

Learn Religions

Virya Paramita

The Perfection of Energy

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Virya paramita -- the perfection of energy -- is the fourth of the traditional six (sometimes ten) [paramitas](#) or perfections of [Mahayana Buddhism](#) and the fifth of the ten perfections of [Theravada Buddhism](#). What is the perfection of energy?

First, let's look at the Sanskrit word *virya*. It comes from *vira*, a word from an ancient [Indo-Iranian language](#) that means "hero." In Sanskrit, *virya* came to refer to the power of a great warrior to overcome his enemies. The English word *virile* evolved from *virya*.

Today, *virya paramita* is translated as the perfection of zeal, the perfection of enthusiastic effort, and the perfection of energy. It also connotes a courageous or heroic effort. Its opposites are sloth and defeatism.

Virya can refer to both mental and physical energy. Taking care of your health is part of virya paramita. But for many of us, the mental energy is a bigger challenge. A lot of us struggle to make time for daily practice. Meditating or [chanting](#) might be the last thing we feel like doing sometimes. How do you grow mental energy?

Character and Courage

Virya paramita is said to have three components. The first component is the development of character. It is also about cultivating the courage and the will to walk the path as far as it goes, for as long as it takes.

For you, this stage might involve correcting bad habits or giving up excuses. You may need to clarify commitment to the path and cultivate [shraddha](#) -- trust, confidence, conviction.

Some of the early Buddhist scholars described this stage as developing the hardness of armor to deal with adversity. However, I believe many teachers would say that the metaphor of

armoring oneself against suffering is not necessarily helpful.

Tibetan Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron wrote in *The Wisdom of No Escape*:

"It isn't easy and it's accompanied by a lot of fear, a lot of resentment, and a lot of doubt. That's what it means to be human, that's what it means to be a warrior. You go through the process of taking off the armor that you might have had some illusion was protecting you from something only to find that actually it's shielding you from being fully alive and fully awake. Then you go forward and you meet the [dragon](#), and every meeting shows you where there's still some armor to take off. Take refuge in the courage and the potential of fearlessness of removing all the armor that covers awakens."

Spiritual Training

The late Zen teacher Robert Aitken Roshi wrote in *The Practice of Perfection*, "The second aspect of Virya, spiritual training, is a matter of taking one's practice in hand -- of not depending solely on the teacher or the Sangha or even the practice to do it."

Spiritual training may include learning liturgy and [rituals](#), as well as a study of Buddhist teachings. A clearer understanding of what the Buddha taught will help build your confidence and give your practice more focus. The written works of the great teachers can inspire and move you.

Of course, "book learning" can be a challenge for a lot of us. I confess I don't always have the patience for it, myself. It's also the case that, while there is a lot of information about Buddhist doctrines readily available, the quality of that information can be spotty.

The guidance of a [dharma teacher](#) can be especially helpful to direct you to use, and accurate, information. If you are just getting started, here is a list of recommended [beginner Buddhist books](#).

Benefiting Others

The third aspect of virya is practice for the benefit of others. The development of [bodhicitta](#) -- the desire to realize enlightenment for the benefit of all beings -- is essential to Mahayana Buddhism. Bodhicitta helps us release selfish attachment to our efforts.

When bodhicitta is strong, it fuels our determination to practice. Deepening concern for others is a sure antidote to apathy.

In many schools of Mahayana, [bodhisattva vows](#) are part of the chanting liturgy. Every time we renew our vows we renew our intention and determination to practice. How can we slack off, when there is so much suffering in the world?

Goals and Desire

Among the first things we are taught about Buddhism is to be wary of desire, which causes suffering; and to not practice with a goal in mind. Yet teachers often advise that desire and goal-setting can help cultivate virya paramita.

Desire is a fetter when it is self-centered, but selfless desire to do good and to help others can fuel our practice. Just take care to be honest with yourself about your deepest motivations.

Meditating with a goal in mind is a problem because expectations take us out of the present moment. But outside of meditation, goal-setting can help us take charge of our practice. For example, one goal might be to better manage our time for daily chanting and meditation.

Sometimes people set a pace for themselves that they cannot maintain, and when they fail to meet their goals they feel defeated. Instead of quitting, have patience with yourself and learn from the experience.

What To Do About Big Barriers

Sometimes the things that seem in the way are *really big* things that are not easy to change. A difficult marriage or stressful job can drain your energy, for example. How do you cope?

There is no one-size-fits-all answer that can be applied here, except perhaps to not stay *stuck* in the same place. Sometimes we may find ourselves enduring a bad life situation because that seems easier than confronting it or trying to change it. Or, we may be tempted to just run away. But neither option is very courageous, is it?

Getting unstuck may involve small steps or big ones, and it may take months or years. But these steps will be part of your spiritual path, also, and you can learn from them and be made stronger by them. So don't put off practice until your circumstances are better.

Robert Aitken Roshi said,

"The first lesson is that distraction or obstruction are just negative terms for your context. Circumstances are like your arms and legs. They appear in your life to serve your practice. As you become more and more settled in your purpose, your circumstances begin to synchronize with your concerns. Chance words by friends, books, and poems, even the wind in the trees brings precious insight."

So, start where you are. Take courage. Develop knowledge and confidence. Dedicate yourself to others. This is virya paramita.