

**The Third Thought:**

*“Choosing beneficial actions and avoiding harmful actions.”*

or (traditional): *“The results of our virtuous and harmful actions are inevitable.”*

This idea is a core teaching in all the world's major religions. In the Buddha's teachings it originated with the Fourth Noble Truth in the form of “the virtue practices” of the Eight-Fold Path (*right speech, right action and right livelihood*). In his later teachings it is the fifth of The Five Remembrances:

*“My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my actions. My actions are the ground upon which I stand.”*

A helpful way to practice this third thought (or any teaching) is with the three-fold paradigm introduced to us by Phillip Moffitt's book, Dancing With Life:

- 1) “Listen.” Thoroughly take it in through listening, reading or reciting
- 2) “Contemplate.” Really try to experience it. Find the direct meaning of it in your own life.
- 3) Then “Rest.” Drop it. Rest without concepts, letting the meaning settle into you without thought.

One possible way to contemplate this thought in practice sessions: (Try to come up with your own.)

“I am aware that all my activities of body, speech and mind have the potential to cause benefit or harm to myself and others. Therefore, in order to increase benefit and avoid harm I must be mindful of the possible effects of all my thoughts, words and deeds.”

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An excerpt from the recent book **Why Meditate?** by Matthieu Ricard:

How can we make the best of this human life, which is precious but subject to being interrupted at any moment? If we want to carry out a plan or undertake some new activity, we have to be sure we are going about it in the right way.....[But] The intention here is not to set up good versus bad in some dogmatic fashion or to conform to some established convention.

Very simply, what we have to do is behave with clear understanding and respect for the mechanisms of happiness and suffering that we ourselves can observe if we are attentive and insightful enough. It's as simple as realizing that if we keep our hand in the fire there is no way of escaping being burned. However, insisting on a 100 percent guarantee of the outcome of our choices is not a wise approach either. It is difficult to predict all the consequences of our deeds. **But the least we can do – whatever activity we are involved in and whatever our circumstances may be – is to examine our motivation to be sure that our goal is not only of benefit to ourselves but also, and especially, of benefit to others.** (emphasis added)

Practicing the Third Thought. (Page 2)

On “**Right Thought**” (From Wikipedia: Noble Eight Fold path):

In the essay "Buddhism Meets Western Science", Gay Watson explains:[\[60\]](#)

Buddhism has always been concerned with feelings, emotions, sensations, and cognition. The Buddha points both to cognitive and emotional causes of suffering. The emotional cause is desire and its negative opposite, aversion. The cognitive cause is ignorance of the way things truly occur, or of [three marks of existence](#): that all things are unsatisfactory, impermanent, and without essential self.

The noble eightfold path is, from this psychological viewpoint, an attempt to change patterns of thought and behavior. It is for this reason that the first element of the path is right understanding (*sammā-diṭṭhi*), which is how one's mind views the world. Under the wisdom (*paññā*) subdivision of the noble eightfold path, this worldview is intimately connected with the second element, right thought (*sammā-saṅkappa*), which concerns the patterns of thought and intention that controls one's actions. These elements can be seen at work, for example, in the opening verses of the *Dhammapada*:[\[61\]](#) The noble eightfold path is also the fourth noble truth.

All experience is preceded by mind,  
Led by mind,  
Made by mind.  
Speak or act with a corrupted mind,  
And suffering follows  
As the wagon wheel follows the hoof of the ox.

All experience is preceded by mind,  
Led by mind,  
Made by mind.  
Speak or act with a peaceful mind,  
And happiness follows  
Like a never-departing shadow.

Thus, by altering one's distorted worldview, bringing out "tranquil perception" in the place of "perception polluted", one is able to ease suffering. Watson points this out from a psychological standpoint:

Research has shown that repeated action, learning, and memory can actually change the nervous system physically, altering both synaptic strength and connections. Such changes may be brought about by cultivated change in emotion and action; they will, in turn, change subsequent experience.[\[60\]](#)

60. Watson, Gay. *Buddhism Meets Western Science*. Retrieved 8 July 2006.