

Right Action

The Fourth Factor in the Noble Eightfold Path

Wisdom is purified by virtue, and virtue is purified by wisdom: where one is, the other is, a virtuous person is wise and the wise person is virtuous. Virtue and wisdom together is called the highest in this world.

–The Buddha (DN 4.22)

The intention to avoid causing harm lies at the heart of the entire Eightfold Path. In fact, without it there is no Eightfold Path. The practice of avoiding harm through our physical actions is the fourth path factor, Right Action. This factor is most commonly defined as *not* engaging in specific activities. The tasks of Right Action are to avoid three specific things:

- killing any sentient being
- taking anything belonging to others that is not freely given
- engaging in sexual misconduct

Practicing these three restraints can be inspiring when we consider the safety and peace they create both for others and for our self. In a world where too many people are in danger of physical harm, practicing right action supports peace.

The dedication to not killing can be interpreted more broadly so it precludes causing any physical harm to others. This may well have been the Buddha’s original intent because the word translated as killing, *pāṇātipāta*, also means to attack and to injure. The avoidance of killing and injuring pertains to all conscious, breathing beings, not only other humans. It includes insects, pests, and the slaughter of animals for food. While the Buddha did not proscribe vegetarianism, he forbade his monastic disciples from eating meat if the animal was killed specifically to feed them.

Avoiding taking what is not given is a higher standard than simply not stealing. It means we don’t take, borrow, or use anything belonging to others unless it has been specifically offered to us. It also implies that we do not withhold items in our possession that rightfully belong to others.

Refraining from sexual misconduct is to avoid any sexual activity with others that might cause harm. It means taking great care not to hurt our sexual partners. It also means respecting and upholding all relationship commitments that have been made, including those made by others.

When we avoid injuring others we also avoid injuring ourselves. When we practice Right Action, for example, we are less likely to have a painful conscience. In addition, the less harm we cause, the less we'll be on the receiving end of hurtful behaviors from others that are retaliatory in nature. Fewer people will be mad at us or wish to do us harm. Right Action also prevents us from acting on our impulses of greed, hate, or delusion. This, in turn, protects us from experiencing the negative consequences that come from acting on these underlying motivations.

Living without intentionally harming any living being is also a source of happiness called the "bliss of blamelessness." This is the ease in the mind from being free of any reason to be reproached, either by oneself or by others. The absence of remorse, fear, and criticism is something to appreciate. It is a joy that can grow from reflection on how provides a mind that has a clear conscience. It is a mind that is well suited for meditation practice.

Hate is a common motivation for wanting to injure or kill; greed is often behind stealing; and sexual misconduct can have a variety of motivations. In addition killing, stealing and sexual misconduct all contain a degree of delusion, in particular the delusion of not recognizing the harmful consequences that can ensue. Greed, hate, and delusion may all be entangled with fear—and they arise sometimes as responses to fear. Right Action is a way to help us limit the impact of these painful motivations.

Because it can be easier to control our actions than to control our mind, the three abstinences of Right Action can be an effective way of preventing greed, hate, and delusion from controlling us. When greed, hate, and delusion are strong, not acting on them may require marshaling a matching degree of restraint. But it is worth it. The restraint of Right Action keeps these impulses in check in such a way

that mindfulness can then help us understand, resolve, and dissolve them from the inside without harming others or causing further harm to ourselves.

In addition to these practices of restraint, Right Action also includes acting on the opposite motivations. Instead of greed, we can tap into our capacity for generosity; instead of hate, we can cultivate love and respect for others; instead of delusion, we can take time to pay more careful attention to the people and beings we encounter.

We can be prompted to cultivate positive motivations when we encounter greed, hate, and delusion in ourselves. When we want to injure others we can instead consider the situation through the perspective of compassion. The impulse to take what is not given might instead prompt an exploration of contentment. Anytime there is a desire for a sexual relationship is probably a good time to ask if compassion and respect are adequately present; this is even more so when we are motivated to engage in sexual misconduct.

Some people prefer to emphasize the positive sides of Right Action—what they can do rather than what they should avoid—because they don't feel inspired by the avoidance of killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct. Sometimes people can feel burdened by the seemingly restrictive nature of these teachings. Even so, one advantage of the negative formulation of these practices is that it is often easier to determine which behaviors constitute non-injuring, non-killing, non-stealing, or sexual misconduct than it is to decide how to be compassionate, generous, and respectful.

Ideally the negative and positive sides of Right Action work together. By restraining harmful actions, we have the opportunity to consider and experience behaviors that promote well-being for ourselves and others. For example, practicing non-killing may help us cultivate a greater appreciation for life; practicing non-stealing may help us cultivate respect for others; and practicing good sexual conduct may help us cultivate trustworthiness.

In addition, it is important to appreciate the tremendous value of looking deeply into the motivations and feelings behind our actions. For practitioners on the Eightfold Path, Right Action provides an opportunity to bring greater mindful-

ness to the underlying causes of unskillful behavior. In this way, Right Action works together with the first two factors of the path, Right View and Right Intention. Plus, it can be inspiring to know that practicing the Eightfold Path is a way to release ourselves from these underlying painful and potentially destructive “roots” of greed, hate, and delusion.

Additional reading:

– Chapter 4 in Bhante Gunaratana’s *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness*

Reflections and Practices for Right Action

1-Intentions for Action (Week 1)

While you may rarely, if ever, act on intentions to cause harm, do you have thoughts, wishes, or impulses toward others that would cause harm if acted on? Do you have impulses for revenge, retribution, or animosity toward others? Do you ever have thoughts or fantasies about taking things not given or taking more than is offered? Do you scheme about how you can get something before someone else gets it? Do you take advantage of people's time and goodwill? Do you have thoughts, fantasies, or desires for sexual relations with inappropriate people?

During this week be attentive to these kinds of intentions and thoughts. How often do you have them? In what circumstances are you most likely to have them? What attitudes do you have toward these intentions? Is there an underlying motivation, need, or personal situation that is fuel for these intentions?

During this week, also spend some time putting yourself in other people's shoes; imagine yourself in their situation. How might this shift the intentions you have toward others?

2-Not Killing or Harming (Week 2)

Do you have exceptions to the precept of not killing? Do you have justifications or rationales for when it is OK to kill people, animals, or pests? What are these justifications? In what situations are you committed to not killing or not injuring other people or non-human beings? What motivates this commitment?

How does it benefit you and your Buddhist or mindfulness practice to be committed to not killing? Are there ways you can expand on this commitment?

For the Buddha, having compassion for all beings is the alternative to killing or harming. During this week, find ways to increase the compassion you feel toward others. You can read my article "Cultivating Compassion," which can be found on the article page of IMC's website (insightmeditationcenter.org/books-articles/articles/).

3–Not Taking What Is Not Given (Week 3)

Are there things you take that are not given? Do you help yourself to things and free time at work that have not been offered? Are there situations in your life where you take inappropriate authority over others, coerce people to do things they don't want, or take more of their time than they have offered? Are there any, even subtle, areas where you are liable to take what has not been given? Spend some time reflecting on such behaviors. What motivates them? What beliefs support them? How often do you engage in these behaviors because you're feeling lazy or unwilling to spend the time to do the right thing?

Spend two days this week reflecting on the precept of not taking what is not given. Then spend two days practicing not taking what is not given as thoroughly as you possibly can. You might go as far as some Buddhist monastics who will not pick up a book on someone's coffee table unless there is a clear invitation to do so. Don't force yourself forward in traffic. If you need something and it is not offered, ask for it or examine whether you really need it.

For the next two days, focus on practicing generosity. Look for opportunities to give things, time, compliments, the benefit of the doubt, and other acts of kindness. At the end of the week review and compare the practice of abstaining from taking what is not given with the practice of generosity. How were the challenges and benefits similar or different?

4–Not Engaging in Sexual Misconduct (Week 4)

One way or another sexual desire and expression are part of everyone's life. It is well worth reflecting deeply about our own relationship to our sexuality. The questions that follow are meant for your own private reflections:

What role and influence does sexual desire have in your life? Is the influence beneficial for you? Are you comfortable with your sexuality? If not, what would it take to become comfortable with it? What is your understanding of sexual misconduct? What forms of thinking, fantasizing, and solitary activities do you engage in that involve sexual misconduct? If you are involved with any of these, what might

be satisfying and realistic ways of substituting these with appropriate sexual conduct?

During this week, spend some time bringing a heightened sense of respect to the person or people you have sexual feelings or thoughts about. Devote time, perhaps two sessions of meditation, to practicing loving-kindness toward them. What effect does this respect and loving-kindness have on your sexual desires and thoughts?