

# The Iron Rod on the Eightfold Path

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My brother died recently from complications after back surgery and a life of addiction. He was forty-nine. His death was hard enough, but the ensuing drama with my mother and sister—the last of my immediate family—widened the rift between us so much that I felt as if I’d lost them all.

My younger daughter broke up with her boyfriend of seven years, which felt much like a divorce for all of us. Then she came home to live and convalesce, had her wisdom teeth out (more convalescing), and decided to move to Hawaii. Plans for the house we were going to buy fell through, and the thermostat in the house we lived in broke and kept randomly getting stuck at ninety degrees.

I was experiencing that trite but true saying, “When it rains, it pours,” and I am here to attest to the first basic teaching of Buddhism: life is suffering.

Fortunately, I am also familiar with the Buddhist concepts of “calm abiding” and “neither craving nor aversion,” which helped mitigate some of my own suffering during that Really Hard Time.

How did I, a Mormon girl from a village in rural Utah, come to know anything at all about Buddhists?

My first encounter with a living, breathing Buddhist came when I moved away from home to attend a larger high school in Roy, Utah. Miss Koga, the assistant band teacher, was Asian and also Buddhist—information whispered in the halls. Her presence was as much an anomaly in predominantly Mormon Utah as the one black student or the exchange student from Germany. What she believed or what being Buddhist meant, I had no idea.

My senior year, the band and choir earned money to go on a trip to Hawaii. I had never even seen the ocean or flown in an airplane. And Hawaii! So different from Utah.

Miss Koga had arranged for us to have lunch with a Buddhist community at their temple where there were a lot of Buddhist kids our age. We politely checked each other out without mingling much. The Buddhist leader welcomed our group and said something like, “We know you’ve probably never seen so many Buddhists before, but we’ve never seen so many Mormons before either.” That was my early encounter.

When I went to college at Weber State in Ogden, Utah, I finally got an introduction to some details of Buddhism. In a world literature class, we studied Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha*.

I learned the story of how the Buddha became the Buddha—that Siddhartha was born into wealth and protected from all suffering and pain. That he one day escaped and saw the reality of how much of the world lived. Unable to endure his coddled life when so many others suffered, he left his home and his wife and child in search of the answer. Having lived a life of indulgence, he tried asceticism, but finally settled on the Middle Way of moderation. Meditating under the Bodhi tree, he achieved enlightenment and learned the way to be free from suffering, which he taught as the Four Noble Truths: Life is suffering. Craving is the origin of suffering. Craving, the origin of suffering, can be extinguished. And, finally, the eightfold middle path leads to the extinction of suffering. I tucked these details away with everything else I was learning at the time.

After college, I moved to South Korea with my friend Penny, who had served a mission there. I didn’t even know where South Korea was, but I wanted some adventure before I settled into real life. In Korea, though Christianity is prevalent, Buddhism is still a major religion. I arrived just before Buddha’s birthday. Thousands of paper lanterns hung overhead in the temples; little children bowed in the glow of candles. This festival of lights served as an introduction to some actual rituals and practices of Buddhism.

Then I met and married a Korean, my first husband, Young Hoon Kwon, whose grandmother was a Buddhist, and that reli-

gion became infinitely more real and personal to me. Young Hoon was a baptized Christian when I met him, as was his immediate family. He joined the LDS Church before we were married. He didn't know much about his grandmother's religion but told me one story he had heard from her. She explained eternity to him like this: If there were a high mountain made of granite, and an angel came once every thousand years and stood briefly on the mountain, eternity is how long it would take for the mountain to wear away from the sweep of the angel's robe.

Grandmother was my ally from the beginning when most of Young Hoon's family were against our relationship. He was the oldest grandson and had a special place in her heart, but she was our advocate because of a dream Grandfather had on Young Hoon's first birthday.

He saw Young Hoon as a grown man standing in a forest with the four directions of the compass clearly marked—north, south, east, and west. A wind began to blow and a great fire roared from the west. Instead of trying to escape from it, Young Hoon ran toward it. Grandfather told Grandmother about that dream many times before he died when Young Hoon was twelve. She didn't understand what it meant, but when Young Hoon told Grandmother about me, a woman from the West, she saw it as fulfillment of Grandfather's dream and supported our marriage.

Grandfather was buried in Pusan, in a plot perched close to the top of a hill with a long vista, appropriately elevated for such an honored man who had served his family so well, a forward-thinking, hard-working, generous patriarch. Over his headstone was a small, wire arch at the center of which was a left-facing swastika. By that time, I was aware it had been a Buddhist symbol for millennia, though I still felt a jolt when I saw it since, in my culture, swastikas only represent evil.

We had stopped at the foot of the hill and bought flowers from a vendor. Grandmother sat on her haunches next to the grave, took the dead flowers out of the vase at the base of the headstone and tossed them aside. She handed the vase to Young Hoon and told him to get some water at the nearby spigot. She pulled some weeds from around the grave, and when Young Hoon returned,

she took a cloth from her bag, dipped it in the water, and carefully washed the dust and dirt from the headstone. She placed the fresh flowers in the vase and returned it to its spot.

Then she spread out a blanket next to Grandfather's grave and we all sat down. She opened a jar and poured a little rice wine into a glass, said something quietly, and then gently flung the contents out onto the grass at the foot of the grave. She took some cakes she had brought, broke them into pieces, and tossed them as well onto the surrounding vegetation.

She motioned for the groundskeeper, who had been standing nearby, to come over and gave him something to eat and drink. He accepted with a bow, both hands extended. After Grandmother had made her offerings, she motioned for Young Hoon to take over. He served Grandmother, then me, then himself. As a newly married foreigner, I could be forgiven for not knowing *I* should have been the one doing the serving. But I have since learned—always eldest first, always two hands. And so we sat at his grave and had a picnic with Grandfather, sharing our food and drink with the living and the dead.

Just before we left, Young Hoon knelt and touched his head to the ground three times and said something softly. I was so moved by the gesture that when my own father died a few years later back in Utah, I waited until everyone had left the cemetery, knelt at my father's grave, touched my head to the ground three times, and told him goodbye.

My actual "practicing" of Buddhist teachings did not come until much later. A couple of years ago, Valea, a friend in my Mormon ward asked if I wanted to do a meditation course with her at a Thai Buddhist temple in Federal Way, Washington. Who knew there was such a thing?

I have heard the word "meditate" used from a Mormon pulpit but not very often. "Ponder" is the more usual expression. We have the scripture, "Be still and know that I am God." And our own temples are wonderful places of worship, not least because they are quiet and peaceful. Though being still is scriptural, it was not part of my own upbringing. My mother used to quote

my great-grandmother who said, if idle for too long, “I’d better go do something even if it’s wrong.”

I was not completely unfamiliar with meditation when Valea asked if I wanted to join her, but it was not something I had done in a long time. I had taken a yoga class at Weber State where we meditated at the end of an hour of strenuous exercise. I sometimes experienced the heightened awareness of the mind with the utter relaxation of the body then.

The Buddhist temple was a lovely edifice tucked away on several acres of land with a pond and trees. Everyone greeted us with a bow, palms pressed together at the heart. The community included a handful of saffron-robed, shaved-headed monks, and people who supported them. The temple had a kitchen and dining area, a large hall with a statue of Buddha, and an altar around it at one end. The rest of the hall was for activities, even sporting a big-screen TV that seemed incongruous in that otherwise quiet refuge. A large meditation room stood separate from the hall and also contained a statue of Buddha with an altar. Windows looking out onto the woods surrounded the room. A library and classroom were downstairs as were the monks’ quarters, off-limits to others.

For several weeks, a visiting monk presented a lecture after which we meditated for an hour. He discussed the monkey mind that jumps from thought to thought. That certainly described the way I felt much of the time. He taught us to focus on the breath, even to count our breaths—one hundred times in and out takes about ten minutes. We sat on pillows on the floor. I wiggled and squirmed trying to find a comfortable position. When I did, I often fell asleep. I never had an epiphany or got into a sublime state of consciousness, though I did find being in the temple calming, relaxing, and interesting.

Once I went by myself in the evening when the monks gathered to chant. The big hall was darkened. Candles lit the altar at one end; the monks surrounded it cross-legged on the floor. I sat away from them by the entrance to the hall. One of the monks noted my presence when he came in to sit down. Nothing more. They began to chant. I also sat cross-legged on a pillow, hands palm up

on my thighs, eyes closed, trying to let go of the concerns of the day, letting the low vibrations of chanting wash over me.

Then something brushed against my knee. Fortunately, I didn't shriek, jarred back from relaxation to reality by a furry touch. It was the resident cat I'd seen walking around. Since it chose to be with me, I simply closed my eyes again. I could feel the cat pressed against my knee as I tried to focus. I sneaked a look and the silly thing was fast asleep on its back, all four feet in the air. I did not myself ever touch nirvana while meditating at the temple, but I think I saw another being that night that did.

At the meditation workshop, I was taught about calm abiding—patiently, quietly being in the moment. I believe this is the first Buddhist concept I really tried to practice, though incorporating it has not been easy. At the time of our workshop, I made a note on calm abiding in the margins of a book. My note says, “This is great if you're a monk. How do you do this with a family? How does this work in real life?” More than once at the Buddhist temple, my friend said, “I could be calm and peaceful too if there were someone to cook for me.” During this recent Hard Time, however, I've actually experienced the benefit of this principle.

I know you've all been there. You get the Bad News, whatever it is, and you know you're in for a really hard time. You know that mentally, emotionally, physically, spiritually, it's going to take more than you have to give, but it's going to take it anyway. You just have to get through it, and you probably have to shore up someone else as well. You have to keep it together to make phone calls and reservations and arrangements. You can't sleep and you can't eat because your mind races and your gut's tied in knots. You know how it is.

I know because I'm still kind of there, more some days than others. And one thing that has helped get me through is trying to abide calmly. Even just thinking the words “calm abiding” helps settle my emotions and my thoughts. Our meditation instructor called it “monkey mind.” I've heard it called “puppy mind.” For me, it's more like a big flock of birds flapping around and then finally settling on a wire, maybe being startled again and scattering, but after a few big breaths, settling once more. Calm abiding.

And for a few moments at least, I'm relieved of everything—all the pressure and sadness and worry and hurt—and it's just me in the moment. And the moment is doable. It's not bad. It just is.

Why don't I use my own Mormon religion to find solace, to pray or read the scriptures, or rely on the Spirit? I do. I pray. I've received priesthood blessings and know they have helped sustain me. I relied heavily on the ward I grew up in where we had the funeral. For whatever reason, I have also found comfort and peace from attempting to practice Buddhist teachings I have been studying such as this one.

I wonder if it isn't somehow a matter of familiarity. Maybe I have become so accustomed to Mormon doctrine that I don't hear it anymore, like the tick of a clock that ceases to register. Perhaps it is also because Mormonism is the practical framework of my family's life, and thus also the background for the difficulties of intimate relationship. In any case, calm abiding has been a significant source of consolation for me.

Mourning the dead is one kind of grief. Dealing with the living is another.

It would seem that death should draw a family together. That was certainly not the case with mine. A big part of the problem was differing views on what constituted honoring the dead. My brother had not been a churchgoer for some time, and my mother's desire to pretend he was and put on the happy face of the happy Mormon family felt like an insult to his memory. My sister believed that services are for the living and those are the ones whose wishes should be honored. I felt like a lot was expected of me but nothing was given back in return. Of course, there were years and years of layers to that, and it came to a head when we were all hurt and fragile.

Family comes with so much baggage. I found myself longing for the idealized relationship encapsulated in loaded words of expectation and responsibility like Love, Family, Mother, Sister. I felt desperate for the warmth and closeness of family—those who have known me my whole life, those who had known my brother, those who had mutual experience and memories and blood. At the same time, I felt repelled by their demands to meet their needs,

to be the strong one and take care of things. When the turmoil of those emotions threatened to overwhelm me, I again found comfort in Buddhist teachings.

Thích Nhất Hạnh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk and prolific author, wrote in *The Energy of Prayer*, “Mindfulness is above all the capacity simply to recognize the presence of an object without taking sides, without judging, and without craving or despising that object.”<sup>1</sup> Without craving or despising.

In Christianity, we’ve got the commandment “Thou shalt not covet.” I’ve always thought of it as not being jealous of your neighbors’ stuff. But in Buddhist teachings, wanting *anything* greatly brings suffering as does despising, or *not* wanting anything greatly. With my family, I feel both of those things—a lot. I crave their love and approval. I resent their demands and insensitivities. They are intrinsically intertwined with my life. I live far away from them for a reason. Desire, disappointment, craving, aversion. If I could just let go of those feelings and accept my family for who they are, I would feel better. I would be relieved of my suffering. I can choose to let go of the burden of family baggage.

Again, these concepts are not foreign to Mormonism, but for whatever reason, I have been able to hear them better recently in Buddhist language. If I can yield to who and what my mother and sister are, neither craving their love nor feeling aversion toward their frailties, I will cease to suffer. Of course, Buddhism and Mormonism also teach that I need to move from simply worrying about my own suffering to having forgiveness and compassion for all beings—even my own family members. I’m working on it.



I met my good friend Mary when I lived in Korea. Raised Catholic, she is a true cosmopolite, having traveled the world, first with her military family and then on her own. We hit it off right away and have remained friends all these years. Mary met an American working for the US military, married him, and stayed in Korea, where she began studying Buddhism. I don’t know when the curiosity became commitment, but as we visited her in Korea over



the years, she often took us to see a Buddhist temple or ceremony. Once when it was again Buddha's birthday, we went with "Aunt" Mary, as my girls call her, to a celebration where the girls helped wash a statue of the baby Buddha.

Mary has become more ardent in her beliefs. She and her husband now live in Bellingham, Washington. She goes on retreats each year and has a teacher who guides her. She tried to explain what she believes to me and recommended I read something by the Dalai Lama. I picked up a book of his, *How to See Yourself As You Really Are*, and it introduced me to the other Buddhist concept that has aided in my spiritual growth. I don't claim to fully understand it, but here is how he puts it:

When you see that all . . . problems arise from a basic misunderstanding, you will want to get rid of such ignorance. The means to accomplish this is to reflect on reasoning that reveals the superimposition of a belief in inherent existence to be totally unfounded, and then to concentrate on the emptiness of inherent existence through meditation.<sup>2</sup>

"The emptiness of inherent existence"? He uses another word that I found easier to grasp: selflessness. *That* word I had heard before in my own religion. Technically, I think it is different, but the goal, I believe, is the same. He also uses "no self," and explains, "[T]here are wholes but their existence is set up in dependence upon their parts—they do not exist independently."<sup>3</sup>

We do not exist independently. I could understand that. When I read something by Thích Nhất Hạnh in his book *Going Home*, it helped me even more:

Non-self does not mean non-person or non-existing. Even though you are non-self, you continue to be a person with a body, with feelings, with perceptions, with mental formations, with consciousness. You continue to be a person, but a person without a separate self.

Is there anything that has a separate self? No. A tree that stands in the front yard does not have a separate self. Without the sunshine, without the clouds, without the air, without the minerals, a tree

cannot be there. A tree is made of non-tree elements. Because a tree has no separate existence, we say a tree has no self.<sup>4</sup>

The way I understand it is, if I am a part of everything, then everything is a part of me—the separateness of each individual is a false perception. My interpretation for my own purposes is this: each person I meet is actually a part of myself. If I hurt that person, or ignore, or judge, or look down on someone or something, I am doing it to myself.

This idea reminds me of something I heard on a bus at the airport. The driver was alert and courteous, letting pedestrians and other buses go ahead of him. Other bus drivers were doing the same. When a passenger commented on the behavior, he replied, “It’s self-serving. It keeps everything running smoothly. Otherwise, it would be chaos.” By being polite to others, he was helping himself.

I don’t believe that I am not an individual entity. The Mormon doctrine of eternal individuality is one I find most glorious. I certainly don’t understand all that the Dalai Lama or Thích Nhất Hạnh teach. But somehow, the concept that a beggar on the street is a part of me resonates with me and helps me *feel* what I do believe—that we are all connected as children of God. That, though we may be individuals, his hurt *is* my hurt and his happiness *is* my happiness. Seeing the doctrines through a Buddhist lens, however blurry they are, has helped me open my heart to the beings of the world in a way that makes me feel I am living my own religion more truly.

The influence on my own spiritual journey is one reason I believe studying Buddhism has been beneficial. I also hold fast to the Thirteenth Article of Faith where it says, “If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things.”

It seems to me that Mormonism and Buddhism resonate in many ways: perpetual transformation, esteem for and care of ancestors, cause and effect in relation to blessings. There’s so much more I want to learn.

Though I am just a beginner regarding Buddhism, what I have discovered has sustained me in a hard time and helped me live my own religion more fully. I am a better person because of it, and I intend to continue holding the iron rod on the Eightfold Path.

### Notes

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1. Thích Nhất Hạnh, *The Energy of Prayer: How to Deepen Your Spiritual Practice*, edited by Rachel Neumann (Berkeley, Calif.: Parallax, 2006), 117.

2. Dalai Lama XIV, *How to See Yourself as You Really Are*, translated and edited by Jeffrey Hopkins (London: Rider, 2007), 41.

3. Dalai Lama XIV, *How to See Yourself*, 61.

4. Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), 19–20.