

Right Intention

The Second Factor in the Noble Eightfold Path

Intention, I tell you, is an action.

Through intention one acts by way of body, speech, and mind.

— The Buddha (AN 6:63)

The Buddha's approach to liberation can live within us when we understand the practices of the Eightfold Path. This path contains a remarkable set of straightforward practices that can free us from attachment and clinging and thus from suffering. As we saw in our discussion of Right View, it is the task of the first factor of the Eightfold Path to provide the perspective for "finding" the path by bringing our attention to suffering, its cause, and the possibility of ending it.

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

Intentions are the primary or underlying motivations for what we think, say, or do. They are often more basic than what we want; they are the deeper purposes for why we want what we want. So, for example, we may want to go food shopping. The underlying intention might be to care for our self or our family. Or the impetus to shop may be to distract ourselves from being lonely. Often, multiple intentions operate together. In shopping for groceries we might be motivated by wishes to eat healthily, to save money, to buy fair trade products, to impress friends coming to a dinner party, to be comforted, or to have pleasure. If we only think our intention is to shop, we may not consider these other purposes that inform why and how we shop.

Intentions are consequential. When we act on them, the consequences are found in their impact on the world. Whether we act on them or not, intentions also

have an impact on inner world of our mind and heart. They can contribute to our mood and to the quality of our mental life. Ongoing intentions create habits of mind that pre-dispose us to continue to be motivated by these intentions. When intentions undermine our well-being, they do so even more when they are habits. When intentions that support our happiness become “second nature,” we create the conditions for greater happiness.

Intentions are connected to fundamental attitudes that in the Eightfold Path are also known as “intentions.” The Buddha singled out three such attitudes, or ways of thinking, that cause suffering and take us away from the path. These are lust, ill will, and hostility (*kāma*, *vyāpāda*, and *himsa*). Lust—and this includes craving and addiction to sensual pleasures of any kind—reinforces attachment and keeps the mind agitated. Similarly, anyone who has experienced ill will or hostility knows these are troubled and painful states. Intentions of lust, ill will, and hostility lead to more suffering, not less.

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

In order to cultivate renunciation, goodwill, and compassion we begin by having the intention to do so. When it isn’t easy to have good intentions, it’s helpful and meaningful to wish that we could. Then we can at least practice restraint and not act on our harmful intentions.

If our intentions or thoughts involve lust, ill will, or hostility, then it is useful to find a way to disengage from them. Becoming aware of how painful these states are can help overcome the mind’s obsession with them. If we recognize the value of the opposite of these intentions—renunciation, goodwill, and compassion—then it

will be easier to adjust our orientation and think in terms of the positive intentions, even when we do not feel like it.

Here is an example of how this might work. When we are caught up in red-hot anger or frustration it is easy to have our attention preoccupied with what has triggered the anger. If we are overly preoccupied with the object of our anger, we may not be aware of what it feels like to be angry. But by becoming mindful of the subjective feeling of discomfort we can realize that it is not worthwhile to keep feeling this way. This helps us to lessen our interest in being preoccupied – after all, being preoccupied is not inherent in a difficult situation, it is our reaction to it. As pre-occupation lessens we can reflect on useful ways to relate to the situation or the persons we are angry with. If we consider Right Intention we could reflect on how goodwill or kindness might be useful. Practicing Right Intention would be to find ways to express this goodwill.

Reflecting on the three right intentions is not meant to pretend or cover over what we really feel. Once we have become aware of how we feel then part of a realistic assessment of a situation includes considering the role that our intentions might have in that situation. In what way could the three right intentions be useful? Which one is most helpful? Through such consideration it becomes more likely that we will want to act on right intentions.

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

And what about those times we can't change our intentions for the better? In those cases it is useful to first bring a heightened awareness of these intentions. It is also helpful to be mindful of the relationships and reactivity we have to our unskillful intentions. Practicing non-judgmental mindfulness can reduce the suffering that comes from how we relate to these unskillful intentions straightforwardly without being reactive and adding to them.

As was stated earlier, we don't just walk the Eightfold Path for ourselves. Sometimes people assume that in bringing attention to our suffering, the Eightfold Path leads only to self-concern. But the renunciation, goodwill, and compassion of Right Intention often establish the path of practice within the context of our interpersonal relationships. A concern for the welfare of others is integral to walking the Eightfold Path. While it is the practice of Right Intention that fosters positive intentions toward others, the next three steps on the Eightfold Path—Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood—are also about putting these intentions into action.

Additional reading:

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

Reflections and Practices for Right Intention

1–Lust and Renunciation (Week 1)

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

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

2–Ill Will and Goodwill (Week 2)

For this week notice and reflect on the role of ill-will and aversion in your life. How frequently are you aversive, condemning, hateful, or indignant? In what conditions are you more likely to be aversive? How do aversion and ill will affect your body? How does it affect your mind and inner life? And how does it influence your behavior?

Also reflect on your relationship to goodwill, kindness, and loving-kindness. How often do you have goodwill for others? Are you interested in or motivated to have more goodwill? For this week spend time actively intending goodwill to others. This could be privately thinking thoughts of well-wishing to strangers you meet, e.g. store clerks or the person standing in a line in front of you. It could be done by reflecting on how you might bring more friendliness to friends or relatives

you will be spending time with. As you practice such goodwill, how does this affect you?

3-Hostility and Compassion (Week 3)

For this week give yourself time to reflect on the ways hostility appears in your life. It may be useful to consider expressions of anger and irritation toward others or yourself as forms of hostility. Do your actions and words cause harm, even in minor ways? How are you harmed, perhaps mentally, when you express hostility? As you consider the effects of your hostility, how are you affected by this reflection?

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

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

4-Loving-kindness Practice (Week 4)

During this week practice a period of loving-kindness meditation every day. If you are not familiar with this practice, instruction can be found in chapter 22 of *The Issue at Hand*. In addition, as you go about your day, periodically send loving-kindness toward people you encounter. Consider ways you might like to act in kind ways; then try to do so.