

The Eightfold Path

The Second Factor: Right Intention

The Buddha's path to liberation starts with seeing a course of practice he called the Eightfold Path. This is a remarkable set of straightforward practices that can free us from attachment and clinging and thus from suffering. As we saw last month, it is the task of the first factor in the Eightfold Path, Right View, to provide the perspective for 'finding' the path by bringing our attention to suffering, its cause, and the possibility of ending that suffering.

If we are interested in walking the path to freedom the Buddha taught, then Right View can show us whether our intentions are in accord with the purpose of this path. By applying the perspective of Right View to the intentions we live by we can determine if our intentions either cause suffering or contribute to the ending of suffering. It is not possible to end suffering if our intentions cause suffering to others or ourselves. We can't end attachments if we remain motivated to cling.

The Buddha singled out three intentions, attitudes, or ways of thinking that cause suffering and are off-track, i.e., which take us away from the path. These are lust, ill will, and hostility (*kāma*, *vyāpāda*, and *himsa*). Craving and addiction to sensual pleasures of any kind reinforces attachment and keeps the mind agitated. And anyone who has experienced ill will and hostility knows they are troubled and painful states. These intentions lead to more suffering, not less.

In contrast, the second step on the Eightfold Path – Right Intention – involves cultivating intentions that lead to less suffering. These are the positive opposites of lust, ill will, and hostility that can overcome these harmful motivations. The opposite of ill will and hostility is simply stated as non-ill will and non-hostility (*avyāpāda* and *ahimsa*). In the ancient language of the Buddha the negative prefix implies their positive opposites. Non-ill will means goodwill, and non-hostility means compassion. The opposite of lust is described as renunciation or relinquishment (*nekkhama*). This works best if we consider the benefits of wise renunciation: simplicity, ease, and non-harming.

Cultivating renunciation, goodwill and compassion begins by having the intention to do so. When it is not easy to have good intentions, it is helpful and meaningful to want to. Then we can at least practice restraint and not act on our harmful intentions. Having the intention to have Right Intention can be the first step and motivate us to begin thinking in terms of renunciation, goodwill and compassion. This, in turn, places us on a path of practice leading to the end of suffering.

If our intentions or thoughts involve lust, ill will, or hostility, then it is useful to find a way to disengage from such thoughts. If we recognize the value of the opposite of these intentions, renunciation, goodwill and compassion, then it will be easier to adjust our orientation and think in terms of the positive intentions even when we don't feel like it. Reflecting on the three right intentions is not meant to be pretending or covering over what we really feel. Pausing and reflecting on our circumstances can be a realistic assessment of the situation including the role that our intentions might have in that situation.

And if we can't change our intentions for the better, it is useful to be mindful and aware of the relationship we have toward our intentions. Sometimes the first role of mindfulness is to notice our attitudes toward unskillful intentions. We suffer more if there is greed or ill will toward our lust, ill will, or cruelty. We will suffer less if we relate to these intentions without being reactive and adding to them.

We don't just walk the Eightfold Path for ourselves. Some people assume that bringing attention to suffering means that the Eightfold Path only involves self-concern. However, the renunciation, goodwill, and compassion of Right Intention clearly establish the path of practice within the context of our interpersonal relationships. A concern for the welfare of others is integral to walking the Eightfold Path. While it is the practice of Right Intention that fosters positive intentions toward others, the next three steps in the Eightfold Path, Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood, are about putting these intentions into action.

The intentions we live by have major consequences in shaping our lives, character, and psychological wellbeing. It is invaluable to reflect deeply about what intentions are most important. These can be the compasses for our lives. Even when it is a challenge to follow the compass, the wish to do so puts us on the path of liberation.

Additional reading:

- Chapter 3 in Bhikkhu Bodhi's *The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering*.
- Chapter 2 in Bhante Gunaratana's *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness*.
- "Cultivating Compassion" by Gil Fronsdal (found on the article page of IMC's website).

Reflections:

November 2-9:

Lust and Renunciation

For this week give yourself time to notice and reflect on the role of lust in your life. For this purpose consider lust as any strong desire or compulsion for sensual pleasure of any kind. How much time do you spend thinking about and wanting sensual pleasure? What forms of sensual pleasure are you most motivated by? How does your desires for sensual pleasure affect you?

Spend an equal amount of time considering what benefits might be available to you if you let go of attachments to sensual pleasure you may have. What helpful intentions might you want to use to replace intentions connected to sensual pleasure? When you do pursue sensual pleasures, what other wise intentions can guide this pursuit? In what ways can peace and simplicity help you understand the benefits of renunciation?

November 10-16:**Ill-will and Goodwill**

For this week give yourself time to notice and reflect on the role of ill-will and aversion in your life. How frequently are you aversive? In what conditions are you more likely to be aversive? How does aversion and ill-will affect you and your behavior?

Also reflect on your relationship to goodwill, kindness, and loving-kindness. How often do you have goodwill for others? Are you interested or motivated to have more goodwill? For this week spend time actively intending goodwill to others. How does this affect you?

November 17-23**Hostility and Compassion:**

For this week give yourself time to reflect on how hostility appears in your life? It may be useful to consider expressions of anger and irritation towards others or yourself as forms of hostility. Do your actions and words cause harm, even in minor ways, to others? If so, spend time reflecting on this. How does reflecting on this affect you?

Also reflect on your relationship to compassion. What role has compassion had in your life, both in receiving it and in having it for others? During this week, look for opportunities to have compassion. Spend time staying with any compassion you might be feeling. How does it feel to be compassionate? How might it benefit you if you cultivated more compassion?

November 24-November 30**Loving-kindness Practice:**

During this week practice a period of loving-kindness meditation every day. If you are not familiar with this practice, instruction is found in chapter 22 of *The Issue at Hand*. In addition, as you go about your day, periodically intend having loving-kindness toward people you encounter. Find ways to act on intentions of kindness toward others.

December 1- 7**Compassion Practice:**

For this week look for opportunities to act compassionately. Notice how this affects you. In what ways can you act compassionately so that you feel more peaceful, more at ease, and perhaps less clinging? How can compassion serve as a support to your inner freedom?