



This document is an extract from the full chapter which is available for download in the table via this [link](#) and is intended for use by participants of meetings.

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

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.

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.

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.

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

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