



Dharma Notes

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“The Three Aspects of Appropriate Action in Pragmatic Buddhism”

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Key Points

- Stephen Batchelor describes the central importance of the Four Ennobling Truths in dharma practice: 1) *understanding* human anguish, 2) *letting go* of its origins, 3) *realizing* its cessation, and 4) *cultivating* the path of human flourishing. The fourth Ennobling Truth is known as the Eightfold Path. When examining the eight practices of the Eightfold Path, Stephen Batchelor and Peter Hershock suggest the use of the adjectives “appropriate” and “corrective and encompassing” respectively—rather than “right”—to highlight the inherently situational application of the Eightfold Path.

- Situational application in Buddhism is NOT the same as relativism, and describes our engagement of the Eightfold Path in a manner that leads to the creation and preservation of 1) personal and social *harmony*, 2) personal and social *health*, and 3) personal and social *happiness* (the “triple H’s”).

- “Appropriate action” is the fourth practice of the Eightfold Path, which includes eight practices in total: 1) appropriate vision, 2) appropriate thought, 3) appropriate speech, 4) appropriate action, 5) appropriate livelihood, 6) appropriate effort, 7) appropriate mindfulness, and 8) appropriate concentration.

- There are three aspects of “appropriate action” in Pragmatic Buddhism: 1) action of performance, 2) action of attitude, and 3) action of bodily health.

What is the Eightfold Path?

The historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, prescribed a treatment for the condition of existential anguish, or psychoemotional suffering. This is the kind of discontentment or unsatisfactoriness that lies beneath the surface of human life. It is the low-grade, chronic anxiety that troubles us when we are confronted by silence and there are no hindrances to allow us to “hide” from ourselves. The Buddha searched for a way out of this condition, and realized that by altering our perspective we could indeed cultivate a path which would empower us with authentic, meaningful freedom.

The prescription needed to heal the condition of existential anguish is called the Eightfold Path, a collection of eight essential *practices* which allow us to fully embody the attitudes and actions necessary for self-empowerment. And, importantly, the kind of self-empowerment we are referring to in Pragmatic Buddhism is necessarily a social-empowerment, because the personal and social are deeply interrelated in a causal world such as ours. The anguish of another IS my anguish also. If my neighbor is not happy, it has direct, negative consequence on the rest of us; if my neighbor is well, however, he or she distributes this wellness freely through the community in which he or she is part and parcel. As Pragmatic Buddhists our self-empowerment IS social-empowerment also. We will

examine all of the eight practices of the Eightfold Path in subsequent talks, but tonight we are going to look at one of the most misunderstood practices: *appropriate action*.

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“Appropriate Action” in Pragmatic Buddhism

Most people understand appropriate action as, simply, carrying out the action for a given situation so that harmony, health and happiness can result. But this is only one aspect of three (we’ll call the first aspect “action of performance,” which is goal-oriented—our “goal” being to participate in the fruition of the triple H’s previously mentioned). There are two other aspects of appropriate action that we recognize and value in Pragmatic Buddhism. The second aspect is “action of attitude,” which includes how we present ourselves to others, how we communicate nonverbally to others, and how we convey positive intent. Numerous studies have confirmed that our very posture and facial expressions send the first and most impressionable messages to others (“microexpressions”). If we are to be successful members of our society, we must take ownership for how we *are* in nonverbal ways (posture, facial expressions, hygiene and attire, bodily tension, eye contact, etc.). It is a blunt fact that people begin gathering information about us as soon as they meet us, and nonverbal communication is the most readily available means of discerning what someone is “probably” like. As Pragmatic Buddhists cultivating appropriate action, we put our opinions aside and deal with facts. If we want to connect maximally so with others, we want to send nonverbal messages that we are open, interesting and capable people.

The third aspect of appropriate action is “action of bodily health.” If we are to **act** successfully in the world for ourselves and others we must be in good physical shape to do so. If we focus on our bodily health within our practice, we are able to live active and engaged lives, and thus contribute positively to the harmony, health, and happiness of society. This kind of action includes nutrition and exercise, and how we actually move during the day. Of course, there are numerous conditions we are born with or acquire which we have no control over: genetic illness, physical injury, and disease, to name a few. But what matters is that we *attend to* our bodily health *where we find ourselves*. Even though some of us have chronic illness—myself included—we can take important steps and include within our daily practice the attention and intent required to make our bodily health the best it can be within its own limitations. We must be physically able to practice and share our practice with others in order to share its fruits. How we carry ourselves in the world physically—how we walk and move, how we eat and posture—can make it easier and more natural to physically relax, and a relaxed physical body is less susceptible to injury, more responsive to movement needs (as is the case in peak performance), and it sends a more powerful nonverbal message of physical capability and confidence to others. Koichi Tohei *Sensei’s* Four Ki Principles remind us how we ought to “be” physically in the world: 1) Keep One Point (groundedness at your center of gravity), 2) Relax Completely, 3) Keep Weight Underside, and 4) Extend Ki (i.e., extend your intent beyond yourself).

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