a WHOLE-LIFE PATH

A Lay Buddhist's Guide to Crafting a Dhamma-Infused Life

GREGORY KRAMER

Insight Dialogue Community

Insight Dialogue Community
P.O. Box 99172
Seattle, WA 98139
InsightDialogue.org

Published 2020
First edition

Cover and interior design by Karen Polaski

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020916409

Print book ISBN 978-0-9666727-1-8

Ebook ISBN 978-0-9666727-2-5

This book is dedicated to the global community committed to following the thread of spiritual friendship to its fruition in a whole-life path of kindness, social responsibility, and liberating wisdom.

CONTENTS

Author's Note

Source of Citations

Except where specifically noted, all of the sutta references and quotations are drawn from Bhikkhu Bodhi's translations published by Wisdom Publications. These include:

The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya (1995; with Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli). Abbreviation in citations: MN.

The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya (2000). Abbreviation in citations: SN.

The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Anguttara Nikāya (2012). Abbreviation in citations: AN.

The Suttanipāta: An Ancient Collection of the Buddha's Discourses Together with Its Commentaries (2017). Abbreviation in citations: Sn.

Translations of Four Key Words

Within sutta quotations, I have replaced the translator's chosen English term for three key Pali words—*mettā, āsava, saṅkhāra*—with

three new terms to more clearly convey the meanings I believe are intended by the early texts. Also, I have left the Pali term *samādhi* untranslated instead of using the common translation of "concentration." I offer these retranslations as a practitioner and teacher, not as a scholar. Nevertheless, I believe their etymology fully supports the choices.

Mettā: This term is most often translated as *lovingkindness,* a construction devised by the first British translators of the Pali Canon. I have decided to render *mettā* as "true friendship" or to retain the Pali term. The word *love* is too easily construed as something emotional or, worse, distant, elevated from everyday access, not easily experienced, or less natural. *Friendship,* on the other hand, is a natural outcome of undefended availability to another and implies the essential quality of goodwill. However, where *lovingkindness* may be formalizing or distant, *friendship* alone errs on side of too mundane. Spiritual friendship, or *kalyāṇa-mittatā,* is closer to the mark but too easily leaves out the universal, unlimited nature of *mettā.* So I have added *true* to *friendship* to convey this sense of thoroughness or depth of friendship, goodwill, and, yes, universal love. *Mettā* is drawn from the root *mid,* which can imply softness or fatness, as well as love or friendliness. Rendering *mettā* as "true friendship" keeps the term close to *mitta, mitra,* and the Vedic *maitri.*

Āsava: The first English translations of the Pali Canon rendered *āsava* as "taints," and this rendering has carried through all of Bhikkhu Bodhi's influential and excellent translations. However, "taints" fails to capture the way this trio of ignorance, sensuality, and becoming overwhelm the mind. It also lacks some important etymological connections. I have chosen to render *āsava* as "intoxicants," following on of the Pali Text Society's indications: "spirit, the intoxicating extract or secretion of a tree or flower."[1] A similar rendering is "floods," a translation preferred by some contemporary teachers. Other teachers use "effluents" and "outflows," and both accord with the root etymology. The construal of "intoxicants" as both inebriating and poisonous is intended, as it implies the

temporary insanity of drunkenness. Fortuitously, this translation also opens up the introduction of the opposites of the *āsava* to be classified as agents of detoxification: wisdom for ignorance, relinquishment for sensuality, and effacement for becoming.

Saṅkhāra: Bhikkhu Bodhi and others translate *saṅkhāra* as "formations," meaning both mental formations (when employed in the context of the aggregates) and volitional formations (in the context of dependent origination). Bodhi has explained his choice of this rendering in his introduction to the *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*.[2] I respect his choices and explanations, but find that rendering *saṅkhāra* as "constructions" remains closer to the etymological root of "making together" while linking the contemporary mind to the use of constructions as they are found in modern and post-modern philosophy and hence in common usage (e.g., "how we construct the world"). Other translations capture this understanding with words such as *fabrications* and *concoctions.*

Samādhi: The most common translation of *samādhi* is "concentration." In our contemporary understanding, concentration usually has a rigid quality; the mind's attention is forcefully held on an object. This understanding is very different from how samādhi is described in the early Buddhist texts, where it is characterized by a mind both serene and gathered. Further, samādhi emerges out of rapture and happiness and generates further happiness and refreshment.

There is really no single English term that adequately captures the combination of power and stillness conveyed by *samādhi.* So after much reflection, I decided to leave the word *samādhi* largely untranslated.

Yet retaining the word *samādhi* presents its own set of problems. The English-Pali combination of "right samādhi" is accurate but awkward. Also, the Pali language allows for expressions of *samādhi* as, for example, a noun (*concentration*), a gerund (*concentrating*), and an adjective (*concentrated*). I have mostly substituted workable English words, and in one sutta quotation I coined the term *samādhied* to capture the adjectival expression of *samādhi.*

On Dhamma and Dharma

In my teaching and throughout this book, I use the word *Dhamma* to refer to the Buddha's teachings and to the natural law that these teachings describe. *Dhamma* is the Pali equivalent of the Sanskrit *Dharma.* Pali derives from the languages commonly used in Northern India in the Buddha's time. The Buddha taught in the popular tongue, so he could speak to even the simplest people. Sanskrit was a language of the elite, used in literature and in Hindu sacred texts. Eventually Buddhist texts also were composed and preserved in Sanskrit, and these two languages are present throughout Buddhist history. Pali was associated with the southern Buddhist lineages, mostly in Southeast Asia, while Sanskrit was the language of the northern lineages. Most Sanskrit Buddhist texts were translated into Chinese and Tibetan, and they have carried through to Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Tibetan forms of Buddhism, though each of these cultures also generated a considerable textual tradition in their own languages.

All of my Buddhist training has been with Theravada monastics from Southeast Asia. *Dhamma* rather than *Dharma,* like *kamma/karma, nibbāna/nirvāṇa,* and *sutta/sutra,* was the language in which I received the teachings. Naturally, I use this language today. Also, the word *Dharma* is burdened with a wide variety of additional meanings due to Sanskrit also being the language of much Hindu scripture. These meanings are often not in alignment with the Buddha's apparent usages of the word *Dhamma.* Using *Dhamma* has the benefit of identifying the referred teachings with early Buddhist texts, which I turn to as root sources.

CHAPTER 1

THE NEED FOR A WHOLE-LIFE PATH

The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path provides a wiser way through life than any offered by our conditioning. It's an intentional path through life's tangle. And intention is necessary. Any change for the good must face the momentum that made things as they are now. Old habits run deep within us; we complicate, palliate, protect, and meander. Norms are sustained in relationships. Patterns are perpetuated by family and social precedents. Organizational structures are built around ignorance, greed, and aversion. When we feel threatened or enticed, personal and social responses like aggression or lust often overpower reflection or compassion. Things big and small call for our attention, and mindfulness and self-awareness are not givens.

Although the Eightfold Path is an intentional path, designed specifically to counteract the ways in which our lives are compacted, we usually miss out on the full extent of the freedom the Path offers. Why? Because we apply the Buddha's teachings to our lives in only a semi-intentional way. If we truly aspire to ending our personal

ignorance and craving, supporting relationships rooted in mettā and compassion, and contributing to human flourishing and to a just and humane society, then we need a fully immersive, always-on engagement with the Noble Eightfold Path. We need to engage the Buddha's Path as a *whole-life* path.

THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT

You and I are so sensitive. Virtual clouds of nerves wrapped in skin, we are drawn to or repelled by every touch. The slightest changes of light trigger responses in the eyes; the slightest changes of air pressure alert the ears to the unexpected. Molecules from afar touch the nose; those nearby touch the tongue. Electrochemical changes in the brain register as thoughts that touch the mind. And when what contacts our senses is perceived as another person, neural and hormonal processes that evolved with the brain itself activate. All of these things are happening right now, as you read these words. Your sensitivities and mine are meeting right here.

This is how we meet the whole world. Placed in an environment in constant change, we organisms seek air, food, safety, and the comfort of others. Affection and loneliness, competition and fear, anger and isolation join the sharp and soft touches of the material world. But that world is out of our control. Hungers drive us, but we can't have what we want. The fragility of the body assures a constant flow of pleasure and pain, injury and illness, aging and loss. We feel belonging and isolation, protected and traumatized. This sensitive life culminates in our own death and the death of those we love.

The body-mind's sensitivity is the seedbed of longings and their occasional gratification. The entire organism tenses against the world's sensory and social onslaught, hungering in vain for stability and settling instead for temporary pleasant stimulation. We interweave with others to satisfy cravings and enhance protection; relationships and groups also become loci of action. Pings of pleasure cause a reflexive grasping as we struggle, individually and collectively, to hold on to what we like and avoid what we don't

like. This tension forms into a core sense of self, an "I" or a "we" that would be protected and satisfied. The self's appetite keeps us off balance as it clings to one thing (or person or group) and then another. Gripped by its project of satisfaction and becoming, the body-mind is blind to the fact that its suffering is self-inflicted.

There are no moments, no events, no interactions, no relationships that do not affect the body-mind. Every thought and action, here and now, combines with all we have done and said to determine the direction and tenor of our individual lives and society as a whole. Learning, memory, and family and cultural conditioning collude to form how we perceive the world. There is no moment when we, as individuals and as a society, are not navigating the body-mind's responses to the world, because every moment conditions the next.

The question is, *how* are we navigating these responses? If we choose to let wisdom guide us, our responses are intentional, and our movement through this life is conscious. If we choose to ignore our power to learn, our responses are habitual, and our movement through life is unconscious. Depending upon which choice we make, there is suffering or there is peace; there is cruelty or harmlessness.

THE PROMISE OF THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH

The Buddha recognized the suffering born of the body-mind's endless appetite, and despite the enormous challenges presented by his own untrained mind, he found his way clear to setting down the burden.

He described the human predicament in the Four Noble Truths. The first noble truth is the suffering (*dukkha*), at once blunt and subtle, of the driven life. His second noble truth recognized that suffering is born of the sensitive body-mind's endless appetite. The organism's longing for pleasure and stability is the urgent energy, the hunger (*taṇhā*), that drives suffering. His third noble truth, that cessation of this hunger will free us from the self-inflicted pain of

dukkha, provides a wholly new vision of human and social possibility: we need not be prisoners of our own ignorance and craving; a profoundly better life is possible for ourselves and for all. The fourth noble truth names the Noble Eightfold Path as the wisdom that, when applied intentionally, leads to a diminishing and even cessation of the ignorance and hunger that has been so painful for ourselves, so limiting to our relationships, and so harmful for society. The wisdom inherent in the Buddha's path allows us to navigate the body-mind's responses with greater dignity, choice, kindness, and the joy and equanimity intrinsic to awareness.

The Noble Eightfold Path, described by the early Buddhist texts and carried forward in multiple Buddhist religions, draws from the exceptional experience of an exceptional teacher. These teachings were offered as practical guidance for navigating the tangles at the intersection of the human organism and its changing environment, and the perspective is offered by someone who successfully traversed the path from bio-psycho-social reactivity to freedom of response within this very body and mind.[3] The Buddha's eight path factors—right view (*sammā diṭṭhi*), right intention (*sammā saṅkappa*), right speech (*sammā vācā*), right action (*sammā kammanta*), right livelihood (*sammā ājīva*), right effort (*sammā vāyāma*), right mindfulness (*sammā sati*), and right *samādhi* (*sammā samādhi*)—provide guidance for developing the mind and acting in the world. The teachings have been tested for millennia. They offer a wiser, more effective navigation system than whatever we might cobble together from our family, cultural, and formal education.

A WHOLE-LIFE PATH: AN IMMERSIVE PATH FOR BUDDHIST LAYPEOPLE

How much of the Path's full promise we experience depends on how we engage it. When we dabble in the teachings, we can experience a fraction of its liberative power, but not enough to fully escape from the body-mind's relentless habits or offer our highest gifts to a suffering planet. To bring about the profound

shifts we aspire to, both within ourselves and in our world, we must bring the teachings into every corner, every facet, every moment of our lives.

Historically, an immersive life has been available mostly to monastics, whose vow essentially stipulates a whole-life engagement with Buddhist principles and practices. But the Buddha's eight path factors can be applied to the totality of our lives as laypeople if we break down each path factor to its essences, then recast it with the assumption that each must encompass life as we actually live it today—with other people, sex, money, social injustice, technology, jobs, complex financial systems, and so on. A whole-life path is one in which the eight path factors are understood and intentionally applied in such a way that, taken together, no moment and no aspect of our individual or collective lives is left out.

The purpose of this book is to help you skillfully craft a whole-life path for yourself. It will point you to the breadth and depth, and the particulars, of the Dhamma's liberating possibilities and how they can be applied to every aspect of life—personal, relational, and social. You might think of it as a layperson's guide to a life inspired by monastic immersion, but that also values the challenges and opportunities of living in the cultured wilds of humanity.

Chapter 2 provides six tenets of a whole-life path. These tenets convey a sense of possibility and basic principles for applying the Dhamma in a whole-life way. They will help you absorb a sense of an always-on path and of how the riches of the early Buddhist teachings can come alive in your life.

Chapter 3 continues with a short look at "the path to the path." The Buddha taught that the practices of giving, morality, and true friendliness (mettā) come first, before the Dhamma of the Four Noble Truths. These are all relational practices, and none of them are optional. We then look at some basic frameworks for assessing the whole-life path to see whether we're on track. What does "right" mean in right view or right speech? What is wholesome and skillful? What is Dhamma, and what is not Dhamma? These frameworks will provide reference points throughout the remainder of the book.

Chapters 4 through 11 are dedicated to the eight factors of the Noble Eightfold Path. Each chapter includes a summary of the traditional understanding of the path factor. Then it extends this understanding to include the perspective of our contemporary lives, forged as they are in the cauldron of technology, presumed individualism, scientific viewpoints, the internet, and large social, economic, and national systems of support or oppression. For many in the West, life within these systems has been infiltrated by relative physical comfort and countless false urgencies. For many, this is a life short on the graces of loving relationship and community that should be our birthright.

The practices embedded in each chapter offer you the opportunity to not just understand how this factor can be lived within your whole-life path, but to check it out for yourself and help make the teachings experientially alive. I invite you to approach each practice in the spirit of *ehipassiko*, or "Let me try this and see what is true in my life."

CRAFTING *YOUR* WHOLE-LIFE PATH

The Buddha suggested that each of us craft a path that is most fitting for us. He explicitly noted that we can determine our path by giving attention to what works. The following teaching applies this notion to an individual discerning for themselves which of the four foundations of mindfulness is most suitable for them.

> Suppose, Bhikkhus, a wise, competent, skillful cook were to present a king or a royal minister with various kinds of curries: sour, bitter, pungent, sweet, sharp, mild, salty, bland.
>
> That wise, competent skillful cook picks up the sign of his own master's preference: "Today this curry pleased my master . . . or he spoke in praise of this bland one."
>
> That wise, competent skillful cook gains clothing, wages, and bonuses . . . because that wise . . . cook picks up the sign of his own master's preference.

> So too, Bhikkhus, here some wise, competent, skillful bhikkhu dwells contemplating the body in the body . . . his mind becomes concentrated, his corruptions are abandoned, he picks up that sign. He dwells contemplating feelings in feelings . . . mind in mind . . . phenomena in phenomena . . . While he dwells contemplating phenomena in phenomena, his mind becomes concentrated, his corruptions are abandoned, he picks up that sign.
>
> That wise, competent, skillful bhikkhu gains pleasant dwelling in this very life and he gains mindfulness and clear comprehension. For what reason? Because, Bhikkhus, that wise . . . bhikkhu picks up the sign of his own mind.[4]

This teaching is empowering: *you* discern what works and put it into effect. Each person's path arises from each person's life. We can craft a path on our own, and we can turn to others for guidance, inspiration, support, and energy. In each case, we reflect and adjust as we go. What is working? What is not?

In every moment of our lives, there are countless options for engagement. That's the key message of this book: the whole-life path is everywhere, and our perpetually creative, skillful move is to recognize where the path is manifesting *right now*. Just the math should be encouraging. There are eight path factors, and each can be cultivated (1) individually in formal practice; (2) interpersonally in formal practice; (3) individually in informal practice that is embedded in our lives; and (4) interpersonally in informal practice. Eight factors times four domains of application—that alone makes for thirty-two entry points. When you see that each factor has multiple elements, the options are further multiplied. Life is vast and, by definition, a whole-life path is as vast as life. We enter anywhere. In any moment we just need to see how to enter and then do it. The eightfold path schema is just a construct to help us do that. What is workable? Where can you find support of others? Where do you feel called?

Start anywhere you feel inspired. For example, you might reflect on your life's overarching direction (right intention). Maybe you feel drawn to the challenge presented by the explicit practices to steady

the mind (right concentration). You may choose to begin with an area in which you already feel some development, some success. For example, maybe you are already well established in speaking truthfully, and you'd like to leverage that to new practices of right speech and right expression. Or just observe your mind in this present moment and ask, "How clearly am I seeing the world right now?" Right mindfulness and view come together; it can be that simple. As you develop your version of the whole-life path, pay attention to what uplifts you, to what sustains your interest and brings a living sense of the path into everyday experience.

By definition, a whole-life path unfolds in the messiness and delicacy of life. Going against the stream of unkindness and injustice, against the tides of thirst for excitement and possessiveness, is a path of peace, but that does not mean it is all rosy. It is in this mix that the promise of liberation unfolds. Nibbāna is described as the pinnacle of equanimity, of contentment that is not dependent upon outer conditions. In a burning world, we need this. Acutely. In the midst of this equanimity, our whole-life path supports our aspiration to function from love. From here, any action can be wise action. And any wise action enables boundless change for the good.

CHAPTER 2

SIX TENETS FOR A WHOLE-LIFE PATH

From the beginning, my experience of the Buddhist path was inspired but fragmented. Formal meditation could be peaceful; daily life was agitated and crammed. Meditation retreats felt great, but I felt a split upon re-entry into everyday life. Elevated states gave way to the messy and confused "me" I was trying to improve. The beauty of giving and the power of morality, like the blissful states described in the discourses, felt a long way from my rumpled life. I longed for continuity, and I unconsciously believed it would manifest as a continuity of the mindfulness I experienced in sitting meditation practice. Yet how could that kind of continuity ever develop given my jumpy mind and busy life?

At the same time, it was painful to encounter my own unkindness. Experiences of pride, longing, and hardness made my mind hurt. The Dhamma sometimes felt far away. I had to consciously bring in questions that would reorient me: "Is this greed? What does it feel like?" "How am I fabricating a self right now around this conceit?" "Am I doing this nice thing out of kindness, hunger

for praise, or both?" I didn't know it at the time, but I was beginning to regard the Dhamma as a reference point outside the system of my conditioned views and personal obsessions.

As I continued to study the Dhamma, the teachings continued to excite and inspire me. I assumed the teachings really applied to my life, but it wasn't clear how I could implement them. Any time I interpreted a teaching as merely a description of my mind and life, the spark of conceptual interest I'd felt quickly faded. When I received that same teaching as a practice, something to be tested in my messy life, it invariably sprang to life as an embodied, richly textured experience. Likewise, when I interpreted the teachings as guidance for a unitary, heroic individual, they felt narrow and far away. As I learned to implement the Dhamma interpersonally and socially, the teachings became freely available and compelling to me.

The tougher life got, the more I felt called to put the teachings to work. I learned to tap into Dhamma wisdom in the midst of illness, death, emotional defeat, and the falls from grace that came with my privileged callousness. The Dhamma rose up in the hospitals I was staying in; in my kitchen, bedroom, and studio; and in all my relationships. When I excluded teachings that were difficult to absorb or held certain teachings at a distance, my path would reflect my narrow personality more than the Buddha's uplifting wisdom. When I included my present experience of shame, regret, or loss in the light of the Dhamma, something always opened up beyond my fabricated worldview—always.

Gradually, a workable whole-life path emerged. As I reflected on how this emergence was happening, I saw a set of tenets naturally underpinning the path:

1. Ground in the Dhamma.
2. Engage all the teachings as practices.
3. Exclude no moment, experience, or teaching.
4. Find each teaching in the here and now.
5. Let all the teachings in fully.
6. Engage the teachings individually, in relationship, and socially.

These tenets have served me well as I've sought to apply the Dhamma to the whole of my life: to meditation, intimate relationships, work, and to my participation in the human family. They've applied, more intuitively than explicitly, in times of struggle, when my mind has been unruly and my actions unskillful. Rooted in my experience of the subtle beauty, piercing intensity, and aliveness of the teachings, these six tenets have provided the grounding I need to skillfully meet life's complexities.

These tenets aren't abstract principles or directions to be followed. They're principles of engagement—a means of engaging the Dhamma regardless of what we're experiencing or doing. Taken together, they support a working relationship between formal Buddhist teachings and our lived lives. From this relationship, our whole-life path—what we do and how we live—naturally emerges.

What is the basis and purpose of each tenet?

TENET 1: GROUND IN THE DHAMMA

The earliest Buddhist teachings provide a sound, consistent basis for a modern whole-life path. They help us act skillfully with others, find peace even as the world rages, and turn towards joy and freedom even when our minds and lives feel tangled. All of the later Buddhist schools or contemporary approaches derived from Buddhism rest on this same foundation but don't focus explicitly on the early teachings. Zen teachings, for example, may emphasize lineage founders over early texts; mindfulness teachers have often chosen to assume a secular veneer and not refer to the root sources of their methods. However, by grounding in primary sources, we ensure that we don't lose our footing.

Because the Dhamma serves as the foundation of a whole-life path, unpacking each path factor from its original meaning can help ensure that it does not become oversimplified. Distortions can happen without realizing it when teachings move from person to person and culture to culture across two thousand years of pre-industrial, pre-technological history. Religious norms can

drain immediacy and relevance from this vital life guidance. To reclaim the aliveness, each path factor can be reduced to its essential meaning, and this meaning must be unpacked in such a way that we can apply it to life as we actually live it today—within our global economy, scientific mindset, and modern sense of individuality, relationship, and society.

TENET 2: ENGAGE ALL THE TEACHINGS AS PRACTICES

All of the earliest Buddhist teachings are practice guidance, not philosophy.[5]

On a whole-life path, we invite these teachings into our lives not as dogma, but as doorways to experience. Life is insistent, and the teachings are not abstract observations. The Buddha said many times that the grand philosophical questions were not important and not what he was teaching.[6] Suffering and the end of suffering are the kernels of the Buddhadhamma, and realizing these truths its central task.[7] This tenet calls us to take the teachings not as literature to interpret, but as practical guidance for our lives. To take the early discourses as descriptions of reality rather than guidance for how to live and learn is to immediately place them at a distance. ("This is a description of life" is very different from "These are practices for me to engage if I'm serious about untangling.")

Taking the path factor of right intention as an example, we examine present-moment experience with the framework "What aspect of experience right now is this thing called intention? What is my aim right now? What is the purpose of this action I'm engaged in? Which of my motivations are wholesome, and which are not?" As you'll see when we look in depth at right intention (see chapter 5), this investigation includes how we can cultivate specific, wholesome intentions as we mindfully engage in the world. There is mindfulness of present-moment experience, and this mindfulness is guided by wisdom that comes from outside the self-referential system. We are engaged in a practice that shifts our basic view of what it is to be

living in the world. A changed view yields changed experience and behaviors. This is the Dhamma at work.

TENET 3: EXCLUDE NO MOMENT, EXPERIENCE, OR TEACHING

The totality of the teachings applies to the totality of our lives as they actually are in this time and place.

Our entire life is our field of practice. It is in these everyday moments and encounters that we can so easily fall into mindless, even harmful, thoughts and behaviors. Because every moment and every experience matters, there is no moment, experience, thought, or action that is not part of the movement toward goodness or harm, happiness or suffering. Or put another way, what thought or action could possibly not be part of this movement, even if only to continue the psychological and neural-hormonal status quo? When we ask, "When is my path active?" the answer is, "Always."

The idea of an always-on, full-spectrum path might sound overwhelming. But really this tenet is just asking us to bring in this wisdom element as best we can. Yes, each of us will still be forgetful and tender. Our hearts will resist change to our cherished and painful patterns. But the Dhamma is here, in its patience and breadth, in each and every moment. When we recognize this availability, it can help us to more clearly discern wholesome perspectives and actions.

The Buddha helps us to understand that a pick-and-choose approach to the Dhamma will not yield the whole-life benefit. The guidance offered in the early Buddhist texts is vast, and much of what was offered has been either ignored by Western practitioners or watered down. Taking in the whole of the teachings strengthens their whole-life potency.

At the same time, by naming eight things to remember, the Buddha makes a life oriented toward unbinding simpler, more workable. That simple breakdown can cover all of this profoundly complex modern life because the essentials of the human body-mind remain mostly identical today to the what they were in

the Buddha's time: eyes and ears; sights and sounds; unspeakably complex minds; language, urges, and fears more elemental than culture; and lives fully interwoven with each other. We have the same astonishing capacity for learning; we also have an astonishing capacity to fool ourselves. This capacity continuum has been a key feature of social, political, and cultural thought across time. That's why the Path outlined by the Buddha in roughly 400 BCE is equally relevant here and now.[8]

TENET 4: FIND EACH TEACHING IN THE HERE AND NOW

Nearly all of the Buddha's teachings, even those on subtle aspects of body-mind and refined meditative states, can be directly experienced by just about everyone.

The Dhamma can illuminate present-moment experience as we're actually experiencing it. It is not distant or abstract. The Buddha taught as a fleshy human being to other fleshy human beings. His felt experience of sensations and emotions, of thoughts, and of worldly contacts was much the same as ours. The fact of the Buddha's humanity, no less than the fact of his release, are what make his life so inspiring. We think, "If he can do it, so can I." The Noble Eightfold Path is an explicitly human one. And it is explicitly available as *our* path, in these living moments.

Some teachings *are* subtle. For example, some teachings refer to exceptional depths of concentration, and fully understanding them is only possible when you have directly experienced the mind states or insights associated with those depths. But at least some aspect or trace of a teaching is usually available to us and can provide a valuable sense of direction. Most of us can experience most of the teachings here and now in their fullness. If we look, we often recognize the impermanence of feelings and thoughts, or the stress that often accompanies even pleasant experiences. Do not assume that any teaching is beyond you, too subtle for you, too tough for you to enact.

With this tenet, we come to see our lives as rich in possibilities for wholesome qualities and genuine insight. We contemplate the discourses as pointing to presently living capacities, asking not only, "What does this teaching mean?" but also, "How am I experiencing this teaching now?"

TENET 5: LET ALL THE TEACHINGS IN FULLY

Arms-length Buddhism doesn't serve us. For an unbridled experience of the teachings, we need to let them in all the way. Some of the teachings will challenge us, and that's okay. If we know this going in, we can accept the challenges and widen our sense of what's possible.

Inevitably, growth in understanding involves times of pain. Meeting our suffering directly is a prerequisite for release. Allowing joy to manifest is an essential source of energy and refreshment. We will feel vulnerable as our lives and relationships change. Still, we are called to let the teachings into our hearts. A path held apart from the most intimate, the most normal, and the most humble moments of our lives, a path relegated exclusively to weekly groups, retreat centers, or nightstand reading, will lack the strength of impact needed to see through a lifetime of entanglement and encourage deep realization. The Noble Eightfold Path is meant to fully infuse the human experience.

As we approach the Buddha's discourses, our modern, individualistic minds may be baffled by descriptions of elevated mind states. Our scientism may be challenged by teachings on rebirth, and our religions or cultures that posit a self or soul may not immediately mesh with teachings on momentariness and relinquishment. But we must be willing to be confronted by those challenges and willing to not know the answers. We cannot separate out mindfulness or those Dhamma teachings that immediately speak to us from the vast map of the Buddhadhamma and still enjoy the full benefits afforded by a whole-life, always-on perspective. We must allow the core teachings

to touch us, to impinge on our comforts, and disturb and inspire us to new ways of being. Vulnerable and humble, we invite the teachings to saturate us.

TENET 6: ENGAGE THE TEACHINGS INDIVIDUALLY, IN RELATIONSHIP, AND SOCIALLY

We are intrinsically social animals, and much of our suffering arises in relationship to other people. It is in relationship that a sense of self is generated. It is in relationship that the language from which we construct a world emerges. And in relationship, our reactive patterns surface in ways they don't when we are alone. Because we are relational and social, a whole-life application of the Buddhist Path must be too. Humans meeting humans is a complex thing. Our relatedness is always operating, even when we're alone, and it's not optional. We need the Dhamma wisdom at the tender points of contact. To truly live all of the teachings as practices, we are called to enact them not only individually, but also in our casual and most intimate relationships and in our engagement with society.

Just as suffering arises during interactions with others, so can the cooling of the heart. With others we can see what we cannot see alone. We may notice hunger and clinging, letting go and compassion, as they arise in our interactions, though these direct experiences remain invisible to us in our individual practice. Patterns of grasping and ignorance that have formed relationally are often most readily recognized and released in relational practice. Opportunities to cultivate compassion, to practice giving and kindness, and to promote peace and reconciliation are most fully available when we are in active relationship with others. Also, challenging teachings, like the subtleties of dependent origination or the suffering that comes with clinging to identity, will benefit from interpersonal and group practices, in which mindfulness, energy, and investigation are amplified as they are supported by more than one mind.

Because a whole-life path can be challenging—scary, confusing, tiring, and just difficult to sustain—the Buddha made clear the importance of spiritual friends and community.[9] Intuitively, we might sense how much we need the warmth, modeling, energy, and guidance of our friends on the path. The kindness and care of others can give us courage to let in the teachings all the way. The support of others who are also committed to mindfulness and the Dhamma we value helps us remember those values.

Finally, this tenet reminds us that our practices and our understanding of a whole-life path reflect a breadth of purpose: individually cooling the hungry and intoxicated mind, relationally living with greater kindness and compassion, and establishing a just and humane society. A whole-life path puts us in touch with both the humanity of the Noble Eightfold Path and with our own humanity.

PRACTICE

THE TENET SWEEP

The tenet sweep is an exploration of your foundational relationship with the Buddha's teachings. In sum, you are asking, "What is my relationship to the Dhamma right now?"

The following are some reflection questions for each tenet. As you become more familiar with the content and attitude of the tenets, each bare tenet will reveal its full wisdom tone. Soon you might well be able to mentally touch each tenet using hardly any words.

The tenet sweep is best undertaken with an attitude of kindness and patience. We are all ripening gradually in wisdom.

1 **Ground in the Dhamma.** What teachings can I apply to my life right now? Do I sense the working of natural laws: in my mind, in relationship, in the world? Can I name them, learn from them? As I study or reflect or engage in conversation,

am I considering what I am saying from the standpoint of the early Buddhist teachings? Other wisdom traditions?

2 **Engage all the teachings as practices.** Am I merely thinking about the Dhamma or actually practicing it right now? When I read or hear about a teaching, do I put it to work in my life? Which approaches to enacting the Dhamma fit best right now: close observation of my thoughts and behaviors, deep reflection on the teaching, concrete physical actions and social engagements?

3 **Exclude no moment, experience, or teaching.** Is this one moment, now, guided by wisdom? Am I excluding anything from the path: my intimate personal life, my professional life, my art or craft, my playtime? Am I avoiding teachings that are difficult to understand? Am I excluding teachings that challenge my belief systems?

4 **Find each teaching in the here and now.** Whatever teaching or practice I'm reflecting on or enacting, do I feel it is available for me to experience right now? How is this teaching manifesting in my thought processes, in my bodily experience? What is deeply true in this teaching, and how does it feel to touch that truth here and now?

5 **Let all the teachings in fully.** Which teachings are closest to my heart right now? Which am I guarded against or pushing away? Can I feel the possibility of an unintoxicated mind, balanced and clear? Can I sense in my body the energy, challenge, and possibility of the teachings? Am I moved and inspired by this Dhamma-rich path?

6 **Engage the teachings individually, in relationship, and socially.** Can I feel that the person I am with right now is a spiritual friend? How am I treating them—with

compassion, with generosity? How might we engage the path together, right now, in our conversation or in what we're doing? Could our togetherness be a doorway out of a heroic and lonely stance? How am I supported and morally challenged by society and humankind as a whole? How can I, alone and collaboratively, bring the wisdom of the Dhamma into these relational and social encounters?

Taken together, the six tenets are a way of charging our lives with wisdom. If the Buddha's teachings feel distant, or if the noises of a vacant culture dull our minds, we can invoke these six tenets one at a time or sweep through all of them. We can explicitly call them up to invigorate our relationship to the whole-life path, or we can sense their presence in the background of a busy but well-intended life. Guided like this, we can craft for ourselves a path that is relevant to a person living in contemporary society, replete with its tacit belief systems and technologies, its economic and social contingencies, and all the brokenness and beauty of its complexity. I know firsthand that such a path can make sense, draw you in emotionally, and fully allow the mystery of consciousness and our conjoined human hearts.

We must engage a whole-life path at an ever-shifting balance point between urgency and patience.[10] Death is near; unskillfulness and delusion are easy to get lost in, and we practice as if our hair were on fire.[11] This is our urgency. At the same time, we can feel a serene confidence in the path and our engagement with it. The Buddhist path has traditionally been conceived of as unfolding over multiple lifetimes.[12] Our modern cosmologies do not provide this same kind and patient framework, so we need to remember the deep roots of our hunger and confusion, let them build ardor in our hearts, and with patience, appreciate that a workable path is available to us here and now.