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# The Noble Eightfold Relationship Matrix

Phil Ginsburg<sup>1</sup>, Daniel Eckstein<sup>2</sup>, Yu-Fen Lin<sup>3</sup>, Chi-Sing Li<sup>4</sup>, and  
Bill Mullener<sup>5</sup>

## Abstract

The authors have created the Noble Eightfold Path Relationship Matrix for assisting couples in considering their relationships. Three relationship examples are provided to demonstrate how the eight principles relate to their own marriage. An interview with a counselor who uses the concepts in her own private practice is also featured. Implications for relationship enhancement conclude the article.

## Keywords

Eightfold Noble Path, relationship enhancement, couple's assessment, case studies, marriage, meditation, mindfulness, Buddhism

There is joy in the simplest of things—a spring flower, a child's laughter, a puppy playfully chasing its tail, a couple holding hands while looking at each other with loving eyes. Just as there is joy, there is also anguish. It takes little effort to see suffering all around us. It seems that we are inundated with reports of economic pressures, racial and political strife, and senseless violence. Many in the West have traditionally found comfort in the roots of Judeo-Christian religious doctrine. In the East, many have relied on ancient Buddhist ideology to put into perspective disparate experiences of joy and suffering.

The purpose of this article is to introduce the wisdom of the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path for relationship enrichment. The article will be organized as follows: following a brief summary of the history, the eight aspects of the Buddhist principles will be defined and illustrated. You as a couple will then be invited to fill out what we are calling the Noble Eightfold Relationship Matrix. Also featured will be three couple's responses describing how the concepts are used in their own marriage. Although the concepts presented in the article are derived from Buddhist philosophy, the authors have found that the concepts have been useful to those who may hold a diverse set of beliefs. Although none of the authors themselves are practicing Buddhists, the concepts themselves have been found to be helpful in their work with couples, regardless of their religious, spiritual, and/or philosophical beliefs.

## History

Buddhism can be traced as far back as 500 BCE. The founder was Siddhartha Gautama, who, later in life, transformed into what we now call the Buddha. Buddha is often misunderstood as the name of an historical figure from India; but this is not the case. Buddha is a principle, not a person. Buddha actually

means "awake." When asked, "Are you a god?" Gautama . . . replied "No." "Then what are you?" the man asked again. Gautama's answer was "I am awake" (Tea Alchemy, n.d.). The authors feel it is important to clarify how Gautama himself developed his own belief system and tried to communicate the importance of becoming aware of one's own set of principles.

Cantwell and Kawanami (2002) note that in his teaching of the Four Noble Truths, Buddha felt that everything is conditioned and subject to change, but people, ignorant of this reality, become attached to impermanent things. He proposed that the only cure is the Noble Eightfold Path. It consists of a set of methods encompassing morality, meditation, and wisdom. The ultimate goal is enlightenment (nirvana), freedom from the cycle of conditioned existence.

## The Four Noble Truths

According to the Buddha, *suffering* is an integral part of the human experience. It refers to a basic dissatisfaction running through our lives, the lives of all but the enlightened. Sometimes this dissatisfaction erupts into the open as sorrow, grief, disappointment, or despair; but usually it hovers at the edge of

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our awareness as a vague sense that things are never quite perfect, never fully adequate to our expectations of what they should be (Bodhi, 1999, p. 6). The fact that suffering is a central theme in people's lives is the first of four noble truths.

The second noble truth is that much of our suffering comes from the stubborn *belief that we MUST have certain things*. These things can be material in nature or they may be relationships that we feel we cannot be whole without. Many times we are attached to certain ideas and insist that our way is the only way.

A realization of hope is the third noble truth. By accepting that our idea of what should be is not necessarily always the best way, we then may be able to let go of the people, places, and things to which we form our unhealthy attachments.

The fourth noble truth is *that there is a path to follow*. This path is characterized by cultivating wisdom, morality, and concentration. The most common Buddhist practice for cultivating these qualities is mindfulness. Mindfulness (Sanskrit: *smirti*) is nonattached yet fully engaged witnessing of internal or external phenomena. Being mindful involves fully attending to what arises in experience without evaluating or interpreting it cognitively or emotionally, as if seeing through the proverbial eyes of a child. (Gehart & McCollum, 2007, p. 217)

Children possess a type of purity and ability to see things as they are. In a child's innocence, there is a tendency to do the next right thing. *Being mindful of retaining our own childlike qualities can help us to decrease our suffering.*

The decision to write this article came about, as the authors discussed how the eightfold path could be used by you, the couple, to minimize the suffering that you may experience in your relationship. Bodhi (1999) notes that:

To sum up, we find three requirements for a teaching proposing to offer a true path to the end of suffering: first, it has to set forth a full and accurate picture of the range of suffering; second, it must present a correct analysis of the causes of suffering; and third, it must give us the means to eradicate the causes of suffering. (p. 5)

In other words, it is important that we be rigorously honest with ourselves about our situation. To the best of our ability, we need to know the source of our suffering (does it come from within or is it caused externally). It is important that we be willing to ask ourselves, again with rigorous honesty, can the path we are about to choose take us where we want/need to go? Will following this path make things better and reduce suffering? The path we choose may not be easy.

Albert Ellis, the renowned originator of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy, felt that much of the suffering that people experience is self-induced. Unless they are willing to let go of the *musts, shoulds, and oughts* that are part of their belief system, they will likely continue to experience suffering and not be able to fully enjoy the present (Heery, 2000).

Ellis encouraged people to view things as they really are. This is similar to what the Buddhist describes as being

*Right View*. It is the first of eight principles or aspects along the eightfold path. The eight principles are *Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration*. "The eight aspects of the path are not to be understood as a sequence of single steps, instead they are highly interdependent principles that have to be seen in relationship with each other" (Thebigview, n.d.).

## Definitions

In the following section, we have defined the principles of the *noble eightfold path* in such a way as to make it easier for you to draw parallels to situations and events in your own life. Although each virtue is preceded with the adjective *right*, the authors have found it useful to suggest that there is not one and only one *right* way of being in a relationship; that can be especially challenging if one member of the relationship arrogantly believes that his or her beliefs are superior. While teaching in a medical school, coauthor Eckstein heard the term *high yield*, in the context of students getting the maximum payoff for the minimal amount of time spent studying for their many exams. Consider *high yield* results as another way of thinking about what you as a couple might achieve by using the following eight virtues in your relationship.

- *Right View* is seeing things as they really are without fear or expectations.
- *Right Intention* naturally follows from Right View and involves giving up the need for controlling and manipulating other people, places, and things.
- *Right Speech* allows us to be genuine, to speak without a filter. We have no ulterior motives. We talk not just to be understood; rather we communicate truth without expectation as to what the outcome of our sharing may be. We speak authentically from our hearts.
- *Right Discipline* involves letting go of activities that can complicate our lives. We eat what we need, we get the material things that we need, but we make a conscious choice to keep our lives uncomplicated. We learn to understand the difference between wants and needs.
- *Right Livelihood* implies that whatever it is we are given to do, that we do so with a full heart and an eye to excellence. We make a conscious effort to ensure that what we do for our livelihood does not negatively impact the rights of other living things. Our livelihood ideally makes a contribution to the common good in some manner.
- *Right Effort*: If we are truly following the path when we deal with challenges as they come, there is no struggle as we interact with others and experience ourselves. When we are involved in Right Effort, we experience maximum impact for minimal energy.
- *Right Mindfulness* is the part of the path that allows us to be conscious of how we are performing the other steps on the path. We notice our physical selves, our breathing, our

touch, and how our bodies experience the five senses. We have awareness of our feelings and emotions; we are aware of our state of mind and our reactions to what we encounter.

- *Right Concentration* allows us to be more fully focused in the moment. We are not day dreaming about what ifs, but allow ourselves to be immersed in the now. We are acutely aware of our views, intentions, speech, discipline, livelihood, effort, and mindfulness. We are aware of what we perceive and in turn how we are perceived.

## The Elephant in the Room

O how they cling and wrangle, some who claim  
For preacher and monk the honored name!  
For, quarreling, each to his view they cling.  
Such folk see only one side of a thing.

(Wang, n.d.)

Keown in 1996 wrote of a story that the Buddha once told of a King who assembled the blind men in his village to gather around an elephant. The King split the blind men into several separate groups.

Each group was then taken to an elephant and introduced to a different part of the animal—the head, trunk, legs, tail, and so forth. Afterward, the king asked each group to describe the nature of the beast. Those who had made contact with the head described an elephant as a water pot; those familiar with the ears likened the animal to a winnowing basket; those who had touched a leg said an elephant was like a post, and those who had felt a tusk insisted an elephant was shaped like a peg. The groups then fell to arguing among themselves each insisting its definition was correct and all the others were wrong.

There are many occasions in marriage where each partner can perceive the very same thing quite differently. Often couples choose to leave things unspoken like an elephant in the room that no one dares talk about until resentments build up, unintended words are spoken, and emotions boil over. Hurt and suffering are often the result for the couple and their loved ones.

## Activity: Creating Your Matrix

The authors have found it can be helpful for couples to fill in a matrix as an exercise that can be done together (see Appendix). The matrix can be used as a visual tool for how you are applying the virtues both individually and together in your relationship. The concepts are meant to be a starting point for stimulating your own creative discussion.

There are several ways to use the matrix. Each of you individually can fill in your responses. It is not expected you will have a response for each cell; rather, look over the matrix and respond to the items that are most relevant to you. You could then meet with your partner and discuss your responses.

A second option is for you to go through the matrix together and to jointly relate your own associations and illustrations. A third variation is for you to interview each other.

The eight virtues are listed on the vertical dimension of the matrix. The horizontal axis features the following five reflective questions:

1. How was this modeled for you as a child and/or adolescent? Who modeled this for you?
2. What are some examples of this in your adult life for you personally?
3. Cite examples of when you believe your partner demonstrated this virtue.
4. With respect to you as a couple together, what are some positive examples of this virtue in your relationship?
5. Which of the eight virtues is underutilized and/or undervalued in your current relationship? In what way? List some possible suggestions for improvement if you have them.

## Three Couples' Case Studies

The three representative case studies that follow have been chosen to reflect various cultures and religious perspectives. The first couple's husband was born in the United States and the wife was born in the Philippines. The second husband and wife were born in Hong Kong and in Taiwan, and the third couple is from the United States. The third example demonstrates how the matrix can be completed by just one partner in a relationship.

### Joy and Phil Ginsburg Matrix

Joy and Phil Ginsburg enjoy a multicultural marriage. Phil's ancestors were from Eastern Europe; however, he was raised in the United States and was brought up in the reformed Jewish Faith. Joy was born and raised in the Philippines as a Catholic. When Joy and Phil met, they found that while they had been raised with some differing view points regarding religion that they had much in common spiritually. They also found that they had very similar family values in regard to how to raise children and the importance that extended family plays in the couple's marriage. Phil and Joy both feel that the similarity in family values that they discussed extensively during their brief courtship is the cornerstone on which their marriage has been built and a big part of their positive feelings and love for one another. Joy and Phil are raising their four children ages 7 to 11 in the Reformed Jewish faith.

### Right View

How was this modeled for you as a child and/or adolescent?  
Who modeled this for you?

**Phil:** In most of the eight aspects of the path, Joy and I feel our parents modeled these things for us quite well.

**Joy:** We grew up in extreme poverty in the Philippines. My mother and father both influenced me greatly. Father would work from dawn into the night, fishing, farming, climbing trees for coconuts. Often he was ill and would work until he literally

could not continue. This is the way it was and we had to accept this. Our poverty contributed to seeing things as they are and living in the moment.

**Phil:** I think that as a very young person, I became aware of how things were through discussions with my mom and dad about the civil rights issues we witnessed in the 60s as well as seeing Vietnam in our living rooms each night. I was certainly sheltered more than Joy as I never wanted for any necessities. I did however, encounter prejudice at an early age. I am Jewish and there were some neighbor children my brothers and I had played with for a couple of years and once their mom found out we were Jewish she would not allow us to play together any more. My mom gently explained how it was in the world. It was the first time I realized not everyone was Jewish. I was five years old.

What are some personal examples of this in your adult life?

**Joy:** I felt for the long term welfare of our family that my husband should change careers and return to school so he could work in a spiritually fulfilling career and not be forced to travel away from our family. This entailed me working in a labor intensive job for an undetermined period of time. To get to a better place, one must sometimes walk a difficult path.

**Phil:** I think for me this still ties into making choices for myself that have been greatly influenced by the role models of my parents and my wife. I had some success in business but felt unfulfilled and hated travelling away from family. I had avoided completing college but in order to have the type of career I truly desired, it required an advanced degree. My mother returned to school in her late 40s after overcoming many personal obstacles. My father taught me to be steady and consistent by his own example. My wife inspired me with her own attitudes and outlook on life despite a great many hardships including her family being caught between warring factions while just trying to farm a small plot of land in the jungle. If I wanted true and meaningful change, there were no shortcuts. The three main influences in my life figured this out long before I submitted to this truth.

Cite examples of when you believe your partner demonstrated this virtue.

**Joy:** I tend to continue to view and treat our children as babies. Our children are 7–11. They are not babies. I wanted young children so badly and the time has flown by so quickly that I am not ready for pre-teens and the different things they are currently experiencing. Phil is wonderful at helping me realize that I need to appreciate each stage of their development before the current stage passes to the next and I miss the present. This continues to be very difficult for me but my husband is always gently reminding me about the realities of this situation and the joy that can be experienced by accepting the *Right View*.

**Phil:** I believe Joy is the embodiment of this virtue. She is immersed in the here and now in so many aspects of her life. I believe this is an important part of the dynamic of our

relationship. While I work very hard, I am also quite a dreamer and Joy's understanding of *Right View* helps keep me grounded and moving forward.

With respect to you as a couple together, what are some positive examples of this virtue in your relationship?

**Joy and Phil:** We think together that the choices we have made financially in order to model for our children and to choose for ourselves a more fulfilling spiritual path, family life and to live within our means while doing so is the best example of *Right View* in our lives at present.

Which of the eight virtues is underutilized and/or undervalued in your current relationship? In what way? List some possible suggestions for improvement if you have them.

**Joy and Phil:** We came to the conclusion that we do fairly well dealing with what is, however we realize that we must continually be mindful of this issue and not stray too far from this part of the eightfold path. We have each other to help accomplish this. This works because of our commitment and history of openly communicating with one another.

### *Right Intention*

How was this modeled for you as a child and/or adolescent? Who modeled this for you?

**Joy and Phil:** Both of us feel our parents modeled ethical commitments to us by way of insisting on honesty and conducting themselves in a moral way. Also we felt that we were taught to not give in to anger and resentments and to be kind and not to harm others. Phil remembers when, as a teenager, he became stuck in a cornfield with his car one rainy night and his father coming to get him. In getting Phil out of the mud, he destroyed approximately five or six stalks of corn in the field. He notified the property owner about the incident. There were thousands of stalks of corn and surely these might not have been noticed but it was the right thing to do.

What are some personal examples of this in your adult life?

**Joy and Phil:** We both do well not hanging onto resentments. There are people who we have been quite generous with that have been very disloyal even hurtful, yet as a couple we choose to continue to be charitable knowing this can happen again. When we do for others we have no expectation of anything in return other than the benefit for ourselves of adding to, rather than taking away from.

Cite examples of when you believe your partner demonstrated this virtue.

**Joy:** I have seen Phil go through some terrible situations where people have taken advantage of him and yet at the end of that day



while he may admit to having had a bad 4 or 8 hour stretch of that particular day . . . he insists that overall his day was a good day. I think this takes deliberate and intentional effort.

**Phil:** When Joy was younger, she left her family to work in the city and would send almost all of her money home to her parents. She would keep very little for herself. I witnessed her taking part of the very little she kept for herself and sharing it with children in the neighborhood even more poor than herself.

With respect to you as a couple together, what are some positive examples of this virtue in your relationship?

I think we both have a strong desire to care for the elderly and those less fortunate. We teach this to our children by example.

Which of the eight virtues is underutilized and/or undervalued in your current relationship? In what way? List some possible suggestions for improvement if you have them.

**Joy:** When I get overwhelmed I can lose my patience with the kids. At times I exhibit anger and I later regret this. With working 40 hours and four kids, my plate gets too full at times and this is an area that I need to improve in.

**Phil:** I think I sometimes have a sense of entitlement and can feel anger when I feel I am not getting good service or being treated improperly. I have had an awareness of this issue for some time and have actually improved a great deal. I must say however that when I become aware of this type of issue creeping up, that making prompt amends helps me become humble and I know that something I am doing or maybe something I am not doing needs to change. I must get quiet and reflective and examine what is going on with me when that happens. I need people that I trust around me to point out when this occurs. I try to not become defensive but listen. I need to meditate and be mindful of it myself. This is something I suspect I will always need to work on . . . however again I am happy with the improvements I have seen.

### Right Speech

What are some personal examples of this in your adult life?

**Phil:** I read a Dear Abby column many years ago. I even cut it out and saved it. I am not sure if I could still put my hands on it. I have discussed this with many people and teach it to my children. Before saying something about someone else I need to ask myself: 1) Does it need to be said? 2) Does it need to be said right now? 3) Does it need to be said by me? This is a good guide for me to use before speaking of others.

Cite examples of when you believe your partner demonstrated this virtue.

**Joy and Phil:** We both can think of examples where we have seen people who we trusted, do things that were harmful to us yet when asked by others why we were no longer friends

with these people we refrained from making negative comments. Also we have a commitment to talk to each other with respect . . . even when no one is looking!

### Right Action

What are some personal examples of this in your adult life?

**Phil:** When I was a single young man, I was dating a lot. While I desired to have a family, I had not yet found that special someone. When I would engage in a physical relationship to fulfill sexual desires and alleviate loneliness instead of being abstinent, I can remember feeling *more* lonely and more detached, *more* of a void. At times I engaged in more of the same behavior to fill the void—yet the void became deeper, my improper action did not work. This awareness came with being mindful of how I felt, maturity, and the willingness to acknowledge the feelings caused by my actions. I had to work on the root of the issue which was looking at how my actions in other areas of my life might block me from finding the person with whom I could have a more meaningful relationship. This was an important stepping stone to accomplishing many of the wonderful things I am experiencing presently.

### Right Livelihood

What are some personal examples of this in your adult life?

**Joy:** I enjoy keeping my home in order and being with my family. For me this is simple and allows me to think about other things at the same time. The work can be hard but I feel good about myself and it is very fulfilling to me to create an environment that is pleasant for me and Phil and our children as well as our friends and family. This actually helps me to be mindful of deeper and more important things. That is why I like to keep things uncomplicated and simple.

Cite examples of when you believe your partner demonstrated this virtue.

**Joy:** Phil has *looked for himself* in his work since he was young. I think he has had to go through a weeding out process to understand what is important to him. I have always had faith that he would find what it was he was supposed to do.

**Phil:** I marvel at how Joy takes pride in each and every thing that she does. I fell in love listening to her sing Christmas songs in July while she is working around our home.

With respect to you as a couple together, what are some positive examples of this virtue in your relationship?

**Joy and Phil:** We believe we have encouraged each other in our work. When Phil was uncomfortable in sales and business on a spiritual level, we discussed and explored our future. We talked about how we as a couple could work together to contribute through our work and what path was best to take. Joy

may go to school now as Phil has recently completed his Masters degree, however what area she will choose to study remains to be seen.

### Right Effort

What are some personal examples of this in your adult life?

**Phil and Joy:** We both like where we are at in the present as it relates to our effort. We feel that we pretty much jump in with both feet into most of the projects we do. As a couple we reviewed our priorities and gave up a great deal financially in order to achieve a better and more fulfilling livelihood. It took a significant amount of mental and physical energy and effort on both of our parts to accomplish this.

With respect to you as a couple together, what are some positive examples of this virtue in your relationship?

**Joy:** One of the issues we discussed together most in this section was how we encourage each other and put a lot of effort into seeing that each partner has space to grow individually. While we are best friends and enjoy doing much together, we also encourage each other to do things individually and share our experiences. I love to dance and go out a few times a year. I do not enjoy alcohol, but unfortunately you usually need to go to a club to dance. Phil got that out of his system when he was a teenager and young adult and does not enjoy the noise and smoke at clubs, yet he always encourages me to go when friends ask. He is genuinely delighted when I have fun. I encouraged his school and did my best to create an environment where our home would be a good place for him to study and complete the goals we needed him to achieve.

Which of the eight virtues is underutilized and/or undervalued in your current relationship? In what way? List some possible suggestions for improvement if you have them.

**Joy:** We both agreed that we are not at our best physically and that we need to work on our self discipline—to watch less TV and do more physical exercise. The more we address each topic we have noticed that they are all quite interrelated. Lack of right effort has caused us to not be at our best physically and this will hinder us from more fully accomplishing what it is we want to do moving forward.

### Right Mindfulness

Which of the eight virtues is underutilized and/or undervalued in your current relationship? In what way? List some possible suggestions for improvement if you have them.

**Joy and Phil:** I think we agreed that this is an area that we need the most work in. We are both very busy and realize we need to take more time for quiet thoughts and meditation.

We both feel we especially need to work on the Mind-Body connection!

### Right Concentration

What are some personal examples of this in your adult life?

**Phil:** I have normally been quite goal oriented. My issue has been choosing where to put my concentration but once a choice is made I normally can use concentration to accomplish my goals.

With respect to you as a couple together, what are some positive examples of this virtue in your relationship?

**Joy and Phil:** Within the worldly or physical realm we feel we do well in putting our energy and concentration where it needs to be. However as discussed we need to expand our ability to meditate so that we are open to other possibilities we may not have thought of.

Which of the eight virtues is underutilized and/or undervalued in your current relationship? In what way? List some possible suggestions for improvement if you have them.

**Joy and Phil:** We are both pretty focused individuals and normally do a good job of prioritizing as a couple. This has gotten better by reviewing successes and mistakes and discussing these things openly together. We normally check our motives when deciding where and how to spend our mental energy but again as discussed we feel by improving the Mind-Body connection that our ability to experience Right Concentration will improve.

### Case Study #2—Chi-Sing Li and Yu-Fen Lin

Chi-sing is a native of Hong Kong; Yu-Fen was born in Taiwan. They met and married in the United States. They both are counselor educators who teach at two Texas Universities. They have one child Annabelle, age 5.

### Right View

A common factor for disagreements or conflicts among couples probably is the difference in background or family upbringing. The Right View, as we discussed, is to cultivate the capacity to accept one another and our differences. The idea that “Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus” emphasizes the gender differences and makes it easier for couples to adapt to each other. Accepting and embracing each other’s differences wherever they are coming from seems to be the pathway to the Right View.

As we look back on the time we were dating and now that we are a family with a lovable daughter, we realize that our physical appearances have changed tremendously. As we approach middle age, we also recognize that we have less

energy compared with ourselves ten years ago. Having the understanding and the ability to foresee our future as a couple and as a family also contributes to the Right View.

Last of all, balancing romance and the day-to-day responsibilities in life helps us see our relationship in a positive perspective. We constantly find ways to spark the romance in our relationship and at the same time we are aware of the roles we are playing at work as well as at home.

### **Right Intention**

We discussed how each of us has to maintain a healthy relationship with ourselves. We need time for self-reflection to deal with our own challenges in life. When we are able to manage our negative emotions, e.g., anger or frustration, these emotions will not spill over to our partner and our intentions will also be clear and good.

An example of a *Right Intention* is when you make your priority clear. For example, I have a desire to watch TV since NBA finals are coming up, but I also realize that I need quality time with my family in the evenings. I probably want to have both. But if I really have to choose, the choice will certainly be my family since ten years down the road, my family will still be important, but NBA basketball may not even be a program I want to watch. Stephen Covey speaks about having the end results in mind. A *Right Intention* for us is to envision what our relationship will be like in the future and to adjust our desires in the present.

### **Right Speech**

Words are powerful and can impact relationships positively or negatively. In addition, negative speech can be contagious; a negative comment can trigger a negative reaction, and a relationship can spiral down before you know it. We are learning to cultivate a positive approach as we speak to each other. When addressing issues of couple communication, John Gottman stresses the importance of active listening and frequent communication. *Right Speech* to us begins with listening and giving each other undivided attention. *Right Speech* also means to be careful of the negative impact of our words and to practice positive speech so as to edify each other.

My wife gave an example here to illustrate the different approaches to verbally address an issue. As she was trying to offer me feedback on driving skills, instead of saying, “You drive too fast and stop too abruptly and you really have to slow down,”

she said, “Please consider that your family is riding with you. We need for you to drive with more caution when you make turns or brake. We appreciate you.”

### **Right Action**

We are amazed that the teaching of Buddha on the *Right Action* is so similar to the Ten Commandments in the Bible. We discussed ways to preserve and maintain our couple relationship.

First, we agree that we need to be aware of our interactions with opposite sex friends at work or at social settings. We especially discuss how to deal with ex-girl/boy friend/partners. We concurred that constantly having open and honest communications with each other can support each other to take the *Right Action*.

### **Right Livelihood**

We mutually support each other on our career development. We behave ethically and professionally in our working environment. We provide adequate quality time with our child to make sure that our work does not interfere but edifies our family life. We consciously reduce our intake of meat in our meals knowing that this choice is both a good and healthy way for us and for the environment.

### **Right Effort**

We realize that exercise is good for us, both physically and mentally. We share the same opinion regarding our active involvement in church activities to enhance our spiritual growth and our connection with the higher power. We encourage each other to appropriately utilize our mental energy to stay active in all aspects of our holistic development.

### **Right Mindfulness**

As we share our daily lives together as a couple, we also seek feedback from each other trusting that we know what the best is for each other. This can keep our minds straight and our perceptions as accurate as possible. For example, my wife was in the process of looking for a teaching position last month. I sat down with her almost every day to evaluate the interview process. She took my feedback very seriously and we were so happy when she found the job that she wanted. The process really helped her maintain The *Right Mindfulness* and it also helped us to feel emotionally intimate with each other.

### **Right Concentration**

“Hands in the air, hands for a prayer, God is good, God is great, let us thank you for our food.” Annabelle, our daughter, says this prayer almost every evening. It is our ritual and also The *Right Concentration* is for our child to practice the power of prayer and meditation. Meditation can happen in any time and in any form. For example, I focus myself when I am jogging or exercising while my wife practices the *Right Concentration* through yoga. Other times, we share our activities with each other.

### **Case Study #3—William R. Mullener**

Several years ago, my life and my career felt like a hamster in a Ferris-wheel type toy, expending a lot of energy and not making any progress. Things were not bad in my life, but I felt there was something vital missing from the fulfillment of my life’s purpose. In the words of Viktor Frankl, my life lacked meaning.



My wife and I sat down several evenings to try to talk through the situation and come to a solution that was measurable, realistic, and attainable. It became obvious that sacrificing now for the rewards in the future was the path I needed to walk, and that involved going back for additional schooling. I was not unaware of the concepts espoused in the Buddhist Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, since the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous had used them in formulating the original twelve-step program. What I was not aware of was how closely my wife and I followed the teachings in our quest for the right answer. What follows is a recap of the mental, communicative, and emotional exercises we performed to arrive at the destination.

### **Right View**

The *Right View* was truly the beginning and the end of the path. We discussed where we were today and where we wanted to be at a point in the future. We knew that once the goal was decided upon, there would be no turning back. I believe we saw the world changing and did not want to be in a position we were uncomfortable with in the future. Whatever decision we made would have to be sustained or the entire effort would have been in vain.

### **Right Intention**

The *Right Intention* was really behind the entire exercise. I had to have the commitment to ethical and mental self-improvement that would allow me to achieve the goal at an advanced age. We were fairly certain I could practice renunciation, good will, and harmlessness in the pursuit of this grail, even though I had fallen short in these areas in my previous career.

### **Right Speech**

*Right Speech* did not appear to be a problem, since I had always had a high degree of moral and ethical discipline. My wife knew the importance of *right speech*, and she encouraged me to continue to speak out, when necessary, for the rights of the downtrodden and to continue to help those most in need of help.

### **Right Action**

*Right Action* is where the rubber hit the road. We believed in the adage that "faith without works is dead," and we knew that would play a large role in whatever decision we made. As previously stated, abstinence had never been one of my long suits, but conditioning over the past few years had made me value it as a virtue worthy of adoption. My wife concurred in this assessment, although she knew there would be challenges to overcome.

### **Right Livelihood**

*Right Livelihood* was the seminal aspect of our original discussion. We could have gone on the way we were, but we both knew there was something better out there, a brave new world, if you will. The four tenets that should be avoided in *right livelihood*; weapons, harming, or taking advantage of other living beings, butchery, and intoxicants, were areas that I already included in my teachings. My choice was to help others and not violate the principals of *right speech* and *right action*.

### **Right Effort**

*Right Effort* followed closely behind, because when the decision was made to proceed, all of my mental effort had to be focused on the task at hand. We had to stay in the wholesome state for at least the next 3–4 years in order to make this dream a reality.

### **Right Mindfulness**

*Right Mindfulness* was evident throughout the process. We both had the ability to see things as they were with clear consciousness, the cognition of a thought germinated into a conceptualization of realistic expectations for the future. Keeping that state of mind over the weeks and months it took to achieve the goal was something we both can look back on with a sense of pride and accomplishment.

### **Right Concentration**

*Right Concentration* can be seen in this scenario as the beeswax that kept the hive together. To quote, "wholesome concentration is described as one-pointedness of mind, meaning a state where all mental faculties are unified and directed into one particular object" (Thebigview, n.d.). Meditation for both of us has been incredibly helpful in keeping the body, mind, and spirit focused.

It is said that behind every successful man stands a strong woman. We could not have accomplished the things we have had it not been for the strength and support my wife and soul mate has provided. It has not been easy, but the gold ring is now within grasp. Every couple contemplating change in their lives would be wise to spend some time looking at the principals outlined in this article.

### **Relationship Implications**

The authors have presented three separate case studies illustrating how the concepts applied in their own marriages. Neither couple had the exclusive "right way" of applying the concept. Rather, it is a personal experience.

## Using the Principles of the Noble Eightfold Path in your Practice

Kimberly Peterson is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor with a private practice in Seattle. She uses the Eightfold Path as one of the core foundations in her couples' counseling. Peterson says that:

By discussing the concept of the Noble Eightfold Path early in the process of couple's therapy, it can help to create a little bit of distance from the stress that the couple is experiencing as a system. This can help to take the pressure off during the early stage of therapy and reduce the dynamics of *He said; She said* . . . . I try to get to the concept of wisdom and begin to get each person's thoughts as to how they view their couple. We focus on Right View and Right Intention . . . What is their view of the relationship? What would a good relationship look like? How does your relationship look compared to that view?

She also believes:

In order to decrease suffering and improve healing, there must be true concentration and genuine effort to remove what is not wholesome. Couples tend to focus on what is wrong instead of what they can contribute to each other and the world around them. Often the focus is on what needs to be fixed in their partner instead of focusing on what *they* want to be and putting effort into taking right action to make this a reality. (Kimberly Peterson, LMHC, personal communication with Phil Ginsburg, April 27, 2010)

## Your Own Action Plan

After completing your own matrix and reading the case studies, here are suggested ways for you both to summarize and to

consider your own application for relationship enhancement. Although the matrix is meant to be an activity you can complete alone or as a couple, you may find it helpful to discuss your responses with someone such as a counselor, a spiritual or religious person, or a trusted friend. Here are some "next-step" considerations:

- In completing the matrix were there any significant *ah-ha*'s of new awareness or insight?
- Which of the eight virtues seemed to be most positively demonstrated in your relationship?
- Which ones were underutilized?
- In reading the three couples responses, which responses were most relevant to you? In what way?
- What would be an agreed upon action plan for you to better utilize any of the principles for improving your own relationship?

## Summary

The purpose of the article has been to introduce the Noble Eightfold Relationship Matrix as a creative way for couples to view their relationship. A similar matrix with a specific focus on the role of culture in your relationship can be found in Li, Lin, and Eckstein (2007).

It is the hope of the authors that by using the principles of the Noble Eightfold Path, you may find a way to live in closer harmony together. Using these ancient precepts, we feel that you both may gain deeper insight into yourselves as individuals, how you live in concert with one another, and what you project as a couple both within the relationship and to others whose paths you will cross in your journeys.

**Appendix**

*Noble Eightfold Relationship Matrix (NERM)*

		How was this modeled for you as a child and/or adolescent? Who modeled this for you?	What are some examples of this in your adult life for you personally?	Cite examples of when you believe your partner demonstrated this virtue.	With respect to you as a couple together, what are some positive examples of this virtue in your relationship?	Which of the eight virtues is underutilized and/or undervalued in your current relationship? In what way? List some possible suggestions for improvement if you have them.
Wisdom	Right View					
	Right Intention					
Ethical Conduct	Right Speech					
	Right Action					
	Right Livelihood					
Mental Development	Right Effort					
	Right Mindfulness					
	Right Concentration					

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