



The Eightfold Path

Laura Good & Robert Hodge
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This series is based on *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness: Walking the Buddha’s Path* by Bhante Gunaratana (Bhante G.). Page numbers after the chapter titles refer to the pages in the book. Any quotes without attribution or endnotes come from the book. The terms, Skillful and Right, are used interchangeable when referring to the steps of the Eightfold Path (i.e. Skillful Understanding, Right Understanding).

From the Bhavana Society web site: “Bhante Henepola Gunaratana is the founding abbot of the Bhavana Society. Born in rural Sri Lanka, he has been a monk since age 12 and took full ordination at age 20 in 1947. He came to the United States in 1968. “Bhante G” (as he is fondly called by his students) has written a number of books, including the now-classic meditation manual *Mindfulness In Plain English* and its companion *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness*. Bhante G regularly leads retreats on vipassana, mindfulness, metta (loving-friendliness), concentration, and other topics at the Bhavana Society.”¹

I. Introduction

pp 1-24

April 28, 2021

Robert Hodge

Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness is about understanding and practicing the Eightfold Path, the Buddha's prescription for true happiness and the end of suffering. This series of talks complements Bhante G.'s books and adds additional material. To truly get the benefit of this prescription, you will need to put in effort. Bhante G. makes the point: "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 great discovery made by the Buddha was finding the essence of suffering (what contributes to suffering) and the cessation of suffering. He expressed this knowledge in his many teachings on the Four Noble Truths which will be presented later. First, we will explore happiness.

What happiness is and what it isn't

For many people, having lasting happiness is an illusion as the very thing that they think makes them happy is the source of their misery. This is because happiness doesn't last (impermanent) and in order to keep it going, they crave more of what they think makes them happy. Examples include making more and more money, seizing more power, buying new clothes, earning more academic degrees...stringing together enjoyable experiences. Like all things in life, everything is impermanent and thus this pursuit of happiness is an endless search.

Happiness comes in several types. The lesser type is related to clinging to something, having to have something--that is seeking sensual pleasure from the six senses: touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing, and mind that includes pleasure, gain, praise, and repute (fame). Much of the happiness coming from the aspect of clinging is short-lived which includes clinging to objects, people, thoughts, etc. The pursuit of happiness at this level is a source of much suffering because it never lasts.

A slightly more satisfying form of happiness comes such as when we help others, maintain stable relationships, earn an honest living, and become free of debt. However, these are not the highest forms of happiness because these actions are dependent on the right conditions in our lives. They, too, are unstable and impermanent. "The more we trust them, seek them and try to hang on to them, the more we suffer."

However, there are higher sources of happiness that revolve around the concept of renunciation--that is, letting go. These include spiritual happiness (seeking happiness beyond worldly pleasures); generosity (letting go of material things); the "happiness of letting go of psychic irritants" (such as anger, jealousy...); and, finally, there is happiness through deep concentration meditation by letting go of thoughts, memories, sensations, and perceptions which can lead to misery.

The highest source of happiness is attaining the stages of enlightenment (awakening) through the Eightfold Path.

The Trap of Unhappiness

Regarding the lesser happiness of clinging, the Buddha explained the unfolding process of the "Trap of Unhappiness." This begins with a feeling of desire for something: To quote the Buddha: *"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."*²

Let's take an example. While shopping in a grocery store, you see a delicious looking pie, the only one left.

The process unfolds as follows:

- Feeling (like, dislike, neutral) – a bodily feeling of pleasure arises when you see that pie.
- Craving – you want that pie because of that feeling.
- Pursuit – you pursue more thoughts about how good that pie is because of the craving.
- Gain – you have thoughts of getting that pie because of the pursuit.
- Decision-making – you decide to buy the pie because of the gain it will have.
- Desire and lust – desire and lust for the pie increase because of the decision you have made.
- Attachment – you are committed to having the pie because of the desire and lust for it.
- Possessiveness – you buy the pie so that it can be yours and yours alone because of your attachment to it.
- Stinginess – you have no concern about denying this pie to others because of your possessiveness.
- Safeguarding – you take measures to keep the pie safe because of your stinginess.
- Unwholesome thoughts (conflicts, quarrels, etc.) arise because of your safeguarding.
- Thus, you suffer.

When we look at this process, we can see that our suffering started with that bodily feeling of pleasure. This "Trap of Unhappiness" can occur with all that we experience including material things, relationships, thoughts, and beliefs.

How we can free ourselves from this trap will be explored with Eightfold Path.

The Gradual Training

True happiness is only possible by eliminating craving. Craving cannot be eliminated by willpower alone; resisting it only makes it worse. The Buddha came up with a better plan: The Eightfold Path. The training can be instantaneous and for most people, it takes time, sometimes years. The point is to start now and keep working on it.

The Eightfold Path

The Eightfold Path is divided into three components: wisdom, morality, and concentration.

Wisdom consists of two steps:

- **Skillful Understanding:** gaining an understanding of what life is really about.
- **Skillful Thinking:** practicing generosity, loving-kindness and compassion.

Morality (Virtue) is adopting core values and living your life in accordance with them. The three core values are contained in the steps:

- **Skillful Speech**
- **Skillful Action**
- **Skillful Livelihood.**

Concentration is the process for practice and contains three steps:

- **Skillful Effort;** developing wholesome mental states.
- **Skillful Mindfulness:** seeing things as they really are.
- **Skillful Concentration:** being able to focus on the task at hand.

We will be going through each step in detail.

Supports for Practice

The supports to help your practice are:

Simplify Your Life

- Are all of your activities necessary or just a way to keep busy?
- Do you spend time in solitude for reflection and self-renewal?

Exercise Self-restraint

- Are you organized?
- Do you keep a healthy body and exercise?
- Do you eat a healthy and moderate diet?
- Do you take the time to reflect and/or meditate each day?

Cultivate Goodness

- Are you practicing generosity?
- Are you practicing patience?
- Do you have faith in your potential to achieve lasting happiness?

Find a Teacher and Explore the Teachings

- Do you have a place where you can practice with others?
- Do you have a teacher whom you can consult and discuss the teaching?

Begin a Practice of Mindfulness

- Practice daily sitting meditation

II. Skillful Understanding

pp. 25-55

May 5 & 12, 2021

Robert Hodge

The Buddha's teaching on the Eightfold Path:

I have heard that at one time the Blessed One was staying near Sāvattthī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery. There he addressed the monks, "Monks!"

"Yes, lord," the monks responded to him.

The Blessed One said, "I will teach & analyze for you the noble eightfold path. Listen & pay close attention. I will speak."

"As you say, lord," the monks responded to him.

The Blessed One said, "Now what, monks, is the noble eightfold path? Right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

"And what, monks, is right view? Knowledge with regard to [or: in terms of] stress, knowledge with regard to the origination of stress, knowledge with regard to the stopping of stress, knowledge with regard to the way of practice leading to the stopping of stress: This, monks, is called right view."³

NOTE: The name of each step of the Eightfold Path may have different translations. In this series, we will be using the term, skillful, instead of right and understanding instead of view.

Skillful Understanding: gaining an understanding of what life is really about.

The Skillful Understanding step is one of two Wisdom components (the second is Skillful Thinking). This step explains the role of 1) cause and effect and 2) The Four Noble Truths.

Cause and effect

When we look at our behaviors, whether they are skillful or unskillful, we ask "what does each bring?" The main point in this part of Skillful Understanding is that all actions have causes and effects. The purpose of mindfulness in working with this step is to develop an awareness that our actions have consequences both good and bad depending on intent. To repeat: actions have consequences both good and bad depending on intent. The basis of Buddhist morality is that acting in unskillful ways leads to unhappy results and acting in skillful ways leads to happy results. Happy means long lasting happiness, not the short-lived happiness obtained through desire, ill-will, or delusion.

The concept of karma comes up in relation to cause and effect. Karma refers to how both skillful and unskillful behavior affects an individual over time. Karma is not punishment or retribution but simply an extended expression or consequence of natural acts. Karma means "deed" or "act" and more broadly names the universal principle of cause and effect, action and reaction, that governs all life. The effects

experienced are also able to be mitigated by actions and are not necessarily fated. That is to say, a particular action now is not binding to some particular, pre-determined future experience or reaction; it is not a simple, one-to-one correspondence of reward or punishment.

So, looking at unskillful behavior, how can it lead to harm? This is not straightforward as was noted above. It can be immediate or delayed. Our mind often makes up causes and effects which may not really be the case. Another way to state it is that karma or unskillful behavior puts you at risk whatever the cause or effect.

An example of multiple causes and conditions can be seen in a clip from the Curious Case of Benjamin Button.⁴ Daisy, a ballet dancer gets hit by taxi after a rehearsal. In the clip, we see a woman heading out to pick up a package. She forgets her coat and in going back to her apartment, the phone rings and she talks for two minutes. She then leaves and just misses catching a taxi. The taxi driver who does pick her up had stopped for a cup of coffee and then had to stop for a man crossing the street. The man was late because he overslept. The taxi driver after picking up the woman, waits for her to pick up the package. However, the shop girl who was late because she had broken up with her boyfriend had not wrapped the package, so the woman had to wait. When the taxi driver got underway, he was blocked by a delivery truck and then had to wait for a light. Daisy who had left the rehearsal had to wait for a friend to tie her shoelaces. She goes out the back entrance and crosses the street. The taxi driver coming up the street is momentarily distracted and hits Daisy.

In reviewing what happened just at the scene of the accident, we might think that Daisy and the taxi driver were at fault because neither was paying attention. Yet, when exposed to the various behaviors of the woman, the shopgirl, her boyfriend, the man who overslept, the delivery truck driver, we can see that if any of these circumstances had been different (such as the woman not forgetting her coat), Daisy might not have been hit by the taxi. As noted above, there is no simple one to one correlation.

This example only illustrates some of the multiple causes and effects that were factors in Daisy being hit by the taxi. It is not possible to determine that this event was any punishment for Daisy because of some previous unskillful act she committed. As Bhante G. notes causes and conditions occur and skillful actions lowers our risk of unhappy results.

Skillful and Unskillful Actions

Skillful behavior yields two results, internal and external: how happy you feel (internal) and how happy others feel as a result of your behavior (external).

There are ten unskillful actions that will cause harm: three from the body (killing, stealing, sexual misconduct); four from speech (lying, malicious talk, harsh language, useless speech); and three from the mind (covetousness, ill will, wrong view (delusion)). There will be more on this later.

Avoiding these unskillful behaviors is not a doctrine or commandments to be followed. Rather, behaviors (unskillful or skillful) are actions that will yield predictable results, regardless.

The Four Noble Truths

The Buddha taught for 45 years and his main teaching was about suffering. The Buddha said, “*What I teach now as before, O monks, is suffering and the cessation of suffering.*”⁵ The Four Noble Truths can be summed up as 1) Dissatisfaction, 2) Cause, 3) End, and 4) Path. We will start with Dissatisfaction.

The First Noble Truth: Dissatisfaction

The Buddha sometimes compared suffering to a disease. In order to treat the disease, suffering, we must first know more about its nature. Dissatisfaction with what life hands us is universal. We may use other names to describe our suffering: stress, fear, tension, anxiety, worry, depression, disappointment, anger, jealousy, abandonment, nervousness, or pain (particularly mental pain). When we are dissatisfied, we generally look for a reason such as circumstances, problems, or uncertainty (not knowing). In order to deal with dissatisfaction, we must look at it head on and examine it closely with stable emotions and a steady mind and without getting pessimistic, depressed or angry. What we will find is that we create our suffering through the thoughts that occur in the mind.

Three kinds of experiences cause most of the dissatisfaction for us: Life Cycle, Change and No Control.

Life Cycle

The Life Cycle consists of birth, aging, sickness, and death. Each of these can cause dissatisfaction. For example, when we are born, we want all sorts of things such as being held and rocked. And when we don't get what we want we cry (suffer). During our life, we experience aging and sickness. And finally, we encounter death. Even though we logically know that we cannot escape death, we fear its coming. To quell this fear, we turn to pleasures of the senses (seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, smelling, thinking) as a way to escape the inevitability of our mortality.

Change

The mind wants stability and doesn't like change. However, everything that arises from causes can be named “conditioned things” or phenomena. All phenomena have three characteristics:

- Impermanence
- Unsatisfactoriness (inability to provide lasting satisfaction or dissatisfaction)
- Selflessness

Change is a part of life and when we find ourselves attached to stability, we are in delusion.

Bhante G. notes that it is easy to understand impermanence and unsatisfactoriness but more difficult to realize selflessness. He notes, “By truly understanding selflessness, you can feel happy and comfortable wherever you go, whether you are treated well or ill...As our practice of mindfulness continues, we can look forward to the day when we will perceive the selflessness and soullessness of all phenomena directly.”

No Control

This is another aspect of selflessness. Having a sense of control is wanting to maintain stability and thinking that we can make it so.

There is a saying: “Act like you are in control knowing that you are not.” This means that in the everyday world we communicate with the terms “I” or “me” but we do not get attached to thinking that the “I” or “me” is real.

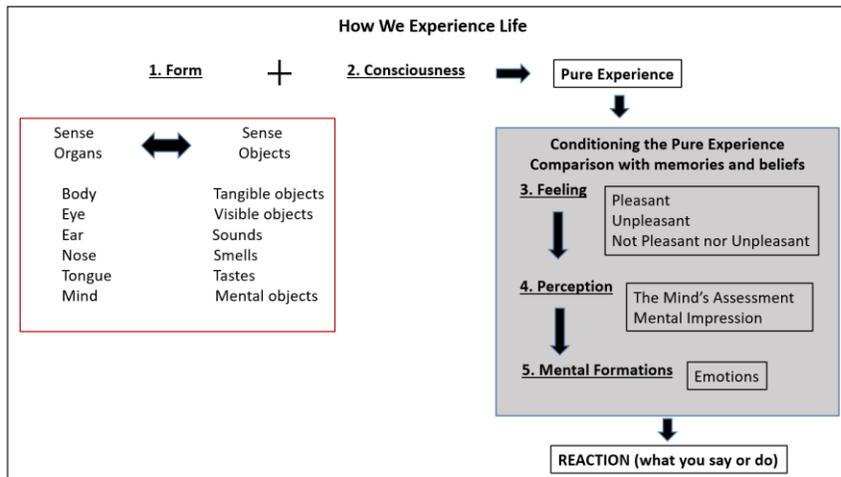
Realistic perception or how difficult it is to see what type of dissatisfaction we are having.

Our mind tends to put the spin on things. The change that the mind makes on our original experience is called conditioning. Just as an air conditioner changes the temperature and humidity, the mind changes our original perception of an experience.

When a thought arises, the Buddha said:

“Depending on the mind and forms, mind 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 recognizable by the mind.”⁶ This proliferation caused by the conditioning.

In the diagram below, How We Experience Life, we can see that the pure experience (contact) is the meeting of the thought sense object (mental formations) with the mind sense organ and consciousness. Then, as the Buddha noted, feeling and perception arise causing other mental formations to arise (mental proliferation).



Realistic perception occurs when we apply mindfulness to all conditioned phenomena and see how things really are (e.g., in accordance with the three characteristics: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness). What gets in the way? As we perceive the conditioned world through the senses, feelings arise that are in one of three categories, pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral (neither pleasant nor unpleasant). In other words, our mind takes the raw sensations from the initial contact and puts the “spin” on. Mindfulness meditation or observation allows us to discern the conditioning of the pure experience. We can see when the mind is adding judgments, commentary, or decision-making to the input we are receiving. In this way, we can see what type of dissatisfaction we are experiencing.

The Second Noble Truth: The Cause of Dissatisfaction.

The First Noble Truth establishes that suffering exists. As with a bodily disease, the Second Noble Truth addresses the cause. The cause is desire that turns into attachment, greed, grasping, craving. Desire includes moving away as well as moving toward. Desire leads us into the Trap of Unhappiness as noted in the Introduction.

Where does desire come from? To quote from Phillip Moffitt in *Dancing with Life*: “Desires are energetic states felt in your body and mind that arise from pleasant and unpleasant feelings associated with various thoughts and sensations which then cause the mind to move toward or away from some experience. Desire can arise and pass without contracting into craving.”⁷

Bhante G. notes that desire is built into humans. One particular source is social conditioning. What we learn from others and our culture embeds in the mind as beliefs that some things are good and others are bad. We become judgmental and suffer.

To look at it another way, suffering occurs when you are attached to an outcome. “You start living from a demand that life be other than it is”⁸ Matt Flickstein notes: “The mind thinks it knows better than life what should be, and it always seems to want things to be other than they are.”⁹

“People seek safety and they believe that safety is in stability and absence of change. You return to a place you visited and you want it to be just as it was when you left. You come back to beloved friends and you want them to be just as they were when you last saw them. Such grasping after what would seem to be a stable or safe experience is a part of the voice of fear that believes that it will not be safe unless it has some kind of permanence. In that belief there is enormous suffering, because, try as hard as you will, you cannot hold things from changing. Can you be with this friend, this world, as it is in this moment, and not as you hold it in memory? It is new and wonderful!”¹⁰

In summary, Bhante G. notes: “At bottom, desire comes out of ignorance—ignorance that nothing lasts and ignorance that desire creates discomfort...Because of desire, people distort reality and avoid taking personal responsibility for their actions.”

The Third Noble Truth: The End of Dissatisfaction

True happiness consists of what is not experienced. Happiness gained through experience (for example, sensual pleasures) is short lived and as a result, not satisfactory in the long run. Once all negative states of mind (greed, hatred, delusion) are eliminated, we can experience total happiness. Another word for this state is peace.

True happiness cannot be understood by the mind. The closest one may come is having brief glimpses when the mind totally lets go of everything. An example is deep (dreamless) sleep. Some may fear this state because in a direct knowing of pure awareness, there is no object of awareness, and no observer (witness) which means that there is no awareness of awareness. So, some would say, “How can this be fun if I can’t experience it?” It is because this peace is beyond experience and it is what you really are: present awareness.

Another taste of this knowing can come from meditation when one practices choiceless awareness. As Phillip Moffitt notes in *Dancing with Life*, “Your mind is willing to be with what is true in the moment and isn’t disturbed by it.”¹¹ This choiceless awareness can eventually become the essence of your being.

Nisargadatta defines true love is as the refusal to make distinctions, to separate.¹² When attachment is present, love is veiled?

The Third Noble truth reveals the cure, the cessation of all attachment.

“The Buddha’s instructions to abandon clinging to desires translates into *caring without demanding, loving without imposing conditions, and moving toward your goals without attachment.*”¹³ When you find yourself doing otherwise ---- suffering occurs.

Why is understanding suffering important? From the Buddha: When a noble disciple has thus understood suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the way leading to the cessation of suffering... he here and now makes an end of suffering. In that way too a noble disciple is one of right view... and has arrived at this true Dhamma.”¹⁴

Cultivating total cessation is when “*You are living the deathless; you are no longer defined by, living from, or identified with whatever is arising and passing.*”¹⁵

Mindfulness helps one realize “not knowing.” Knowing is a product of the mind and is an attachment. As Ajahn Sumedho notes in his book, *The Four Noble Truths*, “We reflect as we see the nature of desire; as we recognize that attachment to desire is suffering. Then we have the insight of allowing desire to go and the realization of non-suffering, that is the cessation of suffering. These insights can only come through *reflection* – through really contemplating and pondering these truths, *they cannot come through belief.*”¹⁶

Life is your teacher – there is no need to create a practice environment. As you experience brief moments of release from cessation, the moments of release will expand.

Remember, “All that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing.”

The Fourth Noble Truth – The Path

Although the cure for suffering is letting go of attachment, it requires a comprehensive approach. The Buddha described the eight steps in the Fourth Noble Truth. The next steps are described in the next chapters.

The Four Noble Truths Summary

Truths	
Dissatisfaction	Dissatisfaction, stress, fear, tension, anxiety, worry, depression, disappointment, anger, jealousy, abandonment, nervousness, mental pain, etc.
Cause	Wanting life to be other than it is, attachment to an outcome
End	Stop craving, let go
Path	The Eightfold Path

Remember, the wisdom of Skillful Understanding includes understanding of cause and effect (karma) and the Four Noble Truths.

III. Skillful Thinking

pp. 57-89

Part 1

May 26, 2021

Laura Good

The Eightfold Path has three parts: Wisdom, Ethics and Concentration. The first step of this path is Right View, or Skillful Understanding. Along with Skillful Thinking, they help us gain wisdom so we can live our life with happiness, no matter what happens. Skillful Thinking is also known as Right Intention or Right Resolve Samma sankappa.

“And what, monks, is right resolve (skillful thinking)? Resolve for renunciation, resolve for non-ill will, resolve for harmlessness: This, monks, is called right resolve”

If you were going to look back at your life and its suffering, dissatisfaction and asked yourself which took up more of the actual time of that suffering: the pain in the body or the pain in the mind, what would you say. I bet you would reflect that it was your thoughts that caused the most suffering. We can experience physical pain and often if it is great pain, we get very focused on that moment and we aren't doing a lot of thinking beside trying to make it stop. But there is something about our thoughts, and the rumination of thinking about something over and over, sometimes not even the subject of the thought, but the fact that you are ruminating; it's getting caught in the loop that can cause even more pain.

Thinking is very powerful and can make us happy or miserable. Thinking refers not only to thoughts but to any intentional mind state. We worry, obsess, have fears, fantasize – all of which can cause suffering. With Skillful Thinking, we learn how to recognize and deal with the unskillful thoughts that arise. As with all phenomena, these thoughts have the Three Characteristics of impermanence, inherently unsatisfying, and selfless nature. We do not control our thoughts; we practice mindfulness as they arise. Skillful thinking is about seeing these thoughts for what they are and knowing that we can let go. It offers us an escape from the pattern of rumination and allows skillful thoughts to arise.

The Three Aspects of Right Intention:

Letting Go - Renunciation

Loving Kindness - Absence of ill-will

Compassion - Absence of cruelty

Traditionally we start with renunciation. This turns a lot of people off. It has caused a lot of people to think Buddhism is a bummer, you can't have any joy or pleasure, because you're not supposed to be attached to anything, that you are just supposed to let go and let go. This is a misunderstanding or as Bhante G says, a trick of the mind. Of course, we can be attached, it's what makes us able to love others and feel loved, relationships are a two way street. We invest in some people, it's not possible to be in a personal relationship with every person on the planet. Nature makes us want to nurture and care for our family and loved ones, otherwise they won't survive or thrive. It is not wrong to love someone or something. It's the clinging that makes us suffer. We may cling to wholesome desires like wanting our

kids to do well or wanting to have good health. But we all know we ultimately have little control of how things turn out. We try our best and still things may not pan out. So, renunciation means we give our all, we give 100% but we are not attached to the results. It's the attachment to a specific outcome that makes us suffer.

There are three main opportunities for letting go of unskillful thoughts:

1. Attachment to material objects
2. Clinging to People, Experiences, Beliefs
3. Fear

Note we are not trying to “push” one kind of thoughts out so we can replace them with others, we are being mindful, without judgement, of what is arising so we can create conditions for more wholesome thinking to naturally occur.

Attachment to Material Objects

We can take an inventory and see how we are attached to what we own or what we desire. It helps to do this without judgment and to be open to looking deeply at what it would be like to cease our attachment to specific objects. This does not mean that we give everything away; it is just that we view material objects as having the Three Characteristics: impermanent, inherently unsatisfactory, and selfless nature. We are looking at material objects with mindfulness so we can see what they really are.

There is also the opportunity to look at our thoughts about material generosity. What attachment do we have to practicing generosity? What keeps us from giving? If we do give, do we expect something in return such as recognition? Look at this deeply without judgment.

The Buddha: “If people knew, as I know, the fruits of sharing gifts, they would not enjoy their use without sharing them, nor would the taint of stinginess obsess the heart. Even if it were their last bit, their last morsel of food, they would not enjoy its use without sharing it if there was someone else to share it with.”¹⁷

Clinging to People, Experiences, and Beliefs

Our mind creates different realms that seem to constitute the whole of reality. This reality consists of an outside world, our body, and our mind. We think that there is an “inner self” that experiences this reality. As we practice mindfulness, we come to realize that this “reality” is just another thought or phenomenon that arises in the mind and that the “inner self” is also just a thought. We move from what seems to be, to what is.

Clinging to people (relationships) and physical form

Our thoughts about relationships, experiences including our body and mind, and beliefs will cause suffering if we are attached to them. Attachment means that we think we own or can control them to attain our preferred outcome. Clinging in relationships, even good ones, is something to be aware of because it can cause suffering.

There is also attachment to our physical form; the motivation being that we can be more attractive to others or be immortal. Our body is always changing; we have no control over that process. We cannot control our sensations. The next sensation might be pleasant or unpleasant. All we can do is be aware of potential clinging to these thoughts about our body.

Clinging to Experiences

As noted above, all of our experiences seem to come from three “reality” concepts: the outside world, the body and the mind. With mindfulness, we see that all phenomena that arise share the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and selflessness. Experiences only exist as memories. In essence, what are we clinging to? Just thoughts and memories.

Clinging to beliefs

As we go through life, we accumulate beliefs about things. We don’t realize that beliefs are just thoughts and when we get attached to them, we suffer. Through holding beliefs, we become more rigid and inflexible. We lose our freedom. Rather than rely on beliefs to guide our lives, we can look more deeply and turn to core values as a broader way of living such as truth, service, patience, and generosity.

The core values of knowing the truth and finding freedom support realistic perception. This includes taking the stand of “*knowing that I do not know.*” Fixed beliefs hinder us from knowing the truth. We may even have to let go our fixed beliefs about Buddhism. The Buddha said the teachings are like a raft that should be abandoned once you cross the flood.

Dealing with Fear

The last opportunity for letting go of unskillful thoughts after attachment to material objects and clinging to people, experiences, and beliefs is dealing with fear.

What is fear? Some of its characteristics:

- Associated with a body sensation.
- Associated with a thought that is usually about what might happen in the future.
- Associated with something that mind perceives as a threat.

Why does fear arise? There are a number of reasons:

- Attachment to something such as ideas, beliefs, concepts, feelings, physical objects.
- Coming into contact with what we don’t understand.
- A situation where the outcome is uncertain, and we are attached to a certain outcome.

As we grow up, we deal with fear in different ways (adapted from *Being Zen* by Ezra Bayda)

- Non-recognition
- Recognition
- Adjusting to it.
- Trying to get rid of it by confronting it. For example, trying to overcome fear with an aggressive stance. (This is replacing one conditioned response for another.)
- Letting it in and practicing mindfulness.

Fear is the result of our conditioning. Memories arise and spark the reaction.

Like memories, fear is just another phenomenon that arises and falls away. It has the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and selfless nature. Know the distinction between “I am fearful” and “Fear arises in me.” Rather than admit or say that “I am fearful”, learn to say, “Fear arises in me frequently”. It is not a permanent condition.

What about courage? “Courage is not the absence of fear; courage is and grows out of the willingness to experience fear.”¹⁸

“When fear is experienced in the present moment, minus our beliefs and judgments about it, we will find that it is rarely unbearable. In fact, when we really stay present with the physical experience of fear, we might experience a deep and pervasive peace, sensing the spaciousness and love that flower as fear transforms on its own. As the solidity of fear becomes porous, life’s intrinsic essence simply flows through.”¹⁹

Remember that a bodily sensation always accompanies the thought. (Fear is a combination of sensation and belief). Get to know these sensations so that they can serve as a reminder of what is arising. “Here it comes again. What will it be like this time?”²⁰. Practicing mindfulness, we can pay to attention moment to moment to what is.

Moving from Letting Go to Generosity

As Bhante G. states, Letting Go “It is generosity in the highest sense.” Even in the smallest case. Letting Go can be a positive energizing experience as we have an opportunity to give away anything that holds us back from our highest happiness.

If our intention is to let go, not only to let go but to be generous, how do we do this?

Replace renunciation with giving. Letting go of a grudge means you are giving yourself some peace and you may be giving something to the other person. But don’t keep score. Forgiveness is mainly about relieving your own suffering.

Letting go of a fixed idea means you are giving a situation the chance just to be as it is, with no expectations or judgement. Letting life be as it is, always changing. We tend to think that is a bad thing, that is feels out of control. If those feelings arise, we have the tools to let them pass through, use RAIN, that is generosity to those involved and to yourself. This is how we get clarity. I am not saying let terrible things happen, I’m talking about the usual pain of rumination which is not reality. It doesn’t solve problems. It’s different than mindful consideration. Yes, we need to think things through, that is skillful mindfulness (the 7th step of the Eightfold Path).

Finally, intention is not enough. If you say, my intentions were good and suffering results, you don’t get out it by just saying that. You continue, you apologize, you help get to the skillful conclusion. Often, saying you had good intentions is all about you. It’s also a little be me centered to think you have all the power in a situation. You may have more than you think you do, but not in the way you think or may

want. Remember, letting go of fixed ideas of outcome is actually letting go of something that can get in the way of our real happiness.

This is how to start setting our own wheel of intention in motion by Skillful Thought. We do this by letting go of what we cling to. This lets our connections and experiences be even more rich and meaningful by letting them be what they truly are, without attachment to outcome. We gain wisdom by the first steps of the Eightfold path Skillful Understanding and Skillful Thinking.

Part 2

June 2, 2021

Laura Good

The Three Aspects of Skillful Intention are:

Letting Go (renunciation)

Loving Kindness: Absence of ill-will

Compassion: Absence of cruelty

If we resolve to apply these three things to our approach to daily life, no matter what happens, we can suffer less and be happy. Even though we may experience great physical pain, it is our thoughts that can cause the greatest amount of suffering.

Thinking is very powerful and can make us happy or miserable. When we ruminate, around in circles as we worry, obsess, have fears, fantasize – we are caught in a trap, as Bhante G says, a trap of unhappiness, because when that happens, we think our thoughts are the whole truth. But that is not the whole truth. The whole truth is, as with all phenomena, these thoughts have the Three Characteristics of impermanence, inherently unsatisfying, and a selfless nature. They don't last. We do not control our thoughts, BUT we can train and set our intention to meet our thoughts with mindfulness. Skillful thinking is about seeing these thoughts for what they are and knowing that we can let go. It offers us an escape from the pattern of rumination and allows skillful thoughts to arise.

We talked about the first aspect, renunciation, which is often mistaken as detachment and not caring about anyone or anything. What it really means is being mindful of how our clinging to anything, anyone or any outcome causes suffering.

It is not wrong to love someone or something. It's the clinging that makes us suffer. We all know we ultimately have little control of how things turn out. It's the attachment to a specific outcome that makes us suffer.

There are three main opportunities for letting go of unskillful thoughts:

1. Attachment to material objects
2. Clinging to People, Experiences, Beliefs
3. Fear

Note we are not trying to “push” one kind of thought out so we can replace it with another, we are being mindful, without judgement, of what is arising so we can create conditions for more wholesome thinking to naturally occur.

We also looked at the difference between clinging to our beliefs and relying on our core values. Beliefs can make us rigid and inflexible, and we lose our freedom, but core values such as generosity and patience help clarify what effects we want our intentions to have. Then with our core values identified even, if “we know that we don’t know” we can still be peaceful and content.

Lastly, we talked a little about fear, how fear feeds fear and is the result of conditioning. So when fear arises, we meet it with mindfulness and instead of pushing it away, we name it and observe how it feels in the body without clinging.

Of course, this is easier said than done, but the emphasis in the eightfold steps is “skillful”. Not hooking into fear is a skill we can develop.

Also, have courage. “Courage is not the absence of fear; courage is and grows out of the willingness to experience fear.”²¹

Moving from Letting Go to Generosity

Finally, a great reminder of how to let go is to think of it as generosity. As Bhante G. states, Letting Go “It is generosity in the highest sense.” Letting Go can be a positive energizing experience as we have an opportunity to give away anything that holds us back from our highest happiness/highest generosity.

Letting go of a fixed idea means you are giving a situation or a person, the chance just to be as they are, with no expectations or judgement. Letting life be as it is, always changing.

Now this is where people say, “how do I let a “bad person” be just as they are? What if they are doing terrible things? What if they are causing great suffering?”

Bhante G has always reminded us that everyone, without exception has “buddha-nature”. Someone who does that is in great pain and has mistakenly made choices that they thought would bring them happiness. I know this sounds simplistic. If you could go back in time and stop Hitler or any leader now that has caused great pain and destruction, would you? The reality is, the conditions that caused such people to do what they did would still be there. It is never just one person.

In multiple cases of young people getting radicalized, they have shown it is because they want to feel they “belong” to something greater than themselves; they want to feel connected even if it’s to a movement that is extreme. So, they have shown that often it just takes small, one on one moments of connecting with a mentor or someone who takes care to listen and connect in more positive and peaceful ways, and then they have an alternative. Whether they knew or not, their intention to feel valued and connected is now on a wholesome trajectory rather than unwholesome.

This is where the second aspect of Skillful Intention comes in: Loving-Kindness,(metta) the non-sentimental love toward all beings.

We all want to be happy and peaceful. However, it is very hard to imagine that those whom we feel are destructive and/or evil have at their very core that same wish. The practice of Loving-Kindness (or Loving Friendliness) helps us to replace our thoughts of ill-will and negativity towards others with openness and understanding.

What is ill-will? It is a thought, accompanied by a bodily sensation. Looking at ill-will mindfully, the first step is to admit that we do harbor such feelings toward others. These feelings come from judgments that stem from beliefs, memories (past experiences), views, ideas and opinions. As Bhante G notes, “These rigid ideas stifle our natural loving-friendliness.”

These feelings of ill-will are more harmful to us than they are to others. These feelings cause personal suffering as well as inciting actions that we later regret. Ill-will serves no useful purpose despite what our mind tells us.

So how do we create or make room for more loving-kindness?

The Practice of Loving-Kindness or Metta Practice is simple but it can be challenging to practice because as we give loving-kindness to those whom we harbor ill-will toward, strong aversions may arise.

Loving-kindness meditation, first relax the mind through a concentration practice of observing the sensation of the breath on the nostrils while breathing in and breathing out.

Then make an intention to come from your heart and to be as open as possible. Make an intention to offer joy and happiness to yourself and others by repeating a series of phrases.

Some examples with blanks to fill in for whom you are offering loving-kindness:

May _____ be happy and peaceful.

May _____ be safe and protected.

May _____ be filled with contentment.

May _____ be free from suffering.

Start with yourself and then move to a loved one. Shift to neutral person (someone whom you have no positive or negative feelings about). Then shift to someone with whom you feel ill-will. Finally, gradually expand your loving-kindness to all beings. You can start with a small geographic area and expand to the universe.

Anger is the main obstacle to generating Loving-kindness. Why does anger arise? Note the wording. It is not “Why do we get angry?” As noted in the second Noble Truth, dissatisfaction such as anger arises when life is not the way we want it to be. Anger can be very subtle such as impatience, or off handed

judging remark. In an instant we see an objective situation, then our mind interprets and then we adopt a strategy.

But often it doesn't feel like it's a conscious process and we react, with high emotion or anger and like it or not this is our strategy. Which often has bad results and is not skillful. Being aware of this process can help us to deal with it mindfully.

All of the ways that we react in our mind and actions is avoiding the true experience of anger. Each is a form of attachment to the memory of anger that obscures the real experience.

As with ill-will, anger hurts you more than with whom you are angry. It can lead to ill-health and can destroy relationships.

How we can work with anger:

- Name it : "Anger is arising" not "I am angry" or " _____ makes me angry"
- Practice restraint – Ezra Bayda in *Being Zen* advocates the Practice of Non-expression. This is not suppression. It is mindfully not reacting with action to the arising of anger.
- Reflection Recreate your anger in meditation and note the bodily sensations that arise. It will be easier to identify them when they come up in the future.
- Have patience. Know that nothing is permanent and that the anger will fall away.
- Reflect on the role of blaming and how it can be an unskillful practice.
- Practice Loving kindness. Whether the anger is directed at someone else or inward (to yourself), wish happiness and peacefulness as a part of your metta practice. "As we practice loving-kindness on a regular basis, it is no longer a meditation exercise, it becomes a part of our being, our natural response to life."²²
- Reflecting on one's actions.

The Buddha said:

"Whenever you want to perform a bodily act, you should reflect on it: 'This bodily act I want to perform — would it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Is it an unskillful bodily act, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it would lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it would be an unskillful bodily act with painful consequences, painful results, then any bodily act of that sort is absolutely unfit for you to do. But if on reflection you know that it would not cause affliction... it would be a skillful bodily action with happy consequences, happy results, then any bodily act of that sort is fit for you to do."

And he goes on saying when you are performing that act, ask yourself is it leading to all of those painful results? If so, stop!

"Having performed a bodily act, you should reflect on it... If, on reflection, you know that it led to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it was an unskillful bodily act with painful consequences, painful results, then you should confess it, reveal it, lay it open to the Teacher or to a knowledgeable companion in the holy life. Having confessed it... you should exercise restraint in the future. But if on reflection you know that it did not lead to affliction... it was a skillful bodily action with happy

consequences, happy results, then you should stay mentally refreshed and joyful, training day and night in skillful mental qualities....[similarly for verbal and mental acts]...

"Therefore, Rahula, you should train yourself: 'I will purify my bodily acts through repeated reflection. I will purify my verbal acts through repeated reflection. I will purify my mental acts through repeated reflection.' That is how you should train yourself."

<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.061.than.html>²³

So in other words, think before you speak or act, and be mindful before you think.

How? Train yourself in meditation seeing what arises, practice loving kindness to yourself and others.

Part 3

June 16

Robert Hodge

The Three Aspects of Skillful Intention are:

Letting Go (renunciation): Absence of clinging

Loving Kindness: Absence of ill-will

Compassion: Absence of cruelty

Skillful thinking is developing thinking or intentions that lead to the cessation of suffering. Since the basis of suffering is clinging, we practice letting go of our deep attachments to material objects: our clinging to people, experiences, and beliefs; and we address fear (anticipation of what might go wrong). Next, we develop loving-kindness to abandon our ill-will and then we develop compassion to abandon cruelty (harmfulness).

In this talk we will explore compassion and mindfulness of all three factors.

Compassion

What is thought associated with absence of cruelty? Compassion

What is compassion?

Compassion is the intention to relieve the suffering of others. It arises with the recognition of the universality of suffering and the realization that all living beings desire happiness.

“Compassion is the melting of the heart at the thought of another’s suffering.” Bhante Gunaratana.

The dew of compassion is a tear – Byron

How does compassion differ from loving-kindness?

In comparing compassion to loving-kindness (metta), Bhikkhu Bodhi notes: “Compassion supplies the complement to loving-kindness: whereas loving-kindness has the characteristic of wishing for the happiness and welfare of others, compassion has the characteristics of wishing that others be free from suffering, a wish to be extended without limits to all living beings. Like metta, compassion arises by considering that all beings, like ourselves, wish to be free from suffering, yet despite their wishes continue to be harassed by pain, fear, sorrow, and other forms of dukkha (suffering)”²⁴

You cannot generate compassion.

We need to express compassion **through our actions and not just hold it as a thought in our mind.**

It is solely by experiencing your experience of another’s suffering that leads to the appropriate action.

Otherwise, compassion just remains as a thought.

Nyanaponika Thera says it very well:

“The world suffers. But most men have their eyes and ears closed. They do not see the unbroken stream of tears flowing through life; they do not hear the cry of distress continually pervading the world. Their

own little grief or joy bars their sight, deafens their ears. Bound by selfishness, their hearts turn stiff and narrow. Being stiff and narrow, how should they be able to strive for any higher goal, to realize that only release from selfish craving will effect their own freedom from suffering?

It is *compassion* that removes the heavy bar, opens the door to freedom, makes the narrow heart as wide as the world. *Compassion* takes away from the heart the inert weight, the paralyzing heaviness; it gives wings to those who cling to the lowlands of self.

Through *compassion* the fact of suffering remains vividly present to our mind, even at times when we personally are free from it. It gives us the rich experience of suffering, thus strengthening us to meet it”²⁵

The Buddha: “And what is the highest manifestation of compassion? To show to the world the path leading to the end of suffering, the path pointed out, trodden and realized to perfection by Him, the Exalted One, the Buddha.”²⁶

Compassion is not pity.

Pity although defined in some cases as compassion is really feeling sorry for someone from a distance. This is a separation as we feel that we are a separate self, viewing another. This does not allow the full experience of someone else’s suffering.

How do you cultivate compassion?

Start with yourself by reflecting on your own suffering. This may bring up painful memories. Allow them to be. This is the beginning of self-compassion.

Olivia Fox Cabane notes: “Self-compassion is feeling that what has happened to us is unfortunate, whereas self-pity is feeling that what happened to you is unfair. In this way, self-pity can lead to resentment or bitterness, and to feeling more isolated and alienated. In contrast, self-compassion often leads to increased feelings of connectedness.

Self-compassion is what helps us forgive ourselves when we’ve fallen short; it’s what prevents internal criticism from taking over and playing across our face.... In this way, self-compassion is critical to emanating warmth. Self-compassion is how much warmth we can have for ourselves, especially when we are going through a difficult experience.”²⁷

Tara Brach notes: “Feeling compassion for ourselves in no way releases us from responsibility for our actions. Rather, it releases us from the self-hatred that prevents us from responding to our life with clarity and balance.”²⁸

Holding Ourselves with Compassion

After reflecting on your own suffering, be aware of the suffering of others by bringing to mind examples of those whom you know well. Finally, have the realization that suffering is universal. You are now making the connection between your suffering and others.

Ezra Bayda notes: "I realized that genuine compassion can never come from fear or from the longing to fix or change. Compassion results naturally from the realization of our shared pain. It manifests as we grow out of our own sense of separateness, isolation, and alienation."²⁹

Kristin Neff, one of the foremost researchers on compassion, defines self-compassion as a three step process. I have added a fourth step (#2):

1. Mindfulness: We are mindful that we are experiencing difficulties.
2. Investigation: We investigate through mindfulness the thoughts and bodily sensations that have arisen.
3. Loving Kindness: We respond with kindness and understanding for ourselves rather than being harshly self-critical.
4. Connectedness: We realize that what we are going through is commonly experienced by all human beings and that everyone goes through difficult times.

Self-compassion is an important component of the RAINS technique: **R**ecognize, **A**llow, **I**nvestigate, **N**on-identification and **S**elf Compassion.

Compassion Practice

In Loving-Kindness practice, we use the phrase "May ___ be free from suffering" Compassion emerges when we know that actual suffering is taking place. Here are some specific phrases to use, first for you and then others, as in the loving-kindness (metta) practice:

May I, together with all those who suffer [this], find peace.

May ___ find safety, even in the midst of pain (or misfortune, difficulties).

May ___ find peace, even in the midst of pain.

May ___ find strength, even in the midst of pain.

May ___ find ease, even in the midst of pain.

May ___ (my, your) difficulties [misfortune, pain] fade away.

May ___ find peace [ease, strength].

May ___ (my, your) burdens be lifted.

May ___ be free from pain and suffering.

May ___ take care of (myself yourself).

May ___ be open to feel the pain in and around (myself, yourself).

May all beings be free from suffering.

Mindfulness of Skillful Thinking

What do we do with all of the thoughts that are not right or skillful, particularly thoughts that seemingly won't go away and which cause suffering? Unskillful thoughts are connected with attachment, ill-will and cruelty. Another way to put it: unwholesome thoughts arise from greed, hatred and delusion.

As Bhante G. notes: wisdom is not possible while we entertain these unskillful thoughts. Also, as we let these thoughts run rampant, we reinforce them, and they become even more entrenched.

It is possible to overcome them with three tools: skillful effort, skillful mindfulness, and skillful concentration. These are three of the steps of the Eightfold Path that will be discussed in more detail later.

Part 4

June 23, 2021

Robert Hodge

The Three Aspects of Skillful Intention are:

Letting Go (renunciation): Absence of clinging

Loving Kindness: Absence of ill-will

Compassion: Absence of cruelty

Skillful thinking is developing thinking or intentions that lead to the cessation of suffering. Since the basis of suffering is clinging, we practice letting go of our deep attachments to material objects: our clinging to people, experiences, and beliefs; and we address fear (anticipation of what might go wrong). Next, we develop loving-kindness to abandon our ill-will and then we develop compassion to abandon cruelty (harmfulness).

In this talk we will explore practices for each intention

Letting Go

The following is a beautiful story about realizing the limiting nature of attachment:

There was a villager in ancient India who happened upon a wandering sannyasi (Hindu yogi).

"I cannot believe this," the villager exclaimed to the sannyasi when their paths crossed.

The sannyasi responded, "What is it you cannot believe?"

"I had a dream about you last night," the villager said. "I dreamed that Lord Vishnu said to me, 'Tomorrow morning you will leave the village and you will run into a wandering sannyasi.' And here you are."

"What else did Lord Vishnu say to you," the sannyasi asked.

"He said that you possess a precious stone and that, should you give it to me, its value will make me the richest man in the world," the villager said. "So - do you have such a stone?"

The sannyasi began looking through his pack and after a moment pulled out an object. "Would this be the stone you saw in your dream? ask the sannyasi, handing the stone to the villager.

The villager could not believe his eyes. It was the same stone - a diamond as big as his fist. He held the diamond in his two hands with great care. "Could I have the stone?, he asked.

"Of course," the sannyasi said. "Please take it. I found it in the forest and you are welcome to it."

The villager took the diamond and sat down under a tree. He held the diamond close to his heart and experienced great joy.

At some point he became immersed in deep thought. And toward evening he returned to the place where the sannyasi was meditating and gave the diamond back to him.

"I've decided that this wasn't what I was truly looking for," he said. But may I ask you for one more favor?"

"What is it?" asked the sannyasi.

"Could you lead me to know what made it possible for you to so easily give away something that would have made you the richest man in the world?"³⁰

Every time we experience suffering, there is a deep attachment involved because we want life to be other than it is with material objects, people, experiences, beliefs, and our anticipation of the future (fear).

How do we let go of our various attachments that are causing suffering? It is possible through developing our mindfulness and concentration and making the right effort. These are the three practice steps of the Eightfold Path: skillful effort, skillful mindfulness, and skillful concentration. We will discuss these in more detail later.

At this point, here are six specific practices for letting go of attachments, ill-will and harmfulness (cruelty). For added benefit, I highly recommend that you record these practices and play them back with your eyes closed.

- I. **Letting go of Attachments - RAINS**
- II. **Letting go of Ill-will with Loving-Kindness-General Reflection**
- III. **Letting go of Ill-will - Metta Practice**
- IV. **Letting go of Ill-will toward others - Forgiveness Contemplation**
- V. **Letting go of Ill-will toward yourself - Self-Forgiveness Contemplation**
- VI. **Letting go of Cruelty -Tonglen Contemplation**

Letting go of attachments - RAINS

Practicing with **RAINS** promotes greater clarity and calmness in the midst of difficulty, which in turn enables us to respond in wiser and kinder ways that can bring greater joy into our lives.³¹

The five components of RAINS are:

R—Recognize your present moment experience

“You can awaken recognition by simply asking yourself, what is going on inside me right now?”³² It can be helpful to bring a sense of curiosity to doing this. You can try naming whatever you notice: this is (fear, anger, etc.). Don’t try to avoid or ignore. Often, we judge a difficult emotion as cowardly and try

to bear up under it with a stiff upper lip. Or we're so resistant that we don't look at all; we change the subject.

A—Allow the difficult emotion to be present without judgment

Allow whatever arises to just be, including letting emotion(s) be present, knowing that in mindfulness practice any emotion is OK. To the degree possible, allowing includes meeting the emotion with an attitude of kindness, friendliness, interest, curiosity. Our resolve to "allow" an emotion can be supported with phrases whispered in the mind, "it's like this," "yes," "this too."

I—Investigate

Sometimes the first two steps are enough to reconnect us with presence. At other times, the attention gets carried away over and over again. If so, we can lean into the difficult emotion, noticing if we're catastrophizing, building a negative story based on "what ifs," things that haven't happened and may not; drop the storying and mindfully return to the present moment. If we can mindfully return to the present, there is nothing more to do. But if the difficult emotion persists, we can take the attention into the body and notice the physical sensations that have been triggered by the emotion. We might even put our hand on the spot.

We might also ask ourselves simple questions. Tara suggests "How am I experiencing this in the body?", "What is happening inside me?", "What most wants attention?", and "What am I believing?" In asking the latter question, it's important to notice the tendency to get lost in thinking, to start a story about the beliefs. Rather, stay with whatever first arises, such as "I'm believing I'm not good enough," noticing your experience in just being with this.

N—Non-identification

This is a key factor in this process, and in this path. In Buddhism, non-self is one of the three marks of existence, (anatta). The other two are suffering (dukkha) and impermanence (anicca). Non-self refers to the absence of a distinct separate solid self; that is, we are all the product of multiple causes and conditions, which are constantly changing. From a physiologic point of view, this is demonstrably true. Most cells in our bodies turn over in a matter of days to months. Even neurons in our brains which are long-lived are constantly rewiring. As a result, we are not our bodies, we are not our thoughts, and we are not our difficult emotions.

To practice non-identification, we can take a step back, remembering that the thoughts, sensations and emotions that are present don't define us. Each of us is more and other than them. We can view whatever is arising as the (fear, anger, anxiety, etc.), not my (fear, anger, anxiety, etc). It is the emotion, not my emotion; the thought, not my thought. You might also respond by saying "not me" or "not mine" to whatever is arising. This can be empowering.

S—Self-compassion

Self-compassion can permeate all of RAINS or be cultivated separately. Responding to yourself as you would a dear friend with warmth and caring – perhaps with a hand on the heart, you might say one of these phrases to yourself, "This is a moment of suffering; may I be kind to myself; may I give myself the care I need; may I hold myself with tenderness."

RAINS can be used any time when an emotion becomes prominent, during formal mindfulness practice or in any moment of one's daily life when strong emotions are present. If something has been bothering us, we might have the intention of paying attention to it during formal meditation, what we refer to as "sitting with it". At other times, we may have the intention of paying attention to the breath while meditating, and we notice that a strong emotion is arising, or there is some sense of dis-ease in the body. If that is the case, we might make this the object of our meditation using RAINS.

So, let's explore this using **RAINS** as the focus of a meditation.

Finding a comfortable position, eyes open or closed as you prefer. Bringing attention to the body, noticing the weight of the body sitting, having some sense of being grounded, of being connected with the earth. Let your attention settle in on your anchor, whether it is sound, the breath or other bodily sensations.

Now let the anchor recede into the background and bring to mind a recurrent situation when you know you will have a strong reaction. Notice the details of this episode. What thoughts arise? Bringing attention to the feelings, what is the predominate emotion?

Recognize what is happening inside you. If there is a predominant emotion, is it possible to name it? "this is anger" or "this is disappointment". It may not be obvious what the emotion is, and if so that's fine.

Just **Allow** your experience to be, without judging it or needing to fix it or make it go away. If this is too difficult, then directing the attention elsewhere is fine, back to the breath or perhaps to the feet or hands. You might try saying "yes" or "just let this be" to yourself.

If you are able to be with the emotion, then **Investigate** it, noticing where you feel it in the body, and the characteristics of the associated sensations.

You can also choose to investigate further the source of this feeling, asking yourself "How am I experiencing this in the body?" Notice the physical sensations that are arising. You might also ask "What most wants attention?", and "What am I believing?"

Whatever is arising, see if it's possible to just be with it without judging as it is a result of multiple causes and conditions, so not **Not identifying** with it, the N of RAINS. It does not define you – you are more and other than this. It may be useful to acknowledge this by saying to yourself "not me" or "not mine".

Being with difficult emotions is hard, and practicing **Self-kindness and self-compassion** can be very helpful. You might do this by responding to yourself as you would to a friend, with warmth and caring, and by answering the question "what do I most need now?"

Often there is a tendency to close down around difficult emotions, so it can be helpful to visualize them held in a larger space. Awareness is vast, so visualizing holding these beliefs and emotions in a larger

space can be helpful, even bigger than the physical self. You can also envision how your wisest self would respond, or you can imagine how a spiritual figure would respond to your suffering.

Just sit with this now, holding whatever is arising with spaciousness, compassion, and kindness.³³

Loving-Kindness

Letting Go of ill-will with Loving-Kindness-General Reflection.³⁴

*To reach the state of peace
One who is skillful in actions should be
Capable and upright,
Straightforward and easy to speak to,
Of gentle nature and not proud,
Contented and easily supported,
Living lightly and having few duties,
Wise and with senses calmed,
Not arrogant and without greed for supporters,
And should not do the least thing that the wise
Would reproach him for.*

One should reflect in this way:

*"May all beings be happy and secure;
Whatever living beings there may be,
Whether weak or strong,
Large, medium, or small,
Seen or unseen, near or distant,
Born or to be born,
May they, without exception, all be happy-minded.
Let no one despise another
Or deceive anyone anywhere,
Let no one through anger or hatred
Wish for another's suffering."*

*As a mother would risk her own life
To protect her only child,
So with a boundless heart should one cherish all beings
Radiating kindness over the entire world.
In all directions, without obstruction,
without hate or ill will,
Standing or walking, sitting or lying down,
Whenever one is awake, may one stay with this recollection.
This is called the best and most sublime way of dwelling in this world.*

Part 5

June 30

Robert Hodge

The Three Aspects of Skillful Intention are:

Letting Go (renunciation): Absence of clinging

Loving Kindness: Absence of ill-will

Compassion: Absence of cruelty

More on Letting Go

Generosity is a form of letting go.

From Matt Flickstein

Generosity is a way of cherishing others, and it supports the cultivation of compassion.

According to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, there are three types of generosity:

The first one is ordinary generosity, giving material goods or providing comfortable situations for others. The second one is the gift of fearlessness. You reassure others and teach them that they do not have to feel tormented and frightened about their lives. You help them to see that there is a basic goodness to life. The third type of generosity is the gift of dharma. You show others that there is a path that consists of discipline, meditation, and intuitive knowing. This leads to freedom from suffering. We find that the more we give, the more inspired we are to give.

From "The Thirty-seven Verses on the Practice of a Bodhisattva":

Generosity is the natural expression of a mind free from attachment. Never hope for anything in return for an act of generosity. Generosity is complete in itself; there is no need for any other reward than having made others happy. If you give something motivated by self-interest, the joy you might have felt will be spoiled, and further unhappiness is certain to follow. But giving out of sheer devotion, love, or compassion will bring you a feeling of great joy, and your gift will create yet more happiness. The motivation behind the act of giving makes all the difference.

The essence of generosity is nonattachment. Transcendent generosity is generosity that is free of the three limiting concepts, that is, attachment to there being any substantial reality of a person giving, a recipient, and an act of giving. To be free from such concepts is precisely how generosity works as a cause of enlightenment.

Letting Go of Ill-will - Metta Practice

There are many metta practices with phrases to give loving-kindness to yourself and others.

The Practice of Loving-Kindness or Metta Practice is simple to understand. It is often challenging to practice because as we give Loving Kindness to those whom we harbor ill-will, strong aversions may arise.

To prepare for a Loving Kindness meditation, first relax the mind through a concentration practice of observing the sensation of the breath on the nostrils while breathing in and breathing out. Then make an intention to come from your heart and to be as open as possible. Make an intention to offer joy and happiness to yourself and others by repeating a series of phrases. Start with yourself and then move to a loved one. Shift to neutral person (someone whom you have no positive or negative feelings about). Then shift to someone with whom you feel ill-will. Finally gradually expand your loving-kindness to all beings. You can start with a small geographic area and expand to the universe. There are many phrases that you can use or you can create a set of your own, all with the intention of wishing happiness and peacefulness to yourself and others.

Some examples with blanks to fill in for whom you are offering loving-kindness:

May _____ be happy and peaceful.
May _____ be safe and protected.
May _____ be filled with contentment.
May _____ be free from suffering.
May _____ be well, happy and peaceful.

Another variation:

May no harm come to _____.
May no problems come to _____.
May _____ always meet with success.
May _____ have patience, courage, understanding and determination to meet and overcome inevitable difficulties, problems and failures in life.

Another variation used by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi

Visualize those (including ourselves) as we gave loving-kindness to each group (ourselves, others close to us, those in our community, nation, globe, and universe). Use these four phrases:

May ___ be well.
May ___ be truly happy
May ___ be safe
May ___'s good aims be successful in the future.

Another variation by Mickael Kewley

May I be free from anger and ill will.
May I be free from fears and anxieties.
May I be free from suffering and pain.
May I be free from ignorance and desires.
May I be happy and peaceful.
May I be harmonious.
May I be liberated from greed, hatred, and delusion.

May I realize the deeper peace within.
May all beings be free from (repeat as above).
May I accept other beings as they are in this moment.
May I accept this moment just as it is.
May I accept myself as I am in this moment.

Letting Go of Ill-will toward others - Forgiveness Contemplation

Please note that “I forgive you” means “I harbor no ill-will toward you.” You can substitute this meaning if it works better for you.

Please close your eyes and begin by gently following your breath until you feel calm and centered.

Imagine a room in which the only furnishings are two chairs that are facing each other. You are sitting in one chair and the chair opposite you is empty. Behind the empty chair is a door.

There is a knock at the door. Ask the person to come in.

Into the room comes someone you have resented for some time. It can be a person presently in your life, someone from the past, or even someone who has passed away.

If several people come to mind, allow in only the person for whom you have the greatest amount of resentment. You will have an opportunity to meet with the others at another time.

Ask the person to sit in the chair facing you.

Look directly into that person's eyes.
Imagine that he or she really wants to be forgiven.

Everyone does. No one wants to be the object of resentment, - even if the person resented will not admit that they wronged someone.

Remember that you are not condoning or approving of what that person did. You are just trying to let go of

the anger, hatred, and resentment that you have been holding onto.

As you say the following, it is helpful to remember exactly what the person did that is the source of your resentment.

If you get carried away emotionally during this process, please go back to following your breath until you feel calm and centered once again:

As you are looking into the eyes of that person, say to them:

I forgive you for the hurtful things you said to me.

I forgive you for the lies you told me.

I forgive you for those lies you told others about me.

I forgive you for all you have done to hurt me.

I forgive you for betraying me.

I forgive you for all the threats you made.

I forgive you for not forgiving me.

I forgive you for not treating me in the same way you treated others.

I forgive you for judging me so harshly and thinking so badly of me.

If it hurts, let the hurt be present. Try not to resist the feelings that arise. Begin to relax and allow the resentment to dissipate.

From your heart, say *I forgive you.*

Allow the person to be forgiven.

Please remember that this forgiveness process is a gift freeing yourself from the emotions that have kept you bound to the past.

Let your heart open to that person even more, and say to them once again,

I forgive you.

Allow the person to stand up in order to walk out the door. If it is comfortable for you to do so, hug the person before he or she departs.

The person now walks toward the door, opens it, and leaves.

Take a deep cleansing breath - someone else may be waiting to enter the room. If so, either continue this forgiveness process with that person or engage in the process with that individual at another time.

Letting Go of Ill-will toward yourself - Self-Forgiveness Contemplation

Please locate a room that has a mirror to use for this contemplation.

Look directly into your own eyes and try not to look away during the entire contemplation.

Remember that you are not condoning or approving of what you have done. You are just trying to let go of the self-judgment that you have been holding onto.

Verbally acknowledge how much you want to be able to forgive yourself for all your past misdeeds so you can finally move on with your life and experience true loving-kindness.

As you say the following, it can be helpful to remember exactly what you have done that is the source of your self-judgment.

Please repeat the following forgiveness aspirations out loud while looking into your eyes:

Calling yourself by your name, say,

Your name, I forgive you.

I forgive you for the hurtful things you have said to others.

I forgive you for the hurtful things you have said to yourself.

I forgive you for all the lies you have told.

I forgive you for all the things you have done throughout your life that hurt other people, no matter how unskillful or harmful those things may have been.

I forgive you for not taking a stand and for letting others mistreat you.

I forgive you for being human and for not being perfect.

Let your heart open to yourself just a bit more as you offer this one final thought of forgiveness.

Calling yourself by name once again say,

Your name, I forgive you.

Smile and if it is comfortable for you to do so, give yourself a virtual hug.

Compassion Practice -Tonglen Contemplation

Begin by sitting quietly and allowing the mind to settle.

Place your attention on your breath.

Feel your breath in the area of your chest, as if you could breathe in and out of your heart.

This practice "rides with the breath."

With each in-breath, we are going to breathe in all the pains and sorrows of those who are suffering and allow that suffering to enter our hearts. This suffering can be visualized as black smoke entering our hearts.

When the suffering, in the form of black smoke, enters our heart through the vehicle of the breath, the heart acts as a transformer. It changes the suffering and sorrow into the warmth of compassion, which we will then be breathing out.

With each out-breath, we will breathe out deep compassion, visualized as rays of white light that reach the innermost hearts of those individuals who are suffering.

Imagine, as vividly and open-heartedly as possible, that someone you deeply care for is standing right in front of you. Try and imagine every aspect of that person's pain and distress.

As you feel your heart opening to their pain, imagine that all their suffering is gathering together as a great mass of black smoke.

As you breathe in, visualize that mass of smoke coming into the very core of your heart.

Experience your heart transforming both the suffering of that other being and your own self-grasping attitude.

Now breathe out the healing rays of compassion and well-being. Visualize this white light of compassion touching their inner-most heart. Deeply feel that the suffering of your loved one has been abated through this process.

Now imagine, as vividly and open-heartedly as possible, that someone with whom you are having difficulty is standing right in front of you. Try and imagine every aspect of that person's pain and distress.

Once again, as you feel your heart opening to their pain, imagine that all their suffering is gathering together as a great mass of black smoke.

As you breathe in, visualize that mass of smoke coming into the very core of your heart.

Experience your heart transforming both the suffering of that other being and your own self-cherishing attitude.

Now breathe out the healing rays of compassion and well-being. Visualize this white light of compassion touching their inner-most heart.

Deeply feel that the suffering of that individual has been abated through this process.

Continue the same procedure for the following categories of people:

Breathe in the sorrows of those who are hungry, and breathe out compassion for their suffering.

Breathe in the sorrows of those who are caught in war, and breathe out compassion for their terror.

Breathe in the sorrows of those who are very ill, and breathe out compassion for their feelings of weakness and despair.

Breathe in the sorrows of those who are dying, and breathe out compassion for their fear.

Breathe in the sorrows for all the pain you have caused in the world, and breathe out compassion for all you have hurt.

With each in-breath, let the suffering of all living beings touch your heart, and with each out-breath, feel the healing force of your compassion touching them.

IV. Skillful Speech

pp.91-108

Part 1

July 7, 2021

Robert Hodge

Skillful (Right) Speech is the first step of the three virtues (or moral disciplines) in the Eightfold Path. The other two virtues are Skillful livelihood and Skillful Action. While the content of these virtues may seem to consist of “do’s and don’ts”, the three virtues are really mindful practices from which we can gain insights.

The Metta Sutta on virtue:

To reach the state of peace

One who is skillful in actions should be

Capable and upright,

Straightforward and easy to speak to,

Of gentle nature and not proud,

Contented and easily supported,

Living lightly and having few duties,

Wise and with senses calmed,

Not arrogant and without greed for supporters,

And should not do the least thing that the wise

Would reproach him for.³⁵

Skillful Speech

“And what is Right Speech? Abstaining from false speech, abstaining from slanderous speech, abstaining from harsh speech, abstaining from frivolous speech. This is called Right Speech.” The Buddha

The Buddha: *“And how is right understanding the forerunner? One discerns wrong speech as wrong speech, and right speech as right speech. And what is wrong speech? Lying, divisive tale-bearing, abusive speech, & idle chatter. This is wrong speech.”³⁶*

How is right speech related to other steps on the Eightfold Path? The Buddha: *“One makes an effort for the abandoning of wrong speech & for entering right speech: This is one’s right effort. One is mindful to abandon wrong speech & to enter & remain in right speech: This is one’s right mindfulness. Thus, these three qualities—right view, right effort, & right mindfulness—run & circle around right speech.”³⁷*

Bhante G notes: “Wrong speech causes us many problems. We lie and then get caught in it; we say something nasty about a co-worker and get him into trouble; we speak inconsiderately and offend a client or friend; we spend a whole day in meaningless chatter and get nothing done.”

Bhikkhu Bodhi notes: “Speech can break lives, create enemies, and start wars, or it can give wisdom, heal divisions, and create peace. This has always been so, yet in the modern age the positive and negative potentials of speech have been vastly multiplied by the tremendous increase in the means, speed, and range of communications.”³⁸

Thanissaro Bhikkhu notes: “As my teacher once said: ‘if you can't control your mouth, there's no way you can hope to control your mind.’ This is why right speech is so important in day-to-day practice.”³⁹

To summarize: Skillful Speech has four qualities:

1. It is always truthful
2. It is uplifting, not malicious or unkind
3. It is gentle not crude or harsh.
4. It is moderate, not useless or meaningless.

Matt Flickstein notes: “When we live with integrity, we consistently speak the truth and our speech is always in alignment with our actions. We harbor no ill-will towards anyone, and we live without guilt or remorse. We are honest, blameless, and trustworthy.”⁴⁰

The Buddha noted that one who practices skillful speech will be trusted and respected.

The Four attributes of skillful speech in more detail

Truthful Speech

The Buddha: *“And how is one made pure in four ways by verbal action? There is the case where a certain person, abandoning the telling of lies, abstains from telling lies. When he has been called to a town meeting, a group meeting, a gathering of his relatives, his guild, or of the royalty, if he is asked as a witness, ‘Come & tell, good man, what you know’: If he doesn’t know, he says, ‘I don’t know.’ If he does know, he says, ‘I know.’ If he hasn’t seen, he says, ‘I haven’t seen.’ If he has seen, he says, ‘I have seen.’ Thus he doesn’t consciously tell a lie for his own sake, for the sake of another, or for the sake of any reward.”*⁴¹

There are other ways of not speaking the truth:

- You can lie by remaining silent.
- Your body language can give you away.

When we realize that we have spoken falsely, we can be mindful of the motive.

Bhikkhu notes: “Though the deceptive intention is common to all cases of false speech, lies can appear in different guises depending on the motivating root, whether greed, hatred, or delusion. Greed as the chief motive results in the lie aimed at gaining some personal advantage for oneself or for those close to oneself — material wealth, position, respect, or admiration. With hatred as the motive, false speech takes the form of the malicious lie, the lie intended to hurt and damage others. When delusion is the principal motive, the result is a less pernicious type of falsehood: the irrational lie, the compulsive lie, the interesting exaggeration, lying for the sake of a joke.”⁴²

“It is said that in the course of his long training for enlightenment over many lives, a bodhisattva can break all the moral precepts except the pledge to speak the truth.”⁴³ Bikkhu Bodhi

Malicious or Slanderous Speech

This is speech spoken to others rather than directly to the person slandered.

Slander is to make a false spoken statement that causes people to have a bad opinion of someone. Slanderous speech “robs people of their good name and their credibility.”

Slanderous speech comes from hate and ill-will and is meant to create division. Even if the statement is true, if the intent is malicious (to hurt), it is unskillful.

Slanderous speech is Irretrievable.

An old Jewish folktale: The Gossiper

A woman repeated a story (gossip) about a neighbor. Within a few days everyone in the community knew the story. The person she talked about heard what had been said about her and she was very sad. Later, the woman who had spread the story learned that it was not true. She was very sorry and went to a wise rabbi and asked what she could do to repair the damage.

After giving this some thought, the rabbi said to her, “Go home, get one of your feather pillows, and bring it back to me.” Surprised by the rabbi’s response, the woman followed his advice and went home to get a feather pillow and brought it to the rabbi.

“Now,” said the rabbi, “open the pillow and pull out all the feathers.” Confused, the woman did what she was told to do.

After a few minutes, the rabbi said, “Now, I want you to find every one of the feathers and put them back into the pillow.”

“That’s impossible,” said the woman, almost in tears. “The window is open, and the wind has scattered them all over the room and blown many feathers outside. I can’t possibly find them all.”

“Yes,” said the rabbi. “And that is what happens when you gossip or tell a story about someone else. Once you talk about someone, the words fly from one person’s mouth to another, just like these feathers flew in the wind. Once you say them, you can never take them back.”⁴⁴

Gossip can easily be slanderous. Tad Friend notes the Three Laws of Gossip:

“The first law of gossip is that you never know how many people are talking about you behind your back.

The second law is “thank God”.

The third—and most important—law is that as gossip spreads from friends to acquaintances to people you’ve never met, it grows more **garbled, vivid, and definitive**. Out of stray factoids and hesitant impressions emerges a hard mass of what everyone knows to be true. Imagination supplies the missing

pieces, and repetition turns these pieces into facts; gossip achieves its shape and amplitude only in the continual retelling. The best stories about us are told by perfect strangers.”⁴⁵

Be mindful of what you might hope to gain by speaking so.

What is the antidote to slanderous speech? Abstinence and silence

The Buddha: *Abandoning divisive speech, he abstains from divisive speech. What he has heard here he does not tell there to break those people apart from these people here. What he has heard there he does not tell here to break these people apart from those people there. Thus reconciling those who have broken apart or cementing those who are united, he loves concord, delights in concord, enjoys concord, speaks things that create concord.*⁴⁶

Harsh Speech

This is speech spoken directly to another person.

Harsh speech is words spoken in anger. Examples include verbal abuse, profanity, sarcasm, hypocrisy, blunt or belittling criticism. Harsh speech can be called bullying with words.

What is the antidote to harsh speech? Patience and speaking gently and kindly.

The Buddha: *“Abandoning harsh speech, he abstains from harsh speech. He speaks words that are soothing, pleasing to the ear, that are affectionate, that go to the heart, that are polite, appealing & pleasing to people at large.”*⁴⁷

Frivolous Speech

Frivolous speech is talk that lacks depth or purpose. Gossip, if not slanderous, is a form of frivolous speech. Engaging in frivolous speech can tempt the mind to engage in the other forms of unskillful speech, lying, slander, and harsh words.

The Buddha: *“Abandoning idle chatter, he abstains from idle chatter. He speaks in season, speaks what is based in fact, what is in accordance with the goal, the Dhamma, & the Vinaya. He speaks words worth treasuring, timely, reasonable, circumscribed, connected with the goal. This is how one is made pure in four ways by verbal action.”*⁴⁸

The Buddha mentioned the kinds of speech to be avoided:

“Whereas some brahmans and contemplatives, living off food given in faith, are addicted to talking about lowly topics such as these — talking about kings, robbers, ministers of state; armies, alarms, and battles; food and drink; clothing, furniture, garlands, and scents; relatives; vehicles; villages, towns, cities, the countryside; women and heroes; the gossip of the street and the well; tales of the dead; tales of diversity [philosophical discussions of the past and future], the creation of the world and of the sea, and talk of whether things exist or not — he abstains from talking about lowly topics such as these. This, too, is part of his virtue.”

In everyday life, these topics are hard to avoid as they come up in conversation with others. That is why it is important to be mindful in conversation.

From the Dhammapada: “Everywhere, truly, those of integrity stand apart. They, the good, don’t chatter in hopes of favor or gains. When touched now by pleasure, now pain, the wise give no sign of high or low.”⁴⁹

The antidote to frivolous speech: Be aware of frivolous speech and mindful of the consequences.

Part 2

July 14, 2021

Robert Hodge

“And what is Right Speech? Abstaining from false speech, abstaining from slanderous speech, abstaining from harsh speech, abstaining from frivolous speech. This is called Right Speech.” The Buddha

Now that we understand the four factors of Skillful speech and what we can abstain from, we can go deeper and explore how to put this into practice. In this and the next talk we will explore:

- What are the times to be mindful of speaking?
- When we do speak, what are the factors for well-spoken speech that we need to take into consideration?
- What is the role of listening in skillful speech?

What are the times to be mindful of speaking?

When we intend to speak, there are three times to be mindful of speaking:

“The Buddha speaks to his son, Rahula:

Whenever you want to perform a verbal act, you should reflect on it....

While you are performing a verbal act, you should reflect on it.....

Having performed a verbal act, you should reflect on it.....”⁵⁰

In summary, to be truly skillful, one needs to be mindful before, during and after the verbal act. The hardest time is before because it is so easy to speak without thinking. Before is where the pause is beneficial. “Can I pause and reflect before speaking?” This takes practice and there are plenty of daily opportunities!

When reflecting before we speak, there is an opportunity not to speak at all depending on our intention. The Buddha: ““Whenever you want to do a verbal action, you should reflect on it: ‘This verbal action I want to do—would it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Would it be an unskillful verbal action, with painful consequences, painful results?’ If, on reflection, you know that it would lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it would be an unskillful verbal action with painful consequences, painful results, then any verbal action of that sort is absolutely unfit for you to do. But if on reflection you know that it would not cause affliction... it would be a skillful verbal action with pleasant consequences, pleasant results, then any verbal action of that sort is fit for you to do.”⁵¹

When we do speak, what are the factors for well-spoken speech that we need to take into consideration?

The Buddha: "Monks, a statement endowed with five factors is well-spoken, not ill-spoken, blameless & unfaulted by knowledgeable people. Which five?

*"It is spoken at the right time. It is spoken in truth. It is spoken affectionately. It is spoken beneficially. It is spoken with a mind of good-will."*⁵²

The five factors of well-spoken (skillful) speech are:

1. Right Time (e.g. when the person will be able to listen and perhaps in private)
2. True (not lying)
3. Affectionate (without judging or making distinctions about the person)
4. Beneficial (the listener will find it of value)
5. Mindset is of good will (having good intentions)

Another way to organize these factors is to consider them in the context of the 5W1H questions “Who, What, When, Where Why, and How. To put these in the order of consideration, the first factor is to consider **Why** you are going to speak the **What**. What is the issue and is it beneficial for you and the other to bring up this topic with them? Or is it more beneficial to let it go? Often, we may be speaking because we want them to change and to use our influence to get them to do so.

Here is an example of reflecting on the **Why**,
Changing Behavior in Adult Children by Joseph Grenny⁵³
Dear Joseph,

My daughter just turned 40 and has gained more weight than ever. Conversations about her weight gain over the years have mostly been negative, though she did actually lose weight with the help of a trainer about eight years ago. She says her schedule doesn’t allow time, but I disagree. I need help on how best to approach her again without offending and/or causing her to stress and eat even more. Thank you.

Signed,
Worried Mom

Dear Worried Mom,

My advice to you will be simple but hard. These three words will not give you control, but they are your own path to healthy influence: Let it go.

Her weight is not your job. We can debate about whether it was prior to age 18. But we’re long past that. She has been an adult for 22 years. You refer to “conversations about her weight gain over the years” which leaves the impression that you have been on a run about this for a while. And the fact that the conversations have been “negative” means she is telling you clearly that she doesn’t want your help. If you are, in fact, having a debate with her about whether or not she has the time to go to the gym, you are way past any healthy boundary.

Let it go. Her weight is her responsibility, not yours.

I can sympathize with the plight of a parent who sees an adult child doing something that you know will cause harm. I have felt it many times myself, and sometimes with things far more threatening than obesity. But it is crucial to both your own emotional health and your relationship with your daughter that you learn to distinguish what you care about from what you are responsible for.

Learn to calm yourself when you panic about her choices. Learn to detach yourself from your need to fix her problems. Learn to think of her choices the same way you would someone you see ordering more in a restaurant than you think they should. Because that is who she is today.

I know what I am suggesting will take enormous work from you. But it is, in my view, your only path to peace.

Warmly,
Joseph

Here we can see how important it is to know your intention in speaking.

Another consideration with the **Why** is the relationship that you have with the other. Have you considered how the relationship might be affected? Here is an example of taking in to consideration the relationship:

How Can I Protect My Daughter from Making Poor Choices by Ryan Trimble⁵⁴

Dear Ryan,

I have a 27-yr-old daughter who ventured out into the world two years ago and she is demonstrating some very dangerous behavior. She appears to be trying to make a statement by telling everyone, literally, that she is on her own now and makes her own decisions. Recently she started visiting not dating sites, but the most dangerous booty call sites. She is publishing suggestive videos (dressed provocatively) and refuses to acknowledge the dangers. I fear she might be flirting with horror to purposely get hurt, or worse. She won't listen to anybody and acts as if she doesn't care, because "you can't tell me what to do." What can a parent do if they think their adult child is going to end up getting hurt? What rights does a parent have to save a child from her bad choices?

Signed,
Daunted Dad

Dear Daunted Dad,

Two things: I ventured out into the world when I was about your daughter's age and tried to make a statement, refused to acknowledge dangers, flirted with horrors to the point of hurting myself, and let nobody tell me what to do. I am also, today, the father of three teenage daughters.

The point is I sympathize. When I first read your question I thought about my own path, my own daughters, and my own desires to influence them. So please know that what follows below is grounded in compassion.

This is what I hear you asking: How can I prevent my 27-year-old daughter from living her own life?

I know that sounds stark, and I'm sure you don't intend to come across that way. You simply want to protect your daughter, not prevent her from living her life. And yet there is no way to "protect" an adult from making her own choices, that I know of, short of trying to control her.

I'm inclined to think you've been operating from this space for some time because, in my experience, a 27-year-old doesn't go around bragging of her independence unless it is newly found. My guess is that you've been "protecting" your daughter from her own autonomy, or trying to, for about 27 years. She is now responding in a way you wish she wouldn't.

Here's what I suggest you do.

Give up trying to save her. Not because she is a lost cause, but because you can't. Respect her autonomy and respect the limits of your influence.

Decide what you really want. Do you want to protect your daughter from making her own choices, or do you want a relationship with her? I'm not suggesting this is a dichotomy but rather a paradox. If you attempt to protect your daughter from her choices, you'll likely hurt your relationship, drive her away, and lose influence. If, on the other hand, you focus on building a relationship, you may hold some influence in her life. That does not mean you'll get to control her.

Make it safe. I'll assume that what you really want is a place in her life. If you're to salvage or strengthen whatever you currently have, you'll need to connect, not protect or correct. So, no lecturing, no preaching, no condemning, no weighing in on her decisions—unless she asks. Make this your new mantra: "When inclined to correct, try to connect." What does that look like for you? Dinner invitations? A shared activity? Listening?

Express yourself. You may not be able to protect your daughter from her choices, but you can tell her how you feel. If you choose to do so, ask for permission first. If granted, proceed by stating how you see things and expressing your concerns, not your wishes. Again, make connection your goal. This may require an unfamiliar and uncomfortable level of vulnerability.

Finally, go easy. You're fallible just like your daughter is, and you're also worthy of the same kind of compassion that she is. Remember that as you move forward.

I hope these suggestions help you increase what's important here: not power over your daughter, but power over yourself and your ability to foster a connection with her.

Good luck,
Ryan

Emily Gregory (Hoffman) advises in *How to Avoid Getting Angry*⁵⁵, "Never let a problem to be solved be more important than a person to be loved." This is good advice!

As the Buddha noted, it is important to determine the anticipated outcome of your verbal action before you speak. If you decide that the **Why** you are going to speak the **What** will be beneficial, then you can reflect on your delivery, the **How**. The **How** considers **When** (Right time), **Where** (privately) and **How** (with a mindset of good will).

In summary, reflecting on your intention (**Why**) before committing the verbal action is critical. As the Buddha counseled his son, reflecting on the verbal action before, during and after will build your skill in Right Speech.

Part 3

July 21, 2021

Robert Hodge

In the past two talks, we have explored skillful speech, examining the four factors of how we speak: being truthful, uplifting, gentle, and moderate. We next learned what the Buddha had to say about the times to be mindful of speaking: before, during, and after. And when we do plan to speak, the factors for well-spoken speech that we need to take into consideration: having good intentions, being truthful, speaking at the right time and place, being affectionate and beneficial. By reflecting on our intention, we might choose to change it to the benefit of the other or just let it go and not speak.

Listening mindfully

During a conversation, when we are not speaking, we listen mindfully to truly be with the other person(s). Listening mindfully means that we are comfortable with silence, especially in our mind.

The Role of Silence

T.S. Eliot addresses the role of silence in this excerpt from the Four Quartets:

“I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre,
The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed
With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of darkness on darkness,
And we know that the hills and the trees, the distant panorama
And the bold imposing facade are all being rolled away—
Or, as when an underground train, in the tube, stops too long between stations
And the conversation rises and slowly fades into silence
And you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen
Leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about;
Or when, under ether, the mind is conscious but conscious of nothing—
I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.”⁵⁶

Letting the dark come upon you is allowing everything to be (as with the A in RAINS). When you are with another, can you wait without thought and truly listen from silence and be with whatever is said? And have faith that what will arise will be ok?

Mark C. Taylor notes: “Silence is as rare as it is essential. When was the last time you really heard silence? How long has it been since you saw a person sitting alone in silence? How often do you leave earphones and cell phones at home? Silence is disappearing as fast as the darkness dispersed by city lights. This loss is no accident—people have come to fear silence because it rends the veil of distraction that noise creates. But not all silence threatens; indeed, sometimes pauses are pregnant. In some

places, silence can be an emptiness that is, paradoxically, full. You do not occupy this silence; it occupies you. Without silence, words can be neither spoken nor heard, and without words, silence is inaudible. Silence does not disappear when it is broken; for those who are not distracted, silence limns language as the necessary condition that exposes both its richness and its fragility. Silence is not just in the gaps and spaces that punctuate sentences but also within words as the lack that renders them fully articulate. To know what a person says, we must hear what remains unsaid. If we cannot hear silence, we do not know how to listen.”⁵⁷

Can you remain in silence and hear what remains unsaid?

Krishnamurti notes: “Can one listen without any conclusion, without any comparison or judgment? I think there is an art to listening, which is to listen completely, without any motive, because a motive in listening is a distraction. If you can listen with complete attention, then there is no resistance, either to your own thoughts or to what is being said. But it is only the very silent, quiet mind that finds out what is true, not a mind which is furiously active, thinking, resisting.”⁵⁸

In another quote, he goes on to say: ““Silence is difficult and arduous, it is not to be played with. It isn't something that you can experience by reading a book, or by listening to a talk, or by sitting together, or by retiring into a wood or a monastery. I am afraid none of these things will bring about this silence. This silence demands intense psychological work. You have to be burningly aware of your snobbishness, aware of your fears, your anxieties, your sense of guilt. And when you die to all that, then out of that dying comes the beauty of silence.”⁵⁹

In a conversation, there are periods of silence – can you stand that?

This haiku conveys the end result of silence in a conversation:

saying nothing;
the guest, the host
the white chrysanthemum
—Ryota Oshima⁶⁰

Chan Practice for Listening to Silence

Patricia Donegan in *Silence: Stillness* If we could slow down and stop for 10 minutes a day, we'd be amazed by the transformation⁶¹ notes: “The Chan practice of listening to silence provides a way to refine our hearts and minds, thought after thought, to the point that they become ever more subtle and increasingly attuned to stillness and emptiness. As we progress, we realize how constricted we are by our discriminating mind. Our minds, not our hearing organs, make the distinction between sound and silence. But if you practice listening until you no longer make distinctions, you develop a power that is liberating. You're no longer pushed around by concepts, emotions, or other mental objects. Instead, you decide what to move or transform.

Four Steps for listening to Silence

1 Deep breaths.

Sit up straight with your chin slightly tucked in, eyes closed or partly open (to prevent daydreaming), and your mouth closed. Breathe in deeply from the dantian, the energy center located right under the navel. With each in-breath, be aware of the air passing through your throat and how it passes through the nose with each out-breath. This process helps us to breathe in fresh energy, known as chi, and expel stale energy.

Repeat this seven times.

2 Move the attention from the eyes to the nose, mouth, and heart.

This step is especially geared toward stopping, or reining in, the monkey mind that we find so difficult to control. Start by gently moving your attention from the eyes to the area under the nose where you are breathing in and out. Let it rest there for a while. From there, move the attention to the mouth. Finally, shift your attention from your mouth to your heart. Try not to hold any thoughts, images, or attachments to experience. Our spiritual heart is empty; it has no shape, form, or size. Once this is done, start all over again from the eyes. Repeat this seven times.

3 Observe the breath.

Breathe in and out naturally while fastening the monkey mind's attention to the breath. When you reach the state where the monkey no longer feels bound by the breath but instead enjoys staying there, then you have reached the stage of stopping. Your awareness is gentle and clear—it becomes one with the breath.

4 Listen to silence.

While the previous three steps are intended to stop the wandering mind by letting it rest on the breath, the fourth step of listening has more to do with "seeing."

In preparation, start by relaxing your ears, head, neck, shoulders, and every cell in your body. Let the entire body quiet down completely. When you hear sounds from outside, like a human voice or the sound of a car passing by, listen to them as the sound of silence. When you tell yourself that distracting sounds are silent, they become that way. However, if you tell yourself that they are noisy and disturbing, that is what they will be. Keep listening to the sound of silence in everything, staying completely relaxed.

Hear the silence in the mountains and rivers, the great wide earth, the sky. Eventually, the whole universe will fall into deep silence. Perceive that same deep silence in yourself.

In this state, there is no sound whatsoever, and when you listen, you listen to the sound of no sound. Every thought returns into silence and becomes still. When practicing this technique, it is important not to force anything when listening but to remain relaxed and listen in a natural way.

Ultimately, it is our awareness unified with emptiness that is really listening to the silence. "Being aware of silence" and "seeing silence" are the same thing. Who is aware of silence? Who sees silence? It is our enlightened nature that is aware and sees. The next step in the practice is to dwell in the clarity of silence, and once you know how to do this, the last step is to enlighten your own mind by seeing your

true nature. It might take quite some time to reach these stages, but if you sustain your awareness of silence, then you will eventually reach it. Practicing slowly and steadily is very important. When you feel that your mind starts wandering again while listening to silence, return to step two and focus on the movement from eyes to nose to mouth to heart, with no thoughts or images in your heart.

Our true nature is the emptiness of all things, the “true formless form.” Chan practice is about seeing, hearing, being aware of, and clearly knowing this. It is about realizing that what we habitually see, hear, and are aware of and know is an illusion. We begin this practice of listening to tune into a deeper awareness that leads to the realization of emptiness, which in turn empties out our mistaken views and notions. Most importantly, this Chan practice lets us enter into the true form of enlightened nature.

Such form is eternal; it is unborn and never dies, is neither stained nor pure, neither increases nor diminishes. There is absolutely nothing here to hold on to: no rebirth in samsara; no world of bodily form, sensation, thought, impulse, or consciousness; no pain and no happiness, no gain and no loss. With our own practice, we, too, can enter the stream of our true nature and see our original face.”

Other factors in skillful listening

I used to teach physicians good communication skills. Regarding listening, here are some key points.

Skillful listening requires:

- Appropriate body language that includes attentive posture, gestures if needed, attentive facial expressions and eye contact.
- Verbal techniques include silence, use of minimal encouragers, and open-ended questions.
- It is also helpful to paraphrase what the speaker has said to confirm that they understand that you understand what they said.

Impediments

Here are some impediments to listening from a truly quiet space:

- Judging what the other person is saying
- Having ideas of how to “fix” the issue the person is presenting
- Having ideas on how to “fix” the person being listened to
- Reflecting on how the issues being presented are similar to the issues you are experiencing in your own life
- Thinking about the past or future
- Thinking of how you will respond to what the person is communicating

As each of these thought processes are recognized, allow them to immediately pass out of consciousness and go back to listening from the space of silence.

When we do listen from this clear and open space and wait until the other person has completed their thoughts, our reply comes from our awareness and it will be more relevant and meaningful. The person to whom we are speaking will know that they were heard (truly listened to).

The role of mindfulness in Skillful Speech

Bhante G makes a key statement: “but by definition, mindfulness keeps us in control of what we think, how we act, and what we say. It’s impossible to shout at someone mindfully, or to abuse alcohol mindfully. If you are truly mindful, you cannot do these things!”⁶²

V. Skillful Action

pp 109-132

“And what, monks, is right action? Abstaining from taking life, abstaining from stealing, abstaining from sexual intercourse³: This, monks, is called right action.

“And what is Right Action? Abstaining from killing beings, abstaining from taking what is not given, abstaining from sexual misconduct. This is called Right Action.” The Buddha

Part 1

July 28, 2021

Laura Good

There is a bumper sticker I saw at a retreat center: “Don’t just do something, sit there!”

Contradiction: just as silence is a form of skillful speech, sitting in meditation is an action. We are stopping our body from moving anywhere, choosing to pause, and quiet ourselves and in doing so, not cause any harm. But even when we are sitting in meditation, harm can still happen inside by being swept away by the negative voices in our head. Our inner critic can cause a lot of harm, so even though our body may not be moving, a right action can be reciting a metta prayer, “May all beings be free from inner and outer harm.”

By being aware of what we say and how we act, we can see how our actions contribute to our suffering or our happiness for ourselves and others. Though the Buddha’s teachings may teach us “not do this or not do that”, he was pretty brief in specifics. What’s left is for us to see what works for us on our own journey and cultivating the mindfulness of our actions is what makes us the best version of ourselves, We discover in real time, how the principles of dharma work in our own lives. There is a word, ehipassiko which means “See for yourself”.

By being aware to not cause harm with any action we do, we instead can act out of deeply meaningful reasons, like acting with kindness and for the benefit of all. This then affects every moment that comes after. Each moment building upon the last, which is all we ever really have control over: what we do in the moment. Ultimately it brings us not only to non-harming but true happiness and that is the point of the eightfold path to not only suffer less, but to be happy and content and free.

The Eightfold Path gives us eight ways to skillfully live life. The order of the path is not specifically linear. Each step naturally flows into the other, and has been time tested for 2600 years. Just because we may have a bad day and yell at someone which may not be skillful speech, it doesn’t mean we have to “start over.” Understanding how right view, flows into right intention, which can clarify our words and our actions and so on, doesn’t mean that we also can’t practice right mindfulness or concentration, the 7th and 8th part of the Eightfold Path. They are more like concentric circles than a linear skill set.

The center circle is wisdom, the next circle around that, the ethics component and the next circle around that, the practice or concentration component. Think of it like an atom, with electrons bouncing

around, absorbing or reflecting energy, affecting each nano second and with each moment we have the opportunity to wake up.

The first part of Skillful Action is about the precepts, the ethical guidelines that were first given to the monastics by the Buddha. They are a code of conduct or set of rules to help people behave in a moral and ethical way. Just like many of the teachings, this moral code is not meant to be a wet blanket. They are really a gift to help us become relaxed and trustworthy and respond to each moment the best way we can.

The Buddha did not invent the Five Precepts. These concepts were common in 6th century BC in religious life. They developed gradually. For example, the precept of not killing was a reaction against ritual animal sacrifice of the time in India. It's not like they were all instant vegetarians either as we'll talk about later.

Simply the five precepts are: Don't kill, don't steal, don't lie, don't engage in sexual misconduct, and don't abuse intoxicants.

Easy, right? The precepts are not commandments but more like guidelines. No matter what philosophy or religion or community you are in, these are plain and simple things to know. If you engage in these actions, they cause harm and suffering and if avoided, they don't. We all know this.

Why did the Buddha specifically spell out the precepts? If the monks were holy, wouldn't they naturally not do these things? The precepts came out of necessity. The monks were human and subject to all the desires and aversions we are. In fact he gave the monks a few more precepts, (6) no eating after midday; (7) no participating in worldly amusements; (8) no adorning the body with ornaments and using perfume; (9) no sleeping on high and luxurious beds; and (10) no accepting gold and silver.

But luckily, we don't need to worry about those as lay people!

Thanissaro Bhikkhu notes: "When our actions don't measure up to certain standards of behavior, we either (1) regret the actions or (2) engage in denial.... These reactions are like wounds in the mind. Regret is an open wound, tender to the touch, whereas denial is like hardened, twisted scar tissue around a tender spot. When the mind is wounded in these ways, it can't settle down comfortably in the present, ...Only if the mind is free of wounds and scars can it settle down comfortably and freely in the present and give rise to undistorted discernment. This is where the five precepts come in: They're designed to heal these wounds and scars. Healthy self-esteem comes from living up to a set of standards that are practical, clear-cut, humane, and worthy of respect."⁶³

So let's go through the five precepts. Notice any interior dialogue you have that may sound like "yeah, but what about..." Just notice, don't judge. See if there is part of you that is trying to disprove these guidelines.

1. Abstain from Killing. This includes killing of all living things including insects. The guiding factor here is intention because, we often inadvertently kill living beings by accident. For example, running over

insects as we are driving an automobile. Bhante G. notes: “Understanding that there are different levels of impact, we make our choices and accept the consequences.”

We kill microbes when we breathe, we kill insects when pull up a carrot in the garden. Even the Buddha ate meat when it was offered to him. The Dali Lama eats yak. There are details that go further into not being the one to intentionally kill meat for food, but eating it is ok. (Being a butcher for example is mentioned in Right Livelihood)

Some of you may have a voice in your head, “yes of course I wouldn’t kill someone. But what about, if someone was going to kill me or someone else, what if my child was starving and the only food was deer that I had to kill?” Would you do it? Could you do it? This is where intention comes in. What is your intention: to starve and die for your ego to be the best Buddhist or feed your child? The hardest decisions need to be mindfully considered case by case. Being too rigid can cause more suffering than less. When monks that get so ingrained in what they think teachings are, they cause suffering, such as not allowing women to be ordained or misusing their power to engage students in sexual relationships.

We go to extremes in our minds, when really the day-to-day ethical dilemma is just to be mindful of your actions and how it might harm.

We also need to protect our own life. Killing in self-defense is “Right Action” provided we have done everything possible to avoid it. The practical impossibility of being perfect leads to the conclusion that intention and effort to preserve life is the best we can do and that is enough.

We could have many talks about how this precept affects topics such as euthanasia or abortion but we can save that for another day.

“From a Mahayana perspective, it is possible to kill without violating the first precept if the killing is of widespread benefit and the killer is motivated solely by compassion. A famous example of this in traditional texts is a story about the Buddha’s former life as a ship captain, found in the *Upayakausalya*, or *Skill in Means* sutra, in which he killed a murderous stowaway on his ship to save his five hundred-person crew from being murdered. Though rare circumstances like this may not be considered violations of the precept, they still create karmic consequences

2. Abstain from stealing

Bhante G. notes: “Stealing is an expression of our greed or envy.....Practicing Skillful Action of not stealing means making an effort to be honest and to respect the property of others.” This includes pointing out mistakes to those who have given you back too much change because they are not aware of what they have given.”

3. Abstain from speaking falsely.

This was covered in the section on Skillful Speech.

4. Abstain from sexual misconduct.

Engaging in sexual misconduct is a form of stealing as one is taking from someone else what is not freely given. In a more general sense, sexual misconduct is abusing the senses. When we abuse our

senses whether it be with sex or other addictions, we find that we can never get enough. Trying to get more leads to more unskillful behavior.

Healthy loving sexual relations that are consensual and non-exploitive are “Right Actions.” The primary guiding principle is that the action produces greater harmony, happiness, wisdom, and well-being, and relieves suffering. So, engagement in sexual activity should be loving, caring, and sensitive, with the intention to produce good for all involved.

5. Abstain from misusing intoxicants.

The use of intoxicants can lead to unskillful behavior such as negligence, infatuation, and heedlessness. Medications used as treatment for a condition are not a problem as long as we are mindful of any side effects that can lead to unskillful behavior.

Using Intoxicants is a way that we can avoid being mindful. Consider other activities that you may engage in to avoid or escape mindfulness. This might include excessive reading, texting, listening to music, etc. When we compulsively reach for something, we are not free. So restraint is actually freedom.

It is very hard to be mindful when you use intoxicants. Some would say the precepts are clear, don't use intoxicants. Not any, not one glass of wine. But others would maintain that it is intoxication of the mind that violates the precept and not the drinking per se. Those who hold this view are apt to draw a distinction between becoming tipsy, blacking out, and enjoying a glass of wine with dinner.

If you're going to have have a glass of wine to savor it, really absorb what it is giving you, not what you think it's giving you. Maybe you are really having just a headache. Maybe having a glass of wine relieves anxiety in a social situation, a signal that the day is over, a connection with your mate, memories of being young and partying and having fun. It's good to pause and ask yourself if this is why you are indulging- trying to recreate a feeling of the past instead of being in the now.

The observance of the Five Precepts is a voluntary act which each individual must take up on his or her own initiative. The Buddha did not formulate the precepts as commandments, nor did he threaten anyone with punishment for violating them, unless of course you were already ordained. In which case, if you violated certain precepts like sexual misconduct, you were out and never allowed to be ordained again.

“The Buddha perfectly understood the workings of the universe, and he proclaimed the law of cause and effect: good deeds beget pleasant fruits, bad deeds beget painful fruits. The Five Precepts are the guidelines the Buddha has given us to steer us away from unwholesome conduct and towards conduct that will prove most beneficial for ourselves and others. When we mold our actions by the Five Precepts, we are acting in accordance with the Dhamma, avoiding future misery and building up protection and happiness for ourselves and others both here and in the hereafter. Thus the closer we live to the Five Precepts, the greater will be the blessing power of our lives”.⁶⁴

What also comes about is a shift in focus “to what we personally want, to what will most benefit ourselves and others.” This is also known as a shift from behavior motivated by greed, hatred and delusion to Skillful Action.

In the next talk, we’ll go into how actions create and affect karma and also different ways to view the five precepts.

Part 2

August 4, 2021

Laura Good

Every summer as I drive by the local peach orchards, I can’t wait for mid-July when the peaches are in season. I always get too ambitious, buy too many and watch as they ripen all at once on my counter. Then it’s a rush to eat them, make peach pies, muffins, peach jelly and so on. I get a little “peached out,” but it is a happy feeling and the only ill effects are perhaps a few extra pounds on the waistline. I know exactly what I am doing: thoroughly enjoying peaches.

Buying local peaches helps the local farmer which is a good thing. But what if I was a diabetic and eating too much peach pie was dangerous? Or what if I was allergic to peaches? Then these actions would be harmful. The simple choice would be not to eat peaches and harm is avoided.

We all know the saying: you reap what you sow. But you don’t sow an apple seed expecting to get a mango. Apple seeds grow apple trees and if you’re lucky, after the right weather and growing conditions, tasty apples result. But it’s a process that has taken thousands if not millions of years to evolve and as our climate changes, every living being has to change with it or risk dying. We may sow the seeds, but reap a different result.

How does karma work? How do know what is the right thing to do? Do we always reap what we sow?

In the last talk, we talked about Skillful Action, the fourth step of the Eightfold Path. Skillful Action follows Skillful Speech. Skillful Speech, Skillful Action and Skillful Livelihood make up the Ethics part of the Eightfold Path.

To review, the first part of Right Action is the Five Precepts: Abstain from Killing, Stealing, Lying, Sexual Misconduct and Abusing Intoxicants. The second part of Skillful Action is Karma: cause and effect.

Karma is a Sanskrit word that means “action.” But usually when people talk about karma, they mean karma and its result—action and the result of action. The technical word for the result is *vipaka*, the fruit of the action. So, it’s the things we intend and then act upon that are the key creators of karma. Those actions arising from our intention that happened in the past, we then experience as fruit in the present moment. So there is no “good karma” or “bad karma” per se but rather how easily and clearly you see your current choices and how you then act.

There is no one way to define karma so let’s hear what some well-known teachers have to say about it.

Joseph Goldstein

“If we act motivated by greed, hatred, or delusion, we are planting the seed of suffering; when our acts are motivated by generosity, love, or wisdom, then we are creating the karmic conditions for abundance and happiness.”⁶⁵

Karma has nothing to do with fate, predestination, providence, or destiny. The world just may be completely impersonal and not affected by what you think your personal destiny is. But we can often see how Skillful Action works in real time. This is the most important thing, not worry about if past lives are true and if so, what we may have done. That person doesn't exist anymore, but you do!

Robin Kornman

“When you completely stop believing in ego, karma no longer has the slightest effect. It ceases to function and you are free of karma.”⁶⁶

This is where freedom lies. We see that if we behave in a certain way, certain things will result. If we do one thing, the mind is agitated. If another, the mind is settled and clear. That's cause and effect.

Norman Fischer: (Zen Teacher)

“Buddhism points to that place of responsibility. We cultivate the past so that we can be clear and responsible in our actions going forward. The slogan I often use with people is, “The situation you're in is not your fault, but it's absolutely your responsibility to take care of it going forward.” And then they ask, “What do you mean it's not my fault? If I did actions in the past that led me to this place, how can you say it's not my fault?” I respond, that the person who did those things in the past is no longer here. However, the person in this present moment has a huge responsibility to take volitional action from this moment forward. The Buddha taught a path of action and responsibility in a very realistic way.”⁶⁷

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

“You have to understand that your present actions are free, to at least some extent, to shape the present moment—for good or bad—and to have an impact on the future. This understanding of kamma would then provide you with **motivation** for looking carefully at what should and shouldn't be done right now to avoid causing suffering.

And this is precisely the understanding of kamma that the Buddha taught. As he pointed out in the *Loṇaphala Sutta* (“The Salt Crystal,” AN 3:101), past actions do have an impact on the present moment, but how that impact is experienced is filtered through your present-moment mind-state. This is one of the reasons that Buddhist meditation focuses on being alert to what the mind is doing right now.”⁶⁸

Jon Kabat Zinn “Many often mistake karma for the notion of a fixed destiny. It is more like an accumulation of tendencies that can lock us into particular behavior patterns, which themselves result in further accumulations of tendencies of a similar nature. So, it is easy to become imprisoned by our karma and to think that the cause always lies elsewhere—with other people and conditions beyond our control, never within ourselves. But it is not necessary to be a prisoner of old karma. It is always possible

to change your karma. You can make new karma. But there is only one time that you ever have to do it."⁶⁹

That time is NOW.

Intention

Vasubandhu (fifth century) says that karma is intention and the acts that flow out of intention. When there is no intention to cause harm, no negative karmic seeds are planted. If bugs get killed on your windshield there is no karmic effect.⁷⁰

However, for one who intentionally causes harm, those seeds never fade away and ripen perhaps even lifetimes later when conditions are right. But it's tricky because there is no way to really "know" this". We just have to rely on trusted authority and only we can see our own perspective in this lifetime.

So it can be sometimes unsatisfying to not see "justice".

Whose Karma is it?

We are born into a certain set of circumstances, who are parents are, where they live etc. So from the get go, we have conditions we need to respond to.

Joseph Goldstein

"Another dimension of the law of karma helps in understanding how individual personalities develop. While it is true that there is no enduring entity, no unchanging self that can be called "I," it is also quite obvious that each of us is a uniquely changing and recognizable pattern of elements. This comes about because each of us has in our own way, both consciously and unconsciously, cultivated different mind states. If we cultivate [lovingkindness](#), we experience its taste in the moment and at the same time are strengthening it as a force in the mind, making it easier for it to arise again. When we are angry, we experience the suffering of that anger as present karma and are also strengthening that particular pattern of mind. Just as we condition our bodies in different ways through exercise or lack of it, so we also condition our minds. Every mind state, thought, or emotion that we experience repeatedly becomes stronger and more habituated. Who we are as personalities is a collection of all the tendencies of mind that have been developed, the particular energy configurations we have cultivated."⁷¹

So, as I said, some of this conditioning starts the moment you're born. From the get go we are part of our parent's karma. But as we grow in awareness, we see what we want to cultivate and what we want to let unplanted.

Ajahn Amaro

"It's interesting that both free will and determinism depend on the idea of a **me** that either has a predetermined future or a me that is exercising free will. But when there is enlightened mind, it doesn't really sound like free will, because it's ever so slightly dictated by the completely open heart responding to the way things are, moment by moment.

The simplest teaching on karma I know is *pratityasamutpada*, dependent origination, **There are gaps in the chain, when the next act is not determined, which is what makes enlightenment possible.**"⁷²

So we pause. We mind the gap.

Understanding the law of karma is known as the light of the world because through this understanding we can take responsibility for our destinies and be more truly guided to greater fulfillment in our lives.

VI. Skillful Livelihood

pp. 113-148

“And what, monks, is right livelihood? There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones, having abandoned dishonest livelihood, keeps his life going with right livelihood. This, monks, is called right livelihood.”

August 11, 2021

Robert Hodge

If we are retired, we may think that this step of the Eightfold Path is not relevant for us. However, this step offers those of us the opportunity not only to reflect on one’s past career but also the wisdom to mentor others as they search for a Skillful Livelihood.

Livelihood is defined as a means of securing the necessities of life. The Buddha defined the necessities as the Four Requisites: clothing, food, lodging, and medicines.⁷³

For one to satisfy the Four Requisites, the Buddha made it clear that there are skillful and unskillful ways to make a living. He stated that wrong livelihood is dishonest. It is dishonest because we are not being honest with ourselves when we think we can follow the path while engaging in an unskillful livelihood. Above all, as Bhante G. notes: “Our means of sustenance should not interfere with our spiritual development.”

The Buddha elaborated on Skillful Livelihood by saying: *“A lay follower should not engage in five types of business. Which five? Business in weapons, business in human beings, business in meat, business in intoxicants, and business in poison.”*⁷⁴ The reason for this is that these occupations violate one or more of the Five Precepts as noted under Skillful Action.

1. Abstaining from killing
2. Abstaining from stealing
3. Abstaining from speaking falsely
4. Abstaining from sexual misconduct
5. Abstaining from misusing intoxicants such as alcohol (because this can lead to unskillful behavior).

The Buddha gave examples of unskillful occupations present in his day and age. In modern times, there are other categories that would qualify as being unskillful and interfering with our spiritual development. Rather than list all of the unskillful categories of livelihood, Bhante G. has created a series of three questions that we can ask ourselves to determine if we are engaged in a Skillful Livelihood.

- 1. Is my job an inherently unskillful occupation?**
 - a. Does it cause harm by definition?
 - b. Does it involve manufacturing, selling, or using weapons, intoxicants, or poisons?
 - c. Does it entail harming living beings?

- d. Does it support the formation of addictions such as gambling or drinking?
2. Does my job or daily occupation cause me to break any of the five core precepts?
 3. Are there aspects of my job which disturb my sense of peace? (E.g. guilt, remorse, uncertainly, fear, or doubt).

Even if we are pursuing a skillful livelihood, issues can arise that we need to deal with. Regarding question #3, here is an example of aspects of one's job that would challenge a sense of peace. The following is an ethical dilemma which highlights some of the principles of Skillful Livelihood. Imagine that this person had written to you. How would you respond?

Dear Crucial Skills,

Recently, I have been put in a very difficult situation. My CEO wants me to do something I consider very unethical; he has also instructed me not tell anyone about it. I am very concerned. First of all, I don't want to do it. Secondly, I don't want to withhold things from my boss. Also, I feel like I am becoming the "fall guy." If the CEO gets caught, I will be the one blamed and fired. How can I explain to my CEO that I don't want to be part of this unethical thing without losing my job?

Signed,
Fall Guy

Response from Joseph Grenny:

Dear Fall Guy,

There is no easy answer here. I will not mince words with you. You face risks either way. If you comply, you will compromise your morals, undermine trust with your boss, and expose yourself to sanctions. If you decline, the CEO may feel it is a risk to keep you around. Or he may externalize his guilt through aggressive action against you. If he has crossed the line of innuendo and made overtly unethical demands of you, you must accept these risks and respond accordingly. The world has changed, and you must respond to the reality you're in.

First, plan for a worst-case scenario. You feel most powerless when you are least prepared for the worst. Increase your own sense of safety and control by limiting your downside risk. Document everything to ensure you can defend your rights for wrongful termination or progressive aggression should either occur. Talk to a lawyer. Involve HR or others with fiduciary responsibility to protect your rights. You are most vulnerable when you are most alone, so get support.

Then, act to create a better scenario. Having taken appropriate steps to reduce your risk, you will feel more empowered to take some risk. If you feel that the CEO is redeemable, consider confronting the issue directly with him. The best way to help someone feel safe when asking them to acknowledge moral lapses is to genuinely appeal to their best self. If your relationship is strong enough, start the conversation by inventorying those things that you admire in the CEO. Then candidly disclose that this recent request is out of character. For example, you might say, "One of the things that has appealed to me about my job is the chance to work for a man I admire. When Anna was ill and you personally paid her out-of-pocket medical costs, I thought, 'This is a company that

cares about people more than profits.' That is why your request that I inappropriately allocate revenues in our financials has been surprising to me. That is not how I see you."

Finally, help him find a way back. Having confronted the issue, don't leave him alone. Explore the motivations that drove him to act unethically. Help him find a creative and honest way to accomplish the same goals. Often our first moral lapses are bad ways of accomplishing good things. It is only when a lapse becomes a habit that corruption becomes intrinsically appealing. You might say, for example, "We can shift accounting staff to work on aggressively reducing receivables. Would extra liquidity accomplish the same thing?"⁷⁵

Here are other questions about Right Livelihood for reflection:

- Are you aware of your unique visions, talents and gifts? How does life express itself uniquely through you?
- Are you following your own creative visions or are compromising them for fear of not being approved or accepted?
- Do you work for an organization that treats competitors as the enemy thereby fostering feelings of aversion? If so, do you personally avoid thinking in this manner?
- Does your organization see its clients or customers in terms of profits and is it rarely concerned about service? If so, are you still able to provide superior support and service to your customers or clients?
- Does your organization promote their products or services using fear tactics?
- Does your organization make exaggerated claims about its products or services?
- Are you too overburdened with work to give proper service to those you are dedicated to servicing?
- If you met the Buddha, would there be aspects of your work that you would avoid mentioning since you knew they were unskillful?

Points to remember:

- "Our means of sustenance should not interfere with our spiritual development."
- Loving-kindness may improve a difficult job situation.
- Your intention is what matters particularly working in unskillful conditions.
- Skillful Livelihood is a goal to be sought gradually as our spiritual practice matures.
- And, as *Albert Einstein noted*, "A man's value to the community primarily depends on how far his feelings, thoughts, and actions are directed towards promoting the good of his fellows."⁷⁶

Endnotes

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 - ² The Great Causes Discourse [Mahā Nidāna Sutta](#) (DN 15)
 - ³ An Analysis of the Path [Magga-Vibhaṅga Sutta](#) (SN 45:8)
 - ⁴ The Curious Case of Benjamin Button 1:51:56 – 1:55:46
 - ⁵ [Alagaddupama Sutta: The Snake Simile](#) MN 22 translated from the Pali by Nyanaponika Thera
 - ⁶ The Ball of Honey [Madhupindika Sutta](#) (MN 18)
 - ⁷ Moffitt, Philip Dancing with Life p. 80
 - ⁸ Moffitt p. 88
 - ⁹ Flickstein, Matthew Non-duality: It's Not What You Think. Self published Forest Way Publications 2020
 - ¹⁰ Thought for the Day, [Deep Spring Center](#))
 - ¹¹ Moffitt p. 156
 - ¹² Nisagadatta I Am That chapter 72 p. 306
 - ¹³ Moffitt p. 102
 - ¹⁴ [Sammaditthi Sutta](#): The Discourse on Right View
 - ¹⁵ Moffitt p. 156
 - ¹⁶ Ajahn Sumedho The Four Noble Truths p. 40
 - ¹⁷ [Iti 1.26](#)
 - ¹⁸ Bayda, Ezra Being Zen p. 71
 - ¹⁹ Bayda p. 72
 - ²⁰ Bayda p. 72
 - ²¹ Bayda, Ezra Being Zen p. 71
 - ²² Bayda p. 121
 - ²³ The Exhortation to Rāhula at Mango Stone [Ambalaṭṭhikā Rāhulovāda Sutta](#) (MN 61)
 - ²⁴ Bhikkhu Bodhi, [The Noble Eightfold Path: Way to the End of Suffering](#). Buddhist Publication Society, 1994, p. 39
 - ²⁵ [The Four Sublime States: Contemplations on Love, Compassion, Sympathetic Joy and Equanimity](#) ([accesstoinsight.org](https://www.accesstoinsight.org))
 - ²⁶ [The Four Sublime States: Contemplations on Love, Compassion, Sympathetic Joy and Equanimity](#) ([accesstoinsight.org](https://www.accesstoinsight.org))
 - ²⁷ Cabane, Olivia Fox, *The Charisma Myth* p. 84-85)
 - ²⁸ Brach, Tara Radical Acceptance P. 207
 - ²⁹ Bayda p. 138
 - ³⁰ Adapted from a training by Matt Flickstein
 - ³¹ Excerpt from the [Taking True Refuge Series](#) White Hall Meditation 2021
 - ³² TR p. 63
 - ³³ Schorling, John [Taking True Refuge Series](#) White Hall Meditation Talk II 10/28/2020
 - ³⁴ [Karaniya Metta Sutta](#): The Buddha's Words on Loving-Kindness translated from the Pali by The Amaravati Sangha
 - ³⁵ [Karaniya Metta Sutta](#): The Buddha's Words on Loving-Kindness translated from the Pali by The Amaravati Sangha
 - ³⁶ The Great Forty [Mahā Cattārisaka Sutta](#) (MN 117)
 - ³⁷ The Great Forty [Mahā Cattārisaka Sutta](#) (MN 117)
 - ³⁸ Bodhi The Noble Eightfold Path
 - ³⁹ Thanissaro Bhikkhu [Right Speech](#)
 - ⁴⁰ Flickstein p. 145
 - ⁴¹ To Cunda the Silversmith [Cunda Kammāraputta Sutta \(AN 10:165\)](#)
 - ⁴² Bodhi The Noble Eightfold Path
 - ⁴³ Bodhi The Noble Eightfold Path

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- ⁵¹ The Exhortation to Rāhula at Mango Stone [Ambalatthikā Rāhulovāda Sutta \(MN 61\)](#)
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- ⁶³ [The Healing Power of the Precepts](#)
- ⁶⁴ Bogota, Robert [A Simple Guide to Life](#), p. 33
- ⁶⁵ Goldstein, Joseph [Cause and Effect Reflecting on the law of karma](#)
- ⁶⁶ [Forum: How Does Karma Really Work?](#)
- ⁶⁷ [Forum: How Does Karma Really Work?](#)
- ⁶⁸ [Safety in Duality While the dharma contains non-dualistic teachings, the Buddha still believed that we can tell the difference between what we should and shouldn’t do](#) By Thanissaro Bhikkhu
- ⁶⁹ [Changing Karma Mindfulness changes karma: when you sit, you are not allowing your impulses to translate into action.](#) by Jon Kabat-Zinn
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- ⁷¹ Goldstein, Joseph [Cause and Effect Reflecting on the law of karma](#)
- ⁷² [Forum: How Does Karma Really Work?](#)
- ⁷³ [The Bhikkhus' Rules A Guide for Laypeople](#) compiled and explained by Bhikkhu Ariyesako
- ⁷⁴ Business (Wrong Livelihood) [Vanijjā Sutta \(AN 5:177\)](#)
- ⁷⁵ Joseph Grenny. Vital Smarts <http://www.crucialskills.com/2014/05/qa-dealing-with-unethical-behavior/>
- ⁷⁶ [Quote by Albert Einstein: “A man's value to the community depends primaril...” \(goodreads.com\)](#)