

## Practice "Right," Not Hard

You might think Right Effort means practicing *hard*, but that's not necessarily so. Do not forget the Middle Way, between extremes. Don't force yourself to endure aesthetic practices or push yourself to exhaustion. If your practice becomes a "chore," that's a problem. Zen teacher [Thich Nhat Hanh](#) says, "The Fourfold Right Diligence is nourished by joy and interest. If your practice does not bring you joy, you are not practicing correctly."

The Buddha taught that practice should be like a well-tuned string instrument. If the strings are too loose, they won't play a sound. If they are too tight, they will break. Practice should be nourishing, not draining.

## The Five Hindrances

When you think of Right Effort also think of the Five Hindrances, from the Nivarana Sutta of the [Pali Canon](#). These are:

1. Sensual desire (*kamacchanda*)
2. Ill will (*vyapada*)
3. Sloth, torpor, or drowsiness (*thina-middha*)
4. Restlessness and worry (*uddhacca-kukkucca*)
5. Uncertainty or skepticism (*vicikiccha*)

The Four Right Exertions		
	<i>unarisen</i>	<i>arisen</i>
unskillful qualities	<b>guard</b>	<b>abandon</b>
skillful qualities	<b>arouse</b>	<b>maintain</b>

These are five qualities that interfere with Right Effort. The Buddha taught that mindfulness—of body, sensations, feelings, and thoughts—will overcome the hindrances.

In his book, [Just One Thing: Developing a Buddha Brain One Simple Practice at a Time](#), Rick Hanson describes how to undertake the process of “developing a buddha brain one simple practice at a time.” The book outlines 52 brief actions a person can do several times a day to craft a brain that is less stressed, happier and more resilient with a deeper sense of well-being. Hanson writes:

*There's a traditional saying that the mind takes the shape it rests upon; the modern update is that the brain takes the shape the mind rests upon. For instance, if you regularly rest your mind upon worries, self criticism, and anger, then your brain will gradually take that shape – will develop neural structures and dynamics of anxiety, low sense of worth, and prickly reactivity to others. On the other hand, if*

*you regularly rest your mind upon, for example noticing you're all right right now, seeing the good in yourself and letting go...then your brain will gradually take the shape of calm strength, self confidence, and inner peace.*

Hanson explains how neuroplasticity is accomplished:

- *Busy regions get more blood flow since they need more oxygen and glucose.*
- *The genes inside neurons get more or less active; for example, people who routinely relax have improved expression of genes that calm down stress reactions, making them more resilient.*
- *Neural Connections that are relatively inactive wither away; it's a kind of neural Darwinism, the survival of the busiest, use it or lose it.*
- *"Neurons that fire together, wire together." This saying from the work of Donald Hebb means that synapses – the connections between neurons – get more sensitive, plus new neurons grow, producing thicker neural layers.*