

The Noble Eightfold Path:
Right Mindfulness

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"I teach one thing: Suffering and its end." -- The Buddha

The Eightfold Path is the fourth of the Buddha's Noble Truths: the way that leads to the uprooting of the causes of suffering, and thus to increasingly stable and profound peacefulness, wisdom, virtue, and happiness. The heart of each element of the Path is **non-clinging**, the fundamental cause of the end of suffering.

Right Mindfulness

Introduction

Right Mindfulness is one of the three elements of the Path that focus particularly on your internal states of being (the others are Right Effort and Right Concentration).

What Is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is simply a continuous, non-judgmental, accepting awareness of your inner and outer world - especially your inner one: the flow of experience. It is a very grounded awareness, not some kind of lofty mystical state.

Why Be Mindful?

Mindfulness feels good in its own right: relaxed, alert, and peaceful. Additionally, studies have shown that it lowers stress, makes discomfort and pain more bearable, reduces depression, and increases self-knowledge and self-acceptance. Mindfulness is required for the "observing ego" everyone needs for healthy functioning. It detaches you from reactions to see them with gentle clarity and perspective, helping you change old patterns and respond more skillfully. The mindful acceptance of a difficult experience, opening to it without resistance, often allows it to move on. Mindfulness brings you into the present, the only place you can ever be truly happy and free. All this is reason enough to cultivate this quality in our lives.

Further, the Buddha described mindfulness, when fully developed, as the direct path to enlightenment and the end of suffering:

"This is the one-way path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentations, for the passing away of pain and dejection, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of Nibbana - namely, the four establishments of mindfulness.

"What are the four? A person dwells contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending, and mindful, having subdued longing and dejection in regard to the world. He or she dwells contemplating feelings in feelings, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having subdued longing and dejection in regard to the world. He or she dwells contemplating mind in mind, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having subdued longing and dejection in regard

to the world. He or she dwells contemplating phenomena in phenomena, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having subdued longing and dejection in regard to the world."

[*In the Buddha's Words.*, p. 281]

"Contemplating body in the body" (or feelings in feelings, etc.) means being simply aware of immediate, experiential phenomena as it is without conceptualization or commentary. Just the sensations of the rising breath in the belly. Just the subtle feeling of a sound being mildly unpleasant. Just the sense of consciousness being contracted or spacious. Just a single thought emerging and then disappearing. Just this moment. Just this.

This pure awareness - which becomes increasingly absorbed by its objects with growing concentration, to the point that there is vanishingly little difference between the observer and the observed (see the handout on Right Concentration) - is a kind of spotlight illuminating the nature of mind and reality in more and more breathtaking detail. This brings insight into the causes of suffering, and into the causes leading to the end of suffering. (In Pali - the language in which the teachings of the Buddha were first written down - the word for insight is "vipassana.")

Mindfulness is the counter to our habitual state of mind, which is beautifully characterized in this story: A renowned Thai meditation master was once asked what his take on the world was. His concise summary was, "Lost in thought."

Imagine being in a lovely and peaceful meadow, with a train full of thoughts and feelings and desires rolling by in the distance . . . Normally, as this train approaches we tend to become fascinated, drawn in some significant way, and we hop on board and get carried away . . . lost in thought.

On the other hand, mindfulness allows you to see the train coming but have the presence of mind . . . to stay in the meadow! And whenever you get swept along by the train, as soon as you notice that, whoosh, you return immediately to the peaceful meadow, to the refuge of mindfulness.

Where Is Mindfulness to Be Established?

The Buddha named four "establishments," "foundations," or "frames of reference" of mindfulness (depending on how the original term is translated):

- Body, both as an objective entity and as a subjective experience of sensations, sights, sounds, smells, and tastes
- "Feelings" which mean not emotions but the tones of pleasant or unpleasant or neutral that come with every experience
- "Mind," which means consciousness and states of consciousness

- "Phenomena," (sometimes translated as "formations") which means all the other contents of mind, including thoughts, emotions, desires, images, plans, inner conflicts, views, murky psychological dynamics, transference from childhood, etc.

Mindfulness in Meditation

Meditation is the preeminent opportunity to practice and to cultivate mindfulness. This is a progressive process in which " . . . *the mind is steadied internally, quieted, brought to singleness, and concentrated,*" leading to liberating insight.

Buddhism is a 2500 year tradition of dedicated practitioners using skillful means to achieve these deepening states of awareness. And recently, research on the brain has both corroborated and enriched that tradition with findings that have practical implications for how to have meditation be as effective as possible.

Some of these findings are specific to steadying the mind . . . or to quieting it . . . or to bringing it to singleness . . . or to concentrating it. Others are more general, and these are presented in the rest of this article. Think of these as practical tools that you can pick and choose among to find whatever might be helpful.

Continuity of Mindfulness

But mindfulness is not reserved just for some special period of meditation in the day, but is to become as continuous as possible, whether sitting, standing, walking, or lying down . . . or doing acts of the body, speech, or mind . . . or answering the telephone, responding to emails, arguing with a family member, doing the crossword, eating, watching the news on TV, and so on.

Consider this story from the book, *Knee Deep in Grace* (p. 83), about Dipa Ma, the great Indian teacher - and housewife and grandmother:

"Dipa Ma was a living example of how to live in this world, of how practice and the mundane activities of our day-to-day existence can be made one. She insisted that the practice be done all the time, and that we do the things we do throughout the day without making them into problems. Dipa Ma wanted to know, "How awake are you in your life? Are you just thinking about being mindful, or are you really doing it?" Dipa Ma said that even while she was talking, she was meditating. Talking, eating, working, thinking about her daughter, playing with her grandson---none of those activities hampered her practice because she did them all with mindfulness. "When I'm moving, shopping, everything, I'm always doing it with mindfulness. I know these are things I have to do, but they aren't problems. On the other hand, I don't spend time gossiping or visiting or doing anything which I don't consider necessary in my life."

For more information about ways to weave mindfulness throughout daily life, please see the article at www.WiseBrain.org/articles.html titled "Continuity of Mindfulness."

Some of the key factors promoting mindfulness are summarized below.

Being Awake

When you can, meditate during the times when you are maximally alert within your own sleep-wake cycle. (Of course, this is irrelevant on a retreat where you are meditating 10 or more hours a day.)

Minimize drains on your wakefulness, such as lack of sleep, fatigue, illness, hormonal conditions (e.g., thyroid problems), or depression.

In sum: take care of yourself. Pay attention to physical factors, rather than trying to muscle through them or beat yourself up for not being able to overcome them.

Being Alert

Several factors increase alertness:

- Posture - Provides internal, somatosensory feedback to the reticular formations that lead to alertness. Being upright says to the mind: "Wake up!"
- "Brightening the mind" - Here you deliberately activate an internal sense of energizing and enlivening your mind. In physiological terms, this is probably linked to a surge of norepinephrine, which helps you feel both alert and relaxed.

This is distinct from epinephrine - adrenaline - which indeed wakes the whole body up, but also has a kind of jangly, fight-or-flight quality to it. And adrenaline decays into secondary metabolites that remain in the body for hours and have a stressful, disturbing quality to them.

Sometimes you may want to trigger an adrenaline-based surge of "darn it, focus, get here now!" in order to wake yourself up. But only in small doses, and consider the "brightening the mind" approach instead.

- Oxygen - Oxygen is to the brain what gas is to your car. By taking several deep breaths, you increase the oxygen saturation in your blood and thus "push the pedal" with your brain.

Feeling Safe

To help us survive, the brain is naturally vigilant, routinely moving attention across the environment to look for threats. Feeling safe encourages the brain to withdraw the sentries from the battlements, so to say, and put them to work internally (e.g., keeping watch on the breath).

For example, there is the Buddha's recurring instruction to find a place of seclusion - i.e., safety - and then sit down at the base of a tree - where he found his own enlightenment - with your back to it, protecting your most vulnerable flank. Other traditional practices help one get used to, and thus relax about, perceived threats - such as meditating on the jungle side of a well or simply being alone in the forest at night. And some practices have a welcome side effect of helping one to overcome fears, even if that is not their primary purpose (e.g., charnel ground meditations, lovingkindness meditation).

Some methods for feeling safe:

- Diaphragm breathing
- Relaxing the body
- Imagery
- Taking refuge
- Disputing or detaching from worries or other views that make you anxious

Feeling Happy

Commonly used Pali words that refer to positive emotions are "sukha" (happiness, contentment, tranquility) and "piti" (rapture, bliss). These are also two of the five factors that cultivate deep states of concentration, including those known as the "jhanas."

Positive feelings:

- Have vigor and pep, and thus foster greater alertness
- Activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which reduces the distractions of the "fight-or-flight" sympathetic system, and brings relaxation and attention to the body
- Increase overall resilience, so you're less likely to be bothered by something when you meditate
- Counteract negative emotions, which consume attention (plus feel lousy)

Feeling happy is skillful means!

Here are some ways to generate positive emotions:

- The "soft smile" recommended by Thich Nhat Han triggers feedback loops within the emotional circuitry of the brain, activating the feelings associated with smiling.
- Metta practice - compassion, lovingkindness, etc. - bathes you in positive emotion.
- Remember past states of positive emotion ("taking in" them helps support this memory). Then access that bodily/emotional memory to rekindle the positive feeling.