



## 62 — Skilful Application: the engine of our raft

### Turning the key and engaging the gears

*“If you do not strive when it is time to strive, young and strong though you be... sunken in irresolution, you will not find the path of wisdom.” ~ Gotama (The Buddha)*

*“You yourselves must strive; the Buddhas only show the way.” ~ Gotama*

### The engine of mental training

In this Training stage of our journey, having clarified how we see things with Skilful Perspective (Chapter 57), set our rudder with Skilful Intention (Chapter 58), and our ethical standards with Skilful Speech, Action, and Livelihood (Chapters 59–61), we now fine tune the engine of our raft. This is the sixth factor of Gotama’s Middle Way Programme: Skilful Application.

Earlier in the workbook (Chapters 15–19) we made the Four Resolves: to prevent what leads to harm, abandon what’s already harmful, cultivate what helps, and maintain what’s wholesome once it’s present. These resolves set our direction. Now we focus on what it looks like to actually carry them out in real time. In Gotama’s raft image, the crossing is not passive: we do not simply climb aboard and let the current decide where we go. We use our own arms and legs – our applied energy, care, and persistence – to steer, adjust, repair, and keep moving toward the far shore.

Resolve sets the course; Application supplies the energy that makes the course real. This is the shift from ‘I want to change’ to ‘Here is the small, specific effort I’m willing to make at this moment.’

Skilful Application is that moment-to-moment energy expenditure. It’s not toughness, white-knuckling, or punishing self-discipline. It is energy in service of care: the willingness to make the minimum effective effort that keeps us moving in the right direction without burning out the engine. It includes a quiet sincerity – a willingness to care enough to keep returning, even when results are slow.

Resolve is checking the fuel gauge and planning the route. Application is

fine-turning the engine and engaging the gears. It is what keeps our raft on course – steady, sustainable effort rather than a heroic push that blows out the engine.

Traditionally, this factor is called ‘Right Effort’ or ‘Right Endeavour’. In this workbook we call it Skilful Application because the point is not effort for its own sake, but the wise application of energy. The question is not ‘How hard can I push?’ but ‘What kind of energy does this moment need?’ Sometimes the skilful effort is restraint. Sometimes it is interruption. Sometimes it is encouragement. Sometimes it is protection of what is already steady.

### **The four roles of Application.**

Skilful Application is the moment-to-moment use of energy that turns Resolve into lived change. The manual describes four distinct ways we apply that effort, depending on what the moment is asking.

- ★ **Preventing:** We use energy early, while things are still manageable. We notice what reliably leads to trouble – certain places, people, times of day, states of mind – and we make small choices that keep us out of needless risk. Preventing is not hiding from life. It is intelligent seamanship. We do not avoid every wave; we avoid sailing knowingly into reefs. The difference is whether the choice makes the raft vulnerable through fear, or safer through wisdom. (Chapter 16)
- ★ **Abandoning:** We use energy mid-stream, when the drift has already begun. A craving has started, irritation is rising, the mind is looping. Here the effort is the interrupt: pause, step away, name it, cut the chain, and choose not to feed it. Abandoning does not mean crushing thoughts or feelings. It means not continuing to feed what is already causing harm. A loop may still be present, but we stop rowing in its direction. (Chapter 17)
- ★ **Cultivating:** We use energy to build what supports freedom. We strengthen steadiness and clarity – practices, routines, supports, and skills that make tomorrow easier than today. This is the training that conditions, not fighting ourselves. (Chapter 18)
- ★ **Maintaining:** We use energy to keep what’s already working. We protect sleep, keep agreements, continue practices, and reinforce the habits that hold our raft together – so we don’t have to restart from scratch each time the weather changes. (Chapter 19)

These are the four roles that keep the vessel seaworthy for the long crossing –

the lookout (preventing), the bailer (abandoning), the supplier (cultivating), and the carpenter (maintaining). The point isn't heroic effort; it's steady, well-placed effort – the smallest adjustment that keeps the raft on course.

### **Finding the steerable point**

Wise effort is selective. It does not try to fix the whole ocean. It looks for the steerable point: the one loop to interrupt, the one support to install, the one boundary to protect, the one wholesome state to encourage. When effort is scattered everywhere, the crew exhausts itself. When effort is placed precisely, small movements change the whole direction of travel.

### **The tone of the engine**

Effort is not only about how much energy we use; it is also about the tone of that energy. We can apply effort with aggression, panic, shame, or self-hatred, and the action may look disciplined from the outside while creating more turbulence inside. That kind of effort often burns hot, then collapses.

Skilful Application has a different tone. It is firm but not violent, steady but not rigid, caring but not indulgent. It says, 'This matters, so I will take one clean step.' When the tone is right, effort becomes sustainable. The engine does not scream; it hums. This pairs well with Christina Feldman's quote: 'We learn to apply and reapply, moment to moment, with an effort that is calm and caring.'

### **When the engine overheats**

Sometimes we notice too late that we have been forcing. We have pushed through tiredness, ignored the body, tightened around results, or tried to change too much at once. This is not failure; it is feedback. The repair is to cool the engine: rest, simplify, reduce the task, soften the tone, and return to one workable step. Over-effort often comes from fear. Under-effort often comes from discouragement. Skilful Application listens for both. It keeps asking: 'what level of energy would help now?'

### **How to practice**

- ★ **The dashboard check** – turning confusion into a practical task: When we feel stuck or off-balance, it helps to stop spiralling and ask four simple questions:
  - What do I need to prevent (avoid a known trigger)?

- What do I need to abandon (stop feeding a harmful loop)?
- What do I need to cultivate (bring in a support or wholesome quality)?
- What do I need to maintain (protect what's already working)?

It's a quick dashboard scan: spot the hazard, stop the leak, raise what supports the crossing, and keep what's steady from slipping away.

★ **The dose – minimum effective effort, not heroics:** In compulsion we often swing between pushing too hard and collapsing. Skilful Application asks for the minimum effective dose of energy, applied in the right place. The question becomes: 'What is the smallest step I can take right now that moves me toward safety?' Consistency changes the baseline; strain often snaps us back into old habits. We don't need a dramatic burst of rowing that exhausts the crew. We need small, reliable course-corrections that keep the raft moving without burning out the engine.

★ **Setting the rigging – balancing effort moment by moment:** Effort works best when it's balanced. Too tight and we get agitated, brittle, and striving; too loose and we get dull, avoidant, and apathetic. So we keep adjusting: if the mind is tense and vibrating, we soften effort; if the mind is sagging and sleepy, we sit up and re-engage. We keep the rigging tuned: not over-tight so it snaps in a gust, and not slack so the sails flop uselessly. The right tension keeps the crossing smooth.

### **A secular dharma perspective – Application**

In the secular dharma teacher Stephen Batchelor's rendering of the path, this factor is less about heroic striving and more about Application: bringing energy to the next workable task. It is not effort for effort's sake, and it is not the harsh discipline of forcing ourselves into shape. Application means applying care, attention, and energy where they can actually make a difference. We do not wait for inspiration or perfect conditions. We take one good-enough step, observe what happens, and adjust. In this sense, Application turns the path from an idea into a practice: the moment when 'I understand' becomes 'I will try this now.'

Application is experimental and responsive. We use energy in four skilful ways: preventing what predictably destabilises us, abandoning what is already pulling us off course, cultivating what strengthens the body-mind, and maintaining what is worth protecting. It also asks us to be honest about the body: energy is not infinite, and a wise path cannot be built on panic, shame, or white-knuckling. In

RAFT language, Application is fine-tuning the engine of the vessel – but a good engine does not simply roar; it responds to conditions, conserves fuel, and keeps the voyage sustainable.

### Self-reflections

1. When I'm under pressure, do I tend to over-effort (push, force, white-knuckle) or under-effort (avoid, numb, drift) – and what's my early warning sign?
2. What does a 'minimum effective step' look like for me today – the smallest step that genuinely moves me toward safety?
3. When I feel stuck, which part of the dashboard do I forget to check most often: prevent, abandon, cultivate, or maintain?
4. What is one hazard I already know I should prevent – and what simple change would lower the risk this week?
5. What is one loop I keep feeding (resentment, scrolling, craving, arguing) – and what would abandoning it look like in one specific moment?
6. What wholesome quality do I most need to cultivate right now (calm, courage, kindness, clarity) – and what is one concrete way to arouse it?
7. Do I give myself permission to experiment – to try a good-enough step, learn from the result, and adjust – or do I demand certainty before I act?

### Journaling prompts

1. **Effort audit (the dashboard page):** Divide a page into four quadrants: prevent, abandon, cultivate, maintain. Under each, write one real example from today (even tiny). If you can't find one, write the next best option you could try tomorrow. Finish with one line: 'The quadrant I neglect most is...'
2. **Minimum effective step log:** Choose three tasks from today (examples include: work, home, wellbeing, conversations). For each, note: Did I over-effort, under-effort, or hit the middle? Then rewrite it with 10% less tension (or 10% more engagement if you were flat). What would change in body, breath, and outcome?
3. **The rigging check:** Describe your current energy like a rope: too tight (anxious, rushed, brittle) or too loose (foggy, heavy, avoidant). What's the smallest adjustment that fits: soften the body, slow the breath, move, splash cold water, sit upright, step outside, contact support?
4. **If-then library:** Write three practical 'if-then' plans for common drift points. Keep them simple and specific: 'If ... happens, then I will ... .' Add one that protects sleep, one that protects mood, and one that

protects boundaries.

5. **Clean energisers list:** List five non-harming ways to lift energy without a crash – music, sunlight, walking, showering, tidying, a gratitude text. Next to each, write when you will use it: morning slump, 3 pm dip, post-work transition.
6. **Sustainability check (maintaining):** Write about one boundary you set recently (or need to set). What did it protect – sleep, recovery time, money, nervous system? What pushback showed up (from others or from inside)? What's one sentence you'll use next time to hold it cleanly?
7. **The experiment:** Describe one moment you took one small step without knowing the outcome. What was the risk? What did you try? What happened next? Finish with: 'Next time, I'll adjust by..'

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

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

- ★ **Neuroscience:** Skilful Application depends on the brain's ability to regulate energy, interrupt habit, and redirect behaviour. A useful way to understand this is through allostasis: the brain's ongoing work of predicting and managing the body's needs. When the system is well supplied – enough sleep, food, safety, and wellbeing – attention, inhibition, and flexible choice are easier to access. When the system is depleted by chronic stress, hunger, overload, or poor sleep, even simple skilful actions can feel exhausting. This is why sustainable effort is not just a matter of 'trying harder'; it also depends on protecting the conditions that make wise effort possible.

Habits are learned through repetition. Well-worn patterns can begin to run like automatic motor sequences: cue, pull, action, result. Skilful Application trains the interruption point. Each time we pause, sense the body, name the loop, and choose one workable response, we strengthen the capacity to stop and reselect. Over time, effort becomes less like forcing the mind into obedience and more like building a reliable braking-and-steering system. The engine works best when it is not starved, flooded, or overheated.

- ★ **Psychology:** Behavioural Activation (BA), a core approach within Cognitive-Behavioural Therapies (CBT), rests on a simple reversal: we often

wait to feel motivated before we act, but action itself can help shift mood and motivation. Small, scheduled, meaningful behaviours reduce avoidance and increase contact with healthy reinforcement. This maps closely onto Skilful Application: we do not wait for the perfect state of mind before acting. We take one small, specific step that changes the conditions – a walk, a call, a boundary, a task started, a loop interrupted.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) adds another important lens: effort becomes more sustainable when it is guided by values rather than guilt, fear, or self-attack. This is called committed action – taking workable steps in the direction of what matters, even while uncomfortable thoughts and feelings are present. Implementation intentions, or ‘if-then’ plans, support this by linking a predictable cue to a chosen response: ‘If this happens, then I will do this.’ Each manageable action also builds self-efficacy – the lived sense that ‘I can influence what happens next.’ Confidence grows from evidence, and evidence is built one repeatable step at a time.

★ **Philosophy:** Pragmatism offers a philosophy of practice that fits Skilful Application well. It asks us to test ideas through consequences rather than merely admire them in theory. In this spirit, effort becomes experimental: try one workable step, observe what happens, and adjust. We do not need perfect certainty before beginning. We need enough care and clarity to test the next skilful movement.

The Stoics add a complementary discipline: place effort where choice is real. Epictetus begins by distinguishing what is up to us from what is not. This is not passivity; it is conservation of energy. We stop trying to control the whole ocean and apply effort at the steerable point: our intention, our next action, our restraint, our willingness to return, our capacity to repair. Skilful Application is therefore not heroic striving. It is a precise, sustainable effort placed where it can actually help.

### **Remember to remember**

Skilful Application is the art of using energy wisely. It is not grit for its own sake, and it is not white-knuckling through life. It is care in motion – the willingness to apply the minimum effective dose of effort in the right place, at the right time, with the right tone. When we practise this, change becomes sustainable. We spend less energy fighting ourselves and more energy shaping conditions that

support steadiness, clarity, and freedom. The aim is not to prove strength, but to build reliability – the quiet ability to choose again, even when the weather turns.

Remember that effort has four jobs: prevent what predictably harms, abandon what has already started to pull us off course, cultivate what strengthens the mind, and maintain what is already working. When we feel stuck, we can return to the dashboard: is there a hazard to avoid, a loop to drop, a wholesome quality to arouse, or a success to protect? We keep adjusting the rigging – not too tight, not too loose — adjusting the level of effort to the state of the system. A small, well-placed shift is often enough: one breath, one boundary, one kind action, one clean interruption. Over time, these small adjustments become a new baseline, and the raft stays on course without burning out the engine.

*“Enthusiasm is common. Endurance is rare.” ~ Angela Duckworth*

*“For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.” ~ T. S. Eliot*

## **Sutta references**

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

- *Summary:* Defines Skilful Effort through the fourfold formula: preventing the unarisen unskillful, abandoning the arisen unskillful, arousing the unarisen skillful, and maintaining the arisen skillful.

### ★ **Soṇa Sutta (AN 6.55) — The Lute**

- *Summary:* The Buddha advises the monk Soṇa, who was striving too intensely, to balance his energy like tuning a lute – not too tight, not too loose – for sustainable practice.

### ★ **Sammappadhāna Suttas (AN 4.13/14) — The Right Endeavours**

- *Summary:* Expands on the four efforts as the essential components of diligent practice (*padhāna*) leading toward liberation

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