

4. Effort

Effort or diligence, *vīrya* in Sanskrit, is etymologically related to the word *virile*. The perfection of effort is the intensity, enthusiasm, and zeal to continue amidst adversity. Spiritual strength and stamina are required to persist on the path. Such heroic effort is about sustaining practice and attention. We continue and sustain our enthusiasm by keeping our balance. If our effort is too severe, if we push ourselves too hard and become too tightly wound, we may snap from the pressure. If we are too easy and lax with ourselves and our efforts, our energy will flag and we will also fail to continue. Enthusiasm and patience support each other and are complementary. Sustainable effort and endurance are two sides of the balance in continuing practice.

We can understand effort in terms of physical and yogic energy. Many spiritual and meditative exercises are concerned with developing our energy, strengthening and toning our body and mind to a balanced state. Buddhist practitioners have availed themselves of techniques from Indian tantric meditation and Chinese Taoist practice that work with psychic energy channels in the physical body to develop and strengthen spiritual energy. The diverse traditions of Vajrayāna Buddhism also have developed tantric practices for working with psychophysical energies. Energizing practices may naturally arise in meditation, for example when focusing on the breath.

Many Buddhist monks have studied martial arts as a way of working in a mode that is more physically active than sitting meditation. The Chan founder, Bodhidharma, is also revered in legend as the founder of kung fu by East Asian martial arts students. Japanese samurai warriors sought to strengthen their mental and spiritual will to match their physical prowess by studying meditative techniques with monks and practicing meditation.

Strenuous persistence is the stuff of bodhisattva legends. Even the Buddha Śākyamuni practiced diligently for six years before his great awakening. His heroic effort included mastering the most severe ascetic practices available at the time, bringing himself to the edge of death for the sake of his spiritual quest.

Milarepa, the famous eleventh-century Tibetan yogi and poet, had used his yogic skill and magical powers for the unwholesome aim of destroying his family's enemies before he took up the Buddhist path. To burn up and purify this karmic obstruction, Milarepa's teacher, Marpa, made him undergo many trials and frustrations. For example, Marpa asked Milarepa to build a stone house. Then he was asked to tear it down and rebuild it. Marpa had him repeat this ten times. Thanks to Milarepa's dedication and energy, he persisted.

Because of the relationship between *vīrya* and *virility*, we might associate this kind of heroic effort or energy with the stereotypical masculine image of a warrior. But effort also includes a more nurturing side, balancing firmness with flexibility. The fulfilled steadfastness and self-confidence of a heroic bodhisattva includes joyfulness and rest or recreation as well as exertion. This is sometimes referred to as effortless effort, persisting and continuing on our way as just the ongoing steps of our ordinary, everyday life. An aspect of holding firm is letting go, the willingness to start fresh from any point, to continue our efforts even when it seems we are starting all over, as Milarepa did with his house.

Bodhisattva effort is fortified by the aspiration and intention to aid suffering beings and to realize awakening. When we look around at the suffering of the world, in the larger world or in our own lives, we can feel and recognize some urgency not to become lazy and give up our best efforts. Each of us has a unique job to do. Each of us has our own special calling, something each of us can offer that is asking us to pay attention and exert ourselves.

Enthusiasm supports and depends on many of the other practices. Meditation and mindfulness practices can help us marshal and care for our energy. Effort is an expression of vow or commitment. Such a bodhisattva vow is the starting point for developing our spiritual energy and vitality.