

Right Intention

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

The second aspect of the Eightfold Path of Buddhism is Right Intention or Right Thought, or *samma sankappa* in Pali. Right View and Right Intention together are the "Wisdom Path," the parts of the path that cultivate wisdom (*prajna*). Why are our thoughts or intentions so important?

We tend to think that thoughts don't count; only what we actually do matters. But the Buddha said in the *Dhammapada* that our thoughts are the forerunner of our actions (Max Muller translation):

"All that we are is the result of what we have thought: it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with an evil thought, pain follows him, as the wheel follows the foot of the ox that draws the carriage.

"All that we are is the result of what we have thought: it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with a pure thought, happiness follows him, like a shadow that never leaves him."

The Buddha also taught that what we think, along with what we say and how we act, create karma. So, what we think is as important as what we do.

Three Kinds of Right Intention

The Buddha taught that there are three kinds of Right Intention, which counter three kinds of wrong intention. These are:

The intention of renunciation, which counters the intention of desire.

The intention of good will, which counters the intention of ill will.

The intention of harmlessness, which counters the intention of harmfulness.

Renunciation

To renounce is to give up or let go of something, or to disown it. To practice renunciation doesn't necessarily mean you have to give away all your possessions and live in a cave, however. The real issue is not objects or possessions themselves, but our attachment to them. If you give away things but are still attached to them, you haven't really renounced them.

Sometimes in Buddhism you hear that monks and nuns are "renounced ones." To take monastic vows is a powerful act of renunciation, but that doesn't necessarily mean that laypeople cannot follow the Eightfold Path. What's most important is to not attach to things, but remember that attachment comes from viewing ourselves and other things in a delusional way. Fully appreciate that all phenomena are transient and limited -- as the *Diamond Sutra* says (Chapter 32),

"This is how to contemplate our conditioned existence in this fleeting world:

"Like a tiny drop of dew, or a bubble floating in a stream;
Like a flash of lightning in a summer cloud,
Or a flickering lamp, an illusion, a phantom, or a dream.

The Eightfold Path

Triratna Buddhist Community New York City

"So is all conditioned existence to be seen."

As laypeople, we live in a world of possessions. To function in society, we need a home, clothing, food, probably a car. To do my work I really need a computer. We get into trouble, however, when we forget that we and our "things" are bubbles in a stream. And of course it's important to not take or hoard more than we need.

Good Will

Another word for "good will" is metta, or "loving kindness." We cultivate loving kindness for all beings, without discrimination or selfish attachment, to overcome anger, ill will, hatred and aversion.

According to the Metta Sutta, a Buddhist should cultivate for all beings the same love a mother would feel for her child. This love does not discriminate between benevolent people and malicious people. It is a love in which "I" and "you" disappear, and where there is no possessor and nothing to possess.

Harmlessness

The Sanskrit word for "non-harming" is ahimsa, or *ahiṃsā* in Pali, and it describes a practice of not harming or doing violence to anything.

To not harm also requires karuna, or compassion. Karuna goes beyond simply not harming. It is an active sympathy and a willingness to bear the pain of others.

The Eightfold Path is not a list of eight discrete steps. Each aspect of the path supports every other aspect. The Buddha taught that wisdom and compassion arise together and support each other. It's not hard to see how the Wisdom Path of Right View and Right Intention also supports the Ethical Conduct Path of Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. And, of course, all aspects are supported by Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration, the Mental Discipline Path.

Four Practices of Right Intention

The Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh has suggested these four practice for Right Intention or Right Thinking:

Ask yourself, "Are you sure?" Write the question on a piece of paper and hang it where you will see it frequently. Wrong perceptions lead to incorrect thinking.

Ask yourself, "What am I doing?" to help you come back to the present moment.

Recognize your habit energies. Habit energies like workaholicism cause us to lose track of ourselves and our day-to-day lives. When you catch yourself on auto-pilot, say, "Hello, habit energy!"

Cultivate bodhichitta. Bodhichitta is the compassionate wish to realize enlightenment for the sake of others. It becomes the purest of Right Intentions; the motivating force that keep us on the Path.

"Human beings are today less free to think and feel simply, naturally, and spontaneously than at any other period in history."

~ Essential Sangharakshita p. 150