

VIRIYA stands for "energy", "effort", "vigour" and "exertion". Derived from *vīra*, "hero", *virīya* stands for the quality that is indeed required for any heroic deed, namely determined effort applied to the task at hand. According to early Buddhism, such determined effort in the form of wisely directed and balanced exertion is an indispensable necessity for progress. In the ancient Indian setting, the early Buddhist conception of *virīya* can be seen to cut a middle path position between the extremes of excessive and unwise striving through ascetic practices and self-tormenting on the one side, and the belief in the futility of any effort upheld by some deterministic or fatalist philosophers on the other side.¹

The significant role played by *virīya* in the Buddhist path to liberation is reflected in its role in such schemes as the four right exertions, the four roads to [spiritual] power, the five faculties or powers, the seven factors of awakening and the eightfold noble path.² In what follows, a survey of these different schemes will be given, followed by examining the importance of *virīya* in general and by surveying some imageries related to the term.

The Four Right Exertions

Out of the different schemes relevant to progress towards awakening, the four right exertions, *sammappadhāna* are dedicated entirely to the theme of effort (see also PADHĀNA).³ In the standard definition given in the discourses, the four right exertions are:

- (1) preventing the arising of unarisen unwholesome states,
- (2) overcoming arisen unwholesome states,
- (3) arousing unarisen wholesome states,
- (4) developing arisen wholesome states.

An indispensable requirement for developing these four right exertions is virtue, whose foundational role in this respect is similar to the role of the earth as a foundation for any activity (S. V, 246). Based on virtue, in regard to each of these four the task is to "stir up desire, make an effort, arouse energy, exert the mind and strive", *chandaṃ janeti, vāyamaṭi, viriyam ārabhati cittaṃ paggaṃhāti padahati* (M. II, 11). According to an explanation given in the *Vibhaṅga*, in the present context to "make an effort", to "arouse energy" and to "strive" are simply different terms

with the same meaning (*Vibh.* 208). Hence these terms points to one basic factor: effort.

The implications of the above fourfold scheme can be filled out with the help of two discourses in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*. The first of these uses the same fourfold pattern as usually employed for the four *sammappadhānas* - preventing unarisen unwholesome states, overcoming arisen unwholesome states, arousing unarisen wholesome states, developing arisen wholesome states - to explain four exertions, *padhānas* (A. II, 74). These four *padhānas* are:

- (1) exertion in regard to restraint, *saṃvarappadhāna*,
- (2) exertion in regard to abandoning, *pahānappadhāna*,
- (3) exertion in regard to developing, *bhāvanappadhāna*,
- (4) exertion in regard to protecting, *anurakkhanappadhāna*.

The other *Aṅguttara Nikāya* discourse then explains in more detail what these four exertions represent (A. II, 16). According to its exposition, "exertion in regard to restraint" stands for sense-restraint, where the arising of unwholesome reactions at any sense-door is avoided through not allowing the mind to be carried away by the details of what has been perceived or by associations related to the same, *na nimittaggāhī hoti nānuvyañjanaggāhī*. "Exertion in regard to abandoning" then stands for overcoming thoughts of sensuality, ill-will or cruelty; while to develop the factors of awakening, *bojjhaṅga*, corresponds to "exertion in regard to developing". "Exertion in regard to protecting" takes place by protecting the sign of concentration, *samādhinimitta* (see also NIMITTA), which may have arisen due to meditating on such objects as a skeleton or a decaying corpse etc.

This presentation shows how the four right exertions can be practised, in that to prevent the arising of unarisen unwholesome states can be undertaken through sense-restraint; to overcome arisen unwholesome states can be put into practice by removing thoughts of sensuality, ill-will or cruelty; to arouse unarisen wholesome states can be implemented by developing the factors of awakening; and to develop arisen wholesome states can take place by protecting the sign of concentration. By treating sense-restraint,

the removal of unwholesome thoughts, the factors of awakening and the development of *samādhi* under the heading of *padhāna*, this presentation throws into relief the all-embracing importance of exertion for various aspects of the path to liberation.

Another perspective on the theme of "exertion" can be found in the five factors required for its successful implementation, the *padhāniyaṅga*. According to the *Bodhirājakumāra Sutta*, these five factors are confidence, health, honesty, energy and wisdom (*M. II, 95*). The same discourse proclaims that one who is endowed with these five factors and trains in accordance with the instructions given by the *Tathāgata* might reach final liberation even within a single day. In view of such potential, it is no wonder that exertion and effort are given such emphasis in the early Buddhist teachings.

Energy as a Road to [Spiritual] Power

Viriya is the second of the altogether four roads to [spiritual] power, *iddhipāda*. In this context, *virīya* performs its role as the *virīyasamādhipadhānasāṅkhārasamānāgata iddhipāda*, the "road to [spiritual] power that is endowed with concentration due to energy and volitional formations of striving". As a road to [spiritual] power, *virīya* should be developed in a balanced way by avoiding weakness and excess, and by neither getting stuck internally nor distracted externally (*S. V, 264*). Here *virīya* that is too weak stands for laziness and indolence, *kosajja*, while an excess of *virīya* manifests in the arising of restlessness (*S. V, 279*). Due to sloth-and-torpor *virīya* becomes stuck internally, and by being disturbed with thoughts related to sensual pleasures *virīya* will be distracted externally.

Developing *virīya* as an *iddhipāda* leads to concentration, *virīyaṃ nissāya labhati samādhiṃ labhati cittaṃ ekaggataṃ, ayaṃ vuccati virīyasamādhi* (*S. V, 268*). Such concentration is maintained in force due to the volitional formations of striving, *padhānasāṅkhāra*, whose task is none other but to implement the four *sammappadhānas*. This shows the degree to which the four *sammappadhānas* are of continuous relevance to other aspects of the path, such as the development of the four *iddhipādas*. Developed in this way, *virīya* as an *iddhipāda* can lead to a whole range of supernormal powers, as well as to reaching the destruction of the influxes.

The Faculty of Energy

Viriya as a "faculty", *virīyindriya*, stands for the effort to prevent unarisen unwholesome states, overcome arisen unwholesome states, arouse unarisen wholesome states, and develop arisen wholesome states (*S. V, 198*).⁴ This presentation mirrors the four *sammappadhānas* and thus further highlights the degree to which these four are of relevance to various aspects of the path. As a faculty, *virīya* has a particularly close relationship to progress towards the different levels of awakening, where with the complete development of all five *indriyas* full awakening is reached (*S. V, 200*). Within the context of the five *indriyas*, *virīya* arises based on wisdom and confidence, and it leads on to mindfulness and concentration (*S. V, 222 and 229*).

Viriyabala, energy as a "power", stands for overcoming unwholesome, blameworthy and dark things; and for establishing their positive counterparts (*A. IV, 363*). This definition echoes the scope of activity of the *sammappadhānas*. According to a discourse in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, *virīya* as a power is in fact equivalent to *virīya* as a faculty, *yaṃ virīyindriyaṃ taṃ viriyabalaṃ, yaṃ viriyabalaṃ taṃ virīyindriyaṃ* (*S. V, 219*), so that the difference between these two would be only nominal. This finds confirmation in a discourse in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, which defines *viriyabala* in the same terms as used in a discourse in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* to define *virīyindriya* (*A. III, 2 and S. V, 197*).

Energy as an Awakening Factor

The relationship of *virīya* to mindfulness and wisdom, reflected in its position and role among the five *indriyas*, comes up again in relation to the seven factors of awakening. Here *virīya* comes third, after mindfulness and investigation-of-phenomena, *dhammavicaya*. Since the seven factors of awakening are developed in sequence, each building on its predecessors, *virīya* as a factor of awakening clearly builds on mindfulness and investigation (*S. V, 68*). Taking into account that *virīya* as a faculty leads on to mindfulness, the relationship between *virīya* and mindfulness is probably best understood to be reciprocal, in the sense that an increase of energy enhances mindfulness, whose establishment in turn stirs up further energy.

According to the *Ānāpānasati Sutta's* exposition of the successive development of the awakening factors, based on having established mindfulness and investigated with wisdom, unshakeable energy arises, *virīya assalīna* (M. III, 85). With further progress in developing the awakening factors, such unshakeable energy leads on to unworldly joy, *pīti nirāmisā*, and eventually to tranquillity, concentration and equanimity. In order to culminate in knowledge and liberation, the *virīyasambojjhaṅga* should be developed based on seclusion, dispassion, and cessation, thereby leading to letting go, *vivekanissita*, *virāganissita*, *nirodhanissita*, *vossaggapariṇāmin* (M. III, 88).

As a factor of awakening, *virīya* stands in direct contrast to the hindrance of sloth-and-torpor, since what acts as nourishment (*āhāra*) for *virīya* has the very opposite effect (*anāhāra*) for sloth-and-torpor (S. V, 104 and 105). Here *virīya* represents in particular the element of resolution, endeavour and exertion, *ārambhadhātu*, *nikkamadhātu*, *parakkamadhātu* (S. V, 66). The scope of such *virīya* comprises bodily energy as well as mental energy (S. V, 111). Its implementation needs, however, be undertaken with circumspection, as to develop the *virīyasambojjhaṅga* suits only occasions when the mind is sluggish and needs to be stirred and energized (S. V, 113). In contrast, to develop *virīya* at a time when the mind is already excited would be similar to throwing grass and wood on a fire that one intends to extinguish.

Right Effort

In the form of right effort, *samma vāyama*, *virīya* also takes up a prominent position within the eightfold noble path. Here, again, the all pervasive relevance of the four *sammappadhānas* manifests, as the standard definition of right effort speaks of making an effort at preventing unarisen unwholesome states, overcoming arisen unwholesome states, arousing unarisen wholesome states, and developing arisen wholesome states (e.g. M. III, 251).

The role of energy in regard to the other factors of the noble eightfold path is examined in the *Mahācattārīsaka Sutta*. According to this discourse, with right view as the foundation right effort has the task to overcome wrong manifestations of the path factors and to establish their right counterpart. Right effort carries out this task in close collaboration with right mindfulness (M. III, 72). The relationship of

energy to mindfulness is also reflected in its position within a threefold division of the noble eightfold path into virtue, concentration and wisdom, where right effort belongs to the concentration section, together with right mindfulness and right concentration (M. I, 301).

Energy and Mindfulness

The relationship of *virīya* to mindfulness can on closer inspection also be seen in the context of the four *satipaṭṭhānas*. Each of these four needs be developed with the help of *ātāpī* (M. I, 56), a term that stands for resolute effort. Though the term *virīya* is not mentioned explicitly, the same quality would be implicit in *ātāpī*.

The Importance and Development of *Virīya*

In this way, *virīya* can be seen to take up some role or the other in the context of each of the seven sets of *bodhipakkhiya dhammas*. This recurrent contribution of *virīya* to each of these sets is an impressive testimony to its importance and relevance in regard to any aspect of the path.

In fact, as long as *virīya* is established and directed towards wholesome things, unwholesomeness has no scope to manifest (A. III, 5). *Virīya* is also of use when one has to patiently bear with hostility by others (M. I, 186); and can help to overcome a disease (D. II, 99).

Since *virīya* is present in each of the *jhānas* (M. III, 25), accomplishment in the realm of mental tranquillity can also be seen as a benefit of energy. In fact, according to the *Ariyapariyesana Sutta* the Buddha-to-be reflected that not only Ājāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta were endowed with energy and other mental faculties, but he also had energy and the same other mental faculties (M. I, 164). This reflection inspired the bodhisattva to practise until he eventually reached the same attainments that Ājāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta were teaching. Not only did he match those attainments by relying on *virīya*, but his attainment of the three higher knowledges in the night of his awakening also took place when his energy was aroused and unwavering, *āraddhaṃ viriyaṃ ahoṣi asallīnaṃ* (M. I, 21).

The definition of *virīya* given in the *Visuddhimagga* similarly reflects the importance of this quality in the

early Buddhist path to liberation. According to this definition, *virīya* should be regarded as the root of all attainments, *sabbasampattīnaṃ mūlaṃ* (*Vism.* 464). In sum, *virīya* can be understood "as essentially that which supports and sustains any particular achievement".⁵ To borrow a simile from the *Milindapañha*, the function of *virīya* in regard to wholesome things is comparable to a piece of wood used to shore up a house that is in danger of collapsing (*Miln.* 36).

In addition to highlighting the importance of *virīya*, the *Visuddhimagga* also offers an analysis of its qualities. According to this analysis, the characteristic of *virīya* is exertion, its function is to consolidate nascent [mental states], it manifests as non-collapse and its proximate cause is a sense of urgency, *ussāhanalakkhaṇaṃ, sahaḥātānaṃ upatthambhanarasam, asaṃsīdanabhāvapaccupaṭṭhānaṃ ... saṃvegapadaṭṭhānaṃ* (*Vism.* 464).

By referring to a sense of urgency as the proximate cause for *virīya*, the *Visuddhimagga* points to a way in which energy can be aroused. Examples are recollection of the possibility of being stricken by death or disease, which when carried out properly would indeed arouse a sense of urgency (*A.* III, 101). In order to arouse energy for progress on the path one also needs to be free from doubts about the *Tathāgata* (*S.* V, 225).

According to a discourse in the *Samyutta Nikāya*, only a mind that is not overwhelmed by attraction to the six senses will be able to arouse the kind of energy that leads to liberation (*S.* IV, 125). Another and rather self-evident obstruction to energy is laziness. The discourses mention altogether eight types of this obstruction, eight *kusīlavatthūni* (*D.* III, 255), such as when one takes a rest in anticipation of the fatigue that will be caused by doing something that needs to be done, or else when one gives in to some rather minor negligible tiredness.

Imagery Related to *Virīya*

In addition to highlighting the importance of *virīya* and the requirements for its development, the discourses illustrate the quality of *virīya* with a range of similes. Thus *virīya* is compared to the wheel of a chariot (*S.* V, 6); or to a beast of burden that moves

towards security from bondage without turning back (*S.* I, 173 or *Sn.* 79). To implement *virīya* is comparable to using one's hands and feet in order to row a makeshift raft over water from a shore beset by danger to the other shore, which is safe and free from danger (*S.* IV, 175). These images bring out the instrumental function of *virīya* in regard to progress on the path.

The imagery of employing one's hand and feet recurs again in another simile as an illustration of energy. A difference in this case is that instead of crossing a water, here *virīya* is required in order to get out of a dangerous current (*It.* 114). The current in this imagery represents craving, hence the point of this simile would be to illustrate "the struggle of energy' (*virīya*) needed to overcome misdirected desire".⁶

The nuance of a sustained struggle recurs in several other imageries related to the same term. Thus *virīya* is like digging into an anthill (*M.* I, 144), which after having removed various obstructions finally yields a *nāga* that symbolizes final liberation. Or else to put forth exertion is comparable to heating up an arrow in order to make it straight (*M.* II, 225). *Virīya* is like a fourfold army that enables a king to conquer any direction, or like a large body of troops that ensures the safety of a citadel (*A.* III, 152 and *A.* IV, 110).

Another set of similes highlight the beneficial aspects of *virīya*. Like a shopkeeper who is capable at buying and selling will soon increase his wealth, in the same way *virīya* will lead to an increase of what is wholesome (*A.* I, 117). *Virīya* in its function of right effort is similar to a water outlet for a field, which ensures that the crop will come to growth and maturity (*A.* IV, 238). When combined with other wholesome qualities, *virīya* leads to progress comparable to the waxing moon (*A.* V, 124). As a factor of awakening, *virīya* is like the gem of a wheel-turning king (*S.* V, 99). The four right exertions are a treasure of the Buddha's teaching, comparable to the treasures found in the deep ocean (*A.* IV, 203). Hence one who has no *virīya* in regard to wholesome things is like a poor and needy person (*A.* III, 352).

One of the perhaps most famous imageries related to *virīya* is the lute example that the Buddha delivered to Soṇa, who through excessive striving had come to the point of wanting to give up monkhood. The Buddha made it clear to Soṇa that the extremes of excessive striving and giving up are like a lute whose

strings are too tight or too loose (A. III, 375). In both cases the lute is unfit for being employed in a musical performance. This imagery brings out the need to undertake mental cultivation with an attitude of balance, with a well-adjusted and finely tuned amount of energy and effort.

In this way, the simile of the lute provides an important spotlight on the fact that *virīya* can not only be deficient, but also excessive. As another passage explains, to strive energetically can turn out to be just restlessness (A. I, 282), which will prevent realization from taking place. Hence *virīya* as an indispensable requirement for progress on the path needs to be developed in a balanced manner in order to avoid the two extremes of submitting to personal laziness and idiosyncrasies on the one hand, and excessive self-assertive striving and self-inflicted suffering on the other.

Those who always make a firm effort
And meditate continuously,
These wise ones will experience *Nibbāna*,
The supreme freedom from bondage.
Te jhāyino sātatikā
niccam daḥaparakkamā,
phusanti dhīrā nibbānaṃ
yogakkhemaṃ anuttaraṃ (Dhp. 23).

Anālayo

References

- 1 Cf. e.g. the proclamation by Makkhali Gosāla at D. I, 53: *n' atthi virīyaṃ*. Warder: "On the relationships between early Buddhism and other contemporary systems", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 1956: 44, explains that "the general outlook of society at that time was coloured with fatalism ... in this environment Buddhism ... reflected the desire to overcome the hopelessness of fatalistic outlooks". Rhys Davids: "On the Will in Buddhism", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1898: 50, points out that in early Buddhism "will as such, desire as such, are not to be repressed", instead, "the culture and development of them are absolutely indispensable to any advance towards the attainment" of liberation.
- 2 On *vīrya* in the Mahāyāna traditions cf. Har Dayal: *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature*, Delhi 1970: 216-221.
- 3 The Sanskrit counterpart is *samyak-prahāṇa*, "right abandoning". Gethin: *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, Leiden 1992: 70 points out that to speak of four right exertions would fit better as a general description of the formula than four right abandonings, "since all four parts of the formula speak of one who endeavours (*vadahati/pradadhāti*) while only the second part explicitly mentions abandoning (*pahāṇāya/prahāṇāya*)".
- 4 Cf. also S. V, 196: *catusu sammappadhānesu, ettha viriyindriyaṃ daḥhabbaṃ*; and S. V, 199: *cattāro sammappadhāne ārabha viriyaṃ paṭilabhati, idaṃ vuccati viriyindriyaṃ*.
- 5 Gethin op. cit. 1992: 78
- 6 Matthews: "Notes on the Concept of the Will in Early Buddhism", *The Sri Lankan Journal of the Humanities*, 1976: 159.

VIRIYAPĀRAMITĀ See PĀRAMITĀ

VIRIYASAMBOJJAṄGA See BOJJHAṄGA

VISĀKHĀ: The laywoman, Visākhā, comes through in the Buddhist texts as a very strong, vibrant personality. She is regarded as the foremost laywoman benefactress of the Buddha. During the time of the Buddha Kassapa she is said to have been Saṅghadāsi, the youngest of King Kiki's seven daughters. They were to become, in the time of the Buddha Gotama, the Mahāpajāpati Gotami, Khemā, Uppalavannā, Paṭācārā, Dhammadinnā and also Mahāmāyādevi and Visākhā². Thus, according to the texts she is considered as belonging in that very special category of women thought she did not attain arahantship during her life time as did the afore mentioned theris. Mahāmāyādevi, the only other non-theri in the group of seven, died one week after she gave birth to the Bodhisatta and is said to have been born in a heavenly abode as a deva king to whom the Buddha preached the *Abhidhamma*.

No other laywoman has been extolled and written about in detail as Visākhā in the Buddhist texts, especially in the commentary to the *Dhammapada*.

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