

**OH NO,
NOT
ANOTHER
BUDDHIST
PRIMER**

BY

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**SECOND EDITION
(Revision 3)**

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INTRODUCTION
Or
WHY ANOTHER BOOK ON BUDDHISM

It's a fair question. Why does there need to be another book to try to explain Buddhism and Buddhist thought? After 2,500 years and hundreds of thousands of essays, suttas, explanations, and explanations of explanations, you'd think there probably wasn't anything left to say about it. There probably isn't. But, as the Buddha himself said, any expedient means to get the ideas and concepts across and have people find their way to enlightenment is a valid premise.

So, in the footsteps of every other 'expedient meaner', I chose to try to put my version of Buddhist thought and concept into language and context that might better apply to present-day circumstance and vernacular. Much of the material that I have found is stilted and scholarly ... as much of it probably should be. But it lacks warmth and applicability to us common folk.

Maybe that was the way it was intended (and in actuality it was, in its earliest incarnations) to be, but to me that was not the intent of the Buddha. He specifically said that he wanted ALL beings to achieve enlightenment as he had done, without exception. I fear that the tendency of human beings to create castes and bureaucracies many times leads to the formation of information that is hard to read and even harder to understand ... making the priest/monk/nun a required feature to interpret the religious teachings for the average Joe. I speak only for myself in this respect (as a possible *pratyekabuddha*) who has trouble taking anything on faith without proof.

Having said that, I must pay homage to the Buddhist monastic orders that preserved and promulgated the teachings of the Buddha for the last 2500 years, and kept them viable and vibrant. To them we owe a debt of thanks and gratitude. It was only through them that we have the incredible wealth of sutras to evaluate and learn from and the rich traditions that they have established to this very day. They have sacrificed

much for that wealth of Buddhist knowledge and paid a heavy price for preserving those traditions.

The monastic tradition has many noble things with which to clothe itself. I cannot and will not deny that. It obviously wouldn't have lasted this long were it not for its many valuable attributes.

I come from the western Judeo-Christian tradition where many of the texts have been modified, altered or selected to suit whatever variety of Judeo-Christianity was using them (usually by their priesthood and monastic orders). This western religious experience may be an impediment to my observing the Buddhist monastic tradition without prejudice. I fully admit that I may have to change my viewpoint on that subject at some time in the future.

In that light, I regret any implication that the Buddhist monastic orders are irrelevant. They obviously are relevant to those that believe in them and keep them going.

However, in all fairness, it is my personal sense that Buddha wouldn't like all the impediments that, in many cases, make his ideology difficult to gain and understand in our present day world. He would want it readily available to anyone that wanted it, and that massive study and years of devotion to that study in this day and age should not be a prerequisite. In the preceding centuries, when much of the knowledge was not readily available except in the oral tradition, and the average person had neither the time nor education to gain it, the monastic orders were the only way to preserve, promulgate, and defend it.

In this day and age, however, I happen to believe that if you can obtain the knowledge and understand it by whatever means possible, there's no reason why (with a little time and effort) you shouldn't be able to achieve enlightenment within your lifetime. My contribution to that process is to present these concepts perhaps in a manner that will allow the more modern reader to gain insight into them with a little less difficulty than has previously been the case.

I will also willingly admit that for many (if not most) people, having a blessed teacher from whom to learn the

principles of the Buddhist tradition is also a must-have. However, being a solitary person without access to such a teacher on a regular basis, I must rely on the information that I can gain through the Internet, of which there is much of differing quality and authenticity. My objective here is to try to distill much of that differing information down to its singular and objective roots ... roots that don't differ in substance between the various sects and schools.

Many theorists will, of course, have difficulty with any text that simplifies ideas like this so that the mass of people can understand it. They'll rip it to shreds, citing chapter, sutra and verse to prove that it is wrong. But the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and it is my heartfelt belief that what is contained here is pretty much correct in concept, and useful in application.

The many Buddhist schools and monastic disciplines will continue to flourish and feud with one another over who is the rightful heir to Buddha's mantle, no matter what I put to paper and screen. But if one person benefits from the work that I have done, then I have achieved far more than I had expected and I will be grateful that it was so.

At the outset here, I must state that I am not a Buddhist ... I am a practitioner of what the Buddha taught. Some may think that this is a distinction without a difference, but I beg to differ. Buddhism (as commonly defined) almost always implies a religious aspect to its doctrines, whereas I do not believe that it should be that way. Buddha taught a philosophy ... and he did create a religion for the majority of people to follow. However, I do not choose to call myself a Buddhist in the common sense of the word. Rather I am a follower of the Buddha's teachings. 'Nuff said on that score.

The approach that I have taken starts with the original teachings of the Buddha that the Theravedan community practices to this day. But there are other paths that non-Theravedan Buddhists also travel. They all still base themselves on the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path to Enlightenment, even if they are not emphasized in many

cases. They take alternate paths to enlightenment that run the gamut from complete discarding of all teachings to embracing years and lifetimes of dogmatic learning.

This is not intended to be an in-depth analysis of this subject ... it would be absolute insanity to claim as much. But showing the fundamentals of the philosophy/religion will give an interested person a starting point for furthering their knowledge and interest.

Read on with me, and learn...

Patricia Whitney
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CHAPTER ONE FROM WHENCE COME YE?

Using a phrase from a Masonic ritual is a strange title for a chapter in a book on Buddhist thought, isn't it? And yet it is so appropriate. How did you, the reader, wind up here, reading about a 2,500 year-old philosophy that is alien to most people in the western world? You surely didn't hear much about it except perhaps from some of the New Age people, and they seem to pick and choose various tidbits from all kinds of religions and philosophies to make a 'feel good' social group.

So where did you come from to get here? What are you looking for? What internal drive led you to this point? Either you're curious and pursuing this from an intellectual standpoint, or you're searching for something that you may not even be sure what you're looking for. In either case, that's fine ... no foul here.

I know for me, it was the result of a lifetime searching for something that I wasn't even sure what it was that I was looking for. Maybe it was a vague notion stemming from the question "Is this all there is?" I had a suspicion that behind all the religion and ideologies that I had studied was some unifying goal or concept that predated or underlay all of them. And yet, even stripping away much of the tradition and hierarchy from the officialdom and dogma that religion generates, the thing that I was looking for still eluded me. Western religion required too much faith without reason. Islam demanded total submission of my intellect and soul. Hinduism and its subdivisions were far too dense to make any sense to me. Scientology and its offshoots were waaaaaaay too dictatorial and arrogant for my tastes.

Of course, this is my inquiring mind wanting to know. And I believe that much of religious dogma is in place to make sure my inquiring mind doesn't find out what I'm looking for. Therefore, without basis and proof, there is no reasonable approach to all this which would anchor it firmly in my own personal universe.

So that left me to wander the religious wilderness. Lots of New Age stuff crossed my sight, as did many ancient religions now extinct ... and a healthy dose of Native American ceremony and practice. Almost every one of them has many valuable and worthwhile basic attributes. The environmentalism of taking only what was needed from the land of the Native Americans. The mind-blowing and mind-altering drug culture of the Summer of Love in San Francisco. The pure intensity and emotional appeal of a Southern Baptist service. So many experiences and encounters. But from it all, I still did not have that elusive, solid set of principles that I felt I needed to run my life the 'right' way for me.

I first encountered Buddhism in my 67th year of seeking. It was a chance encounter with the Nichiren Buddhist community here in southern Oregon. I originally blew it off as another group of chanters with no observable end result. I quote here from another essay that I wrote a while back ...

'As a rank novice and beginner, when you come into Nichiren's world, there is a certain amount of uncertainty as to what you've gotten yourself into. Chanting in a foreign tongue, bells going off at odd intervals, people rubbing beads together and that weird looking piece of paper in the pretty cabinet up front. Fruit, incense, candles. Lots of nice friendly people, but what the heck is this all about?'

And indeed that was my question ... what the hell was this all about? I had a nagging subliminal feeling that buried somewhere in the midst of all this were at least some of the answers I'd spent a lifetime trying to find.

Nichiren's brand of Buddhism is simplified, requires little ceremony or structured beliefs, and seems to work in a reverse sort of way. It involves chanting, study of Nichiren's writings on Buddhism, but stays away from what I consider the bedrock precepts of Buddhist thought.

Needless to say, 'Inquiring minds want to know.' And this inquiring mind spent (and is still spending) a large amount of time reading and rereading many of the various Sutras, Canons, and pieces of Buddhist literature. I went from the Lotus Sutra, the bedrock of Nichiren's sect, to the Nirvana Sutra, which some believe is the summary of Buddhist

concepts all rolled up into one document. Then came a variety of others. As is the case in all religious lore, you have to be careful about which parts of which version of the same purported document you take as gospel.

But in all of them, there are certain basic concepts that are a common and unchanging thread woven through the texts. These are the underlying facts that Buddhist thought and practice is based on, and in all cases, they require that you question their correctness for yourself until you are satisfied that it works. This premise of not accepting until you are sure of what you're accepting is a bedrock concept laid down by the Buddha almost at the start. **Nothing** is taken on faith in Buddhism. All is questioned and all things are open to challenge until you understand them. I expect nothing less when you read the information in this manuscript. But the solid foundation of clear, unvarnished concepts on which all else is built is nothing short of astonishing in light of all the other religions and sects that claim supernatural authority.

To blow off Buddhism either as another religion or another wierd philosophy without fairly intensive investigation is to miss an opportunity to find a real way of living that will indeed make your life better and ground you as a person. Not that the other religions and sects won't, but if you're not in the mode of having 'faith' in much of anything, this just might give you satisfaction on that front.

I ran across a manuscript on the Internet a while back that summarizes all my feelings about this whole thing in just a few paragraphs. It was written by a Buddhist monk in Thailand, named Bhikkhu Buddhadasa. I quote:

"Buddhism" means "the Teaching of the Enlightened One." A Buddha is an enlightened individual, one who knows the truth about all things, one who knows just what is what, and so is capable of behaving appropriately with respect to all things. Buddhism is a religion based on intelligence, science and knowledge, whose purpose is the destruction of suffering and the source of suffering. All paying of homage to sacred objects by means of performing rites and rituals, making offerings or praying is not Buddhism.

The Buddha rejected all this as foolish, ridiculous and unsound. He also rejected the celestial beings, then considered by certain groups to be the creator of things, and the deities supposed to dwell, one in each star in the sky. Thus we find that the Buddha made such statements as these:

"Knowledge, skill and ability are conducive to success and benefit and are auspicious omens, good in their own right regardless of the movements of the heavenly bodies. With the benefits gained from these qualities, one will completely outstrip those foolish people who just sit making their astrological calculations." *And:* "If the water in rivers (such as the Ganges) could really wash away sins and suffering, then the turtles, crabs, fish and shellfish living in those sacred rivers ought by now to be freed of their sins and sufferings too." *And:* "If a man could eliminate suffering by making offerings, paying homage and praying, there would be no one subject to suffering left in the world, because anyone at all can pay homage and pray. But since people are still subject to suffering while in the very act of making obeisances, paying homage and performing rites, this is clearly not the way to gain liberation."

To attain liberation, we first have to examine things closely in order to come to know and understand their true nature. Then we have to behave in a way appropriate to that true nature. This is the Buddhist teaching; this we must know and bear in mind. Buddhism has nothing to do with prostrating oneself and deferring to awesome things. It sets no store by rites and ceremonies such as making libations of holy water, or any externals whatsoever, spirits and celestial being included. On the contrary, it depends on reason and insight. Buddhism does not demand conjecture or supposition; it demands that we act in accordance with what our own insight reveals and not take anyone else's word for anything. If someone comes and tells us something, we must not believe him without question. We must listen to his statement and examine it. Then if we find it reasonable, we may accept it provisionally and set about trying to verify it for ourselves. This is a key feature of Buddhism, which distinguishes it sharply from other world religions.¹

¹ Handbook for Mankind; Buddhadasa, Bikkhu; 'Looking at Buddhism'; 1956; found on the web at <http://www.buddhanet.net/budasa2.htm>

This says it so much more succinctly and better than I can, but I think that there is still room for my attempt at paraphrasing it for the twenty-first century.

In this book, which is in reality a series of essays, I'll try to put these concepts into words and chapters that will be understandable to most people. To the purist, I will be oversimplifying. To the dogmatist, I will be labeled as heretic. To the hierarchy of Buddhism, I will be not only heretic, but also a mind to be discarded and discounted. But to the person who reads and understands what I have put to paper and screen, it is not me, but the ideas and 'expedient means' to get the point across that are important. And the getting of the ideas across to another human being is what this whole effort is all about.

Proceed with me, gentle reader ...

CHAPTER TWO

WADING THROUGH THE SWAMP

If you ever decide to tackle the huge world of texts on, treatises about, or the actual texts of Buddhism, make sure you have plenty of time. There are thousands of them (over 84,000 by some counts). It seems that every monk, bodhisattva (enlightened being) and even lay people have put pen to paper and written extensively on the subject. There are interpretations of interpretations. I suspect the only other religion/philosophy with such a wide range of opinion and literature would be the Jewish Talmud.

There are specific sutras (teachings) for every Buddhist sect and school. Depending on whether you're using a translation from the original Sanskrit language, the Chinese translation from Sanskrit, or the Japanese translation from the Chinese translation from the original Sanskrit, OR the English translation of the Japanese translation of the Chinese translation of the original Sanskrit, you can get a variety of meanings from the same exact document. Of course, this is true of almost any ancient writings. Most were translated a number of times, each time with alterations in meaning and context for the time and place.

Many Buddhist teachings were written for specific people or groups for getting one single concept or idea across. This is referred to in Buddhism as 'expedient means'. That is, to make the story, idea, or explanation work for the group or individuals that were listening at that particular instant for that particular idea or concept. Any good teacher uses examples and stories to get a fact or idea across to their students.

Interestingly enough, the Lotus Sutra and the Nirvana Sutra (which most authorities agree were the next-to-last and last ones that Buddha taught) both say to ignore all the previous sutras and rely on these two for the absolute truth about what he was preaching. What this means is that

everything up to that point was either too simplified, too specific, or too esoteric for those who really wanted to get to the point of enlightenment. To muddy the water further, many of the other earlier sutras claim to be the supreme documents for their time and teachers.

This is not to say that the earlier sutras are worthless ... indeed, they are not. But what they teach was intended for specifically targeted groups and ideas, and not as a guide to eventual enlightenment for those advanced enough to require more. They were intended for (and still are for) certain types of people in which these teachings strike a chord and give them ways to progress further in their practice of Buddhism. They may not, however, take the seeker all the way to enlightenment without broadening the seeker's knowledge and exposure to other elements.

Each of these schools (sects) and its document collection has their followers, who proclaim the doctrines of their founders and believe in their teaching. They are not wrong, but may not be totally right. Much like other religious texts, early parts may contradict or seem at odds with some of the later ones. If you doubt this, look to the Books of the Apocrypha of the early Christians for examples ... the moral being that if it doesn't fit current teachings, ignore it and don't teach it.

When you go to find Buddhist literature, the Internet is a wonderful wealth of works. There are numerous sites that provide English translations of many of the more important teachings (sutras or suttas). But again, I must caution that some of the information is slanted in one direction or another, either when it was written, or subsequently for different purposes.

An example of this is the Nirvana Sutra. Most scholars agree that the first seven chapters are the original teaching, with the additional thirty or so chapters added later at various times to satisfy different rulers or patrons and so allow the philosophy to continue and flourish. So long as we remember this about the teachings, we can take the additional chapters with a grain of salt.

There is another feature to this that will invoke wonder and confusion. There are two major types of Buddhist writings. The Pali Canon, which was compiled by the first Council soon after Buddha's death, and the Mahayana teachings, which derive from the oral tradition. They vary greatly even for the same titled document.

As an example, if you read a translation of the Nirvana Sutra on the Mahayana side, and then read the 'same' document in the Pali Canon, you might as well be reading two different documents. The content varies widely, although the basic premises are relatively parallel. Each contains things that the other does not. Each purports to be the exact and primary text. It is up to the reader as to which version (and which school or sect) they prefer or think works for them.

Also, when we read these texts, we have to take into account the society and culture of the time. Some of Buddhist teaching seems to bend towards discrimination against women and keeping the rigid social classes in India that existed (and still exist) ... understandable at the time, which was basically a feudal/tribal society that did not allow freedom for women to any great extent. These were the great city/states of India that existed for thousands of years prior to the Mogul Emperors. Once we keep this in mind, we can apply the basic concepts and teachings to a much broader field of souls in our modern society.

Another thing to keep in mind is the somewhat tortured sentence structure of the teachings. They are almost always written in the form of a story from the perspective of one listening to conversations at a gathering. Much of it is about who was there and what was happening. They almost always start with 'This I have heard.' There is much flowery language to wade through which the Oriental mind seems to love so much. Once you figure these things out, working your way through these documents becomes a lot easier.

With all these things to remember, we look now to the content.

Buddhist thought is a vast collection of ideas about a philosophy all coming from the teachings of one individual, the Buddha himself. Some of the sutras were written within a couple of hundred years of the historical Buddha's death. Others were added later as interpretations or commentary. As Buddhism spread over the Indian sub-continent, translations into Chinese appeared, and then into Japanese as the philosophy spread northeastward into Asia proper. While the language sometimes varies, the basic message never does, and the bedrock teachings remain the same throughout the various divisions. Only the trappings have been changed to protect the ... oops, wrong metaphor.

Interestingly enough, parts of the Eightfold Path (the basic Buddhist ideas on how to get enlightened) and other significant ideas derived from Buddhism appear later in Christian, Jewish and Moslem texts. It is a known fact that Buddhist thought was known to the Greek Republic. There has been much conjecture about Jesus himself traveling during his 'lost years' to Tibet and India, and becoming familiar with Buddhist thinking and philosophy. Whether this is actually true remains for archeologists and sociologists to research and prove in the future, but the concept is intriguing.

With these historical and technical notions in mind, we'll now turn to the various chunks of the Buddhist world.

CHAPTER THREE

DING, DONG RECESS IS OVER SCHOOL'S IN

Of all the things about Buddhism that confuse and alarm people in the western world, probably the most confusing is the number of different schools, sects and variations. Even within Buddha's lifetime, there were those disciples who took off with a teaching or two and formed their own adherents and groups, many times at odds with later versions of the philosophy that the Buddha himself taught.

When you mention Buddhism to the average person in western culture, the image that invariably comes to mind is that of a saffron-robed, shaven-headed, oriental-appearing person involved in peaceful protests or self-immolation. Another version of Buddhism that appears is that of the fighting monks of ChaoLin, which developed martial arts in self-defense, and have been portrayed in innumerable martial arts movies. While there have been individual instances of these occurrences that have been dramatized, the average Buddhist adherent fits none of these stereotypes.

What the public sees and remembers is not what Buddhism is all about. In addition, there is no 'average' Buddhist ... much as there is no such thing as an 'average' Christian or 'average' Jew or 'average' Moslem. There are many variations upon the theme. The basic premises are still there across the board, but the dogma built on those premises can be as different as winter and summer on the land.

The history of those differences is told better than I can, with an excerpt from the website

<http://www.historyworld.net/wrldhis/PlaintextHistories.asp?historyid=ab77>

for this information.

Siddhartha Gautama: c.430 BC

At the age of twenty-nine Siddhartha Gautama, prince of a ruling house in Nepal, abandons the luxuries of home, and the affections of a

wife and a young son, to become a wandering ascetic. He is following a pattern not uncommon in India at this time, when the rigidities of a priest-dominated Hinduism are causing many to seek a more personal religion. Only a few years previously, in a nearby district, a young man by the name of Vardhamana has done exactly the same - with lasting results in the form of Jainism. (The conventional dates for both men, revised by modern scholarship, have been a century earlier.)

Gautama differs from Vardhamana in one crucial respect. He discovers that asceticism is almost as unsatisfactory as luxury.

According to the traditional account (first written down in the 3rd century BC) Gautama follows an ascetic life for six years before deciding that a middle path between mortification and indulgence of the body will provide the best hope of achieving enlightenment.

He resolves to meditate, in moderate comfort, until he sees the light of truth. One evening he sits under a pipal tree at Buddh Gaya, a village in Bihar. By dawn he is literally buddha, an 'enlightened one'. Like any other religious leader he begins to gather disciples. He becomes known to his followers as the Buddha.

The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path: c.424 BC

Gautama preaches his first sermon at Sarnath, about five miles (8km) north of the sacred Hindu city of Varanasi. In this sermon, still a definitive text for all Buddhists, he proposes a path to enlightenment very different from the elaborate ceremonies and colorful myth attached to the Hindu deities.

Gautama's message is plain to the point of bluntness, at any rate when reduced to a simple list - as it usually is in primers on Buddhism. He states that enlightenment can be achieved by understanding Four Noble Truths; and that the pain of life, with which the Noble Truths are concerned, can be avoided by following an Eightfold Path.

The four Noble Truths are that pain is inextricably part of mankind's everyday life; that our cravings of all kinds are the cause of this pain; that the way off this treadmill is to free oneself of these cravings; and that this can be achieved by following the Eightfold Path.

The Path enjoins the Buddhist to a virtuous life by urging on him the 'right' course of action in eight contexts. Many of these are moral evils to be avoided (as in the Jewish Commandments). However, the eighth step, 'Right Concentration', goes to the heart of the Buddhist ideal.

Right Concentration is described in Buddhist scripture as concentrating on a single object, so as to induce a special state of consciousness through deep meditation. In this way the Buddhist hopes to achieve complete purity of thought, leading ideally to nirvana.

Nirvana means 'blowing out', as of a flame. It is common to Hinduism and Jainism as well as Buddhism. However, in the two older religions it leads to moksha, release from the cycle of rebirth, total extinction. In Buddhism it is a blissful transcendent state which can be

achieved either in life or after death - and which is achieved by anyone who becomes Buddha.

The spread of Buddhism: c.380-250 BC

By the time of his death, at about the age of eighty, the Buddha's followers are established as communities of monks in northern India. Wandering through villages and towns with their begging bowls, eager to describe the path to the truth, they are familiar figures. But so are many other such groups, including the Jains.

The advance of the Buddhists beyond the others is largely due to the enthusiastic support of a king of the 3rd century BC. Asoka rules over much of the Indian subcontinent. His inscriptions, carved on pillars and rocks throughout his realm, bear witness both to the spread of Buddhism and to his own benevolent support of the Buddha's principles.

During Asoka's reign, and with his encouragement, Buddhism spreads to south India and into Sri Lanka. The latter has remained to this day a stronghold of the earliest form of Buddhism, known as Theravada (meaning the 'school of elders').

By the time of Asoka there is already a rival tendency within Buddhism, involving an elaboration of the Buddha's essentially simple message of personal salvation. The difference is similar to that between Protestants and Catholics at the time of the Reformation in Christianity. Compared to the puritan standards of Theravada Buddhism, the other sect - which later becomes known as Mahayana - introduces a catholic profusion of Buddhist saints.

Mahayana and Theravada

Mahayana means the Great Vehicle. Its adherents argue that this form of Buddhism can carry a greater number of people towards the truth than Theravada Buddhism, which they dismiss as Hinayana - the little vehicle.

The main distinction is that in Theravada the Buddha is a historical figure who by his example shows the way towards nirvana; the cult is essentially a human system of self-discipline, with no trace of a god. In the younger but larger sect there is still no god, but there are a great many supernatural beings.

In Mahayana the historical Buddha, Gautama, becomes the latest in a long line of past Buddhas. They exist in some place beyond this world, from which they can offer support. Also in that place are the Bodhisattvas, who have yet to begin the final human life in which they will attain enlightenment as Buddha. They too can help mortals who show them devotion.

In Theravada the nearest approach to worship is the veneration of relics of the historical Buddha, whose hair or tooth is made the central feature of a temple. In Mahayana, with its many semi-divine figures, there is opportunity for more varied, more popular and more superstitious forms of worship. It is well suited to become what it claims to be - the greater vehicle.

A religion for east Asia: from the 1st century AD

Buddhism is the first of the world religions to expand from its place of origin. It does so by two distinct routes.

Theravada Buddhism is carried eastwards into southeast Asia, in an upsurge of Indian trade from the 1st century AD. The merchants and sailors are either Buddhist or Hindu, and missionaries take advantage of the new opportunities for travel. As a result the kingdoms of southeast Asia, much influenced by the more advanced civilization of India, variously adopt Buddhist and Hindu religious practices. Which of the two prevails is often the result of the preference of a ruling dynasty. The areas which eventually choose Buddhism are Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos.

Mahayana Buddhism travels by a land route. In the 2nd century AD northern India and Afghanistan are ruled by the Kushan dynasty, one of whose kings, Kanishka, is a devotee of this form of Buddhism. His encouragement of it has special significance, since his kingdom occupies a central position on the Silk Road - at one of its busiest times, when its caravans effectively link China with Rome.

The western influence on the Kushan region (also known as Gandhara) is seen in the famous style of sculpture which portrays Buddhist figures with the realism of Greece and Rome. Eastwards from Gandhara the trade route is soon dignified with spectacular Buddhist centers, such as Yün-kang.

Buddhism is well established in China by the 2nd century AD and coexists there, with varying fortunes, alongside China's indigenous religions - Daoism and Confucianism. By the 6th century its influence has spread through Korea to Japan. Here too it coexists, in a shifting pattern, with the earlier Japanese religion, Shinto.

The region which develops the most distinctive form of Buddhism lies between India and China, and receives its first Buddhist influences from both directions in the 7th century. This is Tibet. It will evolve an element of Buddhism unique to itself - that of a succession of reincarnating lamas, with the Dalai Lama as the senior line.

In India Buddhism flourishes alongside Hinduism for many years, but from about the 8th century it declines (though Theravada Buddhism finds a lasting home in Sri Lanka). The Mahayana version of the faith becomes gradually submerged by the older and more vigorous Hinduism. It has perhaps been too willing to accommodate new themes, influenced by India's bustling inclination to worship everything.

A weakened Buddhism proves no match for the arrival in northern India in the 10th century of rulers professing another vigorous faith, Islam. Buddhism becomes no more than a faint devotional presence at a few classic shrines. It is the only world religion to have withered in its birthplace.

New sects of Buddhism in Japan: 12th - 13th century

One of Japan's most famous monuments is a vast bronze sculpture at Kamakura. Known as Daibutsu, and cast in 1252, it depicts Buddha. But this figure seated in peaceful meditation is not the historical Gautama Buddha. He is Amitabha Buddha, known and revered in Japan as Amida.

The cult of Amida, also called 'Pure Land' Buddhism, is one of several new sects in Japan, mostly arriving from China, which become naturalized during the Kamakura shogunate. It is based on a sutra in which Amida, who has achieved enlightenment as Buddha, assures all those who adore him that they can live with him forever in a pure land - a promise made in the Sukhavativyuha Sutra.

Another foreign sect of Buddhism, which the Japanese make very much their own, is known in China as Chan and in Japan as Zen (both derive from a Sanskrit word meaning 'meditation'). Zen, reaching Japan from China in the 12th century, lays great emphasis on intuition, or finding the truth within oneself, but it also stresses the importance of discipline.

It appeals to the new samurai class (several Zen masters teach sword fighting), and at periods during the shogunate it becomes almost the state religion. Zen masters encourage some of the most distinctive cultural aspects of Japanese life, including the Tea Ceremony (closely linked with the tradition of Japanese ceramics).

The most aggressive of the Buddhist sects is the only one to have its roots entirely in Japan. It follows the teaching of Nichiren, a fiery prophet who spends much of his life in exile for his criticism of the shoguns in Kamakura. They favor the rivals on whom he pours scorn, the devotees of Pure Land and Zen Buddhism.

Like Old Testament prophets, Nichiren foresees disaster befalling his misguided compatriots. The Mongol invasion of 1274 is seen by many as the fulfillment of his prophecies. His passion inspires a sect which still has a considerable following in 20th-century Japan.

Buddhism today

Buddhism in its various forms remains the most widespread of the ancient religions in east Asia, where it numbers some 300 million adherents. The greatest concentration is in the historic lands of Theravada Buddhism - Sri Lanka and the three countries, adjacent to each other, of Burma, Thailand and Cambodia. Buddhists still practicing in Mahayana regions (China, Tibet, Mongolia) have suffered greatly from the atheist creed of Communism. In Japan a majority still adheres to various forms of Buddhism.

During the 20th century the faith has also begun to spread to entirely new regions. There is now a significant minority of Buddhists in the United States and in Europe.

So you now have a very brief description of where we are today in the Buddhist tradition. This does not include all the infighting and strife that any bureaucracy entails during the evolution of its purpose and direction. In the next few essays, we'll look at some of the basics of the Buddhist tradition and try to explain what they're all about.

One thing to remember here is that the Buddha only taught his disciples, most (if not all) were Hindu Brahmins that had the training and experience to comprehend what Buddha was teaching immediately. Buddha did not teach the masses ... his was an intellectual philosophy to begin with.

It was only after he had gained a substantial following of Brahmins that some of the lower caste people began to ask for access to the teachings as well. At this point, Buddha established the religious side of the practice and instituted the monastic orders so as to satisfy the majority of the people for something to make their lives better.

In working with the basic concepts (as we will be doing), it goes back to the original intent of "teaching only the bodhisattvas" that the Buddha did. A bodhisattva is a person one level below a Buddha, that has not yet achieved true Buddhahood.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHY BUDDHISM?

Another excellent question.

Basic human nature seems to require a higher authority. Whether it is because we feel we need direction in our social structure, or because we need a father figure (imaginary or not), or because we need something (other than ourselves) to take responsibility for our lives whether good or bad ... we usually wind up with SOMETHING in our lives to fulfill that need.

Even atheists will many times generate some concept of a supernatural to close that gap. It's a part of human nature that is inherent in all of us, regardless of race, creed, color or ethnic background.

If a super-natural being is not present, people of religious inclination will create it. Buddhism is no exception. The earlier forms of the philosophy appeal to the intellectual side of the population, and work exceedingly well there. However, the masses, that have neither time nor effort available to pursue these, created more of a deification of the Buddha rather than the exaltation of his beliefs. This gave us the veneration of the Buddha, and later, the elevation of Amida Buddha and others to the same status ... creating the giant statuary and multitudes of temples housing relics and statues devoted to the Buddha and related beings. Granted, the earlier teachings of the Buddha allowed this, but it got taken to excess early on.

There have always been religions. Thousands of years before Christ, pagans, Egyptians, Hindus and Persians all had their religions that created a socially layered system and held priests (or their equivalent) as being some kind of go-between between the supernatural realm and our reality here on earth. Many times they included the ruling monarch in that category, and combined both the sacred and the real-life ruler in one

head of the society. (Note the Egyptian God-King as an example.)

The Greeks and Romans amplified the process, bringing a formal family structure to their gods, who quarreled and bickered and created havoc on earth with heavenly feuds. They also had their earthly priests and priestesses, who held an elevated position in the society and wielded power in larger concentrations than their numbers would indicate. "I can talk to Jupiter and really get you screwed up."

Judaism was the first authentic mono-theistic (single god) religion that evolved out of the Middle East, however the Mesopotamians had somewhat the same idea over a thousand years earlier ... but it didn't survive. The Jews created a forceful, vengeful god that kept people in line by fear, and backed it up with all kinds of punitive things that could happen. It also evolved the first strict social order with laws, customs and restraints that have continued to this day. The Old Testament is full of do's and don'ts for social order.

The Egyptians tried to adopt a single deity state religion for about a hundred years or less at one point, but the old guard of priests eventually created a coup and brought the old religion with its multiple gods back.

Christianity then came along with a 'Messiah' that the Jews had predicted for salvation, and created a variation of Judaism, only with a semi-earthly martyr to relate to as an go-between to God.

Islam comes along as a second descendent of Judaism seven hundred years later, claiming that Jesus was only a prophet like all the rest, and that their own prophet, Mohammed, was the most supreme among those prophets. In the process, they developed their own divisions (Shia and Sunni) who have fought over which sect is the rightful heir to the spiritual Islamic throne for centuries. The divisions (and fighting) exist to this day.

The ever-present thread throughout all these religions, from the most simplistic to the highly bureaucratic, is that of a supreme being or deity who is all-powerful and can control your earthly existence. "God is gonna get'ya for that, ya little

creep.” This means that there is no real independent responsibility for your life and how you live it, and ‘God’ (however defined) will reward good social behavior and punish the alternative.

Basic Buddhism is probably the only religion/philosophy in its essence that does not claim a supernatural deity, and deals with human nature in a very introspective way. This leads to a heated discussion into whether Buddhism is a religion at all, or just a philosophy. You’ll find loud debate on this one.

Most sects of Buddhism tend to drift in the direction of creating a semi-god in the person of Buddha, creating a worship of Buddha’s statuary and a hierarchy of priests and monks who teach but theoretically never intercede for anyone ... because there is really no one to intercede with.

The fundamental teachings instead make the individual responsible for their own actions, creating the concept of ‘karma’ to act as both stick and reward. Do good things, and your karmic index goes up ... do bad things and it goes down. In drastic cases, you get to be a toad or a snake or a sub-human beast of burden or some such the next time around. It’s not quite that simple, but you get the point.

Buddhism at its foundation is very much an individual philosophy and/or way of life. There’s no supernatural being to pass the buck to when you screw up, or to reward you for doing the “right thing”. No savior, guaranteeing eternal salvation, nor an angry god condemning you to an eternal hell. There are no outside influences except what can be rationally deduced from how you see that the world works. No deity to pray to, nor any way to avoid your own personal responsibility for yourself and your actions.

Here's the best way I've found to describe how this works. To satisfy the need for responsibility, religion (excluding Buddhism which really isn't one) creates a (big G) God out there somewhere who will take the responsibility for your life, whereas Buddhism creates the (small g) god within each of us to which we are responsible (which is called the ‘Buddha-

nature'.) Of course, many people want to take the responsibility for their lives when things go well, and blame the external God when they don't.

Does that make Buddhists atheists? An interesting question to be sure. Many would say, that with the more bureaucratic structures of some sects of Buddhism, it would appear to be a religion, even if there was no external God. After all, there are rituals and it appears that the followers are worshipping an idol or icon.

But in the strict definition of religion, it requires that there be an external god, and that makes Buddhists (by definition) atheists ... to me anyway. Not that there's a negative connotation to that, but just a "what's so."

As I said in the first chapter, Buddhism appeals to those who don't take much on faith. It doesn't, however, appeal to those who aren't willing to take the introspective steps to work Buddhist ideas into their own lives and live according to those rules.

Buddhism does hang out a carrot in the prospect of achieving Nirvana ... the state of mind where you no longer need to endure the seemingly endless cycle of birth and death and suffering in between. Whether you choose to call this "immortality" is up to you (it really isn't).

Buddhism also requires that you challenge any and all of its ideas before you believe in them. Nothing is taken on faith alone. Some of it is, I grant, a little obscure and requires study to check out and believe in, but nonetheless, it is open to challenge and question until you grasp it. Almost all of Buddha's teachings are in the form of the Buddha being questioned or challenged on various points of philosophy, and his answers to those questions, which usually generate more questions. The end result, however, is the creation in each individual of a solid idea of who and what they are, and what they stand for and how they wish to live their lives.

In the next chapter, I'll lay out the bedrock beliefs of the Buddhist philosophy and then expand on them so you can get a good idea of what it's all about.

CHAPTER FIVE

ITZ YEW, BABY, JUST YEW

As you may have gathered in the last chapter, Buddhism in its ultimate form isn't for lemmings. Some of the derivative forms of the Buddhist culture create the priestly hierarchy and the intercessionary practices that require an intermediary between you and the Buddha. They'll say not, but in effect that's what happens. Teachers (read priests) are considered to be essential in many of the Buddhist sects, as they consider the average follower incapable of reading the Buddha's teachings and drawing their own conclusions.

One of the main provocateurs in this regard was Nichiren, who in the thirteenth century formed a subset of Buddhism that simplified and streamlined the process into a single mantra and used only that single sutra to provide a path to enlightenment. Others had scores of sutras, decades of dogma and heaps of hierarchy. Even Nichiren's form of the philosophy wound up with a layered bureaucracy of priests and monks with which the lay organization (SGI) eventually parted company.

The problem with all of this organization, hierarchy and protocol is that it hides the basic premises of the philosophy and substitutes dogma and hierarchy. The reason for this is two-fold ... first to preserve the position and power of the hierarchy, and second, to make sure that the followers have to rely on the priests to interpret the Buddha's teachings for you. You may need help occasionally, but there's way too much between you and the basic tenets. The fundamental premises are just that ... basic. They are completely understandable even to us lay people, once you learn what they are and how they work.

The basics of Buddhism aren't that complicated, and aren't that hard to understand. It's only because of all the added layering of various ideas from other people down through the ages that it becomes cumbersome and obscure.

The most bedrock of all Buddhist teaching is individual responsibility. By this is meant absolute, total, unaltered, complete individual responsibility. Why? Because in its basic form, it's absolutely impossible to escape that responsibility. Who else but you can say anything, do anything, perform or make any action with your body or mind within the reality you exist in? Hmmmmm?

That individual responsibility comes with rewards and punishments. In many forms of Buddhism, there are hells and there are heavens, but not in the commonly accepted sense. Both places do exist, but are (with the exception of the highest heaven) resident in this physical world in which we find ourselves. The hells are what we put ourselves through because of the moralistic value or external reactions of our actions. The heavens are forms of peaceful existences (still earthly) where it is far easier to achieve enlightenment and proceed to the highest heaven (nirvana/nibbana).

[Note to purists: throughout this text, we keep the concept of Nirvana intact as a real head space ... even though many advanced concepts contradict this idea. Remember that this is a beginning treatise.]

The Nirvana that is the ultimate heaven is nothing more than an existence where one stays in a state of complete bliss, unmoved by anything. It is the highest plane of existence and is the ultimate goal of every seeker (Buddhist or not). Buddha refers to it as the total absence of suffering, and the escape from the cycle of birth and death.

Much of Buddhist lore is buried in the midst of stories, allegories, single-issue teachings and a lot of muddled interpretation. It's difficult to make sense of it without getting totally confused at the profusion of information and data.

Distilling the essence of Buddhism isn't easy, but it is out there and available, even though most of the Buddhist sects seem to make it obscure and extremely hard. They would have the practitioner do years of discipline to quiet the mind, or go

through years of deprivation to make one worthy of being a follower. This in actuality has nothing to do with the bedrock practice of Buddhism.

That bedrock practice starts with the issue of total individual responsibility and builds from there. Once we understand and accept this one premise, all the rest falls into place. There is no reason for an external God, nor all the dogma and mysticism that goes along with it. I, as an individual being, am totally responsible for my actions, even if I don't realize that this is the case.

The concept of karma goes hand in hand with this responsibility. One description that I have found says it far better than I can.

“The most important feature of karma is its capacity to produce results corresponding to the ethical quality of the action. An imminent universal law holds sway over volitional actions, bringing it about that these actions issue in retributive consequences, called vipaka, "ripenings," or phala, "fruits." The law connecting actions with their fruits works on the simple principle that unwholesome actions ripen in suffering, wholesome actions in happiness. The ripening need not come right away; it need not come in the present life at all. Karma can operate across the succession of lifetimes; it can even remain dormant for eons into the future. But whenever we perform a volitional action, the volition leaves its imprint on the mental continuum, where it remains as a stored up potency. When the stored up karma meets with conditions favorable to its maturation, it awakens from its dormant state and triggers off some effect that brings due compensation for the original action. The ripening may take place in the present life, in the next life, or in some life subsequent to the next. A karma may ripen by producing rebirth into the next existence, thus determining the basic form of life; or it may ripen in the course of a lifetime, issuing in our varied experiences of happiness and pain, success and failure, progress and decline. But whenever it ripens and in whatever way, the same principle invariably holds: wholesome actions yield favorable results, unwholesome actions yield unfavorable results.”¹

¹ 'The Noble Eightfold Path, The Way to the End of Suffering' by Bhikkhu Bodhi. Source: The Wheel Publication No. 308/311 (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1984), second edition (revised) 1994. Online edition

OK, you get all that? While it is a little stilted for many of us, the basic meaning is pretty clear. There is a universal law that mandates our total, personal responsibility for any action we take. That action doesn't even have to be physically acted upon. We'll find out later that there are things we do that generate negative karma, and their opposites, which give us good karma. The two do not necessarily balance each other out within our individual lifetimes.

Each volitional action has its own karma, as described above. Each voluntary action is unique and carries its karma that will be manifested at some point in the future. It is only through eliminating the actions that cause this negative karma that the overall level of returning retribution will decrease. Building up positive karma will result in positive returns, but won't by itself eliminate the negative karma already built up. There can even be the situation where there are large amounts of both types built up, and what appears to be a good and decent person gets whammed with all kinds of negative situations ... the result of built up karmic debt.

As you can see from this, there is no external interference with the law of karma. It's there, it works and there's nothing that any external deity or anyone else can do to change it. It's all yours. And it's up to you to change it by changing your actions, accepting the whole notion of total personal responsibility, and modifying your life so as to live happily and eventually achieve enlightenment. And it is that notion of total personal responsibility from which no person and no thing can absolve you that lies at the heart of Buddhism. It is the one underlying truth.

CHAPTER SIX

“ONE, TWO, THREE, FOUR, WHO’YA GONNA ROOT FOR?”

The bedrock of Buddhist thought and teaching are the Four Noble Truths. They stand as the basis from which all the other tenets and teachings come. Without the Four Noble Truths, the entire philosophy/religion would crack and crumble.

The Four Noble Truths are simple ... so much so that they become difficult to really understand without digging into what they say, and what it means in depth ... much like reading the fine print in an insurance policy.

The Four Noble Truths are:

- **All is suffering.**
- **Suffering is caused by desire and/or ignorance.**
- **If one can eliminate desire and ignorance, they can eliminate suffering.**
- **The Noble Eight-fold Path can eliminate desire and ignorance.**

There you have it! Go forth and become enlightened! All your problems are solved and enlightenment and Nirvana are yours! Live long and prosper! You have the answers to happiness!

Unfortunately, in Buddhist thought, the ultimate in simplicity is (paradoxically) the hardest to understand and practice. However, unlike your insurance policy, it gives you a lot of bang for the buck.

Let’s quickly examine a summary of these four nuggets of Buddhist gold. First:

All is suffering.

Buddhist glossaries define ‘suffering’ as:

The Buddhist understanding of the nature of life, especially human life. It is suffering, pain, misery, and death.

“Dukkha” (a Pali word) is often rendered as ‘suffering,’ but can span the whole range from excruciating pain to not-getting-what-I-want.

Personally, I’ve done a whole lot of the latter. You might call me a ‘Dukkha-holic.’

This Buddhist definition (on its face) of suffering is a bit negative, to say the least. According to this definition, if we think we’re happy, we just don’t see the suffering, since ‘all’ encompasses the entire realm of human existence. I know, it sounds abysmal and has no logical content. How do we know we’re unhappy if we don’t know we’re unhappy?

Within us, there is always suffering ... be it physical or mental. The physical part has to do with the non-permanent nature of the body. We get sick, we hurt, we die. That’s pretty elemental. These are foregone conclusions, unless you fully believe in full-blown bodily reincarnation ... but you still have to die first.

The mental part is the non-fulfillment of things for which we strive and desire, or the ignorance of not knowing that we’re creating the misery for ourselves, so we do it over and over.

It has been said that being wealthy solves all the problems of misery. “Money may not bring happiness, but it sure paves the way for getting there.” Granted, it fulfills a lot of physical wants and needs, but that’s the minor part of suffering. I’ve known some very wealthy people, almost all of whom were pretty miserable people as far as their personal lives went. After all, when your dinner party for two-hundred of your closest friends winds up a bust, you feel miserable (especially when the comments of your guests wind up on the society page of the newspaper.) Or your relationships always seem to wind up on the rocks in a very public way.

Almost all of it that really affects us (outside of constant, gnawing, excruciating physical pain) is derived from this mental part of the equation.

This is what suffering is all about ... a grand cornucopia from which we can find whatever kind suits us best (or worst).

Most of us spend almost all of our waking moments either seeking pleasure or running away from pain of one kind or another. I mean, this is a no-brainer, right? We're programmed to stay away from being hurt in any way, and to chase the more pleasant parts of our lives to what extent we can.

Seeking pleasure implies you want something or want to avoid something. I sometimes want a new widget for my computer. I don't need it, but it would be nice to have. I also have a desire to avoid getting traffic tickets, but my lead foot sometimes gets me over the limit.

Avoiding pain is a desire on its own to avoid the unpleasant things in your life. Confrontations are things that I like to avoid, even little ones. I just don't like unpleasantness. I still have to work on that one.

In all cases, it is a want ... in one case to pursue something, the other to avoid it.

It is when these desires are denied or the ignorance of what we're doing to ourselves causes us problems that suffering occurs ... which brings to Noble Truth number two:

Suffering is caused by desire and/or ignorance.

People (even me) want stuff. It can be comfort, toys, knowledge, or even (in the case of a masochist) physical pain. The denial of any want generates suffering. It makes us hurt. Some ideas might be:

- The hurt of not being able to reach the top of the mountain peak after preparing for it for years.
- The hurt of having your ideas rejected by your peers in a public meeting.

- The hurt of being rejected by someone that you lust after.
- The hurt of being uncomfortable because the power went out this morning.
- The hurt of losing someone or something that you treasure.

We are full of desires. Money salves some of them (or so we think). Most desires are illusory in nature and we chase them much like Don Quixote chasing windmills ... not seeing why we desire these things.

“If I get that promotion, it’ll make me happy.” Needless to say, that promotion probably brings its share of headaches and misery along with the money and prestige. The money and prestige are perhaps false premises on both their face and in the substance. It probably won’t compensate for the misery.

“I want that toy. It will make me happy.” Until you have to share it with another kid, that is. Or until you tire of it and set your sights on something else that will “make you happy.”

“This woman (man) is the one of my dreams. She (he) will make me eternally happy.” Well, anyone who has ever fallen in and out of love or lust will recognize this one.

When (and if) the relationship broke up, how many times did the thought run through your head to just let them win, and get back together. Then the thoughts of how it **really worked** chime in, and you’re saying to yourself “Run, baby, run.”

As you can see, most suffering is caused by desire. And desire can be unfulfilled (or in some cases filled) and cause us pain (emotional or otherwise). Sometimes we think that the desire is satiated and that the pain goes away ... but for the most part, that’s temporary and illusive. It isn't really gone, and won’t go very far away. Tell yourself this when your mind is running all kinds of bad stuff at two in the morning and you can’t make it quit. Now, that’s suffering!

The job goes bad, the toy becomes unused, and the lover has feet of clay. Your employer doesn't have AFLAC. Or worse, you don't have an employer. Now THAT'S suffering.

Now it's time to see what happens when you don't know that you don't know.

Ignorance, in Buddhism, isn't the garden-variety definition. Ignorance in the Buddhist sense is just not knowing about what you're doing to yourself or what makes the world tick. There's no inference of being bad, uneducated, a bigot, or anything else in the definition. It's just 'not knowing' ... plain and simple.

This goes against the western world's premise of assuming that if you're ignorant, you must be uneducated and a bumpkin for not knowing whatever it is that you're supposed to ... plus you're probably a cultural clod, ala the Beverly Hillbillies. That's classic western world ignorance.

Ignorance, in the Buddhist sense, is just not knowing what it is that's causing you your suffering, be it external, or internal.

Someone defined stupidity long ago as doing the exact same failing things over and over, and expecting a different result. Of course, there may be a lot of factors in this, like ego, tunnel vision, and a lot of other things in the personality that impede learning about ignorance and doing something about it.

We'll go into this a LOT in later chapters.

If one can eliminate desire and ignorance, they can eliminate suffering.

The first time you look at this, you think "this is just like the last one inverted." In truth, it really is. In a couple of chapters you'll see just why it was necessary to state it like this, even though it seems redundant.

But, it somewhat makes sense, doesn't it. If you don't want much, then when you don't get it, it doesn't hurt as much. If you find out what it is that is causing you the

suffering, and eliminate it that ignorance, you'll suffer a lot less.

Of course, there's the matter of intensity. If you REALLY want something, it's REALLY going to hurt when you don't get it. So the trick is to stop wanting stuff ... or more clearly put, stop wanting. In the realm of ignorance, it's finding out what you're doing to cause trouble for yourself, and stop.

This brings to mind the old Hee-Haw shtick with the doctor and his patient. The patient says "Doc, it hurts when I do this (moving an arm or somesuch)." The doctor hauls out a rubber chicken and whaps the patient over the head, saying "Well, don't do that!!!"

Of course, if you quit wanting stuff, and something good happens, you're pleasantly surprised. The same goes for identifying and stopping ignorance.

Buddhist thought is all about the elimination of desire and ignorance. The question is how to go about it. Which brings us to the Fourth Noble Truth:

The Noble Eight-fold Path can eliminate desire and ignorance.

A pretty hefty statement. Notice the word "can" rather than "will". It "can", provided the follower of the Eight-fold Path is faithful to that path and sticks to it ... or so it is stated.

The objective of the EightFold Path is actually to help you to see what it is that's causing you the suffering, whether it's outside the mind or inside. A broader definition says that the EightFold Path allows you to see the universe (both internal and external) as it really is ... vivid, unflinching reality.

This is where the Buddhist structure unravels. Various sects and schools use parts of this Eight-fold path and take off running in several different directions, loudly proclaiming that they've got the answer to all life's problems if you but follow their particular brand of thought and practice. Sounds a lot like almost all religions, doesn't it? Some work, some don't,

and a lot seem to make their practitioners feel better without much meaningful gain.

It is not up to me to say which is which ... all the schools have their adherents for whom it works better than the others. This is for each individual to take stock of and find a path that works for them.

The Eight-fold Path is not for the faint of heart. It requires a lot of practice. You can't expect immediate results from it. But you can expect a lifting of spirit and an eventual rise to enlightenment if you study, practice and work at it.

In future essays, we'll go into the details of the Four Noble Truths, the structure of the Eight-fold Path and maybe show how to make it work for almost anyone.

CHAPTER SEVEN

OH THE PAIN ... THE PAIN

The first of the Four Noble Truths seems on its face to be pretty simple. **“All is suffering.”** As is usually the case with simple statements, they wind up being far more complex than they originally seemed to be. In this case, these three words wind up being far more opaque than you would ordinarily think. However, we’ll try make it a little more transparent for you.

Most people understand the dictionary meaning of the word “suffering.” To them it means pain, usually physical. You break a bone and you suffer. You get a bad headache and you suffer. For the Jewish mother, it’s “Oy, how I’m suffering” followed by a twenty-minute guilt trip. This is the ordinary garden variety suffering.

The physical part of suffering is part of the real and external world, and isn’t easily dealt with by the Four Noble Truths (although the Yogi would dispute this. I did say ‘easily dealt with’.) “OK,” you say, “but if I’m physically suffering, it’s my body that is hurting.” This is true. But the body is external to the mind, and is outside the mind’s sphere. The body will provide inputs and do actions, controlled by the mind. It’s the support system for the mind, but it isn’t part of the mind itself.

If you think about it a little more, you’ll include mental anguish and all kinds of mind pain from losing a loved one to being unsuccessful in a relationship to not getting the Christmas present we REALLY wanted. Each hurts in its own way just as much as the broken arm or the horrendous migraine or the Jewish mother.

While physical suffering exists within the external realm of our reality ... we always have to remember that the body isn’t part of the mind. Physical suffering isn’t a mind game, and isn’t part of the psyche (unless you’re a hypochondriac.) We can (and the Yogi and Zen practitioners do) put themselves

into a mental state where pain becomes inconsequential and ignorable. As the late Patrick Swayze said in 'Dirty Dancing', "Pain don't hurt"... which is a very deep commentary for the audience of that film.

This state is achieved through long adherence to disciplines that teach this method. Does it lead to enlightenment? I don't know ... the Yogi claim it does. Zen claims the same thing with their meditative practices and concentration exercises. I'm not so sure about any of it yet.

They say that it is part of the intense concentration and discipline that allows this ... to be concentrating so singularly on the inner self and its workings that outside influences (including pain) cease to intrude. It isn't that they don't exist in the physical world ... they do. But they can be ignored until such time as the practitioner chooses to allow them to become noteworthy.

Physical suffering can also be the intrusion of unwanted noise, interruptions, or anything else derived from the physical senses. These things are all part of the Buddhist definition of 'suffering,' and the elimination of their effect on the mind and the Buddha nature is the end result of all Buddhist thought. The elimination of the things that generate the physical sensations is impossible ... only our reactions (or non-reactions as the case may be) to them are controllable within our minds.

It is much like the little kid with his fingers in his ears saying 'I don't hear you. I don't hear you ...' or the ostrich with head in sand, thinking it now is invisible to anything else. In both cases, the physical elimination of the sense gives us a false sense of security.

Of course, being blindfolded and ear-muffled (as in Al Quaeda suspects during transport) can go the other way and generate massive insecurity.

When Buddhism talks about 'suffering', it is the second type (the mental and emotional pain) that is mostly referred to. Does this mean that many Jews would make good Buddhists? They get the suffering part for sure.

Bikkhu Bodhi, in his manuscript “The Noble EightFold Path”, says it thus:

“... The Pali word [‘dukkha’ is often translated as suffering, but it means something deeper than pain and misery. It refers to a basic unsatisfactoriness running through our lives, the lives of all but the enlightened. Sometimes this unsatisfactoriness erupts into the open as sorrow, grief, disappointment, or despair; but usually it hovers at the edge of our awareness as a vague unlocalized sense that things are never quite perfect, never fully adequate to our expectations of what they should be.”¹

This mental pain or unease is what the Four Noble Truths mainly seem to refer to. In order to understand suffering fully, we also have to understand a little of the mind, and how it works when it perceives something. LOTS more on this later ...

Actually, you just have to ‘get’ what your mind is doing, rather than understanding it. Just think of it this way; you don’t have to understand how a car is engineered and built in order to drive it. You just have to know what it’s going to do (or not) and how to control it.

OK, OK. Back to the mental pain part of it ...

How many times have we been ‘hurt’ by something that happened, only to find out that it either didn’t apply to us, or the circumstances were totally different than we thought them to be?

For the girls ... rumor had it that Susan bought the same prom dress as what you had bought. In truth, that wasn’t the case, but you fretted over it for days and had hissy fits on a regular basis. In actuality, the one you had was far nicer than the one she actually wore to the dance.

For the guys ... the lead cheerleader that you’d been dating was supposedly seen making out with the star quarterback. It was only a rumor, but it trashed you out for days. In actuality, it never happened, and the rumor was started by a jealous rival for the cheerleading position just to

¹ The Noble Eightfold Path, The Way to the End of Suffering. By Bhikkhu Bodhi. Source: The Wheel Publication No. 308/311 (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1984), second edition (revised) 1994. Transcribed from a file provided by the BPS

make trouble. The cheerleader still liked you, and you were an item for a long time thereafter.

If your perception of the situation changed, then the hurt either diminished or went away or sometimes increased, right? So it isn't an absolute that suffering is 'this' or 'that', nor can we define it for everyone. Suffering is anything that keeps us from being happy.

The 'suffering' of someone who is homeless is as real as the suffering of a corporate executive having lost a multi-million-dollar job or a large contract. It hurts. Is the intensity of the hurt any different from either of these extremes? OK, so you would say, "It's tough to measure. How do you measure suffering?"

How **do** we measure suffering? It certainly isn't by the legal definition of "pain and suffering" that juries regularly are called upon to define and put dollar values on. It sure isn't something that I can define by any other means other than "it hurts". It's internal, and immeasurable. One man's 'suffering' might be a panacea for someone else. It's all relative. The Jewish mother would claim to have more suffering than any person on earth ... and she'd be right, from her perspective. And if the suffering is just below your threshold of awareness, we get back to the 'uneasiness' that the Bikkhu was talking about earlier.

Bikkhu Bodhi once again:

"He [the Buddha] starts with what is close at hand, with the suffering inherent in the physical process of life itself. Here dukkha shows up in the events of birth, aging, and death, in our susceptibility to sickness, accidents, and injuries, even in hunger and thirst. It appears again in our inner reactions to disagreeable situations and events: in the sorrow, anger, frustration, and fear aroused by painful separations, by unpleasant encounters, by the failure to get what we want. Even our pleasures, the Buddha says, are not immune from dukkha. They give us happiness while they last, but they do not last forever; eventually they must pass away, and when they go the loss leaves us feeling deprived. Our lives, for the most part, are strung out between the thirst for pleasure and the fear of pain. We pass our days running after the one and running away from the other, seldom enjoying the peace of contentment; real satisfaction seems somehow always out of reach, just beyond the next horizon. Then in the end we have

to die: to give up the identity we spent our whole life building, to leave behind everything and everyone we love.”²

The mental side of this equation is by no means that easy to define.

When we suffer ‘mental anguish’, what are we really experiencing? Almost invariably, it is that we’ve either not gotten something that we really had our sights on, or have lost something that we cherished or wanted badly. In the case of the Al Qaeda suspects being transported, it is the uncertainty and fear from of the loss of freedom that creates the anguish.

The degree of that non-gain or loss (the two aren’t the same) **as we perceive it**, is the suffering that Buddhism seeks to eliminate.

‘Non-gain’ isn’t the same thing as ‘loss’. You can’t lose something that you never had to begin with. You may aspire to it, but you can’t lose it if it was never yours. All you ever had was the desire itself.

‘Non-gain’ implies a want or desire that was created by you when you said “I really want that toy for Christmas” or “that job is one that I could really enjoy” or “I really want a relationship with that person.” In all of these cases, it was something that you created in your mind which you REALLY thought that you had to have to be happy. But the pain arrives when those expectations aren’t met. However, you’re relieved when your friend gets the toy, and it turns out to be not as neat as you thought it was going to be and is quickly dumped into their toy box, never to be brought out again. The job, when closely examined, turns out to be a dog that you would have quit in a month’s time. The relationship turns out to be really toxic, although on the surface it would have seemed to be ideal.

In all these cases, it was the perception of something that you thought would make you happy which you didn’t have that caused the suffering. The relief on seeing the true nature of what you wanted is a relief.

² Ibid.

'Loss' is the reverse of this. This is where you had the toy, and really DID like it, and some playground bully stole it and wouldn't give it back, or when you really DID like that job, and you got fired or laid off, or when you got dumped by your love interest for someone more interesting to them. The suffering caused by a loss is equally hurtful, and actually is the same (once you think about it) as wanting the toy or the job or the relationship to begin with. The toy was really one that you enjoyed ... the job was a dream that gave you great pleasure ... the relationship you thought would go on forever.

Now in the event of loss, you have to separate the idea of rationalizing after the fact, thinking "I really never did like that toy" from the fact that you did, and the emotion (suffering) that was generated when the bully took it from you. You have to remember that the logical mind and the emotional mind are two TOTALLY different things. How many times have you rationalized the loss as denying the way you felt about the object that you lost? "I never cared about that toy" when you really did. "That job never satisfied me" when it was your dream spot. "I never really cared about her (him)" when in reality you really truly loved them and it hurt a LOT. This is the emotional mind talking, and most of the time it serves to shield us from the truth.

So we start to come to the realization that it isn't the suffering that causes us the pain, it's something deeper. In all of these cases where we experience mental pain, it's because we wanted something and couldn't have or achieve it, or lost it and wanted it back really badly.

The second Noble Truth lays bare how that suffering is generated (in the next essay).

CHAPTER EIGHT

Desire is not a streetcar

The first Noble Truth defined suffering as being in all existence. It can be both mental and physical and overlays 'happiness.' Once we've defined it, it's time to find a cause for it.

The second Noble Truth of the four is ... **“Suffering is caused by desire and ignorance.”**

Let's look at desire first.

It's "desire" or "want" ... whichever you prefer. The Buddhist idea of suffering is that it is caused by desire ... the wanting of something not gained or lost once gained and valued. Call it lust, or desire, or 'gotta have it' ... all are equally valid. It's really so simple, once this train of thought is followed to its conclusion.

We have all been taught (or know from the get-go) about desiring things. We want what gives us happiness, is fun, is good, is neat to have or impresses the neighbors. The whole economy of the Western World is built on creating desire for things. Advertising wouldn't work if it couldn't generate a desire for the products it is selling.

We're inundated with commercials for things that will make us feel better, look better, perform in bed better (or at all), amuse ourselves, or in some way be happier. They go on the basis that it's 'things' that will make us happy because we'll feel better about ourselves or feel that we're one notch above the neighbors. We'll root for that team and celebrate when they win with beer and chips that we saw advertised or bought at the stadium.

The creation of that desire is at the basis of a consumer economy. Without it, a major portion of that economy would collapse, because people wouldn't NEED lots of stuff. In that respect, Buddhist thought is the antithesis of much of modern

economics. Ah, the thought of television without the creation of desire ... but I digress.

Oops ... we have to wait a minute and remember the difference between 'need' and 'want'. Want is desire. A need is something that is required to survive or perform some task. We never "need" lots of stuff ... we always "want" lots of stuff.

I can do without a lot of what I currently have, but it certainly wouldn't be either easy or painless to do so. I wouldn't want to go back to grinding my own flour, nor tending a garden large enough for us to exist on. Nor would I want to chop and stack my own firewood or walk twenty miles to town. I perhaps could (age and physical condition would probably prevent it) but it would be difficult and strenuous. Nor would I want to raise and butcher my own meat. Add to that that humans are inherently lazy, and it's definitely not an existence that most of us would opt for.

Desire is the wanting of something that isn't necessary and essential. Some might argue that there are intangible things that we 'need', like family and friends. Recognizing whether something is either desired or needed requires some thinking. Do I want a relationship because I desire it (outside of my current situation) or because I need it (because people need such relationships for the most part?) Do I need that particular car because I need transportation, or because I want to show off for the neighbors and my boss?

Translating 'desire' into 'need' is altogether too easy and most times totally transparent. I might say that I 'need' that new car. No I don't. I don't **need** it. The one I have is probably adequate to get you from point 'A' to point 'B' for a number of years to come if I maintain it correctly. I could make the case that it will need costly maintenance soon, or isn't big enough to take all the kids to soccer practice, but as far as 'need' goes, it may not really be 'needed'. It isn't something that I absolutely have to have for survival. Once you get past survival, desire becomes need altogether too easily, at least when I justify it to myself.

I think you probably are beginning to see the glimmers of the differences between need and want. I need a certain amount of basic foodstuffs for my physical body to exist, but I

don't need five-star, truffle-based entrees to do that ... I may want/desire it, but I don't **need** it.

I need a place to shelter me from the cold and rain, but I don't **need** twenty rooms in a Mc-mansion to do that.

Trying to separate out what is wanted versus needed requires a significant amount of introspection ... a quality many people fail to do in any great degree. And when you really start digging into this stuff, it can hurt.

Sometimes I might think that I really need something, but in reality I could do without it and never miss it. It very seldom works the other way around.

The renunciation of possessions by the Buddhist monks is one way of creating a space for the reduction of want within the individual. But that can also be created in different ways. There are friends of mine that work and live in a minimalist environment and don't need or want much other than their immediate requirements. No massive computer-power with the latest processors ... just something to get on the web with. No fancy car, just something to get to town and back and haul stuff. Patched shirts and old Levis to wear. They just don't need more of much of anything.

When I was going to college in New Mexico, we'd go to one of the local cafes for breakfast sometimes. There would be a group of pretty grungy older guys sitting at a corner table, talking over coffee and donuts. When they would leave, they'd climb into some of the oldest, most beat up pickup trucks I'd ever seen, with the accumulated dirt and mud probably holding much of the body on the frame. I found out later, that these were some of the most successful and wealthiest people in the county ... they just didn't need to accumulate 'stuff'. We called them 'overall millionaires'. I'm sure they weren't Buddhists, but I figure they sure could have been prime candidates.

The operative word in all of this is "want". "I WANT(ed) that toy." "I WANT(ed) that job." "I WANT(ed) that relationship." If there had been no 'want', there would have been no suffering, right? No want, no suffering because you don't care.

OK, now there's the degree ... How badly do (did) you want that toy? And did you 'suffer' when it either never was there or you lost it? Did the 'want' fade over time? And the million-dollar-question, how do you measure it?

It was the same situation both when it happened and later. What's the difference in intensity? Are the emotions as strong later as when the original 'want' made itself known? Sometimes, but usually not. The pain of a loss of a loved one usually diminishes over time, although never completely. The pain of losing that toy fades pretty quickly. The pain of losing the job may be alleviated by getting another one.

In many of these cases, the suffering is abated by replacing it with something (someone) else that filled the want. But the want is still there, and is causing the action to fulfill it, even if you think it is satisfied. You might still want that toy (or one like it), because there's always one that is a little better. Transpose that one into relationships and you have a primary reason for divorces and breakups.

So it is the 'want' (read desire) that is the culprit here ... not the suffering. If we do nothing to eliminate the 'want' from our minds, we are doomed to 'not-gaining' and 'losing' for the rest of our lives. It is the ultimate goal of Buddhist teachings to eliminate that 'want' or 'desire' that prevents us from being happy.

As we saw in the last chapter, suffering has a spectrum that is wide and deep, and is relative to each individual's situation and existence. Now that we've split out desire and need, in regards to our existences, we can start to see that desire (either realized or unfulfilled) creates that suffering.

And there are the primary and secondary results of actually achieving what we desire. If we achieve the fulfillment of a desire for say, a new expensive car, we're happy with it, at least for a while. We zip around the neighborhood or the highway and really enjoy the handling and performance of it. It just happens to be, however, a garage queen that requires high maintenance by trained mechanics that costs a lot of money. It also takes time away for that maintenance so you

can't drive it. It's also a ticket magnet for the highway patrol. The desire has created a secondary result of your being frustrated because you don't have it available or it's costing you money in court.

That car may also generate some friction with your neighbors and co-workers who may feel that you are trying to impress them with your new toy. They secretly gloat when it goes into the shop, AGAIN, or you pick up another speeding ticket. This is another secondary result of the primary desire.

Are you really any happier than you were when you went out and got it? Or are the results not worth the price? Would you have been better off all the way around to find a good, solid, reliable, less expensive car that would get you to where you needed to go without any problems, and wouldn't antagonize the neighbors?

See, that desire got you into more trouble than you expected, didn't it? Unless, of course, you were so oblivious to what was going on around you so as to not care about all these aspects of what was happening. In that case, you're probably not Buddhist material, at least not quite yet.

Desires, when acted upon, generate actions. In Buddhist teachings, these actions are also called causes. Once a cause is generated, it has an effect somewhere, at some time. And it doesn't have to be physically implemented to be out there, either. Much of the time, causes generated by desire are 'wrong actions' and result in the generation of negative karma. In other words, 'stuff' happens (you know what 'stuff' means).

Desire also generates emotions, which affect the state of mind of the individual. Unfulfilled desire can generate anger and a host of associated emotions, which when acted upon are not good. Unfulfilled want can also generate despair and lethargy, which disables the person from doing much of anything.

Loss (the desire of having something back that you have lost) can generate the exact same emotions, with exactly the same results.

So now you begin to see what we're talking about when we say that suffering is created by desire. That suffering (or emotional stress) is exactly the result of a desire that is unfulfilled (either by non-gain or loss).

Am I advocating a minimalist lifestyle? I'd like to, but I've become too used to my various toys and situations. Could I? If forced to, I might be able to, but it wouldn't be easy. I doubt I'd make it into a Buddhist monastery any time soon. But perhaps it's possible to tamp down those desires to a minimal level and do without a lot of things that I probably don't need these days.

Could I do without my 'puter and the Internet? I could, but I couldn't write nearly as much, nor could I find all the material that I need (not desire) to read and contemplate. In addition, if I had to write in longhand (or even print), to read my handwriting is to need the training of a pharmacist.

Since we've gotten to a basic understanding of 'suffering', let me offer a quotation from another source that will give you a different look at it, this time from the Theravada side of the equation. 'Defilements' in this definition refer to states of mind and ways in which the mind works.

"The most basic defilements are the triad of greed, aversion, and delusion. Greed (lobha) is self-centered desire: the desire for pleasure and possessions, the drive for survival, the urge to bolster the sense of ego with power, status, and prestige. Aversion (dosa) signifies the response of negation, expressed as rejection, irritation, condemnation, hatred, enmity, anger, and violence. Delusion (moha) means mental darkness: the thick coat of insensitivity which blocks out clear understanding.

"From these three roots emerge the various other defilements — conceit, jealousy, ambition, lethargy, arrogance, and the rest — and from all these defilements together, the roots and the branches, comes dukkha in its diverse forms: as pain and sorrow, as fear and discontent, as the aimless drifting through the round of birth and death."¹

As you can see, this look at suffering includes a few other things besides desire as root causes of suffering. But in

¹ The Noble Eightfold Path, The Way to the End of Suffering, by Bhikkhu Bodhi, Chapter 1. Source: The Wheel Publication No. 308/311 (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1984), second edition (revised) 1994.

actuality this all boils down to a desire ... to gain pleasure and possessions, to avoid the negative things in our lives, and to just block out the stuff that we don't actively like to deal with. We 'desire' all these things.

But Bhikku Bodhi goes further ...

"The Buddha teaches that there is one defilement which gives rise to all the others, one root which holds them all in place. This root is ignorance (avijja). Ignorance is actually identical in nature with the unwholesome root "delusion" (moha). When the Buddha speaks in a psychological context about mental factors, he generally uses the word "delusion"; when he speaks about the causal basis of samsara (world of suffering, reality, ed.), he uses the word "ignorance" (avijja). Ignorance is not mere absence of knowledge, a lack of knowing particular pieces of information. Ignorance can co-exist with a vast accumulation of itemized knowledge, and in its own way it can be tremendously shrewd and resourceful. As the basic root of dukkha (suffering, ed.), ignorance is a fundamental darkness shrouding the mind. Sometimes this ignorance operates in a passive manner, merely obscuring correct understanding. At other times it takes on an active role: it becomes the great deceiver, conjuring up a mass of distorted perceptions and conceptions which the mind grasps as attributes of the world, unaware that they are its own deluded constructs."²

So here we have the basic difference between ignorance (the second cause of suffering) and everything else. We don't see what's going on with ourselves because we're ignorant of what to look for, or to find the actual ways in which we make ourselves unhappy. We have all the desires to either chase after various things that we think make us happy, allow us to avoid unhappiness, or to just ignore the whole thing.

Ignorance, by the way, can be its own object of desire. We may choose to be and remain ignorant because the alternative is to cause ourselves suffering by thinking about things that we think we can't correct or change.

Basically, in regards to ignorance, it's just simply that you don't see that the actions that you're creating (or sometimes not creating) are what are causing you grief. You have to step back and see what you're doing in order to change things. Seeing that ignorance is also a part of the Buddhist teaching and training, as well as how to get to it and eliminate it.

² Ibid.

So now we've arrived (I hope) of a basic understanding of the Second Noble Truth of Buddhism. The next Noble Truth awaits us in the following chapter.

CHAPTER NINE

GETTING OFF THE STREETCAR

The Third Noble Truth is **“If one can eliminate desire and ignorance, they can eliminate suffering.”**

“Aw, C’mon. This is just the Second Noble Truth turned on its head.” It’s a logical reversal. If $A = C$, then $C = A$ is the only other logical result. Anyone who took high school algebra will recognize this one. So why reiterate it?

For this, we have to remember whom the Buddha was talking to. People largely illiterate, most without much education, and surely without training in Aristotelian logic. What seems so basic today, we have to remember wasn’t so well known in the Buddha’s time. Come to think of it, maybe we don’t have it today, either. For us, in the twenty-first century, it’s equally true, but for different reasons (or maybe not). We get so wrapped up in the wanting that we never see the rest of it ... let alone ‘wanting’ to get rid of all the stuff. If you doubt this, just watch any of the television programs about hoarders of physical stuff, even trash. It’s obvious. “Even the trash is MINE and I won’t give it up.”

‘Want’, ‘desire’, ‘lust’, and above all, ignorance ... all these words are synonyms for requiring something that our mind has decided it has to have (or to deny) to be happy. What the mind doesn’t want to understand is that ‘happy’ is always there, and that the suffering is an overlay that we can strip off so as to allow the ‘happy’ to be present all the time. And it’s far too easy to get trapped into the ‘things’ that are making me ‘happy’. Maybe ‘happy’ isn’t the right word here ... how about the fulfillment of desire that I **THINK** is making me happy.

Lots of that is how the external world around you reacts to your ‘fulfillment’. And it’s how that gets back to you through your mind’s spam¹ filter that makes you fulfilled or not.

¹ An internet term for any software that eliminates unwanted ads and content from incoming mail and web sites.

The mind generates all kinds of stuff in reaction to what it perceives as the outside world, with all kinds of errors and incorrect assumptions. Conspiracy theories and extension of incorrect ideas are much of what it does. It's truly amazing what your mind will come up with when you're not minding the store. It is the goal of Buddhist thought to kick the mind out of its production overdrive and make it do only what you need it to whether it wants to or not.

So how in the world do we eliminate this desire/want? In the external world (at least the physical world), we don't. The external world has absolutely nothing to do with this. It is only within the world of our minds that we begin to tackle the elimination of want and suffering. It is only within our psyches that we start to do away with the distractions of wanting and suffering so as to be able to see the root causes of what we're doing, and the karmic damage that we do to ourselves. There's nothing and no one outside of yourself that can help you with this. It's you and you alone that will make it work.

The mind will work its butt off in order to keep all these mental gymnastics of want, need and desire working. That's what it has been programmed to do. The trick is to re-program it so it can allow happiness instead.

In a way, eliminating desire is much like strip-mining coal. The coal seam is usually under a layer of overburden rock that is useless and prevents us from getting directly to the fossil fuel. We have to strip away the overlaying rock in order to reap the benefits of the coal. To do so requires tools and earthmoving equipment on a massive scale.

To strip away the overlays of the mind requires equally exquisite tools to strip away the overlaying strata of want, desire, ignorance, and erroneous perception.

This isn't a great analogy, but it works in a way ... so long as we don't consider the environmental impacts of what we're doing. Luckily, the overburden of the mind just goes away.

Another analogy might be the overused one of peeling the onion, layer by layer until you get to the center.

Eliminating desire/want isn't easy. Even recognizing it can be fraught with booby traps and dead ends. I may think I desperately desire something or someone, only to find that what I desired has vanished or changed. It may be overlaid with ideas and rationalizations that are so imbedded in my thinking that I fail to realize that they're blocking my seeing the real problem or the real reason for the desire.

In order to even start this process, we have to realize that a problem exists. Remember 'ignorance' from our last chapter? It also has to be worthy of our attention. Sometimes just seeing that we have a problem and raising the red flag to look at it can be almost insurmountable.

Sometimes it's that we're ignorant of how to go about even seeing that there's a problem. Now don't go overboard and confuse ignorance with being flat out dumb. There IS a difference. Dumb is being incapable of learning ... ignorance is not knowing that the learning is possible and accessible or clouding any knowledge we have to obscurity. Or ignorance is having lots of knowledge and using it in ways that are either counter-productive or harmful to others as well as ourselves.

So what is this mental pry-bar that we need in order to open the lid of Pandora's Box within our minds? It's the realization that we are causing most, if not all, of our own difficulties. How do we arrive at this realization? Not easily.

It has to start with the flash of insight that we really aren't happy. We're suffering. We have to admit this to ourselves at some point. Sometimes this comes as a monumental epiphany caused by some catastrophic event in our lives, and other times it arrives quietly as one of those "aha" moments. Sometimes it's a replay of a mental video where we realize that we totally screwed up and why ... other times it's the quiet mirror of a good friend showing you the things that make you unhappy.

So how do you arrive at the conclusion that it's desire and ignorance that is causing much of this mental anguish?

Sometimes it takes being jilted by a romantic partner and the angst that ensues. If you can get through the emotional trauma of the time, you might see that it wasn't worth the chase to begin with. What you wanted wasn't what you got.

Lots of times, your pheromones get in the way, and totally cloud any rational judgment you might have been able to muster in the process. Or the desire for ANY kind of relationship overrules anything logical ... even though your inner voice keeps shouting "RUN! RUN AWAY! NOW"

Sometimes, losing the job because you pissed off the boss will cause you to see that maybe your conduct was out of order (or maybe not). Just seeing that the desire to have your own way got crossways to the path of what the boss wanted, is very important. Then again, you may rationalize the job loss as being their fault; that you were right; and they were totally wrong.

Most times, it's just that you get in your own way.

I'm a pilot ... not a commercial type, just a puddle-jumping private pilot. There was an advanced aeronautical rating that at one point I really wanted, but never could achieve. I tried hard, but never managed to pass the test. I later (once I'd abandoned the effort) saw that it was because my mind didn't react quickly enough to unexpected conditions, and as a result, I couldn't multi-task quickly enough to accomplish the rating. There was too much information to process too quickly for me, and I made incorrect judgment calls as a result. At the time, I perceived it as a massive personal failure and I was really suffering. It hurt that I couldn't get what I wanted. In retrospect, my getting the rating would have exposed me to a danger of getting into situations that could have proved disastrous under certain circumstances, and I now see that it was truly for the better that I didn't achieve my goal. But it was only with time and introspection that this realization was achieved.

It is these types of realizations that lead us to the idea of eliminating desire as the foundation of achieving happiness and 'nirvana'.

Just realizing this one idea is a major achievement. Admitting that we are our own worst enemy can be gut-wrenching. Most people never do. They just go on doing the same thing over and over, expecting a different result. Duh.

But that process is repeated daily, even by experienced practitioners of Buddhism. Asking the question “What am I doing?” to ourselves isn’t in the normal process of everyday living. But it is essential to achieving true happiness. In order to even see those desires for what they are requires asking not only this question, but myriads of others to ourselves in a most incisive and direct way ... and not flinching from the answers. Lying to ourselves is one of the most pervasive traits that we possess, and one of the most likely to not be seen.

When I was pursuing the aeronautical rating that I never achieved, I rationalized all kinds of reasons why I wasn’t getting there. The instructor wasn’t good ... the plane wasn’t working right ... the procedures weren’t valid ... anything but the personal failure. I wanted that rating, and it wasn’t going to be my fault that I didn’t get it. Note the avoidance of personal failure here.

It’s these kinds of rationalizations (lying to ourselves) that keep us in trouble with suffering. If we never see the root cause of the problem, there isn’t much we can do to eliminate it.

It is only with brutal honesty and forcing our minds to go inside, rather than externally, that we will begin to achieve the goals of happiness, enlightenment and the elimination of desire and ignorance, which are at the root of almost all our suffering.

For many, it is the application of discipline to focus the mind inward that turns on the internal process of eliminating desire. Those disciplines and narrowing of goals are the focus of the Eight-fold Path, which the Fourth Noble Truth ties together. This will be the subject of the next essay.

CHAPTER TEN

The Noble Eight-fold Path

The fourth Noble Truth of Buddhism says **“the Noble Eight-fold Path can eliminate desire and ignorance.”**

This is a pretty powerful statement. Eliminating desire and ignorance is a pretty tall order. Can it really accomplish this?

The Eight-fold path is a series of admonitions, suggestions, and practices that can (if followed) lead to happiness and Nirvana ... at least according to Buddhist tradition.

Those eight parts of the path are:

- **Right View,**
- **Right Resolve,**
- **Right Speech,**
- **Right Action,**
- **Right Livelihood,**
- **Right Effort,**
- **Right Mindfulness,**
- **Right Concentration.**

By themselves, these eight items as stated don't mean much. They aren't explained (yet) and they don't lend themselves to ready interpretation at this very superficial level. But they are the key to Buddhist practice and study. Let's get an overview of this and then go deeper when we examine each in turn.

I turn to Bikkhu Bodhi for a brief recap of this:

“To free ourselves from suffering fully and finally we have to eliminate it by the root, and that means to eliminate ignorance. But how does one go about eliminating ignorance? The answer follows clearly from the nature of the adversary. Since ignorance is a state of not knowing things as they really are, what is needed is knowledge of things as they really are. Not merely conceptual knowledge, knowledge

as idea, but perceptual knowledge, a knowing which is also a seeing. This kind of knowing is called wisdom (pañña). Wisdom helps to correct the distorting work of ignorance. It enables us to grasp things as they are in actuality, directly and immediately, free from the screen of ideas, views, and assumptions our minds ordinarily set up between themselves and the real.

“To eliminate ignorance we need wisdom, but how is wisdom to be acquired? As indubitable knowledge of the ultimate nature of things, wisdom cannot be gained by mere learning, by gathering and accumulating a battery of facts. However, the Buddha says, wisdom can be cultivated. It comes into being through a set of conditions, conditions which we have the power to develop. These conditions are actually mental factors, components of consciousness, which fit together into a systematic structure that can be called a path in the word's essential meaning: a courseway for movement leading to a goal. The goal here is the end of suffering, and the path leading to it is the Noble Eightfold Path with its eight factors: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.”¹

“Right view” is essential to the practice of Buddhism. It includes understanding the concepts the Four Noble Truths in depth, and seeing (as well as admitting to ourselves) that they are real in our lives. This involves accepting totally that there is such a thing as suffering (as we’ve defined it), and that the causes of it are real and present.

“Right resolve” or “right intention” is just that. It is generating the internal gumption to proceed on the EightFold Path, and observe the precepts that you will find set out for you. It’s a statement of intent ... “I intend to stick to the Path.”

“Right speech” is the avoidance of saying things that are hurtful or unacceptable to others. It includes lying, abusive talk, and making idle chatter. But it isn’t about politically correct speech ... far from it. You’ll understand when we get to that chapter.

“Right action” is the belief that it is wrong to kill, steal or be un-chaste. This part of the path also brings up some surprising options in the performance of this section.

¹ The Noble Eightfold Path, The Way to the End of Suffering, by Bhikkhu Bodhi, Chapter 1. Source: The Wheel Publication No. 308/311 (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1984), second edition (revised) 1994.

“Right livelihood” is the taking up of work/professions that don’t violate Buddhist principles nor create bad karma. It basically is an extension of Right Action, backing up vocationally what Right Action advises

“Right effort” is putting energy and will into doing these things that will further our becoming enlightened. It also involves putting effort into rooting out and eliminating those things that will hold up our progress.

“Right mindfulness” is the process of quieting the mind to provide only factual, timely input without the mind mucking up what the senses are telling us. As you will find, it is easier said than done.

“Right concentration” is the application of concentration to the mind, forcing it to look only at what you want it to. This is probably the hardest section to talk about, and perform because of the introspection that it requires.

These eight factors are laid out in sequence, but in fact they are but eight parts of a whole process. Consider them like the spokes in a wheel. They all must be there at once in order to roll the load. The trick is to do it. The sequence is provided because you have to start somewhere, and Right View is as good as any.

It sounds overwhelming when you say they have to be applied all at once. But the truth remains that you can’t totally separate them out from one another in reality. They all work together to access a single entity in your life ... your inner Buddha Nature.

You can, however, improve on each separate part of the Eightfold Path without impeding the progress on the other seven. Working on one aspect of the path won’t involve the exclusion of the other seven ... to the contrary, if you strengthen one, you strengthen all of them. Further down the Path, you have to work on all eight somewhat simultaneously rather than in sequence.

If you noticed, the fourth Noble Truth and the 'Right View' of the Eightfold Path refer to each other. You can't have one without the other. This affirms the bedrock status of both of these teachings to the Buddhist way of life. In addition, Right View requires an in-depth understanding of the Four Noble Truths in order to hone the concept of Right View.

The Eightfold Path is called the 'Middle Way'. It is called this because it shows us a path to enlightenment that does not go to any extremes. The extremes that the Buddha refers to are the total immersion in sensual pleasures of all kinds used by some traditions to achieve enlightenment, and, conversely, the **total** rejection of those same pleasures as the Ascetics in India do. It rejects those ascetic practices of many that starve the body or do extreme physical things to achieve enlightenment. In many cases, that rejection is focused on the body ... thinking that the body is the source of the affliction, whereas the real culprit is the mind itself.

Quoting again from Bikkhu Bodhi ...

"Aloof from these two extreme approaches is the Noble Eightfold Path, called the middle way, not in the sense that it effects a compromise between the extremes, but in the sense that it transcends them both by avoiding the errors that each involves. The path avoids the extreme of sense indulgence by its recognition of the futility of desire and its stress on renunciation. Desire and sensuality, far from being means to happiness, are springs of suffering to be abandoned as the requisite of deliverance. But the practice of renunciation does not entail the tormenting of the body. It consists in mental training, and for this the body must be fit, a sturdy support for the inward work. Thus the body is to be looked after well, kept in good health, while the mental faculties are trained to generate the liberating wisdom. That is the middle way, the Noble Eightfold Path, which "gives rise to vision, gives rise to knowledge, and leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbana (Nirvana, enlightenment, ed.)."²

We have to remember (and I will emphasize over and over) is that the eight parts of the Path are not independent of one another. Each of the eight affects and interacts with the other seven. While we may look at and study individual

² The Noble Eightfold Path, The Way to the End of Suffering, by Bhikkhu Bodhi, Chapter 1. Source: The Wheel Publication No. 308/311 (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1984), second edition (revised) 1994.

segments of the Eightfold Path, it is only for definition and understanding that any order is put to the individual factors and no one factor is more or less important or earlier or later in the listing.

The Eightfold Path is just that ... a path. It requires the traveler to walk it; otherwise it is just a depression on the earth with no life on it. It is not something that can be preached from a pulpit or soapbox and gained. It is not something that can be spoon-fed by a teacher or guru. All any other human being (including the Buddha) can do is to 'point the way.' In other words, "ya can't just talk the talk, ya gotta walk the walk."

We'll try to point that way out to you as countless others have done through the centuries. We'll start with the 'Right View' ... but first we need to define karma.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Law of Karma

The term 'Karma' (or 'Kamma') is used a lot by people. Most of them don't know what it means, other than it's another term for "what goes around, comes around." Another use is 'You've got bad cooking karma' (as an example), for when meals go consistently wrong, or 'good cooking karma' when they are spectacular. Or if you're constantly in rejection mode in the romance department, you might say 'My relationship karma is really bad this year.'

None of these actually have anything to do with the real meaning of karma, and yet in an odd, perverse sense, they do, but not in the way you might think. In the real world, karma is far more complex than these quotes would indicate (which is par for the course in Buddhism).

In the Buddhist definition, Karma is **always** the result of action. Action? What Action?

In Buddhist thought, action is any thought that we **voluntarily** put in motion or an idea **that we voluntarily think** that affects the world outside of ourselves. Note that it's voluntary. Note also that it can be a thought by itself that affects other things that we're doing (because other actions can be affected by that thought). Action against our will is not the kind of action that generates karma ... only that which we fire off on our own. Once we start a voluntary thought, whether or not we ever act on it, it generates karma.

Starting an action requires that we 'think' it into existence.

OK, so we 'think' a thought or idea. There are three ways that this voluntary type of thought can generate karma:

- **Through action by the body,**
- **Through action by speech, and**
- **Through action by the mind.**

These are called the 'volitions'.

‘Action by the body’ is if I do something to make that voluntary thought manifest in the external world.

‘Action by speech’ is if I say something out loud to someone else as a result of my voluntary thought.

‘Action by the mind’ is where there is no outside indicator of my thought, but it kicks off other ideas, other plans or subsequent thoughts that do externalize as a result of that voluntary thought.

Let me bring Bikkhu Bodhi in for another look at karma (kamma):

“Its literal name is ‘right view of the ownership of action’ (kammassakata sammaditthi), and it finds its standard formulation in the statement: ‘Beings are the owners of their actions, the heirs of their actions; they spring from their actions, are bound to their actions, and are supported by their actions. Whatever deeds they do, good or bad, of those they shall be heirs.’¹ More specific formulations have also come down in the texts. One stock passage, for example, affirms that virtuous actions such as giving and offering alms have moral significance, that good and bad deeds produce corresponding fruits, that one has a duty to serve mother and father, that there is rebirth and a world beyond the visible one, and that religious teachers of high attainment can be found who expound the truth about the world on the basis of their own superior realization.²

To understand the implications of this form of right view we first have to examine the meaning of its key term, kamma. The word kamma means action. For Buddhism the relevant kind of action is volitional action, deeds expressive of morally determinate volition, since it is volition that gives the action ethical significance. Thus the Buddha expressly identifies action with volition. In a discourse on the analysis of kamma he says: ‘Monks, it is volition that I call action (kamma). Having willed, one performs an action through body, speech, or mind.’³ The identification of kamma with volition makes kamma essentially a mental event, a factor originating in the mind which seeks to actualize the mind’s drives, dispositions, and purposes. Volition comes into being through any of three channels — body, speech, or mind — called the three doors of action (kammadvara). A volition expressed through the body is a bodily action; a volition expressed through speech is a verbal action; and a volition that issues in thoughts, plans, ideas, and other mental states without gaining outer expression is a mental action. Thus the one factor of volition differentiates into three types of kamma according to the channel through which it becomes manifest.”⁴

1 AN 3:33; Word of the Buddha, p. 19.

2 MN 117; Word of the Buddha, p. 36.

3 AN 6:63; Word of the Buddha, p. 19.

4 The Noble Eightfold Path, The Way to the End of Suffering, by Bhikkhu Bodhi, Chapter 1. Source: The Wheel Publication No. 308/311 (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1984), second edition (revised) 1994.

It would seem, then, that the ‘action’ itself is not the cause of bad karma ... it is the **willful** thought on our part that starts the karmic hat-trick. Well, since all three action types originate with the mind, all the rest is a creation of what the mind wants, desires or puts forth.

So I ‘will’ or ‘think’ an action ... now what? Having initiated the thought/action, I own it. I am responsible for it and I have to reap the consequences of that action. It’s mine forever. No getting around it.

Since I am **totally** responsible for that action, and it was of my own volition, there is also an intangible moral component attached to that action, called karma.

Uh oh!!! A moral component? What’s that?

The moral component of a thought/action deals with whether it was the ‘right thing to do/say/think.’ Ummmmm ... by whose rules? Are we getting into political correctness here? I know it may sound like it, but it really isn’t ... it’s more like guidelines for a society that allows it to function with a minimum of friction, and keeping you harmonious with the rest of the world so that you won’t generate as much karma as you could with a conflicted society.

There is a set of basic rules which most of us know at the root core of our beings (unless you’re a psychopath). You know that you shouldn’t kill, steal, or lie. These are the basics. Later on you will find a set of moral guidelines laid out, which describe a series of things that will generate bad karma ... and their inversions that generate good karma for you.

Karma splits into three sections, for each type of action that we saw earlier. These can be considered to be things that will affect the karmic intensity but not the basic type of karma itself. These types are:

- **Whether it is wholesome or unwholesome,**
- **The principal causes of it, and**
- **The roots from which it comes.**

Wholesome karma is an action that is morally correct (within the bounds of moral rules, anyway), assists with

spiritual growth, and is beneficial to both you and others. Unwholesome karma is the exact opposite ... it is morally incorrect, does not help with your spiritual development and produces suffering for both you and others.

There are ten principal causes for karma that the Buddha quotes, but these are primary causes, with innumerable subtypes. There are three concerning the body, four verbal ones, and three are mental. The unwholesome types of karma are:

Bodily Action

- **Destroying life**
- **Stealing or taking what is not given**
- **Bad conduct regarding sensual pleasures**

Verbal Action

- **Lying**
- **Slander**
- **Harsh words**
- **Idle chatter**

Mental Action

- **Coveting what is not yours**
- **Ill will**
- **Wrong view or bad morals**

The causes for positive karma are the opposites of the first seven types, and involve abstaining from this conduct. They are the good thought processes, because if you avoid these actions, it doesn't result in any action outside the mind. You might think it, but at least you avoid saying it. The last three actions involve only mental states, and, again, the opposite positive stuff is also mental. All these types will be found in detail in the Moral Section (Right Action, Right Speech, and Right Livelihood, which outline these suggested moral precepts) of the EightFold Path.

Wholesome and unwholesome actions can also be defined in terms of what generated them. The roots of unwholesome (bad) actions are three ...

- **Greed,**
- **Aversion, and**
- **Delusion**

And their counterparts of

- **Non-greed,**
- **Non-Aversion, and**
- **Non-delusion.**

Any action stemming from the basic negative roots is an unwholesome action, while the counterparts are considered a positive action.

Greed, of course, we all know about. It includes lust and being power hungry and wanting ‘more’. Aversion has to do with dislike, anger, hatred and a few other things. Delusion is not seeing the real world in its true state because of other ideas and concepts that reside in the mind. We’ll go into these in much greater detail later on.

Wholesome actions are defined as being non-greed, non-aversion, or non-delusion originated. If you act in a non-greedy manner, you will practice giving without return, just letting things be and not lusting after stuff. If you operate in a non-aversion state, you become sympathetic, gentle and loving to all. If working in a non-delusional state, you are wise and understanding ... without creating a fake reality for yourself to cloud your thinking.

Karma’s most important side is its way of generating situations later on that relate to the moral value of the action (both positive and negative). **Everything** we voluntarily do has consequences. If your action is morally incorrect, the karma is negative.

The interesting thing about karma is that it is non-time related. Those consequences can happen immediately or can span several lifetimes ... even eons (according to Buddhist thought, that is). Every action leaves a deposit in the karmic bank that will come back when the conditions for it to do so are right. The universal law governing karma is that the results of unwholesome actions will haunt you eventually as suffering, while wholesome actions create happiness. In truth, “what goes around, comes around.”

Integral to the understanding of karma and its effects, is the idea of ‘rebirth’.

In Buddhism, there is no real concept of evolution of species. They assume that the world (as we know it) just ‘is’, and that the origination and future of it are of little consequence. It is the here and now that’s ultimately important. The idea of everything being temporary also enters into the mix, but that the changing of the physical universe does little to impinge on the realm of karma and rebirth.

Buddhist theory maintains that there is pretty much no such thing as a sentient being that did/does/will not have karma left over from a previous physical existence. Thus it implies an almost unbroken eternal string of karma going back who knows how far.

Rebirth in the physical sense doesn’t happen. The physical body **will** return to its elemental components. According to Theravadan Buddhist thought, what does happen is that at the time of death of a sentient being, the karmic energy goes forth much as ripples in a pond, or a sound through air. When it intersects with a concurrent physical conception of sperm and egg, a being is conceived (human or otherwise). This implies that all beings are sentient to some degree. All three factors have to be present for sentience and karma to proceed forward. This is the Theravedan concept of rebirth (greatly simplified, of course).

It is important to note that only the karmic energy from the dying individual is put out for ‘rebirth’, but it has nothing to do with who that individual was, their personality, ego, or anything else. It is strictly the karmic energy that has been built up over that particular lifetime (and the cumulative karma of those previous existences). It is not ‘I’ that is reborn ... it is merely the karma that ‘I’ generated that is carried over to a new sentient being. We’ll get into the whole realm of the ‘I’, ego, and the idea of ‘self’ in a subsequent chapter. For the time being, just try to keep the idea of your present existence as just that ... you are as you are in this instant, not the actual reincarnation of some other person (Tibetan Buddhist thought notwithstanding.)

While this may be incorrectly thought of as 'life after death', 'soul immortality', or some such, it is in reality none of these. The individual that lived in this lifetime transmits none of their being to the new being that is generated ... only the karma.

There's another way to look at this, however.

Consider that in Buddha's society and time, the whole idea of inheritance of personality and DNA determining both form and behavior didn't exist. They didn't realize that 'like father, like son' was a physical process in many ways. Therefore, to explain it, I believe they had to come up with some concept to explain the inheritance problem. Karma may be one of those ways. If they saw the child having the same behavioral problems that the father or mother had, then it had to be 'karma' that ruled.

This is my own concept working here, and I take full responsibility for it.

I personally have a hard time working with the 'multi-lifetime karma' concept. I DO, however, agree with karma for my own lifetime and actions, which in almost all cases is the much more important part of this. What I do definitely has consequences, from the largest down to the lowest and smallest level. Karma is real, and it does its thing.

One thing needs to be mentioned here. Karma is inextricably tied up with 'cause and effect'. There can be no karma without a cause having generated it, and it must continue until the effect of that cause has played out. More on this later.

In regards to karma, we cannot change it. Once generated, it's out there. But if we practice loving kindness on a daily basis, anger and hatred in our lives will disappear and no more karma will exist from it. Similarly, if we practice wisdom and knowledge, ignorance (in the Buddhist sense), and delusion with its karma will equally be gone. Since these negative qualities are what generate negative karma, we get less of it. Likewise, generating positive karma by thinking right thoughts will increase positive karma and tamp down some of

the negative influence. Again, once a karmic-generated cause is generated, the karma is there until the resultant effect of that cause comes 'round to balance.

It's also possible to amplify karma through repetition of the thinking that brought it up to begin with (both good and bad). If you keep on doing the same things (either good or bad) that generated the karma, the repetition tends to generate more karma than the sum of the parts.

It **is** possible to nullify karma ... or at least parts of it. A truly destructive batch of karma can totally eliminate an entire batch of good karma, and creating good karma can balance out or nullify bad karma.

So in truth, you can think of karma as a kind of cosmic credit score, where bad and good practices generate bad and good inputs to the score, and over time both may be erased from the scoring. Bad analogy, but you get the picture.

So, in a nutshell, the whole notion of karma is this: Any volitional creation of mind generates an equivalent piece of karma depending on its relative goodness or evil. Any karma generated can augment or negate existing karma and influence the overall karmic state.

There you have it. Karma in a capsule. While the entire subject is much more complex and subtle, you now have the idea of what it is and how it works.

We now proceed to the first division of the path, 'Right View'. That's next.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Right View Or Setting the Bounds

In any description of a system, we have to have a starting point. Since the EightFold Path is so interlinked, we have to provide a logical starting point, even though it really isn't. We start with 'Right View'.

A 'view' is what we see with our senses, and it depends on the vantage point from which we see it. On the highway at night, the light of your vehicle headlights can limit your view. Or during the day your view from a ridgetop can be a sweeping vista, spanning a hundred miles. From the bottom of a well, your view might be only a small circle of light above you.

When looking where we want to go, a view might be general as to whether we think we want to do well in the future, be healthy, or be more moral. All of these are views from various standpoints.

How we view situations or people influences everything else we think about them. One person may look at a sunset and see beauty and inspiration, while another may see only oncoming darkness and the loss of another day. One person might look at an obstacle and see an opportunity to improve their lives by overcoming it, while another sees an impediment that blocks their way with no solution. It all depends on their viewpoint. Same sunset, same obstacle ... radically different viewpoints.

From an introspective standpoint, it could be said every action we take is based on how we view the situation. Our view(s) on how we feel about it will determine what actions (if any) we take.

If we see a mother harshly disciplining a child in public, whether we intervene is determined by whether we feel that the discipline is warranted, how we feel about harsh discipline, and whether we feel that intervention is within our

right to act. Note the use of the word 'feel' here. We probably suffer, watching the event.

That 'feeling' (in this particular situation) is probably based on some kind of moral teaching that we were given as children or learned on our own from experience. Much of that type of 'feeling' is intangible and cannot be defined very well. What is good for that child? Do we have the insight to determine that? Or are we just reacting to what we've been taught and have accepted as our own moral compass? Remember that it is our mental suffering that we're dealing with.

In truth, what we see as acceptable to us as an individual is, in most instances, subject to our own interpretation. The issue of abortion in the United States is a prime example. Depending on your viewpoint, it is either murder or a legitimate medical procedure. For many, much of that viewpoint comes from moral teachings derived from religion and expanded by dogma. Whether human life starts at conception or birth is not only a scientific question, but is also a moral and religious question as well.

The action of abortion is determined by our view on the matter. From the Catholic Church's viewpoint (and many others), the action (if carried out) is murder, whereas others with other views may only consider it as a matter of choice and family planning.

It is the view defining our reaction and subsequent actions that we equate with 'Right View.' How we look at it determines what we do about it.

'Right View' is both a starting point and an ending point for the Eightfold Path because it is used in two different ways in the Path. Since it is used in two separate instances in two very different ways, it can constitute the beginning and ending of the Path.

Bikkhu Bodhi sheds light on this pretty opaque subject:

Perplexity sometimes arises over an apparent inconsistency in the arrangement of the path factors and the threefold training. Wisdom — which includes right view and right intention — is the last stage in the threefold training, yet its factors are placed at the beginning of the path rather than at its end, as might be expected according to the canon of strict consistency. The sequence of the path factors, however, is not the result of a careless slip, but is determined by an important logistical consideration, namely, that right view and right intention of a preliminary type are called for at the outset as the spur for entering the threefold training. Right view provides the perspective for practice, right intention the sense of direction. But the two do not expire in this preparatory role. For when the mind has been refined by the training in moral discipline and concentration, it arrives at a superior right view and right intention, which now form the proper training in the higher wisdom.

Right view is the forerunner of the entire path, the guide for all the other factors. It enables us to understand our starting point, our destination, and the successive landmarks to pass as practice advances. To attempt to engage in the practice without a foundation of right view is to risk getting lost in the futility of undirected movement. Doing so might be compared to wanting to drive someplace without consulting a roadmap or listening to the suggestions of an experienced driver. One might get into the car and start to drive, but rather than approaching closer to one's destination, one is more likely to move farther away from it. To arrive at the desired place one has to have some idea of its general direction and of the roads leading to it. Analogous considerations apply to the practice of the path, which takes place in a framework of understanding established by right view.¹

We use Right View to keep us on track to the goal, guiding us first to the Moral Group to decrease our negative actions and reactions with the outside world, and later on as part of the Wisdom Group, to see the inner wisdom and achieve Enlightenment.

There are two parts to Right View ... Mundane Right View and Superior Right View.

Mundane Right View is involved with a continuing and deepening knowledge of karma and its results. In a nutshell, it involves the concept that wholesome karma produces wholesome results, and unwholesome karma does the exact opposite. We must understand karma, as we saw in the last

¹ The Noble Eightfold Path, The Way to the End of Suffering, by Bhikkhu Bodhi, Chapter 1. Source: The Wheel Publication No. 308/311 (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1984), second edition (revised) 1994.

chapter, because it is integral to being able to use the Mundane Right View. That's what it's all about.

The Mundane Right View is also much about the Moral Section (Right Action, Right Speech, and Right Livelihood). These parts work to constrain us from doing things that will generate us negative karma, and through the inversions, provide us with ways to generate positive karma.

Superior Right View involves a much deeper involvement and understanding of the scope and complexity of the Four Noble Truths. It comes into play with the Wisdom Group when the mind is able to concentrate on the Truths with total focus. We'll get to that in a few more chapters or so.

Another way of defining Right View is that with a well-defined moral compass (set of moral values), we can begin to define in more detail what we think about it (those moral values). This is right, that is wrong, and we don't care about the other. The more defined the value set, the more definitive and discerning we can become in these judgments. If your value set is twisted or misinterpreted, any actions based on that value set as applied to situations you encounter would be equally twisted and incorrect. This is the purpose of the Morality Group of the Path, which allows us to pull back from unwholesome actions, and interface more sedately with the external world.

There is a danger of morality defined without some basic limits. Taken to extremes, not only 'morality', but the views derived from that 'morality' and actions based on it can be harmful not only to the individual holding them, but also to the society at large if taken further outside the individual's realm of action.

Buddhist philosophy is not unique in its' morality precepts, but it is unique in that it does not seek to intimidate nor force compliance. The reason for this is that Buddhists know that it is only within the individual that change or compliance can occur, and it has to be that individual's choice. To attempt compliance from without is counterproductive.

Thus we begin to see the glimmerings of what 'Right View' encompasses. If we possess 'Right View', then any reactions and subsequent actions will likely have positive consequences. Holding a 'Wrong View' will do exactly the opposite, generating reactions and actions that will have negative consequences for us. Here is where the concept of karma comes into play. Wrong views create actions that initiate and continue suffering (and bad karma) for us, while Right Views will help us eliminate suffering and create good karma.

Right Resolve is next on the list.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AH'M AGONNA DO IT RIGHT! (Right Intent / Right Resolve)

Right View sets our sights on the Path and the Four Noble Truths. Right Intent gives us the energy and drive to keep on it.

We can have all the moral values in the world ... if we don't have the intent to stick to them or lose sight of them they are worthless to us. We can know what is right and wrong and yet not hold to that knowledge in action. Right Intent gives us the push to use them and keep them.

'Intent'. What is our intent for doing something? Is it for the right reasons? Or is it for reasons that the Buddha would have found to generate negative karma. Looking at it another way, all voluntary actions lead to karmic results. We have to think about those actions before we do them, thus thought has to precede action. If the intent of the thought/action is negative, then negative karma will follow. If we intend a negative result, then negative karma is inevitably our end result.

Right View gives a baseline to the thought process (at least at this point) by showing you how you are causing yourself suffering, and gives an inkling of where you need to go to eliminate those causes. Right Intent lets us fuel our willingness to go further down the EightFold Path. We intend to get there.

The Buddha says that there are three types of wrong intent, which have to be countered with the three types of right intent. Pretty logical, huh?

The three types of wrong intent are:

- Desire / Ignorance
- Ill Will
- Harmfulness

They are countered by the three right intents:

- Renunciation
- Good Will
- Harmlessness

Let's take these up one at a time.

In the four Noble Truths, we learned how desire and ignorance are at the root of all suffering. We saw how these traits get us into trouble time after innumerable time. "I want it. I don't need it, but I want it." And we many times wind up getting it. If we don't, the desire keeps nagging at us, and if we do, it probably won't live up to expectations. Nasty stuff, that desire.

Ignorance is equally bad. It is much like the old saying that 'stupidity is doing the exact same dumb thing over and over, and expecting a different result.' If we try to do stuff without understanding as many of the results as possible for what we're getting into, we'll wind up in the basement of the outhouse time after time without a ladder.

Countering desire isn't easy. The right intent to counter it is called 'renunciation.' No, this isn't a steal from the Catholic Church. What this means is that we need to push back or renounce the desire, looking at it and seeing it for what it is. Once we identify it as a desire and not a need, renunciation can be applied against it. We can renounce the desire and then nullify it.

How do we go about this? Since identification is at least 50% of any problem, we have to look at everything we see that we want, and check to see if it's really needed. If it isn't, then we have to push the desire out of the way. One way to do this is to think to ourselves every time we encounter the desire for something or someone and ask (even aloud if necessary to get our own attention) "Do I really need this?" Many times the answer will be 'no', and we can bury the desire. If the desire persists, then thinking about why we want this thing, person or event in our lives and looking at the motivation will do the trick. Lots of times, you'll be surprised or even shocked at why

you want this or that (if you're honest with yourself, that is). There are times when I see some of the 'whys' that I come up with for wanting something and it's downright comical (or sometimes pretty sad).

Look, if you're really caught up in something and can't let go, that's ok. At least you recognized it. But you also have to find a way of changing your view of why it's important to you, and keep it from putting an invisible chain around your ankle.

So the intent of renunciation can be to push back against the desires (as opposed to needs) that aren't necessary for survival.

Ignorance is equally a problem. If you blindly go forward on an action without understanding the consequences, then you probably will regret the result in many instances. You have to renounce ignorance and do your homework before you carry out any action.

You remember those old railroad crossing signs? You remember ... "Stop, Look, and Listen." This phrase applies incredibly well to anything that you do that involves either desire or ignorance. You have to stop what you're doing, look at why you want to do it, and listen to your inner voice as to whether it's the right thing to do, lest the train of karma roll right over you.

Which brings us to the second item on the Wrong Intent list ... Ill Will.

This one is nasty also. It usually surfaces when we get angry or hurt and want revenge and retribution against someone who has "wronged" us physically, economically or emotionally. "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned," etc. etc.

Any action we take based on this wrong intent is inevitably going to generate bad karma, which will wind up coming back at us like the proverbial boomerang. Karma will getcha.

To counter this, whenever we find that we want to do something 'to' someone or something, we have to ask what our motives are. Do we want to hurt them for what we perceive

was a hurt to us? What if our perception is wrong? That will amplify the problem. What's the motive?

Ill will many times is generated by a perceived attack or slight or snub or whatever that makes us feel bad. In order to counter this wrong intent, we have to counter with Good Will.

Good Will can be generated by remembering that this person may be suffering and just lashing out in any direction they can ... you may not even be the target. It can also be that they perceive that you are a threat to them and it's a defense. Whatever the reason, generating Ill Will on your part isn't the answer, since it will lead to action on your part that will bring down your karma fairy to coat you with nasty dust.

But as usual, there's more to the story. People have a tendency to deal with this in one of two ways ... both of which will make the situation worse. Those ways are to give in to the ill-will and go for it, or to repress it and keep it simmering until it erupts somewhere else. Neither of these ways will benefit you in the long run. If you give in to it, then the karmic result will not be good, and while your anger or hurt may be salved, it won't have done you any long-term benefit.

If you repress it, you are just playing whack-a-mole with your mind, and it'll pop up somewhere else and generate even more problems than what you had to begin with. Score: Karma 2, you 0.

Granted, when you're in the middle of a bar fight and someone is heading your direction with a broken pool cue or beer bottle, it's a little tough to not react and redirect their obviously malevolent intent into a wastebasket or through a window. But if you do that, then the law of karma will prevail, and you'll have to share the damages to the bar, pay your opponents medical bills and possibly incur a stay in the local hoosegow. You have to consider the consequences. In this particular case, a big grin and a 'Have a nice day' as you head out the door would probably suffice. The only thing that would suffer on your part would be your ego, and it could probably stand a little takedown or you wouldn't have been in the situation to begin with.

Ill Will is difficult to tangle with, and kicking your mind into seeing it from the reverse perspective can be ugly. But by

looking at why you hate this person, or why you don't want to associate with that one will lead you into some places in your psyche that you've probably never been before, and show you some things that you probably won't like. But that's all part of the game as well.

Bear in mind that much of the ill will that you may generate towards others may in reality be stemming from something that you hate yourself for. Think about it.

The meditation for this in Buddhist thought deals with generating good will towards all beings ... not just those that have wronged you. We'll get into some of this later, but for now, just look into your own mind when you get into the Ill Will trap and see where it takes you.

The third part of the wrong intent triad is harmfulness. I know what you're thinking ... that we just covered this. But wait, there's more ...

Good will has to do with countering ill will and remembering that all beings want happiness as a basic goal.

Harmfulness has to do with making someone or something else suffer. It's the extension (kinda) of Ill Will. Harmlessness (on the other hand) is remembering that I don't need to add to that suffering. Figuring out why I want to cause that person harm is one of the end goals of this Right Intent thingie, and causing harm is never justified. Besides, getting even just kicks up the volume of whatever the other person is working with, and adds to your karma negatively.

As you can see, all this introspection isn't for wimps. It's nasty stuff, and digging into the basement of your mental outhouse isn't the easiest thing to do. But it is necessary to accomplish the Right Intent that you need in order to walk the Path to Enlightenment.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

**I'M DOING IT.
I'M NOT SURE WHAT,
BUT
I'M DOING IT.**

The section of the Eightfold Path that deals with Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood is sometimes referred to as the Moral Discipline part of the Path.

In Buddhist theory, when we talk of 'moral', it isn't the definition that we think of first in western terms. 'Moral', as used by the Eightfold Path, is not defined as an ethical value. Instead, the discipline uses these principles as guidelines for social harmony, rather than theological laws contained within the dogma. Instead of being social rules, they instead provide guidelines for conduct that reduces negative karmic results. It becomes a carrot for our progress, rather than a social stick for compliance. While the ethical considerations are important, they play distant second fiddle to the ultimate goal of enlightenment.

The guidelines contained in this section have much more to do with harmony between beings than obedience, restraint, and obligation imposed by dogma or teaching. They are directed internally at the mind rather than externally at social order. If the mind accepts the guidelines, then the person becomes much more at harmony with their surroundings and society. This is in stark contrast to any required theological/moral/legal obedience and fear of retribution for violating them.

The three divisions of Moral Discipline can also be thought of as all working together to make Right Conduct or a Right Way of Life. The Pali word for this is 'sila'. This harmony can work on several levels at the same time. There's the social level, the karmic level, the contemplative level and the psychological level.

The social level is the easiest to figure out. If the 'sila' is observed by most of the society, then we have good relations

between people. The group combines their own private interests and goals into a social order that keeps violence and conflict greatly reduced.

The karmic level goes hand-in-hand with Right Intent, in that when you keep the guidelines, the focus is on your intent to act and follow them, and you generate far less negative karma, because you aren't doing as many negatively-oriented things to generate it.

The contemplative level involves the use of 'sila' to help start the purification of the mind by the development of serenity and insight. We'll encounter both serenity and insight later on when we look at the various types of wisdom.

The psychological level of 'sila' gives us peace of mind. This is accomplished by protecting us from the split within the mind caused when we make moral transgressions. This rift is the one caused by guilt and remorse after the fact when we screw it up.

When we first deal with the idea of Moral Discipline, the first thing that comes to mind is that there's a whole lot of 'don't do that'. While there is some, what you come to find is that there's also the entire equally positive side of this which stresses 'do do this'. Each one of the requirements has its flip side (think yin and yang). So the abstinence from unwholesome actions is balanced with the emphasis on wholesome actions that work in the opposite (positive) direction. A double whammy, if you will. Push-pull.

The group of guidelines referring to Moral Discipline has three parts:

- **Right Speech,**
- **Right Action, and**
- **Right Livelihood.**

The idea of Right Speech is not what it sounds like. It isn't political correctness or butt-kissing. Nor does it deal with right or wrong as individual items. There is no such thing here in Buddhist philosophy as right or wrong (at least in the western concept of theological meaning). It is far more involved

in how you express yourself to others and how to regulate that for maximum positive effect on your spiritual journey. Note the emphasis with the effect on you, rather than what the other person feels. Not too altruistic, but we are in this for our enlightenment first, and others later. After all, in the ancient platitude ... "We must drink from the well ourselves before we can give water to others."

There are four main categories of Right Speech:

- **Abstaining from false speech**
- **Abstaining from slanderous speech**
- **Abstaining from harsh speech**
- **Abstaining from idle chatter**

False speech is a no-brainer. Simply put, don't lie. The negative side of this of course, is that saying something that you know to be untrue. You're lying. The positive side is that you speak what you believe to be truth when you don't lie. This isn't always black and white, however. If you don't know that statement is false, then there's no karmic violation of the guideline ... remember that all karmic actions are volitional. But if you **know** it to be a falsehood, and **intend** to gain in any manner from it, then you've blown it. You've violated the guideline. Go to Jail, do not pass GO, and do not collect two hundred dollars.

Lying has social as well as personal consequences. Lying tags a person as dishonest and leads to social disorder (at least in regards to them). Societies operate on mutual belief that all its members are playing by the same rules. Lying violates that trust and causes disharmony. Technically this is similar to perjury, while theologically this relates to the Christian commandment about 'false witness'.

On a personal level, the first lie often leads to the second, and eventually the chain traps us in a web of dishonesty. We then become the victim of our own lies and pay the penalty for it.

On a much higher positive level, always speaking truth also means that we are far more in touch with reality as it really is, rather than as it is perceived by most. This stark view

of the reality of existence is one of the hallmarks of an enlightened person.

A seeker may break almost any of the other guidelines occasionally without major consequence, but lying is a cardinal sin (or its Buddhist/karmic equivalent.)

Slandorous speech isn't quite so easy to define. In western thinking, we think of slander as the deliberate sliming of someone with untrue statements. The Buddhist meaning is somewhat different. Slandorous speech here is any that promotes discord or disharmony, or alienates one group or person from another. It's quite different from the western legal definition we're familiar with.

It can be generated from any number of factors (envy, hatred, greed, etc.) It's also very high on the karmic no-no list. Not as high up as lying, but well up there on the cosmic retribution scale.

Harsh speech is pretty much what it says it is. It includes (but is not limited to) abusive speech, insults and sarcasm. Abusive speech is almost invariably intended to cause pain to someone else. Many times it's generated from anger and isn't premeditated. The best antidote here is patience, and not rise to the bait. Insults are a direct affront to the person that they are directed against. Sarcasm is similar, in that you are abusing the person or their ideas, with the intent to hurt.

Idle chatter is a horse of a totally different color. Here, it involves the whole concept of concentration and distraction. In Buddha's day, it would be considered anything (for the monks, anyway) that didn't involve the teachings and their application.

For lay people, some idle chatter is necessary because of family, work and other venues that require niceties and pleasantries. But the Buddha cautions not to let it get out of hand, lest you get caught up in it and lose focus.

Right Action involves externally implementing what the mind thinks about. In Buddhist thought, there are three main categories of right action and its opposite. They are:

- **Abstaining from the taking of life**
- **Abstaining from taking what is not given**
- **Abstaining from sexual misconduct**

Abstaining from the taking of life has a lot of interpretations within the Buddhist community.

Some take it to mean that it is wrong to take the life of any sentient or semi-sentient being, including animals and even insects. Others take it to mean only human life is safe from being killed. The underlying premise, that life is not to be taken, seems to be present in all of them, however.

Depending on which school/sutra/interpretation you want to use, this prohibition can differ vastly in scope ... and in how you even define it.

There is one interpretation that only the taking of life that was unintended is exempt from the karmic provisions, while another maintains that the killing of icchantikas (non-believers with no chance or intent of learning) is justified and without karmic penalty. By the way, it also states in the same sutra that even icchantikas have the possibility of achieving Nirvana and are sentient, so there's an inherent contradiction even within the same sutra.

And there's a vast spectrum in terms of whether warriors/soldiers can be exempted from karmic scoring. Some say that if you are ordered to kill to defend your country, that karma doesn't accrue ... while others say no matter what, if you kill another human being, it is a negative karmic score ... even in self-defense.

And yet again, there is also a teaching that says if you kill someone, they'll just get reborn and come back and kill you to even the karmic debt, so therefore all the karmic debt will be balanced out. Not totally true ... both parties to the issue will go further into karmic debt in actuality.

It's rather confusing.

But the basic premise is still sound. I'd prefer to believe that doing as little killing as possible is to be preferred, and if

you kill animals humanely, there isn't as much karmic buildup as there would be otherwise. Pick your own preference here.

'Abstaining from taking what was not given' covers a lot of ground also. This goes from stealing, robbery and pick pocketing, to fraud and deceit. This also can vary in intensity depending on the value of what got taken, the moral condition of the victim, and the moral condition of the thief.

'Abstaining from sexual misconduct' also has a wide range of meanings. It can range from celibacy for monks and nuns, to just an avoidance of sexual encounters with members of the opposite sex that are:

- **Engaged or married,**
- **Still under the protection of parents or guardians (underage)**
- **Otherwise prohibited**

Mucking with engaged or married folk for an affair is always bad news, even back in Buddha's time.

Likewise underage or protected people are also unfair game.

Otherwise prohibited means celibate monks and nuns, close relatives, and persons otherwise protected by law.

'Right Livelihood' involves what you can do to make a living that won't injure either yourself or others.

It, too, has three parts

- **'Rightness regarding actions'**
- **'Rightness regarding persons'**
- **'Rightness regarding objects'**

Rightness regarding actions means that you should work diligently, not fritter away your time, not steal from the company, and give a good days work.

Rightness regarding persons involves treating employees and co-workers fairly and respectfully.

Rightness regarding objects means that you should not misrepresent an object as being or doing what it is not nor can do. Be honest in your dealings and don't commit fraud.

Buddha described five kinds of livelihood that bring harm to others, which should be avoided. They are:

- **Dealing in weapons**
- **Dealing in living beings (including raising animals for slaughter, slave trade, and prostitution)**
- **Dealing in meat production and butchery**
- **Dealing in poisons**
- **Dealing in intoxicants**

All of these as defined here do damage to other people and should be avoided.

In addition, mention is made of several 'dishonest' jobs that should be avoided, namely, practicing deceit, treachery, fortune telling, trickery and usury. Some sects include actors and politicians in the prohibited categories along with warriors.

Let me also put it into a totally different perspective, which while not totally Buddhist-related, is nonetheless applicable.

Each of us has space. Physics tells us this. We occupy space. Two objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Trying to violate that space without physical harm is almost impossible.

What physics doesn't tell us is that there's also psychological or 'personal' space. This includes our ideas of what is ours and what we're willing to put up with as far as other sentient beings intruding on that space.

Out here in the boonies where I live, the level of intolerance for that violation of space is enhanced from what it would be in an apartment house in a city. There's less noise,

less traffic, and fewer incursions on our peace and sense of space.

All of these guidelines in this chapter have to do with this idea of personal space, whether it's obvious or not.

Right speech means that I don't emotionally intrude on anyone else's space. Right action means I don't intrude on their physical space. Right livelihood means I don't do or sell things that can harm someone else or defraud them. It all has to do with that intangible thing called 'personal space'.

A psychological experiment a few years ago with rats proved this theory (at least to my satisfaction). A community of rats was established that had ample food, water, and nesting space. The experimenters kept adding rats to the community. At a certain level, even though the necessities of life were ample, the rats turned to fighting and cannibalization when the population exceeded a certain point for a given space. It is my opinion that this illustrates that even rats have to have a certain amount of 'space' per individual or chaos breaks out. Even the cougar, the alligator, the rattlesnake and the badger have their own space, and we violate it at our peril. Even the ascetic hermit knows this concept and knows to follow it.

Some may say that all these Buddhist edicts are just social precepts to keep order within a community. I disagree. At a far more profound level, they are essential to our keeping our own lives in order, even if we don't interact with society very often.

In the next chapter we'll examine Right Effort.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DOING THE RIGHT THING RIGHT EFFORT

In the previous chapter we dealt with what is the 'Moral Discipline' division of the path, dealing with how we interface with reality/society and what to watch out for in terms of holding to the teachings. We've learned about Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood.

These are mainly concerned with restraining the mind (and thus our actions) from doing, saying, and working outside the Path. We still have to keep our mind from doing the same thing ... straying into areas that do not lead to the ultimate goal of enlightenment.

Up until now, there have mostly been restraints on these forays into non-beneficial karmic behavior. Right Speech and Right Action are all about dealing with other individuals in the external world. Right livelihood looks to the broader social scope of what we do for a living within that society.

With Right Effort, it's time now to start actively working with our mind to both stop these negative thoughts and actions from coming up, and to encourage the positive thoughts to come to the top. This is far more effective than having to strangle the wrong ones once they arise.

Wisdom is required to become enlightened, but knowledge is not ... other than that necessary knowledge to be able to understand the teachings and the path. To achieve Buddhist wisdom, the mind must be quieted, not just restrained. This is the realm of Concentration division of the EightFold Path, and has three sub-headings ... Right Concentration, Right Effort, and Right Mindfulness. We'll start with Right Effort here and move on to the others in following chapters.

In short, Right Concentration stills the mind to allow wisdom to come to the top of the thought process.

Right Mindfulness gives us the basis for the awareness of wisdom. It does this by stripping away all our ideas and clinging that we place on things and events.

Right Effort helps us generate the energy for the other two parts to take place.

These three factors are tightly intertwined. You can't achieve any one without the help of the other two, and the failure of one leads to the failure of all three.

In order to achieve Right Concentration, it requires the energy of Right Effort, and needs to be balanced by Right Mindfulness. These three gather together the fractured mind and allow us to bring out some of our inner wisdom.

The energy required for the other two factors is gotten from Right Effort, and can be positive or negative. Good energy can be obtained from being generous, through self-discipline, manifesting kindness, using concentration and having understanding. Bad energy is generated from ignorance, desire, aggression, violence and ambition. Either form is energy, but it can be either beneficial or catastrophic (depending on which type). The type of energy used by Right Effort is the positive kind, and totally oriented towards our liberation from suffering.

If the energy is to be directed towards maintaining the EightFold Path, it has to be guided by the Right View and Right Intention and must deal with all the other factors of the path as well.

If it is only ordinary energy, outside the realm of the path, then we merely increase our amount of positive karma, without necessarily breaking the cycle of birth and death. It isn't enough just to live a good life and help others ... we have to go beyond that and enhance our energy that is focused on that singularity of enlightenment.

To harness this necessary energy, requires effort, diligence, exertion and perseverance. You have to keep after it at all times. Any letdown in this activity results in less than spectacular achievement. Your mind is your worst enemy in this regard because it's lazy and wants to keep on doing what it wants.

You can ask, (and in proper Buddhist tradition are required to) why it takes so much work?

The answer is simple. We're each responsible for finding our own path. No two paths are entirely alike. Each and every one of us devises (or doesn't) our own deliverance from the birth/death cycle (samsara). The Buddha merely shows us the way to approach finding it. It is up to us to find what we need, put it into motion, and fund it with energy and Right Effort.

Our starting point is a muddled and scattered mind, and our goal is a liberated mind that works for (and not against) us. While it's definitely not easy, it certainly isn't impossible. Many have done this before ... you're not alone.

Right Effort breaks down into four basic parts:

- **Preventing the generation of negative ideas and thoughts**
- **Abandoning negative thoughts and ideas already achieved**
- **Encouraging positive thoughts and ideas not already present, and**
- **Maintaining positive thoughts and ideas once present.**

Negative thoughts and ideas are kicked up by desires, emotions, and ignorance, which generate intention and action based on that thought. Positive thoughts and ideas, on the other hand, are those not affected by the emotions and desires, which lead to gaining our ultimate goal of enlightenment.

These negative states require us to suppress bad thought patterns so as to keep them from arising, and to squelch bad thought patterns once they're generated. The positive states need lots of encouragement, and have to constantly be worked on to achieve fullness.

The first of the four factors in Right Effort is that of preventing the firing off of negative ideas in the mind to begin

with. Generating these negatives is altogether too easy to achieve. They are usually kicked off by thoughts and actions in five basic areas:

- **Sensual desire**
- **Ill will**
- **Dullness and drowsiness**
- **Restlessness and worry, and**
- **Doubt.**

All these factors bring up negative underpinnings to what you're thinking. They irritate the mind, preventing the necessary calmness and insight. Sensual desire is the root of greed and lust, while ill will represents rejection and revenge, and the other three factors stem from deluded or clouded thoughts.

Sensual desire in a normal, narrow sense is that which is enjoyable sensual input, but here we have to expand that notion to include cravings of all natures.

Ill will is a metaphor for hatred, anger, resentment, and repulsion, regardless of where and how it is aimed.

Dullness and drowsiness are represented by their common appearance of sluggish mental operation. Dullness is also called mental inertia, whereas drowsiness is sleepiness and heaviness of mind.

Opposed to that but equally nasty are the twins of restlessness and worry. Restlessness is where agitation and excitement drive the mind from idea to thought to concept in a frenzied fashion, whereas worry is anxiety and apprehension.

Doubt has to do with your inability to commit yourself to the required path because of lingering doubts in regards to the Buddha, the doctrine and the path itself.

Keeping these factors in check is job one. They do nothing but keep us from focusing and they cloud almost any awareness that we have. Let me cite an example of how this works.

Suppose you, as a child, were playing on the sidewalk when a man wearing sandals and having a red beard comes by

and kicks you (physically) off the sidewalk. You go screaming into the house, but the guy is gone and eventually you consciously forget about the incident.

Fast forward forty or so years. You're now in charge of a division of software engineers at a large company. You're looking for a new engineer, and the interviewee before you is one of the best in the business. He's wearing sandals and has a long red beard. What's going to be your reaction?

I'd bet you unconsciously try to find every reason not to hire him, even though he's the best candidate for the job by far. I'd bet additionally that you don't even realize that you're being driven by your mind, pulling up that faraway incident subliminally from years ago.

This is what we're working with here ... the underground ideas and feelings that are generated by experiences or memories which so greatly influence our present actions.

In other words, the mind deals with process. The sensory input (red beard, sandals) starts the processing (what does this mean to me), evaluates the situation (I could get hurt here), and generates a response ("Thank you, Mr. Jones, we'll be in touch") without you knowing that it's even there.

The whole concept of what I call 'prior similars' is exactly what we're dealing with here. It involves taking what seem to be similar situations (even though they're not) and generating a knee-jerk response in reaction without much conscious thought by you.

These 'prior similars' can work either positively or negatively, but they all require effort to either keep going or root out. That is what this 'Right Effort' is all about ... going after these old underground ideas that color your present day thinking.

'Right Effort' is also about eliminating responses to attractive things. It's about eliminating an Ill Will response to something disagreeable, and it's about stopping an unthought-out response to things we don't understand or see correctly.

This is also about the restraint of the senses (sensory ... not sensual input), but not the denial of senses. The senses are going to be there regardless of what we do, but it's what we do with that input that shapes how we react. We have to try to keep the mind at the sensory level, and not allow it to include other things, like experiences and "prior similars". We have to keep the mind working on 'This is, therefore all that this is, this is.' This means just identifying it, without any extra garbage or analysis (at least at the time).

As cryptic as this sounds, it's simple. Whatever the sensory input is, that's all it is. A sharp bang that you hear is nothing more than a sharp bang. You might analyze it as a gunshot or a backfire. If a gunshot, it could be harmful and goad you into action to find the source, whereas if it were a backfire, you would dismiss it and think no more about it. Of course it could be someone dropping a book on a concrete floor. All you know is it was a sharp bang. Period.

The 'Right Effort' here is to keep the mind at the level of the sharp bang. And effort is what it requires. Lots of it.

This is the second part of 'Right Effort' ... the elimination of negative thoughts and ideas already arisen. The 'bang' has already occurred and you think it was a gunshot.

The concept here is to identify the negative thoughts that go beyond the sensory input, and counter them. This can happen in a number of ways.

First, counter it with an exact opposite. If the analysis is negative, then match it with a positive. "I'm not sure what the bang was." Or "The red-bearded man with sandals is a genius and can make me a lot of money in my division."

You can use shame and moral pressure to counter it. "I'd feel really foolish if I react and dive for the gutter and it wasn't a gunshot." Or "The rest of the crew is going to really come down on me if I don't hire this guy. They all know him."

Redirect the thought. "I'm not hurt, and I'm not sure what the bang was." Or "Where am I going to find someone else as good as this guy is."

Examine the thought intensely. "Why did I immediately jump to the conclusion that the bang was a gunshot?" Or

“Why do I feel so intensely negative about this guy? What is it about him that bugs me?” Eventually, you may remember an incident from long ago, and then (and only then) it’ll be OK to hire him or let go of the analysis of the bang. At that point the negative ceases to exist.

Suppress the thought. This is a last resort, since the mind loves to play ‘whack-a-mole’ and surface the thought somewhere else later on. “Drop it. It’s none of my business anyway.” Or “This guy seems OK. We’ll give him a try.”

These five approaches will usually work to get rid of thoughts already there and kick them out of reach of the mind. If nothing else, they’ll just be out there somewhere yammering away, with you sitting in a corner saying, “there’s that damn negative thought again.” You become the master of your mind, not the slave to it.

The third objective is to arouse those positive thoughts and ideas that haven’t surfaced yet. This can happen in several different ways. There are seven of these that the Buddha identifies.

- **Mindfulness**

Mindfulness is the barebones getting of only fact without interpretation or shading. It is passive and receiving.

- **Investigation of phenomena**

This requires active participation to determine the fundamental structure of whatever phenomena are present. It is dissecting the situation to determine what’s behind it.

- **Energy**

There are three stages of energy to enable these things to happen. Inceptive energy relates to starting and generating enthusiasm. Persevering energy is for propelling the idea and keeping going. Invincibility is for ultimately gaining the contemplation of finishing.

- **Rapture**

Rapture can be pleasurable all the way to ecstatic. Rapture, however is still restless and needs help to mature.

- **Tranquility**
Tranquility grabs rapture and subdues it ... allowing us to proceed with serenity.
- **Concentration**
Concentration brings us to single-focus unification of the mind. It is totally bringing all the facets of the mind to bear on a single idea or concept.
- **Equanimity.**
This is the place where you maintain a steady position between excitement and inertia. It creates a steady pace of progress. You become the onlooker for your mind's progress.

It requires the same (or more) effort as dealing with the negatives to keep the positive ideas and concepts working, once you generate them. But using the same techniques we've examined, you gain the strength to maintain and amplify them. This is the key to gaining stability and strength for holding to the path. That is what this is all about, remember?

In the next chapter, we'll take a look at "Right Mindfulness."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN
RIGHT MINDFULNESS
Or
FOCUS, MAN, FOCUS

When we go looking for the EightFold Path, we often seem to think that it is an esoteric, remote, mysterious truth that is found on a mountaintop in Nepal or in the knowledge of a guru. Nothing could be further from the truth. While these sometimes help, eventually we have to realize that it's totally internal and all the external stuff is merely window dressing.

The ultimate truth, the Dharma/Dhamma is merely the truth of our own experience. Only by intimately understanding our personal experience, and drilling down into its roots can we reach it. In order to make it liberating truth, it has to be known directly and personally. It can't be deduced, implied, inferred, accepted on faith, read in a book or heard from a teacher. It is only through insight and a special kind of understanding that we see and understand it. It is a flash of 'Ah-hah' or just plain 'getting it.'

How do we get this flash of insight? Only through Right Mindfulness.

"OK, oh great giver of information, how the hell do I get this Right Mindfulness stuff?", you say.

Actually, it's easy. And it takes practice.

Right Mindfulness is presence of mind, attentiveness or awareness. Ummmmmm ... not the kind you think. This kind of awareness is radically different than what you usually think of related to consciousness.

Our consciousness usually involves a sense of knowing or experiencing something. For Right Mindfulness we have to take this to a whole new and different level. We keep the mind paying minimal attention, observing (and only observing) what is happening around us and within us. The key word is observing. Just observing. Not analyzing, identifying or anything else. Just observing. 'A tree just fell. It fell on a car. It fell on **my** car. OK.' At this point, most would have their mind

yammering with conjecture, insurance premiums and ‘how am I going to get to work?’ None of that stuff is operative here. You have to leave it at ‘A tree just fell on my car.’ Period.

Judgments and interpretations here are a no-no ... or if they do occur, they are just acknowledged and forgotten. Merely make a note of what comes up, pat it on its gnarly little head, and drop it. It’s a way of being totally in the present and not getting tied up in all the ‘prior similars’ (remember that one?), misinterpretations and misconceptions of and about whatever is going on. What we’re doing is stopping the distractions that plague the mind. Those distractions are triggered by the sensory inputs.

Remember that we cannot destroy or totally ignore the sensory input, merely deal with it as it comes in, and not get distracted by it.

The process that the mind uses is:

- **Get the sensory input,**
- **Wrap an ID around it,**
- **Proceed to grab all the related data about the ID,**
- **Start building hypotheses and conjectures about it.**

And it does all this before you’re even aware that it’s doing it to you.

“Dang, that looks like my ex-husband. Crap, I don’t need this. I remember what he did in April What’s he doing here? He’s probably going to rant at me about ”

You get the picture. At this point, you’re probably on the ceiling and orbiting. The worst part is that it might not even be him, and you’ve wasted all this energy for nothing.

The Right Mindfulness way of dealing with this would be: “That person looks familiar. It could be my ex-husband.” End of story! No mental yammering, no extra conjecture, no conclusions based on faulty ID or bad info. This is the task of Right Mindfulness ... to clear up what we experience (i.e. sensory input) to include only what is coming into our scope of attention, and not include all the crap and dreck associated with it.

Right Mindfulness is not ‘doing something’, it’s exactly the opposite ... we’re ‘un-doing something.’ But be not confused ... it is likewise not ‘not doing something.’ We’re doing something, just not THAT something. Huh? Say what?

The first time I ran into this type of phrase was in an answer that the Buddha gave somewhere in the Nirvana Sutra. He used a lot of phrases like ‘is and not is’, ‘self and not self’, etc. That first time, I reread that section probably a dozen times, finally shaking my head and moving on. It took a while to understand that it means that there are other ways for things to be perceived ... not just hard and fast ‘this or that’ logic. ‘Not this’ doesn’t necessarily mean it doesn’t exist, just that it may be in disguise, or it’s actually something else. Or (just to confuse the issue) it might not exist at all.

For Right Mindfulness to be working, there is no thinking, no judging, no associations, no plans, no imagination, and no wishes. These are all add-ons to the experience ... it’s what the mind does to amuse itself and provide us with what it **thinks** are the options and projections you want added on to the experience. Right Mindfulness allows us to strip the extra stuff away and merely make note of what’s going on without any of the other trash. It’s just a barebones view of the immediate and exact present without any frills. It’s truly being ‘in the now.’

This leads to both serenity and/or insight, depending on how you use it. When you contemplate something, you can either become absorbed with it and become calm and serene, or peel off all the ‘stuff’ surrounding the experience and arrive at insight as to what it ‘really’ was. Or you can do both. Remember the ‘red-bearded man’?

If serenity is what you’re after, then Right Mindfulness is responsible for keeping focus without straying. It also wrings the ‘scrawny leetle necks’ of all the irrelevant concepts and illusions associated with the thing that is the object of your interest.

If insight is your bag, it requires that Right Mindfulness be used in a more directed manner. In this case, we merely observe, note, and discern with precision all of what we sense

(remember that's sensory input only) about the experience until all its fundamental parameters are seen.

OK, so we have to focus to use Right Mindfulness. Easier said than done, right? Yes and no. (Don't you just love these definitive answers?)

According to the Buddha, there are four basic areas that we can use for the training and use of the mind:

- **contemplation of the body,**
- **contemplation of feelings,**
- **contemplation of state of mind,**
- **contemplation of phenomena (experiences).**

The Buddha also states in regards to these four areas that the only way that one can be liberated from all the garbage is to contemplate things through the lens of these exercises, generating that state of Right Mindfulness. Note that the use of the word 'contemplation' here means 'looking at' or 'seeing fully.' It isn't meditation per se, although contemplation is part of meditation, while the reverse isn't true.

Usually, we start with the 'Contemplation of the body.' It's just a starting point, involving some exercises towards getting to a state of calm and serenity.

Many traditions start with the 'breathing exercise. Actually, it's much more than that, but it's a place to start.

This is a very simple exercise, and serves to focus the mind on a single phenomenon ... that of breathing. It requires no special intellectual prowess, only that you become totally aware of your breath. Just totally contemplate where you feel the air coming in and out. Don't try to control it or make it rhythmic, just become aware of the sense of it. As you contemplate it, there's no wandering or junk being generated as you sense it. You can't be in the past or future, because the contemplation is only right now. (If you're breathing anywhere but this here and now instant, there's other problems involved.)

Four basic steps are involved. First, you note the inhaling and exhaling. Are the breaths long or short? That's all. We next graduate to following a complete cycle of breath, noting

its beginning, pauses, ending and duration. Third, we contemplate the cycle in its entirety from start of inhalation to the next start. The final stage of the exercise involves quieting the breath and all associated with it until it becomes refined, quiet and subtle.

There are more advanced exercises and expanded versions available, but I think you get the point of it. It focuses the mind solely on the one phenomenon and forces it to abandon its analytic functions. As Jack Webb famously said repeatedly in *Dragnet*, “the facts, ma’am, just the facts”, or in this case, ‘the senses, ma'am, just the senses.’

Another practice of contemplating the body deals with posture ... walking, standing, sitting, and lying down. I’ve heard that the transitions from one posture to another are the basis for yoga and (I believe, to a limited extent) for Zen.

The premise of these bodily exercises is to show that the body is impersonal and that it isn’t a ‘self’ or a possession, but a conglomeration of living matter being directed by the volition of an individual being.

A further exercise, that of ‘mindfulness and clear comprehension’ can be applied to virtually any physical action. They’re all fair game for meditation, but only with clear comprehension of what is being done.

‘Clear comprehension’ is defined as follows:

- **Understanding the purpose of the action ... recognizing the goal to be accomplished with it, and determining whether it meets a Dharmic need. No need, don’t act.**
- **Understanding its suitability ... knowing that this action is the most efficient means to achieve the goal intended.**
- **Understanding the range of thought involved ... maintaining the mind in a meditative state even when in action.**
- **Understanding without delusion ... observing the action as an impersonal**

phenomenon without any ego or needs/wants involved.

The two following sections on ‘mindfulness of the body’ are ruthless analyses of what the body really is.

The first involves contemplating the thirty-two individual components of the body, examining each in turn and seeing that each one is unpleasant and unattractive. Each of the parts can be seen as representative of the whole ... the body seen from very near can be truly repulsive. Its beautiful appearance from distance is only a mirage. The objective of this exercise is not to induce an aversion to the body, but detachment ... seeing it for what it truly is, and subduing the thoughts of lust when seeing it from distance. What it is, it is, and what it is not, is not. (Chew on that one for a while.)

The other contemplation breaks down the body into the four elements of earth, water, fire, and air ... that represent the four ways these elements behave (i.e. solidity, fluidity, heat and oscillation.

- **Earth represents solidity, and is the solid part of the body.**
- **Water represents fluidity, as with the bodily fluids.**
- **Fire represents heat, being the body’s temperature.**
- **Air represents oscillation, being the body’s breathing.**

The objective is to break with the concept of the body as ‘I’, ‘myself’ or ‘me’, and viewing it as an object apart. It is the broadening of ones perspective so we understand the impersonal nature of all these elements. The body is, after all, made up of ‘real world’ particles, molecules, flesh, and fluids, and these are constantly being changed out, remade, and discarded. It’s nothing to do with the real internal, non-body being (except as a vessel for that being), and the body can be regarded as a ‘thing’ to be dealt with much as any other ‘thing’ in the physical universe. Other than its external appearance, it

cannot be identified with anything that is really 'us'. It's just a carrier for the real being inside ... a support system for the mind.

The last exercise deals with the reality of death. It utilizes visualizations of death and decomposition of the body to cut the clinging that we hold for it. Its purpose is to make sure that we realize how impermanent everything in the physical universe really is. In traditional Buddhism, it involves going to the charnel ground where bodies are dismembered and become feasts for vultures and scavengers. While this sounds gruesome and gross to our western sensibilities, in actuality the process is carried out with dignity and respect, leaving nothing at all in the environment at the end ... no trace of the body remains.

In the next chapter, we'll go into the other three contemplation types for training the mind and why they exist.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

RIGHT MINDFULNESS

Or

FOCUS, MAN, FOCUS

(PART 2)

In the previous chapter, we dealt with the ‘Contemplation of the body’, aimed at showing us the impermanence of it, and the idea of not becoming attached to it. Obviously, it carries us for our physical lifetime, but it is not us ... or rather, it is not who we are at our core. You might consider it as a support system for the brain/mind/inner being. The point here is that our body is not really who we are, and we have to realize and embrace this. I realize that for some people for whom vanity and beauty is a major part of their entire existence may disagree with this, but that is a very shallow and self-centered viewpoint. If your body and external appearance is your total existence and reason for being, then the EightFold Path may not be much in your future.

It is now time to begin to deal with some of the things that the mind does to muck us up on our search for enlightenment.

Wait a minute ... weren't we doing that in the last chapter? We were indeed doing that, but we were using the contemplation of our physical body to accomplish that goal. We were trying to teach the mind to not hold onto the body too tightly ... probably with little initial success.

Our next contemplation is the ‘Contemplation of feeling.’ Here the definitions get a little sticky. ‘Feeling’ in this sense is not the emotional kind, but rather a tighter description where we deal with whether a feeling related to an experience is pleasant, painful or neutral. Here we start to separate the ‘feeling’ from ‘emotion’.

A feeling is associated with a memory or experience, and it consists only of whether it was unpleasant, pleasant or indifferent. To make it a bit clearer, feeling in this case is brought on by prior similars (memories/experiences/scenarios). Emotion, on the other hand, is a direct reaction to a sense input. The feeling is a gut level impression that the prior similar carries with it (good, bad or indifferent) from the experience, whereas the emotion is generated immediately from the current situation.

The Buddha maintains that every moment of experience (not the immediate situation) generates an associated 'feeling' with it. Thus 'feeling' is with us all the time ... sometimes strong, other times weak, but always there. Every experience is accompanied by its associated feeling.

Another way of looking at this is that the only way we make contact with an object in the physical world through a sensory input to our consciousness. That contact (and all the associated inputs), we think of as experience. But it is the cumulative experience that goes with the feeling.

Now I understand that you can make the argument that a feeling (by this definition) can be generated by a memory as well. I have had experiences that generated such emotions. But here we're just trying to identify and sort out the good, bad and the ho-hum as the memories and experiences come flying by. That's all. Try to ignore the fear or rapture or whatever emotion is also generated.

A pleasant feeling from a memory may generate greed or lust, wanting more of that experience. An unpleasant feeling may generate displeasure, hate, repulsion or fear, resulting in your wanting less of that experience. And a neutral feeling lulls us into a false sense of security about the experience ... nothing to be wanted, nothing to be feared. So we see that the basic emotional states have direct links to the 'feelings' that we apply to the experiences we're sensing.

We don't have to have this linkage. Again, remember the 'red-bearded man with sandals.' Mindfulness helps us break these links.

Feelings can only generate this emotional response when we don't notice them. If we aren't aware of what the mind is

doing, it will generate a whole string of stuff based on the emotion or feeling alone, which is not usually helpful. When we can see this at work, then we can actively step in and stop (or deflect) the linkage and any consequent actions that were going to follow. Note that we have only temporarily stopped those particular actions that are based on those feelings ... we haven't eliminated the root causes for it yet. Those root causes are still alive and well.

Remember from the chapter on Karma, that the karmic energy is generated at two levels, the actions themselves to the physical world and the thought that generated them. While we may suppress the external actions, the thought and internal intents are still there generating karma, although you've made a significant dent in the amount.

This exercise begins with noting those feelings that come up, and identifying their distinctive qualities (pleasant, painful or neutral.) Just note the feeling, don't identify with it. It's not necessarily yours, just what your mind generates. Try to keep the mind at the sensory level. Simply put, what is the quality of the feeling related to this current experience?

If you're even a little bit curious, I'd wager that you'll think to yourself in the middle of one of these analyses, "Where the hell did that come from?" As we improve our exercise to higher levels, we start to see not only the quality of the feeling, but the process of what generates the feeling. We find it's a constant barrage of them, coming one after another, non-stop. We see that these feelings that are derived from our sensing of the experience are only temporary ... they rise up almost instantly and fade away just as fast. But the effect on the experience is much more long lasting. Once we actually see them, they can be interrupted and discarded.

The essence of this exercise is to show the temporary nature of those feelings that are associated with experiences, and their long-term results.

The third exercise is the 'Contemplation of the State of Mind.'

We now go from the observation of the feelings generated by experiences, to look at the general state of mind with these feelings present.

Before we go into this, it is helpful to restate at what the Buddhist definition of 'mind' is.

Most of us think of the mind as a part of us that stays pretty much intact, no matter what occurs ... at least until the Alzheimer's sets in. We are who we are ... determined by the mind, and not changing much. It is our identity no matter what.

That's what we're taught.

Buddha, however, rejects this notion of the permanence of mind. The Buddha, in contrast, declares that the mind instead consists of a series of 'in the moment', unique processes ... each being the result of the preceding one, which may be similar but not identical. It's like a mental freight train that just keeps on coming, unless you apply the brakes or sidetrack it.

These mental freight cars can be considered as 'states of mind.' This is different from the 'state of mind' that most people think of. This one is one of many sequential units, each kicked off by the preceding one. Think of it as where your mind is at any instant ... somewhat like minute slices of time.

Actually, it consists of a lot of things, the most prevalent of which is the experience (sensory input plus the feeling[s] generated by the prior similars) with the object you're sensing. 'Object' in this definition, by the way, is not necessarily a physical thing ... it can be an external experience, or a thought, or almost anything else that you can identify as a single unique thing. In other words, you get the entire package all at once, not just the bedrock sensing of the object. We don't separate out the basics of the experience/object that is the bedrock essence of the object itself from all the other junk that the mind puts with it to form the final thought.

This is where it gets a little convoluted. Buddha says that the essence of the object cannot be easily known, because it is overgrown by all the factors that the mind tags it with. However, it can be inferred by a variety of secondary factors/indicators. These are:

- **The mind with and without lust.**
- **The mind with and without aversion.**
- **The mind with and without delusion.**
- **The cramped mind.**
- **The scattered mind.**
- **The developed and undeveloped minds.**
- **The surpassable and unsurpassable minds.**
- **The freed and unfreed minds.**

Whoa! What's this all about?

In the beginning of the exercise, it is good to start with the first three, both the 'with' and 'without' parts.

The objective is to see whether the mind is tied to, or free of any or all of these factors. If you take a single object, examine whether you are thinking about it with or without aversion (hate, jealousy, etc.) or lust (pride, want, etc.). Are you deluded about the object because of all the overlays? Does this object require a developed or an undeveloped mind to see it?

As the exercise progresses, lots of irrelevant stuff disappears. Unrelated thoughts, imagination and emotions subside, the focus becomes clearer, and the mind remains intently aware. It may seem as though you are sitting back and watching all this play out in front of you, but in time, even this notion disappears, replaced by a stream of these processes jumping in and out of our view from moment to moment, kicking up from nowhere and going nowhere, yet the stream just keeps on coming.

The objective here is to just allow that stream of bits and drabs to keep going without acting on them ... the stream is just what the mind does. All this junk just keeps being generated out there, and we neither will pay attention to it nor act on it. Doing this all the time is the key.

What we're doing with all these exercises is quieting the mind ... or at least getting it to yammer out in an alfalfa field somewhere, where it doesn't interfere with what we're thinking and doing. This keeps us on the right track and starts to subdue the mind from including all the garbage in our sensory information.

I'm giving you only the briefest overview of these exercises, because it's necessary to understand what the path consists of, not a detailed discussion of exactly how to perform them. The Internet is loaded with exercises, of which the best are contained in the early Sutras of the Theravada tradition of Buddhism.

Hang in there, there's one more type of exercise that we're going to look at in this section, and the next chapter deals with it.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

RIGHT MINDFULNESS

Or

FOCUS, MAN, FOCUS

(PART 3)

So far, we've looked at using the body to point out the non-eternal state of the real world (impermanence), and looked at ways to see what the mind adds to our basic perceptions. We've also looked at how to subvert it into yammering quietly. Now we deal with a greater mind trip and how to keep from taking it.

The fourth exercise in Right Mindfulness is that of the 'Contemplation of Phenomena.'

Once again, the definition is all-important. 'Phenomena' in our current sense is a combination of two related things. The first of these two are the mental factors mentioned before, that color our perceptions of an experience of an object (prior similars and feelings). The second is the actual constituent parts of our experience from the real world. The combination here we call phenomena. It's the whole nine yards in a time slice.

When we lump this all together, we have to remember not to think that there's anything beyond or behind these phenomena. It amounts to just accepting the object (or phenomena), as it is ... nothing more, nothing less. It just is. There's no substance behind it ... no Wizard of Oz behind the curtain manipulating it (other than your mind's creations). It just exists, period.

As is true of all the Buddha's teachings, the Contemplation of Phenomena is divided into sections and sub-sections. According to these teachings, phenomena consist of five groups:

- **The five hindrances**
- **The five aggregates**
- **The six inner and outer sense bases**
- **The seven factors of enlightenment**
- **The Four Noble Truths**

The first two groups deal with phenomena in the sense of coloring our perceptions of sensory experience. The second three deal more with the reality side of the equation.

We've already talked about these groups briefly in the section on Right Effort, now we'll approach them from the application to Right Mindfulness. (See, the whole thing is interconnected.)

Some of this may seem repetitive, but it really isn't since all eight parts of the EightFold Path are interrelated. It just seems that we cover some of the same ground, but from a different perspective.

The five hindrances are (for the sake of repetition):

- **Sensual Desire**
- **Ill will**
- **Dullness and Drowsiness**
- **Restlessness and worry**
- **Doubt.**

You may remember these from our previous discussion. These are five things that will derail our train of thought towards focusing on what we're doing and why.

When one of these things pops up, we should identify it and make note of it, and when it fades away, we note that also. Not making detailed notes ... just watching it and seeing it happen without reacting to it. We have to also comprehend how these hindrances come up; how they can be removed; and how to prevent them from coming back.

The five aggregates are the five aspects that make up human thought processes:

- **material composition;** **(the raw data itself)**
- **sensations;** **(sense input)**
- **perceptions;** **(integrated sense input)**
- **mental formations;** **(prior similars, etc.)**
- **and consciousness.** **(what we think we know)**

These are similar to the five hindrances, and when we uncover which level the mind is working at, we can then start to see what it's doing to us. Note also that as we go down the list, the functionality becomes more integrated until we come to a conscious thought. The first four are (for the most part) unconscious.

The six inner and outer sense bases are the senses plus the mind itself. The outer sense bases are nothing more than the raw data from the five senses. The inner sense bases are the raw data (processed for identification only) and are what we think the sense data is. Outer : a smell. Inner : It's perfume, etc.

OK, but what about the mind? It's totally internal.

Yes, but it too can come up with abstract data on its own, which it then processes the same way as it would as one of the real senses. Much of this happens when we remember experiences or are daydreaming. It is also what happens when we make scenarios based on theoretical events.

Similarly, we have to deal with the seven factors of enlightenment:

- **Mindfulness**
- **Investigation**
- **Energy**
- **Rapture**
- **Tranquility**
- **Concentration**
- **Equanimity**

This is the series of levels that we go through when we go into contemplation of any kind. We have to be aware when they arise (mindfulness), we check out how that happened (investigation), and how we can make it happen both better and more often (the rest). Note that contemplation is not necessarily meditation in the common sense. Contemplation is the process of examining an object from a number of angles, whereas meditation (at least in its more common forms to begin with) involves merely focusing the mind to a singularity so as to exclude all external distractions.

Mindfulness starts contemplation. When well-founded, it starts investigation, which calls forth energy. Energy generates rapture, which leads to tranquility. Once tranquil, we can head to concentration, and we find that concentration drives towards equanimity. While this is somewhat esoteric now, it'll become clearer in the future. You'll have to trust me on this one.

It is Mindfulness that is a driving factor underlying all of the practice leading to enlightenment. Mindfulness is the regulating power that insures that the mind remains clear, cognizant and balanced.

Throughout this series on Right Mindfulness, we have concentrated on stripping away all the trappings of what the mind puts on our experiences. It is this stripping away of all the extra stuff and reducing our perceptions to only what 'is', rather than what we interpret it to be through all kinds of convolutions, that is important.

Right Mindfulness keeps us on the straight and narrow to accomplish this goal.

Throughout this, it is incredibly easy to get bogged down in the detail and forget about the objective that we seek. Up to our collective butts in alligators, it becomes difficult to remember that we were originally going to drain the swamp. I realize that a lot of this stuff seems unrelated to where we're

going, but it really isn't. We're approaching the central concepts from a number of different directions, and what we don't understand from this angle, we'll get from another. Trust me, it does work.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Interruptions, Interruptions Right Concentration

In all of this contemplation or meditation madness, it is always stressed that the mind is not only controllable, but must be controlled in order to eliminate all the distractions that it so beautifully comes up with. Right Concentration serves to intensify that control, so that we can strip away all the junk that obscures our true nature, and gain a view of reality that deals only with the here and now.

Even now, when you're concentrating on reading what I've put to paper in this chapter and paragraph, you're hearing things. The house creaks, the birds outside are chirping, the creek gurgles and roars, the passing traffic distracts. So long as nothing changes once you've identified these sounds, the mind is happy and you go on reading. Change one thing ... a car backfires on the street outside, the phone rings, or a child yells in that pitch that can cut glass, and your concentration and focus are out the window. You have to start over on that paragraph, or maybe the entire chapter. Right Concentration deals with not allowing those external distractions to enter into the stream of thought.

I once worked with a fellow that had this singularity of focus. At the time, it was kind of a joke, that you could walk up on Ray, call his name, and there would be no indication that he heard you. He'd just go on doing what he was doing. When he reached a stopping point, be it thirty seconds or thirty minutes later, he'd pop back into reality and say 'Yes?'. By this time, of course, you'd probably forgotten what you were going to talk to him about to begin with. But his powers of concentration were so potent that he just stored your request, and acted on it when it was appropriate. In retrospect, it was pretty awesome.

Your senses are always there ... there's no shutting them off. They generate identifications, which in turn require conclusions that kick off emotions, and a reaction. Example:

your nose detects the smell of fresh baked bread. The mind says “Ahhhhhhh... fresh baked bread. That will taste so good. I remember how my grandmother used to bake bread from scratch. She’d put it in the window to cool, and I’d steal a loaf and just sit under a tree and enjoy it. I miss her. I remember when ... etc... etc...” The mind just takes off and runs ... **that’s what it is designed to do.** It’s still the most powerful data retrieval and analysis device for its size on the planet. But leaving it to its own devices is equally problematic for you.

Right Concentration takes all the massive power of your mind and focuses it on what you are doing, without allowing it to be distracted. The inputs to your world stop with the sensory input, with none of the rest of the cascading thoughts following up and throwing a switch to derail your train of thought.

We normally think of concentration as being tunnel-visioned in regards to what we are doing. But this kind of concentration is too broad, and encompasses too much other stuff. A football player on the field concentrates on what they are to do when the play starts. But they also are gathering and analyzing inputs about where the other players are, what the opposing line is doing, and modifying their actions to match those factors. A boo from a fan in the stands that they hear may distract them at a critical time. This is not the kind of Right Concentration we’re dealing with, although it is relevant in its own way.

The even narrower type of concentration we’re looking at is the kind that is needed in order to achieve higher and higher awareness. Ordinarily the mind is constantly skipping from subject to subject, never alighting on any one long enough to make much of a difference. It has been compared to a funhouse mirror, where the image we see is distorted and untrue, or an out-of-control slide show that just randomly shows images ... or even the butterfly, fluttering from blossom to blossom.

When we generate Right Concentration, that skipping around stops. We contemplate each thing, and we can focus the full force of our attention to stripping away all the extra

junk that our mind generates about it and see it as it is, not as we wish it to be or what we interpret that it is.

So how do we develop this intense form of concentration? Most schools of Buddhism will encourage and require a teacher so as to guide you on the proper methods of achieving Right Concentration. But a teacher is not always required in order to achieve it. While it helps in many instances, it isn't an absolute rigid requirement.

The methodology is as varied as the schools that teach it.

In Theravada, that concentration is generated by a series of exercises that start with the mundane objects of reality and graduate to more abstract objects of the Buddha himself, the Buddha-Nature and other such esoteric subjects.

In Zen, the meditative process is taken to a far greater height, requiring the meditator to concentrate for hours at a time on quieting the mind and actively discarding any extraneous thoughts so as to achieve a totally peaceful meditative state.

Pure Land school uses the mandala and mantra to induce a state of mind that excludes any outside influences ... thus allowing concentration on the sole item of their itinerary, that of being reborn in the "Pure Land" from which it is far easier to make the jump to Nirvana.

Yoga emphasizes power over the body so as to gain power over the mind.

There are other disciplines too many to mention that take different approaches to the same goal.

All of these various disciplines (for the most part) are all designed to get you to the same place. In a much broader sense, they may be like the spokes of a wheel. You can start anywhere on the rim, go around and around, or take any one of the spokes to gain the center. The end result is the same place ... the singularity at the middle.

Whatever the path we take, we use concentration to examine the object of our attention to the exclusion of all else.

An example would be of examining a rock. How heavy is it? What color is it? What shape is it? Why is it here? What

was its history? Why did I select this rock? No matter which of the answers to all the questions arises, it will invariably generate far more junk than a simple answer to the question that you asked. “Oooh ... that’s pretty” (a totally subjective thought.) “It’s sharp” (compared to what? “It would skip really well across water.” (Go back to its shape.) You get the idea. We have to keep to the reality, not overanalyze and extrapolate what we’ve got.

This is not the BowFlex or Jack LaLane kind of exercise we’re going to do here. Then again, maybe they do it also. But at least it isn’t physical. Far from it.

As we start to meditate and focus our minds, we first have to be physically comfortable. Once comfortable, we can focus on the object of our attention. Once the mind strays (at it almost invariably will), each time we pull it back to the object.

When we’re settled in and the mind is used to this new routine, a lot of other stuff will start jumping into the process. Remember the five hindrances (desire, anger, sloth, worry, and doubt?) They’ll pop up when the outside things start quieting down. As they do, you gently lay them aside after looking at them. Many times, they’re so strong that you have to bring up a counter-attack in the form of another line of thought. If the object of your attention makes you angry, find something to like about the object. If you worry about it, find something that is not worrisome about it. But the objective is to eventually develop the ability to concentrate only on the object of your attention without any distractions.

Meditative practice consists of five rough stages. They are (in approximate order) :

**initial application of mind,
sustained application of mind,
rapture,
happiness, and
one-pointedness.**

In actuality, it’s a broad range with no definite bounds, just approximations.

Initial application of mind is what we described above, getting the meditation going. Sustained application means keeping it going and improving it. Rapture is the joy of observing the object as a whole without distraction, while happiness is examining it from all angles. One-pointedness is bringing the full weight of your uninterrupted mind to bear on the object that you're concentrating on.

Now don't get confused by the word 'object' here. Remember that 'object' can be a thing, or it can be a concept. It doesn't have to be anything tangible, just something to observe and concentrate on. It can be anything from a rock to the concept of Nirvana (and indeed spans that range.)

Each stage counteracts one of the five hindrances.

Initial application overcomes laziness and drowsiness ... it takes energy and application to start and stay with the meditation. It's way too easy to find yourself drifting off to sleep while sitting bolt upright. Zen masters carry wands to whack meditators when this happens.

Sustained application overcomes doubt ... you find that you can indeed do what is necessary to focus on the object of your meditation.

Rapture overcomes ill-will ... it's difficult to hate if you're ecstatic.

Happiness overcomes restlessness and worry ... it's equally difficult to worry a lot when you're in a happy state.

One-pointedness overcomes sensual desire ... devoting your attention to the meditation object doesn't leave much room for desire and lust.

Interestingly enough, as your meditation practice changes and evolves, so too will your object. If your initial object of meditation was a physical object, you will evolve to using a mental image of that object, so that you don't need the actual object to concentrate on. That mental image is further refined and purified and eventually a much clearer version of the object comes into view.

The next phase of meditation that you enter is absorption. In this you begin to **really** exclude the influences

generated by the mind ... they do not even arise to get into the stream of concentration.

The Buddha is said to have taught:

“And what, monks, is right concentration? Herein, secluded from sense pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, a monk enters and dwells in the first jhana, which is accompanied by initial and sustained application of mind and filled with rapture and happiness born of seclusion.

Then, with the subsiding of initial and sustained application of mind, by gaining inner confidence and mental unification, he enters and dwells in the second jhana, which is free from initial and sustained application but is filled with rapture and happiness born of concentration.

With the fading out of rapture, he dwells in equanimity, mindful and clearly comprehending; and he experiences in his own person that bliss of which the noble ones say: "Happily lives he who is equanimous and mindful" — thus he enters and dwells in the third jhana.

With the abandoning of pleasure and pain and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief, he enters and dwells in the fourth jhana, which has neither-pleasure-nor-pain and purity of mindfulness due to equanimity.

This, monks, is right concentration.”¹

The first level of absorption is what we have been describing (initial application, sustained application, rapture, happiness, and one-pointedness). Mastering this ‘jhana’ (or concentration level) is essential to proceeding further. Unless you can develop the ability to sustain and regain this level at will, it becomes difficult to gain the second level.

The first level has problems with refinement, however. It becomes evident that it is a broad, coarse approach that requires more work to distill. When the initial and sustained applications aren’t necessary any more, the meditator gets to the second level. Having eliminated the first two factors, all that is left are rapture, happiness and one-pointedness. It gains, however, other things ... including confidence of mind.

Even though the second level becomes unified and tranquil, it still includes rapture, which is exciting and

¹ Digha Nikaya 22; Nyanatiloka Thera. *The Word of the Buddha*. (Buddhist Publication Society 14th ed., 1968). , pp. 80-81.

distracting. It is the key at this level to tamp down this excitement and proceed again. When rapture fades out, the third level is accomplished.

Within the third level of Right Concentration, only happiness and one-pointedness remain of the factors we started with. In return, the meditator is given some other subsequent factors, including clear comprehension, mindfulness, and equanimity.

You'd think that having happiness at this level would be enough, but alas, it isn't. It is necessary to proceed once again towards only the one-pointedness, and neutral feeling ... that of neither joy nor grief; neither pain nor pleasure. This generates a high level of equanimity, which is a special purity of mindfulness.

But wait ... there's more. At least that is what the Buddha teaches.

There are four more states beyond the jhanas, known as the four immaterial states.

I know, I know, this is getting so esoteric that you're glazing over. I'll try to be brief and to the point.

These are levels of absorption where the mind goes beyond the visualized images still persisting throughout the jhanas. In these levels, we don't deal with the mental factors, but with refining the objects themselves, replacing the relatively gross object with a subtler one.

The four are named after their contemplative objects ... infinite space, infinite consciousness, the base of nothingness, and the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. These are such abstract concepts that they defy understanding until a meditator is truly far advanced. But even as far as these exercises and contemplations take us, they still lack true wisdom.

Of course, now that I've thoroughly discouraged you from proceeding with this line of practice, there is an alternative.

So far we've only fixed the mind on solitary objects to the exclusion of all else. There is, as always, a different way to do this. If you totally invert this process, you simply observe the

changing states of mind and body, noting whatever comes along. The task is to maintain a continuous awareness of everything that comes into the senses, rejecting nothing and retaining nothing. As this happens, keeping up with the flood of input requires more and more concentration, until you arrive at one-pointedness ... the intense concentration involved in grabbing each input as it happens. Voila, a shortcut!!! In reality, it means that we're overwhelming the mind with so much input to deal with, that it overloads and short-circuits, leaving us with the ability to concentrate it on what we're looking at.

This concentration, taken with the other four foundations of mindfulness, leads to an equivalent point with that of the singularity concentration technique. They both will eventually lead to the next level of wisdom.

CHAPTER TWENTY

WISDOM AIN'T SMARTS

If you've made it this far, there is light at the end of the tunnel, and it isn't an oncoming train. We're not quite there yet, but the end may be in sight.

Right Concentration is the last factor on the Noble Eightfold Path. But it isn't the be-all and end-all. As in the commercial, 'But wait, there's more!!!'

Gaining concentration makes the mind quiet and unifies it, giving us bliss, serenity and power. But it still won't release us from the bonds of suffering by itself. To do that requires us to step back and consider the Eightfold Path in its entirety, which in turn kicks off a new and improved version of both Right View, and Right Intention.

If you remember, Right View keeps us looking at where we're going, and Right Intention gives us the will to keep on going down this path. Now (in the new and improved version), we use Right View to see directly into the **real** nature of all things in regards to actual suffering and what we are causing ourselves, and Right Intention is used to identify those remaining emotions and other thoughts that lie in wait and ambush us when we least expect it by adding additional baggage to the load.

Those remaining emotions and reactions exist on three basic levels:

- Transgression emotions and reactions. The emotional reaction is acted upon, causing karmic problems not only for you but usually someone or something else as well.
- Manifested emotions and reactions. Only the thought & it's associated emotion is out there, but not acted upon.
- Latent emotions and reactions. This is where the reaction/emotion is dormant, and only erupts under duress (usually at the worst possible time).

These can be summarized as active externally, active internally, and latent (different words, same thing).

Right Concentration works on the active internal and external reactions, but it can't deal by itself with the latent variety. Why, you ask? Because if it isn't where it can be concentrated upon (i.e. if it isn't out there to be seen), there is nothing TO concentrate on. This is a concentrated version of the explanation.

The three divisions of the Eightfold path work against these three levels of emotions and reactions.

The Moral Discipline division (Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood) keeps us from entering the transgression phase of this. If we keep these precepts in our lives, there's a lot less external action that will generate bad karma for us.

The Concentration division (Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration) deals with the manifested emotion/thought phase, but only when it is in the process of erupting. (Duh.)

It is only wisdom (Right View and Right Intention) that will bring us full circle and allow us to finally work with the latent phase of these negative mind games. Just following the rules won't do it, and just thinking about it won't do it. It's only through understanding the latent reactions and lopping them off at the base that will get us around these final obstacles.

The fundamental factor that kicks up these latent reactions is that of ignorance.

Now again, we have to redefine the term for modern times. Ignorance in our day and age is usually defined as being unknowledgeable or unknowing. "He was ignorant of the end result of his actions." "Ignorance of the law is no excuse." And so on ...

Ignorance in the Buddhist sense is something quite different. We've talked about this before in a rather superfluous manner. Ignorance here is a fundamental and inherent factor within the mind that mucks with every aspect of our thinking. I think it's more appropriate to call it 'Bad Thinking' or 'Bad memories'. But that's not too great either.

OK, we'll stick with ignorance. But try to remember the new definition.

At the cognitive level, which is where the mind usually works, ignorance will unconsciously alter our perceptions, thoughts and views, so that we come to misinterpret our experiences by overlaying it with layers of delusion and incorrect interpretation. There are three delusions that play major roles in our psyche.

- Seeing permanence in the real world.
- Seeing satisfaction in the unsatisfactory
- Seeing a 'self' in the 'selfless'

Uh-Oh! A couple of these items look like gobbledygook. And you'd be right for thinking so at this point. But they will become clearer (at least in the definitions) in a little while. It can become esoteric if you're not careful, so stay close.

The first major delusion is that of thinking (and believing at a profoundly basic level) that there is permanence anywhere in the real world. Yes, the eggheads will say that the 'Law of the conservation of energy' prevails, where there cannot be any destruction of matter or energy, only the transformation from matter to energy and visa-versa. OK, maybe at an atomic level that's true and fundamental energy and particles are permanent (which is proving debatable), but anything above that level is never permanent ... at least at any level of the real world that our senses by themselves are able to perceive. To believe that anything is truly permanent is being exquisitely ignorant (original definition).

'Seeing satisfaction in the unsatisfactory' is not just settling for second best. It is more in the vein of thinking we that have a right to pleasure, and working for it regardless of all the pain, setbacks and frustrations. This is in the realm of the real world, where we strive for goals and attainments that are not related to our basic survival, and we find lust, greed and avarice working to help us get there. Getting satisfaction while using that greed, lust and avarice as a means to accumulate wealth and 'things' is counterproductive on the spiritual level, although it may work on Wall Street. Where it

won't work is one day when you face yourself in the mirror and ask 'What the hell have I done?'

The phrase to begin with is somewhat circular. All the goals that we seek, or all the things we choose to achieve are never permanent, and thus cannot be ultimately satisfactory. Even if we think they are, they discontinue with our deaths, and so cannot carry on or become permanent. Thus whatever we have achieved is never enough, and becomes unsatisfactory because we know it can become better. We find that any goal we achieve only leads to another more difficult one to conquer ... and that's never satisfactory in the long run.

'Seeing self in the selfless' gets more to the realm of the head-shrinkers. What it means is that we delude ourselves when we think that we **have become** what we've collected around us, and believe that the image we've created for ourselves to the real world is truly who we are. This has to do more with what we think we are and our status in the world, rather than with who we really are at our basic internal levels. Since in our society, our relative status depends a lot on what we accumulate and show off for our neighbors and the rest of the society, to exist for this is not a very good thing (but it's socially unpopular not to do this).

All of these are **major** delusions, and all fall into the realm of 'Bad Thinking' (ignorance). Actually, our initial definition of ignorance may not be that far off the mark after all.

It is only through Wisdom (not knowledge ... there is a difference) that we can identify and deal with Ignorance.

Ignorance obscures the true nature of things. Wisdom removes that ignorance by removing the distortions caused by it. With this removal, we see the real world and ourselves with direct perception (sense objects piped directly to us, not routed through the mind). It is the development of insight into reality through our own experiences ... while stripping away all pretexts and preconceived notions of what is. It is experiencing totally on the sensory level, without any intermediate interpretation at all.

Usually, we're so involved in our experiences that we don't comprehend them to any great degree. We walk through them, but we don't understand them (or don't want to understand them). All these experiences are viewed through the triply distorting lens of permanence, pleasure and self.

Of the three, 'self' is the most detrimental and fundamental. This is the delusion that somewhere inside, there is a 'me' that is unique and real. In actuality, there is no 'I', only my idea of 'I'. 'I' is a collection of images, things and ideas about what I think 'I' am, and who 'I' am that I want shown to the outside world, things and all. In reality, other than this collection, can you name me anything else that defines 'me'? I doubt you can.

The whole self-delusional part of this is when we get this idea embedded of 'self' or 'I', that we start thinking in terms of 'me'/'them', and 'mine'/'not-mine'. Of course the minute we think this way, we enter the realm of all the emotions and reactions associated with 'me', 'myself', 'I', and 'mine.' Greed, envy, lust, and the rest of the brood then flood the marketplace, generating emotions, reactions, and actions with all the devastating results thereof. We want more of what isn't ours already, and many times have the urge to destroy what isn't ours so nobody else can have it.

So how do we develop this thing ... this ... this wisdom?

Ah, grasshopper, you are finally thinking.

In order to solve a problem, we must first identify and see it. The first step towards wisdom is one of taking that which we either are experiencing or have experienced and seeing how it relates to us and to our idea of self. To do this, we match it up against a set of factors known to be in the realm of 'not-self'.

This is not to be viewed as we would a car, watch, or any physical thing. It cannot be looked at as a collection of levers, gears, metal fabrications, atoms, or circuits that can be separated out into a set of individual parts which otherwise have no relation to each other. Rather it should be seen as matching the experience against a functional set of criteria, seeing if the experience tries to become part of our 'self' ... our

I'. The criteria are what you think you are, and want to be (as presented to the outside world).

If we find that the functions related to that experience don't change with our constantly changing environment, then "we've got a problem, Houston."

Another way of looking at this is to use the maxim "Stupidity is doing the same exact thing over and over, while expecting a different result." We can't use knee-jerk reaction thinking to solve an ever-changing environment that we find ourselves in. And, in truth, our environment is ever-changing from moment to moment, and is never the same. We may think it is from casual observation, but it isn't.

Usually this factor analysis used is called 'the five aggregates of clinging'. It involves hanging onto the stuff and rote thinking that we regard as 'ours', and which we believe defines us. The 'Five Aggregates of Clinging' are:

- **Material form** ... the physical part of the equation dealing with everything external to the body, including the senses, and all the crap in the garage that we accumulate through a lifetime. (My sense of touch tells me there's something crawling on my arm. My eyes tell me that it's a creepy crawly of some sort.)
- **Perception** ... applies identification and categorization. (It's a fly. It's on my arm. OK. <shrug>)
- **Feeling** ... the emotional part of the equation. We like to keep hanging onto the positive feelings and emotions, and hang onto letting go of the negative ones. They are all worth examining and working with. (I really don't like this fly on my arm. It's annoying, but it'll fly off soon.)
- **Mental formations** ... the action and expressive factors. (Should I swat the fly or shoo it away? If so, I have to be fast).
- **Consciousness** ... the root awareness which is necessary to have the experience to begin with. (I perceive the fly. It's made up of the same star stuff that I am. Hello, fly.)

When we try to examine experience in these terms, we have to keep seeing it solely as it pertains to these factors (or the factors pertain to it.) If we stray into looking for the 'I' in any of this, we start playing 'snipe hunting' or some other game where what we're looking for doesn't exist in the first place. We have to look solely at the five factors as applied to experience(s) only, not to how we think they apply to 'us'. We see them arise, watch them as they work, and see them leave ... without ever acting in any way, shape, or form on them.

An alternative means to this end is the contemplation of the six senses and their internal and external parts. They also have leg irons attached that have to be noted and removed. The six are:

- **The eye and visual forms.**
- **The ear and sounds.**
- **The nose and odors.**
- **The tongue and tastes.**
- **The body and tactile sense.**
- **The mind and its mental objects.**

Whoa! Why six? I only have five senses. Well, since each sense triggers the mind, and generates suppositions and prior experiences for that input, we also see that the mind, from memories, can also trigger these same suppositions and prior experiences. The best place to see this at work is to take a look when you're awake at two in the morning and you're awake staring at the ceiling. No inputs, just your mind rattling. Watch what it comes up with ... it'll be an eye-opener.

Each of these triggering inputs carries baggage with it, because of the interpretation by the mind of what generated the sensual input, and what it means. Interestingly enough, in the sixth sense, we get into the realm of the mind examining the mind ... always an interesting conundrum.

The idea with all of this is to tamp down any notion of 'self'. That self is our internally generated façade of what we think we are to both the external world and ourselves as well (the two may be very different).

Think of the 'self' as our eggshell. It protects us against a truly brutal reality, and that in turn affects our perceptions of that reality by altering the sense information from what is real to what we **want** to be real.

Each of these four sense factors (aggregates) of the Five Aggregates of Clinging exists only when they are dependent on other conditions. They are not in reality part of 'I' or my 'self'. Each of them is tied in both time and space to the rest of the universe. Every one of them is dependent on something else. This is called "dependent origination."

The body is dependent on the original conception of sperm and egg. It has to have food, water and air to exist. But it is not 'I' or my 'self'.

Feeling, perception, and mental formations are dependent on the body's senses to generate the inputs to begin with. But they are not 'I' or my 'self'.

The first four of the aggregates (Material form, Feeling, Perception, and Mental Formations) require, in turn, an umbrella consciousness, and the linkage of that consciousness to the experience (and the object of that experience), then to the senses that allow it to be experienced. But this is not 'I', either. (Pssst ... there is NO I.)

Even more, all of this is augmented by previous experiences, and the karma that they generated at the time.

Seen in this light, nothing is independent in our entire existence. It is all tied together in innumerable ways, none of which can be separated out and exist by itself. All of it is dependent and works in relation to everything else.

This is where we enter the concept of 'all things affect each other', and 'any action affects all other actions.' This is called (again) 'dependent origination.'

Even the two ways of tangling with the 'clinging attributes' (insight and wisdom) won't totally get to the ego and its supports of bad perception. In order to get to this essence and deliver a knockout blow, we look at them in terms whether we think they're permanent, if they're involved in creating lust, greed or other such emotions, and if they're really part of 'I' or my 'self'. Damn, we're back to this again.

To do this, the ego and its factors must first deal with permanence. Any phenomenon or experience (which is conditioned by all others, by the way) is constantly in change. They change, make their mark, and disappear almost as soon as they get here. What appears to be stable is in reality an entire string of minute, very short events that is constantly changing. They change subtle and unseen ways (until we see them, of course.) This probably gives rise to saying that “the only thing constant is change.”

So we see that the ego/self isn't a constant either ... it's a constantly changing mixture of all that we are clinging to for our self-image. It primarily consists of the effect of the sensed external events, and a torrent pouring through the mind corresponding to the four mental aggregates that we generate because of these perceived events.

Once we see this, we can't define self in these terms any longer. With all of the aggregates being impermanent, if we try to use this definition, it becomes an impossibility because the definition would be constantly changing ... ergo, it's an invalid definition. But what the aggregates really are, are ownerless, empty entities that occur depending on the conditions for their origination. The mind generates them based on prior similars (remember the red-haired man?), which have probably since changed, although the mind won't know or care ... it just goes on generating all the aggregates for fun if nothing else.

When we get on a roll with all this, everything comes together with a vengeance. The factors of the Eightfold Path all work together and make a fusion of total force to attack the whole concept of 'self'. Moral Discipline (Right Action, Right Speech, Right Livelihood) works to keep us from transgressing and even the thought of unethical conduct won't come up. The Concentration factors (Right Concentration, Right Mindfulness) keep us focused on the goal. And with the wisdom of insight, Right View grows keener. And Right Intention keeps us detached and steady to implement all this.

The practice at this point (that of gaining wisdom) is called 'Insight Meditation.' We'll go further into this in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWENTYONE

WISDOM AIN'T SMARTS (Part 2)

In our last episode, the Lone Ranger©®™ was engaged with his faithful Indian companion Tonto, holding off an entire band of ... wait, that's the wrong essay, episode, and epigraph. But this whole idea of finding ourselves (our 'self') is almost a morality play in itself. In an odd way, we're finding truth, justice and the American Way©®™ by playing Lone Ranger in search of our minds. It's hiding in the rocks just up the hill, and doesn't want to be sent back to the reservation. Looking through the rocks with our latest surveillance gear, we find it flitting from rock to rock, never stopping long enough for a steady shot. But at least now we know a) that it exists, and b) it's not mythical like Bigfoot.

We talk a lot about wisdom in the higher stages of Buddhist thought. In another essay a while back, I talked about the difference between wisdom and knowledge, and one of the conclusions was that when we get too much knowledge, we lose wisdom. Knowledge consists of facts ... wisdom is how to use them. Ummmmm... but wait! Without knowledge, we can't really exist in the 'real world', right? What is really meant here is that when we get bogged down in factual existence, we can lose sight of **why** those facts are important. One of the old maxims of philosophy that even the Greeks considered, was 'Just because we have the technology or knowledge to do something, doesn't necessarily mean that we SHOULD do it.' You can call this idea a conscience, a higher being, or wisdom. It's the discernment to determine what path to take, and whether that path leads to a good result or a karmic disaster.

Gaining that wisdom is the goal of Insight Meditation (that's what we've been talking about, in case you were wondering). We addressed the underpinnings of it in the last chapter. That had to do with the five aggregates (material form, perception, feeling, mental formations and

consciousness); how experience can be analyzed in terms of them; and how that is used to try to eliminate what is left of the 'self'. Notice I didn't say suppress ... when we suppress stuff, it just plays 'whack-a-mole' and pops up somewhere else. It's much like using hypnosis to quit smoking ... we just start being addicted to Diet Coke or frozen nachos or something (almost anything) else. We didn't eliminate the addiction, just redirected it to another outlet. The mind is a wonderful thing to behold.

When we talk about insight meditation and what it does, we are placing in our sights something called 'conditioned formations', which are comprised of the experiences in light of the five aggregates we talked about earlier. This is the mind-formed whole of what the mind **thinks** is going on. Insight should result in finding the bedrock characteristics of those experiences, namely impermanence (we find it's temporary), unsatisfactoriness (no long term reward for it), and selflessness (is it only part of our projected image to the world?). But it still only deals with stuff that was generated by external stimuli and 'conditioned' by all the mind muck that we place on it before it even gets to a spot that we can look at it. Buddha called it at this stage the 'mundane path.' But getting this far is anything but mundane by any normal standard. Even to here, it can be a Herculean task. The goal is enlightenment and what we've done so far leads to that enlightenment, but it's still dealing with real-world-generated stuff.

But fear not and trudge on, for when we reach a high point in gaining insight, we fully realize how non-eternal everything is. We see how unsatisfactory all that is gained with lust, greed and avarice really is and how we aren't really the façade that we have put up to the outside world. We then break through all the 'conditioned' thinking, and realize the higher levels behind it ... which is finally that elusive goal of Nirvana. At this point we see it with a direct intuitive vision ... it is an immediate realization.

Of course, this is not a direct experience of my own ... far from it. But it is the result of a lot of reading about it and distilling what I found into what I hope is a succinct and easy-to-understand set of ideas that convey what it's all about. I'm still working on "Now that I've got my s..t together, I can't lift it." But I digress ...

As we take our mental hot-air balloon, rising above 'conditioned' thinking, the mind now does a parallel assault on the Four Noble Truths. It simultaneously sees:

- **The full range and comprehension of suffering.**
- **All existence as being unsatisfactory, being overlaid with avarice, greed and lust.**
- **The full abandonment of craving, cutting through the muck of the ego and all that goes with it that generates suffering.**
- **The full spectrum of the Eightfold Path.**

That spectrum includes:

- **Right view becoming a direct vision of Nirvana.**
- **Right Intention being the application of the mind to Nirvana.**
- **The three moral factors (Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood) keeping us from the transgression phase.**
- **Right Effort giving us the energy to pursue the path.**
- **Right Mindfulness giving the awareness of the Path.**
- **Right Concentration focusing our efforts on the singularity of our goal and intent.**

These factors all happen simultaneously at this level. The entire path combines to place you in a position of total enlightenment. Here you become totally and completely aware of the Four Noble truths and see them with certainty of

experience not as concepts, but as eternal truths of existence. It is complete and unified in a single moment.

It might be helpful here to define what Nirvana (Nibbana) really is. What IS this goal we're after? After twenty chapters, it might be nice to figure out why we've taken all this time and energy to get to it. One definition is as follows:

“It is the cessation of suffering, the liberation from karma, and therefore the passing over into another existence. The best way to think about nirvana is that it is the final goal of Buddhism, and that Enlightenment is the step immediately before it. Thus one becomes aware of the nature of Ultimate Reality in Enlightenment, and then one becomes unified with that reality in Nirvana. Thus the Buddha, when he died, passed into Nirvana, having previously attained Enlightenment during his life and sharing it with humanity.”

Hmmmmmmmm ... a really tangible goal, huh?

Look at it this way. If you were a Christian, Moslem, or Jew, this is the heaven that you qualified for when you were alive. You lived your life in bounds set by your religion and were rewarded by getting to 'heaven' (however you define it). You believed and sought salvation, and on 'judgment day', you'll "fly away" ... but only if you're worthy.

In Buddhism, you know that you're worthy because you have a track record and have seen the tangible results of a much better life and much more happiness than would have otherwise been possible had you not taken the Eightfold Path and found the Four Noble Truths. And you know, because of that track record, that the best is yet to come (yucky platitudes notwithstanding.) But knowing that you're worthy doesn't generate the elitism that most religions generate in their adherents. Indeed, it generates a great humility and compassion for other beings (human and otherwise).

And, just when you thought it was safe to go into the water, we find out that some of the more subliminal stuff that we were dealing with up to now isn't really gone ... we just kept from running. We haven't eliminated it completely. It's

still down there, causing damage occasionally, and probably screwing things up in our minds under the radar. But, there's hope!!! (Blast of trumpets).

Buddha defines ten categories of what's left, called 'fetters':

- **Personality view.**
- **Doubt.**
- **Clinging to rules and rituals.**
- **Sensual desire.**
- **Aversion.**
- **Desire for fine-material existence.**
- **Desire for immaterial existence.**
- **Conceit.**
- **Restlessness.**
- **Ignorance.**

But wait!!! You say "I thought we handled all this along the way. This is discouraging." OK, ok ... you're right. We have handled a LOT. But up until now you were just playing 'whack-a-mole' with 'em. They were still there under the board. The moles just didn't dare come up above the board. NOW the job is to take the board off and start whacking for real down in the mole holes. There's never a ferret around when you need 'em.

Here we find some terms that we've heard along the way, such as 'stream enterer', 'once-returner', 'non-returner', and 'arahat'. These are the four levels left to the practitioner of all that has gone before.

The four levels each take care of a set of the 'fetters' that remain.

The 'Stream Enterer' takes care of the first three 'fetters', being the least refined of the set. At this level,

- **Personality View ... that of an existent self of external images, is dumped since you see the selfless nature of everything.**

- **Doubt goes away because you have seen for yourself the truth of what the Buddha taught.**
- **Clinging to the rites and ceremonies is eliminated because you know that unbending moralism and ritual practices won't work ... only the actual and repeated practice of the Eightfold Path.**

The 'stream enterer' still has more work to do, however, since there are seven 'fetter's to go. It may take as long as seven lifetimes (or as few as one) to achieve, but they're definitely on the road, and cannot be deterred or detained any further. We said as many as seven lifetimes ... it has been known to happen in a flash of insight well within one.

Knowing that they are close to achieving enlightenment, the seeker now kicks up the energy level, totally suppressing greed, aversion and delusion. This stage is known as the 'once-returner' who will only come back to this world one more time at most before attaining liberation. Again it is possible to achieve within a single lifetime.

The third level of attainment is that of 'non-returner', which eliminates the two fetters of ill will and sensual desire. There is no more sensual pleasure, and they do not rise to anger, aversion or discontent. At this stage, there is no coming back to the human form ever again after this lifetime. They are elevated to a higher plane of existence from which they will gain enlightenment and head into Nirvana.

Last, and in this case, by NO means least, we arrive at the status of 'arahat'. Here all the remaining fetters are cast off:

- **Desire for fine-material existence ... wanting elegance and good 'stuff'.**
- **Desire for immaterial existence ... the desire to be reborn into some ethereal plane other than Nirvana.**

- **Conceit ... the thinking that there still may be a 'self' buried deep within that we haven't found yet.**
- **Restlessness ... a residual excitement about reaching this level of attainment.**
- **Ignorance ... the remaining thin veil of Bad Thinking that remains even at this stage.**

Attaining the status (wait, wrong word ... status implies relation to a real world social order). Attaining the level of 'arahat' is awesome. Here we kill off the remaining moles and truly live a righteous and 'holy' life. We mean 'holy' here in a non-religious sense. The world is full of people who declare themselves as 'holy' people, who then proceed to perform some of the most 'unholy' acts imaginable. There is no room for hypocrisy in Buddhism. It's brutally honest, because the judge of what you're doing and how you're doing it is you. If you're hypocritical, you're doing nothing but mucking up yourself and your opportunity for a far better existence.

This final level of possessing a body in the real world, while having a complete and comprehensive view of the Four Noble Truths is the last station on the railroad. From here on, there is no turning back, and the trip is a one-way ticket. The full truth of suffering (as declared in the Four Noble Truths) is evident and complete. The craving from which suffering comes has been eliminated. The cessation of suffering is Nirvana itself, and the consummated total practice of the Noble Eightfold Path has given them this achievement.

Having gotten to this point, the title of 'arahat' is well deserved. They have been liberated from all the fetters. They have traveled the Noble Eightfold Path to its ultimate destination. As the Pali Canon says: "Destroyed is birth; the holy life has been lived; what had to be done has been done; there is no coming back to any state of being."

The arahat has actually become the Eightfold Path ... no longer practicing it, but being it. At the end of this lifetime, they make the decision to head on to Nirvana or to return at

will as a 'Bodisattva' ... one who will teach the truths of what they have learned to others on the way.

It is that teaching and the various schools of it that we will return to in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWENTYTWO

WHY SO MANY?

When we get into the realm of the various types of Buddhism, things get a little murky when it comes to virtually everything except the basics.

As we saw back in the chapter on history, Buddhism split into two major schisms within a few hundred years of Buddha's death. Some disciples headed in one direction, while others went a different way. Why? Differences in dogma and interpretation.

We can only analyze retrospectively what eventually came about.

First, we have to see the main division of Buddhism and how the two sides vary. The following table draws those distinctions.

Differences Between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism

Theravada	Mahayana
<u>Location</u> Southern (Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, parts of Southeast Asia)	Northern (Tibet, China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, parts of Southeast Asia)
<u>Schools and Sects</u> One surviving school (as many as 18 existed at one time)	8 major schools: four practice-based (Zen, Pure Land, Vajrayana, Vinaya); four philosophy-based (Tendai, Avamtasaka, Yogacara and Madhyamika)
<u>Buddhist Scriptures</u> Pali Canon/Tripitaka only	Books of the Theravada

<u>Buddhas</u> Historical Buddha (Gautama) and past Buddhas only	Triptaka plus many other sutras (e.g. Lotus Sutra) Gautama Buddha plus Amitabha, Medicine Buddhas, and others
<u>Bodhisattvas</u> Maitreya only	Maitreya plus Avalokitesvara, Mansjuri, Ksitigarbha and Samanthabhadra
<u>Goal of Training</u> Arhat	Buddhahood via bodhisattva-path
<u>3 Buddha Bodies (Triakaya)</u> Very limited emphasis; mainly on nirmana-kaya and dharmakaya	Emphasized, including the samboga-kaya or reward/enjoyment body
<u>Original Language</u> Pali	Sanskrit /Pali/Japanese/Chinese
<u>Language of Transmission</u> Triptaka is only in Pali.	Teaching in Pali supplemented by local language. Scriptures translated into local language.
<u>Buddha's Disciples</u> Historical disciples described in Scriptures	Many bodhisattvas that are not historical figures
<u>Mantras and Mudras</u> Some equivalent in the use of Parittas	Emphasized in Vajrayana; sometimes incorporated in

	other schools
<u>Bardo (Limbo)</u> Rejected	Taught by all schools
<u>Non-Buddhist Influences</u> Mainly pre-Buddhist Indian influences like concepts of karma, sangha, etc.	Heavily influenced by local religious ideas as transmitted to new cultures (China, Japan, Tibet).
<u>Buddha Nature</u> Not taught	Emphasized, especially in practice-based schools
<u>Rituals</u> Very few; not emphasized	Many, owing to local cultural influences

As you can see, the width of the schism is pretty wide. It is somewhat akin to the schism in Islam, although this split is ideological, whereas the Islamic split between Shia and Sunni is mainly political and hierarchical.

What I've described in this book so far is the essence of Theravada Buddhism. Actually, it's the basis for all Buddhism, although some of the morphing along the way can obscure those origins. For most factions, it's a long, drawn-out process that usually doesn't allow for anyone to gain enlightenment in a single lifetime, or for lay people to gain it at all. The basic principles are straightforward, but not put into a format or regimen that most of us could stick to without deviation.

Theravada Buddhism was the original form of the philosophy, having its roots directly in the teachings of the Buddha himself. They (the adherents) maintain that their teachings most closely reflect the ways that Buddha taught, using the Pali Canon (an Indian collection of the early period

teachings.) Most (if not all) of the later sutras of Mahayana are not recognized nor taught.

Theravada tends to be more theocratic and philosophical, with the ideal of becoming an arahat (as we described in another chapter) as the goal, achievable only by a lifetime(s) of study and practice.

Theravada tends to emphasize worldly rejection and moderate asceticism so as to more clearly focus on achieving the goal.

Theravada is the only remaining school of the original eighteen or so of what was called the 'Hiniyana' division, or the 'Lesser Vehicle.' It was called so (usually in a derogatory sense) by the adherents of the 'Mahayana' or 'Greater Vehicle.'

'Mahayana' Buddhism is a more liberal version of the original, which allows for both a much greater access to all adherents, and the possibility of achieving Buddhahood within one's own lifetime. It tends to simplify and expand the scope of the religion/philosophy for many more adherents, including women and lay followers. It is also known as 'Northern Buddhism' because of its prevalence in China and Japan, whereas Theravada is usually found in southeast Asia and is also known as 'Southern' Buddhism.

The Theravada side incorporates only the Pali Canon, which is the original set of 'suttas' set forth by the Third Council in the third Century BC. The Mahayana division accepts not only the Pali Canon, but a number of 'sutras' from later in the period.

Mahayana and Theravada also differ on the purpose of the training. Whereas the Theravadans strive for arahatship, without the attainment of Buddhahood (at least in this lifetime), the Mahayana side strives for the status of 'bodhisattvas', who have become enlightened but chose to teach and help others attain it, rather than go into Nirvana themselves. Mahayana also believes that it is possible to gain enlightenment within a single lifetime, even for lay followers. All of the various sub-divisions of Mahayana do agree on the

potential of single lifetime attainment of enlightenment, even if they disagree on almost everything else. They also agree on the Four Noble Truths, and sometimes even on the Eightfold Path, however in some it takes some digging to find this out.

There are varying degrees of ritual, ceremony and rites, as well as images, icons and sacred objects within the Mahayana sects, whereas there is more of a total philosophical bent to the Theravedan path. The extremes of this are shown by the Tibetan side, which contains quite a bit of the religious factor of the sect, whereas the Zen adherents are quite vehement on the fact that none of all that dogma and teaching matters and maintain that they are not in any sense religious.

TENDAI

Of the Mahayana schools, the earliest was the Tendai school from which derived both Nichiren and Pure Land schools later on.

These are all based on the Lotus Sutra, and the school is also called the 'Lotus School'. The Lotus Sutra was originally translated from the original Sanskrit into Chinese in the 5th century CE. The sect gets its name because the founder, a monk named Chih-hi, established a monastery on Mount T'ien-t'ai in southeast China. Chih-hi is usually named as the founder of the Tendai school, as he first interpreted and defined the Lotus doctrines.

The sect came to Japan with Saicho, who founded the Japanese division and founded an important monastery on Mount Hiei.

Tendai as a whole tends to incorporate the best parts of other schools, ranging from Vinaya, to Shingon and Zen, not to mention Shinto, the local Japanese religion. It remains centrally focused, however, on the Lotus Sutra and its teachings.

Those teachings represent the way to enlightenment, and attaining Buddhahood. In this Sutra, it maintains that it is the complete doctrine of the original Buddha, who is defined more as an immortal than a historical figure. This Buddha uses all kinds of 'expedient means', such as parables, lectures, and sermons ... in short, whatever works to get the point across.

He also teaches that there are three different ways to achieve the end result of Buddhahood and Nirvana:

- Srakakayana or 'way of the disciples.' Those of the Theravada sect who choose to become an arahat.
- Pratyeka-buddhayana. A person who seeks to attain enlightenment for themselves alone.
- Bodhisattvayana or 'way of the bodhisattvas'. Those who delay their own enlightenment so as to help others attain it.

ZEN

Of all the Buddhist schools, the one best known in America is probably Zen. It has been popularized by a number of western authors, notably Alan Watts and the poets of the 'Beat' generation on the west coast.

What Zen concentrates on is concentration. It teaches that the best way for attaining enlightenment is to meditate as the original Buddha did. Zen teaches that the Buddha-Nature, and the capability of attaining enlightenment resides in all of us, and is obscured by ignorance (the Buddhist definition, please.)

Zen rejects study and works of almost all kinds, focusing strictly on meditation to achieve the flash of insight and awareness of the ultimate reality.

Zen started in the sixth century CE in China, and is usually thought to have been founded by Bodhidharma in about 520 CE. Philosophically, it is taken from a Sutra dating to the fourth century or so called the Lankavatara Sutra. It derived some of its doctrines from Tao influences in the process of its evolution. Those are evident in the concept of spontaneity and naturalness is all things.

Zen in Japan was present as early as the 600's CE, but did not achieve any great status until the 12th century. When it really took off, it wound up influencing many aspects of Japanese cultural life including gardening, ink painting, calligraphy and even the famous 'Tea Ceremony.' It was Zen priests who preserved Japanese cultural life by serving as diplomats and administrators during the upheavals of 16th century Japan.

Zen, like all other Buddhist schools, has several divisions within it.

Rinzai Zen uses the 'koan' or paradoxical puzzle/question to help the seeker to think 'outside the box' and thus escape the logical part of the mind. Rinzai also teaches the defense of the state, and offers prayers and chants to achieve that goal. It was very much embraced by the warrior class of Japan, and martial arts became a major player within the Zen community.

Soto Zen is another variant on the basic Zen. It arrived in Japan in 1227 with the teacher Dogen. It utilizes the zazen (sitting meditation) as the way to achieve enlightenment. It encourages the practitioner to merely clear the mind of all thoughts and concepts without making any conscious effort towards enlightenment. Stir quietly until enlightenment occurs.

NICHIREN

Nichiren Buddhism came to be in the mid-1200's CE in Japan. It is named for its founder, Nichiren Daishonin, born in 1222 and living 60 years. He was convinced that there were far too many different ways to enlightenment, and took off on his own from the Tendai tradition in which he was trained. He came to the conclusion that the Lotus Sutra was the only path that truly led to enlightenment ... a conclusion that brought him near death and much hardship at the hands of the other schools that had favor with the local rulers. He was exiled and almost executed for his beliefs.

He also taught that the times in which he lived (political unrest and upheaval) were indicators of the prophecy of the latter times of the Law as stated in the Lotus Sutra. During these times, says the Sutra, only the bodhisattva was capable of insuring the purity of Buddhist doctrine, and he considered himself to be one of these protectors and a teacher destined to spread the Lotus teachings to the rest of Japan. In this sense, he eventually succeeded, although not too well within his lifetime.

Nichiren's Buddhism maintains that enlightenment can be attained in a single lifetime, through its practice. That practice consists of three elements, chanting daimoku (the recitation of the mantra 'Nam(u) Myoho rengo kyo') to the Gohonzon (a Nichiren designed Mandala), while in the kaidan (meeting hall or sacred place). The Gohonzon is a mandala fashioned by Nichiren representing the three entities of Sakyamuni Buddha, and many others. Chanting can go on for several hours a day using the mala (sacred beads or rosary) to keep on track.

There are three main branches of Nichiren's Buddhism:

- Nichiren Shu, which does not accept Nichiren's claim that Nikko (his declared successor) was his reincarnation and thus could not be his real successor.
- Nichiren Shoshu claims the opposite and their chief priest is designated as the reincarnation of Nichiren himself.
- SGI (Soka Gakkai International) which is a lay subset of Nichiren Shoshu, but independent of it.

Some of this sounds vaguely reminiscent of the Muslim rift over who is the legitimate heir to Mohammed's caliphate. There are other major differences, however.

Nichiren Shu is by far the more mainstream version, not excluding other Buddhist practices. Study of the Four Noble Truths and Taking Refuge are still present and utilized, whereas in the other two sects, they are downplayed or ignored. The emphasis on the daimoku is still there, but it is the height of the Dharma, not the sole practice. The mandala isn't necessarily blessed by the high priest, nor the sanctity of the Gohonzon recognized, since they claim there is no evidence that Nichiren ever really designed it. Nichiren Shu is starting to make inroads into other areas of the western world, notably North America.

Nichiren Shoshu claims Nichiren's disciple Nikko as the legitimate successor to Nichiren himself, making Nichiren

Shoshu the only ‘true’ school of Nichiren Buddhism. It says that Nichiren is the True Buddha, who was foretold by Buddha Sakyamuni himself for the later ages. Nichiren Shu, on the other hand, says that Nichiren wasn’t the True Buddha, but merely his priest. (The parallel here is that Islam claims that Jesus wasn’t the true messiah, just another prophet.)

The central focus of Nichiren Shoshu practice is chanting ‘namu Myoho rengo kyo’ to the Gohonzon. The phrase encompasses the ‘Mystic Law’, which is the law of causality that underlies everything that we do in daily life.

Soka Gakkai (SGI) is an umbrella group of lay organizations founded in the 1930’s as a subset of Nichiren Shoshu. It parted company with (actually was excommunicated by) Nichiren Shoshu because SGI objected to the increasing wealth within the priesthood. It has since been spread to over 190 countries.

Its primary practice is chanting the daimoku, reciting two sections of the Lotus Sutra (gongyo), and the study of important Buddhist teachings (primarily those of Nichiren himself).

Two more variations on the theme remain, and we’ll deal with them and some observations in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWENTYTHREE

WHY SO MANY? (Part 2)

There are two more variations of Buddhism that need to be mentioned. The first is:

Pure Land Buddhism

Pure Land Buddhism was first brought to China somewhere around 150CE. It centers its focus on one of the five Wisdom Buddhas, named Amitabha (or Amida in Japanese), and his sector of Paradise, known as the Pure Land. It migrated to Japan and was established itself as an independent branch of Buddhism called Jodo Shu in about 1200CE. It is currently the predominant form of Buddhism in Japan.

Its primary teaching is that Nirvana isn't within the reach of people in the current environment. Rather, becoming a devotee of Amida will gain you enough karmic points to get to Amida's Pure Land. It isn't Nirvana, but it's close, and it's a lot easier to achieve Nirvana from there.

Adherents focus on a single mantra of devotion to Amida, chanting it as much as possible to gain and maintain a state of mind from which they can gain admission to the Pure Land when they die. It is a simplistic form of Buddhist thought, and thus it is very popular, due to its lack of dogma and study.

In Japan, it has a number of schools and sects, all of which follow the simplified version of the Pure Land doctrine.

As a total aside, the world-famous statue of the 'Sleeping Buddha' isn't really Buddha himself, but Amida.

Engaged Buddhism (sometimes known as Socially Engaged Buddhism)

Started by a Vietnamese monk in the twentieth century, Engaged Buddhism is not so much a sect of the philosophy as

it is a movement. It seeks to employ Buddhist thought and practice in a more non-traditional activist and social manner.

Some comment here is necessary.

While it may be confusing as to the multitude of sects and schools of Buddhism, it is important to remember that they grew out of the same basic thought and philosophy. They all employ the same roots and points of origin. They differ as to application and direction, but all seek to achieve the same goal of enlightenment and Nirvana.

If there were one right school for everyone, nobody would ever join any of the others. They all have a place for individuals whose mental makeup attracts them to the different schools and traditions. Some of this influence is cultural, some is inherent in the individual's traits and ways of thinking. Some require discipline of a strict sort, while others are attracted to the free-thinking and non-regimented parts of Buddhism. Some are scholarly in their approach, while others come to it by ritual and belief. It is up to each individual to choose the type of Buddhism they require for their own enlightenment. Remember that thingie about individual responsibility? Here it is in spades.

We can make similar statements about all religions across the board. All have their own variations, which in some cases totally cloud the original intent. It brings to mind the adage of the dog chasing the sports car ... what're they gonna do with it once they catch it.

I've seen any number of people that I've known chase a variety of psycho-babble groups, religions, and movements up to the point where the individual responsibility kicks in, at which they wander off to start over with another approach.

I direct you again to the idea of the Hindu Rope Trick, where the rope rises of its own volition (using this word advisedly) and disappears into thin air above me. I can approach the rope from any direction. I can shake it, or I can evaluate it somehow from the ground, but I will never know how it works unless I climb it. I can be supported by others on

the ground who can lead me to the rope and push me up it a short distance, but it is up to me to climb the rope by myself and see what makes it tick. Once there, I may never descend, or I may come back to encourage others to do the same trip. I think this is a good analogy for the journey to enlightenment and Nirvana. The Bodisattva or Arahat comes back down the rope to help others gain what they have achieved.

Go forth and climb the rope.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

SOME COMMENTS OF MY OWN

As I said earlier, there are many variations on the theme, and vocal adherents for each variation. Some sects stress the hierarchical structure with monks and nuns, some don't. Some take the path of least resistance with little dogma and follower requirements, others go off the deep end with endless mandates on the followers. Many, unfortunately, have followed the western religious practice of overlaying so much dogma so that the underlying premises of the religion/sect/philosophy have been obscured to all but the most diligent. It is that addition of dogma and the deification of the main proponent of their individual schools that has overlaid the simple and direct teachings of the Buddha that he set out two millennia ago.

But that is not all bad. People tend to do that deification regardless of what the originator of the philosophy had in mind. The intellectual approach worked well with the intellectual Brahmins in India, but didn't go over well with the majority of the working class. This is why the historical Buddha established the religious side of the equation, so as to feed that need for a more religious experience. For those that can grasp the philosophy at its original level, however, the rest of the religious trappings are unnecessary.

What the various schools provide is a smorgasbord of ways to achieve the same end of enlightenment and nirvana. Some people require the rigid discipline of Zen, while others are looking for the 'worm-hole' results of Nichiren's brand. Some adhere to the idea that there is no way I'll be able to achieve enlightenment on this plane, while others want the fast-track path to Nirvana. Some require the monastic life and community, while others are solo seekers that have to find their own path based on what Buddha taught. In the long term, it doesn't matter which way you get there ... remember the Hindu Rope Trick.

Whatever works for each individual contributes to the whole of the spiritual community. Any improvement in the reduction of karma and karmic debt of the world's population will lead inevitably to a lower level of violence and greater civility. To the seeker just getting started, I recommend looking at all the variations of Buddhism and find the one that works for you and your mind. There is probably one out there, but if not, then a study of the basics from which they all sprang is valuable, and who knows, you may found your own school and develop your own methodology of enlightenment and Nirvana.

One thing that is discouraging about the various sects and schools is the lack of understanding of the others. Each devotes much time and energy to pounding its own chest as to its efficacy and value, while deriding those that have different views and directions. But I suppose this is normal, given that western religions do the same thing. But it sidelines a lot of energy and effort that could be redirected into a broader coalition of all Buddhists to make a greater impact on the western world.

Another discouraging thing about much of Buddhism is the public perception of it. What the western world immediately comes up with is the image of a saffron-robed devotee involved in self-immolation somewhere in Southeast Asia. They conjure up shaven-headed beggars who do no work and prey on the public dole. Little do they know. The education of the western world is going to be a slow process, given the misperceptions that exist.

Much 'new age' thought in the west is derived from the Buddhist smorgasbord, with many of the necessary underpinnings left behind. Quick fixes are the order of the day. One such that is better than most, is the Sedona Method founded by Lester Levinson. It takes much of what Buddhism is based on, and without reference to Buddhism at all, provides its own path to mental clarity and freedom.

There are innumerable other 'new age' methods and variations, from the hippie/beat generation folks, to the

'Est'ies. Some work (kind of) and some don't. But so long as it works for the individual involved, that's great.

A word of caution to those who choose to proselyte the Buddhist faith. Be careful how you present this stuff to potential adherents. Almost all potential believers that I've run into have had various preconceptions that were so far off the mark as to almost erect insurmountable barriers to getting through. We've got to find a way to present this stuff in a more palatable and non-traditional manner to even be able to knock on the door.

Having the other organized religions against you (particularly evangelical Christians) doesn't help, either. But then, we're in good company there with the long laundry list of people they consider heathen.

But what we have to do is present Buddhism in a different light, that isn't tied to any country or sect, but as a philosophy that can make people happier, more able to achieve their goals, and can ultimately free their minds from the bonds accumulated over centuries.

It's a daunting goal. What I have done here I believe is a very small start. I've tried to present the underlying beliefs of Buddhist thought in a way that people can understand and use to further their study and practice of it. What I have done here is not a definitive treatise on Buddhist thought. There are enough of those to fill a football stadium. But what I've tried to do is tweak the interest of those seeking something that they know is out there, just as I did. And if you've made it this far in this manuscript, you just may have.

However, if your thirst hasn't been quenched so far, I've got another manuscript that goes into far more detail. It's called the Path of the PratyekaBuddha In it you'll find an in-depth analysis of the Four Noble Truths and the EightFold Path, with some extra goodies included at the end. Try it ... you'll like it. Seek further if you're interested ... there are innumerable resources both on line and in your public library (if it's still open.)

Live long and prosper.

CHAPTER TWENTYFIVE

THE END OR THE BEGINNING?

At the beginning of this book, I lied. I told you that we were going to go through the basics of Buddhism ... that part is true. What I didn't tell you is that you intuitively knew all of this to begin with. Had I done that, you'd have used the paper that this is printed for fishwrap or birdcage liner, or winter firestarter. (It's too slick for the outhouse.)

You didn't need all of this ... you just didn't know you didn't need this. So maybe the lie (read 'expedient mean') wasn't so bad after all.

We all know this stuff at some basic level. We all are looking for some core belief that we can grab onto and use to make our lives better. The irony is that it's been right under our noses the entire time, and we ignored it.

You don't need to be a prophet, sage, monk, reverend, mullah, priest, or any other title to achieve lifelong happiness ... just use what you've already got. All I have done is reawaken this in your psyche. At least I hope that's what happened.

So what went wrong over the eons? Why have we lost these basics?

Much of it has to do with the basic human instinct to grab onto power and money. It's called lust and greed. Either we bully or cajole our way to the top of the heap, and find that it's not enough, so we find another heap to work our way up. I think it's why Buddha set up all the 'not-have' rules for monks, to keep them from playing this game ... but guess what, it didn't really work. Many of the monks still have a superiority complex because 'they' are following Buddha's teachings more closely and are 'more holy' than the laity.

Protestant Christians aren't exempt. I can't count the number of preachers that have risen to mega-church or

televangelist status, that ride around in limousines, sport thousand-dollar suits and play politics as a sideline. They preach salvation and donation, touting 'Ours is the only true teaching.'

Catholics have one of the greatest hierarchies in the world, sporting the largest library and collection of pornography on the planet ... for research, of course. There are subsects within the Catholic church ranging from Opus Dei to the Knights of Columbus. They maintain that theirs is the only true religion and version ... 'Ours is the only true teaching'.

Eastern Orthodox Christians have their own set of problems, ranging from a papal competition with the Catholics, to all the pomp, circumstance and liturgy that they can muster on a regular basis. They maintain that they are the direct descendants of Christianity through an unbroken chain of church leaders since Constantine gave Christianity the boost it needed to survive in the fourth century A.D. 'Ours is the only true teaching.'

Jews aren't exempt, either. Rabbis constantly fight over who has the correct interpretation of the Torah, and whose addition to the Talmud is more valid. Then you get into the sect warfare between the Orthodox, the Ultra-Orthodox, the Reform movement and myriad of other offshoots. 'Ours is the only true teaching.'

Islam is equally at fault, in a different direction. The Koran forbids a formal structure among its leaders, but is militant in its teachings ... most notably the Sharia, the strict Islamic law. Since God laid it down and made it available through his prophet Mohammed, it must be so. Over time, it too has split over the issue of power and control over the religion, pitting Shia against Sunni for supremacy of the faith, muscling out the Sufis and a host of other minor sects. Each one claims 'Ours is the only true teaching.'

I could go on, but you get the point.

Dang, I sound like Nichiren, the thirteenth century Buddhist monk who founded his version of Buddhism, while railing at length against all the other schools who in his

opinion were up to no good and could never lead a fly to Nirvana, let alone human beings.

However, I understand where he's coming from. Once the teachings get taken over by the religionists, the whole thing comes undone. It goes from being something personal to something universal and impersonal. Dogma trumps teaching and pretty soon, you get so many overlays that the original teaching is virtually unrecognizable.

In lots of cases, the sidetracks with charismatic religious leaders or even 'New Age' gurus, suck off people and suck up their money with little or no betterment of their lives in return, aside from an emotional high for a while. I remember that EST graduates were often accused of having to go back to EST and continue, because they needed 'booster shots' to keep them locked into the movement. Nothing new there, they all do it.

Even Nichiren fell heir to the traps of religiosity. He found his own way to what he believed to be the path to Nirvana, which wound up being religionized by his followers and disciples later on and Nichiren being deified. I wonder if he himself would recognize the structure that has grown up around his singular teachings on the Lotus Sutra, let alone what the Buddha himself would think of all of this. But then again, in the trait of 'expedient means', the Buddha would probably say 'Whatever it takes. If it works for one person, it's worth the effort.'

All these religions/movements have their proponents, to whom it is invulnerable to criticism and for which they have no doubt as to its authenticity and power. I humble myself before them for their dedication and belief. It just doesn't happen to be my dedication and belief. Once we go even the slightest increment beyond ourselves in our search for a better existence, we've lost the game and have to start over.

The frustrating thing about the fundamentals of Buddhism is that it makes so much common sense, and yet we don't seem to be able to see it without some of the trappings of religion thrown in for good measure.

I started this particular journey with the Nichiren folks in southern Oregon. As all Buddhists claim to, and few do, I questioned the validity of the teachings. I questioned the validity of everything that I was hearing. I wrote a number of essays examining parts of what Nichiren had put forth and how it was practiced. Out of it, I was led to re-examine the historical growth and mutation of Buddhist thought, and its religionization.

The problem, as with all religions, is that the dogma so surrounds the basics that they become obscured with other people's interpretations of what it all means. NONE of the core documents from any of the major religions was written down at the time, and was put to paper only after the oral tradition had been in place for anywhere from a few years to much longer. This is true of Buddhism as well. Who's to say that all the sutras/suttas are accurate? Who's to say that they haven't been added to and altered to suit the times that they were being used? I certainly can't.

But there is one set of basics which have been handed down over the ages for Buddhists, and that's the Eightfold Path that we've been looking at in this volume. It's a pretty simple set of basics that work. The hitch is in the implementation, as you have seen.

The Buddhist schools that have split off have all differed over the implementation, not the basics of the philosophy. They all have their own disciplines, power structures, and adherents. For those adherents, if it works for you, I admire you and urge you to continue. For those of us who are looking for our own customized, tailored to us version of Buddhist thought, I offer this as an alternative for the 'back to basics' crowd.

I would warn you, however, that the minute that you take what I have said as being gospel, or attempt to make me anything other than a messenger, you're asking for trouble, because you're doing what I've been howling about with every other religion ... putting it external. IT ISN'T. The minute you

do that, you've lost the entire concept. It is you and only you (sounds like a song, doesn't it.) In a word, DON'T.

So, my friends, we close out this volume. I hope you will read and reread parts of this to understand more fully these truths that you contain and can use to achieve your own version of enlightenment. Keep looking. Keep questioning. Keep the Eightfold Path. Your own personal Nirvana awaits.