

The Four Noble Truths II: The Noble Eight-Fold Path

Having discussed the first five steps of The Noble Eight-Fold Path, this writing will focus upon the final three: Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Meditation.

The first five steps must be practiced as a group, not linearly. To the precise degree they have been mastered, the sixth, Right Effort, will be existentially possible only to that extent. It is a matter of mental preparedness, resulting from living the life as prescribed in steps one through five. Without this preparedness, Right Effort is not possible.

What, then, is Right Effort? Here is one of Buddha's formulations, a four-fold practice: Encouraging the arising of good thoughts, maintaining arisen good thoughts, discouraging the arising of bad thoughts; eliminating arisen bad thoughts

What is a *good* thought? Simply: a thought which is positive, impersonal, non-ego-centered. Conversely, a *bad* thought is negative, personal, and ego-centered.

How encourage the arising of *good* thoughts? Simply dwell upon Teachings, primarily upon the deeper meanings of the first three Noble truths, coupled with thoughts about and gratitude to the Teachers. This effort, clearly, is a practice and, as with any practice improves with consistent efforts over time.

How maintain arisen *good* thoughts? Simply dwell upon them when they have arisen. Realization results from dwelling upon the object to be manifested. That upon which one dwells, to whatever extent, will be realized; in the sense that it will, to that degree, occupy one's consciousness.

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How discourage and eliminate *bad* thoughts? Simply by thinking of, dwelling upon, their opposites, with a positive intent.

The seventh step, Right Mindfulness is possible to the exact extent to which Right Effort has been mastered. This in turn is possible only to the exact extent that steps one through five have been mastered.

What, then, is Right Mindfulness? It is the ability to be aware of one's mental activities without becoming involved with, subsumed by them. It is to barely notice these activities, including those which are deliberately initiated by the *self*. It is to begin to be *in the world, but not of the world*. Indeed, it is a gradual movement resulting from ardent, sincere practice, towards "the Divine Spectator," which is *One*: There is no separateness. The *sense* of separateness arises within one's self, often unconscious, imagination that must be *slain*. To slay this imagination requires no effort by being deprived of energy, of life—a matter of non-violence, so to speak.

In mindfulness, one's own stream of consciousness is passively observed. It becomes external to one's observing self. Gradually, it is seen to have no more to do with oneself than the clothes one is wearing. The mind, like one's clothing, is something one *has*, not something one *is*. Thus, like one's clothes, it needn't become an obsession. Its importance is minimal.

It is at this stage that one may begin to seriously wonder just who it is observing all these phenomena. One may ask the question posed by Sri Ramanamaharshi, "Who am I"? Should one persist in raising this question within one's self, it may come to pass that suddenly the fulcrum of the question will change: It is not one's self asking who one is, but, rather, it is someone/something asking one, "Who am I?" This example moves one

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towards Right Meditation, the eighth step on the Noble Eight-Fold Path, to which we now turn our attention.

What, then, is Right Meditation? Buddha describes it variously, although all descriptions have certain features in common. Its possible methods and modes are elaborated in the oldest text on meditation, Pantajali's *Yoga Sutras*, of which there are number excellent translations, albeit several not excellent at all. The form of meditation appropriate to one individual may be inappropriate for another. Thus, all Great Teachers taught different procedures to different students, suited to his or her stage of development.

The first stanza in Pantajali's *Yoga Sutras* teaches the goal meditation, of any and all sorts: "Meditation is the hindering of the modifications of the thinking principle." Thus, one aspect of the goal of Right Meditation is to slow down, slow the mind, and calm it—to calm the turbid waters on one's life. Those who truly meditate are, relatively, calm within. This calm may or may not manifest externally, being governed by deliberate and conscious choice, not possible in the earlier states of spiritual development.

How are these modifications to be *hindered*? Simply focus and hold one's attention, one's mind, upon one thing—external or internal—one image, one idea, one Being. That upon which to focus must be chosen by each seeker, something which possesses a sacred dimension, meaning for the seeker. It is the holding one's attention upon the chosen object that constitutes meditation and holding the attention upon that object for increasing periods of time.

At first, it will seem impossible to hold one's attention upon the chosen idea. The mind will fly-off in various directions, to people, places and things. This can be discouraging to notice. If one's motivation lacks sincerity

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and sufficient depth, one may wish to give up usually having provided the self with a good reason for doing so; falling back into *endless self-deception*. However, if one is fortunate to have encountered Krishna's advice, one will persevere: "...bring your mind back, again and again...in time it will remain." It is the willingness to return the mind to the object of concentration over and over again which counts that separates success from failure. "The only failure is the failure to try." It does not matter is one has to bring the mind back countless times in five minutes, for soon, if efforts persist, the number will diminish. The time will come when one can maintain focus for five minutes! Then, move on to ten minutes of focus, and so on. In the end, there is no time.

These steps sound simple enough. In practice they are extremely difficult, not only to do, but, more importantly, to consistently wish to do. There will be, and is, great resistance. "Know ye, mankind, ye suffer from yourselves. None else compels..." (Buddha) It comes from one's own self. Not from anything, anyone outside, as there is, in fact, no outside from which the resistance to come. It arises under the dubious auspiciousness of one's lower self, which imagined personal being, identified with Name and Form, separate from all others and, thus, suffering from "the Dire Heresy of Separateness." This illusory (sense of) self is sometimes referred to as Mara, the goddess, but must be understood to refer to the unenlightened aspects of one's own consciousness. It might be seen as one's karmic share in mankind's collective un-enlightenment, dis-ease, darkness and death. But, one must be ever vigilant regarding the forces within, pandering to the gods and goddesses of un-enlightenment, shadows and delusions, fighting the

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Light with all their imaginary might. Overcoming these will lead to success in unity.

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