

3 The Lifelong Path of Contemplative Health

Without veering towards either of these extremes (hedonism or self-denial), the Transcendent One awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nirvana. And what, mendicants, is that middle way awakened to by the Transcendent One...? It is this noble eightfold path; that is, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

(Turning the Wheel of Teaching Scripture¹)

In this passage on Shakyamuni's first teaching of four noble truths, the eightfold path of self-healing that leads to the peace of Nirvana is offered as a middle way between extreme lifestyles of addictive self-indulgence and anorectic self-denial. The current relevance of this ancient text is clear. Our modern minds and lives remain torn by conflicts between addictive and anorectic extremes in our motivation and behavior. According to Buddhist contemplative science, it is our moment-to-moment struggle with such conflicting intentions and habits, not the prior history of our evolution or childhood, which most powerfully determines whether our lives tend towards suffering or happiness. That is why the causal efficacy of intentions and actions is the subject of one of the three core disciplines of contemplative healing. Traditionally called self-discipline or ethics, this final discipline requires the most introduction for our modern minds.

A Fork in the Road: Buddhist Ethics and Modern Therapy

Despite a growing interest in mindfulness and the virtues of acceptance, forgiveness, love, and compassion, modern psychology and the analytic mainstream of modern therapy are still rooted where Freud planted them: on the materialist side of our ambivalent culture. While his work was deeply ethical in the classical sense that it aimed to help people understand their own nature and master their self-destructive conditioning and instincts, Freud hid his moral intent behind the façade of a supposedly value-free science.² A man of his age, he shared the conventional wisdom that human nature was as aggressive as it was social; that our character was more or less fixed by genetics and development; and that the self-transcendent ethos of our religious traditions was a comforting illusion at best, and at worst, a repressive ideology of social control. This understandable bias was largely responsible for his break with the spiritually inclined Jung, his favorite disciple, as well as the marginalizing of later schools which explicitly value self-transcendence, like existential, humanistic, and transpersonal psychology.

So when it comes to the core discipline of Buddhist ethics, our cross-cultural matching of Buddhist psychology with modern therapy is not so simple. Buddhist psychology sees the path to optimal health not just as a function of gaining insight or changing mindset or emotion, but as inextricably bound with a more or less profound shift in our whole way of life. While modern therapy takes a permissive, facilitating stance towards an individual's chosen aims and lifestyle, emphasizing internal shifts catalyzed by the therapy, Buddhist psychology takes a corrective, educational stance that is highly concerned with the quality of moment-to-moment intentions and actions in daily life. In this, it anticipates recent findings that the lion's share of healing and change may take place outside the therapy, in the space of an individual's daily world.³ Buddhist ethics assumes that a lifestyle driven by post-traumatic distortions and stress-reactive emotions will invariably block healing and change, since its intentions and acts reinforce the very self-destructive instincts and conditionings that reproduce suffering. So it focuses on empowering individuals to motivate and sustain healthy changes in their way of life, changes that effectively take the individual down a road-not-taken by modern secular society and psychotherapy.

Traditionally, the practice of Buddhist ethics was not simply a matter of individual will, but was supported by engagement with the alternative rolemodels, traditions and communities that evolved around Shakyamuni

and his heirs. For some, going for help to Buddhist teachers, teachings and communities meant leaving lay life entirely, seeking what amounts to asylum from its stress and trauma in the healing institution of Buddhist monasticism. Once there, individuals would be immersed in a whole, alternative way of life, meant to help support them in renouncing and recovering from addictive motivation and compulsive action. Buddhist monastic sanctuaries and schools offered refuge to people of all backgrounds and walks of life who had experienced a devastating life crisis, such as the loss of a livelihood, spouse or child.⁴ These institutions would provide not just free food and shelter, but also free medical care, and a complete system of education and contemplative training.⁵

As time went on, Buddhist centers like Nalanda increasingly opened their doors to the lay community, admitting people as novices to heal and learn for a few years before returning to lay life, or accepting secular students for programs of higher education and professional training like our modern universities.⁶ As part of this open-door policy, these students would be immersed in the alternative, healthy lifestyle promoted in this tradition, learning skills of ethical self-discipline and self-mastery that would serve them on their return to lay life. And these open Buddhist centers also offered outreach to people in the everyday world, developing ethical guidelines and life-strategies suited to the demands of a lay life. The system of the gradual path on which this book is based was the fruit of an ambitious outreach by Nalanda masters and international visiting faculty to offer a healthier alternative life to both highly developed and underdeveloped Asian cultures.

While this history holds rich lessons on how to transplant Buddhist psychology into the cultures of the modern West, the challenge facing us is in some ways unique. Psychotherapy holds great promise for individual guidance and support of healthy change in our day, but the permissive, value-free culture of conventional therapy leaves people prey to the extreme lifestyles of their family of origin or ambient culture. Even today's contemplative therapies offer limited concrete ethical guidance and communal support for changes in behavior and lifestyle.⁷ As I see it, the main challenges we face here are three: (1) confronting traumatic or compulsive habits of emotion and action that are promoted as forms of healthy self-defense by mainstream society and psychotherapy; (2) confronting addictive and anorectic lifestyles that are normalized by our family or culture of origin, secular or religious; and (3) providing alternate role-models, traditions and communities that support healthy changes in motivation and lifestyle outside the bounds of conventional therapy.

***Karma* Theory: The Causality of Moral Development**

The first and hardest practical challenge, as we saw in the Introduction, stems from the contrast between the materialist ethics of modern psychology and the developmental bioethics of *karma* theory. Beyond its multi-life model of agency, *karma* theory challenges the permissive ethos of modern humanism by insisting that instinctive post-traumatic reactions like hyper-vigilance or the shame-based projection of blame and rage, while natural, only perpetuate trauma and must not be confused or indulged as part of the healing process.⁸

This challenge is based on the prime, causal assumption of *karma* theory: that specific intentional acts have determinate effects. Negative emotions like anger, for instance, are seen as invariably endangering positive human development, regardless of whether the anger motivates the most wanton violence or the most legitimate self-defense. While *karma* theory acknowledges the quantitative difference between the harm done by anger that is sadistic, relished, and condoned, versus the harm done by anger that is involuntary, repugnant, and regretted, it does not waver in its insistence that the developmental effect of anger is to reinforce the cycle of stress and trauma, and hence promote long-term suffering. In this it is consistent with contemporary research suggesting that anger is a general risk factor for a wide range of physical and mental health problems in adults and children.⁹

More challenging still, in contrast to the rights-based ethics of modern humanism, the bioethics of *karma* insists that injuries inflicted by others harm an individual's development less directly than indirectly, by serving as an objective condition which invites the traumatic distortions and destructive emotions that are the most serious causes of developmental effects on the injured party. Interestingly, this stance is in line with Freud's controversial view that the source of neurosis may be as much in the individual's mind as in the failings of the environment. And it helps explain the enormous range of individual responses to seemingly similar traumas. Yet there is no denying that this strict insistence on the individual mind's primary causal role in development challenges popular beliefs about childhood and adult trauma, and may be all too easily confused with blaming the victim.

No matter how sensitive or difficult it may be, the Buddhist view that our own intentional acts are the

primary determinants of our development puts a whole new spin on the victim-of-childhood narrative that has become something of a fixture in modern therapy.¹⁰ By insisting that harm done by our own misperceptions and stress-reactions, however innocent and unavoidable, outweighs the harm done by others and can only be undone by changing our minds, *karma* theory holds us to a higher standard of responsibility for our personal suffering and happiness. Yet it also empowers us by insisting that we have the potential to free our minds from the self-protective emotions and habits activated in childhood, emotions and habits we typically come to identify as “me” or “mine,” i.e., as fixed in our nature or personality.

Time and again, I've seen people free themselves from lifelong patterns of internal or interpersonal conflict by following the Buddhist ethical path of purging their minds of distortions and compulsions developed through trauma in childhood or adulthood. Once they see their own active role in perpetuating the cycle of trauma, people can finally break free of the passive, victim stance that locks us into a hostile dependence on parents and others. This freedom allows us for the first time to see the cycle of stress and trauma objectively: as a multi-life chain-reaction of destructive instincts and habits transmitted across generations and afflicting all humanity in one way or another. And it also yields the deep transformation of self modern therapy calls deep character change and Buddhist psychology calls the transition from an alienated to a noble personality.

Without this behavioral component of healing and change, even the most robust integration of mindfulness or contemplative insights into modern therapy will be incomplete and yield only a fraction of the efficacy of Buddhist psychology. As I said in the Introduction, I see the integration of *karmic* bioethics not as a romantic mission, but as a scientific refinement of evolutionary psychology. While it involves a dramatic shift in our view of the way development works, the shift is consistent with the insights of Freud, Jung, Piaget, Nagy and others, that the developing mind has a causal efficacy of its own, set within the soft evolutionary process of preserving learned patterns of perception, emotion and action within and across individual lives.¹¹ This view sees the human infant not as a passive, blank slate or innocent victim, but as a naturally powerful, sovereign agent of its own social learning and moral development.

Healing and the Middle Way: Challenging Our Extreme Lifestyles

The second challenge of translating Buddhist ethics into the contemporary West is finding skillful ways to confront addictive and anorectic lifestyles that are normalized by our mainstream cultures. Addictive habits seen as normal in our secular mainstream, like ritualized social drinking or the workaholic pursuit of wealth or position can have an insidious effect on the mind. Likewise, anorectic habits seen as normal in our religious mainstream, like suppressing distress or stigmatizing non-conformity, can also have an insidious effect on the mind that reinforces repressed trauma and blocks healing change. Yet the non-directive ethos of modern therapy leads many therapists to minimize the impact of seemingly “normal” addictive lifestyles, and to attribute the ills and blocks they cause to fixed mental disorders that supposedly require chronic treatment. And while conventional therapy typically challenges repressive religious worldviews and lifestyles, it does so in a biased way that fails to acknowledge the potential benefits of a healthy spiritual outlook or sober lifestyle, alienating the spiritually inclined.¹²

By contrast, the middle way of Buddhist ethics exposes the addictive pleasures of a materialist lifestyle as self-medication for the deep discontent of a life driven by a false sense of alienation and scarcity. In place of the vain pursuit of security through consumption, Buddhist ethics offers a path to sustainable well-being and happiness through taming the inner demons of self-reification, attachment and rage, while cultivating the inner peace, tolerance, and benevolence that allow us to feel lasting contentment within. On the other hand, this centrist ethics exposes the anorectic self-denial of fundamentalist lifestyles as a wishful escape from the insecurity of a life based on a regressive fantasy of an eternal, unchanging self, spirit or soul. In place of a regressive faith that we can be saved from the laws of cause and effect, Buddhist ethics offers a path to sustainable well-being through facing the reality of our impermanence and interdependence, while cultivating the genuine self-knowledge, insight, and wisdom that allow us to master the causality of freedom and happiness.

In my experience, the challenge here is best met by translating Buddhist ethics as an evidence-based behavioral middle way that avoids such lifestyle extremes. Contemporary research on the neuroscience of stress, addiction, and trauma increasingly confirms the corrosive effects such driven lifestyles have on the mind-brain.¹³ Such research supports the Buddhist ethical view that all compulsive ways of life promote mental, physical, and existential suffering, including premature illness, aging, and death.¹⁴ On the other hand, the new positive psychology has convincingly shown that the benefits of a spiritual ethos or lifestyle come not

from self-denial or fear-based conformity, but from the direct causal benefits of peaceful and benevolent habits on the body and mind.¹⁵ By supporting the centrist guidelines of Buddhist ethics with these new sciences and weaving them into a contemplative lifestyle therapy tailored to our ways of life, I've found very palpable gains in the efficacy of psychotherapy.

It Takes a Village: Providing Intensive Support for Life-Change

The third challenge to be faced in transplanting Buddhist ethics into the West is providing alternate role-models, traditions and communities outside the bounds of conventional therapy to support healthy changes in motivation and lifestyle. Despite all we've learned from object-relational analysis, interpersonal psychology, and family systems theory, the communal aspect of healing is still largely neglected by the individual-centered paradigm of most modern therapies. Although most clinicians are well aware of the potential for group modalities to complement and enhance individual work, good group therapies are hard enough to start and run that they are in short supply. As a consequence, most therapists are trained to see groups as luxuries, dispensable to their work. My experience with the Buddhist tradition has taught me that the corrective impact of being part of a genuinely healing group, institution or community adds a depth and breadth to self-healing that in most cases cannot be provided by any amount of individual therapy.

The best case for the power of a communal approach to psychological healing and change comes from the unconventional model of Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). Inspired as I said by the traditional teaching approach of a Zen Buddhist community, DBT sets individual therapeutic bonds within a system of corrective social learning and support, including a group education in contemplative insights, methods, and life-skills. What's notable about this approach is its intensive structure and immersive quality, both of which lend DBT a bit of the feel of a healing family or village with an alternative, corrective culture. Of course, the therapy still must be time-limited, and is typically tailored to a subset of people with serious childhood trauma and a history of self-injury.

One of my intentions in founding Nalanda Institute was to be able to extend this Buddhist-inspired communal learning paradigm in ways that would replicate its original open format of lifelong contemplative learning for all. The classes, workshops, and retreats offered by the Institute provide people who have been or are now in therapy with a source of self-healing insights, skills and life-strategies in a setting of ongoing guidance and communal support for contemplative life-change. In effect, the Institute offers a bridge between the mainstream contexts of mind/body medicine and psychotherapy and the more traditional communities teaching Hindu yoga or Buddhist meditation in a more religious or culture-specific way.

Buddhist Ethics: The Behavioral Science of Buddhist Psychology

While linked with a popular system of religious beliefs and cultural values, at its heart Buddhist ethics is the behavioral science of Buddhist psychology. Unlike our behavioral psychology, it treats intention or motivation as even more crucial to the developmental effects of actions than overt vocal or physical behaviors. Yet it also insists that true insight or a good motivation alone is not enough: our daily habits and lifestyle must undergo real change if we want our minds and lives to change. And since we human beings are such thoroughly social animals, we rarely if ever change in a void. For most of us, profound personal change involves communal change, that is, taking part in an equally profound change in our social and cultural ways of life. The role of the ethical discipline of Buddhist psychology is no more or less than to help people to initiate, guide and sustain the gradual transformation of their way of life—from a familiar lifestyle that conforms to a compulsive mainstream, to an alternative lifestyle that supports more contemplative, peaceful ways of being.



Figure 3.1 Gunaprabha, Master of Behavioral Science

In the rest of this chapter, we'll survey the practical dimension of Buddhist psychology following the eight-step map of the journey to contemplative living spelled out in the fourth noble truth. Although technically, only the third, fourth and fifth steps are explicitly devoted to building ethical self-discipline, the entire eightfold path maps the practical journey of self-transformation which comes within the domain of ethics broadly conceived. In what follows we'll survey that domain by reviewing the eight steps in light of their role in the work of behavioral life-change.¹⁶ To help flesh out the key aspects of this work, I'll cross-reference the behavioral map of the eightfold path with two maps that cover the cognitive and motivational aspects of contemplative self-transformation. These coordinated maps are the map of eight insights within the self-healing horizon of the gradual path of contemplative living,¹⁷ and the map of the five paths of purification which traces our progress transforming obsessions and compulsions into renunciation, true happiness and benevolence.¹⁸

The First Step: From Self-Deceptive Worldviews to Valid Knowledge of

Karma

The first step on the eightfold path is to develop a realistic view of the nature and causes of suffering *versus* happiness. As we saw in quickly reviewing the path of knowledge in chapter 2, generally this involves seeing through any view of the world that makes us feel someone or something outside our own minds is responsible for our suffering and happiness. In positive terms, this means grappling with the profound insights spelled out in the Buddha's four noble truths. From the perspective of behavioral change, these healing truths can be boiled down to one ethical challenge. However identified we are with our suffering and however driven we feel by forces beyond our control, the four truths convey Shakyamuni's fundamentally ethical insights that the forces driving our compulsive life are within us, and that we alone have the power and final responsibility to make or break the grip they have on our minds and lives.

Seen in this light, the truth of suffering means that our misguided intentions and actions alone are the engines which create and recreate lifestyles of bondage and dissatisfaction; the truth of origin spells out exactly how our misguided actions, driven by the cycle of stress and trauma, reproduce such a compulsive form of life; the truth of extinction affirms that we and we alone have the power to break the spell of instincts and habits that perpetuate and reinforce such compulsive life; and the truth of the path prescribes the steps of learning, healing and change by which we can shift the course of any given life from compulsive repetition to mindful freedom.¹⁹ In terms of ethical practice, the step of cultivating a realistic view comes down to understanding the key insight of Buddhist psychology—for better or for worse—our way of being in the world is the developmental effect of the intentional acts of our own god-or-demon-like minds, informed by good and bad models and habits of action passed by learning from generation to generation.

The Ten Paths of Action: The Commandments Explained

In practice, the first step on the path of Buddhist behavioral ethics is to arrive at a realistic view not just of our god-like role in our own development, but also of the kind of intentional acts which impede or promote health and happiness. Most moderns who turn to Buddhist culture for a humanistic alternative to the culture of monotheism are surprised to find the list of negative versus positive modes of action almost identical to what we know as the Ten Commandments. This coincidence challenges our materialist preconception that Western religious ethics are unrealistic cultural taboos, especially since the Buddhist rationale for its list of ten do's and don'ts dispenses entirely with any image of reward or punishment and explains them instead by a naturalist logic that anticipates current health psychology and positive psychology.

The idea is that the ten modes of negative action have developmental effects which reinforce the grip of violent, antisocial instincts of stress and trauma, while the ten modes of positive action have effects on development which cultivate non-violent, social instincts of peace, trust and cooperation.²⁰ Given the overwhelmingly social and cultural nature of human life, especially in the unnatural state of civilization, the progressive modes of social behavior naturally prepare us to meet the challenges our daily lives, while the reactive modes of antisocial behavior are naturally maladaptive. For clarity, the list of negative actions is usually cited along with their developmental effects, and contrasted with the list of positive alternatives, as follows:

Ten Modes of Negative Action

1. Violent actions lead to traumatic injury;
2. Compulsive acquisition leads to scarcity;
3. Perverse sexuality leads to frustration;
4. False speech engenders mistrust;
5. Slander engenders disrepute;
6. Abusive speech engenders isolation;
7. Idle speech engenders contempt;
8. Covetous intent results in dissatisfaction;
9. Malicious intent results in insecurity;
10. Unrealistic views result in confusion.

Ten Modes of Positive Action

1. Non-violence leads to peace;
2. Generosity leads to abundance;
3. Sublimation leads to satisfaction;
4. Honest speech engenders trust;

5. Tactful speech engenders respect;
6. Caring speech engenders leadership;
7. Meaningful speech engenders authority;
8. Philanthropic intent results in contentment;
9. Benevolent intent results in confidence;
10. Realistic views result in clarity.

Of course, developing a realistic view is not the same thing as perfecting the life-shift from negative to positive actions. In fact, it mainly involves recognizing the need for this shift, by clearly understanding the behavioral causality linking actions with their developmental effects. Seeing this causal link puts teeth into the insight that our minds are naturally free and ultimately responsible for the development of our personality, health and well-being. It is this empowering and sobering recognition of our mind's god-like role in our lives that leads to the second step: realigning our intentions from negative to positive, following the principles set out in the two tenfold lists.

In effect, the first step addresses only the final item on the lists, obliging us to look at our thoughts and perceptions themselves as developmentally crucial acts.²¹ Seen in this light, the analysis and correction of our unexamined views of ourselves and our world appears not just as a matter of intellectual curiosity, but as an ethical responsibility we cannot abdicate or delegate to experts or authorities, at least not without risking real harm to our future and the future of our world. While we covered the nuts and bolts of this analysis and correction in exploring the path of knowledge in chapter 2, it is Buddhist ethics that helps spell out the healing spirit and true intent which must motivate and guide our progress on that path.

Mapping Contemplative Insight: The Reflections of the Gradual Path

While the eightfold path maps the journey of self-healing for all who wish to follow in the Buddha's footsteps, it was initially developed for individuals choosing to opt out of the often overwhelming stresses of lay life and adopt a monastic lifestyle. To make the journey more accessible to lay people in the world, Nalanda's masters evolved the gradual path as a system of self-analysis and lifestyle change. The gradual path consists of a sequence of reflections, contemplations and practices that systematically prepares people to build a contemplative life in the world, by addressing the personal, social, cultural and natural challenges of daily living.

Since this system has been presented in many formats over the centuries, for simplicity's sake I'll present it in the format I chose for this book, covering what I call the four horizons of human development.²² Within the first horizon, devoted to personal self-analysis, self-healing, and self-care, I'll touch on eight key points of reflection which highlight the cognitive dimension of the first and narrowest scope of Buddhist ethics, concerned with personal aims and needs. Although these eight points don't line up exactly with the steps on the eightfold path, for convenience, we'll touch on one point in the context of each of the steps.

The First Reflection: The Precious Freedom and Opportunity of Human Life

Alongside the first step of realistic view, the first point of reflection on the gradual path is to appreciate the boundless potential and value of having a precious human life. While at first blush this might seem to contradict the initial emphasis of the first step—contemplating the noble truths of suffering and its origin—in fact it goes straight to the heart of the truths: the Buddha's insight that we all have the potential for the true freedom and happiness of Nirvana. While every individual and each form of life is equally deserving of freedom and happiness, human life is especially precious because of the potential we have evolved to free our minds from the self-limiting instincts and habits that have locked most living beings throughout history in a traumatic struggle for survival.

The best way to get the real flavor of this insight is by following the traditional reflection that our lives are precious because we've been born with a human body and mind, in a life endowed with eight freedoms and ten opportunities.²³ Of the freedoms, five relate to being born free from the bonds of non-human forms of life, and three relate to being born free from the bonds of a human life of extreme deprivation. While these reflections are cast in the traditional terms of the multi-life cosmology of *karma*, it helps for us moderns to remember that the forms of life we regard as mythological—hellish, ghostly, titanic, and divine—are viewed in the scientific teaching tradition as mentally created ways of being rather than the fully embodied

psychophysical forms of humans and animals.²⁴ So a psychosocial reading of this reflection is neither novel nor imposed. Hellish lives are compulsive lives driven by the cycle of violence; ghostly lives are addictive lives consumed by endless craving and insatiable appetite; animal lives are reactive lives driven by the cycle of trauma and survival; titanic lives are obsessive lives driven by unbridled envy and competition; and divine lives are deluded lives driven by irrational pride and narcissism.

Among the last four freedoms, three consist in having a life free from the constant exposure to physical pain, hunger or the consequences of a cognitive handicap. The fourth consists in freedom from the limits of a godly life in which we have so much pleasure and are so insulated from suffering that we get locked in self-satisfied complacency, without any motivation to learn, grow or change. The gist of the first four freedoms is that a normal human life is precious because it represents a natural golden mean: an ideal form of life in which we feel safe and comfortable enough for true life learning, yet not so comfortable that we lack the motivation to develop ourselves.

Along the gradual path, the preciousness of life is fleshed out further by contemplating ten opportunities that make human life precious. While some of these—like having a human body and mind with intact faculties—seem clear enough, a look at the fine print shows how very different the Buddhist view of opportunity is from a modern vision like the American dream. From a Buddhist vantage, the rare good fortune of being born human is not having the opportunity to pursue and enjoy material wealth and comfort, but having the optimal evolutionary platform for learning to free oneself from the archaic instincts and habits that lock us into a garden variety life of stress and trauma.²⁵

In fact, eight of the ten opportunities are opportunities to gain freeing self-knowledge and self-mastery, rather than opportunities for material gain. These include being born in a place where contemplative traditions like Buddhism flourish; where one is sheltered from the culture of violence that might lead one into a life of violent crime; and where one is encouraged to respect contemplative traditions, literature and learning. The point is further underscored by the fact that five of the ten are cultural opportunities involving access to contemplative education. These include birth in an age illumined by the teachings of enlightened sages like Shakyamuni, birth in an age when contemplative traditions are alive and well, access to contemplative communities which provide social support and guidance for contemplative learning, and access to living mentors who can provide personal support and guidance for contemplative learning.

While one might conclude from this list that Buddhist ethics sees no value in material wealth and a life of leisure and social mobility, in fact this contemplative culture doesn't avoid or demean a comfortable life, but rather *presupposes* one. As hard as it might be for us to believe, this ancient Indian tradition takes for granted a broad and continuous access to material abundance and social advancement, as we do in the contemporary West. The human question it seeks to answer is the one we face today: after material wealth, what's next? In this sense, it is unlike the spiritual traditions of the West, which arose in conditions of relative scarcity, among oppressed or marginal social groups. In contrast, the Buddhist tradition arose in the safest, richest and most tolerant center of the ancient world, lead by a powerful prince of the ruling class, and was closely allied with the growth of the cosmopolitan business class. So while the monastic tradition he founded has some elements in common with Christian monasticism in the West, its ethos is closer to those of contemplative cultures which offered liberal education as a gateway to a better life in the world, like modern liberal arts colleges or the ancient Confucian academy.

Mapping Self-Transformation: The Five Stages of Buddhist Practice

Alongside the behavioral map of the eightfold path and the cognitive map of the gradual path, the third perspective we will take on the ethical journey of Buddhist psychology is the perspective covered by the motivational map of the five stages of purification. Also known as the five paths of practice, these stages obviously overlap with the eight steps and eight reflections which map the journey of Buddhist ethics from the perspectives of behavior and insight. The focus of these stages is to map the journey of contemplative self-healing from the standpoint of the gradual removal of obstacles which block our potential to motivate and sustain healthy change. The blocks which obscure that potential are of two kinds: cognitive and affective. So the stages of the path of purification map the internal progress made in seeing through ever deeper and subtler levels of misperception and in transforming ever more primal and instinctive forms of compulsive emotion and misperception.

Since the first stage bridges the first through the fifth steps, we will discuss it in several installments. Called the path of accumulation, this stage has three parts: accumulating the insight that supports letting go of attachment to our physical bodies; accumulating the perseverance that supports letting go of negative actions and cultivating positive alternatives; and accumulating the willpower that supports a genuine

contemplative life. We'll discuss the first part along with steps one and two; the second part along with steps three and four; and the last part along with step five.

The Truth that Frees: The Accumulation Stage, Part One

On the first step of cultivating a realistic worldview, we begin to accumulate the insight that helps us let go of our unrealistic view of our bodies as fixed bases of endless pleasure and lasting happiness. Traditionally, this first phase in the accumulation stage works by applying the four scopes of mindfulness to the four noble truths, and arrives at insights into the four characteristics of things we mentioned in chapter 2.²⁶ Since this first part of the first stage spans the first two steps, the first step involves bringing mindfulness to the first two truths, suffering and its origin. According to this map, sustained, complete mindfulness of the living, breathing body serves as a basis for contemplating the noble truth of suffering. While we instinctively grow to reify our bodies as the fixed, solid, and unitary basis for our sense of our own personal identity and reality, mindfulness reveals it as a complex system of constantly changing, totally interdependent elements. Eventually this practice yields the insight that the body is not as we naïvely take it to be, but is in fact an impermanent flux which we cannot cling to or grasp.

In essence, this insight exposes the true nature of our chronic condition: our unexamined life is like a house built on sand. Our whole sense of security, identity and reality has gotten wrapped up in a profound self-deception that sets the stage for an inexorable, tragic downfall. By projecting our naïve wish to have a fixed place in the world onto the body, and by clinging to the fantasy that the body is that place, we make the natural flow of change that actually supports life seem like a cruel plot against us, a traumatic nightmare. Eventually, we must see that our own sleight of hand—or rather of mind—is what lies behind the sense of alienation and trauma we inject into the fact that injury, illness, aging, and death are not curses but the natural costs of having a living body in the first place. Contemplating this insight into the first noble truth helps us stop reifying and clinging to the body, and so prepares us to truly renounce the life sentence of repetitive and preventable suffering which we alone can impose on ourselves.

Once we gain this first degree of renunciation, mindfulness of sensation serves as a basis for deepening renunciation by contemplating the second truth: the origin of suffering. With sustained, complete mindfulness of sensation, we come to see that our embodied lives are not filled with the constant, stable satisfaction we want or imagine but are a bumpy, roller-coaster ride, oscillating between fleeting highs, long stretches of indifference, and inexorable lows. This window into the raw feel of our embodied lives gives us a clear view of the normally unconscious chain of causality which drives us to seek boundless pleasure and lasting happiness by practicing addictive and compulsive habits that prove inevitably disappointing. By contemplating the causality of stress and trauma taught in the second truth we gradually arrive at the insight that any life driven by that compulsive cycle is dissatisfactory. Applying this insight to the cycle of craving, fleeting pleasure and numbing indifference that grips our sensitive bodies helps us eventually renounce our deluded attachment to the body as a source of limitless, lasting pleasure. So contemplating the second truth and the insight that compulsive life is dissatisfactory prepares us to fully renounce the chains that bind us to a body hooked on the addictive cycle of stress and trauma.

The Second Step on the Eightfold Path: Authentic Intentions

The corrective self-analysis and release of attachment on the first step brings us to the second leg of the eightfold path: the deeper shift away from the compulsive motivations that drive the cycle of stress and trauma, towards the genuine positive intentions of non-attachment, non-violence and non-confusion. A key feature of the Buddhist ethos of *karma* is the insight that of all the activities that impact development, the most basic mental acts of intention are primary. This is because, according to Buddhist psychology, these precede all other activities of mind, speech and body, setting their tone and direction in a way that determines the substance of their developmental effects.

In terms of the psychology of stress and trauma, the shift of step two corresponds to a healing transition away from the traumatic self-involvement at the heart of all stress-reactivity towards the empowered self-confidence or self-efficacy that is the well-spring of stress-tolerance, resilience and proactive engagement. As a consequence of this deep shift, we can begin letting go of the oscillating post-traumatic modes of addictive attachment and compulsive aggression, as well as to cultivate their positive alternatives, true benevolence and radical acceptance. These deep shifts in primary motivation are the basic changes in mental activity prescribed by the eighth, ninth and tenth modes of action.²⁷ In terms of Buddhist ethics, this dramatic change in the

direction of our mental life from stress-reactive insecurity and compulsion to contemplative presence and confidence is precisely what the second step on the eightfold path is made of.

Healing Refuge and Healthy Reliance: The Social Matrix of the Second Step

While the shift in primary intentions is an internal one, from the traditional standpoint it doesn't happen in a social or cultural vacuum. In particular, the intentional shift of the second step is part of gradual process of renouncing our habitual dependence on familiar views and attachments and coming to rely instead on the realistic views and healthy supports provided by Shakyamuni's example, teaching and community. This shift in orientation or reliance—called taking refuge—cannot truly take place without a realistic view of why and how the eightfold path can help change the course of our lives away from suffering and towards happiness.²⁸ When preceded by such clarity, the growth of bonds of realistic confidence and reliance is crucial to the intentional shift away from an alienated attachment to the familiar, towards healing engagement with truly reliable individuals, knowledge, and groups.

This shift in some ways resembles the early process of engagement in psychotherapy in which people come to feel a greater sense of safety, hope and possibility based on accepting a more realistic view of their suffering and engaging in the “holding environment” of a healing alliance. Yet it is also quite different, mostly obviously because of the ethical dimension of Buddhist psychology. Since insight alone is not enough from a Buddhist perspective, if healing is to occur our deepest intentions must gradually shift in accord with fresh insights, followed by outward behavior and lifestyle. And since any human life is inexorably social and cultural, these personal shifts must be reflected in and supported by engagement with new social networks and new ways of being in the world.

The Second Reflection: Accepting the Immanence of Death

Alongside the behavioral dimension of the second step, the second insight to be cultivated on the gradual path is the awareness of death.²⁹ At the opposite existential pole from the first reflection on the preciousness of life, this insight plays a key role as the ultimate test and touchstone of intentional change within Buddhist ethics. Since physical death is instinctively seen by all living beings as the ultimate threat, it is typically lurking somewhere behind every stress and trauma we experience in our lives. By exposing the delusional nature and self-destructive effects of denying death, the first step on the eightfold path, taken together with the first reflection on the gradual path and the first part of the accumulation stage, prepares us for a dramatic shift away from primitive denial and towards radical acceptance of life on life's terms.

As we begin to gain the perspective and confidence to face our physical life as an impermanent flux, the ultimate test and touchstone of our realism is the capacity to face and embrace death as part of the fabric of our very existence. We do this by first understanding death not as an aberrant exception but as the limiting case of life's signature pattern of growth, change, and decline. By contemplating impermanence and change as the omnipresent equivalents of death, we begin to desensitize ourselves to its organic reality and relative finality. Such contemplations are often aided by the routine rehearsal of the eventuality of dying and death, including envisioning our final decline and our corpse on display at our own funeral.³⁰

These two classical forms of death meditation are meant not as morose exercises in pessimism, but quite the opposite, to help retrain our minds to live in the reality of every moment as a precious opportunity for learning, growth and change.³¹ The deepest measure of such change is the shift away from the reflex intentional modes of panic, rage and clinging to the shifting sands of the physical body, and towards the contemplative modes of radical acceptance, tolerance and letting go which can preserve our presence of mind in the face of death. In this sense, contemplating death serves as a kind of athletic training in overcoming the mindless self-protective intentions that terrorize us at every moment in life, as the true minions of our self-destructive demonization of death.

On a more mundane level, contemplating the certainty and immanence of death can also serve as a touchstone to reveal our deepest and highest intent for our lives. By holding each moment up to that touchstone, we can gain the perspective and sense of urgency to renounce life's idle busy-work or distractions and to seize the fleeting opportunity of the present to make every choice and every action count. In particular, by reflecting that, at the end life, all the mundane goods of material wealth, worldly success and personal attachments cannot help us, we give ourselves a reality check of the supreme importance of our state of mind in determining the quality of our experience. In this way, reflecting on death can help underscore a shift in

intentions and values away from the compulsive wish to accumulate more wealth, power and attachments, towards the contemplative aspiration to use our precious human life to learn how to tame and cultivate our wild minds.

The Truth That Frees Continued: Completing Part One of the Accumulation Stage

Alongside the second step on the eightfold and gradual paths, the next step in overcoming our inner obstacles to healthy change involves completing the first part of the first stage on the path of purification. This part of the first stage is completed by accumulating the healing insight and intention to stop identifying not just with unrealistic images of our physical body but with the deluded sense of our minds and life-experience as having a fixed, unchanging nature, identity or character. Traditionally, this step is taken by bringing mindfulness to the last two noble truths and the insights they foster. So we begin by bringing mindfulness of mind to contemplate the truth of Nirvana.³²

As we saw in chapter 2, mindfulness of mind involves delving beneath the complex surface of symbolic consciousness to the deepest, most primary layers of mind, where we experience consciousness in its natural clarity, unobscured by its various contents.³³ This experience helps support the insight that the mind is a continuous flow or field of sheer clarity or openness, empty of any fixed, limiting nature, identity or character, even any fixed nature or identity of “mind.” This insight helps us break out of the narrow bandwidth of experience we mistake for our minds, and to glimpse our full potential to experience life and death with a profound clarity and peace we may never have dreamed possible. Given the prior insight that the body is an impermanent flux which can’t be grasped, seeing the mind as a continuous flow of sheer awareness helps us realize that the whole mind/body process is entirely lacking any fixed, unchanging nature or element we can cling to. This profound intuition, also known as a tolerance of the ungraspable nature of things, opens one of the doors to complete renunciation or freedom.³⁴

The next move in the process is for us to bring inclusive mindfulness to the contemplation of the fourth noble truth of the path. By examining the contents of our experience mindfully and in light of our deeper clarity and freedom of mind, we begin to see through our identification with familiar habits of thought, perception, and emotion as “I” or “mine.” This gradually leads us to the insight that all the elements of our experience are selfless. At first, this means that our minds can break free of a seemingly fixed identification with them, and come to see them instead as mere contents or aspects of a stream of consciousness which lacks any fixed identity, nature or character. Beyond the insight that there is no fixed personal self in the contents of our experience, we eventually recognize those contents in turn as lacking any fixed identity or substantial nature. Instead of seeming objectively real and true, like self-evident givens or immovable matters of fact, the thoughts, perceptions and emotions that make up the surface of our lives are exposed as being like dreams, illusions, fictions or mirages. Seeing them in light of the natural clarity of our primal awareness, we can begin to own the buzzing blooming confusion of our experience as a complex projection of our own minds, covering up the deeper reality of our lives and our world.

These insights help free and empower us to take responsibility for the compulsive nature of our minds and lives; to recognize the self-limiting causality of suffering by which we’ve been bound; and to renounce our whole compulsive way of life in favor of the healing journey of the contemplative path. This final move towards breaking out of the cycle of stress and trauma brings us to the complete renunciation of compulsive life, galvanizing the insights of the four truths with the healing intention that motivates and directs our practical progress on the eightfold path of self-change. With this glance at the first two steps on the eightfold path we’ve completed our overview of the role of outlook and intention in the ethical dimension of Buddhist psychology. Taken together, the next three steps address the outward changes in behavior and lifestyle prescribed by Buddhist ethics.

The Third Step on the Eightfold Path: Appropriate Speech

We start with appropriate speech, the step that serves to carry our change in mindset over into a new way of being with others in the world. This third step spells out the contemplative shift in forms of expression prescribed by the four modes of action that deal with speech. Unlike any other step on the path of contemplative healing, this one challenges the ideal of free speech assumed by both psychotherapy and modern secular society. Of course, the challenge is not to the democratic ideal that each and every individual

is and should be free to think and say what they believe is true. Nor does it challenge the psychotherapeutic ideal of “free association,” that healing dialogue requires a radical acceptance and protection of each party’s freedom to experience and share whatever happens to come to mind.

The challenge posed by the step of appropriate speech is that, from the standpoint of Buddhist contemplative science, this natural freedom is not absolute, but comes with an equally natural responsibility. Buddhist science anticipated the view of recent cognitive science that our inner dialogue and outward expressions have natural effects on our development as individuals and as social agents.³⁵ While we’re certainly free to think and say whatever comes to mind, we can’t exempt ourselves from the mental causality by which our every speech act either reinforces our compulsive instincts, habits, and lifestyle or else helps us break free of them. If the things we think to ourselves or say to others are rooted in misperception and watered by destructive emotions, no amount of “venting” will get them “off our chest.” Instead, as current research and cognitive therapy show, it may only deepen and tighten the strangle hold our self-destructive instincts and traumatic conditioning have on our minds, bodies and dialogue with the world.³⁶

Beyond its precocious view of speech acts, Buddhist science also sees language as the greatest advantage humans have over less fortunate forms of life, and as the most basic and powerful of all human social actions. Speech allows humans to share and learn more realistic ways of understanding the world and more effective ways of living in the world. This view of speech and its power is clear from the traditional teaching that of the twelve great deeds that distinguish an enlightened life like Shakyamuni’s from ordinary life, the one of ultimate importance is the act of sharing wisdom in and through speech.³⁷ Another measure of its importance is that, among the ten modes of negative and positive action, four address speech, while mental and physical action are each covered in only three. For the nuts and bolts of this step, it’s best to look at each of the four modes of speech action it prescribes, one at a time.

Transforming the Four Crucial Modes of Speech Action

The first element of appropriate speech is to turn false speech into truthfulness. The most egregious case of false speech is lying, in which we intentionally deceive others by exaggerating, distorting, or denying the truth out of myopic attachment to some mundane self-interest. This includes not only overt lies that completely distort the truth but also “white lies” that only slightly distort the facts based on understandable self-interest, such as wanting others to think well of us or wanting to conceal innocent errors that may be upsetting to others if they were known. It also covers unexamined statements that assume or express false views the speaker wrongly believes to be true, based on a self-centered wish to appear more knowledgeable, wise or accomplished than one really is.

The seriousness with which Buddhist ethics views false speech is clear from the fact that it is one of the five precepts for a lay practitioner and one of only four infractions for which a monk or nun may be expelled from a Buddhist order.³⁸ This fact not only underscores the point but helps clarify the rationale for this strong stance. Since speech is the ultimate medium for correcting the misperceptions at the root of all preventable suffering, anything which obscures the transparency of that medium blocks the effectiveness of contemplative healing and learning, no matter what the particular path. This rationale should be familiar to practitioners and clients of “talking therapy,” which was founded as part of a broader movement in Freud’s Vienna to cut through misuses of speech and restore the openness and honesty of human communication.³⁹

The second part of appropriate speech is to turn divisive words or slander into inclusive speech or true dialogue. Slander is speech which has the destructive intent or effect of interfering with healthy relationships, dividing families and communities or excluding individuals from helpful groups. The guideline to avoid it underscores the fact that the natural role and aim of speech is to guide and enhance social cohesion and cooperation.⁴⁰ This guideline is meant to protect that role and aim from the corrosive effects of our primitive self-protective and self-indulgent instincts. As with transforming false speech, the highest concern here is that divisive speech or slander may get in the way of any individual or groups’ progress towards a contemplative way of life.

The third path of appropriate speech is to turn abusive, harsh or cursing speech to speech that is tolerant, gentle and reassuring. Like divisive speech, the vice of harsh speech is taken very seriously because it undermines the primary role and aim of human language as a force for social cohesion, communication and learning. Here again, this guideline may seem to us to impose an artificial constraint on speech or repressive ban on sharing natural feelings of hurt and anger. Yet it is not meant to force social conformity with an unrealistic, hypocritical code of conduct. In fact, suppressing such urges is considered as damaging as

indulging them. Instead, it serves to protect the speaker from reinforcing or escalating violent thoughts and urges which reinforce trauma and block healthy social assertiveness and effectiveness.

Unfortunately, the most insidious and common form of harsh speech is not the gratuitous verbal abuse of the rageaholic but the all-too-human harshness of the involuntary shame-blame reflex, triggered when our childhood wounds have been inadvertently touched. What makes this kind of speech so insidious is that, locked like a cornered animal in our traumatized, victim mindset, we lose all track of the violence of our response, as well as any empathy for the person or persons who we feel hurt by. All too often, the speech that results from our self-protective shame-rage not only alienates the empathy of others when we most need it, but also risks poisoning otherwise healthy relationships with the toxic emotional charge of repressed traumas. It's vital that we learn to restrain this knee-jerk reflex in order to protect our own minds as well as others and our bonds with them.⁴¹ By healing underlying traumas and breaking the chain of stress-reactivity, we can begin to practice disarming and proactive speech, to work through stressful or painful interactions with others in the collaborative spirit of mindful dialogue.

The final guideline for appropriate speech is to transform idle gossip into purposeful, enlightening and liberative speech. Here again, this guideline sets a higher standard of speaking than we are accustomed to in our day and age. Our conventional wisdom teaches us that shooting the breeze—whether water cooler rambling, talk show gossip, or witty repartee—is essential to decompressing, enjoying our freedom or cultivating our minds. On the other hand, as language philosopher Wittgenstein warned, “The confusions which occupy us arise when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work.”⁴² The essential insight of Buddhist psychology and ethics is that each and every action of body, speech and mind is in fact a world-creative deed, altering our lives irrevocably either for better or for worse. If we let our mouths idle without our mindfulness engaged, we are far more likely to cause accidental harm to ourselves and others than to hit on anything useful or meaningful.

The Third Reflection: The Wild Mind and the Path of Misfortune

Growing out of the reflection on the immanence of death and the mind's primary role in our future quality of life, the third reflection is to face the sobering fact that our lack of control over our wild, compulsive minds puts us at grave risk of self-destructive actions and their unwanted consequences. Traditionally, this reflection proceeds by contemplating the suffering of the unfortunate forms or life driven by the destructive emotions of anger, greed, and fear-based attachment.⁴³ In lieu of assuming the psycho-cosmology of reincarnation, we can contemplate our common vulnerability to be driven by compulsive action-patterns into traumatic lifestyles plagued by compulsive violence, addictive lifestyles plagued by compulsive greed or craving, and animal lifestyles of mere survival plagued by panic and clinging.

How would our minds react to being kidnapped and abused or tortured? How far are we from the tipping point where our worst addiction could escalate out of control and take over our lives? How much of our day is preoccupied with mere survival, panicking and pushing from crisis to crisis without taking a breath to contemplate what our lives are really about? Given the persistence of primitive instincts for predation, scavenging and deer-in-the-headlights paralysis, how far are we from the plight of our blood relatives in the animal world? What specters of repressed rage, voracious hunger, or nightmarish terror might our minds conjure up in the face of death and its minions—pain, loss of control, and forced separation from all we know? Whatever our world-view, such thought-experiments will likely lead to one certainty: we do not yet have enough control over our minds to skillfully face the extremes of experience that lie in wait for us, just outside the narrow circle of our comfort zone.

While this sobering line of reflection may seem unrelated to the step of appropriate speech, from the standpoint of Buddhist psychology it is not. The reason lies in the Buddhist view that our habitats and lives are not created by nature or God, but shaped by the cumulative effects of our individual and collective actions.⁴⁴ Among our *karmic* actions, the most powerfully world-creative are the symbolic actions of our imagination and speech. According to Buddhist science, forms of life or life-worlds are constructed socially when the power of individual minds is linked through the coordinated use of common words and images. So both the step of appropriate speech and the insight of our mind's uncontrolled power are meant to help us recognize the urgency of learning to master our symbol-making minds.

Due Diligence: The Second Part of the Accumulation Stage

Aligned with the step of appropriate speech and the intent to master our wild minds, our motivational journey at this point on the path takes us to the second phase of the first practice stage of accumulation.⁴⁵ Growing out of the insights of the four noble truths and the renunciation of our traumatic view of our bodies, minds and lives, we begin to gather the healthy willpower to let go of negative habits and build positive ones systematically, one at a time.

Traditionally, this phase of the path consists of a process of increasing purification and cultivation, motivated by four progressive levels of diligence. The first level of diligence helps us initially abstain from and gradually abandon unhealthy habits we've been actively engaged in. The second helps us maintain that abstinence or abandonment by keeping us consistently at work preventing slips or relapses back into those old habits. The third level of diligence helps us initiate and gradually cultivate healthy habits we haven't practiced before. And the fourth level helps us continue to cultivate those healthy habits, without interrupting or stopping that cultivation by giving into complacency or self-limiting beliefs. In synergy with the growth of diligence is a progressively clear and continuous awareness of the moment-to-moment causality of suffering and/or happiness within the mind, helping us keep a finger on the pulse of our momentary choices and feel a growing sense of confidence and mastery of our inner process.

While the third step on the eightfold path and the third reflection on the gradual path focused on mastering our symbolic minds, this part of the accumulation stage concerns itself with facing and mastering the power of our habit-patterns and habit-energies. As with the practice of shifting intentions, this phase doesn't take place in a vacuum. Traditionally, it's part and parcel of a social practice of asking for and receiving help from healthy models and groups. The help we need confronting and overcoming our own blind spots requires a sustained, open dialogue, supported by two mutually reinforcing forms of healing communication. The first is the practice of private confession, distilled in the ritual contemplation on the four remedial powers: regretting unhealthy habits; disclosing them to role-models; asking for support and guidance; resolving to change. The second is the practice of public confession, distilled in the ritual of mindful feedback and dialogue,⁴⁶ traditionally in the context of small group meetings held at the end of communal winter retreats.⁴⁷

The Fourth Step: Appropriate Execution

With this perspective on the role of speech in bridging inner shifts in mindset with the outer transformation of our lives, we are ready to look at the next step: the sea-change from compulsive behavior to mindful modes of action. The fourth step of appropriate execution covers the translation of our new contemplative ways of thinking and speaking into a genuine contemplative way of life. It's one thing to adopt a more idealistic worldview and a kinder, gentler manner and tone, but it's quite another to change the way we actually behave on the ground every day. This is especially true when we take the paths of negative action at face value and begin to contemplate living without harming any living being, without taking anything that isn't freely given, and without sexually perverse acts of any kind. The challenge is even greater when we consider the paths of positive action: acting to improve and save lives, giving freely whatever is needed, and channeling our sexual energy into healthy intimacy, parenting, service, or creativity.

Taking Refuge: Committing to a Contemplative Life

As for particular guidelines, the Buddhist tradition offers a range of different life-strategies based on the depth of our renunciation, the level of our diligence and the power of our will. These typically come in the context of different horizons of practice, involving distinct kinds of refuge or reliance, based on individual aims and needs. Although we already touched on the intentional shift involved in choosing to rely on Shakyamuni's example, teachings, and community, here this pivotal move of "taking refuge" returns as part of a practical step into a contemplative way of life. This step involves the motivational strategy of channeling the energy freed by our break with past habits into healthy behavioral change, by linking refuge with some set of vows and commitments.⁴⁸ Since we can choose to rely on contemplative models and methods with various aims and needs, the precise vows and commitments we make will vary depending on our personal goals and inclinations.⁴⁹

If we adopt the preliminary goal of healing our bodies and minds, our vow may be simply to follow our healing path to its end, and our commitment, to make lifestyle changes like letting go of addictions, sticking to a restorative steps like healthy diet, exercise, and a regular practice of yoga and meditation. If we adopt a

more ambitious personal aim of lifting ourselves and our descendants out of unfortunate forms of life, we will need to seriously grapple with the root causes of our obsessive, compulsive or addictive lifestyle, including observing one or more of five basic precepts: renouncing violence, deceptiveness, acquisitiveness, perverse sexuality, and/or intoxicants. Finally, if we adopt the ambitious aim of freeing ourselves and our descendants entirely from the cycle of stress and trauma, we will need to commit to the whole journey of behavioral learning and change prescribed by the eightfold path. While it is said to be easiest to travel this contemplative journey as a monastic, it is certainly possible to do so while living a lay lifestyle, provided we can realistically commit to observing the five basic precepts and mastering all three contemplative disciplines based on the eightfold path.

The First Precept: The Nuts and Bolts of Non-Violence

While renouncing violence is fundamental to contemplative healing and living, that doesn't mean we all need to conform to a rigid ideal, like becoming a vegetarian right away. Despite their avid adoption of Indian Buddhist culture, for instance, most Tibetan Buddhists were not vegetarian because of the near impossibility of growing enough grain and legumes to support a healthy vegetarian diet on the Tibetan plateau. While embracing the violent realities of our ambient cultures is invariably negative, there are many different ways to engage with those realities, each with its own developmental effects. Depending on key psychological and behavioral variables, for example, the effect of an act like eating meat can range from more or less negative, to neutral or even positive. The most important variables are: whether we have a true violent intent; whether we follow through on that intent by acting on it ourselves or directing others to act; whether or not the violent act ultimately inflicts harm; and whether we experience satisfaction or remorse about the harm done.⁵⁰ The intent of *karmic* ethics here is not to provide rationalizations, loopholes, or excuses, but to help us accurately assess the relative costs and benefits to our long-term development of the many shades of grey that make up the bread and butter of our daily actions. The teeth in the laws of *karma* lie in the recognition that the end never justifies the means, since no provocation of any kind can immunize a person from the self-destructive effects of violent urges and behavior.

The Second Precept: Committing to Non-Deceptive Speech

Though we've already discussed the precept of non-deceptiveness in the context of appropriate speech, a few words about the other three precepts may be helpful.

The Third Precept: The Nuts and Bolts of Non-Acquisitiveness

I've translated the third precept as non-acquisitiveness rather than more literally—as non-stealing—since the intent of this guideline is much broader than merely abstaining from overt thievery. Traditionally, the sense of this precept is spelled out broadly as choosing not to take anything that is not freely given.⁵¹ This is relevant to us because much of what passes for pragmatic street-smarts or good business sense in our age falls under the scope of this precept, raising some real questions about the predatory and scavenging ethos of our modern marketplace jungle. Whether we're talking about hostile takeovers, predatory lending, windfall profits, or just keeping a dollar bill we find on the street, from the standpoint of Buddhist bioethics, greed is not just not good, but ultimately impoverishing. By reinforcing our self-reifying sense that our interests and happiness lie in an isolated struggle against our neighbors and all other life, the acquisitive ethos of free market economics deprives us of a realistic view of our place in the world, as well as access to the emotional intelligence we need to truly live well with others in an interdependent world.⁵² This loss easily outweighs the bottom line gains by which we've learned to judge our misguided pursuit of happiness, racking up enormous costs in stress, isolation, addictive consumption, and the degrading of our natural and social environment, all of which are hidden by a myopic accounting scheme that counts only what we want, not what we really need to live well.⁵³

The Fourth Precept: Sublimating and Channeling Sexual Energy

In a world in which genuine love, mutual trust, and true intimacy is in short supply, addictive sexuality often is mistaken for the real thing, and rushes in to fill the void where more stable and mature closeness is lacking. This natural hijacking of love-starved hearts by more primitive sexual craving is all the more

problematic since many aspects of our culture, including the film industry, pulp fiction, the media and advertising, reinforce unrealistic fantasies of sex, romance and love.⁵⁴ Nor is what passes for sex education or sex therapy of much help, since it tends to take a mechanical view of sexuality which avoids the psychosocial and cultural complexities of human intimacy.⁵⁵ On the other hand, the anorectic stance of mainstream religious traditions only adds the fuel of ignorance, neglect and repression to the fire, contributing to the hypocrisy exposed by the sex scandals that have increasingly rocked Western churches as much or more than our secular institutions. As with renouncing violence, Buddhist ethics insists that renouncing additive sexuality is only practically possible when we learn to understand, master and transform our wild mind and the primal instincts that drive it. Offering a middle way aligned with dynamic couples therapy, this tradition teaches that satisfying love and intimacy requires us to accept our sexual instincts and energies while learning to purify them of stress and trauma so they can be channeled into mature love and compassion.⁵⁶

The Fifth Precept: Renouncing Intoxicants

Given the continued debate in contemporary medicine about whether intoxicants like alcohol and marijuana are poisons or medicines, it may seem puritanical to us that this guideline is included within this most bare-bones schema of lay Buddhist ethics. So it helps to bear in mind that the current debate reflects conflicting findings about the effects of these substances on different organ systems in uncontrolled contexts. While some studies have found small amounts of alcohol may be helpful in reducing high blood pressure and the risk of heart disease, and others have found marijuana helpful in treating nausea, glaucoma and chronic pain, no studies have ever suggested that such substances have beneficial effects on mental development or the brain.⁵⁷ Whether intoxicants dull or stimulate the mind/brain, they invariably block developing conscious self-control of factors like attention, concentration, insight, analysis, and judgment, which are among the main engines of contemplative learning and change.⁵⁸ More insidiously, relying on chemicals to regulate the mind and nervous system typically medicates away at least some of the distress we need to understand our suffering and motivate efforts to change. So while going cold turkey on intoxicants is not necessary for those wishing to start on a contemplative path, gradually letting go of them as crutches and blocks is seen as indispensable to progress on that path, let alone to finally arriving at a truly contemplative way of being.⁵⁹

The Fourth Reflection: Healing Refuge and Healthy Reliance

Sobered by reflecting on the risks and costs of our uncontrolled, wild minds, we come to recognize that we ourselves lack the know-how to understand and master them. Taken seriously, this recognition should eventually get us out of our heads, engaged in a search for models, methods and support networks that have the necessary wisdom, effectiveness and compassion to help us. Traditionally, this search culminates in a process of identifying, engaging, and committing to the most reliable sources of help we can find, a process known as taking refuge. Although this process is often enacted in various ritual forms, the nuts and bolts of it involve a mutual acquaintance, assessment and alliance between those seeking help and those who can provide it. As in the healing alliance of psychotherapy or the recovery bond between sponsee and sponsor, refuge or reliance in Buddhist ethics is seen as only being as grounded as the analysis, judgment and commitment of the individuals who take and give refuge.⁶⁰

How does the active refuge at this point on the path take us beyond the intentional refuge of the second step? This has to do with the way the public or social act of taking refuge is meant to pull us out of our heads, into engagement with models, traditions, and communities, encouraging us to commit to putting our actions where our intentions are. Using the public act of refuge as leverage to bind us to a healing path of action is how the fourth step works to put teeth into the refuge contract. Traditionally, this level of refuge begins with a public pronouncement like, "I take refuge in the Buddha, his teaching and community." Typically, this pronouncement is immediately followed by selected vows and commitments, lending them the creative power to shape our intentions and actions towards the end we seek.

The Power of Will and Effort: Starting the Third Part of the Accumulation Stage

With this look at where the path of insight lines up with the fourth step, we're ready to turn to the path of

practice, specifically the third and last phase on the stage of accumulation. Once our willpower has been freed up from its compulsive entanglements by renunciation and directed towards healing change by due diligence, we're ready to build the motivation we need to follow through with the steps of appropriate execution and appropriate livelihood. This is accomplished by combining renunciation and diligence with progressively deepening mindfulness and concentration, to the point where they can be forged together into power-tools for change. These power-tools are known as the four bases of mental power.⁶¹ Of the four, the first two align with the step of appropriate execution and the last two with the step of appropriate livelihood.

The first basis of mental power is the motivational energy that comes from consciously developing a concentrated will. Like the fuel we need to build a fire, having the willpower to stay single-mindedly focused on the inner workings of our mind allows us to kindle all the insight and diligence we've built thus far into a steady light that helps guide us away from compulsive intentions and actions, and towards healing alternatives. Given this willpower and the stable clarity it brings, we gradually develop a proficiency in our healing choices and actions which puts us in touch with our inner genius for change. The second basis of mental power is the motivational energy that comes of consciously developing concentrated effort. This energy gives us the enthusiasm to break free of unhealthy habits and initiate healthy alternatives, as well as the willpower to persevere in our renunciation of negative acts and our cultivation of the positive.

The Fifth Step: Appropriate Livelihood

Once we've begun to gain some mastery of our compulsive behavior and actively embarked on the path towards a contemplative life, the eightfold path asks us to reflect on whether our means of livelihood is supporting or undermining our progress. This fifth step is especially relevant to lay practitioners faced with finding a way of life that supports contemplative healing and change in the world. Of course, it's only natural to wonder how guidelines developed in such a different place and time can still be relevant in the complex, fast paced world of today. Yet however much the cultural conditions of our daily lives have changed over the centuries, the basic facts of our nature have remained much the same since the first hominids walked the earth. What is more, the deep challenges of adapting our human nature to the unnatural conditions of civilized living still far outweigh the surface demands of increasing intensity and complexity which distinguish our age.⁶²

The bottom line is, any means of livelihood that demands we reinforce the violent, stress-reactive side of our nature is basically incompatible with a contemplative life, and hence should not be undertaken lightly or without careful analysis of its long-term risks and costs. Of course, by this standard, it's likely that most professions in our day might not meet the standard of appropriate livelihood. This is especially true in the over-developed societies of the West, where the mainstream popular and professional consciousness is still caught in the death-grip of a compulsive work ethic and insatiable hunger for wealth and status.

In practice, the most insidious feature of our current work ethic is that we are so habituated to the short-term gains and perks of a compulsive way of life that we can't actually see or feel the costs of our line of work until it's too late. When eventually work stress pervades our whole style and pace of life, pressures and starves our relationships, clouds our mind, and undermines our health and well-being, we start to burn out. The erosion of our reserves of well-being may hit us with full force only when we find ourselves abruptly laid off, addicted, divorced, depressed, or seriously ill. Months or years later, when we begin to understand and undo what happened to us, we may finally be in the position of reevaluating the meaning of work and success. Here is where we wake up and find ourselves on the fifth step.

Unfortunately, our doctors and therapists may not be there along with us. Distorted by the compulsive ethos of the mainstream, modern psychiatry and psychotherapy often see themselves as handmaidens of "the good life," and try too hard to patch us up to go back into the fray. Our reliance on high-tech medicine and "miracle drugs" like Prozac, Klonopin, and Adderol reflects our personal and professional willingness to continue to sweep the unsustainable nature of our lives under the rug, much as we did for too long with the inconvenient truths of the mortgage melt-down or global warming. Is there a viable alternative? There must be. And the wisdom of our contemplative traditions, ancient and modern, can be our guide.

The first moves on the path to appropriate livelihood are those shifts in mindset, speech and lifestyle we've mapped over the course of the last four steps. These moves help us get out of the survival rut we think will bring happiness, onto the road to real happiness based on genuine self-knowledge and inner self-mastery. As we begin to see and feel the real, immediate benefits of downshifting from the overdrive of stress and trauma, we come to see through the misplaced attachments that have kept us locked in self-destruct mode. Now the choice to take a fresh look at our means of livelihood doesn't feel like a sacrifice but rather like a win-win no-

brainer.

The first part of this new take is internal. It involves the shift from looking to work as a quick fix for a life that leaves us burnt and spent, to beginning to taste real happiness within and looking to work as a way to share what we've found with less fortunate others and the world we live in. This shift from craving and grasping to benevolence and grateful service is the catalyst that can turn our random walk in life into a true path to contentment and purpose. Although occasionally this may involve a dramatic retooling of our vocation and skill-set, most of the time, it may mean a more modest adjustment of why, where and how we work. Beyond this general change in tone and direction, the fifth step's guidelines for change follow quite simply and clearly from the fourth step's precepts for action.⁶³

The Fifth Reflection: The Laws of Action and Development

Given our work on the fourth step, we've begun to experience the benefits of positive actions enough that we can begin to see the background malaise of our former lives as the results of compulsive habits. On the fifth step, we take this awareness further by recognizing the inexorability and specificity of the laws of development, making them the basis of a more adult relationship with our lives and livelihood. Instead of experiencing our lot in life in a childish, subjective way as the result of our being favored or punished by the powers that be—whether human or divine—we begin to relate to our fortunes and fate in mature, impersonal way, as direct effects of our own actions.

A key factor in this contemplative shift towards our lives and work is the dawning of greater clarity about the precise nature of the causal laws of happiness and its development. The key features of the causality of development are traditionally listed as four: specificity; multiplicity; determinacy and inevitability.⁶⁴ Specificity means that specific intentions and actions have equally specific effects. Multiplicity means that a single action can lead to a range and chain of consequences. Determinacy means that we never experience an effect without some action or reaction on our part which contributed to that effect. Inevitability means that, however repressed, delayed or covert, every intentional act we take has an inexorable effect on our development or that of our heirs.

Although these principles are far from obvious and may strike us as harsh or even unfair, they reflect a long and painstaking history of contemplative self-analysis and are presented as guidelines for each of us to test and either accept or reject in our own minds and lives. In this sense, they're akin to the collective wisdom of self-analysis handed down in the practice of modern therapy, a wisdom that few of us can relate to without going through the process ourselves. As in psychotherapy, so too on the gradual path. Once we begin to see and feel the causal logic of our development for ourselves, the result is not a kind of shame-bound fatalism or moralism but a proactive confidence born of self-knowledge.

The Power of Mind and Analysis: Completing Part Three of the Accumulation Stage

Alongside the fifth step and the contemplation of the laws of development, the path of practice takes us through the end of the first stage of accumulation. The culmination of this stage is traditionally described in terms of the last two bases of mental power.⁶⁵ The first of these is the motivational energy that comes of consciously developing a concentrated mind. Growing out of the concentration of effort, we gradually develop the capacity to tap the full potential of our minds, by getting and staying in the single-pointed flow which frees our mind's innate genius for learning. The second is the motivational energy that comes of consciously developing concentrated analysis. This energy gives us the mind-power to put all we've learned into practice in real time, by exposing and cutting through misperceptions acquired in this lifetime along with the instinctive confusion and delusion that anchor them.

Taken together, these newfound powers of mind give us leverage over the most ingrained habits, by bringing causes and conditions that are normally unconscious and automatic into the light of consciousness, where we can hold them up against our healthy enthusiasm and valid knowledge. This deep motivational growth empowers us to do the hard work of cutting through the traumatic distortions and self-protective instincts that maintain unhealthy character traits and block the development of a wiser, more mature personality. This profound process of character change brings a genuine experience of inner freedom and peace, supporting the gratitude and contentment we need to transform our way of being in the world and turn our livelihood into a vehicle of true benevolence and service.

The Sixth Step: Appropriate Effort

Given the focus in the last three steps on our working relations with the outer world, the next step on our survey—appropriate effort—serves to bridge the outer-directed path of action with the inner-directed movement of the final, contemplative steps on the eightfold path. Since we moderns have learned to see ourselves as the most industrious people in history, we may feel we've already got the effort thing down. So it's vital for us to reflect that the kind of effort meant here has a radically different tone and direction from the kind we're used to putting out. Rather than effort directed at accumulating material wealth and power, outwards achievements, social status or celebrity, the kind of effort the Buddhist tradition calls appropriate is effort directed at inner contentment and willpower, mastery over one's mental and emotional blocks, and transcending normal limits of concentration and wisdom.⁶⁶ This inner-directed effort in fact is very challenging to most of us raised with the extraverted values and lifestyle of the over-developed world. Some of the most active and hard-working people I teach find the inner challenges of learning to calm the body and still the mind truly exasperating!

Of course, by this point on the eightfold path, we've not only come to understand the need to master our wild minds, but have also begun to isolate and exercise the muscles of concentrated will and effort that we need to change our outwards behavior and lifestyle. Based on this prior exercise, we now have the awareness and self-control to build these muscles to the point where we can apply them to the work of transforming the inner life of our minds. Appropriate effort is pivotal in more ways than one. First, it gives us the willpower to push the process of concentration beyond the stage of profound calm called quiescence to the more intensely focused, higher energy states of single-pointed concentration.⁶⁷ Second, it gives us the mind-power to push the process of self-analysis beyond the stage of reflective insight towards the fully meditative inferential insights of impermanence, suffering, emptiness, and selflessness that lie at the heart of the four noble truths. By helping us deepen and integrate concentration and insight, appropriate effort builds the contemplative muscles we need to counteract and unlearn the gross intellectual confusions and compulsive emotions that block our progress towards more profound clarity and peace of mind.

The Sixth Reflection: The Limitations of Fortunate Lives

Alongside this progress on the eightfold path, the gradual path of insight extends our reflection on the inexorable laws of development to contemplate the limits of even the most fortunate forms of compulsive life.⁶⁸ This reflection completes the contemplation of the risks our wild mind poses for self-destructive living by exploring the limits of forms of life driven by compulsive self-improvement or self-involvement. While committing to healthy reliance on contemplative models, traditions and communities may have lifted our sights above the worst-case nightmares and traumatic reactions of our wild mind, it opens up a range of different paths for contemplative life.

The most accessible of these is the path of contemplative self-improvement, which puts a kinder, gentler face on the struggle for survival that drives all contemplative life. In terms of archetypal imagery, this contemplative path leads to upwards mobility towards a more heavenly life of security and peace within our own lifetime or in the lifetime of our loved ones and heirs. In terms of conventional spiritual imagery, it is reflected in the common ideal of a future rebirth in a heavenly afterlife or next incarnation. In psychological terms, it refers to an upwards mobility in personality and lifestyle away from a form of life driven by anger, greed, or fear to one driven by competitive strivings or narcissistic self-satisfaction.

Like our contemporary obsession with the lifestyles of the rich and famous, this kind of aspiration involves an unrealistic fantasy of escaping from the laws of development into a cozy niche in which we're permanently insulated from the painful realities of impermanence, illness, aging, and death. The fact is, no matter how fortunate our form of life or station in life is, there's no escaping the reality that all lives, like all things, are subject to constant change, decay, loss, and death. So underlying the natural wish to be more insulated from uncontrollable change, there remains a self-reifying confusion and unrealistic clinging to our body-mind, which keeps us locked in the death-grip of a futile struggle with how reality is and works. In other words, a contemplative path aimed at rising above misfortune to a state of permanent comfort and ease is really locking us into another cage of self-reifying confusion, however golden that cage may be.

Expanding on this sober insight, the mythic cosmology of Buddhism underscores the point and highlights an uncommon view of contemplative living. According to Buddhist mythology, beings born in heavenly realms, even the pantheon of orthodox gods and demi-gods, are not there for eternity but a finite lifespan.⁶⁹ Although living in extreme beauty and abundance, they too are subject to the laws of development,

impermanence, illness, aging, and death. Since their level of comfort and control is such that they tend to deny their vulnerability and neglect their wild minds, reality dawns as a shock at the end of their long, blissful lives, too late for them to develop realistic self-knowledge and self-mastery. This is why, for the pursuit of sustainable happiness, life in a human body is best: not too driven by survival to stop and learn, yet sensitive enough to avoid the opposite extreme of over-confidence and complacency.⁷⁰

The aim of this sixth reflection on the path of insight is to protect the mind from being seduced by its own childish fantasies of eternal happiness in a heavenly escape, and to commit instead to a more sober view of contemplative life. This view sees the ultimate goal of contemplative life not as ascendance to a “higher realm” but rather as transcendence in the here and now. The pivotal shift behind this sobering insight is the shift from a view of happiness as primarily dependent on external circumstances and conditions, towards a view of happiness as primarily dependent on an inner capacity to accept and cope with reality as it is. In the language of modern psychology, this view of contemplative life involves a shift from the childish view that what controls our state of mind lies outside us towards a mature view that we ourselves can and should take control of our own destiny. This shift leads us to the next reflection on the path of insight: that unconditional or sustainable happiness can only come of a radical commitment to self-transcendence, by freeing our mind from its own self-limiting instincts and habits.

Heat, Peak, Tolerance, Triumph: The Stage of Application

Based on the foundation built on the stage of accumulation, the path of practice now moves to the next level: the stage of application.⁷¹ By applying ourselves with the ever-increasing power of appropriate effort on this stage, our inner work of self-transcendence is traditionally said to move through four successive phases: heat; peak; tolerance, and triumph.⁷² As applying effort to deepening concentration brings us to virtual and actual inner stillness or quiescence, we gradually enter a euphoric flow that sparks a natural high or inner heat akin to the endorphin high of physical exercise. The positive energy of this state gives us greater leverage over negative habits, allowing us to pry our consciousness free of habitual emotional blocks and realize greater freedom of mind. As we continue applying appropriate effort, quiescence deepens to the level of single-pointed concentration, where it can turn analysis into a surgical power-tool that cuts through all the learned distortions and misperceptions of our acquired false views.

This breakthrough is possible in part because the mind grows so stable that it no longer wavers from one extreme to the other, swayed by the influence of reified, binary concepts. As a result, the true beliefs that have guided our insights thus far gradually lead us to valid inferential knowledge of the noble truths, without the gross confusions and doubts that come of lingering ambivalence. Having reached this peak experience of intellectual insight, we gain greater leverage over our mental blocks, allowing us to enjoy more accurate and continuous knowledge of the nature and workings of our body-mind. This further empowers us to break free of the confusion that maintains compulsive emotions, reinforces traumatic habits and blocks our ability to initiate and maintain healthy alternatives. Growing out of these two phases on the path of application, we begin to access and master a number of key positive mental factors called the five powers: faith or confidence, effort, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom.⁷³

With these powers as fruits of the first half of the application stage, we’re better equipped to move onto the second half, traditionally described in terms of the phases of tolerance and triumph.⁷⁴ Growing out of the rational insight of the peak phase, increasing confidence in the insights of selflessness and emptiness gradually lead to an intuitive wisdom called the tolerance of the ultimate ungraspability of things. Applying persistent effort to develop this tolerance eventually brings us to the phase of tolerance. Here, we begin to disarm reflex fears of losing ourselves or relaxing our compulsive grip on our mind and body, by overcoming self-reifying thinking and traumatic memories and reactions. As a result, we’re more able to tolerate the transitions of loss, growth and change, as well as the suffering our minds and bodies are prone to.

Finally, in the phase called triumph, our inferential realization of the truths of selflessness and emptiness completely triumphs over all our acquired self-reifying views and the post-traumatic reactions they rationalize. This triumph frees us from any shadow of a doubt that could perpetuate lingering confusion about whether there’s even a shred of a fixed, unitary self to protect or cling to. Such rational certainty builds the greater clarity and confidence we need to see through traumatic distortions and override stress-reactive emotions, allowing us to throw ourselves without reservation into appropriate effort on the path of contemplation. While the five powers that emerged from the first two phases of the application stage are state-specific faculties that may waver between meditations, the five forces that emerge from these two final phases of

application are fully developed and integrated forms of the powers of faith, effort, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom, equally accessible within and between meditation.

The Seventh Step: Perfect Mindfulness

With the seventh step of perfect mindfulness, we enter the inner sanctum of Buddhist ethics, the realm of deep contemplation where we're gradually freed of the subtlest learned confusions and emotions, as well as their instinctive roots. While deepening levels of mindfulness and concentration have been part of our contemplative path all along, on the seventh and eighth steps they reach their culmination and fruition in the deepest levels of meditative single-mindedness and direct, healing insight. By repeatedly examining the five aggregates through the four, successive scopes of mindfulness, our meditations have gained ever deeper understandings of the four noble truths and the four healing insights that are their quintessence. In the accumulation stage that spanned the first five steps, this insight came from applying conceptual learning and contemplative reflection in the context of deepening mindfulness and quiescence.⁷⁵ In the application stage on step six, focused effort pushed the process beyond quiescence to a single-pointed analysis, with the power to yield valid inferential insights born of genuine meditation. Such powerful insights, though still conceptual, gave us the gut certainty we need to let go of gross confusions and the compulsions they rationalize.

On this step of perfect mindfulness, we finally gain the expertise and control we need to immerse our minds deeply enough in those meditative insights that they lose their conceptual scaffolding and, for the first time, have the force of direct mental perceptions.⁷⁶ The benefit of such breakthrough states is that they temporarily free our minds of the learned misperceptions that support even our subtlest confusions and doubts.⁷⁷ As a result, when those misperceptions return in the daily experience we have between meditations, we are unmistakably clear that they are deceptive, like optical illusions. This unmistakable clarity allows us to finally and fully abandon even the subtlest false views we've acquired through learning in the course of childhood and adult experience. This clearing up of cumulative lifelong distortions and misperceptions has a powerful effect on our compulsive emotions as well. It frees our minds to see these, no matter how habitual they've become, from a mature stance of sober self-parenting that gives us the freedom to let go of them more quickly and easily. At this point we begin to feel like a new person, surprisingly and uncharacteristically peaceful, able, and free.

The Seventh Reflection: Committing to Self-Transcendence

On the path of insight, the step of perfect mindfulness aligns with the reflection on the need to commit to reaching the self-transcendent state of inner freedom and lasting happiness, Nirvana.⁷⁸ As the taste of freedom we've gleaned from our meditative breakthroughs lingers in daily life, we come to a newfound place of clarity and confidence about our nature and potential. With a real visceral sense that we are not identical with or forever bound to our compulsive habits and sense of self, the dust begins to settle on the nightmare of stress and trauma we've unknowingly inflicted on ourselves. The profundity of this sense lies in the fact that it frees us to complete the radical shift towards renunciation and letting go we began with our first reflection and first step on the path. It galvanizes a growing conviction that our highest self-interest and ultimate satisfaction will come not from any particular station in life or any degree of outwards comfort or success, but rather in a radical and complete inner freedom.

Factors of Enlightenment: The Stage of Insight

As for the path of practice, this stage gradually takes us beyond the approximate, virtual insights of the application stage to authentic, direct personal experience of how things are and work.⁷⁹ This direct, intuitive feel for the true nature of our lives and our world stands as an unmistakable counterpoint to the delusions and distortions we learned to mistake for reality. In particular, the self-reifying views of our bodies, minds, selves, and world as fixed, unitary and unchanging are exposed by our meditative experience as a house of cards which nonetheless imprisons us in a nightmare of isolation, stress, and trauma. Among the many fruits of this breakthrough, the most important is final freedom from the compulsive intentions and actions that drive us to cling to such self-enclosing mind-states and forms of life. Supporting this breakthrough is the final fruition of key factors of positive health, including seven identified as factors of enlightenment, and five as forms of fearlessness.⁸⁰

The Eighth Step: Perfect Concentration

Finally, the step of perfect mindfulness brings us to the eighth and last step on the eightfold path: perfect concentration. On this step, we continue to deepen the capacity for direct, intuitive breakthroughs until we master the ninth and last stage of concentration, known as meditative equipoise. Technically, equipoise is the most profound and centered of all states of mind, often described as a lucid, ecstatic trance. Here, investigation and analysis have practically ceased and awareness is fully absorbed in what it knows in an effortless flow stabilized by state-specific factors of unwavering bliss, single-mindedness and equanimity.⁸¹ Given this powerfully focused mind/body state, we gain and perfect the ability to immerse ourselves fully and stably in direct experience of how things really are and work.

While the seventh step gives us our first real taste of reality, the eighth allows us to savor and acquire that taste so fully and stably that we become one with it and it with us. As this deeper immersion in the truth of our breakthrough insights slowly sinks in at the deepest, most visceral levels of our body-mind, it helps us see through and cut out the instinctive confusion and compulsive emotions that anchor our habitual worldviews, traumatic distortions, and stress-reactions.⁸² The deep self-surgery of this step is an ongoing process that moves in a gradual progression from the grossest compulsions to the most subtle, until we are finally freed not just of the bad habits we've learned in this lifetime but of the deeply rooted and ingrained innate errors we share with all humanity and all forms of life. Eventually, this radical deprogramming reaches deep enough into our minds and lives that we're free of the death-grip of stress and trauma not just in the lucid moments of meditation but in the aftermath in-between sessions as well.

The Eighth Reflection: Committing to Complete the Path

Alongside this step on the eightfold path, the gradual path of insight arrives at the final reflection on the self-healing horizon: committing to mastering the whole path that leads to true freedom and happiness.⁸³ It should come as no surprise that this reflection follows the last one on gaining lasting freedom from our needless suffering and its causes. Since the path gradually exposes the ways in which we mindlessly cause our suffering, and also arms us with the insights and skills we need to learn new ways, actually following through with the course of treatment the path prescribes is the only way to make good on the last reflection. Contemplating this fact means committing to fully and finally assimilating the powerful medicine of the four noble truths.

Removing Our Blocks to Freedom: The Stages of Meditation and Mastery

On the path of practice, the eighth step of perfect concentration aligns with the developments of the stage of meditation.⁸⁴ This stage involves the gradual elimination of ever subtler forms of instinctive confusion and compulsive emotion, a process traditionally conceived as occurring over time in nine successive levels. The many traditional metaphors for this process—like washing stains out of a cloth—emphasize the incremental, painstaking nature of the gradual dissolution of compulsions.⁸⁵ The way this clearing out of the mind is reached by combining progressive degrees of insight with deeper levels of concentration. Traditionally, this stage involves reviewing the four truths one final time, with each truth looked at from the standpoint of four insights, for a total of sixteen insights. And, on the meditative side of the process, these deepening insights require the ever deeper levels of concentration mapped onto the increasingly more refined states of equipoise called the four formless absorptions.

As a final note, the culmination of the eightfold path in perfect concentration yields not just final freedom from suffering and its causes but also the final fruition of qualities previously cultivated but subtly blocked by innate compulsions. The fifth stage of mastery, which represents our arrival at the goal of cessation that marks the path's end, is traditionally fleshed out in terms of the development of ten forms of valid knowledge and of thirty-seven factors of enlightenment. The ten forms of valid knowledge are: knowledge of mundane conventions; of the elements of suffering and happiness; inferential knowledge of the truths; direct knowledge of suffering; of its origin; of its cessation; and of the path; knowledge of other minds; knowledge of the termination of suffering; and knowledge of the non-recurrence of suffering.⁸⁶

As for the factors of enlightenment, they include fully mature and integrated forms of the positive mental factors developed earlier on the path, including: the four forms of mindfulness—of body, sensation, mind and all things; the four forms of due diligence—abstaining from old vices, not slipping back into them, cultivating

new virtues, not ceasing to cultivate them; the four bases of mental power—the concentration of will, effort, mind and analysis; the five powers—faith, effort, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom; the five forces, the five powers in their most potent form; the seven factors of enlightenment—mindfulness, discrimination, effort, interest, flow, concentration, and equanimity; and the eight steps on the path to enlightenment.⁸⁷

The Journey of Contemplative Living: All Roads Lead to Integrity

In surveying the many details of the path we've looked at from the vantage of three distinct maps, one thing should be clear: the fundamental role of ethical motivation and moral self-discipline on the path of contemplative healing and living. This clarity challenges our modern confusion of ethics with a more or less arbitrary cultural convention imposed on human nature and life, with little benefit to us as individuals and groups. In so doing, it reinforces the findings of modern health psychology, affective neuroscience and positive psychology that positive thinking, positive emotions, and prosocial behaviors help counteract stress and promote optimal health, peace and well-being. Though it raises real questions and practical challenges for the integration of Buddhist psychology with modern therapy, I believe the robust inclusion of the ethical dimension of contemplative science into psychotherapy is not only feasible but necessary to making a modern contemplative therapy fully effective and beneficial.

Committing to Contemplative Life: Meditative Experiment 3

Get yourself comfortable, and settle your body and mind down so you can take in what you've learned on our journey thus far. After a long, full out-breath, let your next in-breath flow in as gently as you can. Give your body-mind the time they need to gradually relax, so you can shift into a deeper, slower, and more seamless flow of breath. Now use that slow flow as the focal-point to collect and center your mind. Balance your energy and awareness by breathing calm into your restlessness and clarity into your fatigue. And remember to scan and balance sensation as well, breathing patient acceptance into your lows, sober awareness into your highs, and clear presence into the grays in-between. Now turn your mindfulness to your mind and try to dive under the surface waves of thoughts, images and emotions towards the clear and calm depths of your primal mind. Keep working to resist the lure of distractions from your outer life, assuring yourself all will be well if you immerse yourself in your deep, open mind. Also work to resist the seductive undertow of drowsiness, making efforts to keep your mind ready, willing and able to see reality as it is. As you begin to get into the flow of your primal mind, open the scope of your deep mindfulness so you can have a fresh take on your life from your clearest most centered mind-state.

Scanning your physical body, try to see and feel the pulsing flow of its life, as ungraspable as the waters of a stream or the sand of an hourglass. As you see and feel your real body, try to face how futile it is to cling to it in denial of impermanence, aging, and death. See the constant strain you put on yourself and your relationship with reality by living in the grips of the fantasy that your body is your permanent, secure base in the world, now and forever. Seize the opportunity of this moment to start letting go of your death-grip on it, here and now. See this grip of panicked confusion as the driver of all the violent urges in your life. Now, if you like, promise yourself you'll stop tightening this grip by choosing to let go of your violent thoughts, words and deeds, and opt in to the nonviolent modes of inner tolerance, reassuring words and caring deeds.

Now scan your sensation, trying to face and accept the raw feel of being in your sensitive body, a breath at a time. Open your sensitive mind to honestly face the uneven terrain of your sensory experience of life here and now, and bear with the whole feel, as if you suddenly found yourself wearing what poet T.S. Eliot called "an intolerable shirt of flame." As you take in the exquisite sensitivity of your body-mind, soberly face the bottom line that your way of life isn't all it's cracked up to be; that your pursuit of happiness is more like an addict's drive for a fix or a chronically ill person's search for some fleeting relief. Acknowledge that your gut exposure to life on life's terms is the origin of the craving that locks you into the cycle of stress and trauma. Try to seize the moment to start letting go of the craving that drives you and see your tendency to avoid distress and live in fantasy as the root of the whole web of deceptive thoughts, words, and deeds your life has been tangled up in. Take this opportunity to taste the sober relief of clearing out the tangled knots in your mind by honestly accepting and working with the reality of your life. And, finally, if you like, promise yourself you'll learn to live in that relief by choosing to let go of deceptive thoughts, words, and deeds and take the contemplative road of rigorous inner honesty and sober transparency in your outwards words and deeds.

Next, scan your primal mind, trying to stay as immersed as you can in its ungraspable spaciousness and unrecognizable flow. As you loosen your grip on all the familiar content that keeps us stuck on the choppy surface of consciousness, try to see and feel the spacious clarity of your deep awareness as your innate potential for the lasting freedom and peace of Nirvana. Seize the moment to let go of your habitual confusion of mind with the thoughts and images it creates, even your most potent obsessions with idealized objects of desire and your most cherished fantasies of others' bodies as fetishes of perfect beauty or trophies of blissful conquest. Recognize that insatiable craving to fill the inner space of your mind with bliss from outside as the original urge that drives the insatiable craving for compulsive sexuality we mistake for the real thing. Try to acquire a taste for your mind's innate blissful openness, and savor it as the taste of freedom that can fill you with the inner joy of contentment you need to get out of the "meat market" of confusing yourself and others for mindless bodies. Now, if you like, promise yourself you'll take the space to acquire that taste, by choosing to let go of the obsessive thoughts, seductive words, and addictive habits of compulsive sexuality and opt in to the real abundance of inner contentment and sober love in your intimate relationships.

Finally, open your mindfulness to include your mental contents, scanning the range of thoughts, images and emotions that normally occupy your mind. Try to see your compulsive urge to clutter your mind with contents that feed the illusion that you have some fixed identity or character. Instead, bring your deep, lucid openness of mind to the whole range contents—good, bad, and indifferent—and see them as binary constructs or fictions, none of which capture the full scope and complexity of your constantly changing life process. Recognize the voracious hunger to stuff and clutter the open space of your mind with content as the original urge that drives the rat race of unrealistic desires, insatiable greed, and compulsive acquisitiveness we mistake for the way to happiness. Seize the moment to unhook your sense of "I" and "mine" from particular thoughts, images, and emotions, and to try to accept and embrace the reality that your mind-body process is a constant, open flux with no fixed or limiting character, identity, or self. Choose to see that flux as the open door to the path of contemplative living and learning that can empower you to transform your compulsive, confused self into a free and clear self capable of lasting happiness. Now, if you like, promise yourself you'll take the space to acquire a taste for your selfless openness, by choosing to let go of the acquisitive thoughts, words, and habits and opt in to the real abundance of inner contentment, and true generosity in your words and deeds.