primary institutions place a higher value on faith than on rigorous self-awareness and self-discipline.

Functionally, the concepts contained within all the religious institutions are valid, but Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration have a heightened value because the product of this sort of discipline transforms liberating concepts into liberating realizations.

The Pali term for Right Effort is *samma vayama* (sah-mah vah-yah-mah); samma means correct and vayama means exertion, effort, channeling of energy. It is also represented as one of the Seven Awakening Factors*, viriya* (vihr-yah), the Energy Awakening Factor, as well as one of the Five Powers, which contradict the hindrances, and one of the Five Faculties, which bring the process of Awakening to fulfillment.

My view of Right Effort follows what is suggested by Daniel Siegel—we take in energy in the form of food and oxygen and transform it into metabolic activity, most importantly as the fuel provided to the brain, which generates consciousness and all of our subjective experiences. The activities of the brain are either guided by greed, hatred and ignorance or by generosity, kindness and wisdom.

Right Effort channels the energy of attention, and the primary application of this energy is dedicated to the process of Awakening. Here is a quote that describes how the Pali Canon views this channeling:

“And what, monks, is right effort? (1) There is the case where a monk generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the sake of the non-arising of evil, unskillful qualities that have not yet arisen. (2) He generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the sake of the abandoning of evil, unskillful qualities that have arisen. (3) He generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the sake of the arising of skillful qualities that have not yet arisen. (4) He generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the maintenance, non-confusion, increase, plenitude, development, & culmination of skillful qualities that have arisen. This, monks, is called right effort.” (Maha Vibhanga Sutta, translated by Thanissaro)

Right Effort also manifests as persistence, most recognizable as the Energy Awakening factor. Right Effort, combined with the Awakening Factors of Mindfulness, Investigation of Mental Phenomena, produces a balance between Joy (enthusiastic engagement of attention) and Tranquility (calm alertness). This dynamic process supports Concentration (unification of all the Seven Awakening Factors), in cooperation with Equanimity, (which balances all the other Awakening Factors).

It can also be understood in the context of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in an often-repeated phrase--*ardent, alert, and mindful—atapi, sampajanna, sati*. *Ardency* is another way that the mindful energy of attention is channeled—*an actively engaged, comprehensive awareness of what is happening in the mind as it occurs*. Ardency is synonymous in its function with Joy.

In the context of the Seven Awakening Factors, the Energy Awakening Factor is closely associated with the two preceding Factors, Mindfulness and Investigation of Mental Phenomena. These three factors are recognizable as the just described atapi, sampajanna, sati. When the mind is stimulated to organize a self, the Awakening process requires persistent, dedicated and mindful investigation of what is forming, alert to the potential organizing of unwholesomeness, which is denied and replaced by the arising and fulfillment of a wholesome self-state organization.

The commentaries describe different levels of effort: *initial effort, sustained effort* and *determined effort*. Initial effort brings attention to focus on emerging states of consciousness—this is called *vitakka* (vee-tah-kah). Sustained effort is called *vicara* (vee-chah-rah). Determined effort called *adhitthana* (ah-dee-tah-nah), is recognized as *persistent reapplication of the channeling process* described in the first quote—to “the non-arising of evil, unskillful qualities”, and “generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the maintenance, non-confusion, increase, plenitude, development, & culmination of skillful qualities that have arisen”.

In the Four Foundations of Mindfulness Discourse, the commentaries describe *sampajanna* *as four comprehensions*, as found in the book by U Silananda entitled “The Four Foundations of Mindfulness”, on p. 52:

There are four kinds of clear comprehension mentioned in the commentaries. One is the “clear comprehension of what is of benefit”. The second is the “clear comprehension of what is suitable”. The third is the “clear comprehension of the meditator’s domain” and the fourth is the “clear comprehension of non-delusion”. Meditators have to understand and observe each of the small actions of the body with these four kinds of clear comprehension in mind….

These four clear comprehensions can be understood through a change in terminology that is a better fit for contemporary life:

*Clear comprehension of what is of benefit* regarding determining what is a worthy goal or value to be realized in terms of living a wholesome life. Using the ethics of the Noble Eightfold Path, a decision regarding what is emerging in consciousness can be mindfully investigated and appropriately determined through Right Effort.

*Clear comprehension of what is suitable* can be understood as determining what is the most suitable approach to achieving a worthy goal or value. In some cases, this might require preplanning, while in others it might be acting on what is currently the best approach given the circumstances.

*Clear comprehension of the meditator’s domain* represents the ongoing application of *atapi sampajanna sati*. We can establish a worthy goal or value only in the context of the circumstances that prevailed when establishing the goal or value. Circumstances can, and often do, change in ways that devalue an otherwise valuable goal or interfere with the most effective approach to realizing it. Ongoing ardent, aware mindfulness can also determine whether the suitable approach is being skillfully activated, or if the ways and means for realizing the worthy goal are shown to be inadequate, in which case the suitable means can be changed to be more effective.

*Clear comprehension of non-delusion* can be understood to pertain to the “worldly” goal of “finishing a project”, as well as fitting within the realization of Awakening. On a mundane level, mindfulness and investigation, activated through the discipline of Right Effort, supports creating and sustaining a successful lifestyle—Right Livelihood. On a spiritual level, the channeling of the energy of attention through persistent development of the Noble Eightfold Path provides a path for realizing our full potential as spiritual beings.