

Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness

By Bhante Henepola Gunaratana
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This well known Buddhist monk, born in Sri Lanka, educated in the U.S. and teacher of Buddhism in several American and foreign universities, and presently at his Bhavana Society Center in West Virginia, has completed this his second book on mindfulness and meditation. The themes of mindfulness and happiness are clearly expressed in simple, understanding terms with the application of the Buddhist realization of the Eightfold Path in our lives. Bhante shows the reader skillful ways to recognize that the mind filled with greed, hatred and delusion leads to suffering and continued wrongdoings.

The author introduces the terms “skillful” and “unskillful” with regards to thoughts, words and actions and gives many practical analogies of the Buddha’s ancient teachings in terms of one’s present-day experiences. The Buddha’s realization of the Eightfold Path, which occurred at the time of his enlightenment, was an expression of ways to end suffering and allow liberating insight—insight to happiness for all living beings.

In this text the author describes specific actions of the body, speech and mind which are unskillful and inevitably cause suffering. He explains in detail according to each step of the Eightfold Path how we can attain “skillful understand” (incidentally, the first step). He asserts that...“the basis of Buddhist morality is that acting in unskillful ways leads to unhappy results, and acting in skillful ways leads to happy results.” (p.27) This principle of cause and effect (karma) opens the door for the reader, giving a clear method for mindful thought and interpretation of all light steps of the Path.

Bhante Gunaratana, in his instruction of how to begin a practice of mindfulness, describes the method of attaining skill in the practice of vipassana meditation. He

gives a general definition of “mindfulness” as “a unique method of cultivating, moment-by-moment awareness of the true nature of everything experienced through the body and mind.” (p.17). His valuable instructions on the posture, place, and time dedicated to sitting meditation will motivate both the beginning and experienced meditator to a more dedicated practice. Suggestions for five strategies on dealing with the pain experienced in sitting meditation should resolve the meditator’s anxieties (psychological pain). Both types of pain are explained as awareness to skills in resolving other pain and how we can direct our pain, by mindfulness, to dissipate, the fifth, most successful method for setting the mind is to focus on the breath.

The author takes the reader through each of the steps of the Eightfold Path in an instructive manner, relating the methods of mindfully working the steps in ways relating to possible happenings in the readers’ lives. He never strays far from the pragmatic—a way to test one’s progress using the Path in Buddhist practice.

Finally, Bhante Gunaratana contends that when one is trapped in the cycle of unhappiness it is because people engage in misdeeds (unskillful behavior) due to faulty understanding and that their minds are poisoned by greed, hatred or delusion. The nature of morality is the nature of mindfulness. From the Buddhist standpoint, this morality must be embraced. Working out moral issues in life can be done by the Eightfold Path: skillful understanding and thinking in the Wisdom Group; skillful speech, actions and livelihood in the Morality Group; and, skillful effort, concentration and mindfulness in the Concentration Group. In a manner of encouragement the author suggests: “We must work slowly along the Buddha’s path of gradual training with much patience and encouragement...We all bring differences from our past experiences and the intensity of our dedication to spiritual growth.” (p.11) Morality is the foundation of all spiritual progress, and without which nothing of the path will work to produce happiness.

— *Thich An Hue*