

The Five Workers



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Association for Insight Meditation

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Contents

The Five Workers.....	1
Right View.....	1
Right Thought.....	2
Right Effort.....	3
Right Mindfulness.....	3
Right Concentration.....	4
Training the Workers.....	5

The Five Workers

(Kāraka Maggaṅga)

To accomplish any task that requires teamwork, the members of the team need to work together in harmony. Some members of the team can give instructions while others do the hard graft, but they all need to fulfil their roles properly.

To develop insight knowledge we need five workers to fulfil their roles as part of the team. To gain concentration and insight into the true characteristics of mental and physical phenomena, five workers are needed. What are these five workers? They are Right View, Right Thought, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. No doubt you will recognise these as the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path, minus the three factors of morality: Right Action, Right Speech, and Right Livelihood.

Does this mean that we do not need morality in order to gain concentration and insight? No, not at all. How could anyone observe morality without these five workers? It is impossible to observe Right Speech without these five workers. If you are not mindful of what you are saying, could you avoid slander, falsehood, or idle chatter? If you became angry and wanted to abuse or slander somebody, how could you avoid doing so without Right Effort? Again, if you don't think there is any harm in drinking intoxicants, would you abstain from doing so? Right View is vital to observe morality properly, and if you don't observe morality, then you hold wrong views.

Right View

The first worker is Right View. It is like the architect or engineer who plans a project. Before we begin any project, we need a good plan. To gain concentration and insight leading toward nibbāna one would first need to understand at least something about the truth of suffering, and appreciate the desirability of gaining liberation from the endless cycle of rebirth, which is called saṃsāra. If Right View is lacking, one won't be

interested in learning Dhamma properly or practising meditation. To someone with wrong views, it is absurd to spend so much of one's precious time to develop mindfulness and concentration. It would be better to enjoy oneself, or at least to work or study to earn more money to enjoy oneself more in the future.

Right Thought

The second worker is Right Thought. This is like the site manager who understands the vision of the architect or engineer and instructs the other workers towards achieving that end result. Having a good plan is not enough. It might be a wonderful plan, but we also need to implement it. If you have Right View, which means that you wish to escape from saṃsāra, and see danger in the slightest fault, then you will exercise your mind in various ways to realise that wish. "How can I overcome my attachments?" "How can I avoid getting angry?" "How best should I spend my time?" "Is it possible to realise nibbāna in this very life?" "Why am I so lazy?" "How many days do I have left to live?"

Such skilful thoughts are motivated by Right View. They turn the mind away from sensual pleasures and towards nibbāna. This is the first kind of Right Thought called *nekkhamma saṅkappo* — thoughts of renunciation.

The second kind of Right Thought turns the mind away from anger and towards loving-kindness. "Others are just like me. They wish to enjoy happiness and do not want to suffer." It is called *abyāpāda saṅkappo* — thoughts of non-hatred. It is barely possible to *like* everybody in this world, but if you practise non-hatred you will have good-will (*metta*) towards everyone.

Then there are thoughts that turn the mind away from cruelty or callousness and towards compassion. These are *avihiṃsa saṅkappo* — thoughts of harmlessness. "The hearts of everyone in this world are burning with the three fires of greed, hatred, and delusion. They need the cool water of Dhamma to extinguish those fires."

Right Effort

Once the mind starts moving in the right direction, one can no longer remain idle or plead inability. Since one clearly sees that there is a job to be done, one must set about doing it. Right Effort is like a gang of four labourers. First, the effort to prevent the arising of unarisen unwholesome mental states. Right Thought knows that lust and anger led to unwholesome thoughts, words, and actions in the past, so it directs Right Effort to avoid those unskillful paths. The second kind of Right Effort strives to remove unwholesome states that have arisen. Right Thought becomes agitated at the presence of unwholesome thoughts and feelings associated with passion, but Wrong Thought thinks they are good and welcomes them. The third kind of Right Effort motivated by Right Thoughts of humility and wisdom seeks to develop wholesome states like wakefulness, concentration, mindfulness, and equanimity. Then the last Right Effort retains and encourages what is wholesome and conducive to the goal, and seeks to enhance and strengthen it.

All the time, Right Thought needs to tell Right Effort what to do. It is like an angel sitting on one shoulder whispering in your ear, "Get up early and go for meditation." Wrong Thought is like a devil on the other shoulder whispering in the other ear, "It is Sunday today, you've been working hard all week, have a lie in." The trouble is, they sometimes swap shoulders, so you don't know which one you should listen to!

Right Mindfulness

This worker is like a storekeeper or watchman who guards and keeps count of the materials necessary to complete the project. It makes sure that the other workers have what they need, but doesn't allow them to waste anything. He employs the good, honest workers, but sacks the lazy ones.

One needs to be optimistic and confident that practising meditation will result in real benefits that lead one gradually

towards the end of suffering. However, one needs to keep checking that one is getting at least some results. If the method is wrong, or the effort is weak, then one won't make much progress. Right Effort must be constant, continuous, and uninterrupted to gain concentration. One must keep the mind free from sensual and malevolent thoughts. One must be sincere and perfectly honest with one's teacher and with oneself. Concentration must be balanced with effort. Sitting should be alternated with walking meditation. Too much concentration or not enough effort leads to dullness and drowsiness. Too much effort or not enough concentration leads to restlessness. Mindfulness keeps a check on the present state of mind, so that one can take corrective action.

Right Concentration

The fifth worker is Right Concentration. To gain insight one needs to concentrate on realities, not on concepts. When we breathe in and breathe out, our abdomen rises or expands, and falls or contracts. We should pay attention to the movement itself, not to the ideas of rising and falling. Right Concentration must bring the mind to penetrate the object and get immersed in it. If we are watching the breath at the nostril, we should pay attention to the touching of the breath, not to the ideas of in-coming or out-going breaths. How do we know the breath is coming in? Because we feel it touch inside the nostrils or on the upper lip, or we feel our abdomen rise or expand outwards.

Similarly, with walking meditation we should know the actual movements of the feet as we take each step. Whether it is the left foot or the right foot, a big step or a small step, a fast step or a slow one, is not the point. We should just know the movement, or the heaviness or lightness, or the hardness or softness as the foot touches the ground.

When eating our meals, we should clearly know each action and movement of the hands, eyes, and mouth, we should know

the taste, smell, and texture of the food. These are realities. We should not be lost in thoughts about the food. Noble silence is indispensable to the meditator who wishes to gain concentration. Talking is the greatest hindrance to the meditator.

Training the Workers

My first talk at [Ketumati](#) Vihāra in Manchester was about the importance of Right View. I chose that as the topic then as it is the beginning of all good things. If your view is not right, then your thinking will not be right either. Without Right Thought, you won't have Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration, Right Speech, Right Action, or Right Livelihood. Suppose I was thinking, "If I give a good Dhamma talk today people will give lots of donations" would that be Right Thought? No, of course not. It is wrong thought motivated by greed, isn't it? However, if I am thinking, "If I give a good Dhamma talk today people will become interested in meditation and begin to strive for nibbāna," that would be Right Thought, wouldn't it? Right Thought is motivated by renunciation or loving-kindness, not by greed or anger. Then it follows that if thought is right, the speech must also be right. Right View leads to Right Thought, which encourages Right Speech, Right Action, and so forth.

If we were to ask anyone, "Are you above average intelligence?" at least 95% would say that they were of above average intelligence. That doesn't make sense, does it? How can 95% of people be above average? At least 45% of people must be giving a stupid answer, mustn't they? It is the same if we ask, "Do you have any wrong views?" I think 99% of people will not admit to having any wrong views. However, that doesn't make sense either. The only persons without any wrong views are Noble Ones like Stream-winners, Once-returners, Non-returners, and Arahants. So less than 1% of people are free from Wrong View, more than 99% are still stuck with wrong view.

To get rid of wrong view is not easy. One cannot do it just by listening to Dhamma talks and reading books. That is the wholesome kamma of listening to Dhamma, or straightening one's wrong views, but it doesn't eradicate wrong view. After the talk, or after reading the book, self-view still remains in one's stream of consciousness. It has been with us throughout all of our previous lives up until and including the present one, so it is not going to be got rid of so easily. To get rid of such a cunning defilement we are going to need the right strategy. We shouldn't underestimate the task, but at the same time we have to have confidence that it is both possible and desirable to accomplish.

We need to study and listen to Dhamma to eradicate gross wrong views like eternalism and annihilationism. If we cling to either of these two extremes we won't practise. If we believe that we have many, many lives to achieve nibbāna we won't strive for it. We will keep putting it off. "This life I will do my best to keep the five precepts and practise charity as much as possible, then with all that merit to my credit, next life I can strive for nibbāna." That's eternalism isn't it? How are you going to strive for nibbāna next life if you're reborn as a sheep, when you don't even strive for it in this life when reborn as a human being? If by some fluke you're reborn as a human being again, if you made excuses in this life, you will make the same excuses next time too, even if you happen to meet up with Buddhism again. So don't get stuck in the wrong view of eternalism.

The other extreme is thinking that nibbāna is some kind of annihilation or black hole. If there is no self, who attains nibbāna? Why should I give up sensual pleasures and run away from life? Life is to be lived in the here and now. Who knows what happens after death? If I attain nibbāna I shall become some dispassionate robot or reclusive misanthrope with no friends and no aim in life. This annihilation belief is widespread among non-Buddhists. They do not wish to be annihilated at all, but wish to enjoy life to the full, pretending

that it will never end. However, they don't believe in rebirth after death, and view death as the end of existence.

When mundane Right View is established by reflecting wisely on the teaching of the Buddha, you will realise that there is only one way out of this maze.

“The inner tangle, and the outer tangle,
 This generation is entangled in a tangle.
 ‘And so I ask of Gotama this question:
 ‘Who succeeds in disentangling this tangle?’”
 “‘When a wise man, established well in Virtue,
 ‘Develops Consciousness and Understanding,
 ‘Then as a bhikkhu ardent and sagacious
 ‘He succeeds in disentangling this tangle’” (S.i.13)

These two short verses from the Saṃyuttanikāya form the basis for Venerable Buddhaghosa's Visuddhimagga — a meditator's manual of nearly a thousand pages.

What we have to do, then, is develop our minds through meditation to gain concentration that will lead to the gradual maturation of insight. We have to work to develop Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

When a wise man: means if a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, has rightly grasped the mundane right view and has realised that there is a task to be accomplished, a goal to be reached, defilements to be abandoned, and that nibbāna is something well worth striving for, then one is “a wise man.”

Established well in virtue: means fully endowed with five precepts, eight precepts, ten precepts, or 227 precepts, ashamed of any past failure in that virtue, and fearful of any future failings in virtue.

Develops consciousness: means develops the mind or develops concentration. The word used here is *citta* rather than *samādhi*. Most of you have heard of Cittaviveka Forest Monastery. Cittaviveka means with the mind secluded from unwholesome states. It means purified and free from the five hindrances.

Develops understanding: means that the pure mind is able to see things more clearly than ever before. When the clouds are gone, the sun shines brightly, and everything appears as it really is. The final chapter of the Visuddhimagga describes the progress of insight in detail, but since most of us are just beginners I won't go into it here. It is sufficient to know that the purified mind is able to rightly understand mental and physical phenomena without the illusions of self-view, permanence, and pleasure that usually dominate the mind. After purity of mind, comes purity of view.

As a bhikkhu: Here, 'a bhikkhu' means anyone who sees danger in saṃsāra and so strives to escape from continued rebirth. One has the faculty of confidence based on knowledge (*saddhā*) to the extent that one is willing to forgo indulgence in sensual pleasures — like eating and sleeping as much as one wishes. One applies oneself to full-time meditation practice as one gone forth should do.

Ardent: Striving with 100% of one's energy and determination. Right Effort is not a half-hearted effort. It means all out, continuous, and relentless effort.

Sagacious: means learned and wise. Able to discriminate between what is beneficial and what is not, between what leads towards the goal and what does not, what is the teaching of the Buddha, and what is not.

He succeeds in disentangling this tangle: As one progresses in meditation, the fetters of sensual indulgence and wrong view that prevent one from striving and hinder one's progress, gradually become weaker. The weaker they become, the harder one strives. If one continues with the practice, the time will come when one's faith, effort, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom are strong enough to escape from the gravitational pull of the world. Then one will attain nibbāna and be assured of final liberation in due course. On the attainment of Stream-winning, we can say that the ardent meditator succeeds in disentangling this tangle.

Thus Right View leads to Right Thought, and Right Thought leads to Right Effort, that is a strenuous effort to practise meditation. The four Right Efforts are the labourers who do the hard graft. If the workers go on strike, even the best plans in the world will come to nothing. The 'Site Manager' has to make sure that the 'Four Labourers' keep working hard by instructing them, encouraging them, and admonishing them as necessary.

The first labourer is the effort to prevent the arising of unwholesome mental states. When engaged in intensive meditation practice we must guard the six senses that might lead to the arising of sensual, malevolent, or deluded thoughts if left unguarded. Every action and movement of the limbs should be noted in detail. When eating, one should carefully note chewing, tasting, and swallowing. When sitting, the rising and falling movements of the abdomen should be noted, and any secondary objects such as hearing, thinking, or feeling stiff or hot. If one fails to note systematically, energetically, and precisely, the five hindrances will gain access to the mind, and progress will come to a grinding halt.

This is where the second labourer must take over. Whenever unwholesome mental states such as lust, anger, sleepiness, restlessness, or doubt have gained entry to the mind, one can no longer note and observe the primary objects of meditation clearly. The hindrances now become the primary objects to contemplate. Right Thought must stir up energy and mindfulness to dispel them. It is difficult to get an opportunity to practice meditation for long periods without interruption. If you haven't done it for a while, inevitably the five hindrances will raise their ugly heads. Do not despair, but encourage and admonish yourself in various ways not to waste your precious time with unwholesome thoughts.

The third labourer stirs up wholesome mental states like mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. As mindfulness and concentration become established, the five hindrances gradu-

ally get dispelled and occur less often, but if there is any lapse in one's effort, they can creep back in. Mindfulness must be constant, continuous, and sustained to develop concentration.

At this point the fourth labourer takes over and builds on the hard work done by the other three labourers. When the four labourers are working together in harmony, the five hindrances get no chance to enter the mind, and one gains purity of mind (*citta visuddhi*) or momentary concentration (*khaṇika samādhī*).

As Right Effort develops Right Mindfulness — which means continuous and unbroken mindfulness of the realities occurring from moment to moment — one gains Right Concentration. The mind becomes deeply absorbed in the various objects of mindfulness meditation. It stops wandering here and there as it did before. If it does slip off the object momentarily, mindfulness quickly notices that attention is wavering and brings the mind back to the present moment.

At this stage the 'Site Manager' can relax a bit. If he has done his job well, the four labourers are working well together, the store-keeper makes sure that the labourers have what they need to do their work efficiently, and the architect is pleased to see his project taking shape.

Discursive thinking becomes much less as mindfulness and concentration become strong. Mental noting is light, quick, and smooth due to repeated practice. The mind becomes quiet, even silent for brief moments. One will enjoy extraordinary feelings of peace, harmony, and joy that one seldom or never experienced before. The pure mind is a quiet mind, free from all stress and negativity. Even if another meditator carelessly bangs the door, one's mindfulness is not disturbed. One hears the sound, and knows what has happened, but the mind doesn't react in the usual way.

"Passion remains undeveloped in him who recollects with mindfulness the sound that he has heard. Thus freed from lust, he refuses to imbibe it."

“Listening to an audible object, a meditator just hears it and just feels that he hears it, without conceptualising it. With this, suffering ceases. One who practises in this way is said to be near to nibbāna.” ([A Discourse on the Mālukyaputta Sutta](#))

Just how near one is to nibbāna depends on one’s perfections. Don’t even think about that, but just keep working to develop deeper insight. Rest assured that you are a lot nearer to nibbāna than you were before practising meditation. Enjoy the peace that comes with mental purity, but don’t get attached to it. There is still plenty more work to be done to gain the higher stages of insight. If you get good results like this after just one or two days, you will become a dedicated meditator, and will keep coming back for more at every opportunity.

When Right Concentration is established, insights into the three characteristics of existence are sure to arise. Thus one’s Right View becomes refined and straightened out a bit more. Although this may still be mundane right view, it is no longer just intellectual knowledge. Since one has gained some results from meditation practice, any former scepticism, and gross wrong views like eternalism and annihilationism are dispelled.

For many lives we have wandered in saṃsāra, always looking for happiness, but mostly meeting with suffering. Now that we have met the true teaching of the Buddha, let us dedicate ourselves to this simple practice of mindfulness as much as possible. The benefits are immediate. If we practice hard the results will be enduring, if we reach our full potential, we will put an end to suffering forever within seven more lives at the most.

