



## 60 – Skilful Action: handling our raft with care

### Handling our raft skilfully and harmlessly

*“One is not noble who injures living beings. One is called noble because one is gentle towards all living beings.” ~ Gotama (The Buddha)*

*“I am the owner of my actions, heir to my actions... Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir.” ~ Gotama*

### The physics of integrity

In this Training stage of our journey, we’ve now done the inside work that guides behaviour: we’ve clarified how we see things with Skilful Perspective (Chapter 57), what direction we want to live by Skilful Intention (Chapter 58), and how we communicate with Skilful Speech (Chapter 59). The next step is where the journey becomes unmistakably practical: what we actually do.

Traditionally, Skilful Action refers especially to bodily conduct: what we do with our hands, feet, sexuality, possessions, energy, and physical presence. Speech has its own training (Chapter 59), and livelihood will have its own training (Chapter 61), but here the focus is on the body as the place where intention becomes visible. The question is simple: does this action protect life, respect what belongs to others, and honour trust in intimacy?

Skilful Action is the fourth factor of Gotama’s Middle Way Programme. It means training our actions so they reduce harm and support stability – choosing behaviour we can live with, rather than behaviour that creates regret, damage, or aftershocks. It’s the operating protocol for daily life: how we treat people, how we handle impulses, and how we translate values into real movements and choices.

When we explored the Five Gifts (Chapter 04), we made a clear commitment about behaviour: not harming life, not taking what isn’t given, avoiding sexual misconduct, and refraining from intoxication. At the time, these could feel like simple ‘don’ts’. Now, in the Training stage, we turn those commitments into something more alive and practical: a moment-to-moment skill in how we act.

Skilful Action is where our values stop being ideas and become visible. It's how we handle urges, how we treat people when we're stressed, and how we choose behaviour we can stand behind later.

In RAFT terms, the Five Gifts are the foundational planks of the raft, and Skilful Action is the handling ability that keeps our vessel steady. Every action either adds drag (turbulence, regret, repair work) or reduces drag (ease, safety, trust). When we act skilfully, we don't crash into other vessels (people), and we don't run our own raft aground on the reefs of craving.

Skilful Action is not only the refusal to harm; it is the cultivation of protective presence. We practise becoming someone whose actions make the world a little safer: safer for bodies, safer for trust, safer for boundaries, safer for our own future self. This is why restraint is not repression. Restraint is care in motion.

### **The four handling skills – permissions to live lightly**

These four trainings are not meant to weigh us down with rules. They're permissions to live more lightly – with less guilt, less chaos, and fewer consequences that come back to hurt us. They protect our dignity and protect our relationships. When we practise them, life gets simpler: fewer secrets, fewer messes, less backwash. They are the core handling skills that keep the hull sound. When we ignore them, the raft springs leaks – not always dramatically at first, but steadily enough to make the crossing harder.

1. **Caring for life (abstaining from harming life):** We commit to non-violence in thought and behaviour: not killing, injuring, intimidating, exploiting, or treating any body – including our own – as disposable.. The practice is treating bodies, our own and others', as worthy of protection, and choosing responses that don't escalate into damage. The leak here is harm: violence, intimidation, cruelty, or careless damage. Repair means steering in a way that doesn't create destructive wakes, remembering that harm always damages the vessel that delivers it.

Responsibility in intimacy also asks us to consider power. Is anyone pressured, intoxicated, dependent, afraid, confused, or unable to give clear consent? Are we using charm, status, secrecy, or emotional leverage to get what we want? Skilful Action treats intimacy as an area where trust must be protected with particular care. The question is not only, 'Can I?' but 'Is

this clean, mutual, honest, and safe?’

2. **Honesty with things (abstaining from taking what is not given):** We don’t steal, cheat, exploit, or cut corners in ways that create hidden debt. We practise fair exchange and respect boundaries – other people’s property, time, energy, and trust. The leak here is taking what has not been freely offered – property, credit, labour, time, attention, trust, or access. Repair is practising fair exchange so the raft stays stable – no panic about being caught, no turbulence of debt and distrust.

In modern life, taking what is not given may include taking credit, taking someone’s attention through manipulation, using another person’s labour without fair exchange, crossing digital privacy, or assuming access to someone’s body, time, money, or emotional energy without consent.

3. **Responsibility in intimacy (abstaining from sexual misconduct):** We avoid sexual behaviour that betrays trust, coerces, manipulates, or exploits. We practise care, consent, and clarity, so intimacy doesn’t become a source of harm or shame. This training asks us to treat desire as something that needs honesty and responsibility, not secrecy, entitlement, or force. The leak here is intimacy without consent, truthfulness, or care: betrayal, pressure, manipulation, hidden agendas, or using another person’s vulnerability for our own gratification. Repair means slowing down enough to ask what is really happening. Is this mutual? Is anyone pressured, intoxicated, dependent, afraid, confused, or unable to give clear consent? Are we using charm, status, secrecy, loneliness, or emotional leverage to get what we want?

Skilful Action treats intimacy as an area where trust must be protected with particular care. The question is not only, ‘Can I?’ but ‘Is this clean, mutual, honest, and safe?’ When intimacy is handled carelessly, it leaves wreckage below the waterline: shame, mistrust, confusion, and broken confidence. When it is handled with respect, it becomes part of a life with fewer secrets, fewer storms, and less harm to repair.

4. **Clarity of mind (refraining from intoxication):** The fifth gift, refraining from intoxication, supports the others: when clarity collapses, the leaks of harm, taking, betrayal, and careless speech open more easily. We practise not clouding the mind in ways that make harm more likely. This does not

only mean avoiding alcohol or drugs when they lead to carelessness; it also means noticing anything we use to escape ourselves so completely that we lose care, consent, honesty, or restraint.

The leak here is intoxication: states of mind that make us careless with speech, bodies, money, promises, anger, and desire. Repair means protecting clarity – choosing enough sobriety, pause, and self-respect that we can still steer. A clouded mind may feel like relief in the moment, but it often hands the rudder to impulse, and impulse does not care where the raft ends up.

Harm is not only dramatic violence. It can also be repeated carelessness: driving when unsafe, ignoring the body's limits, intimidating someone with our anger, or allowing avoidable damage because we do not want to pause. Skilful Action asks for enough steadiness to interrupt damage before it becomes a wake we cannot easily repair.

### **The body keeps the score of action**

Every action leaves a trace. Some actions leave the body contracted: secrecy, tension, vigilance, the fear of being found out, the ache of having crossed a line. Other actions leave the body simpler: nothing to hide, less to explain, fewer loose ends to manage. Skilful Action is not moral theatre; it is practical physics. What we do changes the conditions we then have to live inside.

This is why ethical restraint is a gift of care to the future self. When we refrain from harm, theft, misconduct and intoxication, we are not merely obeying rules. We are reducing turbulence. We are choosing actions that let the nervous system settle, relationships remain trustworthy, and the raft moves with less drag.

### **How to practice: the sequence of handling**

To move from reactive impulse to skilful handling, it helps to have a simple sequence we can lean on in real time. This isn't about being perfect or moralistic; it's about staying oriented when pressure rises, so our actions don't create avoidable damage. When the moment is hot, we don't need a lecture – we need a few steady steps that bring us back to care, boundaries, and responsibility.

1. **Name the moment and the vulnerability:** State the concrete situation and

who or what could be harmed here – self, others, trust, consent, or stability. Keep it real and specific.

2. **Check the tone and settle the body:** Name the feeling-tone (pleasant, unpleasant, neutral) and take three soft out-breaths. A steadier body handles the wheel better than a panicked one.
3. **Use the three lenses (the mirror):** Hold the action up to the mirror.
  - a. Does this care for life?
  - b. Does this respect boundaries?
  - c. Does this honour responsibility in intimacy?
4. **Choose the minimum effective step:** Favour the smallest kind action that reduces harm now – leaving the venue, binning the substance, paying the invoice, pausing the argument.
5. **Create friction for harm and ease for care:** Make harmful acts harder (remove access, change routes, set barriers). Make wholesome acts easier (prepare food, set reminders, arrange support).
6. **Repair early if there was a collision:** Repair proportionally – return, replace, repay, restore – and do it while it's still small. Repair teaches the body what 'right' feels like.
7. **Close the loop:** Note what helped and how you'll remember next time. This cements ethical learning into behavioural memory.

### **A secular dharma perspective**

With this lens, the secular dharma teacher Stephen Batchelor translates Skilful Action as practice-in-the-world rather than moral scorekeeping. Skilful Action is where the path becomes visible: how we behave under pressure, what we choose when no one is watching, and how we handle desire, anger, power, property, sexuality, and physical presence. It asks whether our actions protect life, respect boundaries, and create fewer backwashes for ourselves and others.

Because we rarely have perfect information, we do not wait until we know everything before acting. We take one workable step, watch what it produces, and revise our responses. In RAFT language, this is how we handle the vessel: how we steer with our body, our choices, our boundaries, and our restraint. Every action leaves a wake. Some actions create turbulence, regret, secrecy, or repair work; others leave the waters calmer and the vessel more trustworthy. This is where Skilful Action becomes a lived act: the small, testable deeds that express our values where life is actually lived.

## Self-reflections

1. When I'm under pressure, which of the four handling skills is hardest for me to remember – caring for life, honesty with things, responsibility in intimacy or clarity of mind – and what usually pulls me off course?
2. Where am I most likely to create a backwash right now – through harm, taking what isn't mine (including time/energy), blurred boundaries in intimacy or intoxication – and what would the smallest protective step look like today?
3. Where am I most tempted to cut corners (time, truth, money, consent, clarity) – and what one action would restore integrity?
4. Do I treat my body as worthy of protection, or as a machine to push through? What would caring for life look like today in one concrete choice?
5. What would repair look like in one relationship I care about – is there an unpaid debt, a boundary I crossed, or a harm I haven't named?
6. When I'm about to act impulsively, what body signal tells me to pause – and what pause actually works for me (breath, step away, text someone, delay)?
7. What would tell me this training is working – fewer collisions, cleaner sleep, less regret, steadier mood, fewer repairs needed, quicker repairs?

## Journaling prompts

1. **Daily action audit:** List three actions that reduced harm today and one that needs repair. Write the first step of that repair.
2. **Life / belongings / intimacy / clarity of mind map:** Choose one domain. Note two current risks and two protections you will install this week.
3. **Friction & ease:** Choose one harmful behaviour. List three factors that aggravate this behaviour. Choose one helpful behaviour and list three ways to add ease.
4. **Amends plan:** Draft a brief plan for a proportional amends (return, replace, repay, restore). What is the earliest appropriate moment to offer it?
5. **Safety card:** Write 3–5 'safety actions' you can take under pressure (leave the room, call X, walk, drink water, delay ten minutes). Add one line: 'If I do nothing, the likely cost is...'
6. **Values to motion:** Choose one value (kindness, honesty, restraint). Describe exactly what your hands and feet did today to express it.
7. **The sequence check:** Describe one moment where naming the vulnerability

+ checking tone + choosing the minimum effective step changed the outcome.

## **Supporting material – scientific and philosophical perspectives**

For those interested in the scientific and philosophical underpinnings of Skilful Action, the following overview highlights some key connections.

★ **Neuroscience:** Skilful Action depends on the brain's capacity to interrupt habit and choose a different motor sequence. Habits are not 'stored in one place,' but a well-described theme in neuroscience is that repeated behaviours become more automatic through cortico–basal ganglia circuits, where actions can be learned as efficient chunks and executed with less deliberation. When compulsion is strong, the cue–routine chain can feel like it runs itself. The practical implication is not that we have 'no control,' but that control needs to be trained in the same system that runs habits: we have to build a reliable interruption point.

That interruption point looks a lot like 'stop and sense.' Response inhibition research highlights a fronto–basal ganglia braking network (often discussed in terms of right inferior frontal cortex, preSMA, and subthalamic nucleus) that supports stopping or cancelling an action once it's underway. Each time we pause, downshift the body, and choose a harmless next step instead of the automatic one, we're rehearsing that braking-and-reselection pattern. Over time, inhibitory control performance is linked with the integrity of fronto–basal ganglia connections (including white matter properties), which fits the training language: repetition builds reliability.

★ **Psychology:** Behavioural activation (BA) is a core Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) approach built on a simple reversal: we often wait to feel better before we act better, but BA treats action as a lever that can change mood. It targets avoidance loops by increasing engagement with meaningful, stabilising activities and reducing patterns of withdrawal that keep distress cycling. Reviews and trials consistently support BA as an effective intervention for depression, with the behavioural component performing strongly even when compared with larger CBT packages. The overlap is direct: Skilful Action is behavioural activation with an ethical compass – small, specific actions that reduce harm and increase stability. This is why 'minimum effective step' matters. Under pressure, the most

workable move is often not a grand resolution, but one small behaviour that changes conditions: leave the room, drink water, delay ten minutes, pay the invoice, bin the substance, make the call. BA theory emphasises that behaviour changes the reinforcement landscape – what we do changes what happens next, and that changes what the mind learns. In RAFT terms, skilful action reduces backwash: fewer regrets to manage, fewer fires to put out, more bandwidth for practice.

★ **Philosophy:** At the ethical core of Skilful Action is a very old principle: non-maleficence – the obligation to avoid causing harm. In clinical ethics it's often summarised as 'do no harm,' and it functions as a baseline duty: before we try to do extra good, we stop creating new damage. This matches the framing of the four trainings as permissions to live lightly: when we refrain from violence, exploitation, misconduct, and intoxication, we remove whole categories of suffering that aren't necessary for the journey. The Stoics echo this same practicality: Marcus Aurelius offers a simple behavioural filter – 'If it is not right, do not do it' – and Epictetus roots freedom in what is actually ours to govern: our choices and actions, not outcomes.

It also clarifies the difference between 'being good' and being skilful. Non-maleficence isn't moral theatre; it's realism about consequences. Harm creates ripple effects – fear, retaliation, debt, shame, loss of trust – and then we have to navigate inside the mess we made. Aristotle adds the training logic: character is formed by repetition, so each clean act isn't just a one-off correction, it's practice in becoming steadier and more reliable. When we choose harmlessness first, integrity becomes a kind of physics: the system has less drag. And when we do collide, repair isn't a failure of ethics; it's ethics continuing – restoring what we can, learning what happened, and adjusting course so the next action is cleaner than the last.

### **Remember to remember**

Skilful Action is where the path becomes visible. It's the point where our values stop being ideas and become movements: what we do with our hands, our feet, our money, and our bodies – especially when we're tired, triggered, or under pressure. When we act with care, we reduce harm, protect trust, and prevent the kind of backwashes that drain the crew for days. This is why the four trainings matter so much. They aren't punishments or moral badges; they are permissions to live lightly – less guilt, less chaos, fewer collisions, fewer secrets, and more

dignity in the crossing.

Remember, too, that this isn't about getting it perfect. It's about staying oriented and choosing what we can live with. When the moment is hot, we return to basics: name the vulnerability, settle the body, hold the action up to the mirror, and choose the minimum effective step that reduces harm now. We create friction for what hurts and ease for what helps. And when we do collide, we repair early and proportionally – return, replace, repay, restore – then learn and adjust the course. Each clean choice strengthens our raft. Each repair restores integrity. Over time, Skilful Action becomes less a rule we follow and more a way we naturally handle life: steadier, simpler, and safer for everyone on the water.

*“My actions are my only true belongings... My actions are the ground upon which I stand.” ~ Thich Nhat Hanh*

*“Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people, can transform the world.” ~ Howard Zinn*

## **Sutta references**

### **★ Magga-vibhaṅga Sutta (SN 45.8) — Analysis of the path**

- *Summary:* Defines Skilful Action explicitly as abstaining from taking life, taking what is not given, and sexual misconduct, framing them as the essential ethical boundaries of the path,.

### **★ Cunda Kammāraputta Sutta (AN 10.176) — To Cunda the silversmith**

- *Summary:* Lists ten courses of action. It details how physical actions (killing, stealing, misconduct) generate suffering (unwholesome kamma), while abstaining from them generates well-being,.

### **★ Ambalaṅṅhika-Rāhulovāda Sutta (MN 61) — Advice to Rāhula**

- *Summary:* The Buddha instructs his son to reflect before, during, and after every bodily action to ensure it leads to no harm. This is the source of the ‘Feedback Loop’ and ‘Mirror’ method

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