

Introduction to the IMC Eightfold Path Program

*Just as in the great ocean there is but one taste – the taste of salt,
so in this teaching and discipline there is but one taste – the taste of liberation.*

—The Buddha (Udana V 5)

Buddhism is found in just one place—in the people who engage in the practices the Buddha taught. Reading about Buddhism without practicing is like reading a recipe but never cooking the meal. While it may be interesting and educational to read about Buddhist practice, you won't experience the taste of liberation without practicing.

This program is meant to be a practical introduction to the Buddha's most useful and accessible recipe for walking the path to liberation—the Eightfold Path. To support a personal engagement with each of the eight path factors, the program includes reflections and exercises for each factor. Taking the time to do these reflections and exercises is a way to deepen your connection with the Eightfold Path and to better apply it to your life.

It is my hope that the offerings in this program will encourage you to engage in the process of active reflection and contemplation of Buddhist teachings and your relationship to those teachings. There are a number of ways you might do this: You might think about where and when the teachings can be useful in your life. In exploring your relationship to the teachings and practices you might consider how well you understand them, how much enthusiasm you have for them, and the challenges and reservations you have about them. You might come up with questions that bring new perspectives on the teachings.

The value of the readings as a basis of reflection on the teachings and their application to your life can be enhanced by reading them slowly, stopping regularly to consider what you have read. Reading slowly and repeatedly will give you time to

think about the implications of the teachings, perhaps with each reading thinking of new applications and relevance in your life.

The Eightfold Path is a tremendous support for meditation practice. Practicing the path factors in daily life creates a supportive state of mind for engaging in meditation. Some of the factors are directly applicable to meditation practice. Reflecting on their connection to meditation and how to have them support one's meditation practice is a valuable exercise. As you do the readings and engage with the program you might regularly consider how what you learn can be applied to meditation.

It can be very helpful to discuss your reflections with others. For this reason, we have mentors with whom you will meet monthly plus monthly participant meetings in this program. Having conversations about the teachings, the practices, and your findings is one way to develop new understandings about them. Sometimes expressing our ideas out loud provides an opportunity to develop our understanding further. Hearing others discuss their understanding and application of the teachings can open new perspectives and provide inspiration.

It can also be useful to have a “practice journal” in which you write down notes about your experiences practicing with each factor of the Eightfold Path. Sometimes by keeping a journal and rereading your entries, you can better discover how your practice changes and develops over time. It may be possible to notice patterns in how you engage in the practice—for example, you might notice the most common perspectives and concerns you have, or, perhaps, what you tend to ignore or leave out.

One of the ways to explore each of the factors of the Eightfold Path is to spend one month studying and practicing each factor. Included in this program are four sets of reflections and practices for each path factor. I recommend spending one week doing each set of exercises before moving on to the next path factor.

Also, during each month try to read or listen to what a variety of Buddhist teachers have said about the factor you're studying. In addition to this book, you might also read Bhikkhu Bodhi's *The Noble Eightfold Path* and Bhante Gunaratana's *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness*. You can also listen to the talks I've given on the

Eightfold Path factors, which are available on [audiodharma.org](http://www.audiodharma.org) (<http://www.audiodharma.org/series/1/talk/3840/>).

Having the Eightfold Path mature within you is one of the great joys of Buddhist practice. It brings confidence, strength, ease, freedom, and so much more. I hope this program helps you along the path.