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Emptiness and Eight Fold Path

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Dr. Thomas Alexander

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In the East, ideas of life and how to live it are not so different from those of the Western Christian world. Interbeing, interconnectedness and emptiness is what people strive for during their lifetime now and for the future lifetimes they believe to have after death. This “emptiness” notion of people and of the all the things that exist in this world are what matter most in the East for many of those who follow Mahayana Buddhism and the Eight Fold Path. By following the Eight Fold Path one can achieve this state of emptiness, however practicing certain parts of the path and leaving out other parts does not work because each part of the path is as empty as the other. Much like driving a car with missing parts, one gets nowhere they want to be or need to be. These parts of the Eight Fold Path are equally empty; therefore, they are forever connected together as all other things in life are.

One can easily say that Christian or Christian-based thought is the center of the Western world’s view of life and reality. Thich Nhat Hanh explains in his book Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism, a comparison of Western Thought and Buddhist thought.

“Modern Christianity uses the ideas of vertical and horizontal theology. Spiritual life is the vertical dimension of getting in touch with God, while the social life is the horizontal dimension of getting in touch with humans...this understanding does not accord with the true spirit of Buddhism, which teaches that Buddhahood, the nature of enlightenment, is innate to every being and not just a transcendental identity. Thus, in Buddhism the vertical and horizontal are one. This is the meaning of “being in touch with”.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Interbeing p.4

The way Thich Nhat Hanh describes these contrasting worlds of thought sets the basis for interbeing and emptiness which is at the heart of Mahayana Buddhism.

In various religious thought throughout the Western world, a center belief is the existence of a soul; something that is permanent in a world where nothing ever remains permanent. As Western thought goes, each person is his or her own soul, therefore at the time of death the person seems to become non-existent in this world. It can seem to convey the idea that without a soul, one is nothing and lost. As Williams describes the nature of the Self (soul) it in his book, Mahayana Buddhism: the Doctrinal Foundations as, “‘truly existing’, truly established’, ultimately existing’, and ‘existing from its own side’”.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, he adds it is “existing completely independently from the mind which apprehends the entity concerned.”<sup>3</sup>

This is far from the meaning of emptiness in Eastern thought, particularly the many schools of Buddhism. In the Mahayana Buddhist sense, there is no soul because we are not seen as separate entities from everything else. We are always a part of something else which makes us empty and equal. This is important to Buddhism because by knowing this we learn to let go of the ego. The ego of the self: “I am”, “I need” and “I want” is what causes us to suffer which is what the First Noble Truth talks about. Thich Nhat Hanh says, “Attachment to the false view of self means belief in the presence of unchanging entities that exist on their own.” Further, he mentions that “to break through this false view is to be liberated from every sort of fear, pain and anxiety.”<sup>4</sup>

To be empty does not simply mean that there is no existence or nothingness. “Emptiness” in the Buddhist sense is a feeling, state of mind and a state of being. In the

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<sup>2</sup> Mahayana Buddhism, Williams. P 60

<sup>3</sup> Mahayana Buddhism, Williams. P 61

<sup>4</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Miracle of Mindfulness. P48

Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra it explains that, “in emptiness there is neither form, nor feeling, nor perception, nor mental formations, nor consciousness...”<sup>5</sup> From this description it seems to insinuate nothingness but that is not the case. If one thinks about the concept of emptiness in terms on an empty glass, it is easy to illustrate to someone not familiar with Buddhists ideas. Our minds are seen as the glass. Through life we fill this glass with mental formations and perceptions of things we experience ourselves, with the people know or don't know. These mental formations and perceptions are also things we have experienced or not have experienced, seen or haven't seen and so on. We fill this glass so full that later in life it leads to being narrow-minded because we have no more room to fit in new ideas; the old ones have already filled up the glass. We are then quick to make judgments without looking deeply into situations. We create stereotypes, false knowledges, and perhaps a sense of superiority at times. Therefore, being “empty” is described as open-minded since there are no other thoughts existing to judge or stereotype. Essentially, to be empty is to be empty of a separate self; to be empty of the ego.

Interbeing is just a continuation of the concept of emptiness according to Thich Nhat Hanh's many works, books and talks. His ideas on emptiness are illustrated well for Westerners to understand. If we and everything and around us are all empty, we are the same and we exist in each other; we are no longer separate. For example, waves and the ocean are different but the same because of this concept of emptiness. One cannot exist without the other; there is no wave without the ocean, and there is no ocean without a wave. When the waves rise from the ocean, crest, and crash onto the shore, they always return back to the ocean from which they come from. As Thich Nhat Hanh calls it, the

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<sup>5</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Heart of Understanding. P.3

waves and the ocean in this example “inter-are”<sup>6</sup>. In essence, they belong to each other because one does not exist without the other; they are interconnected and empty and each other.

This goes as well for people, and even animals. We may look different and come from different places, or even be a different species but we are all the same; we have life, emotions and all live together on this earth. Just because someone is of another race than we are does not mean that we are totally separate; we are living beings. Mahayana Buddhism teaches to see oneself in others, because without others we cannot be and cannot function as they cannot be and cannot function without us. Just like a family, without the parents, there are no children. In the children, you have the parents because they are both empty, they cannot exist without each other. When the mind is not empty, there is a tendency to think that we are separate from others, that we are superior or inferior, or even that we do not need others. When our mind is empty of these perceptions then we see ourselves in each others shoes; judgments lift away and true understanding will shine through.

In a good example of interbeing, Thich Nhat Hanh uses roses and garbage as an example to say there is nothing in the world that is neither pure nor defiled, that in fact these concepts are empty.

“Roses and garbage inter-are. Without the rose, we cannot have the garbage; and without the garbage, we cannot have the rose. They need each other very much.

The rose and garbage are equal. The garbage is just as precious as the rose. If we

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<sup>6</sup> Thich Nhat Hahn. Heart of Understanding p.3

look deeply at the concepts of defilement and immaculateness, we return to the notion of interbeing.”<sup>7</sup>

In other words, what is beautiful will transform into something quite the opposite in time, while what is ugly can transform into something of beauty. Ugliness and beauty are equal because they are inseparable. Because as he calls it, they inter-are, so therefore, there are empty. These concepts of beauty and ugliness are only perceptions. These are the kind of perceptions that fill our mind which is our empty glass.

Along with the idea of inter-being, is the Buddhist idea of the divine and how it plays a role in everyday life. In most forms of Buddhism, there is no God but rather bodhisattvas which could be compared to the Catholic saints in Western thought. These bodhisattvas are those who dedicate their lives to help others in general or on the spiritual path to liberation. Back to the notion of God, the Buddha stated that he was not a god or divine in any way, but rather a man trying to find liberation from the suffering of the world. This means that there is no higher being than the other; all is empty and linked together and we are all the same. He believed that people alone controlled their own fate through their actions. Therefore, we are our own gods as well as any other creature is.

Knowing a good definition of what it means to be empty is what one needs to know before understanding the Eight Fold Path. However, before even exploring the Eight Fold Path, one must know the Four Noble Truths. First, the Buddha taught that life was suffering. From an Eastern view of this, this idea is not as pessimistic as it would sound in the West. Because what he meant was that life is suffering because everything is impermanent; subject to change at any time. What we love today will be gone tomorrow, whom we love today will be gone tomorrow and none of it is in our control. Because we

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<sup>7</sup> Thich Nhat Hahn, Heart of Understanding p.31-32

desire for things to go our way and be in control of what we want, that is what makes us suffer so. Desire and attachment to things, ideas, and people is the source of our suffering. That is the basis of the First and Second Noble Truths. The Third Noble Truth was that there is a way to extinguish suffering and that is done by following the Eight Fold Path, the last of the Four Noble Truths.

In his search for overcoming suffering, the Buddha had tried numerous things to find a path that ultimately lead to enlightenment and end of suffering. He found the Eight Fold Path in particular was the one that actually worked in becoming empty and eventually overcoming suffering. This path consists of eight parts which are known as: Right View, Right Thinking, Right Mindfulness, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Diligence, Right Concentration and Right Livelihood. The Buddha also found each one of these eight components to be equally empty in nature. They are empty and practicing these with deep concentration and meditation will bring about the destruction of the ego and into a state of emptiness—a bliss without desire and a sense of interconnectedness. However, all of these parts of the path cannot exist alone. Because they are equally empty in nature, one part of the path is part of the other, which is part of the rest. In other words, one cannot practice just select parts of the path to reach this state of emptiness. To understand the Mahayana Buddhist way of understanding the Buddha's teachings, one can think of a wheel with eight spokes. Each spoke of the wheel is each part of the Eight Fold Path. The center of the wheel is the Four Nobles Truths that the spokes are connected to. Lastly, the outer rim of the wheel is the idea of inter-being, holding all of the other part together. Between the spokes of the wheel, there is emptiness. All of these make the wheel function, there cannot be one left out or else it will fall apart. The idea is

to use the wheel to where one needs to go and then leave it behind, don't just take it with you.

To return to the example with the empty glass and the concept of emptiness, if one uses the Eight Fold Path as a doctrine and not as a practice as it is intended to be, it is seen as clinging to an ideal or a way of thought. Therefore, it does not further the person to a state of emptiness but does the very opposite, it fills the mind with conditioned ways to think or to not think. If one does follow this as a doctrine they then accept this group of ideas as "the only way" or "the right way" because there is little room left for new ideas and ways to live one's life in the person's mind. These following parts of the path listed as Right View, Right Thinking, etc. do not mean that that is the "right" and only way to follow them, but rather "good" or "workable" suggestions and ways to come about encompassing the parts of the Eight Fold Path. The Buddha himself said that to take nothing as doctrine or gospel until one tried it out and found to mutually beneficial to oneself and others as well. He said he was not a divine being of any kind but just a man trying to find a way to liberate himself through a way he thought benefited himself and others.

The first fold of the Eight Fold Path is Right View. From the Heart of the Buddha's Teachings, it is described as merely "a deep understanding of the Four Noble Truths."<sup>8</sup> Right View talks about seeing things as they are and knowing that perception is what makes something look the way it looks. People can have different perceptions of the same thing because their experiences through life and other thoughts existing in their mind. As Nhat Hanh says, "the source of our perception, our way of seeing, lies in our

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<sup>8</sup> Thich Nhat Hahn, Heart of Buddha's Teachings. p51

store consciousness.”<sup>9</sup> He also goes to make an example of this by explaining, “if ten people look at a cloud, there will be ten different perceptions of it. Whether it is perceived as a dog, a hammer, or a coat depends on our mind—our sadness, our memories, our anger.”<sup>10</sup>

Right View is knowing that no perception is right or wrong and that liberating ourselves from the idea of perception entirely will liberate us from suffering. What one person sees will never be what the other one sees because of perception. In Right View, the person realizes that there is no right reality and that it is all in the mind; which is the glass. There, in fact, are no perceptions, therefore they are empty.

The part of Right Thinking is to purify our mind of unwholesome thoughts. By unwholesome thoughts, we mean harmful, violent, angry, or even jealous thoughts directed at another or oneself. One way of understanding Right Thinking and how it works is if one imagines that everything he or she thinks will come out his or her mouth in the form of words. There will certainly be some things that we will not want others to hear, especially if they are the subject of the thought and it is in a negative context. By making one’s thoughts empty and rid of unwholesome or destructive thoughts, can one also make their speech empty as well. If there is no negative thought, there is no negative word. Therefore, thoughts and speech are empty because if there is one, there is the other. The word cannot exist without the thought. However, this must come before learning Right Speech and Right Speech cannot exist alone first without Right Thinking or Right Thought. These parts of the path are linked together and empty in nature.

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<sup>9</sup> Thich Nhat Hahn, Heart of Buddha’s Teachings. p53

<sup>10</sup> Thich Nhat Hahn, Heart of Buddha’s Teachings. p53

Right Mindfulness deals with being able to stay in the present moment as it comes and being able to let go of it as it fades away through time. As Thich Nhat Hahn explains, “we should not try to lose ourselves in the dispersion or be carried away by regrets about the past, worries about the future, or craving or angry or jealousy in the present.”<sup>11</sup> He then goes on and to emphasize that “mindfulness allows us to touch the wondrous, refreshing, and healing elements that are inside and around us, and to nourish the seeds of joy, peace, love and understanding in ourselves.”<sup>12</sup> What is right in front of us now will never be someday and we must learn to realize this in every moment that everything in this world is destined to change. Impermanence is suffering. What we are now, or have now in the present moment will be gone. Therefore to practice, one must appreciate the moment that is given to them, whether it be good or bad because we learn much more that we know from every experience. Only appreciating the good is not that is meant by this. We also appreciate the bad so that when the good comes, we are able to appreciate it more. Life is a balance, neither good nor bad but a mix of both. Here, even the ideas of good and bad are seen as roses and garbage. There is never one without the other; we need them both.

The Dhammapada is one of the most well known collections of sayings and teachings attributed to the Buddha. It explains what is possible with mindfulness:

“Mindfulness is the path to immortality. Negligence is the path to death. The vigilant never die, whereas the negligent are the living dead... The wise man, by vigor, mindfulness, restraint and self-control, creates for himself an island which no flood can submerge... Do not lose yourself in negligence; do not lose yourself

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<sup>11</sup> Thich Nhat Hahn, Interbeing p.37

<sup>12</sup> Thich Nhat Hahn, Interbeing p.37

in sensuality. For it is the mindful and meditative man who will experience supreme happiness.”<sup>13</sup>

Mindfulness also means that one is able to watch his or her actions and see the results of those actions in relation to his or herself, and to other people they affect. Knowing what kind of karma one creates through his or her actions and thoughts is a step towards Right Mindfulness. One can say that mindfulness is like the teaching “look before you leap” as well as the leap and effects afterward. This careful watchfulness of our actions is what it means to be mindful. When we watch ourselves and others this way, we look at everything that happens as well as that which can happen. To be mindful is also to know that our actions affect others; we are not separate from them because we are all interconnected and empty. Here, no one is above the other. Creating mindfulness is finally being able to abandon selfishness and the notion of separateness and open up into the inter-connectedness and emptiness of everything this world has to offer in this moment we are given.

Right speech is something that is one of the hardest to cultivate while following the Eight Fold Path. Speech is the medium in which our thoughts come to life for those to hear. Without Right Thinking and Right Mindfulness, Right Speech is not possible because they are equal and empty as each other. This part of the path is to be empty of harmful words, lies and gossip when speaking. Speaking the only truthful words is the center of this part of the path. Back to the book Heart of the Buddha's Teachings, Thich Nhat Hanh gives an affirmation to what it means to cultivate Right Speech in today's world:

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<sup>13</sup> Dhammapada – Mindfulness p.7

“Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I am determined to speak truthfully with words that inspire self-confidence, joy and hope. I will not spread news that I do not know to be certain and will not criticize or condemn things of which I am not sure. I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord, or that cause the family or community to break. I am determined to make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.”<sup>14</sup>

Right Speech also teaches not to speak without a purpose. This means saying a statement that deliberately make no sense or has little importance. Refraining from speaking when the time is not right is also what it means to cultivate Right Speech.

Also on a lighter side, Right Speech attempts to lessen harmful speech. One can illustrate this is someone is being yelled at, but the other reacts kindly and does not yell back, but instead will try to talk kindly to the other. This part of the path is important in learning to cultivate kind or helpful speech when the situation or need arises. This part of the path acts in order to prevent hurting others as well as the person speaking. Think of a time when you said something hurtful and wished you wouldn't have said anything at all. Having Right Speech in mind would have benefited the speaker as well as the person being spoken to. For example, if someone you may not like needs help in a situation and you have information that could help them, speaking up in this kind of situation is also Right Speech.

The next part of the Eight Fold Path is known as Right Action. From What the Buddha Taught by Rahula, he states that Right Action “aims at promoting moral, honorable and peaceful conduct.”<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, “it admonishes us that we should

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<sup>14</sup> Thich Nhat Hahn, Heart of Buddha's Teachings. p84

<sup>15</sup> Rahula, What the Buddha Taught p.47

abstain from destroying life, from stealing, from dishonest feelings, from illegitimate sexual intercourse, and that we should also help others to lead a peaceful and honorable life in the right way.”<sup>16</sup> This is the part of the path where mindfulness is met through our actions and choices. People practice this part of the path by acknowledging the suffering they may bring about to ourselves, animals, other people, plants and the even planet itself. When one talks about Right Action they can be talking about anything from behavior to food choices to alcohol and to sexual misconduct. From the Dhammapada, it states, “act righteously, refuse to do otherwise. One who follows this path lives happily, both in this live and the life to come.”<sup>17</sup>

Many, but not all people who follow Mahayana Buddhist beliefs or those who are following something like the Eight Fold Path sometimes chose a vegetarian or vegan diet. The acknowledgement that the animal experienced suffering is something that many other people don't think about the next time they have a hamburger or while using a product that required animal ingredients or animal testing. Being aware of this and acting upon it is what one could call Right Action. Not littering is an example of Right Action because one thinks about the possible harm it can do to the environment. As for alcohol and sexual misconduct, if misused, could very well bring suffering upon oneself or others and is best to avoid. It requires a great amount of responsibility and even willpower to correctly cultivate Right Action. But with help from the other interconnecting parts of the path, will this path be nearly impossible than without. Cultivating Right Action is not possible without creating Right Diligence. In essence, Right Action is linked with the other parts of the path including Right Livelihood which will come later.

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<sup>16</sup> Rahula, What the Buddha Taught p.47

<sup>17</sup> Dhammapada p.47

Along with following the Eight Fold Path is the enormous amount of willpower needed is the part of Right Diligence. This is the drive one must have to keep moving. This drive is optimistic in the sense of failing and being able to come back from it. From mistakes we can only learn, that is, if we do not accept the failure and quit. This can be compared to a person trying to lose weight. It is a mental and physical struggle but if he or she has the diligence and mindset on working out and eating right regularly, they achieve a plain higher than they have been before. Also the person must be optimistic in trying to achieve their goal. They overcome themselves in the same way one must do in the Eight Fold Path. Without the drive to accomplish what one wants, one does nothing. Therefore it is empty and cannot and will not exist alone from the other parts. But equally important, Right Diligence does not mean to be so diligent that one ignores other aspects of the life around ones' self. It is also in the middle of the spectrum of extreme and lax like the Middle Way.

Right Concentration is the next part that makes up the Eight Fold Path. What it means to have Right Concentration is maintaining the thought in the mind without distraction. This is where meditation comes in very deeply into the person's practice. By being able to meditate on a single thing without distraction is making oneself able to devote his or her mind to what he or she must accomplish or wants to accomplish. This comes into play when a problem occurs or something happens that needs immediate attention. With Right Concentration, the person is able to devote their mind to that thing solely and develop a non-harmful solution to fix it. When the mind is fixed on something and other things are blocked out, one's concentration is better than thus, one performs better in things in life. Thich Nhat Hanh explains that "we don't use concentration to run

away from our suffering (rather) we concentrate deeply make ourselves deeply present.”<sup>18</sup> Further he states, “Living each moment deeply, sustained concentration comes naturally, and that, in turn, gives rise to insight.”<sup>19</sup> Having Right Concentration is not possible alone because to practice other parts of the Eight Fold Path, one needs concentration to keep one’s mind focused on what one wants to achieve.

Of all the seven other parts of the Eight Fold Path, the last spoke is known as Right Livelihood. This is the ultimate fold of the path that ties all the other part together to make the practice complete. This is interconnected all the rest but within the area that includes Right Action and Right Diligence. According to What the Buddha Taught, “Right Livelihood means that one should abstain from making one’s living through a profession that brings harm to himself or others. Examples of these are professions such as trading in arms and lethal weapons, intoxicating drinks, poisons, killing animals, cheating, etc. With Right Livelihood, one should live by a profession that is honorable, blameless and innocent to others.”<sup>20</sup> An example of this could be a doctor, who is there to listen deeply to others and help their suffering whether it is physical, mental, social or emotional. To also speak in truth and not to exaggerate is a skill needed in the Eight Fold Path and in this profession. Just a few examples of the opposite would be someone who is a bartender, a drug dealer, a murderer, thief, or even a butcher. He or she would deal and profit from the physical and mental suffering of others and encourage more suffering from each buyer he or she had. A conman is another, who lies and steals from others whom are unsuspecting. Right Livelihood is the final step in living one’s life in what the

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<sup>18</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Heart of the Buddha’s Teachings. p106

<sup>19</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Heart of the Buddha’s Teachings. p106

<sup>20</sup> Rahula, What The Buddha Taught p.47

Eight Fold Path teaches. It encompasses every part of the path; in fact it can be seen as the keystone to completing a bridge or arch.

Without one of these parts of the path, this stage of the practice could be unstable if other areas are omitted. One cannot simply arrive at Right Livelihood without steps to get there successfully. That is why it is empty, because it connects to the other components that are also empty. It takes all of these to become empty, to be empty of a separate self. While following this Eight Fold Path, we will be able to think differently, feel differently, and react to things in a different manner as well. We will see with clarity what is real and what is an illusion created by the society we live in everyday. Our minds will be empty as well as opened-minded with the capacity to accept new ideas and people for who they are and what they do. Prejudice and racist thoughts will not cling to an empty mind; instead the emptiness will only bring peace and kindness.

From all eight, we have three target areas: ethical, mental and wisdom. These three areas are the points of the triangle, meaning one cannot exist without the other and they are interconnected. Being interconnected, they are equal and empty. From What the Buddha Taught, Rahula explains:

“These three factors (Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood) of the Eightfold Path constitute Ethical Conduct. It should be realized that ethical and moral conduct aims at promoting a happy and harmonious life both for the individual and the society. The moral conduct is considered as the indispensable foundation for all other higher attainments. No other spiritual development is possible without this moral basis.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Rahula, What The Buddha Taught p.47

Right Form is known as the part of the path that is ethical training, Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood benefit oneself and others by acting, speaking and living ones' life in ways that hurts no one; neither the one who acts or receives the action. No one is hurt from harsh words or guilty of giving them. Nor one is hurt from an action or hurt by performing the action to another person. With Right Livelihood, one is not hurt in any way from someone else's lifestyle. Nor is the person hurting his or herself in the lifestyle they have currently.

Next, he concludes that mental discipline constitutes Right Diligence, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. All of these focus on the willpower, the thoughts and the mindset of the path and keeping it steered in the right direction and getting back up again when one fails. And lastly, Right Thinking and Right View cover the wisdom area. Knowing that everything is empty, bound to change, and that there is suffering in the world because of change is crucial to this area.

The Four Noble Truths are as empty as the Eight Fold Path because without them, the path would not exist and the path cannot exist without the Four Noble Truths. Knowing there is suffering in the world, that there are the causes of our suffering in us, and that there is a way to diminish suffering is part of the mental aspect of the path. From the last Noble Truth, knowing that suffering can be overcome by the Eight Fold Path is the action part of following the path. Therefore the Four Noble Truths are as empty as the path itself and the Buddha's teachings, none of them are held in higher esteem as the other, but instead rely on one another.

As we can see, practicing just one or two of these will not work without the other. These three area parts are interconnected and therefore are empty as each other. Neither

one of these parts is held in higher esteem than another, but must be practiced together equally and mindfully. One cannot be experienced and trained in ethical conduct area if they don't have the first part, wisdom because is it part of training. What is meant here is training the mind. Nor can someone without mental training be able to consciously practice ethical conduct. It is something of a triangle; one cannot have a triangle with only two points or one point instead of three that makes it a triangle. This is why the Eight Fold Path is empty and interconnected. Just as someone is connected with nature and their surroundings is the path connected to nature and its surroundings as well. Everything depends on the other, and without one, it does not function well or as it is intended to. If one thinks of the Eight Fold Path as a blanket the interconnectedness can be illustrated. The fabric and the threads of the blanket are equal in size and length and as act one together to perform a function. It is a symbol of interbeing and emptiness; everything the blanket is made up of works equally as a whole to keep one warm. However, if there are holes in the blanket, how well can it keep someone warm? Just like the parts of the path, if some are missing what good can it do to one who is using it to further him or herself spiritually?

Through these ideas of emptiness, inter-being and being one with everything, this brings about the idea of no birth, no death. What is meant by no birth and no death is that these concepts, like the Four Noble Truths and the Eight Fold Path, are empty as well. Because we are linked with everything in this world, we are all empty. If people die, they continue as something else, they do disappear into nothing. In the same way, we come from something else. As Thich Nhat Hanh says in [The Sun My Heart](#):

“If anyone of us does not exist, no one else can exist either. Reality cannot be confined by the concepts of being, non-being, birth and death. The term “true emptiness” can be used to describe reality and to destroy all ideas which imprison and divide us and which artificially create a reality.<sup>22</sup> Further, ...”liberation from birth and death cannot come from intellectual comprehension alone. When you see the interdependent nature of everything in the universe, when you understand the meaning of true emptiness and the miraculousness of existence, you have sown the seeds of liberation in the field of your consciousness.”<sup>23</sup>

Something that all the parts of the Eight Fold Path and even the Four Noble Truths have in common is what the Buddha taught in the beginning when describing the meaning of word “right” when talking about his teachings in particular. As mentioned earlier, the Buddha said to never accept anything as gospel or doctrine until the individual has tried it out for himself and found it to be mutually beneficial to himself and to others. All of the parts of the path he emphasized along with the Four Noble Truths are mutually beneficial to oneself as well as others. None of these parts work against oneself or others while putting them into practice.

To illustrate this, from Right View and Right Thinking, one is benefiting himself by letting go of perceptions that hurt himself or others and letting go of thoughts that are negative in nature. Nothing nor anyone benefits from superior thoughts or negativity, for even perception itself is the root of this negativity. With the parts of the path that are more wisdom-based, we have Right Diligence, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. These as well benefit oneself and others. Here with Right Diligence, one

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<sup>22</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, The Sun My Heart. p93

<sup>23</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, The Sun My Heart. p98

does not quit when he or she fails, but gets up again. If this didn't happen others would not be benefited when they depended on us. Right Mindfulness benefits us and others by not worrying about things outside the present moment. If we do not be mindful of what is in front of us, we take things for granted and that hurts us in the end as well as the people on the receiving end. Right Concentration helps us focus on what we to do without letting other thoughts distract us. If we devote our time and energy into one thing to make it meaningful, that benefits others as well as ourselves. A very easy example of this is seeing someone help another overcome a math problem. If both devote their thoughts and energy into the problem with minimizing distraction, one can solve it. This is true as someone else can overcome anything else in which they put their mind and deep concentration, Right Concentration to. We can see here that our efforts along the Eight Fold Path are empty because their results help everything and everyone else as if everything were of equal importance.

As the Eight Fold Path is able to be beneficial to oneself and to others, so are the Four Noble Truths that lead to them. First of all, it benefits all of us including ourselves to know that in life there is suffering. This is the Noble Truth that everyone must know in some way, shape or form just from experiencing life itself. When not only ourselves but others understand that there is suffering, this truth is interconnected with the next truth that suffering is caused by desire. When the individual finds this cause, he or she can help others understand their root of suffering. From there, the third and the last of the Noble Truths is that the root of suffering can be overcome or extinguished and by doing this we can use the Eight Fold Path. Here the circle is complete.

All these parts work as one, to be beneficial to not only oneself separately but for others as well. These parts of the path and the Four Noble Truths serve everyone as whole; no one is served more or less but equally. Even when one liberates himself and reaches a stage of emptiness and bliss, through this enlightened person's mindset, actions and even words, it overflows and reaches others who will benefit and learn from him. Here everything is empty.

This idea of emptiness and inter-connectedness is at the core of Mahayana Buddhism. As we have seen, it is not the same as we in the Western world think of how one should live his or her life. If we see in that life is suffering because we desire to have things turn out the way we want, to control things in a world where everything changes and nothing is ever certain or set in stone. Our minds must be as empty as the glass, so we have the capacity to take everything into our mind and not cling to ideas, images, people and perceptions. When our glass is empty, we have to mindset to be open and free from what makes us suffer, desire. We merely have "the golden rule" in the Western world while the Eight Fold Path in the East is a path many people of any faith (not only Buddhist) take in trying to achieve happiness in the simplest things life has to offer. But as mentioned frequently, the parts of the path are equally empty and cannot be practiced separately from another but together will mindfulness and compassion. If one does not do this and practices the parts that seem easy, one does nothing to help neither himself nor the community. Knowing that everything is empty and interconnected can even liberate us during our lives and in death as well because these ideas are empty. Emptiness is the greatest and vastest state of mind one can have, not only in this life but the next in some way, shape, or form.

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