



Liberation through Compassion and Kindness : The Buddhist Eightfold Path as a Philosophy of Life

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[Essay]

Liberation through Compassion and Kindness The Buddhist Eightfold Path as a Philosophy of Life

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Abstract

In this essay I offer my interpretation of the Buddhist Eightfold Path as a philosophy of life, beginning with discussion of right views concerning suffering, liberation, compassion, and kindness. Compassion and kindness are virtues that direct us away from ourselves and our craving, and thus free us from suffering. The goal of right thought is to have only the kinds of thoughts we want to have. Right speech is practiced in words that express compassion and kindness. Right action calls us to be slow to react, and thoughtfully do the next right thing. Right livelihood means that any work that directly or indirectly causes others to suffer is work to avoid. Right effort recognizes that we live well only with effort. Right mindfulness is doing one thing and thinking only of it. Right concentration — clearing the mind in meditation — is both the culmination and the second beginning of the Eightfold Path. No one graduates from the Eightfold Path; living well is an ongoing process.

1. Introduction

One does not need to be a Buddhist to appreciate Buddhism. In fact, many elements of Buddhism can be adopted no matter what one's religious beliefs or lack thereof. I offer here my interpretation of the Buddhist Eightfold Path as a philosophy of life. The Eightfold Path consists of right views, right thoughts, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

Right views include knowing the Four Noble Truths and the goal of spiritual enlightenment. The Four Noble Truths are:

1. All existence is filled with suffering.
2. Suffering is ultimately caused by craving.
3. We can be liberated from suffering.
4. Liberation requires following the eightfold path.

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Let's begin with analysis of the right views concerning suffering, liberation, compassion (*karuna*), and kindness (*metta*).

2. Suffering and Compassion

The first noble truth of Buddhism is that all life is suffering. Although we are not all in physical pain or mental anguish all the time, we do exist primarily in a state of being ill at ease in the world, of being alienated, "made other." Life is not easy. Thankfully, though, we do not have to suffer; liberation is possible, not necessarily in any grand religious or spiritual sense, but in the personal sense of freedom. I can free myself from suffering once I become aware of it and become willing to follow the path. Craving leads to suffering, as the second noble truth tells us, but craving can be overcome.

Compassion and kindness are virtues that direct us away from ourselves and our craving, and thus free us from suffering. Ironically, the most self-interested thing I can do is be unselfish. To treat myself best, to free myself from suffering, I need to focus not on my suffering but on the suffering of others. My suffering feeds on itself, and my attention to it is the oxygen that fills its lungs. So enlightened self-interest demands that I take the focus off myself.

We owe it to ourselves to treat other people with something greater than respect, namely compassion, because, like us, they are suffering. Compassion involves both the recognition that others are suffering and the fellow-feeling that the recognition brings. Others too are ill at ease in the world, alienated. I do not feel sorry for them or have pity for them; I have compassion for them, recognizing their state of being as my own. I recognize that even people with great power and influence over my life-situation are suffering, and thus deserving of compassion. Compassion is simply the wise way to approach others, recognizing their suffering and treating them accordingly.

Being misunderstood is painful, and so we should strive to understand others. Compassion thus involves an ethics of intention. While the carelessness and foolishness of certain actions makes them blameworthy even with good intentions, it is charitable, kind, and appropriate for us to consider others' intentions. Looking to others with their intentions in mind helps me to cultivate compassion. It is good *for me* to be compassionate. By tuning in to and attempting to alleviate the suffering of others, I reduce my own suffering.

Considering what motivates the other person makes me less likely to take the words or actions of the other person as a slight. Realizing that not everyone thinks and acts from my exact frame of reference broadens my perspective on the world and stimulates and increases my intelligence. Think of how giving a gift that is truly appropriate requires putting ourselves in another person's place, not just in the other's situation, but in the other's mindset. Children are sometimes comically bad at this, giving their mother a toy for a birthday present. We laugh, but many of us do not get too far beyond this, as hopelessly wrapped up in ourselves as we are. Similarly, being a good host and a good guest requires that we put ourselves in the mindset of the other. What do they need and want? As the host, it takes some imaginative empathy to see what the guest would need and want. Similarly, it takes some imaginative empathy for the guest to see the particulars of what would make a good guest in the eyes of the host.

And on a daily basis, empathic listening requires compassionate intentionalist interpretation. The goal is not to understand the other person as suits me; or from my point of view; or to find some piece of common ground. The goal is to understand the other from his point of view, as he intends and hopes to be understood.

3. Kindness

The worst kind of suffering is my own. The external cause does not matter. Ironically, the only reliable relief for my suffering is compassion for someone else's suffering. Doing something for someone else with no clear, direct payoff or benefit for me indirectly brings the greatest benefit of all. It takes my mind off myself and thus relieves my suffering.

Compassion manifests itself in kindness, other-directed thought and action. Doing things for another person, without substantial motivation of personal gain, is kindness. Ironically there is, of course, always substantial personal gain to be had in kindness, namely liberation from my own suffering. A perpetually miserable man once quipped, "I'm not much, but I'm all I think about." Along these lines, I can calculate a "misery index" by comparing the number of times I think about myself and my own interests as compared to how many times I think of others and their interests. A misery index of ten is when I think about myself ten times as often. The goal is to get it down to one. Given this motivation, kindness should come easily, but it does not. Kindness is a virtue that, like

others, must be practiced to be achieved.

Fortunately, wonderfully, thinking of and acting for others turns out to be in my self-interest in terms of peace of mind — and in other ways too. Doing acts of kindness is a beneficial habit to cultivate. Most obviously, the habit is beneficial for those on whom I bestow kindness, but it is most deeply beneficial to myself. Looking for opportunities to do small acts of kindness is a very pleasant distraction, taking me outside myself and leaving me with a very pleasant feeling. Smaller acts of kindness and anonymous ones are less likely to garner thanks, but they make me feel good about myself.

“Give and you will receive.” We always have more than someone else, in fact probably more than many people. Giving our time, money, energy, attention, or whatever it may be to someone who has less makes us appreciate what we have and feel “rich.” The good feelings that result not just from the comparison, but from the gratitude and the empowerment, make us magnets for good to come in return. No magic is involved, but the positive feelings giving birth to, and being born from, positive thoughts lead to positive words and actions, which attract like in kind. Again, no magic. People just like to do things for and with positive people.

Consider the Prayer of St. Francis:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love.
Where there is injury, pardon.
Where there is doubt, faith.
Where there is despair, hope.
Where there is darkness, light,
And where there is sadness joy.
Divine Master, grant that I may
Not so much seek to be consoled,
As to console;
To be understood, as to understand;
To be loved, as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive —
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

This is a prayer for kindness and compassion, asking that I may be relieved of the bondage of self. It asks nothing for me myself, though it recognizes that in directing myself towards others I ultimately benefit much more than I would in self-seeking. Maladies of turmoil, hatred, injury, doubt, despair, darkness, and sadness afflict human life. The prayer does not ask that I be spared of these. It asks instead that I help spare others by bringing to them the gifts of peace, love, pardon, faith, hope, light, and joy. Ironically, though, it will be in bringing these gifts to others that I will receive them myself. This is no mystery. Teachers know that they learn by teaching their students; parents know the greatest love and reward is in loving their children; recovering alcoholics know that in helping others to stay sober they stay sober themselves.

Obsessive concern for ourselves, our own problems and situations, does more harm than anything external. Focusing on others and helping them is the key to unlocking the chains that keep us in misery. To receive these gifts we must seek to do for others rather than to have things done for us. Though it may be our tendency to seek to be understood, loved, given to, and pardoned, we will receive these gifts most effectively in giving away what little we have in order to understand, love, give to, and pardon others. We make ourselves magnets and targets of the kindness and good will of others by being kind and of good will. Not that this is the prime motivation. How could it be, for who would believe it works? Desperation is the initial motivation, and the relief we feel in forgetting about ourselves for a short time is the initial reward that allows us to persist until the unexpected results come.

The closing line of the St. Francis prayer reveals how the psychology is consistent with Christian theology: only in dying do we come fully to life. But we do not need to accept the Christian theology to see and accept the profound wisdom of the psychology. In fact, aside from the closing line, the prayer could work just as well within a Buddhist context. The self and its desires are the source of all suffering. Getting outside the self, reaching out to another to relieve his suffering, unwittingly relieves my suffering, which is further relieved by following the rest of the Eightfold Path.

4. Liberation

The goal is to become master of myself, so constant and at ease with myself that I can truly feel compassion for anyone — including antagonists — because

they are suffering. If there is any measure of greatness, it is a person's ability to feel compassion. That measure of compassion indicates to what extent one is master of oneself. Much of what attracts and repels other people is nonverbal; our thoughts and dispositions manifest themselves in the way we nonverbally project ourselves. A smile goes a long way; just contracting the facial muscles needed to smile helps change the biochemistry to make us feel better, feel like smiling. A smile is kindness, as it sends the message of approval to the other person and echoes inward.

We need to “suffer fools kindly,” be compassionate to them as fools. By “fools” I mean pests, not dumb people. Intelligence doesn't have much to do with it. It is easy to become impatient and angry with a fool who wastes my time and energy; it is easy to think I am doing a fool a favor by giving him a verbal lashing, which may set him straight. In truth, though, the lashing will likely have little effect. I would not be the first to lash this fool, nor would I be the last. He is a fool, after all. I will help myself and the fool most with kindness. I need to listen to him without letting him think he has me fooled, showing him patience and kindness nonetheless. This will be something new for the fool. He will look at me with admiration — I am not cruel and dismissive; I am someone to emulate. There is no guarantee of this reaction, of course, but more importantly perhaps, I will feel good. There will be no echo or hangover of bad speech or behavior. The fool is like a child, and there is no lasting sense of satisfaction in lashing out at a child or a fool. There is, though, a sense of satisfaction in exercising restraint and kindness and perhaps even having a good influence as a result.

When someone wrongs, offends, or harms me, I need to have compassion for him as a suffering person. He would not strike out and behave that way if he were not suffering. In fact, I need to take it even further and ask myself what part I have to play in it. Even if the other person is clearly in the wrong from an objective point of view, I need to ask myself if I could have done anything differently to ease this person's suffering and lessen the likelihood that he would strike out at me. In most situations there are shades of gray in which I will honestly admit that I did something wrong even if the other person was clearly, objectively far more wrong. The other person's wrongdoing is his to live with. What is important is that I be able to live with myself and that I learn to identify and avoid my own conflict-causing behavior. This is not about being a doormat; it is about being a strong and compassionate master of my self, avoiding conflict

before it happens and resolving it when it unfortunately does happen.

It is easy to love our friends and difficult to love our enemies. Similarly, compassion is most difficult — and most important — when it is for someone in a position of power, advantage, and privilege over us. Power is an illusion in the hands of the suffering. They have the appearance of power; and may even inflict pain out of a position of authority; and may even be drunk on the adrenaline of having their way; but internally they suffer. We need to be assured of this, they suffer. On the surface, people in positions of power are not clearly suffering, but indeed powerful abusers are suffering — not necessarily in the sense of being tormented or pained but being dislocated and not at ease. The bad behavior of those in power that most leads us to despise and resent them is actually the clearest evidence of their suffering; someone who is not suffering would not treat another person so badly.

No matter how powerful someone is, he still has no power to control our thoughts and emotions. The ultimate proof of this is that it is always possible to have compassion rather than contempt for a powerful abuser. It is not easy, though; it takes practice and repeated, disciplined reaction to make it come naturally. In such cases, compassion is clearly differentiated from pity. Pity is emotional and uncontrolled, irrational or non-rational; it is a reaction rather than a response. Compassion, by contrast, is a controlled, rational response. This is not to say that compassion is without feeling; it is simply that feeling does not overwhelm the compassionate person. We do not pity those in power over us, though we can have compassion for them in their human suffering.

We shouldn't explicitly offer powerful abusers forgiveness, but nonetheless we should forgive them and live in the spirit of forgiveness. We do this not for them, but for ourselves. It may well benefit them and we hope it does, but we can only count on it benefiting us. We should forgive such a person in our hearts, though it does not make sense to verbally offer the person forgiveness. Such a person may not have admitted in her own heart that she is wrong, and so approaching such a person with words of forgiveness may only provoke rancor.

Not forgiving someone is not giving myself enough credit; it is being prideful in a way that betrays underlying insecurity. Really needing the other person's apology is demanding reparation where none is needed. I must be whole with or without the other person's apology. When I do wrong, I need to make an apology so that I will be forgiven and unburdened of guilt, but when wrong is done to me, I do not need to have an apology made to me. I'm whole

and above the offense; I need not be offended. On the other hand, when wrong is done to me, I can help to heal the other person and clear the air by offering forgiveness in my heart, even when none is sought in words.

Other people may often seem to make life more difficult with their demands, their thoughts, opinions, and ways. But love and friendship are great gifts without which life would be difficult to bear. One's purpose, whatever it may be, and one's successes and failures cry out to be shared. No success is as sweet without sharing, no failure is as hard when shared.

Admittedly, there are some people it would benefit our emotional life to have removed. But others ultimately give us the chance to rise above the fray and to have compassion for fellow sufferers, thus relieving ourselves of some suffering. We cannot force love or understanding on everyone. We need to have some practical wisdom in its offering and application.

Throughout my compassion for others, though, I need to remember that my first duty is to myself. I can only be of genuine use and value to others if I take proper care of myself. We are instructed before an airplane takes off that if the oxygen masks drop in an emergency we should put on our own first before attempting to put them on our children. Putting myself first is not selfish, not in any blameworthy way. It is responsible.

Having considered right views concerning suffering, liberation, compassion, and kindness, we turn now to the remaining seven steps on the Eightfold Path.

5. Right Thought

Thoughts lead to words, which lead to actions, which lead to character. And character is destiny. My life, my destiny, is in my thoughts. The goal is to have only the kinds of thoughts I want to have. Having nasty thoughts about people is not as harmful as speaking nastily about them, but it is harmful still. Thoughts unchecked and uncorrected often lead to words I regret.

Thoughts about myself are perhaps even more important. To think negatively about myself often goes right to bad action, skipping speech. Thoughts and fantasies of revenge, imagined conversations, arguments, and putdowns, all do no good and some harm. By contrast, envisioning things positively allows me to believe in myself and my ability to get from point A to point B, and thus enables me to say and do the things that will get me there.

6. Right Speech

Foul language, slander, and gossip are counterproductive; they reverberate in thought, causing an emotional hangover. And they push forward into action, leading us to do things that increase our own suffering. Foul language would seem to be a harmless catharsis. A word is a word, and to invest it with the power and the aura of being off limits seems silly and superstitious. But foul words put us in touch with the lower brain. We crawl down the evolutionary history of the brain to its lizard level, an uncomfortable place where there is simply aggression, without rational thought or elevated, positive emotions.

Slander and gossip likewise leave us with an emotional hangover, no matter what the guilty pleasure and rush in the moment. Slander and gossip simply are not worthy of us. If we are concerned with truth, why would we deal in untruth? While slander and gossip may not constitute outright lies, they are not true in the fullest sense. They are hidden and slanted, bringing suffering to others and increasing our own suffering. We cannot help but suffer more in the knowledge that we have caused others to suffer. For a moment we may take some dark pleasure in inflicting suffering, but the pleasure returns more than is bargained for in pain. Similarly, sarcasm needs to go. The word *sarcasm* comes from the Greek, meaning “tearing the flesh.” Ironic wit is fine, but mean-spirited sarcasm serves no good purpose.

I need to avoid criticizing others for their benefit, because most often it does not actually benefit them. There is such a thing as constructive criticism, but it is a delicate art. To see if it is constructive, I need to ask myself what my true motives are in offering the criticism. If I truly would rather not offer the criticism, but nonetheless feel I would be doing the person a genuine disservice in refraining, then perhaps I should offer the criticism — it is constructive. If I have a real desire to offer the criticism, then probably I should not. The other person may or may not benefit from it, but my motives may be revenge or a feeling of superiority. No good comes from such criticism, or at least not enough good.

We need to refrain from lying — lying becomes a vicious habit if we permit ourselves the indulgence. We can find ourselves lying for no good reason, when the truth would serve our interests just as well. And we can eventually, at some level, believe our own lies. So lies potentially lead not only to bad action but also lead back to bad thought. This is not to say that a lie may not sometimes be

justified. If a serial killer asks me where my mother is, I should lie. But the exceptional permissibility of lying is easily abused. I need to beware of being too quick to make an exception for a lie.

Laughter is a gift, but it has its limits. Laughter at another's expense may hurt the other person, and it certainly hurts me. Making a buffoon or an ass of myself through boisterous carrying-on harms me. A certain dignity is called for by right speech.

On the positive side, right speech is practiced in words that express compassion and kindness. It is practiced in words that do not put myself down but express proper pride, dignity, and liberation. Telling the truth commands respect. No matter what else people may think of me they will respect me for my word if I earn it.

But while the goal and practice of right thought and right speech is admirable, perhaps it is not healthy. Perhaps it involves repressing the thoughts and words that come naturally, making them bubble beneath the surface, only to explode at a moment of weakness or become manifest in neuroses. Certainly if right thought and right speech involve repression, then the end does not justify the means. And if we experience right thought and right speech as puritanical prohibitions, such repression is likely. If, however, we see thoughts and words in violation of right thought and speech not as forbidden fruit but as vermin, they will be more easily exterminated. We must (come to) see such thoughts and words not as "given up" but "gotten rid of." The proof is in the pudding of the happier life led in conformity to right thought and right speech.

Right speech is easier and more basic than right action and can help lead to right action. Taking these steps leads to a life that is steady and happy rather than one that is stormy and sad.

7. Right Action

We need to be slow to react, and thoughtfully do the next right thing. Certain actions, including theft and violence, are prohibited, aside from extremely exceptional situations. We cannot take from, or physically harm, another without harming ourselves; a mental hangover results. We do not have to accept reincarnation or some mystical force to believe in Karma in the secular sense of "what comes around goes around." Not only are we liable to get payback from the other person, but from ourselves. Theft and violence are such violations of

right action that put us in a position ill at ease with the world. In wronging the other, we cause suffering in ourselves.

Two wrongs don't make a right, because I wrong myself in doing wrong to the other person. It seems trite; it seems like the kind of moral trap that we should be able to overcome; but it is true. It is a lesson I continue to learn and relearn. The temptation is great to play judge, jury, and executioner. When I see a wrong and I see a way to counteract it — to bring the “right result” — I almost cannot resist. But even if I manage to achieve the “right result,” I'm not happy about it. There may be an immediate rush, but I am left with an emotional hangover. It might be possible to overcome such a reaction, but none of my past efforts could change it. The temptation to exercise power and to play superhero avenger is great, but resisting it once makes it easier to resist the next time.

If two wrongs don't make a right, though, what does? Right in the face of wrong makes right. A right greater than the wrong sets things right. Not revenge in the form of an eye for an eye (or more), but forgiveness, makes right out of wrong. On the positive side, acts of kindness and compassion ease the suffering of others and hence ease our own suffering.

8. Right Livelihood

We need to make a living in a way that allows us to be at ease with ourselves. Traditionally, Buddhism bans trade in weapons and intoxicants. I would not universally ban those means of making a living, but neither of them would suit my own peace of mind. Any work that directly or indirectly causes others to suffer is work to avoid, as it will reverberate in our own suffering. No matter what our line of work, we can cause the suffering of others. Clergy have abused children, using their place of trust to prey on their victims. On the other hand, a prison guard could bring hope to inmates and reform to the system. It is not so much the line of work as the approach we take to it that matters. Still, some lines of work are less likely to put us in the company of virtuous people than others, and for that reason should generally be avoided. Unless we come to the job of insurance broker or investment banker with the high aspiration of ennobling the profession, we are likely to get caught up in the moral compromises that are everyday business. Similarly, just because we work in a profession that is generally recognized for the good — teaching, social work, nursing — and we do no great harm and commit no abuse, we cannot assume we

are practicing right livelihood. The requirement is greater: we must conscientiously perform acts of kindness and avoid causing suffering through our work.

9. Right Effort

Laziness and procrastination are familiar foes to even the most industrious people. It is all too easy to slack off, or to put things off until tomorrow. We do not live well easily, we live well with effort. All of the preceding steps on the path require right effort for their fulfillment. The virtues implicit in each step require repeated action despite difficulty and resistance, internal and external. In pursuing goals, satisfaction is found in knowing we have tried our hardest and done our best. Getting started is often the hardest part of any task, and so right effort often calls for leaning forward into a job to counteract the inertia of standing still.

10. Right Mindfulness

Focusing on what is at hand is difficult, partly because it is not our normal way of doing things. We have the natural capacity and are socialized to do a number of things at once, all the while thinking about what we have to do next. Right mindfulness is doing one thing and thinking only of it. So rather than watching television and talking on the phone, while washing the dishes, we need to just wash the dishes and be there in the task. For adults, hand-eye coordination is automatic, but young children have to learn it with some difficulty. Right mindfulness in chopping wood or washing dishes involves getting back in tune with the motion and hand-eye coordination we have come to take for granted, being in and with the motion—losing ourselves in it. We do things better and with greater satisfaction when we are fully present to them. Peace of mind attends right mindfulness.

Being “in the zone” means having no meta-reflection, just immersion in the task at hand. Whether chopping wood, washing dishes, hitting a baseball, making love, or writing a novel, the idea is to clear the mind of all but the present activity. No thinking about the doing; being and doing become one, unmediated by the play-by-play announcer of the reflective mind. When reading out loud in public, for example, we must get in the zone. If we reflect on reading

while doing it, we will almost inevitably trip over the words. By contrast, getting lost in the act of reading lets the words flow. Our being is *in* the doing, not removed as a cerebral spectator of the doing. We become most fully ourselves in losing (sight of) ourselves. In this ecstasy (some of) the separation from the rest of being is overcome. This is joy, euphoria, which once glimpsed, will beckon return.

11. Right Concentration

Right concentration — clearing the mind in meditation — is both the culmination and the second beginning of the Eightfold Path. Whereas right mindfulness requires us to focus on what is at hand, right concentration focuses the mind on nothing — or at least nothing much, such as our breath or mantra. The eighth is the most difficult step on the path, yet even its imperfect practice enhances the practice of the other steps, as it requires and gives control of the mind — so essential to the other seven “rights.” Right action and right speech are important but will be fragile without the underlying right mindfulness. Right action and right speech can and perhaps should come first to a certain extent, but they will never be “perfected” without underlying right mindfulness. Right mindfulness is best achieved in the right concentration of meditation, and can then be carried into the rest of the day.

In meditation we clear our minds of the chatter and noise, the recurring thoughts and story lines. By noticing our thoughts and letting them pass in meditation, we can more easily come to do this in the course of the day. We develop the discipline necessary for the practice of controlling our thoughts and, in turn, our emotions.

Sometimes the best way to achieve a result is indirectly. In meditation, unblinking concentration is sought. More effective than directly willing ourselves to have such concentration is proper position and posture, which keeps us from a slumping position — habitually associated with idle rest and day dreaming or sleep — and gives the mind something to focus on in addition to breathing. The mind needs to “hold” something to prevent its restlessness; holding proper bodily posture helps. Progress in meditation is slow and difficult to chart, but the physical signs of progress — becoming adept at breathing deeply and sitting comfortably contorted — give reasonable hope that we are making parallel progress in the mental/emotional realm.

As with so many things, in meditation an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. I used to meditate in the late afternoon as a way of relieving stress. But I found it makes much more sense to start the day with meditation, to put me in the right frame of mind, to avoid and prevent stress. The prevention is not anything like 100% effective, but it does work better and more effectively than trying to get rid of stress through meditation later in the day.

Meditation, like reading, is haunted by distraction. It is surprising to see the thoughts that arise without even calling them. The goal is to be focused on what is at hand, though. Still, other things seem more interesting, almost inevitably. The aim is to clear my mind and simply follow my breath, but thoughts intrude, and often one thought leads to another, despite my not wanting to think of anything at all. Finding purpose and focus on what is at hand is crucial, and developing the discipline of staying focused brings rewards.

We solve problems *through* meditation, *not during* meditation. Meditation puts us in the proper state of mind and body for dealing with problems. Meditation does not deal with specific concerns, but with repairing and maintaining the general health and well-being of mind and body. Sometimes an insightful thought arises during meditation, but we need to let such a flash pass. Later we can write it down and act on it.

It is often hard to see the value of meditation, especially at first. But a football player knows the value of lifting weights. The game is not won or lost based on who can bench press the most, but the bench press will help him push off an opponent. Running laps and wind sprints seems tiresome and unnecessary, but the conditioning pays dividends in the fourth quarter. Similarly, we do not live our lives in the lotus position, but time spent in the lotus position brings strength and endurance to life outside. The discipline and ability to control our thoughts, which we need and acquire in meditation, can be transferred to workaday life. Weightlifting and running become satisfying in their own right, quite apart from any benefits on the athletic field. So too does meditation.

Few people seem able to sit quietly alone for long — they go stir crazy or fall asleep. Uncomfortable alone, they talk on cell phones in public. Even when people seek solitary isolation they often listen to music, watch television, or read books — the words of others. Sitting quietly alone in meditation is a difficult, but worthwhile way to get in touch with *being*, as opposed to the everyday *doing*.

So much of our time is spent *doing* and in pursuit of *having*. Meditation

halts the runaway train of doing and having, allowing us to be-here-now. Living in the present moment should be the easiest, most natural thing in the world, but it is extremely difficult. The lesson learned in practicing meditation properly is how to be in the moment, and this can be transferred outside the practice of meditation itself. Finding my thoughts drifting to another concern in the midst of something to be enjoyed and experienced to the fullest, I can correct my thoughts by focusing on the moment. Through repeated practice the habit and its virtue can be established.

12. Conclusion: Habit

Unfortunately, no one graduates from the Eightfold Path. Living well is an ongoing process. Happiness is like riding a bicycle; we have to keep pedaling or we fall off. The temptation is to think we can coast, that we do not need to do the things that brought us to happiness — the good habits we have established. But if we want something to become easier; if we want to become better at it; we need to do it more, practice, and develop the habit. Habit counteracts the inertia that resists taking difficult steps. Habit is muscle that needs to be exercised so that it will kick in during good times and bad. When we are in a good state of mind we move effortlessly through our day. When we are down or finding life difficult we count on the habits established during good times to pull us through, to help us to act on autopilot and to overcome the weight and inertia that opposes our action. Habit develops a kind of flow, a conveyor belt on which the actions are carried along.¹

¹ My interpretation of the Eightfold Path is inspired by many conversations with friends and by many books including Michael C. Brannigan's *The Pulse of Wisdom: The Philosophies of India, China, and Japan* 2nd Edition (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2000), Walpola Rahula's *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1959,) and Thich Nhat Hanh's *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy, and Liberation* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1998).