



## *Dharma Notes*

March 25, 2010

# ***“The Three Aspects of Appropriate Effort in Pragmatic Buddhism”***

**Talk given by Dr. Jim Eubanks Sensei**

Director of Buddhist Studies, CPB  
Abbot, OPB

### **Key Points**

- Stephen Batchelor describes the central importance of the Four Ennobling Truths in dharma practice: 1) *understanding* human anguish, 2) *letting go* of its origins, 3) *realizing* its cessation, and 4) *cultivating* the path of human flourishing. The fourth Ennobling Truth is known as the Eightfold Path. When examining the eight practices of the Eightfold Path, Stephen Batchelor and Peter Hershock suggest the use of the adjectives “appropriate” and “corrective and encompassing” respectively—rather than “right”—to highlight the inherently situational application of the Eightfold Path.

- Situational application in Buddhism is NOT the same as relativism, and describes our engagement of the Eightfold Path in a manner that leads to the creation and preservation of 1) personal and social *harmony*, 2) personal and social *health*, and 3) personal and social *happiness* (the “triple H’s”).

- “Appropriate effort” is the sixth practice of the Eightfold Path, which includes eight practices in total: 1) appropriate vision, 2) appropriate thought, 3) appropriate speech, 4) appropriate action, 5) appropriate livelihood, 6) appropriate effort, 7) appropriate mindfulness, and 8) appropriate concentration.

- There are three aspects of “appropriate effort” in Pragmatic Buddhism: 1) ameliorative effort, 2) goal-oriented effort, and 3) altruistic effort.

### **“Appropriate Effort” in Pragmatic Buddhism**

Traditionally, there are four purposes for practicing “appropriate effort” in daily life: 1) to shed our unwholesome habits and dispositions, 2) to prevent the cultivation of unwholesome habits and dispositions, 3) to cultivate and develop wholesome habits and dispositions, and 4) to nurture the conditions which promote the cultivation and development of wholesome habits and dispositions. We can look at the promotion of “wholesome” results as doing that which cultivates and develops harmony, health and happiness within ourselves and society—what we collectively call the requisites for “human flourishing”—while preventing the cultivation of “unwholesome” results (destruction, disease, depression).

Like appropriate action, there are three aspects of appropriate effort I would like to highlight for our practical consideration. The first is “ameliorative effort.” This includes doing that which proactively addresses those habits and dispositions that cause us psychoemotional suffering and real-world problems. Ameliorative effort literally relieves us of our anguish, and prevents its persistence and reoccurrence. Daily meditation is, among other purposes, an example of ameliorative effort due to its ability to induce inner calm, a sense of well-being, and enhanced attentional processing. Another

important example of ameliorative effort would be joining a like-minded community, or *sangha* where you can share your experiences and grow and develop together.

The second aspect of appropriate effort is “goal-oriented effort.” This is the kind of effort expected of us in the home or workplace, or in one’s Buddhist practice, where specific goals are defined and sought. We must have goal-oriented effort if we are to live within society, because so much of our life is dependent on our achievement of various daily goals. While this sounds simple enough, it is often easy to *neglect* the cultivation and appreciation for goal-oriented effort, and instead propagate procrastination, demotivation, and apathy. As an integral part of our practice of appropriate effort, we must specifically refine our goal-oriented behavior. It is a matter of practical success in daily life.

The third aspect of appropriate effort is “altruistic effort.” This is a practice that aims to share the fruit of one’s personal practice with others while recognizing that sharing the fruit of our practice with others creates a better world for everyone, ourselves included. Altruism is a primary ingredient of human flourishing. It is a contribution to the very fabric of society, and promotes a deeper degree of connection among people, especially when those who share themselves altruistically are cultivating positive personal characteristics. Our altruism arises from two pathways: 1) our psycho-emotional cultivation of suffering *with* (empathy) and compassion *for* other sentient beings, and 2) our psycho-rational awareness of the practical benefits of altruism in an interconnected world. I think the evidence shows us that most people use both of these pathways to varying degrees to generate their altruistic motivations (we both “feel” and “understand” the logic of altruism), but some people use one or the other, simply due to the disposition of their neurological constitution. We should refrain from saying that one of these two pathways for generating altruistic motivation is “better” than the other, or “more correct” than the other, as is sometimes implied in traditional accounts of *felt* compassion in Buddhism. Sometimes the emotive nature of altruism is untenable to those who are not as emotional due to their neurological disposition, and we need an account of altruism that includes them wholeheartedly. I think the Buddha outlined this twofold distinction for this very reason. The discoveries of modern brain science show us that not everyone is capable of experiencing the same depth of *felt* compassion that others might, and likewise, some do not logically relate to the implications of social interconnectedness that others might.

Whether we tend to “feel” our altruistic motivations or tend to “understand” the logic behind altruism, let us dedicate ourselves to the unhindered spread of altruistic action throughout society. We must remember that having the emotional prerequisites for compassion, or the understanding of altruistic logic is not enough itself to move us to action; this is where appropriate effort comes in. We must *realize* (“make real”) our altruistic effort through intentional application. We cannot remain shackled by the sufferings of the world and thus fail to act out of our overwhelming sadness, just like we cannot remain only intellectually interested in the logic of causal interconnection. Action is what makes human flourishing real and what makes our role in its creation meaningful. The aim of altruistic effort, from the point of view of the society, is to promote and propagate those factors within society that allow its people to flourish. It is a substantial aspect of our practice of appropriate effort, so may we learn to share the fruit of our practice freely with others.

Notes: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

^ JEE

