# The Eight-fold Noble Path

## From *The Buddha's Way* by H. Saddhatissa

1. *Samma ditthi* (right understanding or views) in the initial stages of one's practice of the path need mean little more than a vague recognition that "all is not what it seems." Right understanding implies in the first instance having seen through the delusion that material security automatically brings peace of mind, or that ceremonies and ritual can wipe out the effects of a past act. Gradually, as the path is perfected, right views, based on knowledge, replace the previous delusions or superstitions that were based on ignorance and lack of insight.

The first factor of the path is then concerned with the contents of the mind. In order to develop this factor one must cease to think mechanically, and begin to question one's previous assumptions, until all erroneous views have been replaced by views based on an understanding of things as they really are.

One must see life as it is, in accordance with its three characteristics of impermanence *(anicca)*, dissatisfactoriness *(dukkha)* and egolessness *(anatta)*; one must possess a clear understanding of the nature of existence, of the moral law, of the factors and component elements that go to make up *samsara.* In short, one must have a clear understanding of *paticcasamuppada* and the Four Noble Truths. On the basis of understanding these facts one can perceive the causes of the vicissitudes of life.

2. *Samma sankappa*, usually translated as right thought or right motives, seems to apply to the emotional basis of thought rather to thinking itself. As the first factor of the path is concerned with the content and direction of thought, the second factor is concerned with the quality of the drive behind the thinking.

It is quite possible, and even at present quite fashionable, to hold opinions that would be called by a Buddhist "right views," and yet the emotional drive behind those views may not be "right" at all. It is possible, for example, to be driven by an unrecognized fear of involvement to adopt the view that "all is impermanent." Similarly a pathological inability to relax or to enjoy oneself can lead one to grasp at the view that "all is suffering"—the fault being thereby shifted from within to without. The doctrine that there is no permanent, abiding soul or personal identity can easily find favor with one who has never succeeded in forming a satisfactory relationship with another—or with himself. The development of "right thought" implies gradually uncovering and resolving these unrecognized drives. It implies weeding out the "unwholesome" roots and encouraging the "wholesome" roots of generosity and unselfishness, kindness and compassion, wisdom and insight.

*Samma sankappa* (right thought or motives) is that quality of consciousness wherein there is no obstruction to the thought processes. Sometimes, although to an observer one may seem to be reasoning logically and clearly, one is dimly aware of an emotional block

that is in fact controlling the direction of one's reasoning and preventing it from penetrating beyond a certain point. *Samma sankappa* is the absence of all such emotional obstructions. It denotes a state of consciousness that is limpid, clear, cool, free from the limiting considerations of self-interest, without tension or veiled uneasiness.

This means that one's mind should be pure, free from carnal "thirst" (*raga*), malevolence (*vyapada*), cruelty (*vihimsa*) and the like. At the same time, one should be willing to relinquish anything that obstructs one's onward march.

3. *Samma vaca* (right speech). By not indulging in, or listening to, lying, back-biting, harsh talk and idle gossip, we can establish a connecting link between "right thought" and "right action." *Samma vaca* is free from dogmatic assertions and from hypnotic suggestions; it is an instrument whereby one can learn and teach, comfort and be comforted. We are practicing right speech when we use conversation as a means of coming to know people, to understand them and ourselves. This last sentence may seem a little ridiculous if looked at superficially: What else, one might ask, could conversation be used for? Yet one has only to sit in a bus or train and listen to the "conversations" going on around to realize that they are very rarely examples of right speech. Most so-called conversations are a series of interrupted monologues: each member of the group speaks more or less in order, but no one listens or makes any attempt to respond.

The practice of this third factor of the path implies a gradual but radical change in our use of language. At the same time the eight-fold path was expounded the spoken word was the main medium of communication; but what is here set down as "right speech" should now be interpreted as "right communication"—whether that take the form of radio or TV programs, advertising material, newspapers, magazines or books. The development of *samma vaca* should lead to a gradual refining of our use of all forms of communication. We shall come to realize the destructive nature of hypnotic TV advertisements, sensational newspaper articles and escapist literature of all kinds. We shall come to realize the dangers as well as the immense potential value of conversation.

Right speech, then, means using the various modes of communication to further our search for understanding and insight.

It would not only be characterized by wisdom but also by kindness. Right speech should not be unduly excitable, not prompted by infatuation or selfish interests. It should not be such as to inflame the passions.

The person of right speech has been explained by the Buddha as follows:

> "S/he avoids lying. S/he speaks the truth. Wherever s/he may be s/he never knowingly speaks a lie, either for the sake of her/his own advantage, or for the sake of another person's advantage, or for the sake of any advantage whatsoever. S/he avoids tale bearing. What s/he has heard here, s/he does not repeat there, so as to cause dissension there; and what s/he has heard there, s/he does not repeat here, so as to cause dissension here. Thus s/he unites those that are divided, and those that are united s/he encourages. Concord gladdens her/him, s/he delights and rejoices in concord; and it is concord that s/he spreads by her/his words. S/he avoids harsh language. S/he speaks such words as are gentle, soothing to the ear, loving, such words as go to the heart, and are courteous and friendly, and agreeable to many. S/he avoids vain talk. S/he speaks at the right time, in accordance with facts, speaks what is useful, speaks of the law (i.e., Dharma) and the discipline;

her/his speech is like a treasure, at the right moment accompanied by arguments, moderate and full of sense.

"S/he uses such speech which is harmless, pleasant to the ear, agreeable, touching the heart, courteous, delightful to many and pleasant to many. This one is called 'the honey-tongued.'"

4. *Samma kammanta* (right action). This involves much more than just keeping the precepts. In the early stages of the practice of the path, keeping the precepts will probably require such an effort that there will be little energy left for any more advanced development of right action. Gradually, however, as the unwholesome patterns are weakened and we begin to build up some positive virtues, the further implications of *samma kammanta* can be considered.

Right action is any action that proceeds from an unobstructed mind. Whereas morality, in the usual sense of the word, can be practiced by one who is blind to the motives behind this behavior right action is impossible without a clear and deep understanding.

The *path* of right action involves abstaining from unwholesome *kamma* and performing only those actions which will lead to beneficial results. The *goal* of right action, however, is to transcend even *kusala* (wholesome) *kamma,* for once the enlightenment experience has arisen in life, actions will cease to produce any *kammic* results, harmful or beneficial. The *Upanishads* put it slightly differently: "Only actions done in God bind not the soul of man," but the meaning is similar. Although for many years and perhaps for many lifetimes we shall have to strive to develop the fourth factor in the sense of "wholesome practices," when once the path has been fully perfected, actions will no longer have any binding effect, will no longer form part of the *kamma/vipaka* chain.

5. *Samma ajïva* (right means of livelihood). The simplest interpretation of this factor of the path is based on the five precepts. Conscientious observance of the five precepts automatically vetoes certain trades and professions. The first precept—not to harm living things—requires that we do not earn our living by means of butchering cattle, dealing in flesh, fishing, hunting and so forth. Neither may one make or use weapons, nor engage in any form of warfare. Similarly the fifth precept—not to indulge in drinks or drugs that tend to cloud the mind—prevents us not only from trafficking in drugs, but also from engaging in the manufacture or distribution of alcohol. This straightforward interpretation of *samma ajïva* makes a very useful beginning, but it is only a beginning. As soon as we delve a little deeper into the concept of right livelihood, a host of problems and further shades of meaning becomes apparent.

We shall list a few of the problems, without attempting to give any answers. The reader, if he tries to practice this factor of the path, will evolve his own answers—and, of course, an infinite number of further questions. Among the problems raised by an attempt to practice *samma ajïva* are:

1. whether one can support, by working, paying taxes and accepting benefits, a government which is engaged in warfare, or actively preparing for it;
2. whether, in the name of the relief of human suffering, one can engage in medical research that involves sacrificing the lives of countless animals; and, more subtly, whether one can prescribe, sell—or even use—those drugs which have been discovered and tested by means of such experiments;

3. whether one has the right to destroy disease-bearing insects, or work in the preparation of materials for that purpose;
4. whether the third and fourth precepts would prohibit one from working in advertising or mass production work.

The list is endless. The questions are all ones that can only be answered by careful analysis of the circumstances, the motives and the attitudes of the people involved.

Even if one manages more or less to avoid the wrong means of livelihood, the problems are not yet over. *Samma ajiva* implies much more than the mere avoiding of wrong means of livelihood. It implies a careful weighing up of our attributes and potentialities, and the selecting of a job that will use the talents we have and at the same time help to develop our weak points.

Briefly, then, we might say that the fifth factor of the path requires us to stop and consider how and why we are spending our working hours. It requires us to take time to think out and find some means of occupation which will be conducive to our own growth and development and which will, if possible, be beneficial to others. If a job helps us in our search for an understanding both of ourselves and of the world around us then it is, for us, *samma ajiva*—no matter how futile and crazy it may seem to our friends and neighbors.

6. *Samma vayama* (right effort). Although the canonical division of right effort into four categories seems at first sight to be rather pedantic and meaningless it has, if one studies it more closely, a sound practical and psychological validity. The four-fold division of right effort consists of:

1. the effort to cut off unwholesome states that have already arisen;
2. the effort to prevent the arising of unwholesome states that have not yet arisen;
3. the effort to preserve wholesome states that have already arisen;
4. the effort to encourage wholesome states that have not yet arisen.

Right effort requires the development of insight, intuition and will power. We need to develop insight in order to perceive which of the states of mind habitually present are to be preserved and which are to be weeded out. We need to develop intuition so that we can gauge when we are sailing close to a hitherto unknown state of mind and whether we should go ahead or withdraw from it.

This sixth factor, though dependent on insight and intuition, is primarily concerned with the development of the will. Buddhism insists on the development of wisdom rather than of will power; nevertheless it recognizes the need for the latter and provides scope for the perfecting of it in this factor of the path. Without the constant and deliberate practice of right effort, no sure progress can be made.

7. *Samma sati* (right mindfulness) is the pivotal factor of the path. Without it none of the other factors can be brought to completion. Right mindfulness serves too as a control over the other factors, preventing the excessive development of one at the expense of the others. In Christian terminology *samma sati* might be translated as "the practice of the presence of God"; it implies gradually extending one's awareness until every action, thought and word is performed in the full light of consciousness.

The practice of mindfulness has been described under four headings known as the four foundation of mindfulness, *satipatthana*. Firstly, mindfulness of the body: this consists in becoming gradually more aware of the body. We can begin this practice by trying to watch the various changes in the postures of the body—lying, sitting, standing, walking. Care must be taken to be neither too objective nor too subjective; we are not being asked to look at out bodies as "things" moving puppet-like before the watching mind; nor are we asked to "feel" very acutely every movement and gesture. What is required rather is that we try to live here and now "in our bodies." This may seem a bizarre request, but once we try to experience this state we realize how rarely in fact we are "living in our bodies," how rarely we are aware of the movements of our limbs and the interplay of muscles. Mindfulness of the body can be practiced too by watching the breath flowing in and out of the nostrils, by listening to sounds impinging on the ear, not pausing to name and pass judgment on them, but just noting their arising and passing away. We can learn to become aware of the taste and texture of food, not after the manner of the gourmet or the connoisseur, not for the sake of becoming an expert in the detection of spices or in the selection of wines, but simply in order to intensify our awareness, noting the order and intensity of sensations, the variety of flavors, temperatures, colors, etc.

For some, and particularly for the intellectual types, mindfulness of the body is at first difficult. It is difficult to know what it is all about, what in fact one is supposed to be doing. But once we begin to get the feel of it, it becomes very simple. We forget about it of course, maybe for hours on end, then suddenly the memory returns, and we begin again. "Happy is he who dwells mindful of the body," it has been said. Whenever we become tense, nervous, exhausted, if we can remember the "feel" of mindfulness of the body and re-establish it, the tension and weariness dissolve.

When we find ourselves becoming too relaxed and complacent, then is the time to move on to the second foundation of mindfulness. (Not that the four are to be practiced in strictly water-tight compartments, but it is probably wisest to become fairly conversant with one before setting out on the next.) Mindfulness of the feelings requires us to take up a similarly quiet and detached attitude towards our feelings as towards our bodies. By feelings is meant here the emotional reaction that follows any stimulus: pleasure, pain or indifference. We can watch this reaction occurring in response to both physical and mental stimuli. A warm wind blows, the reaction is pleasant; our pride is trampled on, the reaction is painful; we succeed in accomplishing a difficult task, the reaction is pleasant; we get angry about something, the reaction is painful; etc.. Again we must be careful not to adopt an objective, mechanistic attitude towards feelings; that would be as erroneous as our old method of clinging passionately to them. What is required is that we watch the arising and the passing away of each feeling—without trying to hold on to it, if it is pleasant, or trying to hurry it away, if it is unpleasant. Gradually we find that our sense of perspective is developing; we no longer identify ourselves with each fleeting feeling or let it carry us away to say or do things that we later regret. It is not at all a question of suppressing any feelings that arise—that would be completely at variance with the practice of mindfulness. But we watch each feeling arise, and, without tampering with it, let it pass away.

Mindfulness of the mind seems to be something of a tautology, yet it is perfectly feasible. In this third foundation of mindfulness we watch the constantly changing quality

of the state of mind. Now the mind is joyful, limpid, enthusiastic; now it has become clouded over, sullen, lethargic; now it is sentimental, now reflective, now angry, now compassionate. Always the same advice: watch, do not tamper, allow each state to come and go unimpeded.

The fourth foundation of mindfulness is the most difficult but the most fruitful. Here we relate the object of mindfulness to some aspect of the teaching. For example, if our expectations are suddenly frustrated, instead of noting that there is present an unpleasant feeling or an angry state of mind, we note that there is present suffering (*dukkha*)—the first noble truth. As one mood replaces another, we note *anicca*—impermanence, and so on.

One more aspect might be mentioned here. The factor of mindfulness is to be developed not only internally but also externally. Mindfulness of the body is to be practiced externally as mindfulness of the physical world; again we are not asked to classify or explain, to judge or correct, but only to observe—color, texture, sound, etc. Mindfulness of feelings and the states of mind can be practiced externally by watching their arising and their passing away in other people. And the fourth foundation of mindfulness is potentially present everywhere we look: the sun shifting fitfully through the window, a car passing by in the street, a child eating sweets.

8. *Samma samadhi.* Right concentration or meditation is the last factor of the path leading to the cessation of suffering. Meditation and its counterpart in daily life—mindfulness (*sati*)—form together the essence of the Buddha's teaching. The third section of this book will discuss in some detail the various methods and aims of meditation. Here we shall confine ourselves to a few general remarks.

It has been said of the mind that it is like a pool. Too often that pool is agitated and muddy, reflecting nothing but its own turbidity. Buddhist meditation is designed to quieten the mind until it becomes perfectly still. Then the deep recesses of the pool can be seen clearly, and it will reflect a true picture of whatever is presented to it. There are many hindrances in the way of one who seeks to quieten the mind in this way: violent emotions of desire or of hatred, restlessness and discontent, hesitation and doubt, laziness, weariness and sloth. Meditation manuals list the different obstacles that are likely to arise and explain how each one can be dealt with.

*Samma samadhi* (right concentration) should not be equated with what the Christian Church calls meditation. Certain elements are, of course, similar, but *samma samadhi* includes also those states which the Christian would call contemplation rather than meditation. Whether Buddhist *samadhi* goes even beyond contemplation as it is know to the Christian Church—though not, of course, to some of its mystics—or whether it falls short of that goal, is for each one of us to decide, in the light of our own experience.