

## Right Action

Right Action and the Eightfold Path By Barbara O'Brien, About.com

Right Action is the fourth aspect of the Buddhist Eightfold Path. But what is "right action," exactly? For me, the words "right action" evoke social and environmental activism, and such work can be examples of right action. But "Right Action" in the Buddhist sense also means acting in harmony with the other aspects of the path. These aspects are:

Right View  
Right Intention  
Right Speech  
Right Action  
Right Livelihood  
Right Effort  
Right Mindfulness  
Right Concentration

This means that when we act "rightly," we act without selfish attachment to our work. We act mindfully, without causing discord with our speech. Our "right" actions spring from compassion and from understanding of the dharma. Each aspects of the path supports all the other aspects.

### Right Action and the Precepts

Right Action, Right Speech and Right Livelihood make up the ethical conduct part of the path. Most basically, Right Action refers to keeping the precepts. The many schools of Buddhism have various lists of precepts, but the precepts common to most schools are these:

*The Five Precepts are as follows:*

1. Not killing or causing harm to other living beings. This is the fundamental ethical principle for Buddhism, and all the other precepts are elaborations of this. The precept implies acting non-violently wherever possible, and many Buddhists are vegetarian for this reason. The positive counterpart of this precept is love.
2. Not taking the not-given. Stealing is an obvious way in which one can harm others. One can also take advantage of people, exploit them, or manipulate them — all these can be seen as ways of taking the not given. The positive counterpart of this precept is generosity.
3. Avoiding sexual misconduct. This precept has been interpreted in many ways over time, but essentially it means not causing harm to oneself or others in the area of sexual activity. The positive counterpart of this precept is contentment.
4. Avoiding false speech. Speech is the crucial element in our relations with others, and yet language is a slippery medium, and we often deceive ourselves or others without even realizing that this is what we are doing. Truthfulness, the positive counterpart of this precept, is therefore essential in an ethical life. But truthfulness is not enough, and in another list of precepts (the ten precepts or the ten kusala dharmas) no fewer than four speech precepts are mentioned, the others enjoining that our speech should be kindly, helpful, and harmonious.
5. Abstaining from drink and drugs that cloud the mind. The positive counterpart of this precept is mindfulness,

## The Eightfold Path

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or awareness. Mindfulness is a fundamental quality to be developed the Buddha's path, and experience shows that taking intoxicating drink or drugs tends to run directly counter to this.

Many Buddhists around the world recite the five precepts every day, and try to put them into practice in their lives.

The precepts are not a list of commandments. Instead, they describe how an enlightened being naturally lives and responds to life's challenges. As we work with the precepts, we learn to live harmoniously and compassionately.

### Right Action and Mindfulness Training

The Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh said, "The basis of Right Action is to do everything in mindfulness." He teaches Five Mindfulness Trainings that correlate to the five precepts listed above.

The first training involves respecting life. In awareness of the suffering caused by destruction of life, we work to protect all living things and this planet that sustains life.

The second training involves generosity. We give freely of our time and resources where they are needed, without hoarding things we don't need. We do not exploit other people or resources for our own gain. We act to promote social justice and well-being for everyone.

The third training involves sexuality and avoiding sexual misconduct. In awareness of the pain caused by sexual misconduct, we honor commitments and also act when we can to protect others from sexual exploitation.

The fourth training involves loving speech and deep listening. This means avoiding language that causes enmity and discord. Through deep listening to others, we tear down the barriers that separate us.

The fifth training involves what we consume. This includes nourishing ourselves and others with healthful food and avoiding intoxicants. It also involves what books we read or what television programs we watch. Entertainments that are addictive or cause agitation might best be avoided.

### Right Action and Compassion

The importance of compassion in Buddhism cannot be overstated. The Sanskrit word that is translated as "compassion" is *karuna*, which means "active sympathy" or the willingness to bear the pain of others. Closely related to *karuna* is *metta*, "loving kindness."

It's important to remember also that genuine compassion is rooted in *prajna*, or "wisdom." Very basically, *prajna* is the realization that the separate self is an illusion. This takes us back to not attaching our egos to what we do, expecting to be thanked or rewarded.

In *The Essence of the Heart Sutra*, His Holiness the Dalai Lama wrote,

"According to Buddhism, compassion is an aspiration, a state of mind, wanting others to be free from suffering. It's not passive -- it's not empathy alone -- but rather an empathetic altruism that actively strives to free others from suffering. Genuine compassion must have both wisdom and lovingkindness. That is to say, one must understand the nature of the suffering from which we wish to free others (this is wisdom), and one must experience deep intimacy and empathy with other sentient beings (this is lovingkindness)."