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## **The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering**

By Bhikkhu Bodhi

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## Chapter III - Right Intention (Samma Sankappa)

(This chapter has been heavily abridged.)

The Buddha explains right intention as threefold: the intention of renunciation, the intention of good will, and the intention of harmlessness. The three are opposed to three parallel kinds of wrong intention: intention governed by desire, intention governed by ill will, and intention governed by harmfulness. Each kind of right intention counters the corresponding kind of wrong intention. The intention of renunciation counters the intention of desire, the intention of good will counters the intention of ill will, and the intention of harmlessness counters the intention of harmfulness.

Right intention claims the second place in the path, between right view and the triad of moral factors that begins with right speech, because the mind's intentional function forms the crucial link connecting our cognitive perspective with our modes of active engagement in the world. On the one side actions always point back to the thoughts from which they spring. Thought is the forerunner of action, directing body and speech, stirring them into activity, using them as its instruments for expressing its aims and ideals. These aims and ideals, our intentions, in turn point back a further step to the prevailing views. When wrong views prevail, the outcome is wrong intention giving rise to unwholesome actions. Thus one who denies the moral efficacy of action and measures achievement in terms of gain and status will aspire to nothing but gain and status, using whatever means he can to acquire them. When such pursuits become widespread, the result is suffering, the tremendous suffering of individuals, social groups, and nations out to gain wealth, position, and power without regard for consequences. The cause for the endless competition, conflict, injustice, and oppression does not lie outside the mind. These are all just manifestations of intentions, outcroppings of thoughts driven by greed, by hatred, by delusion.

Since the most important formulation of right view is the understanding of the Four Noble Truths, it follows that this view should be in some way determinative of the content of right intention. This we find to be in fact the case. Understanding the four truths in relation to one's own life gives rise to the intention of renunciation; understanding them in relation to other beings gives rise to the other two right intentions. When we see how our own lives are pervaded by *dukkha*, and how this *dukkha* derives from craving, the mind inclines to renunciation — to abandoning craving and the objects to which it binds us. Then, when we apply the truths in an analogous way to other living beings, the contemplation nurtures the growth of good will and harmlessness. We see that, like ourselves, all other living beings want to be happy, and again that like ourselves they are subject to suffering. The consideration that all beings seek happiness causes thoughts of good will to arise — the loving wish that they be well, happy, and peaceful. The consideration that beings are exposed to suffering causes thoughts of harmlessness to arise — the compassionate wish that they be free from suffering.

Since greed and aversion are deeply grounded, they do not yield easily; however, the work of overcoming them is not impossible if an effective strategy is employed. The path devised by the Buddha makes use of an indirect approach: it proceeds by tackling the thoughts to which these defilements give rise. Greed and aversion surface in the form of thoughts, and thus can

be eroded by a process of "thought substitution," by replacing them with the thoughts opposed to them. The intention of renunciation provides the remedy to greed. Greed comes to manifestation in thoughts of desire — as sensual, acquisitive, and possessive thoughts. Thoughts of renunciation spring from the wholesome root of non-greed, which they activate whenever they are cultivated. Since contrary thoughts cannot coexist, when thoughts of renunciation are roused, they dislodge thoughts of desire, thus causing non-greed to replace greed. Similarly, the intentions of good will and harmlessness offer the antidote to aversion. Aversion comes to manifestation either in thoughts of ill will — as angry, hostile, or resentful thoughts; or in thoughts of harming — as the impulses to cruelty, aggression, and destruction. Thoughts of good will counter the former outflow of aversion, thoughts of harmlessness the latter outflow, in this way excising the unwholesome root of aversion itself.

### The Intention of Renunciation

The Buddha describes his teaching as running contrary to the way of the world. The way of the world is the way of desire, and the unenlightened who follow this way flow with the current of desire, seeking happiness by pursuing the objects in which they imagine they will find fulfillment. The Buddha's message of renunciation states exactly the opposite: the pull of desire is to be resisted and eventually abandoned. Desire is to be abandoned not because it is morally evil but because it is a root of suffering. Thus renunciation, turning away from craving and its drive for gratification, becomes the key to happiness, to freedom from the hold of attachment.

### The Intention of Good Will

The remedy the Buddha recommends to counteract ill will, especially when the object is another person, is a quality called in Pali *metta*. This word derives from another word meaning "friend," but *metta* signifies much more than ordinary friendliness. I prefer to translate it by the compound "loving-kindness," which best captures the intended sense: an intense feeling of selfless love for other beings radiating outwards as a heartfelt concern for their well-being and happiness. *Metta* is not just sentimental good will, nor is it a conscientious response to a moral imperative or divine command. It must become a deep inner feeling, characterized by spontaneous warmth rather than by a sense of obligation. At its peak *metta* rises to the heights of a *brahmavihara*, a "divine dwelling," a total way of being centered on the radiant wish for the welfare of all living beings.

### The Intention of Harmlessness

The intention of harmlessness is thought guided by compassion (*karuna*), aroused in opposition to cruel, aggressive, and violent thoughts. Compassion supplies the complement to loving-kindness. Whereas loving-kindness has the characteristic of wishing for the happiness and welfare of others, compassion has the characteristic of wishing that others be free from suffering, a wish to be extended without limits to all living beings. Like *metta*, compassion arises by entering into the subjectivity of others, by sharing their interiority in a deep and total way. It springs up by considering that all beings, like ourselves, wish to be free from suffering, yet despite their wishes continue to be harassed by pain, fear, sorrow, and other forms of *dukkha*.

## Summary

To sum up, we see that the three kinds of right intention — of renunciation, good will, and harmlessness — counteract the three wrong intentions of desire, ill will, and harmfulness. The importance of putting into practice the contemplations leading to the arising of these thoughts cannot be overemphasized. The contemplations have been taught as methods for cultivation, not mere theoretical excursions. To develop the intention of renunciation we have to contemplate the suffering tied up with the quest for worldly enjoyment; to develop the intention of good will we have to consider how all beings desire happiness; to develop the intention of harmlessness we have to consider how all beings wish to be free from suffering. The unwholesome thought is like a rotten peg lodged in the mind; the wholesome thought is like a new peg suitable to replace it. The actual contemplation functions as the hammer used to drive out the old peg with the new one. The work of driving in the new peg is practice — practicing again and again, as often as is necessary to reach success. The Buddha gives us his assurance that the victory can be achieved. He says that whatever one reflects upon frequently becomes the inclination of the mind. If one frequently thinks sensual, hostile, or harmful thoughts, desire, ill will, and harmfulness become the inclination of the mind. If one frequently thinks in the opposite way, renunciation, good will, and harmlessness become the inclination of the mind (MN 19). The direction we take always comes back to ourselves, to the intentions we generate moment by moment in the course of our lives.

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