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Body, Mind & Spirit

Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness: Walking the Buddha's Path
Bhante Henepola
Gunaratana
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“If you want to weed a garden, you have to be able to distinguish the weeds from the flowers.” Such aphorisms fill Gunaratana’s book, expressing the Buddhist sensibility that informs this simple yet profound book. For a reader who knows little about the world’s fourth largest religion, Gunaratana’s book is a basic primer in Buddhist philosophy and practice. Gunaratana, who has lived in the United States since 1968, teaching at various institutions of higher education and serving as president of the Bhavana Society in West Virginia, writes in a direct and compelling manner about the eight principal pillars of Buddhist belief.

An ordained Buddhist monk since the age of twelve, Gunaratana suggests, “even a little effort to incorporate these eight steps into your life will yield happiness.” Clearly he knows the Middle Path intimately; he outlines for readers the Four Noble Truths: life is suffering; we suffer because we desire; we desire because we become attached; and by following the eight steps of the Middle Way, we can transcend suffering.

The author illustrates Buddhist principles with a timeless directness: “[The Buddha] compared sensual pleasure to a bone with no meat thrown to a hungry dog. Though the dog gnaws the bone for a long time, the bone never satisfies his hunger.” Such simple, colloquial speech effectively brings Buddhist teaching to an American community; Gunaratana’s writing alleviates the obstacles between the Western consciousness and Eastern philosophy.

In order to illustrate the points along the Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness, Gunaratana draws from a rich scriptural tradition of parables about the Bodhisattvas, the enlightened beings who taught aspirants the means to enlightenment. While these ancient stories, which are a highlight of the book, at times may seem unrelated to a modern sensibility, Gunaratana’s skillful retelling makes these tales relevant to a contemporary mind.

Because of the universal wisdom presented in Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness, whatever one’s faith or spiritual perspective, reading this book with an open mind and a

willingness to explore the basic tenets of Buddhism “will help you if you practice sincerely, investigate your unhappiness fearlessly, and commit yourself to doing whatever it takes to reach lasting happiness.”

Duncan Sprattmoran