



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.

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

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.

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...'
-

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

[RAFT to Freedom](#) © 2025 by Dr Cathryn Jacob and Vince Cullen is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

To view a copy of this license, visit

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

