

Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation, Weeks Two and Three: Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path

I. Four Noble Truths

The Buddha often organized his teaching around the Four Noble Truths. He suggested that we transform our habit of viewing the conditions of life in terms of what we like and what we dislike and replace it by understanding life from the point of view of the Four Noble Truths.

1. Stress and suffering arise in our lives due to the habit of struggling with the inherent challenges of life. We live in a constantly changing world. Nothing that is permanent can be found. The experience of constant change is unsatisfying. We want security; therefore we attempt to control life. Of course, we are never completely successful in controlling what can not be controlled, so we suffer. We can get interested in the basic vulnerability in life and better understand that life is fundamentally ungovernable.

2. Understanding suffering and stress in life allows us to see its cause – clinging. We suffer when through attachment we struggle with the conditions of life. We try to hold on to or grasp after what we like, and we try to push away, deny or escape from conditions that we don't like. The Buddha called this habit of struggling clinging.

3. The end to stress arises when there is a letting go of clinging. The habit of struggling with the conditions of life is well entrenched, but it can be unlearned or abandoned. This abandonment is freedom from suffering. With practice, we begin to understand that suffering arises only when we identify with and act out our attachments. It is possible to be free from these attachments and the suffering that they imply.

4. With practice one begins to see that there is a path (a way of living) that leads to the end of suffering and stress. The path is about understanding stress, abandoning clinging, and realizing the natural freedom that arises when attachments are abandoned. The path unfolds through the development of awareness or mindfulness. It is this clear seeing that illuminates that which is currently not being seen clearly. The Buddha laid out an eightfold path describing this process.

II. Eightfold Path

Steps 1-3: The development of ethical conduct through right speech, right action and right livelihood. Ethical living is learning how to sow the seeds for mutual support and a life in harmony with others. This is not about being good versus bad; instead, it is about recognizing and living in alignment with the truth of interdependence. By paying attention to the skillfulness of our actions we are able to avoid guilt, fear, restlessness, and exhaustion associated with unskillful actions. An ethical life provides the necessary stability of the mind and heart needed to deepen our meditation practice.

Steps 4-6: The development of the sensitivity of the mind through right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration: These three steps are about purifying and developing the strength of mind in order to facilitate insight. The development of concentration leads to the

happiness of tranquility.

Right effort: this is the practice of remembering to be present. Jack Kornfield talks about the quality of repetition or starting again. Joseph Goldstein mentions that right effort comes first. It is this wise effort that leads to energy and enthusiasm for the practice. The motivation for right effort comes from our courageous heart. This wholeheartedness inspires us to use our life for practice, to start again out of compassion.

Right Mindfulness: Mindfulness is a non-interfering awareness – awareness free of agendas and expectations. Mindfulness is a simple knowing or recollecting of what is present, moment to moment.

Right Concentration: Concentration arises as the mind learns to be with present moment experience with greater and greater continuity – awareness without distraction. A concentrated mind is more sensitive due to the stilling effects of tranquility and calm. Concentration adds power, depth and greater clarity to the practice of mindfulness.

Steps 7 and 8: The development of Wisdom through right view and right intention. With a concentrated mind we are better able to see things as they are. Seeing clearly transforms our understanding leading to the peace of non-clinging. The Buddha teaches that wisdom arises through insight into the conditioned and interdependent nature of all experience. As we more clearly see the conditioned nature of things we begin to act more often from intentions of compassion and wisdom and abandon intentions based on self-centered fear and craving.

III. Homework

At the beginning of each meditation period remember that we are training the heart to be present with the anchor of the breath and with the distractions that arise to disturb this attention to the breath. Mindfulness is about not forgetting, “This is how it is now”.

Make an ethics inventory – reflect on areas in your life where there is more awareness and areas where there is less awareness. Choose one theme or area that you would *like* to work on (For example the themes of: generosity, simplicity, kindness, truthfulness, patience, compassion; or the areas of: intimate relations, work, community, children, parents, etc.). Every morning take a couple of minutes to make the intention to be more awake in the place you have chosen to work with. This is a powerful way to work with mindfulness in daily life. This is not about forcing changes in life; rather it is about remembering to be mindful in places where we tend to be not so awake. Just being more awake in these areas will lead to more skillful action over time.

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