

# THE BARE BONES OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHING

By Victor Byrd

## THE EIGHTFOLD PATH

### RIGHT THOUGHT

(Samma-sankappa)

"In the old days Kuei Shan asked Lazy An, 'What work do you do during the twenty-four hours of the day?'

Lazy An said, 'I tend the ox.'

Kuei Shan said, 'How do you tend it?'

Lazy An replied, 'Whenever it gets into the grass, I pull it back by the nose.'

Kuei Shan said, 'You're really tending the ox!'

People who study the Path, in controlling wrong thoughts, should be like Lazy An tending his ox, then gradually a wholesome ripening will take place of itself."

In my psychotherapy practice I have yet to meet a client who is not in some way vexed by automatic, negative and, all too frequently, self-destructive thoughts. Most of us recognize how our negative self-talk creates a downward spiral that leads to anxiety, anger, depression, and in the worst case scenario, hopelessness and suicidal ideation.

A client recently spoke about the negative thinking pattern he has lived with for most of his life. Now, after years of "letting things slide," he has begun to turn his small business around but he is unable to trust that he has actually turned the corner. Each day he awakens to the recurring thought that he is going to screw things up, "I did it before, and I'll do it again." I asked him, "Can you imagine having an inner dialogue with that voice?" He was intrigued by this question. "Imagine that you are locked in a dark room with a voice continuously blaring negative commentary about you through a loud speaker. Wouldn't you resist that voice with all your might unless it broke your will to resist? (We know of remarkable stories about human beings who never broke under the most extreme punishment.) So what is the difference between an external voice that

slowly brainwashes you into submission and this negative internal voice that relentlessly plays faultfinding chatter in your head? What if you had the power to introduce a counter voice that turned the monologue into a dialogue?" (Easier said than done, of course.) The suggestion that he could safely "enter" that empty room where for so many years he has passively acquiesced before this punishing voice was an empowering idea to him.

What I was suggesting to this client is that he "tend to the ox" when it wanders off into a swamp of negativity. By turning a self-punishing monologue into a constructive dialogue, he can gain a measure of control over the unconscious program that has dominated much of his adult life. This type of intervention, which is probably the most frequently used psychotherapy technique in America, is called cognitive psychotherapy. Cognitive psychotherapy modalities teach us to focus on the content of our thoughts, helping us recognize when we are lost in minimizing, catastrophizing or splitting (making everything all black or all white).

Focusing on the content of our thoughts and, more importantly, noticing how those thoughts literally affect our feelings - or in reverse, how our feelings affect our thoughts - can begin a sea change in psychological work. We begin to contemplate a revolutionary idea: Human beings need to take responsibility for what they think *and* feel. This is a radical point of view and sad to say the jury is still out on whether or not our species will survive long enough to climb onto this next rung of the evolutionary ladder. Will the universe patiently wait long enough for us to grow up and take responsibility for the world we create - the world that exists between our own two ears?

Boiled down to its essence, cognitive therapy is based on one assumption: We are what we think. Surprise, surprise! These assumptions did not originate with contemporary psychological theorists. The world's first great cognitive therapist was none other than Dr. *Sigmund Buddha*, who said this, "It is your mind that creates this world."

If Right Understanding, the first step of the Eightfold Path, is about process, then Right Thought, the second step of the Path, is about content. If the proof of the pie is in the pudding, then right thought is the pudding. In other words, my thoughts are a true indicator of the depth of my understanding. The words that I speak may reveal very little of what resides behind the mask that I present to the world, but my inner thought-words reveal everything. You have probably heard the saying that

character is what you do when no one is looking; perhaps the Buddha would say that character is what we secretly think.

Most of us carefully choose the most presentable flowers from our mental garden and we hide the weeds even from ourselves through processes of denial and repression. But occasionally, Mr. Freud “slips” through with an embarrassing “outside” thought. A client was describing his resistance to going to work each morning; this forty-two year old man said, “I still have a resistance to getting up and going to *school* each morning.”

A friend e-mailed me a short video of a comic doing hilarious impersonations of George Bush and Bill Clinton, using this very idea of “inside words” and “outside words.” As George Bush, he mused about having said something “accidentally.” “Now was that supposed to be an inside thought or an outside thought?” the comic wondered out loud. It was funny and apropos. As many people are doing these days, he made the President look dumber than a box of hammers. I watched and listened to the routine and I was struck by the universality of his observations. Who among us does not cling to the idea that we have inside words and outside words? Far more disturbing, don’t we think that we are only responsible for the outside ones? The truth is we are all dumber than a box of hammers, sometime or another.

The core teaching of the second step of the Eightfold Path is that *we are responsible for our thoughts*. How quickly our eyes dance past that sentence! We are responsible for our thoughts? Surely not! Everyone knows that we are responsible for our *actions*, but not our thoughts. Our laws punish people for committing wrong actions but we don’t go to jail for thinking about doing something bad, do we? We may think about killing or stealing but as long as we keep our murderous and criminal thoughts to ourselves, we won’t be doing time in the slammer.

The Buddha says that we are responsible for our thoughts! This is the teaching of the second step of the Eightfold Path. When the ox steps into the grass, we need to pull it back by the nose. Rather than indulging in a game of pretend (for example, I am the passive observer of my inside secret thoughts and they just “happen” to me), I must pay attention to each one and take them seriously. If we take the Buddha at his word, we are called to accept the radical idea that our private thoughts are the real mirror of Right Understanding. The Buddha’s architectural blueprint is

perfectly designed. Right Thought is the logical, vital and necessary second step of the Eightfold Path.

What is right thought? What is thought that is right? The Buddha describes *samma-sankappa* as “the thought free from Lust; the thought free from Ill-will; the thought free from Cruelty.” These are plain and straightforward words. As I suggested earlier, the Buddha points directly toward the content of our thinking rather than to the underlying resolve or intention. I mention this because many teachers translate *samma-sankappa* as “right intention” or “right resolve” and surely right intention or resolve is a necessary part of Right Thought. My sense is that the Buddha is being far more practical in this second step. He is not asking us to pay attention to our intention as much as he is asking us to stay connected to this “inside” aspect of the practice. In an ancient Chinese poem, the poet says that “there is no second person.” In other words, there must not be an inside me and outside me. Nisargadatta says exactly the same thing: “The self you want to know, is it some second self? Are you made of several selves? Surely, there is only one self and you are that self.”

The spiritual seeker must have internal consistency. This is one of Nisargadatta’s core teachings. In psychological terms, the conscious part of our self needs to be on the same page as our unconscious part. How often do we watch ourselves say or do something that violates or contradicts the image of who we think we are or what we believe? For example, when one experiences intense anger towards another, an anger bordering on hatred, how does she reconcile this with a self-image that embraces *ahimsa* or nonviolence? Years ago I wrote some lyrics that describe how our belief in nonviolence vanishes in the presence of “highly mitigating circumstances:”

“But all the world agrees, we need a killing freeze,  
Except in highly mitigating circumstances.  
It’s always wrong to fight, except when we are right.  
Think of all those English boys that we killed to be free.”

How easily we seem to live with these contradictions. Here is one of my favorite passages from Nisargadatta’s *I Am That*:

“To remember what needs to be remembered is the secret of success. What is supremely important is to be free of contradictions: the goal and the way must not be on different levels; life and light must not quarrel; behavior must not betray belief. Call it honesty, integrity,

wholeness; you must not go back, undo, uproot, abandon the conquered ground."

Nisargadatta has captured the essence of the Buddha's second step of Right Thought. If understanding is the Light, right thought is the Life and they must match. "The goal and the way must not be on different levels." When I sit with clients, I often think of Nisargadatta's statement that our goals must match our Way. Over the years, I have come to see that most (if not all) of our troubles arise from inner contradiction. We say one thing but mean another. Right thought is putting your money where your mouth is.

Most of us say, "Well, this is impossible. What normal person can walk around noting thoughts of ill-will, cruelty or lust all the time?" Even if we believed that it was possible, would we really want to control our thoughts all the time?

The Buddha said that he taught himself to divide his thoughts into three categories and he would note his thoughts one by one: "This is lust. This is ill-will. This is cruelty." Could we do the same? How subtle and pervasive these three can be! While overt violence, hatred and lust are easy to detect and reject, each of the three "poisons" has subtle cousins in our marvelously deceptive minds. Perhaps I have evolved beyond blatant cruelty, even to the point that I would not swat at a fly, but what about cruelty's second or third cousin? If I accuse myself of being stupid or making a fool of myself, isn't that a form of cruelty? If I am walking down the street and find my eyes gazing a little too long at some object of desire, it may not be lust, but isn't my "interest" the near relative of lust?

My personal "favorite" is ill-will. It whispers like a soft summer breeze through my thinking process: "I don't like him. She's rude. They're mindless. He eats too loud and what on earth is he doing on this retreat?" On and on the mind goes, judging others, practicing intolerance and impatience. For me, watching ill-will would be a full-time occupation but my shadow side tells me that there is nothing wrong with merely *thinking* these thoughts, so why bother? After all, I don't act on them, so where's the harm in merely thinking these bad things and who is going to know but me? During a recent Sunday sit, I asked everyone, "What do you think happens to our thoughts as we sit together in meditation? Do they stay locked away in that space between our ears? Or are they a form of energy

that pours into the room, even as we sit in silence?" Aren't our thoughts creating new sankharas, moment by moment?

The Buddha challenges us to believe that right thought is actually possible. He invites us to consider a totally radical notion: We can actually control our thoughts. Urging the truth seeker on, he says: "Whatever thought he desires, that thought will he think, whatever thought he does not desire, that thought will he not think."

What an incredible statement and I mean the word "incredible" in Webster's precise meaning: "Too extraordinary and improbable to be believed." I don't quite know whether to say that the Buddha's statement is empowering or terrifying. Have you ever met anyone who would actually want such inner control? Or to bring the question closer home, do you really want to think only the thoughts that you desire and never have a thought that you do not desire? Wouldn't that make us perfectly programmed robots? Isn't it almost inhuman to have that much inner control? Perhaps this is what the old Ch'an Masters mean when they warn us that the Buddha-dharma is not based on human sentiments.

The "Oxford American Dictionary" defines thought as "the process or power of thinking," which tells us exactly nothing. The definition of "think" is a bit more informative: "to exercise the mind in an active way." But those of us who can bear the discomfort of being with and watching the thought-circus as we sit in meditation tend to have a little less hubris when it comes to conceptualizing thought as an "exercise of our mind in an active way." *Who* is exercising this mind in an active way? We begin to discover something that may become our first real insight: *I am not thinking, at least not in the sense of "I am choosing to think."* More often than not, our actual experience in meditation is *"thoughts are thinking me."*

Meditation trains us to pay attention to the chatter in our heads and as we sit we begin to see something astonishing. The ego proudly announces to itself, "I will now watch my breath and stop thinking!"

Sure...

What do we discover? Thinking does not stop because we said that it should. In fact, it may explode into a three ring circus just to show us how much we really are in charge; as someone once said, "It's like being locked in a phone booth with a lunatic." This can be maddening to some but it can

be a doorway for others, as the realization dawns that thoughts of ill-will, hatred or cruelty are impersonal energies that arise from avijja (nidana number one). These energies act *upon* us and condition our minds (nidana number two) moment by moment.

It's hardly surprising that a psychotherapist would be very interested in the practice of Right Thought and that is certainly true in my case. Indeed, it is at this precise juncture that the work of meditation can facilitate the process of cognitive psychotherapy, taking it to a far deeper level. Knowing that I am lost in envy is useless to me if I am unable to separate from the content of my feelings of envy and hatred. Through meditation one can connect with a separate observer who has the power to enter and change the unconscious program .

If right understanding is the *meaning* of Dharma, right thought is the *expression* of that meaning. In the Lankavatara Sutra, the Buddha makes a clear distinction between meaning (right understanding) and verbal thought:

“Neither words nor sentences can exactly express meanings, for words are only sweet sounds that are arbitrarily chosen to represent things, they are not the things themselves, which in turn are only manifestations of mind. Discrimination of meaning is based upon the false-imagination that these sweet sounds which we call words and which are dependent upon whatever subjects they are supposed to stand for, and which subjects they are supposed to be self-existent, all of which is based on error. Disciples should be on their guard against the seductions of words and sentences and their illusive meanings, for by them the ignorant and dull-witted become entangled and helpless as an elephant floundering about in the deep mud.”

As babies, our first primitive cries mean “I’m hungry.” A giggle or burst of laughter expresses pleasure and happiness, but gradually we learn to convey meaning through a sweet word, such as “mama.”

Soon we are speaking in simple sentences and eventually these sentences begin to reflect ever more complex thought-structures. Thought has now become the master instead of the servant. We cannot imagine not thinking! Words, sentences and their illusive meanings solidify into this thing that we call “mind.” The mind hardens into a set of beliefs which we

cherish as if they were reality: “Zen is the only real way to practice Buddhism; you can only be saved through Jesus; democracy is the only hope for the world.” Our beliefs are like computer programs silently controlling our minds and our lives. The Buddha says that we have become “dull-witted” and “entangled and helpless as an elephant floundering about in the deep mud.” Who could possibly doubt this?

The Buddha distinguishes between Right Understanding, which can only be experienced through silence, and Right Thought. Meaning can never be captured in the net of words. This is why we struggle with words such as dharma and anicca. Their ultimate meaning can only be felt through complete silence. For example, imagine how impossible it would be to capture the essence and feeling of a direct experience of “no self” in words. The concept of “anatta” is not the experience. Our intellect (the fourth skandha) insists that words are reality; thus thought overpowers meaning.

As a young boy, I remember listening with rapt attention as a charismatic minister gave a stirring sermon at a tent revival in East Tennessee. With a rising voice and increasing intensity he shouted, “You may not be able to keep the birds from flying over your head, but you can sure keep them from nesting in your hair!” In his own way, he was speaking about Right Thought. In fact, he was also pointing to the sixth step of the Eightfold Path: Right Effort. In other words, the only way to keep the birds of lust, ill-will and cruelty from nesting in your hair is to make sufficient effort to prevent them from finding a nice, safe landing strip on your head.

But in describing Right Effort, the Buddha suggests a completely radical idea: We can actually keep the birds from flying over our heads altogether! We will look at that more closely when we discuss the Four Great Efforts. For now, suffice to say that Right Thought depends not only on Right Understanding (the wings) but also on Right Effort (the motion of the wings).

*vitakka*

The Buddha divides thinking into two categories: *vitakka* and *vicara*. Earlier, we noted that most of the time we are not thinking as much as being thought. In other words, most of our thoughts are just flowing through the mind like a cascading waterfall. One thought triggers associations to a related subject and off we go to that next thought, like a

monkey swinging from limb to limb. The Buddha suggests that it is possible to *choose* to think, and *vitakka* is that conscious intention or aim. Vipassana meditators may have the intention to note “thinking” as we watch thoughts race through the mind but we can only do that if we have sufficient energy (power) and mindfulness to interrupt the stream of unconscious thought. That one conscious note, “thinking,” may create a wedge in the unconscious stream of robotic thought and for one precious moment we are not “being thought.”

I find that I can “aim” conscious thought (just barely) when I silently ask myself this question: “Right thought?” As I lie in bed in the morning, the mind slips into random thoughts of planning, worrying, anticipating, and at some point in that stream of unconscious words, the question “Right thought?” suddenly emerges into consciousness. That question creates the wedge and the unconscious stream of words is temporarily interrupted. In that blessed moment I am literally awake.

*vicara*

Now comes the crucial second step of right thought: *vicara*. It is hard enough to muster up sufficient power to create the wedge that interrupts the unconscious stream of automatic thoughts but it is exponentially more difficult to maintain that flow of conscious awareness. Usually, we slip back into the unconscious, automatic program. We completely forget that only a moment ago we experienced a little taste of freedom, a tiny space of clarity. Ta Hui reminds us that it isn’t the first thought – the one where we become aware – that is important, it is the *second* one. In other words, most of us do not have sufficient energy-power to stop ourselves from slipping back into the unconscious stream. There may be a temporary interruption in the movie but our minds are deeply conditioned to rejoin the movie as quickly as possible. With that second thought, we slip back into the mist of unconsciousness, completely forgetting the previous moment of clarity.

*Vicara* is the sustaining factor of conscious thought, what Mahasi Sayadaw, the great Burmese Vipassana teacher called “rubbing” the object. The *vicara* aspect of conscious thought is “staying with it.” *Vitakka* and *vicara* are what make investigation possible, and indeed, the Buddha lists “investigation” as one of the factors of enlightenment. Nisargadatta says, “There can be no salvation without investigation because non-investigation is the main cause of bondage.”

Think of vitakka as the activity of dipping the mop into a bucket of clean soapy water. Vicara is like mopping (rubbing) the floor. It removes the dirt and grime of ignorance with the “all-purpose cleanser” of Right Understanding, mixed with the clean water of Right Thought.

Let’s assume that I have succeeded in aiming the mind (vitakka) toward the unconscious stream of thinking and have interrupted the flow with the question “right thought?” My ability to stay with the thought allows the investigative element to unfold. Believe it or not, investigation seems to be a natural function of awareness, like water seeking its own level. If I stay with observation, investigation happens naturally. For example, I may be able to see, with surprising clarity, that envy is dominating the content of my stream of thoughts. Vicara allows me to actually perceive that in one particular thought and if there is sufficient energy to sustain present awareness, Right Understanding will rise. I may discover that my envy has created a state of suffering. Perhaps I will realize that dukkha really is the First Noble Truth and that I have been scratching my own sores. By the miracle of awareness, ill-will or envy will disappear, hiding under a rock, so to speak, waiting for a more propitious moment to show its hard-edged splendor.

Without the practice of Right Understanding and Right Thought, I will never find a convincing reason to engage with *thoughts* of ill-will, lust and cruelty. After all, aren’t my thoughts harmless as long as I keep them “inside?” Who’s going to know anyway? This belief that our thoughts do not matter is met head-on by Right Understanding and Right Thought: Every unskillful action begins with a thought that is silently nurtured. (“I told it not, my wrath did grow.”) On a psychological level, feelings such as silent envy or jealousy can feel comforting, like rocking yourself to sleep when you feel overwhelmed and anxious. These dark feelings serve as self-soothing mechanisms. If we truly engage with this second step of Right Thought we discover that we are “in the trenches” of the real work in the Eightfold Path. Right Thought is where the depth of our Right Understanding is glaringly apparent.

There is one final element necessary to the practice of Right Thought. So far we have mentioned two legs on which the stool of Right Thought rests: Right Understanding and Right Effort. But in fact Right Thought rests on a three legged stool. What made me ask myself the question, “right thought?” as I lay in bed this morning? What makes the wings move in order for the bird to take flight? The Buddha says that Right

Thought certainly depends first on Right Understanding, or the first leg of the stool, and the second leg of the stool is Right Effort. The third leg of the stool is Right *sati* or mindfulness (the seventh step of the path).

Sati is that faculty that *remembers* to practice in the first place. It is the *sine qua non* of inner discipline and the touchstone of Vipassana meditation. Sati is that which “remembers what needs to be remembered.” I can practice wrong understanding or right understanding, wrong thought or right thought. I can put enormous effort into unskillful projects as well as skillful ones. But *sati* is the silent whisper that reminds me to practice in the first place. It is the faculty of mind that remembers to ask the question, “right thought?” *Sati* is the essence of the Buddha-mind, and once in a while, when it shines through the dark clouds of ignorance (*avijja*), we experience a moment of freedom and clarity.

At the beginning of the discussion on Right Thought, I posed this question: “Do you really want to think only the thoughts that you desire and never have a thought that you would not desire?” What about it? Would you give up having “spontaneous” thoughts? This is an extraordinarily important question because it helps us to clarify just what our intention really is. What is your true attitude towards Right Thought? Of course you and I both agree that Right Thought is important but are we only paying lip service to this jewel of the dharma? Perhaps we actually believe that it would be impossible to have that much discipline, at least in this lifetime.

We resist inner control. We cling to a fantasy of spontaneity and resist any suggestion that we become robot-like. Underlying this resistance is the fear of being controlled. All wild things have this fear. In a sense, we are still children fighting furiously for our freedom. Even the faintest hint of taming (controlling our thoughts) sends us packing. We recoil when we witness the mindlessness of cult followers who move in lockstep with their charismatic leader or people who have been subjugated by political dictatorships and reduced to the role of helpless pawns. Aren't we supposed to be free to explore and manifest our potential, to inhabit the fullness of our being?

There is spontaneity and there is *spontaneity*. An infant taking a good dump in his diapers is being spontaneous; so is a teenager experimenting with sex, drugs and rock and roll but must we equate the spontaneity of unconscious behavior with freedom? One intriguing description of the

Buddha is “tamer of the animal mind.” Doesn’t “taming the animal mind” make you a little nervous? It does me. Yet who is it who gets nervous at this idea of being tamed, if not the animal mind!

What is true spontaneity? It is freedom from the robotic mental programs, the intricate web of beliefs that hold us hostage. When we are lost in these programs – in the story and “spontaneous” unconscious reactive patterns of our lives – we are no more free than someone serving a life sentence in prison. Spontaneity is precisely what we are not because of our deep fear of the vast silence that lies at the heart of what we truly are.

Of course, duality, which is the result of discriminating thought, is alive and well in this human realm of experience. If Ta Hui’s story of tending the ox is a perfect analogy to cognitive psychology (working with the content of thought), inevitably there is a second discipline. In psychological terms the other side is called process or depth work. We will see, shortly, that Ta Hui also addresses this other way of tending to the ox.

In psychology, depth work is based on the theory that change can only be manifested through work with the unconscious mind. In other words, changing the surface does not change the interior. In depth psychology, we peel back the surface and look at (uncover) what is underneath; for example, what is causing the negative spiral of self-punishing words.

Let’s repeat Ta Hui’s story because it really does bear repeating many times over. This time we will add the one sentence that points toward a second way of tending the ox:

“In the old days Kuei Shan asked Lazy An, ‘What work do you do during the twenty-four hours of the day?’

Lazy An said, ‘I tend the ox.’

Kuei Shan said, ‘How do you tend it?’

Lazy An replied, ‘Whenever it gets into the grass, I pull it back by the nose.’

Kuei Shan said, ‘You’re really tending the ox!’

People who study the Path, in controlling wrong thoughts, should be like Lazy An tending his ox, then gradually a wholesome ripening will take placed of itself.”

Here is the added commentary:

“You must not let wrong thoughts continue. *If you cannot see through them*, then the moment a wrong thought comes up you should quickly concentrate your mental energy to pull yourself away (italics mine).”

Ta Hui says that we must engage in the cognitive approach of pulling the ox out of the grass only if we are unable to “see through” our thoughts. What does he mean by “see through?” Surely, he is referring to the awareness that *all* thought – brilliant, mundane, or completely idiotic – is made up of absolutely nothing and it leads us absolutely nowhere. Here is what Krishnamurti says about thought:

“Thought, by its very structure, is self-isolating; it cannot be made vulnerable. Thought cannot be spontaneous, it can never be free. Thought is the continuation of the past, and that which continues cannot be free. There is freedom only in ending.”

Krishnamurti urges us to look in another direction (the second way) as we work with the ox. Could it be that the one seeking to control the ox is none other than the ox itself?

“In uncovering the thought process, which is self-knowledge, the truth of what *is* puts an end to the thought process. The truth of what *is* is not to be found in any book, ancient or modern. What is found is the word, but not the truth. Only when thought ends is there truth. There is no ending of thought through compulsion, through discipline, through any form of resistance.”

How difficult it is to get the mind around this second way of working with Right Thought. In this “process” approach to thought, we are asked to leave the ox alone! We are asked to see that all thought is unreal. Good thoughts may be more skillful than bad thoughts, but we must not build our house on any thought: good, bad or indifferent.

Our old friend Chogyam Trungpa also describes this second approach:

“Insights come only when there are gaps in our struggle, only when we stop trying to *rid ourselves of thought*, when we cease siding with

pure, good thoughts against bad, impure thoughts, only when we allow ourselves simply to see the nature of thought (my italics).”

These great teachers are pointing to *sunyata* or emptiness. What is the nature of thought if not emptiness? Parenthetically, I think that this “process” approach to right thought is more in the Zen and Tibetan tradition than the more straightforward, rational and cognitive Theravadan approach. I would add that this very difference offers us a world of insight into the futility of thinking that there is a “one size fits all” approach to the Dharma. Two teachers can say radically different things and each be completely in accord with the Buddha’s teaching.

When we work from the standpoint of nonduality, we do not try to tend the ox by grabbing it by the nose and pulling it back onto the path. Likewise, we do not work with our thoughts by trying to control them. We do not *empower* thinking by “giving it authority,” to quote Ruth Denison’s marvelous dictum. Instead, we cultivate the awareness that the problem is not the content of what we think; it is the thinking process itself. By definition, discriminating thought splits everything into two, so “good” will *require* evil and the concept of nirvana must stand in contrast to samsara. This is the mess that thought creates: You cannot think one thing without creating its opposite.

Right thought can mean being free of thoughts of lust, greed and ill-will. In the context of meditating, or “just sitting,” as Dogen called it, Right Thought can mean *no thought at all*. At a seven day retreat, Joseph Goldstein reminded his students, “In the context of meditation, nothing is worth thinking about.” This is truly a subtle way to tend the ox, recognizing that the ox was never real!

There is no doubt that this “process” approach to Right Thought is also in accord with the bare bones of the Buddha’s teaching, but a warning label needs to be clearly printed across the bottom of this “Refined Guide to Training an Ox.” It may be cunning *avijja*, disguised as a *deep thinker* that whispers, “I don’t need to work with labeling my thoughts or pulling the ox out of the grass all day long. I’ve been at this for ten years and surely I’ve grown beyond that elementary level. My practice is to work with the unreality of all thought.” Perhaps. The name of the wise teacher who uttered the following words has long ago disappeared from my memory, but surely he or she understood the power and seduction of duality:

“One may amuse oneself by calling the world an illusion, or think of it as unreal. But karma, the force of action, will force him to believe in it.”

In other words, I may talk up big concepts like “It’s all an illusion; life is a dream; these thoughts are not real, in fact, I’m not real and neither are you!” But what if my dear “unreal” friend dies suddenly? What if my nondual state of equanimity is disturbed by a sexual fantasy so powerful that I would be willing to go to hell and back for one night in paradise? Then how quickly I’ll find myself believing in this so-called dream world after all!

If we can accept the Buddha’s assertion that ignorance (nidana number one) precedes each conscious moment (nidana number three), then we are called to remember that there is an implacable opponent within all of us, and it resists waking up, with every ounce of its fiber. So perhaps most of us ordinary folks need to believe that the ox is real before we are ready to see beyond its nose, or our own.

In his book *Radical Awakening*, Stephen Jourdain adds a fascinating insight into the age-old teaching that enlightenment is nothing but waking up from a dream. Jourdain says that many of us are lost in a nightmare, or even a plain old bad dream, from which there is no possibility of waking. For example, the Tibetans remind us that we need to practice deep gratitude for the circumstances of being born in a country where we are free to practice the dharma, or where we have the leisure to sit together (for instance, each Sunday afternoon). I have read that over half the world’s population exists on less than two dollars a day. So, one in two people on this planet spend his or her waking hours scavenging for enough food to make it through another day. Life itself becomes a nightmare.

Then there are psychological nightmares. Many people are so embedded in hurt and anger that they cannot begin to find the wedge that would give them a moment’s respite from their bad dream. Many of us are lost in the bad story of our childhood and there is no exit in sight. Even if we did find it possible to sit, what are the odds that we can find a wedge, a tiny tear in the fabric that binds us to the dream-story that is endlessly looping in our mind? Jourdain suggests that the gift of Western psychology may be that it can help us to create a more healthy dream, one from which we may eventually awaken.

So much of our contemporary mindset is about having a more pleasant dream and surely Western Buddhism is being shaped by our obsession with creating a better dream. The slogan, “Buddha Lite,” is hitting close to home these days. But the Buddha’s radical teaching is purely about waking up and the pointer of his second step is that each of us must turn inward and look at the mind itself. We must drop this childish notion that our thoughts are accidents over which we have neither control nor responsibility. Where there is ill will, cruelty or lust, there can be no space for Right Understanding or its reflection as Right Thought.

Right Thought is not an end in itself; it performs a dual role. It is the mirror of what is inexpressible, a reflection of the *meaning* of Right Understanding. It is also the connecting link to the next three steps on the Path: Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. These are the steps that teach us how to actually manifest the Dharma into the world around us.