



# A Whole-Life Path: A Layperson's Immersive Approach to the Noble Eightfold Path

by Gregory Kramer

The Noble Eightfold Path offers us a way through life that is far more wise and intentional than the meandering path of ongoing suffering that our human conditioning naturally takes us on. If we are to experience the full liberating potential that the Path offers us, however, an ad hoc, semi-intentional, pick-and-choose application of the Buddha's eight path factors won't do.

We need what I call a whole-life path, a fully immersive, always-on engagement with the Noble Eightfold Path.

Historically, this kind of immersive life has been available mostly to monastics. But there are countless ways that the eight factors of the Buddha's noble path can be applied to life as we actually live it today—with other people, sex, money, social injustice, technology, jobs, and complex financial systems. A whole-life path recognizes the breadth and depth of each path factor and then looks into the complexity of life for opportunities to put it into practice.

You might think of the whole-life path as one inspired by monastic immersion, but that also values the

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challenges and opportunities of living in the cultured wilds of modern humanity.

## The Need for a Whole-Life Path

Why do we laypeople need such an immersive, all-encompassing path?

Because every thought and action combines with all we have done and said to determine the direction and tenor of our lives. There are no moments, no events, no interactions, no relationships that do not affect the body-mind. Our learning, memory, and family and cultural conditioning are colluding to form how we perceive the world. Meanwhile, we are participating in social norms and organizational structures built around ignorance, greed, and aversion.

Indeed, within every moment and every facet of our lives—at all personal, interpersonal, and societal levels—there is the potential for further deepening our entanglement or for turning toward liberation.

If we are to consistently choose the latter, we need nothing less than a whole-life engagement with the Noble Eightfold Path. The eight path factors need to be understood and applied in such a way that no moment and no aspect of our lives is seen as outside from their purview.

If we want to live in a way that leads to ending our personal ignorance and craving, that leads to interpersonal relationships that are rooted in lovingkindness and compassion, and socially contributes to human flourishing and a just, humane society, then a whole-life, always-on

engagement with the Noble Eightfold Path is a way to realize that aspiration.

## **Six Tenets of a Whole-Life Path**

I propose that a whole-life path is one built on the following tenets:

1. The Dhamma is the foundation.
2. All the teachings are practices.
3. No moment, experience, or teaching is left out.
4. All teachings can be experienced here and now.
5. The teachings must be let in fully.
6. The teachings are engaged individually, in relationship, and socially.

These six tenets convey the basic principles for applying the Dhamma in a whole-life way.

It's important to recognize that they are principles of engagement rather than directions to be followed. Taken together, they point to a working relationship between formal teachings and our lived lives. From this relationship, what we do and how we live naturally emerges.

Let's look at each tenet in detail.

### **Tenet 1: The Dhamma Is the Foundation**

The earliest Buddhist teachings provide a sound, consistent basis for a modern whole-life path. These teachings have been tested through practice for millenia.

To take the early Buddhist teachings as our basis, we must first free each path factor from oversimplified definitions that have been handed down from two thousand years of pre-industrial, pre-technological history and codified by religious norms.

Then, after each path factor has been reduced to its essential meaning, we can unpack this meaning and apply it to life as we actually live it today—within our global economy, scientific mindset, and modern sense of individuality, relationship, and society.

This is a path that is aimed towards *nibbana*, that is, towards cooling of the intoxicants of ignorance, sensual craving, and self-obsession. Put another way, this is a path of detox, of cultivating wisdom, relinquishment, and self-effacement. This is the purpose at all individual and relational levels, and the Dhamma is the most reliable foundation for its realization.

## Tenet 2: All the Teachings Are Practices

All of the earliest Buddhist teachings are practice guidance, not philosophy.<sup>1</sup> There are no idle teachings in the Dhamma. The Buddha said many times that grand philosophical questions were not important and not what he was teaching.<sup>2</sup>

How do we interpret as practices, not abstract descriptions, the Buddha's teachings on the Four Noble Truths, for example, or on morality or the aggregates? The answer is simple: we investigate, live by, practice, and put them to work in our lives, so we can see for ourselves. This reflection-in-practice—in formal meditation,

conversations, and throughout our days—transforms description into practice.

### **Tenet 3: No Moment, Experience, or Teaching Is Left Out**

The totality of the teachings must apply to the totality of our lives as we are actually living them in this time and place. Because every moment and every experience matters, there is no moment, experience, thought, or action that is not part of the path to goodness or harm, happiness or suffering, wisdom or ignorance. This entire life is the path.

There is another way to understand this: Since the body-mind is the nexus of all suffering and freedom, and this mind is behind every thought and action, how could any moment possibly not be part of the path? This is what is addressed in the Buddha's dispensation. The guidance offered in the early Buddhist texts is vast. By naming eight things to remember, the Buddha makes a life oriented toward unbinding simpler and more workable, yet the simple eightfold construct enfolds all of the teachings.

The eight path factors can cover all of this profoundly complex modern life because the essentials of the human body-mind remain mostly identical today to what they were in the Buddha's time: eyes and ears; sights and sounds; unspeakably complex minds; language, urges, and fears more elemental than culture; and lives fully interwoven with each other.

We have the same astonishing capacity for learning and a no less astounding tendency to apply this intelligence to fooling ourselves. That's why the Path

outlined by the Buddha in roughly 400 BC is equally relevant here and now.<sup>3</sup> And this Path is relevant to each and every moment.

## **Tenet 4: All Teachings Can Be Experienced Here and Now**

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

The Buddha taught as a fleshy human being to other fleshy human beings. His felt experience of sensations and emotions, of thoughts, and worldly contacts, was much the same as ours. The fact of the Buddha's humanity, no less than the fact of his release, are what make his life so inspiring. We think, "If he can do it, so can I." The Noble Eightfold Path is an explicitly human one.

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

This is a profound attitude shift from "I can't possibly understand, let alone experience, these deep teachings," to "What can I experience in this teaching, and how can I more fully realize it in my life?"

## **Tenet 5. The Teachings Must Be Let in Fully**

For an unbridled experience of the teachings, we need to let them in all the way.

A path held apart from the most intimate, normal, and humble moments of our lives, a path relegated exclusively to weekly groups, retreat centers, or nightstand reading, will lack the strength of impact needed to see through a lifetime of entanglement and will not encourage deep realization.

As we approach the Buddha's discourses, our modern, individualistic minds may be baffled by descriptions of elevated mind states. Our scientism may be challenged by teachings on rebirth, and our religions or cultures that posit a self or soul may not immediately mesh with teachings on momentariness and relinquishment. But we must be willing to be confronted by those challenges and willing to not know the answers.

We also cannot separate out mindfulness or those Dhamma teachings that immediately speak to us from the vast map of the Buddhadhamma and still enjoy the full benefits the Noble Eightfold Path. If we are to live from a whole-life perspective, we must allow the core teachings to touch us, to impinge on our comforts, and disturb and inspire us to new ways of being. Vulnerable and humble, we invite the teachings to saturate us. Arms-length Buddhism has no place in the whole-life path.

## **Tenet 6: The Teachings Are Engaged Individually, in Relationship, and Socially**

We are intrinsically social animals, and much of our suffering arises in relationship to other people. It is in relationship that a sense of self is generated. It is in

relationship that the language from which we construct a world emerges. The very structure of the body-mind—the brain, hormones—reflects this relational nature. Therefore, the whole-life path must encompass our individual, relational, and social nature, both in its practices and purpose.

To truly live all of the teachings as practices, we are called to enact them as individuals, in our casual and most intimate relationships, and in our engagement with society.

With others, we can see what we cannot see alone. Because life in the Dhamma can be challenging—scary, confusing, tiring, and just difficult to sustain—the Buddha made clear the importance of spiritual friends and community.<sup>4</sup> The kindness and care of others can give us courage to let in the teachings all the way and sustain our commitment to a whole-life path.

In addition, without spiritual friendship, we might well remain blind to the dysfunctions and structural injustices of our society. Our blindness contributes to these dysfunctions and injustices, and they in turn support our continued blindness.

On a truly whole-life path, the liberating power of love and compassion, of applied wisdom, impacts us individually and extends beyond the separate self, encompassing those very close to us and extending all the way out to the invisible social structures and mores governing our lives.

The aim of the whole-life path includes individually cooling the hungry and intoxicated mind, relationally living with greater kindness and compassion,

and establishing a just and humane society. This tenet reminds us that our practices and our understanding of the path reflect this full breadth of purpose. A whole-life path puts us in touch with both the humanity of the Noble Eightfold Path and with our own humanity.

## Crafting Your Unique Whole-Life Path

Using the six tenets as our basis, each of us can craft a whole-life path that is most fitting for us. Your whole-life path will arise from your own life. And in every moment of your life, there are countless options for engagement.

Just the math should be encouraging. There are eight path factors, and each can be cultivated (1) individually in formal practice; (2) interpersonally in formal practice; (3) individually in informal practice that is embedded in our lives; and (4) interpersonally in informal practice. Eight factors times four domains of application—that alone makes for thirty-two entry points.

When you see that each factor has multiple elements, the options are further multiplied. Life is vast and, by definition, a whole-life path is as vast as life. You can enter anywhere. Start where you feel inspired.

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

Suppose, Bhikkhus, a wise, competent, skillful cook were to present a king or a royal minister with various kinds of curries: sour, bitter, pungent, sweet, sharp, mild, salty, bland.

That wise, competent skillful cook picks up the sign of his own master's preference: "Today this curry pleased my master... or he spoke in praise of this bland one."

That wise, competent skillful cook gains clothing, wages, and bonuses . . . because that wise . . . cook picks up the sign of his own master's preference.

So too, Bhikkhus, here some wise, competent, skillful bhikkhu dwells contemplating the body in the body...his mind becomes concentrated, his corruptions are abandoned, he picks up that sign. He dwells contemplating feelings in feelings . . . mind in mind . . . phenomena in phenomena... While he dwells contemplating phenomena in phenomena, his mind becomes concentrated, his corruptions are abandoned, he picks up that sign.

That wise, competent, skillful bhikkhu gains pleasant dwelling in this very life and he gains mindfulness and clear comprehension. For what reason? Because, Bhikkhus, that wise... bhikkhu picks up the sign of his own mind.<sup>5</sup>

This teaching is empowering: *you* discern what works and put it into effect.

As you develop your version of the whole-life path, pay attention to what uplifts you, to what sustains your

interest, and brings a living sense of the path into everyday experience.

Apply *ehipassiko*, or seeing for yourself. Continue to ask yourself, what is working, and what is not? Is what I'm doing right (*samma*), or oriented toward unbinding, or is it not?

Finally, remember to turn to others for guidance, inspiration, support, and energy.

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There is a clear need for an intentional path that provides guidance for a harmonious and liberative life.

Such a path must be relevant to a person living in contemporary society, replete with its tacit belief systems and technologies, its economic and social contingencies, and all the brokenness and beauty of its complexity.

The elements of this path must be applicable; this path must work. This path must draw you in emotionally and also make sense, while fully allowing the mystery of consciousness and our conjoined human hearts.

A whole-life approach to the Noble Eightfold Path is exactly the path we seek.

Excerpted and adapted from Gregory Kramer's forthcoming book, *A Whole-Life Path*.

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<sup>1</sup> Our primary references are the Pali discourses and comparably early teachings from the Chinese and Sanskrit literature.

<sup>2</sup> SN 44.7

<sup>3</sup> This is refuge in the Dhamma.

<sup>4</sup> SN 45.2 and many others

<sup>5</sup> SN 47.8