

The Buddha's Program for Psychological/ Emotional and Social Transformation- The Eight Factor Path By Rodger R. Ricketts, Psy.D. As a chapter in the book, The Buddha's Teachings: Seeing Without Illusion. Copyright Rodger Ricketts, 2014. All rights reserved. Protected by international copyright conventions. No part of this article may be reproduced in any manner whatsoever, or stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, without express permission of the Author-publisher, except in case of brief quotations with due acknowledgement. Published through Calistro Green & Kindle.

The Buddha's Program for Psychological/ Emotional and Social Transformation- The Eight Factor Path

'As an ocean deepens gradually, declines gradually, shelves gradually without sudden precipices, so in this law and discipline there is a gradual training, a gradual action, a gradual unfolding, and no sudden apprehension of supreme knowledge.'

Anguttara Nikaya 8.19

'The best of paths is the Eightfold Path...This is the only Way. There is none other, for the purity of vision'

Dhammapāda verses 273 and 274

Psychological Transformations

The Buddha was very clear that *Nibbāna* was the goal of following the Eight-factor Path. Based on his own experience, he set out quite clear and effective guidelines and instructions to help us reach this goal. The Eight-factor Path, ultimately, is an experiential practice of psychological transformation and not only the acquisition of theoretical knowledge. It is through introspection, reflection, insight, and compassion that we have a lasting and profound psychological transformation of mind and reach the goal of Enlightenment.

The Eight-factor Path or Middle Way transforms and purifies our minds through the training of compassion, concentration, and insight. Even though enlightenment is not often thought of as a process of attainment, the Buddha clearly taught that the Middle Way is a graduated path towards the achievement of *Nibbāna*. Or, as Bhikkhu Bodhi stated, "The Buddha presents his teaching in the form of a gradual training. Buddhist discipline involves gradual practice and gradual attainment. It does not burst into completeness at a stroke, but like a tree or any other living organism, it unfolds organically, as a sequence of stages in which each stage rests upon its predecessor as its indispensable foundation and gives rise to its successor as its natural consequent."¹ Indeed, at the highest level of the Buddhist discipline, the eight

factors of the Path function simultaneously. This training can be accomplished within a person's lifetime of day-to-day practice and more intensive periods of practice at a temple or retreat center removed from the demands and distractions of daily life.

The Middle Way is a practical and gradual training; it is not mystical or metaphysical. It is Bhavana (mental culture or mental development) which aims through gradual psychological transformation or purification to cultivate qualities as concentration, awareness, volition, energy, confidence, happiness, tranquility, leading to the attainment of the highest wisdom – nibbana – here and now, in this lifetime. In fact, Awakening is the psychological insight and understanding of emptiness, the unfettered experience without the subject-object dualistic interlude between the experience of the world, free from the 'self' concept. Therefore, since the Eight-factor Path is a prescription showing us how to achieve this experience of Awakening, we need to clearly understand the process.

Nibbāna as Goal

There is a goal set by the Buddha; do not be dissuaded from this truth. The goal is *Nibbāna*.

As with every goal we start toward accomplishing, we need an orientation as to what to do and how to achieve a particular goal. We need an orientation that sets us off in the correct direction, and the Buddha confirms that when he says at the beginning of the Eight-factor Path we need to have the Right View or Right Perspective. The Right View is understanding the framework of the Buddha's teachings: the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths give us the orientation, the context of the practice, and ultimately the focus to achieve the goal of Enlightenment.

Another aspect of the attainment of any goal is that we begin our project with the more rudimentary aspects and then move on to more refined, complicated, and complex skills for the accomplishment of the goal. In the Middle Way, after Right View comes virtuous conduct and thinking: Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Thought, or *sīla*. Then, later, we practice the subtle, evolving meditations.

The Middle Way: Askesis

The Eight-factor Path is a life lived between extreme self-denial and sensual self-indulgence, a life in which the mind is cultivated and purified based on bhavana or mind training to reach the goal of *Nibbāna*. It is a total spiritual

discipline involving the mind and the body, for without a healthy body the mind is adversely affected. Through the practice of the Eight-factor Path, the Buddha provided all the necessary practical and rational guidance needed for us to gain peace, happiness, and release from *samsara*.

To reach this pragmatic goal of Awakening, an approach to living is needed that is like the original meaning of the ancient word *askesis*. For the ancient Greeks, the very broad meaning of *askesis* was practical physical training; later, for the Romans, it related also to the mental discipline which is required for any rigorous training. Finally, the ideal of *askesis* came to include attaining wisdom or mental powers by developing and training the mental facilities. It became connected with both knowledge and practice as well as the necessary amount of self-abnegation that a person undergoes to obtain the skills and mastery to reach various types of goals, whether they be physical, academic, spiritual, or otherwise.

In fact, for the attainment of the goal of the Eight-factor Path, skilful application is required in its practice and training in our daily life. Our improved mental clarity is acquired through effort and consistent disciplined training, or *askesis*. However, while we may think that this training is only accomplished through formal meditation or practice, this isn't the case. Many of our everyday experiences provide ample and important practice for our training. An example of how our practice can be accomplished through our everyday living was given by the Buddha when he said: "The most excellent of ascetic practices is the practice of forbearance." By this he meant that not only in our formal meditation but also in our ordinary daily lives, we are given many opportunities to apply mental training when we are patient and forbearing through the often ordinary, troubling, and difficult relationships and situations that arise in life; this is also a form of *askesis* training. Persistence, equanimity, and right effort are needed to work through these kinds of obstacles, which will appear every day while following the Path. Our everyday exasperations are often described as 'teachers' for the practitioner; we should be grateful for them and learn from them. As Bhante Henepola Gunaratana recommended:

*'View all problems as challenges. Look upon negativities that arise as opportunities to learn and to grow. Don't run from them, condemn yourself, or bury your burden in saintly silence. You have a problem? Great. More grist for the mill. Rejoice, dive in, and investigate.'*²

The Eight-Factor Path as a Psychological Program

Askesis is a training deeply embedded in one's life. Buddhist *askesis* is a life of mental development lived daily. The Buddha outlined the necessary

discipline of training that weaves a lengthy line of progressively pure mental states leading onward to the goal of *Nibbāna*. The Eight-factor Path is a model for action and a superb prescription to change our patterns of thoughts – and, hence, emotions and behaviors – and develop new insights, understandings, and wisdom. Actually, the Buddha’s Eight-factor Path is quite similar to what one sees now in contemporary literature in goal accomplishment.

To better comprehend Buddhist askesis, let us hypothetically begin to proceed toward achievement of the goal of the Eight-factor Path. Firstly, spiritual searches are often initiated to alleviate personal malaise when there is a realization that our suffering needs attention and a remedy or a spiritual life provides deeper happiness. As Bhikkhu Bodhi wrote, ‘When this insight (“I am unhappy”) dawns, even if only momentarily, it can precipitate a profound personal crisis. It overturns accustomed goals and values, mocks our routine preoccupations, leaves old enjoyments stubbornly unsatisfying. A deeper reality beckons us; we have heard the call of a more stable, more authentic happiness, and until we arrive at our destination we cannot rest content.’³ Once we decide to alleviate our unhappiness or suffering, we are confronted with the problem of where and from whom we should seek help. So once we decide to seek some practical spiritual/emotional relief, we do what the Buddha recommended to his followers 2,500 years ago: “Believe nothing, O monks, merely because you have been told it or because it is traditional, or because you yourselves have imagined it. Do not believe what your teacher tells you merely out of respect for the teacher. But whatsoever, after due examination and analysis, you find to be conducive to the good, the benefit, the welfare of all beings that doctrine believe and cling to, and take it as your guide.” In other words, the Buddha’s advice is to find, initially accept, and trust a teacher only after an inquiry into the teacher’s character, reputation, and teachings.

Faith

At the beginning of our spiritual training, a certain amount of faith for our teacher is needed. This can be a surprise to some people. “I thought,” they might say, “you didn’t have to have *faith* in Buddhism.” And often they are thinking of the type of fanatical faith that Martin Luther is often quoted as saying: “Faith must trample underfoot all reason, sense, and understanding.”⁴

However, in Buddhism, it is a rational and tested faith we seek, not an irrational one. We can also call it confidence or trust, and it is an important factor to develop. We will practice the Buddha’s teachings seriously only if we have a sense of congruence and some confidence: not only that our teacher is knowledgeable and helpful but also that the Buddha has found and shown the

way to reach the goal of *Nibbāna*. We also need to trust that there is such a thing as *Nibbāna* that provides the exit from *samsara*. So when we say: “I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha,” we are expressing faith or confidence in the Teaching and in the order of monks who have preserved it and handed it on. With trust or faith, we free ourselves from the excessive doubt which is one of the major obstacles to a committed and diligent practice.

While faith or trust in a teacher plays a useful role in our progress, ultimately, we need personal insight to claim direct knowledge. The stream-enterer (a person who has attained an intuitive grasp of *dhamma*) and those of higher attainment have attained personal confidence and conviction in the Dhamma as they progressed along the path. In fact, the Buddha’s teaching insists that genuine confirmation of the truth of the Dhamma can only be achieved through observation and acceptance of our personal experiential evidence. The Buddha even invited his own disciples to inquire into his claim of having attained full enlightenment. They were told to test his claim by closely scrutinizing his behavior for as long as needed. So firstly, to summarize, before entering into a teacher-student relationship, we should investigate the teacher’s credentials and views. Then, after some time of instruction, we should reflect on the results of the teacher’s instructions and our commitment to the practice. If, after close examination, we find that we are satisfied, “These qualities are skillful; these qualities are blameless; these qualities are praised by the wise; these qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to welfare & to happiness” — then you should enter & remain in them.’, we may continue with that teacher. All of these actions are needed to avoid doubt and to develop a reasoned trust or faith in the Path.

Right Effort

The Buddha’s words show us that effort is very important to reach the goal of *Nibbāna*:

‘If I am to achieve true happiness, the peace of the teaching of liberation, I must begin to strive in this very lifetime.’⁵

‘If I do not make an effort while I have the leisure and opportunity and this human body, a vessel so hard to gain and easy to lose, I will never be freed from the ocean of existence or be able to cut off the stream of its endless, diverse forms of suffering.’⁶

‘Exertion is most helpful for the final attainment of the truth, Bharadvaja. If one didn’t make an exertion, one wouldn’t finally attain the truth. Because one makes an exertion, one finally attains the truth. Therefore, exertion is most helpful for the final attainment of the truth.’

MN 96 Canki Sutta

'You yourselves must strive; the Buddhas only point the way.'

Dhammapada, verse 276

To continue, now, on the Path: after careful consideration, we have decided to practice the Eight-factor Path, and we have chosen and come to trust a teacher to learn from; in fact, what comes next? While faith strengthens our determination to persevere, clearly a certain amount of energy is required to practice the Eight-factor Path, because it is through Right Effort that we rid ourselves of unwholesome states of mind and develop wholesome ones. Right Effort concerns making the conscious effortful practice to positively shape our cognitions, thoughts, and, therefore, our 'world.'

Actually, to reach any goal, whether it is spiritual, psychological, academic, business-oriented, or otherwise, effort is needed; inactivity will not make it happen. Just *wanting* to make progress along the path is not enough. It is by making an effort, step by step, within the framework of a program, that eventually a goal can be reached. In fact, effort has been called the root of all achievement. Clearly, the Buddha intentionally used effort to reach a state of Enlightenment, and he taught that Right Effort was also necessary for anyone to become Awakened. Attaining happiness and Enlightenment depends upon one's own efforts. Thus, we must put effort into the practice of Buddha's teachings before the desired results can be obtained.

Right Effort in Buddhism is commonly detailed as four types of endeavors that are ranked in ascending order of perfection:

- to prevent the arising of unarisen unwholesome mental states;
- to abandon unwholesome mental states that have already arisen;
- to arouse wholesome mental states that have not yet arisen; and
- to maintain and perfect wholesome mental states already arisen.

So, the function of Right Effort is a fourfold mental effortful practice: to prevent, abandon, develop, and maintain. Right Effort is vital in eliminating negative and harmful thoughts and in promoting and maintaining positive and healthy thoughts.

Mind development through these four efforts is not something that can be gained immediately. Progress takes time and the regular practice of mental training. Just as an athlete does not succeed with only sporadic training, the training of the mind requires regular and constant application (*askesis*). For positive results, meditation and the practice of mental culture need to be done regularly for a considerable period. Psychological changes come slowly. Patience is a virtue.

So in general terms, Right Effort is the ongoing practice that directly purifies the mind. Every time there is avoidance of 'Right Anything,' then Right Effort is called for. Right Effort, also known as 'right endeavoring,' is the Buddhist practitioner's continuous effort to keep his or her mind free of thoughts that might impair his or her ability to realize or put into practice the other elements of the Noble Eight-factor Path that will eventually lead to *Nibbāna*.

From the beginning, there are five particular hindrances which have been identified as frequently presenting major difficulties for a practitioner of the Path; Right Effort as persistence and determination is directly applied to these.

The five hindrances or obstacles are:

craving

anger

laziness and torpor

restlessness and regret

doubt

These obstacles cover major factors that can interfere with the ability to carry on successfully with the accomplishment of any goal and, in particular, with continuation along the Eight-factor Path. Right Effort is used to overcome them.

So without Right Effort, which is an act of will originating in the mind, nothing will be achieved. However, it must be 'Right,' because the mental energy that is the force behind any effort can be either wholesome or unwholesome. The same energy that fuels fervor, envy, aggression, and violence can, on the other hand, also fuel self-discipline, honesty, benevolence, and kindness. So misguided effort which distracts the mind from its task and creates unhappiness is guarded against and counteracted by 'Right' Effort with the direction of Right View or perspective.

Practice 'Right,' Not Hard

One might think that Right Effort means practicing *hard*, but that's not so.

Effort is the exertion of energy, but Right Effort is more subtle. In fact, an often-cited simile that the Buddha taught to illustrate Right Effort is that practice should be like playing a well-tuned string instrument. The Buddha said to a monk, "Religious discipline is also like unto playing such a stringed instrument. When the mind is properly adjusted and quietly applied, the Way is attainable. But when you are too fervently bent on it, your body grows tired, and when your body is tired, your spirit becomes weary, your discipline will relax, and with the relaxation of discipline there follows many an evil.

Therefore, be calm and pure, and the Way will be gained.”⁷ If the strings of an instrument are too loose, they won’t play a sound. If they are too tight, they will break. Thus, to be ‘Right,’ effort has to be balanced; its intensity must be adjusted according to circumstances, and we have to know when to relax and when to be diligent. If we try too hard, we get mentally fatigued and agitated, and if we do not try hard enough, we stagnate. Avoiding the two extremes of stagnation and exhaustion, we practice using the optimal balance through the Middle Way.

If our practice becomes a hardship, it shows that we are being too fervent. Buddha emphasized that one should be kind to oneself. Our practice should be nourishing, not draining. What makes the effort right is that it’s skillful, appropriate. As our effort gets more consistent, we start getting results. The more we get results, the more we find a joy in and through the effort. We find joy in abandoning unskillful qualities, and we take joy in developing skillful ones. Right Effort, then, enables us to establish a positive feedback loop: success in meditation makes us feel better emotionally and physically, and feeling better makes us enthusiastic about keeping our practice. And the effort given to carry out the intention is, we now know, Right Effort.

Right View/Right Intention

Now that we are confident and energetic in wanting to begin a practice, we must accept that effort and confidence aren’t enough. It is easily seen, and has been alluded to above, that only a ‘Right’ or balanced Effort will create happiness and benefits, whereas misguided effort distracts the mind from its task and creates unhappiness. Therefore, as we proceed toward *Nibbāna*, what we need is a Right View or schema, which provides a framework representing a dynamic psychological method for a correct practice, and Right Intention, which is needed to give commitment or right resolve for a correct practice.

Right View is the correct understanding of the central teachings of the Buddha: the Four Noble Truths. The Noble Truths – namely those of suffering, its arising, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation – enable us to understand our starting point, see our destination, and recognize successive landmarks as our practice advances. As Bhikku Bodhi so nicely states it:

‘Conceptual right view, also called the right view in conformity with the truths (saccanulomika-sammaditthi), is a correct conceptual understanding of the Dhamma arrived at by study of the Buddha’s teachings and deep examination of their meaning. Such understanding, though conceptual rather than experiential, is not dry and sterile. When rooted in faith in the Triple Gem and driven by a keen aspiration to realize the truth embedded in the formulated principles of the

*Dhamma, it serves as a critical phase in the development of wisdom (pañña), for it provides the germ out of which experiential right view gradually evolves.*⁸

Therefore, Right View is the benchmark of, and even the impetus for, a correct practice. It is a correct framework of the problem and how to solve it. To confirm the importance of right view, the Buddha places it at the very beginning of the Eight-factor Path. Elsewhere in the Suttas, the Buddha calls Right View the forerunner of the Path, which gives direction and efficacy to the other seven Path factors.

Once we have a Right Perspective or schema along with faith and energy, we then need the Right Intention or Determination to go forward correctly. Right Intention is between Right View and the three moral factors known as *sīla*. Understanding the Four Truths in relation to one's own life gives rise to the Right Intention. Intention involves cognition and is a purposeful act of determining some action. Therefore, our intentions are the forerunners of our actions.

Since the cognitive and purposive sides of the mind intertwine and interact in close correlation, in every moment that we generate thinking we also generate intentions that give direction to the course of our lives. On the Path, Right Intention has three characteristics: selfless renunciation, or detachment, which counters our intention of desires; loving kindness, or the wish for happiness which counters ill will; and compassion, or the wish to remove suffering, which counters harmfulness. Our actions are instruments for expressing our aims and ideals (our intentions), and these point back one step further to our views; these, in turn, always point back to the thoughts from which they originate.

Right Speech/Right Action and Right Livelihood

*'Let one guard oneself against irritability in thought;
let one be controlled in mind.
Abandoning mental misconduct,
let one practice good conduct in thought.'*
Dhammapada 17.223

So now that we have the Right Schema, Right Intention, initial trust and acceptance in the program, and willingness to exert effort skillfully, what do we do next? We go forward using the next three Path factors of moral discipline (*sīla*) – Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. These three are considered as preliminary on the path, and all these 'Rights' interact and support each other. Often *sīla*, or the three moral 'Rights,' are described in

a descriptive manner as actions or behaviors that support virtue and virtuous conduct. So, for example, with right livelihood our occupations should do no harm to other people or animals; with right speech we should do no harm to other people in how we talk to them; and with right action we should do no harm through our actions.

While the *sīla* practice might appear to focus only on behavior, it does more than that. There are always two perspectives: a descriptive one and an explanatory one. In this case, the descriptive explanation of *sīla* is that these are behaviors that need to be consistently performed in order to live a virtuous life. However, at a deeper explanatory level, their function is the earnest beginning of the training of our mental states. Therefore, they are not prescribed only as guides to action, but primarily as aids to mental purification. In fact, these three practices are a means of developing and purifying the mind. While the descriptive is easier to see and explain, the explanatory description goes deeper, providing an understanding of the process of psychological transformation inherent in the Path.

In the Buddha's teachings, we see that mind is primary. He states: "All that we are is the result of what we have thought. The mind is everything. What we think we become. Those whose minds are shaped by selfish thoughts cause misery when they speak or act."⁹ So mind culture is the most important factor in progressing toward the goal of *Nibbāna*. The mind is the key to changing 'our world' – the nature of our experiences. Therefore, the mind is the source of all virtues, of all qualities – and in order to attain these virtues, one must properly construct the mind.

How does the mind create virtuous behaviors? We know that, from the Buddha's perspective, the mind is first. First, there are our thoughts, which then become an intention or plan, which then becomes volition or the cognitive process of decision and commitment to a particular course of action, which then becomes action. In other words, we have mind > intention > volition > action. So when we reverse that process by control and developing a certain mode of behavior (action > volition > intention > mind), we are actually training the mind at the same time. While we descriptively appear to be controlling our behavior, we are, more importantly, influencing our mind content. For example, if I have a thought to speak angrily (not Right Speech) to another person because I think they have insulted me, my virtuous inhibition of that action is my thought, 'Don't say that; it's not Right Speech!' So through directing my behavior in both a positive proactive way and with inhibition, my thoughts are also being affected and trained. Then, later on in the Path, it is through the more direct meditation methods that we come to understand, modify, and purify our mind states.

So, we see that in all aspects Buddhism is a way of life of cultivating and purifying the mind based on mental development. As the Buddha said, “Therefore, monks, you should reflect on your mind moment to moment with the thought: for a long time this mind has been defiled by lust, hate, and delusion. Through the defilements of the mind beings are defiled; with the cleansing of the mind beings are purified.”¹⁰ The moral drawn is that the untrained mind is conditioned by many negative influences, and only through purposeful reconditioning can we purify our minds. If one creates wholesome actions, wholesome thoughts must be the root of those actions. It is impossible for unwholesome actions to originate from wholesome thoughts and vice versa. Also, while our focus can be solely on ‘non-doing’ in terms of avoidance of unwholesome actions, abstaining is often not enough: it involves the important act of refraining from evil, but it doesn’t initiate the positive and proactive wholesome thoughts and actions which are needed to purify our minds.

In more modern terms, continued unwholesome or wholesome thinking has the effect of reinforcing those respective dispositions by further nourishing and strengthening them. Like attracts like. If you have an unwholesome thought, that thought attracts all sorts of unskillful thoughts in other people. Also, you can ‘pass’ that thought on to others. Thought is a dynamic force. Thought is an energy. On the other hand, if you dwell on a sublime thought, this thought can attract good thoughts in others. You ‘pass’ good thoughts on to others. You pollute the world with unwholesome thoughts, while your good thoughts help the world.

Therefore, the starting point on the path towards our goal of well-being and, ultimately, the liberation of our mind with the attainment of *Nibbāna* is the voluntary abstention from bodily and verbal behavior originating in negative thinking as well as the encouragement and use of wholesome activities originating in positive or wholesome thinking through *sīla*.

In neurophysiology, the process of neuron adhesion strengthening has been known for a long time; it basically works as follows: thoughts and memory strengthen by repetition. So, if you entertain evil thoughts or good thoughts, these negative or good thoughts have a tendency to recur. Thoughts are like ‘birds of the same feather which flock together’: as we entertain a certain type of thought, all sorts of similar thoughts reinforce each other; we may also seek behavioral stimulation to foster those thoughts. If you entertain a good thought, other good thoughts join together. The lesson is that the untrained mind can be and has been conditioned by many negative influences and that it is only through purposeful reconditioning that we can purify our minds.

The practice of *sīla* also encourages harmony on a social level. The principles

of *sīla* help to establish harmonious interpersonal relations, in which conflict is reduced if not eliminated. While training in *sīla* fosters the ‘public’ benefit of inhibiting socially detrimental actions, more importantly it creates the personal benefit of mental purification by preventing the defilements from influencing our conduct. The final purification of mind will be completed, however, in a deeper and more thorough way with the next two Path factors of *samādhi* and wisdom.

We see with *sīla* that while the focus of the practice remains in our behavior, importantly, we come to understand that our actions are preceded by our intentions, which are preceded by our thoughts. Through this lesson we are less likely to act impulsively, instead, we become more reflective and proactive as to how our actions are prompted by our beliefs, attitudes, and thoughts and how we can create positive and beneficial consequences for our well-being and that of others. Also, since we are reducing conflict between others and using positive thinking in ourselves, we experience a calmer, less stressed, and happier mind.

Morality/Ethics

‘The morality found in all the precepts can be summarized in three simple principles: ‘To avoid evil, to do good, to purify the mind.’ This is the advice given by all the Buddhas.’

Dhammapada, 183

‘Purity of morality has only the purity of mind as its goal.’

Daniel Coleman Buddhist Publication Society¹¹

‘In the Buddhist doctrine, mind is the starting point, the focal point, and also, as the liberated and purified mind of the Saint, the culminating point.’¹²

Nyanāponika, Heart of Buddhist Meditation

So with all this talk about virtuous behavior, what does Buddhism say about ethics? Well, to begin, ethics has to do with our actions and decisions and is concerned with whether we are acting in accordance with our beliefs. Morals, on the other hand, are values which we attribute to a system of beliefs and, in this case, to Buddhism. Often morality and ethics overlap in answering questions regarding what is good and evil, what is right and wrong, what justice is, and what our duties, obligations and rights are. In other words, ‘How should we act?’ However, *Buddhist* ethical discipline has one purpose: preparation for Enlightenment through ‘preparation of mind,’ not only by practising restraint but also through the positive effects of compassion and

equanimity. The ethical training is the very positive practice for achieving liberation or Enlightenment.

Morality and ethics do not exist separate from the elements of the Eight-factor Path, but they are especially emphasized by *sīla*. The Path in Buddhism is based on a moral transpersonal psychology and uses various techniques to help us overcome unwholesome dispositions and encourage wholesome ones in our mental experiences. 'Wholesomeness' is understood to be the absence of greed, hate, and delusion which can lead one toward meditative states of purer consciousness and finally to *Nibbāna*. The Buddha says that the mind is the source of all mental states, the source of all merits and virtues. Since action is precipitated by thought, unwholesome tendencies first exist in the mind. Buddhist ethics are based on this truth: that the mind is the basis of action and that the ethics of an action depend on the mental state from which the action originates.

Mind is the key to changing the nature of our experience. As mind is important in all spheres of activity, mental development has an extremely important role in the practice of the Noble Eight-factor Path. Mental traits that support our spiritual lives and the attainment of *Nibbāna* are, therefore, considered 'right views', or good, while any mental trait that hinders clarity of mind and mental composure and becomes an impediment to the attainment of *Nibbāna* is considered a 'wrong view', or evil. 'Evil' here means something that is a cause or source of suffering, harm, or injury; it is anything that is harmful to progress toward *Nibbāna*.

Buddhist ethics recommend positive actions which cultivate wholesome dispositions and restraint in behavior that reinforces and habituates unwholesome dispositions. Optimistically, Buddhism says that there is always a possible positive side in human life that all people should try to achieve. So in Buddhism, morality and ethics are very important, and the moral principles are subordinate to the path's governing goal: final deliverance from suffering.

Ultimately, ethical behavior is a method of keeping one's mind and life pure and free from negative influences. To illustrate this, we can use the analogy of keeping one's blood and liver clean and fresh to maintain good physical health; the mind, too, is regarded as a stream which should be kept clean and constantly checked for impurities which, if found, must be removed for good spiritual health to be maintained. The cultivation of *dāna* (giving) and ethical conduct refine a practitioner's consciousness and create a positive, less stressed, less conflicted environment.

The core ethical code of Buddhism for a lay Buddhist is known as the Five Precepts – no killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, or intoxicants – while

the Buddhist clergy, known as the *Sangha*, are governed by 227 to 253 rules depending on the school or tradition. One ‘takes,’ or accepts, the Five Precepts as a code of behavior. Unlike ethical points of view based on obedience to divine laws, the Five Precepts are not meant to be commandments (such as ‘thou shalt not’) but are training rules or ‘principles of training’ that we apply in order to live a better life and, ultimately, achieve *Nibbāna*. Consequently, to avoid confusion, the Buddha often avoided the words ‘good’ and ‘evil’ and instead used ‘wholesome’ and ‘unwholesome’ or ‘desirable’ and ‘undesirable.’ Buddhist ethics are founded upon true insight into the hazards of greed, hatred, and delusion and the inherent values of love, equanimity, and compassion.

Buddha developed these guidelines out of compassion, to help us avoid bringing problems and suffering on ourselves and others. The guidelines of ethical behavior in Buddhism are based on the twin principles of pragmatism and relativity. ‘Pragmatic’ means ‘for some practical purpose,’ while ‘relative’ means ‘in relation to something else,’ that is, as a means to an end, and not an absolutist end in itself. So, in this system of practice, everything has a pragmatic and a relative value with regard to the accomplishment of the ultimate goal: *Nibbāna*.

Therefore, recommendations – about the beneficial way to act, for example, or what to refrain from – are based on Right View and compassion and the purification of our minds to attain *Nibbāna*. There are many methods that help us to develop ethical self-discipline. This has been called *labored* development, because we have to develop it with intention, labor, and effort. But eventually it becomes effortless and we don’t need to remind ourselves to act according to the precepts; moral, ethical behavior just comes naturally. When our ethical self-discipline becomes *unlabored*, it has become well integrated into our cognitive systems; it’s not forced. So in the beginning the practices that we develop can feel artificial. Through repetition, resultant familiarity and congruence, they become natural and integrated. They are adopted freely and skillfully and put into practice, and with these positive thoughts and intentions we can often experience emotions of happiness and even joy.

We are able to enter into deep meditation only if we lead an ethical life. When we have led the moral life, we build up the other steps of purity in our minds. Then we can cultivate the mind in concentration and can devote ourselves fully to meditation. The more we lead the moral life and the more we meditate, the greater the likelihood that we will enter into *samādhi*, which can help to liberate us from the round of births and deaths and can confer the bliss of *Nibbāna*.

Honesty and Responsibility

The Eight-factor Path requires of its practitioners self-honesty and responsibility in normally difficult areas, especially in the evaluation of our intentions and in understanding the consequences of our actions. If we can't be honest with ourselves about our thoughts and intentions, how can we clearly perceive, for example, our craving or anger in real time to abandon it? If we don't recognize what have been called psychological defense mechanisms, we will often ignore or deny or project or rationalize the fact that our thoughts and impulses are unwholesome and our actions have caused unwholesome effects, and we will have more difficulty in overcoming ignorance. Ignorance is caused mostly by a lack of self-awareness and self-honesty, not a lack of information. We need to see clearly that unwholesome processes take place within ourselves and not always outside. This is the importance of understanding that the evil one, Mara, is really a personification of our possible inner mental states. Therefore, progress in the Eight-factor Path lies in our ability to recognize and 'own' any unwholesome, harmful dispositions and effectively counter them with wholesome, beneficial ones.

Also, we do not debilitate ourselves with feelings of guilt or obsess over our errors. As the Buddha stated, feelings of guilt can't undo the past error, but they can debilitate and sap the mind of the strength that it needs to keep from repeating old mistakes. So instead of guilt or excessive shame, an appropriate response to our unwholesome action would be regret, or 'appropriate' shame, which acts as our 'conscience' to help us try to behave in a manner that is Right. There is a personal recognition and sense of responsibility for an unskillful thought and action, but it isn't debilitating.

Since, in Buddhism, there is no question of a higher power intervening to redeem us, the notion of personal responsibility is central. There is the recognition that our actions and corresponding consequences are determined by our present and past thoughts. Having recognized that through our memory and neuron adhesion, the past essentially continues to live in the present, we make a conscious effort to resist the temptation to fall into old unwholesome patterns, and we train ourselves to act with new, different, positive behaviors. But this is not always easy.

In Buddhist mental development, it's essential that we train ourselves to make considered, conscious decisions in the present based on Right View. In moments of difficulty, we often think of protecting the fictitious 'self,' but with practice and with a deliberate act of intention, we can set aside our ego pride. As we move through the stages of the Path, we become increasingly honest, heedful, and capable of living an authentic life. We cannot have meaningful

and honest interactions with others if we persist in clinging to dishonest, psychologically unwholesome states.

Accepting responsibility for those problems for which we are accountable is a prerequisite to changing our lives. We need to see that the teachings in the Buddhist texts point directly to the fact that the defilements and the *dhamma* are within ourselves, not hidden elsewhere, external, apart from ourselves. It is a matter of personal ability: if we deny our capacity to create destructive consequences, refusing responsibility for having (often unconsciously) done so, where will the insight to transform one's life and relationships come from? The fact is that the maturing of our practice requires that effort be directed correctly and that we recognize the subtle tactics of our inner tendencies (Mara) that seek to send us down the wrong path. Therefore, the good news is that through the Eight-factor Path, which focuses on the mind and its purification, self-honesty and responsibility, we can come to know ourselves, train ourselves, and free ourselves from unwholesome factors and, in the end, achieve our goal of attaining the highest of all freedoms: *Nibbāna*.

Right Concentration

At this point along the Path, we are following the framework of our mental schema of the Buddha's program to begin to purify our minds in wholesomeness through the practice of *sīla*, and we have more trust and confidence in the *Dhamma* and *sangha* because we are happier, have a better relationship with the world, and experience uplifted thinking. Because of these positive results, we are more determined to continue and to put the correct amount of effort into our practice to achieve further good results.

So we are ready to move on to another of the eight factors of the Path: Right Concentration (meditation) or *Samma Samādhi*. Right Concentration is intensified concentration that results from a deliberate intention and mental effort to raise the mind to a higher, more purified level of awareness. The main function of *samādhi*, as wholesome concentration, is to collect the ordinarily scattered stream of mental states to create a unified mental state. The mind that is trained in concentration can remain focused without distraction, and this induces a more open and serene mind to insight.

Two important features which distinguish a concentrated mind from an unconcentrated mind are absorbed attentiveness to an object and the subsequent tranquillity of the mental functions. The untrained mind exists in a scattered manner which has often been compared to a monkey moving and swinging randomly through the jungle trees. An untrained mind cannot maintain a fixed attention but rushes from thought to thought, from stimulus to stimulus, without much inner control. Such a distracted mind is often

overwhelmed by worries and stress and can be constantly influenced by the defilements.

To stop the mind from wandering off to other objects and, instead, have it maintain a fixed attention, there are many types of meditations teaching the absorption or concentration of the mind on a single object. For example, a common practice of Right Concentration is to choose a tranquilizing object, the breath, and pay full attention to the sensations of inhalation and exhalation. Eventually we experience a quiet and tranquil mind because all other distractions are eliminated and the body has become calm. A sense of oneness with the object occurs; this is called 'one-pointed' concentration or absorption. This is a tranquillity or 'calm-abiding' practice. The ability to concentrate is, however, limited in its duration, because distracting thoughts eventually arise in our minds. Therefore, although concentration meditation can be a very pleasurable state of mind, these results are impermanent and, therefore, not indicative of true liberation.

The Stages of Concentration

Right *Samādhi* is the state of mind that is not attained all at once but develops in stages. The initial stage is called 'preliminary concentration with a preliminary object.' The meditator sustains a constant selective attention on a chosen object (respiration sensations) and constantly monitors their quality of attention for when the mind strays, one mindfully or attentively observes this quickly, and with Right Effort redirects or brings it back gently but firmly to the concentration object, doing this over and over again as often as is necessary. At this level of practice, we already see clearly the different Path factors working together to produce the desired results of *Samadhi*. Then the mind begins to relax and settle into the practice – but five obstacles are likely to arise. Sometimes they appear as thoughts, sometimes as images, and sometimes as obsessive emotions such as desires, resentments, agitation, or doubts. These 'hindrances' can be a difficult barrier, but with patience and sustained effort they can be overcome. If a particular obstacle becomes strong, a countermeasure to use is to temporarily put aside the primary subject of meditation and take up an opposing subject. Another countermeasure is persisting by bringing the mind back again and again to the primary subject. Often a teacher can be very helpful in choosing the method. With any skilful effort in concentration, helpful mental factors can be activated. They are application of mind, sustained application of mind, capacity to smoothly disengage and redirect the mind, rapture, happiness, and one-pointedness. Linked together, and directing the mind towards *Samadhi*, they are called the *Jhana* factors, or the factors of absorption.

Jhana

Interestingly, the development of *samādhi* is not exclusively Buddhist. Yogis before the Buddha practiced concentration meditation, and the future Buddha – Siddhartha – even studied with two meditation masters and attained all of the *jhanas*. With the jhanic meditation experience, Siddhartha developed *samādhi*, and each level of the *jhana* took him to more refined levels of ‘divine’ mental states with corresponding mental delight, pleasure, and increased insights. He realized a greater happiness than the normal sense-based happiness. However, not finding true liberation, Siddhartha searched beyond the jhanic mental states and later came to find complete peace and deliverance – *Nibbāna*.

While the *jhanas* were not the direct portal to *Nibbāna*, the Buddha repeatedly encouraged practitioners to cultivate *samādhi* through the *jhanas*, for on the Path of mental purification, these lead to higher wisdom and the ending of the unwholesome mental states. Meditative development of these sublime states is aided by reflecting often upon their qualities, the benefits they bestow, and the dangers of their opposites. As the Buddha said, “What a person considers and reflects upon for a long time, to that his mind will bend and incline.”¹³ Importantly, the *jhanas* come into being when the way has been prepared by purifying our virtuous minds and ending obstacles to our practice. In this way we can keep the necessary focus. Also, especially with the *jhanas*, the services of a qualified teacher who can give the suitable meditation explanation and instruction are important. The meditation teacher should be knowledgeable and should give guidance and advice based on his or her own practice and experience. Since much has already been written, and because practical experience with proper instruction is so important for the concentration practices, we won’t spend much time detailing them in this book. For our purposes, a general overview is all that is necessary for the ‘Right View’ scope of this book.

Samādhi Factors

The cultivation of *Samādhi* requires attention to various factors; a simile that is often used is that of minding a fire. In the early stages, the flame of *Samādhi* must be kindled closely and carefully (Right Intention and Effort) with adverse influences such as too much wind (desire) controlled. After that, with the flames becoming stronger and more consistent, wood logs still must be placed carefully (effort and attention carefully focused). Then, when *Samādhi* is burning energetically, when the fire has become deep (serene effort and mindfulness flow), it will burn by itself with very little attention needed apart from periodic fuelling. *Samādhi* becomes the resultant mental state with

particular qualities. In fact, the *Jhanas* are qualities of mind resulting from the application of the mind. They do not arise out of nothing but depend on Right Conditions.

A modern, cognitive neuroscience description of attention process has parallels with the above simile. Both scientists and experienced meditators recognize that the ability to focus and sustain attention on a chosen object uses the skill of monitoring the focus of attention, detection of a distraction, disengaging from the distraction and redirecting and engagement of attention on the desired object. At first, this mental behavior requires the activation of several specific brain systems and energy through effort. As one's skill increases, the regulative mental processing are activated less frequently and our sustaining attention becomes progressively effortless.

Eight Levels

Samādhi, or the stages of absorption or one-pointedness, is traditionally divided into eight levels of *jhanas*, each marked by greater depth, purity, and subtlety than its predecessor. The first four states of mind, *metta*, *karuna*, *mudita*, and *upekkhā* (or loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and detachment) represent the highest levels of mundane consciousness. This meditation is called *Brahma-vihara-bhavana*: the meditative development of the sublime or 'divine' states. The meditations on love, compassion, and sympathetic joy produce the attainment of the first three absorptions, while the meditation on equanimity leads to the fourth *jhana*, in which equanimity is the most significant factor. The second group of four *jhanas* also form a set: the four immaterial states (*aruppa*). The eight need to be attained in progressive order.

The Path of Concentration

Material States

Access

Hindering thoughts overcome; other thoughts remain.
Awareness of sensory inputs and body states.
Primary object dominant thought. Feelings of rapture
happiness, equanimity; initial and sustained thoughts of
primary object; flashes of light or bodily lightness.

First

Hindering thoughts, sensory perception, *jhana*, and
awareness of painful body states all cease.

Loving-kindness.

Initial and unbroken, sustained attention to primary object. Feelings of rapture, bliss and one-pointedness.

Second

Feelings of rapture, bliss, and one-pointedness.

Selfless joy.

No thought of primary object.

Third

Feelings of bliss, one-pointedness, and equanimity.

Compassion.

Rapture ceases.

Fourth

Equanimity and one-pointedness

detachment.

Bliss and all feelings of bodily pleasure cease.

Concentration imperturbable. Breath ceases.

Formless States

Fifth

Consciousness of infinite space.

Equanimity and one-pointedness.

Material States

Sixth

Objectless infinite consciousness.

Equanimity and one-pointedness.

Seventh

Awareness of no-thing-ness.

Equanimity and one-pointedness.

Eighth

Neither-perception-nor-non-perception.

Equanimity and one-pointedness.

In the first level, after the access level, arise delight and happiness. The progressive states of *jhana* refine these until later only equanimity is left. Even though each of the first four *jhana* develops a quiet and alert mind, there is still a small amount of disturbance. The first *jhana* constitutes the five absorption factors: initial application, sustained application, rapture, happiness, and one-pointedness. As *samādhī* deepens, in the second *jhana*, the mind becomes

more tranquil and more unified, but , even its stillness and delight become annoying. When that is surpassed, the result is the third *jhana*; even then, in the greater stillness of the third *jhana*, the pleasure itself becomes a vexing distraction in the mind. So we exert ourself to surpass the sublime happiness of the third *jhana*. When we succeed by means of letting go or non – attaching, we enter the fourth *jhana*, which is defined by two factors: one-pointedness and a neutral feeling. It has the perfect purity of both equanimity and mindfulness.

At this level of *jhana*, Right Effort ceases as intentional effort is unnecessary. Just as in the above simile, in which the fire dries out the woodpile used to feed it and becomes self-sustaining, *samādhi* settles into a deep *jhana* of its own and effort is not needed or desirable.

These first four states – loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity – are also known as the boundless states because, in their true nature, they are unlimited, impartial, and have no limit caused by preferences or biases. It is impossible for a mind during the attainment of these states to harbor hatred or other defilements. To achieve a mental attitude of wholesome impartiality, we use the four qualities of metta, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity as principles of conduct, objects of reflection, and as subjects of methodical meditation.

Another practical benefit of the ‘divine’ states is that if our everyday conduct is directed by these sublime states of mind, we will experience much less resentment, tension, and irritability, and our meditation periods will be more responsive to wholesomeness. Since our everyday life and thought has a strong influence on our meditative mind, it is easier to attain a steady meditative progress and achievement of the highest aim of our practice when there is little difference between the everyday and the meditative mind.

Beyond the first four *ghanas* lie the four immaterial states, levels of absorption in which the mind transcends even the subtlest perception of visualized images sometimes persisting in the *ghanas*. The four attainments are named after their respective objects: the base of infinite space, the base of infinite consciousness, the base of nothingness, and the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. They stand at the height of mental concentration, the absolute highest degree of unification possible for consciousness. However, they still lack the wisdom of insight, and are not sufficient for gaining *Nibbāna*. Ultimately, Buddhist meditation goes beyond tranquility meditation and any identification with, or clinging to, calm and tranquility. Meditation becomes a transcendence of a more radical type of insight, allowing us to see through into the relativity of world concepts, their

falsifying nature, and the perception of permanence underlying them. It allows one to achieve Awakening.

Mindfulness

Going back to our hypothetical practice of the Eight-factor Path: as we are progressing well on it, we have come to understand the basic schemata or guidelines to follow to achieve the goal of *Nibbāna*: we have 'Right' perspective, desire, effort, energy, and intention to skillfully maintain wholesome thoughts and behaviors; we are now able to collect our ordinarily scattered stream of mental states and create a unified mental state, which has easily induced an open and serene mind more available to insight; and, finally, we strive earnestly to be honest with ourselves about our intentions. But how do we keep the necessary focus or remain in the observation mode needed to continually monitor ourselves to stay on the Right Path and not become heedless? This is the function of mindfulness. Clearing up our mental muddle calls for increased and consistent self-observation and insight, and these are accomplished through mindfulness.

Mindfulness is vital in the Buddha's techniques of mental purification. The Buddha said that constant mindfulness and heedfulness are necessary to avoid ill and do good. Our thoughts and emotions need constant care and watchfulness to direct them and to stay on the correct path to *Nibbāna*. Purification is accomplished through perseverance and watchfulness; and the Buddha often warned against heedlessness or carelessness as detrimental to our progress toward *Nibbāna*.

If we neglect mindfulness or constant watchfulness, we will neither promote and maintain wholesome thoughts nor put aside unwholesome ones. Right Effort and Right Mindfulness go together to check the arising of unwholesome thoughts and to develop and promote good ones. If craving, envy, and aggression flare up, we must first diligently observe them arising in our mind and then energetically counteract them by promoting the other side with honesty, benevolence, and kindness.

So the person who is mindful is being aware of his or her thoughts, words, and actions. With Right Mindfulness, we guard against deviating from wholesome thinking and we continue to behave virtuously. In other words, if we are mindful or aware of our inner thought processes, then we are able to distinguish positive from negative thoughts; in turn, this then allows us to skillfully make any necessary interventions.

The Buddha recommended that Right Mindfulness be applied to each and every thing that we do. In all of our movements, we are expected to remain

heedful or observant – to be mindful. When we walk, stand, sit, speak, eat, keep silent, and drink, all of the detailed motions that we perform are to be done mindfully and ‘wide awake,’ or with full consciousness. The Buddha said “mindfulness, good monks, I declare, is essential in all things everywhere.” Pristine mindfulness comprises the balancing of attention/concentration to discipline a wandering mind and awareness/introspection to understand *Kamma*/volition.

The preferred method for cultivating mindfulness is to precede it with training in the *jhanas*. Having some degree of mastery in mental development, we then apply our power of *samādhi* to the task of mindfulness. There is, however, another method called ‘bare insight,’ in which these practices are undertaken without previous attainment in *jhana* concentration. With bare insight, the prerequisite level of absorption or concentration is attained through the practice of mindfulness itself. During the first stages of bare insight, the meditator’s mind will be interrupted by wandering, hindering thoughts. Sometimes they will be noticed, sometimes not. Gradually the concentration of mind in real-time noticing will strengthen until virtually all stray thoughts are noted; any negative thoughts can then be counteracted, and the practice will resume. Finally, the straying of the mind will be stopped and then the noticing of sense and cognitive processes will proceed without interruption. This is functionally equivalent to the access concentration level.

In the suttas, the primary description of the techniques of Right Mindfulness is in the *Satipatthana Sutta*, also called the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (*cattaro satipatthana*); these Four Foundations include the mindful contemplation of four objective spheres:

1. Mindfulness of body (*kayasati*)
2. Mindfulness of feelings or sensations (*vedanasati*)
3. Mindfulness of mind or mental processes (*cittasati*)
4. Mindfulness of mental objects or qualities (*dhammasati*)

For this practice, we need to be constantly aware of (1) what our bodies are doing, (2) what we sense and feel, (3) what we are thinking about, and (4) our biases, preferences, subjective attitudes and facts in general.

The first form of observation and reflection is on our bodies and regards the nature and functioning of our body systems. We want to understand the body: its composition; its operation; its functions, such as breathing, moving, and habit formation; and its impermanent nature. Through observation and reflection on the body, we come to know our body’s limitations and

capabilities and we can act in accord with its well-being. The second form of observation and reflection is awareness of our senses and feelings. We reflect to understand our various feelings: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral in regard to our sense experiences and aesthetic experiences. Third is observation and reflection on our thoughts, our cognitive constructions. We pay attention to how we construct thoughts and images in our mind and how they come and go like clouds floating in the sky. Regarding this third aspect, the Buddha said, "Therefore, monks, you should reflect on your mind moment to moment with the thought: for a long time this mind has been defiled by lust, hate, and delusion." The lesson drawn from this is that our minds are the source of both defilement and purification.

Fourth, we observe and reflect on our preferences, biases, and the subjective attitudes that we hold in relation to our cognitive constructs and facts in general; these distinctions include good/bad, better/worse, like/dislike, subjective/objective, and more. With Right Mindfulness, we constantly reflect to gain an understanding of our experiences, thoughts and life with regards to the practice of the Eight-factor Path. We try to always be aware of the correct objectives and how to achieve them.

Mindfulness as attention or awareness in Buddhist meditation is very significant. Mindfulness as a capacity of non-reactive monitoring is a form of introspection allowing us to be aware and heedful of our ongoing mental states and processes. The process of honing, using the ability of mindfulness is a means to identify our cognitive and emotional habitual patterns. In fact, long-term practice of mindfulness meditation has been reported to result in lasting mental and brain functions which fosters ongoing non-reactive, non-deliberate selective awareness; reduces elaborative thinking stimulated by evaluation or interpretation of attended objects and enables greater emotional flexibility. Interestingly, the physical basis of mindfulness is possibly the processes involved in monitoring the body's internal state (e.g. temperature change, pain) or 'interoceptive awareness'.

Observing Ego

With practice, we can learn to automatically monitor our thoughts and actions; this is particularly helpful in the initial stages of the Path, because especially diligent monitoring is vital in the early phases. When we 'monitor,' we can gain new awareness and insights about our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Actually, mindfulness as described by the Buddha is similar to the modern psychological term of 'observing ego.' First, we need to remember that the term 'ego' used here describes the conscious mind based on perceptions of the inner and outer environment.

The observing ego is the mechanism of our consciousness that has the ability to monitor our thoughts, actions and behaviors in real time. The idea is that we all have an inherent ability to observe our own behaviors, thoughts, emotions and actions as they are being created. The more we become aware of how these forces are coming into effect, the better our ability to make the proactive changes necessary to avoid unwholesome thoughts and consequences and to create positive ones. This helps us stay on our path rather than putting energy into everything that momentarily fascinates us. Similarly, with Mindfulness, when you are mindful of something you are observing it, not caught up in it and not psychologically identified with it.

Therefore, for a meditative practice, time spent in secluded introspection is necessary and very beneficial. A formal practice at a weekend retreat or longer at a temple or retreat center strengthens our ability in meditation and purifying our minds. Also, an 'informal' practice as an everyday activity is very instructive and useful.

Gaining awareness and insight into the workings of our inner experience is the most important application of mindfulness – not only in the selection on the contemplation of the body, but also in the sections on feelings, mind, and mind objects we find this mode of insight development. None of the objects taken up for the purpose of developing mindfulness is tenaciously grasped. It is through insight into the dependent arising of our inner experience that we come to understand that it is our mind that creates our suffering. It is through insight, not *samādhi*, that all phenomena are seen to be nothing more than interdependent temporary manifestations that come and go. It is eventually through Awakening that one has the ability to understand the nature of the mind, the subject-object duality and emptiness; as a result, it is this Awakening that allows the letting go of attachment to craving. It is through insight that one becomes enlightened and liberated. The net result of developing this insight is expressed in Buddha's words: 'He abides independent and does not cling to anything in the world.' While words and concepts have to be utilized to describe the attainment of *Nibbāna*, the aim is only the increase of mindfulness and knowledge. Once their purpose is served, the concepts and mental constructions are dismantled, like a scaffolding for a building, without being a bother to the mind.

Purification of Mind/Development of Wisdom

Even though Right Concentration is usually listed last among the factors of the Eightfold Path, concentration is not the path's culmination. The ability to concentrate makes the mind still and steady, unifies all aspects, and creates bliss, serenity, and force. But by itself it isn't sufficient to reach the highest

accomplishment, *Nibbāna*. Concentration cannot eliminate latent tendencies toward defilement, since to overcome them calls for wisdom (*pañña*), which is insight into the emptiness of phenomena.

Up to the point of insight meditation, Right View and Right Intention have performed a preliminary function. With *vipassana*, they are raised to a higher level. Right View becomes Right Understanding – a direct personal seeing into the real nature of phenomena which was before only grasped conceptually – and Right Intention becomes a letting go, nonattachment, or renunciation.

So it is Wisdom alone that is the remedy for ignorance, the deepest and strongest of the defilements. Ignorance is not only a lack of Right Knowledge; it is an active, unwholesome, and ensnaring mental state influencing all aspects of our cognitive ‘world’. It distorts our cognition, dominates our volition, and can determine the entire quality of that ‘world.’ Since ignorance pervades our perceptions, thoughts, and views, we distort our experiences with multiple levels of mirage. As the Buddha said: “The element of ignorance is indeed a powerful element.”¹⁴ So the Buddha’s teaching is to finally let go, disidentify and transcend even the wonderful experience of equanimity with pure experience. For if we view any of our experiences on the path to enlightenment as ‘special states’, we still retain layers of attachment. As the Buddha is reported to have said, “When the mind that was in darkness becomes enlightened, it passes away, and with its passing, the thing which we call Enlightenment passes also. Enlightenment exists solely because of delusion and ignorance; if they disappear, so will Enlightenment.”¹⁵ In the ultimate disidentification, enlightenment itself is ‘nothing special’.

Special Experiences

The Buddha talked about ‘special experiences’, and they are often reported by people who have meditated. In the *suttas*, there are six super-knowledges: the exercise of psychic powers, the divine ear, the ability to read the minds of others, recollection of past lives, knowledge of the death and rebirth of beings, and knowledge of final liberation. These knowledges are achieved by highly advanced meditators. They occur simply because the factors are right, and they have no special significance. These experiences are not indicative either of enlightenment or of progress towards enlightenment, since they are not necessarily associated with the Right Knowledge leading to enlightenment. The correct attitude towards them as they occur is simply to observe them. These experiences are like many others in meditation. The prescribed approach is just be mindful that they are occurring, without attaching any particular significance to them, and let them go when they pass. In other words, the aim is non-clinging.

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