

from the author of

MINDFULNESS IN PLAIN ENGLISH



EIGHT MINDFUL STEPS TO HAPPINESS

walking the buddha's path

Bhante Henepola Gunaratana

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EIGHT MINDFUL STEPS TO HAPPINESS



Walking the Path of the Buddha

Bhante Henepola Gunaratana



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List of Abbreviations



IN ENGLISH-LANGUAGE WORKS, CITATIONS from the Pali Canon are typically referenced to the page numbers they appear on in the Pali-language edition from the Pali Text Society (PTS), Oxford. (You can find these citations in the various English translations using page number references that are inserted throughout the translated text.) Where possible in this book a more straightforward form of citation has been adopted for your convenience. The various genres of texts are organized differently, however, thus no one approach will work with all the books in the Pali Canon.

- A *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, or *Gradual Sayings*, available through the Pali Text Society (PTS), Oxford. (Example: A I (Threes). VII. 65 refers to volume 1, *The Book of Threes*, chapter 7, story number 65.)
- D *Dīgha Nikāya*, or *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, available through Wisdom Publications, Boston. (Example: D 22 refers to Sutta number 22.)
- Dh *Dhammapada*, or *Word of the Doctrine*, available in translation through many publishers, including PTS. (Example: Dh 5 refers to verse number 5.)
- DhA *Dhammapada Aṭṭhakathā*, or the *Dhammapada Commentary*, available through PTS as *Buddhist Legends*. (Example: DhA 124 refers to part 124 of the Commentary, which analyzes *Dhammapada* verse 124.)

- J *Jātaka*, or *Jataka Stories*, available through PTS. (Example: J 26 refers to story number 26.)
- M *Majjhima Nikāya*, or *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, available through Wisdom Publications, Boston. (Example: M 80 refers to Sutta number 80.)
- MA *Majjhima Nikāya Atthakathā*, or *Commentary to the Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, not available in English. (Example: MA i 225 refers to volume 1, page 225 of the Pali edition.)
- Mhvs *Mahāvamsa*, or the *Great Chronicle of Ceylon*, available through PTS. (Example: Mhvs V refers to chapter 5.)
- Miln *Milindapañho*, or *The Questions of King Milinda*, available through PTS. (Example: Miln 335 [V], refers to the page number 335 of the PTS book in Pali; reference to chapter 5 is added to assist in locating the verse.)
- S *Samyutta Nikāya*, or *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, available through Wisdom Publications. (Example: S I.7.1 [2] refers to part 1, chapter 7, subchapter 1, story number 2.)
- Sn *Sutta Nipāta*, or the *Group of Discourses II*, available through PTS. (Example: Sn 657 refers to verse number 657.)
- Thag *Theragatha*, or *Poems of Early Buddhist Monks*, available through PTS. (Example: Thag 303 refers to verse number 303.)
- Thig *Therigathā*, or *Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns*, available through PTS. (Example: Thig 213 refers to verse number 213.)
- Ud *Udāna*, or *Verses of Uplift*, available through PTS. (Example: Ud VI.2 refers to chapter 6, story number 2.)

- V *Vinaya*, or *Book of the Discipline*, available through PTS. (Example: V ii 292 refers to volume 2, page 292 of the Pali edition.)
- Vsm *Visuddhimagga*, or *The Path of Purification*, available through the Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka. (Example: Vsm I [55] refers to chapter 1, paragraph number 55.)



Introduction

SOON AFTER *Mindfulness in Plain English* was published, several of my friends and students asked me to write a book about the Buddha's path to happiness in the same straightforward style. This book is my response.

Mindfulness in Plain English was a meditation manual, a guide for students in the practice of mindfulness meditation. Yet mindfulness is only part of the Buddha's teachings. Mindfulness can much improve our lives, but the Buddha offered more. He gave us a complete guide to happiness, which he summed up in eight steps. Even a little effort to incorporate these eight steps into your life will yield happiness. Strong effort will transform you and bring you the happiest and most exalted states achievable.

The eight steps of the Buddha's path are easy enough to memorize, but their meaning is deep and requires an understanding of many related topics of the Buddha's teachings. Even those familiar with the Eightfold Path may not see how central it is to the whole teaching or how it fits their experience. As in *Mindfulness in Plain English*, I have tried to present this teaching plainly, so that anybody can practice the eight steps in their daily life.

I recommend that you do not read this book as you would a novel or the newspaper. Rather, while reading, continually ask yourself, "Am I happy?" and investigate what you find. The Buddha invited the people he taught to come and see. He invited all of us to look at ourselves, to

come home, to come close to our own bodies and minds and examine them. Don't get lost in beliefs and suppositions about the world, he told us; try to find out what is really going on.

We are good at accumulating information, gathering data. Perhaps you have picked up this book to gather more information. If you have been reading popular Buddhist books, stop and ask yourself what you hope to get from this one. Do you just want to impress people with how well you know Buddhism? Do you hope to gain happiness through intellectual knowledge of the teachings? Knowledge alone will not help you find happiness.

If you read what follows with the willingness to put the Buddha's path to happiness into practice—to actually try out his advice, rather than just get an intellectual impression—then the profound simplicity of the Buddha's message will become clear. Gradually, the full truth of all things will be revealed to you. And gradually you will discover the lasting happiness that full knowledge of the truth can give you.

If you get upset by things that you read in *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness*, then investigate why. Look within. Ask yourself what is currently happening in your mind. If something you read makes you miserable, ask yourself why. Sometimes we feel uncomfortable when someone points out how unskillful we are. You may have a lot of bad habits and other obstacles that keep you from greater happiness. Do you want to learn about them and make some changes?

So often we get upset by some tiny little thing and then blame it on someone—a friend, secretary, boss, neighbor, child, sibling, parent, the government. Or we get disappointed when we don't get what we want or lose something we value. We carry within our minds certain "psychic irritants"—sources of suffering—that are triggered by events or our thoughts. Then we suffer, and we try to stop the pain by changing the world. There's an old story about a man who wanted to cover the whole earth with leather so he could walk more comfortably. He would have found it much easier to make a pair of sandals. Similarly, instead of trying to control the world to make yourself happy, work to reduce your psychic irritants.

But you must actually train yourself, not just read or think about it. Even meditating won't get you far if you do not practice the entire

path—especially its key aspects of developing right understanding, making strong, discerning effort, and practicing continuous mindfulness. Some of you sit on your meditation cushion for hours with your minds filled with anger, fantasy, or worry. Then you say, “I can’t meditate, I can’t concentrate.” You carry the world on your shoulders as you meditate, and you don’t want to put it down.

I heard that a student of mine was walking down the street while reading a copy of *Mindfulness in Plain English*. He wasn’t being mindful of where he was, and he was hit by a car! The Buddha’s invitation to come and see asks you to personalize what you read here. Put the Buddha’s eight steps into practice, even while you are reading. Don’t let your misery blindside you.

Even if you read this book a hundred times, it won’t help you unless you put what’s written here into practice. But this book surely will help you if you practice sincerely, investigate your unhappiness fearlessly, and commit yourself to doing whatever it takes to reach lasting happiness.

THE BUDDHA’S DISCOVERY

Rapid technological advances. Increased wealth. Stress. Stable lives and careers come under the pressure of accelerating change. The twenty-first century? No, the sixth century B.C.—a time of destructive warfare, economic dislocation, and widespread disruption of established patterns of life, just like today. In conditions similar to ours, the Buddha discovered a path to lasting happiness. His discovery—a step-by-step method of mental training to achieve contentment—is as relevant today as ever.

Putting the Buddha’s discovery into practice is no quick fix. It can take years. The most important qualification at the beginning is a strong desire to change your life by adopting new habits and learning to see the world anew.

Each step along the Buddha’s path to happiness requires practicing mindfulness until it becomes part of your daily life. Mindfulness is a way of training yourself to become aware of things as they really are. With mindfulness as your watchword, you progress through the eight steps laid down by the Buddha more than twenty-five hundred years ago—a gentle, gradual training in how to end dissatisfaction.

Who should undertake this training? Anyone who is tired of being unhappy. “My life is good as it is,” you may think; “I’m happy enough.” There are moments of contentment in any life, moments of pleasure and joy. But what about the other side, the part that you’d rather not think about when things are going well? Tragedy, grief, disappointment, physical pain, melancholy, loneliness, resentment, the nagging feeling that there could be something better. These happen too, don’t they? Our fragile happiness depends on things happening a certain way. But there is something else: a happiness not dependent on conditions. The Buddha taught the way to find this perfect happiness.

If you are willing to do whatever it takes to find your way out of suffering—and it means confronting the roots of resistance and craving right here, right now—you can reach complete success. Even if you are a casual reader, you can benefit from these teachings, so long as you are willing to use those that make sense to you. If you know something to be true, don’t ignore it. Act on it!

That may sound easy, but nothing is more difficult. When you admit to yourself, “I must make this change to be more happy”—not because the Buddha said so, but because your heart recognizes a deep truth—you must devote all your energy to making the change. You need strong determination to overcome harmful habits.

But the payoff is happiness—not just for today but for always.

Let’s get started. We’ll begin by looking at what happiness is, why it’s so elusive, and how to start journeying on the Buddha’s path toward it.

What Happiness Is and What It Isn’t

The desire to be happy is age-old, yet happiness has always eluded us. What does it mean to be happy? We often seek an experience of sensual pleasure, such as eating something tasty or watching a fun movie, for the happiness it will bring us. But is there a happiness beyond the fleeting enjoyment of a pleasurable experience?

Some people try to string together as many enjoyable experiences as they can and call that a happy life. Others sense the limits of sensual indulgence and seek a more lasting happiness with material comforts,

family life, and security. Yet these sources of happiness also have limitations. Throughout the world many people live with the pain of hunger; their basic needs for clothing and shelter go unmet; they endure the constant threat of violence. Understandably, these people believe that increased material comfort will bring them lasting happiness. In the United States the unequal distribution of wealth leaves many in poverty, but the starvation and deprivation commonly found in much of the world is rare. The standard of living of most U.S. citizens is luxurious. So people elsewhere assume that Americans must be among the happiest on earth.

But if they were to come to the United States, what would they see? They would notice that Americans are constantly busy—rushing to appointments, talking on cell phones, shopping for groceries or for clothes, working long hours in an office or in a factory. Why all this frantic activity?

The answer is simple. Although Americans seem to have everything, they are still unhappy. And they are puzzled by this. How can they have close, loving families, good jobs, fine homes, enough money, richly varied lives—and still not feel happy? Unhappiness, they believe, results from the lack of such things. Possessions, social approval, the love of friends and family, and a wealth of pleasurable experiences ought to make people happy. Why, then, do Americans, like people everywhere, so often experience misery instead?

It seems that the very things that we think should make people happy are in fact sources of misery. Why? They do not last. Relationships end, investments fail, people lose their jobs, kids grow up and move away, and the sense of well-being gained from costly possessions and pleasurable experiences is fleeting at best. Change is all around us, threatening the very things we think we need to be happy.

It's a paradox that the more we have, the greater our possibility for unhappiness.

People today are ever more sophisticated in their needs, it's true, but no matter how many expensive and beautiful things they collect, they want more. Modern culture reinforces this wanting. What you really need to be happy, as every TV ad and billboard proclaims, is this shiny new car, this superfast computer, this gorgeous vacation in Hawaii. And

it seems to work, briefly. People confuse the buzz of excitement gained from a new possession or a pleasurable experience with happiness. But all too soon they're itching again. The suntan fades, the new car gets a scratch, and they're longing for another shopping spree. This incessant scrambling to the mall keeps them from discovering the source of true happiness.

The Sources of Happiness

The Buddha once described several categories of happiness, placing them in order from the most fleeting to the most profound.

THE LESSER HAPPINESS OF CLINGING

The Buddha lumped together almost everything that most of us call happiness in the lowest category. He called it the "happiness of sensual pleasures." We could also call it the "happiness of favorable conditions" or the "happiness of clinging." It includes all the fleeting worldly happiness derived from sense indulgence, physical pleasure, and material satisfaction: the happiness of possessing wealth, nice clothes, a new car, or a pleasing home; the enjoyment that comes from seeing beautiful things, listening to good music, eating good food, and enjoying pleasant conversations; the satisfaction of being skilled in painting, playing the piano, and the like; and the happiness that comes from sharing a warm family life.

Let us look more closely at this happiness of sensual pleasures. Its lowest form is the wholehearted indulgence in pleasure from any of the five physical senses. At its worst, overindulgence can lead to debauchery, depravity, and addiction. It's easy to see that indulging the senses is not happiness, because the pleasure disappears almost immediately and may even leave people feeling wretched or remorseful.

The Buddha once explained that as one matures spiritually, one comes to understand that there is more to life than pleasure through the five senses. He used the metaphor of a tender little baby tied down by thin strings in five places: both wrists, both ankles, and the throat. Just as these five strings—the five sense pleasures—can hold down a baby but not a mature adult, who easily breaks free, so a discerning person

breaks free from the idea that indulging the five senses makes life meaningful and happy. (M 8o)

Worldly happiness, however, goes beyond sense indulgence. It includes the joys of reading, watching a good movie, and other forms of mental stimulation or entertainment. It also includes the wholesome joys of this world such as helping people, maintaining a stable family and raising children, and earning an honest living.

The Buddha mentioned a few of these more satisfying forms of happiness. One is the happy, secure feeling you get from possessing wealth earned through honest, hard work. You enjoy your wealth with a clear conscience and no fear of abuse or revenge. Better than this is the satisfaction of both enjoying the wealth that you earned honestly and also sharing it with others. Another especially gratifying form of happiness comes from reflecting that one is completely free of any kind of debt to anyone. (A II (Fours) VII.2)

Most of us, even the most discerning, view these things as the essence of a good life. Why did the Buddha consider them part of the lowest form of happiness? Because they depend on conditions being right. Though less fleeting than the transient pleasures of sensual indulgence, and less potentially destructive to long-term happiness, they are unstable. The more we trust them, seek them, and try to hang on to them, the more we suffer. Our efforts will create painful mental agitation and ultimately prove futile; conditions inevitably will change. No matter what we do, our hearts will break. There are better, more stable sources of happiness.

HIGHER SOURCES OF HAPPINESS

One of them is the “happiness of renunciation,” the spiritual happiness that comes from seeking something beyond worldly pleasures. The classic example is the joy that comes from dropping all worldly concerns and seeking solitude in peaceful surroundings to pursue spiritual development. The happiness that comes from prayer, religious rituals, and religious inspiration is also part of this category.

Generosity is a powerful form of renunciation. Generously sharing what we have, and many other acts of renunciation, make us feel happy. There is a sense of pleasure and relief every time we let go. It stands to

reason that if we can let go completely of grasping at anything in the world, then this great relinquishment will bring even more happiness than occasional acts of renunciation.

Higher than relinquishment of material things is the “happiness of letting go of psychic irritants.” This kind of happiness arises naturally when we work with the mind to quickly let go of anger, desire, attachment, jealousy, pride, confusion, and other mental irritations every time they occur. Nipping them in the bud allows the mind to become unobstructed, joyful, bright, and clear. Yet there is no guarantee that the negativities will stay away and stop irritating the mind.

Even better is the refined pleasure and happiness of the various states of deep concentration. No sorrow can arise in these states. Powerful and transcendent as these states of concentration can be, however, they have one big drawback: the meditator must emerge from them eventually. Being impermanent, even states of profound concentration must come to an end.

THE HIGHEST SOURCE OF HAPPINESS

The highest happiness is the bliss of attaining stages of enlightenment. With each stage, our load in life is lightened, and we feel greater happiness and freedom. The final stage of enlightenment, permanent freedom from all negative states of mind, brings uninterrupted, sublime happiness. The Buddha recommended that we learn to let go of our attachments to the lower forms of happiness and focus all of our efforts upon finding the very highest form of happiness, enlightenment.

But he also urged people to maximize their happiness at whatever level they can. For those of us who cannot see beyond the happiness based on the sense pleasures, he offered sage advice for avoiding worldly troubles and for finding optimal worldly happiness, for example, by cultivating qualities leading to material success or a satisfying family life. For those with the higher ambition to be reborn in blissful realms, he explained just how to accomplish that goal. For those interested in reaching the highest goal of full enlightenment, he taught how to achieve it. But whichever kind of happiness we are seeking, we make use of the steps of the Eightfold Path.

The Trap of Unhappiness

The Buddha knew that the relentless search for happiness in pleasurable worldly conditions traps us in an endless cycle of cause and effect, attraction and aversion. Each thought and word and deed is a cause that leads to an effect, which in turn becomes a cause. Pointing out how the cycle of unhappiness works, the Buddha said:

Because of feeling, there is craving; as a result of craving, there is pursuit; with pursuit, there is gain; in dependence upon gain, there is decision-making; with decision-making, there are desire and lust, which lead to attachment; attachment creates possessiveness, which leads to stinginess; in dependence upon stinginess, there is safeguarding; and because of safeguarding, various evil, unwholesome phenomena [arise]—conflicts, quarrels, insulting speech, and falsehoods. (D 15)

We each experience versions of this cycle every day. Say you're shopping in the grocery store. You see a delicious-looking pie with red filling and fluffy white topping. It's the last pie left. Though only a moment before, your mind was quiet and content, this sight, which the Buddha calls "contact between sense organ and sense object," causes a pleasant feeling and pleasant thoughts to arise.

Craving arises from the pleasant feeling. "Mmmm...strawberry," you say to yourself, "with real whipped cream topping." Your mind pursues and expands upon these pleasant thoughts. How delicious strawberry pie is! How good it smells! How wonderful whipped cream feels on the lips and tongue! A decision follows: "I want to have some of that pie." Now comes attachment: "That pie is mine." Maybe you notice some aversion as your mind hesitates for a moment while it considers the negative effects of the pie on your waistline or your pocketbook.

Suddenly you realize that someone else has stopped at the display and is admiring this pie. Your pie! Seized with stinginess, you snatch it up and hurry to the checkout while the other shopper glares. In the unlikely event that the other shopper were to follow you into the parking lot

and try to take your pie, imagine what unwholesome actions might take place—insults probably, maybe a shoving match. But even if there is no direct confrontation, your actions have caused another person to develop negative thoughts and to see you as a greedy person. Your contented state of mind has also been destroyed.

Once craving arises in the mind, selfish and stingy behavior is usually inevitable. In our drive for any kind of small pleasure—a piece of strawberry pie—we may act rudely and risk making an enemy. When the craving is for something major, such as someone's valuables or an adulterous sexual contact, the stakes are much higher, and serious violence and endless suffering may result.

If we can reverse this cycle, starting from our negative behavior and moving backward step by step to its emotional and mental causes, we may be able to eliminate our unhappiness at its source. It only makes sense that when our craving and grasping is wiped out—completely eradicated—happiness is assured. We may have no idea how to accomplish such a feat, but when we recognize what we have to do, we have started our journey.

The Gradual Training

Now you see why we say that true happiness comes only from eliminating craving. Even if we think that attaining the highest happiness is unrealistic, we will still benefit from reducing craving. The more we let go of craving, the greater our sense of happiness. But how do we reduce craving? The idea of lessening craving—much less eradicating it—may seem daunting. If you think that making the effort to force craving out of existence by sheer willpower will end in frustration, you are correct. The Buddha came up with a better way: the gradual training of the Eightfold Path.

The Buddha's path of gradual development impacts every aspect of your life. The process begins at any point, at any time. You start wherever you are and move forward, step by step. Each new wholesome change in behavior or understanding builds upon the last.

Among the crowds of people who heard the Buddha teach, some had such receptive minds that they achieved lasting happiness after hearing

his step-by-step instructions in a single discourse. A few were so ready that upon hearing only the highest teaching—the Four Noble Truths—their minds were completely freed. But most of the Buddha's disciples had to work their way through the teachings, mastering each step before moving on to the next. Some disciples took years to work through obstacles in their understanding before they could move on to the next level of inquiry.

Most of us must do a lot of personal work to disentangle ourselves from years of destructive and self-defeating attitudes and behavior. We must work slowly along the Buddha's path of gradual training with much patience and encouragement. Not everybody gets full understanding overnight. We all bring differences from our past experiences and the intensity of our dedication to spiritual growth.

The Buddha was a profoundly skillful teacher. He knew that we need some basic clarity before we can absorb the higher teachings. His Eightfold Path to happiness consists of three stages that build upon each other: morality, concentration, and wisdom.

The first stage, morality, consists of adopting a core set of values and living our lives according to them. The Buddha knew that thinking, speaking, and acting in ethical ways are preliminary steps to take before progressing to higher spiritual development. But of course we must have at least some wisdom to discern what is ethical. Thus he began his teaching by helping us to cultivate a basic level of Skillful Understanding (step one) and Skillful Thinking (step two). These mental skills help us distinguish between moral and immoral thoughts and actions, between wholesome behaviors and those which hurt us and those around us.

As we develop the right mind-set, we can begin to put our evolving understanding to work by practicing Skillful Speech (step three), Skillful Action (step four), and Skillful Livelihood (step five). These practical steps of good moral conduct help make our minds receptive, free from hindrances, elated, and confident. As the distractions that come from destructive behavior begin to fade away, concentration can arise.

Concentration has three steps. The first is Skillful Effort (step six), which brings mental focus to every other step of the path. Such effort is especially necessary if many unwholesome thoughts spring into awareness when one sits down to meditate. Next is Skillful Mindfulness

(step seven). To have mindfulness there must be some wholesome concentration at every moment, so that the mind can keep in touch with changing objects. Skillful Concentration (step eight) allows us to focus the mind on one object or idea without interruption. Because it is a positive state of mind, free from anger or greed, concentration gives us the mental intensity we need to see deeply into the truth of our situation.

With morality as the foundation, concentration arises. Out of concentration, the third stage of the Buddha's path—wisdom—develops. This brings us back to the first two steps of the path: Skillful Understanding and Skillful Thinking. We begin to experience “aha!” insights into our behavior. We see how we create our own unhappiness. We see how our thoughts, words, and deeds have hurt ourselves and others. We see right through our lies and face our life as it truly is. Wisdom is the bright light that shows us the way out of the tangle of our unhappiness.

Though I have presented the Buddha's path as a series of sequential stages, it actually works more like a spiral. Morality, concentration, and wisdom reinforce and deepen each other. Each of the eight steps on the path deepens and reinforces the others. As you begin to practice the path as a whole, each step unfolds, and each wholesome action or insight gives impetus to the next. Along the way, everything about you changes, especially your tendency to blame others for your unhappiness. With each turn of the spiral, you accept more responsibility for your intentional thoughts, words, and deeds.

For instance, as you apply your increasing wisdom to understanding moral conduct, you see the value of ethical thought and behavior more profoundly and are led to make even more sweeping changes in the way you act. Similarly, as you see more clearly which mental states are helpful and which you should abandon, you apply effort more skillfully, with the result that your concentration deepens and your wisdom grows.

SUPPORTS FOR PRACTICE

As you get started on the Buddha's path, you will naturally wish to modify your lifestyle and attitudes to support your practice. Here are a few changes that many have found useful in advancing along the path; they will help you overcome obstacles in the work you undertake as

you read the following chapters. Do not be dismayed; some of these suggestions present great challenges that you may work with for quite a long time.

Simplify Your Life

A good place to begin is by honestly assessing your habitual daily activities. Look also at how you spend your time. Make a habit of asking yourself, “Is this task or behavior really necessary or is it just a way to be busy?” If you can reduce or eliminate some activities, you will achieve greater peace and quiet, which is essential to advancing in the training.

Right now you may have many responsibilities to your family or others who depend upon you. This is good, but be careful not to sacrifice opportunities to calm your mind and develop insight. Helping others is important, but as the Buddha stated clearly, tending to your own development is a priority.

Cultivate the inclination to spend time each day in solitude and silence, rather than always being in the company of others. If all your time is spent with other people, it’s easy to get caught up in unnecessary activities and conversations. That makes it harder to maintain a contemplative practice. No matter where you live, if you wish to deepen your understanding and wisdom, from time to time get away from your commitments and spend time alone.

Of course, outer quiet is not always enough. Even in a quiet and solitary place, we sometimes find ourselves besieged by anger, jealousy, fear, tension, anxiety, greed, and confusion. We’ve also experienced times when our minds are completely quiet and peaceful despite all the commotion around us.

The Buddha explained this paradox. If we have little attachment and craving, he said, we can live in solitude in the midst of a crowd. We can let go of our sense of possession and ownership. Our loved ones, our possessions, our jobs, our obligations and ties, our views and opinions—all these we cling to. As we reduce our grasping, we move closer to inner freedom, the essence of solitude. Real solitude is in the mind. A person whose mind is free of the bonds of possessiveness and attachment, said

the Buddha, is “one living alone.” And someone whose mind is crowded with greed, hatred, and delusion is “one who lives with a companion”—even in physical solitude. The best support for our practice, then, is a well-disciplined mind.

Some people may find that traditional rituals help them calm the mind and remind them of what is really important. You and your family can chant together, light incense or a candle, or offer flowers to a Buddha image every day. These simple, beautiful practices will not bring enlightenment, but they can be useful tools to prepare the mind for a daily mindfulness practice.

Exercise Self-Restraint

A well-disciplined life can also be a source of happiness. Take a good look at your physical surroundings. If your bedroom is strewn with dirty laundry, if your desk is a jumble of books, papers, computer disks, and old magazines, and if last week’s dishes are still in the sink, how will you be able to organize your mind? Practice develops from the outside in. Clean up your house first and then move inside to sweep away the dust of attachment, hatred, and ignorance.

Practice also benefits from a healthy body. Yoga and other forms of physical exercise contribute to our mental health. At least take a long walk each day. Walking is both good exercise and an opportunity to practice mindfulness in solitude and silence.

A healthy and moderate diet also supports spiritual practice. Eating a good breakfast, a reasonably substantial lunch, and a light supper will make you feel comfortable the next morning. There is an old saying, “Eat your breakfast like a king, share your lunch with your friend, and give your dinner to your enemy.” (I would add, however, that you should not do something that could hurt your enemy!) Junk food, alcohol, coffee, and other stimulants make it more difficult to concentrate. Eat to live, don’t live to eat. Try not to make eating a mindless habit. Some practitioners engage in an occasional fast, which quickly demonstrates that much of what we think of as hunger is really just habit.

Finally, discipline yourself to meditate every day. A session of meditation in the morning as soon as you get up and in the evening before

you go to bed will help you progress. If you find that you are unable to maintain a regular practice, ask yourself why. Perhaps you doubt the importance of meditation, or fear that it will not help you solve your problems. Examine your doubts and fears carefully. Read the life stories of the Buddha and others who have used meditation to achieve permanent happiness. Remember that you alone can change your life for the better and that meditation has proven effective for countless others. Then apply a bit of self-control, especially at the beginning, to maintain the discipline of regular, daily meditation.

Cultivate Goodness

The cultivation of goodness—generosity, patience, faith, and other virtues—is the beginning of spiritual awakening.

Generosity is taught in every religious tradition, but it is a natural state of mind that all living beings possess inherently. Even animals share their food. When you are generous, you feel happy, and you delight in remembering the recipient's joy.

Also practice patience. Being patient does not mean giving someone free rein to abuse you. It means biding your time and expressing yourself effectively at the right time, at the right place, with the right words and the right attitude. If you impatiently blurt out something, you may regret what you say and cause pain.

Patience also means trying to understand others as best you can. Misunderstanding, misinterpretation, and suspicion cause pain and dissatisfaction. Remember that others have as many problems as you—maybe more. Some very good people are sometimes in a bad place and may say or do things unmindfully. If you remain patient in spite of provocation, you can avoid getting upset, and your understanding of the human situation will deepen.

Try not to blame others for your pain or expect others to make you happy. Look within, discover why you are unhappy, and find a way to be content. Unhappy people tend to make others unhappy. But if you're surrounded by unhappy people, you can maintain your peace of mind by keeping your mind as clear as possible—and your patience and understanding might cheer them up.

Finally, have faith in your potential for lasting happiness. This includes confidence in your religious teaching, in yourself, in your work, in your friends, and in the future. Faith or confidence leads to an optimistic attitude to life. You can increase your confidence through examining your own experience. You already have evidence of your many abilities. Have faith as well in those you have not yet manifested.

Find a Teacher and Explore the Teachings

A good meditation center and a meditation teacher who is sincerely willing to assist you are important aids. You don't want a teacher who requires submission or promises magical powers. You are looking for someone who knows more than you, whose life is exemplary, and with whom you can develop a long-term relationship. The Buddha's path may take several years—in some cases, several lifetimes. Choose your guide wisely.

The Buddha described the perfect teacher as "a good friend." Such a person speaks gently, kindly, and earnestly, respects you, and is caring and compassionate. A good friend never asks you to do anything wrong, but always encourages you to do the right thing and helps whenever you need assistance. A good friend is learned and resourceful, ready to share knowledge with you without hesitation.

Observe a potential teacher carefully. Deeds are more important than words. Daily contact with someone who has followed the Buddha's path for at least ten years is a good way to see for yourself whether the teachings work. Beware of teachers who charge high fees; they may be more interested in your money than your spiritual development.

Just as a master craftsman trains apprentices, not just in the techniques of the craft, but also in the personal characteristics needed to apply those skills, so, too, a good teacher both guides your practice and helps you make the lifestyle changes necessary to support it. If you are really seeking happiness, take the time and make the effort to apprentice yourself to such a master.

Next, follow the course of gradual training that the Buddha prescribed. The gradual training essentially involves learning how to quiet

down and observe your thoughts and behavior and then to change them into something more conducive to meditation and awareness. It is a slow process, not to be hurried. One reason why so many people drop meditation is that they haven't taken the time to lay the foundation for effective practice.

Finally, make time to read and discuss the Buddha's teachings. Books are readily available, as are discussion groups and classes. You can even talk about the Buddha's message online and via email lists. Reading about and discussing the Buddha's teachings is never a waste of time.

While these requirements for progress might seem obvious, very few of us live quietly, eat moderately, exercise regularly, and live simply. Even fewer study with a qualified teacher, discuss the Buddha's teachings regularly, and meditate daily. This emphasis on simplicity and moderation does not mean that you cannot start to follow the Buddha's path right now, whatever your lifestyle. It simply tells you what you may need to do over a period of years—or even lifetimes—in order to advance toward the highest happiness.

BEGINNING A PRACTICE OF MINDFULNESS

The lifestyle changes mentioned in the previous section have one goal: to help you make mindfulness a part of your daily life. Mindfulness is a unique method of cultivating moment-by-moment awareness of the true nature of everything experienced through the body and mind. You may have heard it called "vipassana meditation." It is a skill that you will develop and use throughout every stage of the Buddha's path to happiness. Here are some suggestions for beginning a practice of mindfulness meditation.

Sitting Meditation

A good time to start your practice of sitting meditation is early in the morning, before you begin your day's activities. A quiet place is preferable, but as there are few noiseless places in the world, choose a place that is congenial for concentration and arrange a comfortable cushion there.

Next, choose a posture for your sitting practice. The best—but most

difficult—posture is the full-lotus. Cross your legs and rest each foot on the upper part of the opposite thigh, the sole turned upward. Place your hands just below the level of the navel, with the bend of the wrists pressed against the thighs, bracing the upper part of the body. Your spinal column is straight like a stack of coins, each vertebra atop another. Your chin is up.

If you cannot sit in the full-lotus posture, try the half-lotus. Put your right foot over the left thigh (or the opposite), resting your knees on the floor. Then bend forward and tug the cushion behind. If touching the floor with your knees is difficult, then rest one thigh on the bend of the other foot.

You may also sit with the left or right lower leg in front of the other on the floor. Or, you may sit on a small bench, such as those provided in meditation halls. If all of these are difficult, you may sit on a chair.

After selecting one of these positions, straighten your back and make sure it is perpendicular so your chest can expand easily when you breathe. Your posture should be natural and supple, not stiff.

Settle into your posture carefully, because it's important not to change your position until the end of the meditation period. Why is this important? Suppose you change your position because it is uncomfortable. After a while, the new position becomes uncomfortable, too. Then you want another, and soon it too becomes uncomfortable. So you go on shifting, moving, changing from one position to another for the whole time you are on the cushion rather than gaining a deeper level of concentration. Exercise self-control and stay in your original position.

Determine at the start how long you are going to meditate. If you have never meditated, begin with about twenty minutes. As you repeat your practice, you can gradually increase your sitting time. The length of your session depends on how much time you have available and how long you can sit without pain.

When you are seated, close your eyes; this will help you concentrate. The mind before meditation is like a cup of muddy water. If you hold the cup still, the mud settles and the water clears. Similarly, if you keep quiet, holding your body still and focusing your attention on your object of meditation, your mind will settle down and you will begin to experience the joy of meditation.

Dealing with Pain

Suppose you have followed the instructions on posture and are sitting in the most comfortable position. Soon you realize that your comfort has vanished. Now there's pain, and you lose your original determination, your patience, and your enthusiasm for sitting in meditation.

It can be discouraging. But rest assured that the pain is mostly due to lack of practice. With practice, it diminishes, and you also find it easier to tolerate. So let pain become a signal to renew your determination to practice more.

If pain occurs due to a physical defect such as a dislocated disk or a past injury, then you should change your posture—perhaps moving to a bench or a chair. If, however, you are feeling pain in a normal, healthy part of the body, I suggest you try the following.

The most effective but most difficult way to deal with pain is to watch it. Be with the pain, merge with it. Experience it without thinking of it as my pain, my knee, my neck. Simply watch the pain closely and see what happens to it.

At first the pain may increase, which may cause fear. For example, your knee may begin to hurt so much that you fear you'll lose your leg—it will get gangrene and have to be amputated—which leads you to wonder how you'll get by with only one leg. Don't worry. I have never seen anybody lose a leg to meditation! When that pain that you're watching comes to its most excruciating point, if you wait patiently for, say, another five minutes, you will see this frightening, life-threatening pain begin to break up. The pain will change to a neutral sensation, and you will discover that even a painful feeling is impermanent.

You can use a similar technique with psychological pain, perhaps due to some guilt or traumatic memory. Don't try to push the pain away. Welcome it. Stay with it, even if some awful scenario plays out in your mind. Without getting lost in the story line, keep watching that psychological pain and see it eventually break up, just like physical pain.

When the breakthrough happens and the pain disappears, you may feel great relief, a peaceful and relaxing calm. Of course, the body pain or the painful memory may arise again. But once you have broken through a particular physical or psychological pain, that particular pain

will never recur with the same intensity. And the next time you sit, you'll probably sit longer before the pain arises.

The second strategy for dealing with pain is to compare it with the pain you have experienced throughout your life. This present pain, although it seems so difficult now, is only a small portion of the pain you have experienced, and you have endured far worse. And don't forget the subtle, background feeling of dissatisfaction that haunts you day and night. Compared to these other pains, this small pain in your leg is not so great. It's worth bearing with it so that you can overcome the greater and more pervasive pains of life. This pain is like a splinter. Removing a splinter hurts a lot, yet you accept that hurt to avoid greater pain later on. In the same way, you can endure the pain of sitting meditation to save yourself from worse troubles in the future.

Another approach is to think of the pain that others are experiencing. Right now, many people are suffering physical and psychological pain due to sickness, exposure, hunger, separation from loved ones, and other serious problems. Remind yourself that compared to this misery, your pain is not so bad.

The fourth approach is to ignore the pain. You deliberately divert your attention to the breath. To help you stay with the breath, you may breathe quickly several times.

My final suggestion, only when all else fails, is to move—very mindfully. Slowly shift the muscles to see if the pain can be reduced with a minimum of change to your posture. If the pain is in your back, note that the back will begin to ache if you have slouched forward. If tension arises in the back, first make a mental survey of your posture, relax, and then gently straighten the back.

Pain in the ankles and knees needs a special approach, because you do not want to create damaging stress on the tendons. If you think the pain may come from a tendon, first try mindfully flexing and relaxing the muscles above and below that joint without changing or shifting your posture. If that does not bring relief, move the leg slowly just enough to alleviate stress on the tendon.

You may wonder what is to be gained from enduring pain. "I started this practice to get rid of my suffering. Why should I suffer more in sitting meditation?" Remember, this is the kind of suffering that can lead

to the end of all suffering. When you mindfully observe pain as it arises and disappears and experience the blissful feelings that follow its disappearance, you gain confidence in your ability to withstand pain. More important, because your experience of pain is voluntary and focused, it is a good training ground. You break through your resistance to greater pain in life.

Have patience. Perhaps you have never assumed a meditation posture before, or have done so only occasionally. Perhaps you are accustomed to sitting on chairs and couches. Naturally you will feel some pain when you first sit on the floor in meditation. Have you ever climbed a mountain or ridden a horse? Remember how the body felt the first time you did it, or how sore it felt the next day? If you climb mountains or ride horses daily, however, you soon enjoy it pain-free. It's the same with meditation: you just have to do it again and again, sitting in the same posture every day.

Focus Your Mind

A good way to settle the mind is to focus on the breath. The breath is readily available. You don't have to work hard to find the breath, for it's always flowing in and out through the nostrils. The breath is not involved in any emotion, any reasoning, any choice-making. Keeping your mind on it is a good way to cultivate a neutral state.

You should begin every sitting meditation session with thoughts of loving-friendliness. Sometimes people can directly tap into them and send them to all living beings. More often, you need a method to do so. Begin with yourself and then slowly expand your thoughts of loving-friendliness to include all living beings. I recommend reciting (mentally or aloud) the following passage:

May I be well, happy, and peaceful. May no harm come to me; may no difficulties come to me; may no problems come to me; may I always meet with success. May I also have patience, courage, understanding, and determination to meet and overcome the inevitable difficulties, problems, and failures in life.

After reciting this passage, repeat it, replacing the words “I” and “me” with others, beginning with your parents: “May my parents be well, happy, and peaceful. May no harm come to them...” and so forth. Next recite this passage for your teachers: “May my teachers be well...” Then recite it for your relatives; then for your friends; then for “indifferent persons” (people toward whom you have neutral feelings); then for your adversaries; and finally for all living beings. This simple practice will make it easier to gain concentration in meditation and also help you to overcome any resentment that may arise as you sit.

Next take three deep breaths. As you breathe in and out, notice the expansion and contraction of the lower abdomen, the upper abdomen, and the chest. Breathe fully to expand these three areas of your body. After taking three deep breaths, breathe normally, letting your breath flow in and out freely, effortlessly, and gracefully, focusing your attention on the sensation of the breath on the rims of your nostrils. Most people notice the breath easily at the rims of the nostrils; however, some may prefer to focus on the sensation of the breath touching the upper lip, or in the nose, or in the sinus area, depending on their facial structure. Having chosen a place of focus, simply notice the feeling of breath going in and out.

When you focus your attention on the breath, you feel the beginning, middle, and end of each inhalation and each exhalation. You do not have to make any special effort to notice these three stages of breathing. When one inhalation is complete and before exhaling begins, there is a brief pause. Notice it, and notice the beginning of the exhalation. When the exhalation is complete, there is another brief pause before the next inhalation begins. Notice this brief pause, too. These two pauses occur so briefly that you may not be aware of them. But when you are mindful, you can notice them.

At the beginning, perhaps both the inhalation and the exhalation are long. Notice that, but without thinking or saying “long inhalation, long exhalation.” As you notice the feeling of long inhalations and exhalations, your body becomes relatively calm. Then perhaps your breath becomes short. Notice how the short breath feels, again without saying “short breath.” Then notice the entire breathing process from beginning to end. Now, perhaps, the breath becomes subtle. Mind and body become calmer than before. Notice this calm and peaceful feeling.

In spite of your efforts to keep focused on your breathing, your mind may wander away. You may find yourself remembering places you visited, people you met, friends you have not seen for a long time, a book you read long ago, the taste of food you ate yesterday. As soon as you notice that your mind is no longer on your breath, mindfully bring it back and anchor it there.

Some people make use of labeling, which is putting words to phenomena that come up in meditation. For example, the meditator may notice thoughts and then say mentally, "Thinking, thinking, thinking." On hearing a sound, the meditator thinks, "Hearing, hearing, hearing."

I don't recommend this technique. The occurrences you may want to label take place so quickly that you have no time to label them. Labeling takes time—time for the thought to arise or the sensation to occur, time to think of words to conceptualize what you are aware of. You cannot label something while it is happening. You can only label something after it has already past. It is sufficient to watch things as they happen and be aware of them.

Mindfulness teaches you direct awareness. It helps you to eliminate intermediaries such as concepts and words. Concepts and words arise after awareness to help you communicate ideas and feelings. In meditation, however, you're not expressing anything to anybody. You're just knowing that seeing should be limited to seeing, that hearing is hearing, touching is touching, knowing is knowing. That's sufficient.

Practice One-Minute Mindfulness

When you get up from your sitting meditation, make a determination to meditate for one minute of every hour throughout the day. You may wonder what you can do in one minute—that's hardly time to find your cushion. Don't worry about finding a cushion. Stay where you are, sitting, standing, lying down—it doesn't matter. Spend fifty-nine minutes of every hour doing whatever you do during the day. But for one minute of that hour, stop whatever you are doing and meditate. You might even set your wristwatch or computer to beep every hour as a reminder.

When you hear the beep, put whatever you have been doing out of your mind and close your eyes. Stay focused on your breathing. If you

think you won't know how long a minute is, breathe in and out fifteen times giving undivided attention to the breath. If you spend longer than a minute, don't worry about it. You're not losing anything.

When the minute is up, before opening your eyes resolve to meditate again for a minute at the end of the next hour. Look forward to that minute and build up enthusiasm for it. Also ask yourself, "When am I going to sit and meditate again?"

If you repeat this simple method, by the end of the day, you will have done ten or fifteen minutes of additional meditation. Moreover, by the end of the day, your wish to sit in meditation—strengthened by your thinking of it every hour—will help you find the motivation to sit for a while before bed.

End your day with half an hour of sitting meditation. When you go to bed, keep your mind on your breath as you fall asleep. If you wake up at night, bring your mind to the breath. When you wake up the next morning, your mind will still be on your breath, reminding you to begin your day with sitting meditation.



STEP 1

Skillful Understanding

THE STORY OF THE BUDDHA'S LIFE is familiar to many of us. We know that Prince Siddhattha left his father's lavish palace, took up the homeless life of a wandering spiritual seeker, and after years of rigorous practice, attained enlightenment while meditating under the Bodhi Tree. When the Buddha arose from meditation, he walked to the city of Benares, now called Varanasi. There, in the Deer Park, he taught for the first time what he had discovered about the path to permanent happiness.

The Buddha's message was simple but profound. Neither a life of self-indulgence nor one of self-mortification can bring happiness. Only a middle path, avoiding these two extremes, leads to peace of mind, wisdom, and complete liberation from the dissatisfactions of life.

The message of the Buddha is traditionally known as the Four Noble Truths. The last of these four truths sets out eight steps to happiness. He taught us to cultivate skillfulness in our understanding, thinking, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration.

In this and the following chapters we will examine these steps in detail. You'll notice that three aspects—understanding, effort, and mindfulness—come up repeatedly in each step. These are the cardinal points of the path. All the steps are intertwined, but no step functions without the strong application of understanding, effort, and mindfulness.

You walk this path by bringing mindful awareness to every aspect of your daily life, continually working toward greater wholesomeness and

applying proper understanding. As the mind settles down, insights begin to arise.

Some insights feel like a gentle “aha!” when some part of your life or the world suddenly becomes clear. Other insights feel profound, as though the whole earth has been shaken by your new knowledge. There may be a feeling of release, followed by a powerful sense of well-being or bliss that can last for hours or even for days. These wonderful experiences are not enlightenment. They just hint at what full enlightenment may be like.

But there may come a moment when all the factors of the eight steps are in place. Morality is perfected; concentration is deep and strong; the mind is bright and clear without any hindrances present. Then you may have a most profound insight—that all experience is impersonal and impermanent in every way, that nothing is worth clinging to. At that moment, all your doubts disappear, and the way you see everything changes.

From that time on, you walk the path on a whole new level. Before this point, you must already have had a good, clear intellectual understanding of the way all the parts of the path fit together. After that profound insight, your understanding reaches a higher level, called the “beyond worldly” level, and you proceed with supreme confidence. You know that no matter what, you will reach your goal.

In anything we do, the first step is to know why we’re doing it. That’s why the Buddha made Skillful Understanding the first step on his path to happiness. He wanted us to understand that the Buddhist path is not some abstract notion of “promising to be good” so that we can get some reward, not some mysterious code of behavior we have to follow to belong to a secret club.

Rather, the Buddha’s path is grounded in common sense and in careful observation of reality. He knew that if we open our eyes and look carefully at our lives, we will understand that the choices we make lead either to happiness or unhappiness. Once we understand this principle thoroughly, we will make good choices, because we do want to be happy.

As the Buddha explained it, Skillful Understanding has two parts: understanding cause and effect, and understanding the Four Noble Truths.

UNDERSTANDING CAUSE AND EFFECT

Buddhists may describe actions as being right or wrong, good or bad, moral or immoral, but they intend a somewhat different meaning than these words usually convey. “Skillful or unskillful” probably explains the idea best. The basis of Buddhist morality is that acting in unskillful ways leads to unhappy results, and acting in skillful ways leads to happy results. This simple principle of cause and effect is an aspect of what Buddhists call kamma (or karma).

Even though unskillful deeds may bring temporary happiness—when, for example, a drug dealer is pleased with his shiny new car, or when you feel self-righteous gratification in causing pain to someone who has hurt you—the Buddha pointed out that wrong actions always lead to harm. Our own observations confirm this truth. Some of the harm may not be visible, such as the mental suffering of guilt and remorse. Other kinds of harm may not manifest immediately. The results of skillful and unskillful actions, the Buddha explained, may come to someone far, far in the future, even beyond this lifetime.

You may think, “I’m not worried about a future lifetime, I just want what I can get out of this life.” The Buddha advised us to consider these possibilities: Even if there is no future life, doing wholesome things will bring me happiness and a clear conscience in this life. If it turns out that there is a future life beyond death, I will be doubly rewarded—now and again later. On the other hand, if there is no future life, acting in an unwholesome way will make me feel miserable and guilty in this life. And if it turns out that there really is a future life beyond death, I will suffer again later. Thus, whether there is a future life or not, letting go of unwholesomeness and cultivating wholesomeness guarantees our happiness.

Once we understand that everything we think, say, or do is a cause that leads inevitably to some effect, now or in the future, we will naturally want to think, say, and do things that lead to positive results and avoid those thoughts, words, and deeds that lead to negative ones. Recognizing

that causes always lead to results helps us accept the consequences of past actions. It also helps us focus our attention on making choices that can lead to a happier future.

Skillful actions are those that create the causes for happiness, such as actions motivated by loving-friendliness and compassion. Any action that comes from a mind not currently filled with greed, hatred, or delusion brings happiness to the doer and to the receiver. Such an action is, therefore, skillful or right.

Suppose, for example, that you consistently cultivate generosity and loving-friendliness toward all. This good behavior is a cause. Of what results? You'll make lots of friends, many will love you, and you'll feel relaxed and peaceful. People around you may be angry and unhappy, but you won't be.

Your positive behavior has generated two types of immediate results. The first is internal—how you feel. Since you have been consistently generous and loving and have reflected upon your acts of generosity and love, your mind is peaceful and happy. The second is external: other people appreciate you and care for you. While their caring is certainly pleasant, it is less important than how you feel. Since external effects are dependent on the response of others, they are less reliable.

Once we understand this principle, its opposite also becomes clear. The Buddha pointed to ten actions that are always unskillful because they inevitably cause suffering. Three are actions of the body: killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct. Four are actions of speech: lying, malicious words, harsh language, and useless talk. The last three are actions of the mind: covetousness, ill will, and wrong view of the nature of reality.

What is meant by each of these ten actions and how we can avoid them is explained in detail in later steps of the path. Before we can even begin to practice the Buddha's path, however, we need enough basic understanding to see that these ten actions are unskillful because they inevitably bring deep suffering both to the doers and the recipients.

Refraining from these ten actions is not a list of commandments but a set of voluntary principles to follow out of conviction. Nobody can force them upon you. You have to find out for yourself, from your own

experience and from your observations of the experiences of others, whether such actions lead to positive results or negative ones. Your experience will tell you that unskillful behaviors bring about physical and psychological pain to yourself and others.

Moreover, people engage in such misdeeds only when their understanding is faulty and their minds are polluted by greed, hatred, or delusion. In fact, any action that comes from a mind filled with greed, hatred, or delusion leads to suffering and is thus unskillful or wrong.

Buddhist morality is rational behavior based on this principle of cause and effect. You have to be lying to yourself about causes and effects to act wrongfully. The worse your behavior, the bigger your lie has to be. What deep insight, what release, will you ever reach if you deliberately feed your delusions with behavior that goes against this basic truth that actions have consequences? If you engage in seriously wrongful behavior, you won't gain much clarity—let alone liberating insight—from the Buddha's path. You must embrace this morality. That's essential.

Mindfulness meditation increases awareness of the devastating consequences of immoral behavior. The meditator vividly experiences the painful effects of unwholesome thoughts, words, and deeds and urgently feels the need to give them all up.

You alone are the author of your future—experience teaches you that. Your behavior is not an unchangeable law of nature. At every moment, you have the opportunity to change—to alter your thoughts, your speech, your actions. If you train yourself to be mindful of what you do, and ask yourself whether it's likely to lead to positive results or negative, you'll be guiding yourself in the right direction.

Repeated good intentions can generate a powerful inner voice that will keep you on track. It will remind you—whenever you trap yourself in a cycle of unhappiness—that you can get out of that trap. Periodically you will have glimpses of what it is like to be free. You make this vision a reality by acting in positive ways and letting go of misery.

Thus morality—defined as actions in accordance with reality—is the foundation of all spiritual progress. Without this, nothing of the path will work to reduce suffering.

The idea that actions have their corresponding results is the first part of Skillful Understanding. Now you must add to it a good comprehension of the Four Noble Truths.

UNDERSTANDING THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

The Buddha himself said that he taught only four ideas: dissatisfaction, cause, end, and path. “Dissatisfaction” refers to the unhappiness we feel in our lives. “Cause” is the reason for this unhappiness: our undisciplined, grasping mind. “End” is the Buddha’s promise that we can end suffering by eradicating our craving. “Path” is the eight steps we must take to reach this goal.

In his forty-five years of teaching, from the time of his first sermon in the Deer Park until his death, the Buddha explained these four words hundreds of times. He wanted to make sure that these essential ideas could be understood by people with different temperaments at various stages of spiritual growth.

On one occasion, he explained that dissatisfaction with the suffering of life is a burden. We cause our dissatisfaction by taking up the burden. We end it by putting the burden down. The path tells us how to unburden ourselves. Another time, he called dissatisfaction a sickness. Like a doctor, the Buddha diagnoses the cause of the sickness. The end of the sickness is Dr. Buddha’s cure, and the path is the medicine he prescribes to make us well.

Understanding the First Truth: Dissatisfaction

The Buddha’s first truth tells us that dissatisfaction is unavoidable. You may wonder, “Is this teaching on dissatisfaction relevant to the modern world in which so many discoveries have made our lives more comfortable? In the time of the Buddha, people must have suffered from the elements, disease, and natural disasters. But doesn’t our current technological know-how allow us to do whatever we want, go anywhere we wish, and manufacture anything we need?”

Yet, no matter how easy and safe our modern lives may seem, the truth of dissatisfaction has not changed. It is as relevant now as it was

in the Buddha's time. People back then were dissatisfied, and so are we.

We may call the Buddha's first truth any number of names depending on the situation: suffering, stress, fear, tension, anxiety, worry, depression, disappointment, anger, jealousy, abandonment, nervousness, or pain. All human beings, no matter when or where they live, are subject to these problems.

We may fall ill at any time. We may be separated from our loved ones. We may lose what we have or be forced by circumstances to put up with conditions we despise. Parents and children, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, neighbors and friends, communities and countries—all quarrel over wealth, position, power, and boundaries. Some of these problems are created by greed, some by hatred, others by ignorance. All of them relate to conditions both in the world—social, political, economic, educational, environmental—and in ourselves.

Recognizing the inevitability of these problems triggers pain in our minds. Acknowledging them and accepting them as they really are, without blaming others, is the essence of the Buddha's first truth. To get started toward happiness, he told us, we need to look at dissatisfaction straight on—with stable emotions and a steady mind—without getting angry or feeling depressed or pessimistic. We must look squarely at our predicament: every experience of life brings some degree of suffering to anyone not fully enlightened.

The suffering may be extremely subtle, perhaps an underlying subtle restlessness. Or it may be more obvious, some strong attachment to a person, possession, or opinion. It all depends on how much greed, hatred, and delusion we have, and on our personalities and past experiences.

Consider, for example, two people who witness the same event but have completely different impressions. One finds the event happy and agreeable; the other, frightening and terrible. Happiness and its opposite are mind-made. Our minds create our life experiences, and our minds either enjoy those creations or suffer because of them. That is why the Buddha spoke of our creating heaven and hell in this very life.

Until we attain enlightenment, many kinds of experiences cause powerful dissatisfaction for us all. Let's look at three: the life cycle, change, and having no control of our lives.

THE LIFE CYCLE

The inevitable round of the human life cycle—birth, aging, sickness, death—gives rise to dissatisfaction.

Babies are not born with big smiles on their faces. As we grow, the cry with which we first greeted the world becomes less audible. We might say that it changes to an inward cry that continues for the rest of our lives. We cry for so many gallons of milk; so many tons of food; so many yards of clothes; so many square feet of land for housing, schools, and hospitals; so many trees for making books, papers, furniture; so many pills for various sicknesses; so many people to love us; so many ways to try to fill our neediness. If we had not been born into this unsatisfactory world, all other kinds of dissatisfaction would not come into existence. With every baby, it seems, unhappiness, too, is born.

Society as a whole also suffers as a result of birth. As the earth's population increases, the pollution of our air, water, and land grows alarmingly. With so many mouths to feed, resources are depleted, and hunger stalks many parts of the planet. More forests are cleared to build roads and houses. Overcrowded living conditions contribute to the spread of terrible diseases. These are but a few examples. You can, no doubt, think of many more.

The aging process also gives rise to dissatisfaction. We've probably forgotten the adjustments we made in childhood to a new neighborhood or a new teacher, but we can remember the difficulties we had as teenagers adjusting to our changing bodies and emotions. In adulthood we have to adjust to new jobs, new relationships, new technologies, new diseases, new social conditions, often before we are fully at ease with existing ones. Uncomfortable changes seem to be common to every stage of life.

As we grow old, the problem of adjusting to change becomes more conspicuous. It is painful to lose the physical well-being we had when we were young. We know that aging is inevitable, but we wish it were not. Thus we suffer.

When the Buddha said that aging gives rise to unhappiness, he was really talking about growth and decay generally. We know that every cell in our body is decaying or dying, and new cells are continually taking their place. Every state of mind also disappears and a new one arises.

Eventually, this process of decay and change weakens the body and mind, causing our physical death.

Illness is obviously another cause of dissatisfaction. Everybody knows how painful sickness is. Sickness actually causes two kinds of pain: fear of sickness and its direct experience. Thus sickness is a continuing source of anxiety, causing suffering when we are ill and fear when we are healthy.

People generally think that pain and dissatisfaction are synonymous, but they are not. Though you can't avoid the pain of injury and disease, it is possible to avoid dissatisfaction as a result of the pain. As you grow less attached to your body feeling a particular way, you become less dissatisfied when it feels different. For instance, when Devadatta threw a rock and wounded the Buddha's foot, the Buddha experienced pain. But because he understood the nature of pain, he did not suffer like ordinary people. Pain sensations are usually manageable. Dissatisfaction with "what is" is more profound and harder to overcome.

The fourth form of suffering in the life cycle is death—not just the moment of death but also everything that leads up to it. We all fear death and worry about how and when we might die. We also know that when we die, we will have to leave everything behind. Can we bear that? When a loved one dies, we experience shock, grief, and loss which can last for years if not forever.

But the dissatisfactions of the life cycle do not end with death. The Buddha taught that death does not bring the cycle of dissatisfaction to a close. Someone who has gone through a lot may say, when nearing death, "I don't want any more of this." But that mere wish cannot stop the life cycle from continuing. As long as we are ignorant of the true nature of reality, this life links to another. As long as desire, hatred, and ignorance exist in our consciousness, the endless round of rebirth—the cycle of past, present, and future lives—will continue.

Within that cycle, the dissatisfactions that we have mentioned recur again and again. The energy of all these experiences is like a backpack that we carry from life to life through countless rebirths. In each new life, its contents are simply transferred into new baggage. When we die, nothing material goes with us. Yet that same backpack of energy—the imprints of all the mental activities and all the intentional words and

deeds of this and previous lifetimes—not only travels with us but actually initiates the new life.

Until we have emptied our backpacks—until we have exhausted the results of all we have created through desire, hatred, or ignorance over countless lifetimes—we cannot escape perpetual death and rebirth. We can use this thought to motivate us to do whatever we can in this lifetime to achieve the permanent happiness of liberation.

We have already mentioned desire and hatred as strong motivations for our actions, but what does the Buddha mean by ignorance? And why is it so critical to the dissatisfactions we feel?

Ignorance in the Buddhist sense is both “not knowing”—as in not knowing what the Buddha meant by the Four Noble Truths—and “wrong knowing”—believing that we understand the way the world works when we do not.

Ignorant of the truth of dissatisfaction, we believe that a new job, a new house, or a new partner will bring us genuine happiness. Ignorant of how the energy of our words and deeds travels with us from this life to the next, we allow greed, hatred, doubt, and jealousy to motivate us. Ignorant that a simple and disciplined life, good friends, meditation, and mindful investigation of the true nature of our experience will bring us happiness in this life and in lives to come, we make millions of excuses for not engaging in these positive activities.

We are ignorant even of our ignorance. After a particularly deep teaching on the nature of reality, the Buddha’s attendant Ananda said to him, “Venerable sir, this teaching appears to be very deep, but it is as clear to me as clear can be.”

The Buddha replied, “No, no, do not say that! It not only seems to be deep, but it is deep.” (D 15)

Because of his ignorance, Ananda’s understanding of the Buddha’s message was not yet complete, and thus he did not attain liberation at that moment. Like Ananda, our ignorance keeps us spinning through the life cycle’s many dissatisfactions.

CHANGE

Change also dissatisfies us. No matter what we do, change separates us from what we love and presents us with what we hate. Death and distance

divide us from people we love. Friends move away. Partners reject us. Such separations hurt a lot. Losing anything to which we are attached makes us angry and sad. Even something trivial can cause grief when it breaks or disappears.

Once when I was four years old I drew a perfect circle around me with my finger tip as I sat in the sand. Was I pleased! My sister, who was about seven, came by and rubbed away my circle with her foot. I became so angry I chased her, picked up a small but heavy wooden bench, and threw it at her. She still has a scar on one of her toes. All that upset and rage, all those tears and pain, caused by something so silly and transient as a circle in the sand!

Not only do we lose things we love, we are continually confronted by people and conditions we wish did not exist—at least not here, not right now. Living or working day in, day out with someone we do not like causes much unhappiness. Even something we cannot control, like the weather, makes us dissatisfied. At the Bhavana Society in West Virginia where I teach, people complain when it is hot and sticky. But they also complain when it is rainy and cool. When it is dry, they complain that their skin or their sinuses are affected. When it is cold, they complain because they fear they will slip on the ice. And when the weather is perfect, they complain that they do not have time to enjoy it!

When we look around us, it's clear that everything that exists causes dissatisfaction. Why is this so? Actually, everything in the world exists as the result of a cause. Changes in the barometric pressure, winds, and temperature are causes of rain. A tree is caused by the seed from which it grows and the sunlight, soil, and water that nurture it. Our lives, too are the product of causes and conditions—the direct physical cause of our parents' procreation and the cause of the energetic imprints we accumulated during our previous lifetimes.

The Buddha called these and everything else that arises from causes "conditioned things." He explained that all conditioned things are characterized by three qualities. First, they are impermanent. Over time, everything—mountains and mayflies, marshmallows and microchips—breaks down, changes, or dies. Second, because of these changes, all conditioned things are unsatisfactory. As we have seen, every changing thing can give rise to suffering. Third, all conditioned things are selfless

or soulless. This last quality is the most difficult to understand, so let's put it aside for a moment.

Impermanence is pretty easy to understand. The fact that things are temporary is not the problem. Rather, it's the attachment we have to people and things—like my circle in the sand—that makes us unhappy. Say we have a new jacket that we like enormously. After wearing it only a few times, we get some wet paint on it, or we tear it on something, or we leave it on a bus. We feel annoyed.

A ruined or lost jacket is no great tragedy, of course, and we can easily replace it. But what if the jacket was a gift from someone we love? What if we bought it to remember a special birthday, anniversary, or trip? Then we're really attached to it, and its loss or damage saddens us deeply.

Sometimes people get upset when they hear discussions like this. "How about happiness?" they ask. "Why don't we talk about that? Why don't we talk about joy, delight, and pleasure instead of dissatisfaction all the time?"

The answer, my friends, is change. Because of impermanence, anything that is pleasant, happy, or delightful, does not remain so. As intelligent, mature people, we must talk about what's really happening without getting upset. We must look it right in the eye, this dissatisfaction caused by change, and acknowledge it. Why hide it and pretend that everything's rosy?

When we look at change head on, we may begin to see that it has an up side as well. We can count on the fact that whatever conditions exist in our lives will also change. Things may get worse. But they may also improve. Because of impermanence, we have the opportunity to learn, develop, grow, teach, memorize, and make other positive changes, including practicing the Buddha's path. If everything about us were set in concrete, none of these changes would be possible. The uneducated would stay uneducated. The poor and hungry would stay poor and hungry. We would have no chance to end our hatred, greed, or ignorance and their negative consequences.

Okay, we understand impermanence and the dissatisfaction it causes. Now, what about this selflessness or soullessness? What do they have to do with change? The Buddha taught that the things and beings of this

world are selfless or soulless precisely because they are always changing. We and everything around us are not static, permanent entities. We cannot affix a “me” or “mine” label to anything in the universe. It all changes too quickly.

With our changing body and our changing feelings, perceptions, thoughts, consciousness, habits, and intentions, how can we point to something and say, “This is mine” or “This is me”? Even the idea or belief “this is me” changes right away. For convenience, we may say “I am here” or “this belongs to me,” but we should say these words wisely and not be fooled into thinking that they imply the existence of an unchanging entity, the “I” or “me.” Physical objects also change continually. We may use conventional labels and say “this is a chair” or “this is a chimpanzee,” but these labels barely fit the changing reality that we experience.

Rather, we and everything else are in process, in a continual flux of growth and decay, buildup and breakdown. Nothing about our world or ourselves is separate or enduring. Watch your mind for one minute and you’ll see what I mean. Memories, emotions, ideas, sensations flicker across the screen of consciousness so quickly we can hardly catch them. Therefore, it makes no sense for the mind to grab on to any of these passing shadows with attachment or to push them away with hatred. When our mindful attention is quick and sharp, as it is in a state of deep concentration, then we can clearly see the changes—so clearly that there is no room left for belief in a self.

Some people feel depressed and disappointed when they hear about the doctrine of non-self. Some even become angry. They mistakenly conclude that life has no meaning. They don’t understand that a life lived without a sense of self is most pleasant and meaningful.

Once I gave a manuscript of an article to a friend to edit. He was a professional editor, and I figured that the job would take him about an hour. Yet for six months I heard nothing from him. He finally came for a visit, and we went for a walk. When he said nothing about my article, I sensed this would be a delicate topic. Very gently and hesitantly I broached the subject. I asked, “Have you had time to take a look at my article?” He remained silent for a long moment and then replied, “Bhante G, I looked at it. When I came across the teaching of non-self,

I became so angry I threw away the whole manuscript!" I was amazed, but I did not get upset with him. Instead I let go of my attachment to the article I had written. He had thrown away my manuscript because of non-self, so I threw away the self associated with the manuscript. I was able to stay relaxed, friendly, and peaceful. This man, however, became rigid, uptight, and unhappy, due to his clinging to self.

So you see how hard it can be to accept this notion of non-self. Yet so long as you retain this notion of self you'll feel uncomfortable, rigid, and grasping, and people will find your egotistical self unpleasant. You'll get upset or angry when someone disagrees with you or blames you for something, when things disappoint you or don't go your way, and even when somebody offers you constructive criticism. Correctly understanding this idea of non-self, you'll feel relaxed and comfortable. You'll mix easily with people of any nationality, you won't feel any more or less important than others, you'll adapt easily to any situation, and everyone will feel comfortable around you.

By truly understanding selflessness you can feel happy and comfortable wherever you go, whether you are treated well or ill. Don't let this teaching make you depressed and don't let it make you angry.

For now, we must be content with trying to accept this idea intellectually. As our practice of mindfulness continues, however, we can look forward to the day when we will perceive the selflessness and soullessness of all phenomena directly. When we do, the unhappiness that comes as a result of change will end for us, forever.

The Buddha and the other great beings who have attained full enlightenment are proof of this. The Buddha was completely free of the concept of "I." Of course, the Buddha continued to live in society after he achieved enlightenment. For conventional purposes and to make communication easy, he continued to use conventional terms, such as "I" or "me." It's okay if you do as well. The name on your driver's license may not be an absolutely accurate label, a guarantee of your permanent identity, but it's a convenient handle for the conventions of everyday life.

But when mindfulness leads you to realize that the "self" you have been protecting so vigorously is, in fact, an illusion—a stream of constantly changing sensations, emotions, and physical states, with no

permanence or fixed identity—then there will be no “you” to attach to the impermanent things of this world, and thus no reason for you to be dissatisfied or unhappy.

NO CONTROL

If we were really in control of our lives, we’d have no reason to be dissatisfied. But we’re not in control. Time after time we don’t get what we want, and we get what we don’t want.

We want our perfect job, perfect office, perfect boss, and perfect pay to continue forever, but they change, and we have no say about why or when. We want to keep our loved ones, but no matter how tightly we cling to them, someday we’ll be separated. To stay healthy we take herbs and vitamins, work out, and eat right, but we still get sick. We want to remain young and strong and hope that old age will happen only to others, but years pass and we discover that our body has other plans. Whatever ideal situation we’re in, we naturally wish to hold on to it. But we have no control over the law of impermanence. Everything exists by consent of this law, and we have no protection against it.

It’s also painful to have things happen to us that we never wished for. You’re stung by a bee. Your favorite TV show is canceled. Someone breaks into your car. You lose your job. A loved one gets cancer. Your precious wedding pictures or baseball memorabilia are lost in a fire. Your child has an accident or gets involved in drugs. Scandal, blame, shame, failure, hunger, loss of goods, loss of love, physical deterioration—so many bad, unwanted things happen to us and to the people we wish to protect. And we have no control over any of it.

“All right!” you may be saying. “Enough already!” But there’s one more piece to this picture. If we look carefully, we can see that even getting our wishes fulfilled is also unsatisfying.

Say what you wish for is a beautiful house. So, you buy it, and look at the trouble you have to go through. You have to pay the mortgage, pay the taxes, protect it, secure it, insure it, decorate it, repair and maintain it. And then, you’re not home very much anyway. Early in the morning, you go to work. In the evening, maybe you go to a party or a movie, come home to sleep for five or six hours, and then off you go again. The house is very big and very beautiful, no doubt. And you keep

paying the bills and cutting the grass and fixing the roof and cleaning out the garage. You have gotten what you wished for, but are you happy?

Look at another example. A boy likes a girl, and she likes him. Each works very hard to attract the other. But from the moment they start their relationship, they are afraid. He fears that she'll fall for some guy who is more handsome, and she fears a more attractive woman will steal him. Jealousy, suspicion, worry. Is this happiness?

You can think of other examples. Just read the newspaper. Read about the lucky fellow who wins the lottery and lives miserably ever after! That's why it is said that there are only two tragedies in life: not getting what one wants, and getting it.

REALISTIC PERCEPTION

The Buddha tried to make it very clear that every single thing in life brings suffering for the unenlightened person. He listed "five aggregates" that include every possible aspect of reality: form, feelings, perceptions, volitional formations, and consciousness. "Form" refers to all material existence—including the body and things that are contacted through the senses.

The other four aggregates cover all mental experience. At the end of a list of all the things that bring suffering, the Buddha said, "In short, the five aggregates of clinging are suffering." (D 22)

What's going on here? Why is it that dissatisfaction touches absolutely every aspect of our lives? As the Buddha explained, our dissatisfaction comes from how we perceive and think about what we experience. How this works is very subtle.

We know that we perceive the world through our senses. We generally talk about five senses, through which we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. The Buddha also spoke of a sixth sense, the mind, for our minds can also perceive ideas, thoughts, mental pictures, and emotions. So far, so good.

What our senses actually perceive is the raw data of experience or, in the case of the mind, mental pictures of experience—color, shape, size, intensity, pitch, hardness, and grossness or subtlety. We know, of course, that perception can differ from person to person depending on the perceiver's state of mind and senses. A person with a bad cold may have

difficulty smelling or tasting. A person whose hearing is impaired may not hear low-pitched sounds. So perception is subjective, depending on the faculties of the person perceiving.

We're aware of these differences, but our mind plays a trick on us. It convinces us that our perception is solid and reliable. It encourages us to take for granted that the qualities we notice are actually part of the thing we're looking at, rather than the result of ever-changing conditions, including the changing conditions of our own senses.

Not only that. After we perceive something, our mind immediately categorizes or judges whatever it is and puts the thing or experience into one of three boxes. The first box is labeled pleasant perceptions—the smell of fresh baked bread, a violin concerto, a brilliant sunset. The second holds unpleasant perceptions—the memory of our father's death, a headache, the wail of a police siren. Into the third go neutral perceptions—all those things and experiences about which we have a neutral reaction.

Then, of course, because our minds are not completely free of attachment, we cling to the pleasant. Because of aversion, we push away the unpleasant. And because of ignorance, we ignore the neutral, and we regard all objects—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—as permanent, as possessing a self or soul, and as capable of giving us permanent happiness or causing us permanent misery.

The Buddha explained the effect of this mistaken or unwholesome perception this way:

Depending on the eye and forms, eye consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as a condition, there is feeling. What one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates. With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perception and notions tinged by mental proliferation beset a man with respect to the past, future, and present forms cognizable by the eye [the same regarding the ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind]. (M 18 [translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi])

Realistic or wholesome perception, on the other hand, neither clings nor pushes away. It perceives impermanence as it is, dissatisfaction as it

is, and selflessness as it is. When we perceive the world in a wholesome way, we cultivate wholesome thoughts. Realistic perception is powerfully therapeutic. If we could see objects and people as they truly are—as impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless or soulless—nothing that we perceive could make us unhappy.

Realistic perception is the goal of mindfulness meditation. Being realistic means not running away from unpleasant facts about ourselves and our world.

Through mindful awareness, we learn to look realistically at existence, which is not always beautiful, pleasant, or happy. We see that life is a mixture of pain and pleasure. We notice physical or mental suffering at its very birth and watch how it arises. We also observe how long it remains and how it disappears. Mindfulness meditation acts like a shock absorber. If you've grown accustomed to facing the dissatisfactions of everyday life and know that they are natural occurrences, when some difficult or painful situation comes your way you'll face it bravely and calmly.

When we can look into the face of suffering without flinching, we will also be able to recognize true happiness.

Understanding the Second Truth: The Cause of Dissatisfaction

The Buddha's second truth tells us that the cause of our dissatisfaction is desire, which we might also call attachment, greed, or grasping. It doesn't seem to matter what it is—a fine meal, a dear friend, an exalted spiritual goal—if we're attached, we'll feel dissatisfied and suffer.

Where, you might ask, does desire come from? Most obviously, it comes from the impulses of the body—the desire to stay alive, the desire for food, clothing, shelter, warmth, variety, pleasure. Desire is built into humans. It is also built into animals. Even plants seem to have some kind of desire, for they turn toward the sun for light and warmth. Another source of desire is social conditioning—all those views and values that we learn from parents, family, friends, schools, advertising, and books that condition us to believe that some things are good and others are bad.

The strongest desire is that based upon pleasurable feelings. Life provides us with overwhelming pleasure through each of our senses. Take, for instance, the sense of sight: your eyes are agreeable and pleasurable. So, too, is eye consciousness agreeable and pleasurable, and so are visual objects, eye contact, feelings about what we see, visual recognition, desire for visual things, thoughts of them, deliberations, fantasies, and so on. Similarly agreeable and pleasurable sensations arise from the ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. Every single day you have opportunities to get involved in agreeable and pleasurable objects through your senses. Yet you are not happy.

In his second truth, the Buddha asked us to recognize that our attachment to sensual pleasure is dangerous to our happiness. He compared sensual pleasure to a bone with no meat thrown to a hungry dog. Though the dog gnaws on the bone for a long time, the bone never satisfies his hunger. On reflection you may find that you are like that, too. No matter how much sensual pleasure you have, you're still hungry for more.

How many potato chips are enough? How many pieces of chocolate? How many video games must you play or novels must you read to fulfill your longing for such experiences? How much sex would it take for your sexual craving to be satisfied forever? How much alcohol or drugs? Sometimes people stay up and party all night until they pass out. Did they get enough? You can always think of some pleasurable thing that you haven't yet tried.

The Buddha compared sensual pleasures to a razor-sharp sword with honey smeared on the blade. To taste the honey, people are willing to risk great pain. We can all think of examples of people who hurt or even kill themselves seeking pleasure. There was a story in the newspaper a few years back about a worker who was repairing a roof when, looking down through a skylight, he caught sight of the woman of the house walking around in the nude. To get a better view, he leaned so far over the skylight that it gave way; he tumbled into the house and was badly injured.

Alcohol, drugs, adventure travel, dangerous sports—to say nothing of careless sexual behavior—cause many people much suffering.

Moreover, sensual pleasures don't last. Like a dream, pleasures are fleeting. They slip away from you quickly, leaving you nothing to hold

on to but your feelings and memories. Like borrowed goods, they are not yours to keep. The more attached you are to a pleasure, the more it hurts when time, change, or circumstance inevitably snatches it away.

Desire arises from feelings of pleasure and pain. When pleasure arises, there is a desire to cling to it and perpetuate it. When pain arises, there is a desire to reject it or turn away from it. Because of your attachment to pleasant feelings and your aversion to unpleasant feelings, you constantly seek experiences that perpetuate the pleasant or reject the unpleasant. Once you have found something that accomplishes this goal, you become biased and prejudiced. This state of mind makes people cling. To protect or hold on to what they have, people are willing to lie, abuse or insult others, and even take up arms to defend what they believe is theirs.

Desire also leads to mental suffering. Due to feelings arising from contact with what is pleasurable—sights, smells, sounds, tastes, touches, and ideas—people think and rationalize, theorize, philosophize, speculate, and conceptualize. They come to hold wrong views and wrong beliefs. Recalling past pleasant sensations, they concoct even more desirous thoughts, beliefs, and theories.

Some people become so obsessed with their desires that they hope to be reborn to enjoy all the pleasant things again. Others, because of unpleasant experiences they have had, desire not to be reborn: “This is it,” they say. “One life is enough. I don’t need any more of this.”

At bottom, desire comes out of ignorance—ignorance that nothing lasts and ignorance that desire creates discomfort. When the senses contact something pleasurable, the ignorant mind develops the intention to grasp and hold on to it. The reverse also occurs. When the senses contact something unpleasant, the ignorant mind develops the intention to escape and avoid it. Because of these intentions, people engage in unskillful actions of body, speech, and mind, despite the consequences. Because of desire, people distort reality and avoid taking personal responsibility for their actions.

ACCEPTING RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR ACTIONS

The Buddha’s teaching on causes and their results makes clear that accepting responsibility for our actions is the foundation for personal

well-being and fulfillment. Denying your shortcomings and blaming the world for your discontent keeps you mired in unhappiness. Bad things happen to everyone. As long as you blame your parents or society for your problems, you give yourself an excuse not to change. The moment you accept responsibility for your situation, even though others may have contributed to it, you begin to move in a positive direction.

It seems to me that we distort reality and excuse ourselves from taking personal responsibility in at least three ways. First, we think that our unhappiness is caused by the outside world. As a result, we direct all of our energy and our mental capabilities outward. We get engrossed and sometimes even obsessed in trying to straighten out the people around us, as if their perfection would bring us relief. Or we try to straighten out society, assuming that correcting society's ills will solve our own problems: "When hunger, war, and pollution are eliminated, then I'll be happy."

The desire to improve society is, of course, commendable. We see how dissatisfied people are, we feel compassion, and we act to alleviate their suffering. But often we don't recognize that while trying to correct others people's problems, we forget or suppress our own. Our excuse: there are so many social wrongs that need to be fixed, we have no time to improve ourselves.

In reality, we may lack the honesty and courage to examine our real intentions. While people involved in social action may be very compassionate and service-minded, some of us fail to admit our real motivation. We all know that helping the less fortunate can give us a sense of power that we would not get from working with people who are not dependent on us. The desire for power is a basic instinct. It takes much honesty to see how much of what we do for others springs from this desire. Recognizing the intentions behind our actions can help us focus on the all-important task of putting our own house in order before we try to save others.

The second excuse we use to avoid accepting responsibility for our actions is to insist that there is no problem with us. We focus on our own ends and pleasures and have little regard for how what we do affects others. Deep inside, we may believe that the outside world is unimportant,

in a certain way even imaginary. If we could listen to our own thoughts, we'd hear ourselves say, "I alone exist, and only what I care about is important—nothing else matters."

We can all think of public figures who declare certain values while privately acting against those values.

These people focus on helping themselves. Some who are a bit honest admit that they are driven by the desire for financial success, power, or popularity. Still, they have found a way to avoid taking responsibility for the results of their actions. They fool themselves into thinking that the personal goal they pursue is more important than anything else. They fool themselves into believing that if they reach their goal they'll be happy, no matter who gets hurt along the way.

The third way we avoid our personal problems is simply running away from them. We all do this. Watching television or raiding the refrigerator for chocolate ice cream are typical ways to avoid honest self-reflection. You lull your mind and body into comfort and relaxation, and then you go to bed. Time passes. Except for getting older and fatter, nothing changes. The challenge is to have the courage to ask why.

At one time or another, we have all indulged in these kinds of escapes from responsibility, and they have given us some temporary solace, some very brief comfort. But none offer a genuine or lasting solution to our problems. Whether you try to change the world, ignore the world, or distract yourself from the world, you cannot avoid ultimate responsibility for your actions. Life has its ups and downs, and we create them. This vehicle of ours—our mind-body combination—is full of difficult moments. The only thing that works, according to the Buddha's teaching, is to find a way to improve the only instrument that has the power to make ourselves and the world happy. That instrument is our own mind.

Understanding the Third Truth: The End of Dissatisfaction

The Buddha's third truth is his promise that there is an end to dissatisfaction. That end comes from our completely eradicating all attachment, all desire. Now that we are beginning to understand the causes and consequences of our own behavior and to accept responsibility for our

thoughts, words, and deeds, we can see that we have an important part to play in ending our own unhappiness. Yet it is hard for us to imagine at this point what total happiness might feel like. What would it be like never to experience desire or hatred?

This very question came up among Buddha's disciples. One day the Venerable Sariputta, one of the Buddha's two chief disciples and himself an enlightened teacher, was having a discussion with a group of monks. They asked him, "Venerable Sir, this state of permanent happiness, which the Buddha calls nibbana [or nirvana], is said not to be experiential happiness. How can something that is not experienced be called happiness?"

Sariputta answered, "That is why it is called happiness." (A IV (Nines) IV 3)

In other words, happiness consists of what is not experienced. The third truth teaches us that happiness is wiping out all negative states of mind—all desire, all hatred, all ignorance. When we at last succeed in putting out the internal fires that burn our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind, then we experience total happiness, total peace. It may be hard to imagine what such a state feels like, but the only way to find out is by following the path toward this goal.

Like many of us, the monks talking to Sariputta wanted to know right at the beginning of the path what its end is like. This is like asking a young girl, "How does it feel when you give birth to a child?" The young girl has never given birth. She has to grow and mature in order to have that experience. She may be able to say something about childbirth from what she's read or heard, but she cannot express the entire experience.

Even her mother might not be able to capture what it's like to give birth. She can describe her own experience, but listeners who have never given birth will still not be able to understand how a mother feels.

The permanent happiness of enlightenment is like this. It can be understood only by those who have completed the preliminary work and gone through the experience themselves.

Suppose that same young girl goes to her father and asks, "Daddy, what is your relationship to Mommy?"

He might reply, "Darling, go out and play. I will tell you later."

Perhaps, when she grows up and is ready to be married, her father

says to her, "Long ago you asked me what my relationship with your mother was. Do you want me to answer that question now?"

The daughter replies, "No, Daddy, I know the answer."

The daughter has matured in her understanding. She knows the answer to the question herself. If a worldly experience such as the relationship between a man and a woman is so difficult to explain, imagine how difficult it is to understand the permanent happiness of freedom from dissatisfaction!

At present, our mind is full of ideas, opinions, and views, many of them motivated by desire, hatred, or ignorance. Trying to understand the bliss of permanent happiness before we have eliminated our negative states of mind is impossible. All we can do is quote the similes, parables, and analogies told to us by those who have reached enlightenment and try to come to some inferential understanding. For instance:

Once a tortoise living among the fish and other sea creatures suddenly disappeared. When he returned, the fish asked him questions about where he had been.

"I went to the land," the tortoise told them.

They asked him, "What is the water there like?"

He replied, "There is no water on the land."

"How did you swim?"

"I didn't swim. I walked."

"Walked? What do you mean 'walked'? And did you find many fish there?"

When the tortoise tried to explain, the fish said, skeptically, "No water; no fish; you can't swim; and you say you 'walked.' How can this be?"

The tortoise answered, "You seem satisfied with your speculations. Let me go back to the land." And with that, he disappeared.

Just as the fish could never conceive of the idea of land, a person who suffers from greed, hatred, and delusion cannot make sense of nibbana. To understand, you must transcend all negative states of mind and experience enlightenment for yourself.

Until you do so, the nearest you can come to experiencing the

happiness of enlightenment is the bliss you sometimes achieve when you have momentarily let go of your burden, when the mind is just “mind” with nothing else in it. The inferential understanding you get at such times may be compared to being in the desert and feeling tired and thirsty. You come upon a deep well with some water at the bottom but there is no bucket or rope. You’re too weak to hoist up a bucketful anyway. So although you can see the water, you can’t taste it, let alone drink any. Similarly, when your mind is temporarily free of greed, hatred, and delusion, you can perceive the peace of nibbana, but you don’t necessarily have the tools to reach it. Getting rid of greed is like finding the rope of generosity. Freeing the mind from hatred is like attaching the rope to the bucket of loving-friendliness. Strength in your hands is like wisdom, free of ignorance. When you put these three together, you have the means to taste, at last, the bliss of nibbana.

The bliss of this state is indescribable. Its single characteristic is peace. It is not born, not created, not conditioned. The best we can do is to say what this state does not have. It does not have desire or attachment or grasping after things, people, and experiences. It does not have hatred or aversion or anger or greed. It does not have the fault of seeing things as permanent, as satisfactory, or as possessing an inherent self or soul.

People who are still under the delusion that they are enjoying life as it is here in this unsatisfactory world might hear this description and say, “Enlightenment does not sound like much fun. I’m not sure I want to attain that state. Are there houses there? What about families, schools, medical insurance, hospitals, good roads, and so forth?” I have been asked this question.

We would have to answer no. One who remains attached to life, this endless existence, does not have the clarity of mind to want to attain the state of permanent bliss. This person has not understood the Buddha’s first truth, that dissatisfaction is unavoidable, or his second truth, that to whatever degree we desire, to that degree we suffer. Without Skillful Understanding of these essential points, it is impossible to understand the Buddha’s third truth—that dissatisfaction ends when we cease all attachment, all desire.

You might be wondering whether it is all right to have the desire to achieve enlightenment and escape the endless round of rebirth.

The answer is yes, this is very good desire—called “the desire to be desireless.”

Understanding the Fourth Truth: The Path

The Buddha’s fourth truth is the path that leads to the end of dissatisfaction. Its eight steps bring peace and happiness to those who follow them. Later we’ll examine each step in detail, but let’s look at them quickly:

- Step one: Skillful Understanding of the Buddha’s message requires that we understand skillful behavior in terms of cause and effect and the Four Noble Truths and how they fit into the overall scheme of the Buddha’s teachings.
- Step two: Skillful Thinking introduces us to three positive thoughts—generosity or letting go, loving-friendliness, and compassion.
- Step three: Skillful Speech explains how telling the truth and avoiding malicious talk, harsh language, and gossip can help us advance on the path.
- Step four: Skillful Action lays out the principles for leading an ethical life—especially abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and intoxication.
- Step five: Skillful Livelihood explains why choosing an appropriate job or profession is important to our spiritual practice and how we should approach questions of business ethics.
- Step six: Skillful Effort lays out four steps we can take to motivate our practice—preventing negative states of mind, overcoming negative states of mind, cultivating positive states of mind, and maintaining positive states of mind.
- Step seven: Skillful Mindfulness refers to the practice of mindfulness meditation—specifically, cultivating mindfulness of your body, feelings, mind, and thoughts.
- Step eight: Skillful Concentration refers to four stages of deep absorption we can reach in meditation.

These eight steps are not merely an interesting list of ideas taught by the Buddha. They are your best hope for enlightenment. If the eight steps are something you have just skimmed through quickly and then set aside, you have missed their potential. No other teaching is more profound and more central to the Buddha's message. In fact, these eight steps are the Buddha's message.

These eight steps are often represented as a wheel—the wheel of clarity, as opposed to the wheel of endless birth, death, and rebirth. Clarity stops the cycle of repeated births and deaths. The spokes on the wheel of clarity are the eight steps of the Buddha's path. Its hub is the combination of compassion and wisdom. By contrast, the spokes of the wheel of endless birth, death, and rebirth are the many lives we have led and will lead in the realms of suffering. The hub of this wheel is the combination of desire, hatred, and ignorance.

Both wheels are always in motion. We see all around us the endless cycle of birth and death. Plants, animals, people are always being born and dying. It's harder to see the motion of the wheel of clarity, yet it is there. All around us, people are practicing the Buddha's path to happiness. This wheel is in motion because spiritual practice is dynamic, always active and moving. The circular shape of both wheels symbolizes perfection. The wheel of life and death is a perfect closed system—it is the perfect system to stay miserable. Whereas the circular shape of the wheel of clarity symbolizes that the Eightfold Path is complete and perfect.

To liberate yourself from dissatisfaction, you should put into practice every aspect of the wheel of clarity. Simply reading about the eight steps of the wheel will not help you make your life happy. If you try to make a bicycle wheel stand upright, it will fall over. However, if you set the wheel spinning by riding the bicycle, the wheel will stand upright as long as the motion lasts. To benefit you, the wheel of clarity also needs to be put in motion through daily practice.

MINDFULNESS OF SKILLFUL UNDERSTANDING

As an example of how you might practice the first step—Skillful Understanding of the Four Noble Truths—imagine that while sitting on your cushion one morning you get a pain in your leg. Instead of just

noticing the arising and passing away of the sensation, on this occasion you become unhappy about the pain, and your unhappiness makes the pain worse. If your mindfulness had been skillful, this problem would not have happened, but now you are stuck. What should you do?

You can overcome the suffering caused by this pain by using the Buddha's eight steps. Here is an opportunity to see the Four Noble Truths in action.

Although we have described the eight steps in a particular order, you do not need to exercise them in that order. It is not so neat and tidy as that. If you are cooking in a kitchen where all the pots are hung according to size and all the utensils neatly arranged in some kind of logical order, you don't use these implements in the order in which they are arranged. Instead, you grab whatever spoon or pot you need at the moment. Similarly, incorporating the eight steps into your daily life requires that you select and use whatever step is needed.

First you simply become mindful of the pain and your resistance to it. Thus you make use of Skillful Mindfulness, the seventh step of the path. With mindfulness, you become aware that "this is suffering." When you thus see the truth of your suffering, you are seeing the First Noble Truth. It becomes real to you, and you begin working with Skillful Understanding, which is the first step of the path.

With mindful attention, you will likely notice that the more you resist the pain, the worse it feels. So you make an effort to overcome your aversion. This involves Skillful Effort, the sixth step. You let go of aversion by relaxing and cultivating a friendly attitude. You may, for example, realize that the pain in your leg is as worthy of loving-friendliness as any other bodily sensation. In this way, you develop an aspect of Skillful Thinking, the second step.

Then you may notice that your suffering arises not just because of aversion but because you want to feel better. You may think, for example, "If only I could have a peaceful sitting, without this pain!" Seeing the connection between your desire and your suffering brings direct insight into the Second Noble Truth, the truth that desire causes suffering. Now you have developed further Skillful Understanding.

As you sit with the awareness of the Second Noble Truth, becoming increasingly mindful of the connection between your desire and your

suffering, you also further develop Skillful Mindfulness. Because you see so clearly how desire leads to suffering, determination arises to do something about desire. Rousing energy, you again apply Skillful Effort, this time, in order to let go of your craving and clinging to pleasant feeling. The thought of letting go, also known as renunciation, is another aspect of Skillful Thinking.

Perhaps you initially reacted to the pain with a sense of disappointment and frustration. If self-blame or other uncompassionate thoughts directed toward yourself have arisen, you now make a Skillful Effort to let go of them. In doing so, you again exercise Skillful Thinking. Please notice that if you make excessive effort, it will create more pain and tension. With mindfulness, however, you see that problem. Then the step of Skillful Thinking again becomes useful, this time to cool your mind with thoughts of loving-friendliness toward yourself.

Such successes in cultivating Skillful Understanding, Thinking, Effort, and Mindfulness let your mind settle down. The mind becomes more concentrated; this is an expression of the eighth step of the path, Skillful Concentration. When there is good concentration, the physical and mental pain goes away. As the pain disappears you feel joyful, tranquil, peaceful, and happy. These qualities, in turn, lead to even deeper concentration.

Deeper concentration causes mindfulness to strengthen, and you continue to examine your experiences. You see that the pain disappeared because you let go of your desire for pleasurable sensations. Then your Skillful Understanding increases as the logic and power of the Third Noble Truth become clear: with the ending of desire comes the ending of suffering.

You may notice that in this example we have not mentioned the “morality” aspects of the path: Skillful Speech, Skillful Action, and Skillful Livelihood (steps three, four, and five). But they too play a role, for they are key aspects of a good life. Immorality unsettles the mind, making meditation difficult even in comfortable circumstances. You need a good moral foundation before you can remain focused and maintain strong determination in the face of physical or mental pain.

Thus, when you correctly apply the steps of the Buddha’s path, you find in them the way to let go of suffering. In doing so, you witness the

last of the Four Noble Truths, the truth that the way to end suffering is to follow the Eightfold Path. Now you have touched upon all four basic aspects of Skillful Understanding.

By seeing for yourself how the Four Noble Truths function in this kind of situation, you glimpse how they work in your life generally. Thus the wheel of clarity spins on.



KEY POINTS FOR MINDFULNESS OF SKILLFUL UNDERSTANDING

The following points will help you gain happiness through Skillful Understanding:

- Skillful Understanding leads us to act with a comprehension of cause and effect and the Four Noble Truths.
- In accordance with the principle of kamma (karma), acting in skillful ways causes happy results and acting in unskillful ways causes unhappy results.
- Any action that comes from a mind under the influence of greed, hatred, or delusion leads to suffering and is thus unskillful or wrong.
- Any action that comes from a mind not under the influence of greed, hatred, or delusion brings happiness and is thus skillful or right.
- The Four Noble Truths proclaim dissatisfaction, its origin, its cessation, and the Eightfold Path that leads to the cessation of dissatisfaction.

- Facing the truth of dissatisfaction helps us recognize true happiness.
- Birth, old age, sickness, and death; separation from what we love and association with what we hate; not getting what we want and getting what we don't want—these are all dissatisfaction.
- Dissatisfaction arises when we fail to accept the impermanent, inherently unsatisfying, and selfless nature of all phenomena.
- Desire is the underlying cause of dissatisfaction. To the degree we have desire, to that degree we suffer.
- We must take responsibility for our desire and the intentional actions it motivates.
- When we take responsibility for the results of our intentional actions, we change our behavior.
- There is an end to dissatisfaction.
- The eight steps of the Buddha's path to happiness show us the way to end dissatisfaction and achieve total happiness.
- Mindfulness can help us understand the Four Noble Truths and the eight steps of the path to happiness.