



46 – Enthusiasm as a Support

Sustaining insightful momentum and the fine-tuning of power

“For a person who is energetic, vigorous, and always making an effort, mindfulness is well-established.” ~ Gotama (The Buddha)

“Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm.” ~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

A gentle hand-off from Penetrating Inquiry to steady energy

When ‘Penetrating Inquiry’ is alive, something often follows quite naturally – *momentum*. The mind becomes less foggy, less passive, more willing to engage. ‘Enthusiasm’ is that steady willingness – not strain or hustle, but a workable readiness to keep going. It is the Support that carries insight forward when the initial spark has passed.

In this Freedom stage, the key question is no longer “How do I push harder?” but “How do I keep going without burning out?” Enthusiasm is the kind of energy that lasts: steady, renewable, and guided by what helps.

From raw thrust to sustainable momentum

In this Freedom stage of our journey, following the establishment of ‘Liberating Mindfulness’ (Chapter 44) and the ignition of ‘Penetrating Inquiry’ (Chapter 45), the third essential Support arises: ‘Enthusiasm’ (traditionally called energy).

It helps to see how ‘Energy’ matures as our journey progresses – the same capacity, refined for different waters:

★ **Courageous Energy:** The Recognise stage – a ‘Creative Power’ – *raw thrust* (Chapter 22).

‘Courageous Energy’ is the surge that breaks inertia. It gets us moving when we have been stuck, numb, or resigned. Its job is *to start* — to make the first clean turn toward freedom.

★ **Courageous Effort:** The Abandon stage – a ‘Defender’ – *the paddle* (Chapter 30).

‘Courageous Effort’ is the steady exertion that meets resistance. It keeps us from being swept back into old currents when cravings and aversions, hazards, or strong emotions rise. Its job is *to persist* – to hold course when it would be easier to drift.

★ **Enthusiasm:** The Freedom stage – a ‘Support’ – *Sustainable momentum*.

‘Enthusiasm’ is not a battle-energy, but a steadier wind. It carries practice forward with less friction because the mind has begun to trust the path. Its job is *to continue* – to keep engaging, day after day, without burning out.

This Support is not the same as brute *willpower*. Willpower can feel tight and finite. Enthusiasm is different: it renews itself when we see, directly, that a skilful choice brings relief, clarity, or ease. When the mind recognises “this helps,” effort becomes less forced and more willing.

In the early discourses, this kind of energy isn’t treated as hype or heroic strain. It is something that can be fed and stabilised. Gotama describes the nutriment for the energy factor of awakening as ‘Wise Attention’ to three simple qualities: *initiative* (the willingness to begin), *exertion* (the willingness to stay with it), and *strength* (the capacity to carry it through). When these are attended to in a grounded way, energy becomes steadier and more dependable – less like a flare, more like a lamp.

The pivot of Freedom: the tuning peg

The pivot that opens the door in this chapter is the shift from the *quantity* of effort to the *quality* of effort. Many of us have been trained to believe that if something isn’t working, the answer is simply to *try harder*. But too much effort can tip into striving and restlessness; too little can slide into dullness and drifting.

‘Enthusiasm’ acts like the tuning peg. It tightens the mind when it is dull (often by re-awakening interest) and softens the mind when it is over-driven (often by easing pressure and restoring calm). It learns, over time, that *consistency beats intensity* – and that Freedom is supported by a steady rhythm rather than extremes. Gotama illustrated this with the story of the

monk Soṇa, who had been striving so hard in meditation that he was close to giving up. Soṇa had once been a skilled lute player, and Gotama reminded him that a lute only makes music when its strings are tuned to a balanced pitch – not too tight, not too loose. In the same way, effort that is over-tight becomes restlessness, and effort that is too slack becomes laziness. The path is found by tuning the energy to the middle.

Another discourse makes the same point with a fire image: if the mind is already blazing with agitation, you don't throw on dry fuel – you emphasise the cooling factors. If the mind is smouldering in heaviness, you don't smother it with more damp grass – you bring in the energising factors. In other words, energy is not added indiscriminately; it is applied in the direction of balance.

The Secular Buddhist teacher, Stephen Batchelor, points out that sustaining this kind of steady practice is not always easy, because it runs against the grain of our conditioning. When we settle into stillness, depth, openness – even moments of wonder – we also meet our vulnerability. We are going against the stream of habit, and against a survival-driven momentum that is built to grasp what we want and push away what we don't. So it can feel like hard work to remain in a quiet, free space, even when we know it is nourishing. Many people recognise the odd resistance that appears even after deeply meaningful or blissful experiences: a part of the mind still prefers distraction, fantasy, old loops – anything but staying with what is most alive. In that light, Enthusiasm includes courage: the conscious intention to keep returning, again and again, not with strain, but with a willing heart.

How to practise: the Governor of momentum

1. **Subtle regulation:** At this stage we're not trying to *push through*. We're learning how to keep energy workable – small trims rather than big battles – so practice stays steady instead of spiky.
2. **String-tension check:** We notice when we've tipped too tight (rushing, clenched jaw, shallow breath, urgency) or too loose (slumped, drifting, bored, half-asleep). Often one small adjustment – posture, breath, pace – is enough to change the whole feel.

3. **Just-enough effort:** Before a sit or a task, we sense what's actually needed here. Not full force, not collapse – just the minimum that keeps us engaged and moving in the right direction.
4. **Two-minute launch:** When motivation is low, we start tiny: two minutes, one step, one message, one page. A lot of the time enthusiasm doesn't arrive before we begin – it shows up because we begin.
5. **Values touchstone:** Now and then we remember why we're doing this. What matters here? What kind of person are we practising to be in *this moment*? That sense of meaning steadies effort in a way pressure never can.
6. **Mark the small win:** When a skilful choice happens — even a small one – we let it register. A quiet inner “yes.” This is how the mind learns, from experience, that the path helps and is worth repeating.
7. **Protect the pace:** We keep momentum by protecting our reserves: a planned downshift, plugging one energy leak (rumination, scrolling, needless conflict), and choosing a pace we could live tomorrow. Repeatable effort becomes reliable effort.

Self-reflections

1. Do I believe that if I am not pushing hard, I am not making progress? Where did I learn that?
2. When my energy dips, is my first instinct to criticise myself – or to get curious about what is happening?
3. Can I tell the difference between driven energy (tight, narrow, urgent) and wholesome enthusiasm (bright, steady, present)?
4. Where in my life is the string too tight? Where is it too loose?
5. Do I associate energy with panic – or can I imagine a calm, strong energy?
6. How does seeing the benefits of this path naturally feed my willingness to continue?
7. Am I trying to sprint a marathon? What would a walking pace look like today?

Journaling prompts

1. **The lute-string audit:** Where is my effort today – tight/restless or loose/dull? What is one small adjustment toward the centre?

2. **Success spiral:** List three tiny things that went well today. How does remembering them shape tomorrow?
3. **Right effort, including rest:** Write a definition of ‘Appropriate Action’ (Chapter 60) that includes rest as a skill, not a failure.
4. **The energy leak:** Identify one habit that drains you. If you plugged it, where could that energy go instead?
5. **The wind, not the oars:** Recall a time you felt carried by engagement rather than pushing. What conditions allowed that?
6. **Letter to the striver:** Write to the part of you that believes perfection equals safety. What would you offer instead?
7. **The joy of function:** Write about the quiet pleasure of a body and mind that work. How is this different from excitement?

Supporting Material: scientific and philosophical perspectives

For those interested in the scientific and philosophical underpinnings of ‘Enthusiasm’ as a Support, the following overview highlights some key connections.

★ **Neuroscience:** Motivation is shaped by brain systems that constantly weigh effort against reward. Dopamine circuits help energise action, while regions such as the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) are involved in judging whether something is *worth the work*. When we’re depleted or low, the brain tends to inflate the cost (‘too hard’) and shrink the payoff (‘won’t help’), so avoidance can feel like the most reasonable option.

Small, real wins can retrain this because the brain learns by updating expectations. When you clearly register an immediate benefit – “that breath softened me,” “that pause reduced heat,” “that choice helped” – the mind starts to predict a nearer-term reward from the effort. Over time, this lowers the barrier to starting and supports a steadier, more sustainable kind of energy.

★ **Psychology:** Many evidence-based approaches support the same principle: sustainable change comes less from heroic intensity and more from workable repetition. Behavioural Activation emphasises small actions that rebuild momentum; Motivational Interviewing strengthens intrinsic reasons for change; and ACT links effort to chosen values so energy is steadied by meaning rather than pressure.

Across these models, the aim is not to ‘force motivation,’ but to create conditions where engagement becomes the next sensible step. Psychologically, enthusiasm grows when action is aligned, achievable, and reinforcing. Tiny commitments lower the barrier to starting, success builds self-trust, and values give direction when mood is flat. In this way, enthusiasm becomes less a mood to wait for and more a learnable pattern: choose a doable step, let it count, and allow momentum to accumulate.

★ **Philosophy:** Spinoza’s conatus describes the natural impulse of living beings to persist and flourish. From this view, enthusiasm can be understood as the felt experience of that impulse when it is not blocked – a steady increase in the capacity to act, respond, and live skilfully. Rather than being *pumped up*, we feel more able: clearer, more capable, more inwardly coherent.

In Spinoza’s framing, joy is not a prize at the end but a sign of movement toward greater power and freedom – an expansion of what we can do and who we can be. Enthusiasm, then, is not strain; it is the quiet sense of life flowing in a helpful direction, where effort supports capability rather than exhausting it.

Remember to remember

Enthusiasm is not the flash of energy that gets us started; it is the steady pulse that keeps us going. It grows from inquiry, and it is protected by balance. Too tight, and the mind overheats into striving. Too loose, and it drifts into dullness. But when effort is tuned, practice becomes repeatable – and what is repeatable becomes reliable. As Stephen Batchelor suggests, this steadiness asks for a particular kind of courage: to go against the stream of habit, to stay with what is vulnerable, and to not be seduced back into the old escape-routes of distraction and reactivity.

Remember: consistency beats intensity. A small, steady breeze will take you further than a storm that tears the sails. When the mind wobbles, it can be enough to return to the centre – soften what is tight, brighten what is dull, and take the next workable step. Let Enthusiasm be quiet, rhythmic, and kind: not pressure, but willingness; not grit, but a courage you can live day by day.

“Grit is passion and perseverance for long-term goals.” ~ Angela Duckworth

“*Tiny is mighty.*” ~ BJ Fogg

Sutta references

★ **Soṇa Sutta (AN 6.55) – The Lute String**

- Summary: The Buddha teaches the monk Soṇa to tune effort like lute strings – neither too tight (restlessness) nor too loose (laziness). Balanced effort makes awakening “playable.”

★ **Āhāra / Nutriment Teaching (SN 46.51) – Food for the Factors**

- Summary: Enthusiasm is supported by wise attention to what rouses energy and sustained exertion, and weakened by attention that feeds lethargy and discouragement.

★ **Aggi Sutta (SN 46.53) – Fire**

- Summary: A practical balancing teaching: when the mind is agitated, cultivate tranquillity/concentration/equanimity; when dull, cultivate investigation/energy/joy. Shows energy is deployed in service of balance, not intensity.

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