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The summer after I graduated from high school, my older brother invited me to spend a weekend in the White Mountains. Our parents were divorcing and this time and place took on a special significance for both of us. Even then I remember thinking that these few days with my brother, an SPS alumnus and someone I looked up to, would help shape a difficult time in our lives and somehow provide a clearer perspective.

We did a few of our favorite hikes in the Presidential Range and on the afternoon we had to return home, made a last stop at the trailheads below Profile Lake. Looking up to see the famous rock face, more than 10,000 years old and then held together by steel bolts and cables, we didn't have to say much before we decided to deviate from the lake-side trail and bushwhack up toward the Old Man of the Mountains. At first, the climb was surprisingly easy. We made quick progress zigzagging through evergreens and later through maples and birch, to the point where the cars in the parking lot began to look like toy models. But about an hour into our adventure, the path became rougher. Finally, it became obvious why relatively few trails lead to the summits of these mountains: the steepness from all but a few directions makes them nearly impossible to climb.

In a last attempt to glimpse the profile, we shimmied up to a ledge of a rock. Peering out, we got the perfect view--as pristine as the one on postcards. Only we were close enough then to see the boulders that comprised the face as well as some of those cables. Despite the unnatural way the formation was held together, it was strangely moving to witness that particular arrangement of granite--how the rock really did take on the appearance of a nose, chin, forehead.

Given the turmoil in our lives, it is easy to understand why my brother and I sought out this particular site. Even with its wires and supports, here was a structure that had weathered time, revived memories of family trips through Franconia Notch, and seemed like it would last forever. We were even willing to risk our own safety for access to something so stable, so permanent.

Of course, the Old Man wasn't that. Seeing the images of the formation crumbled half-way down the Notch two weeks ago brought home a particularly potent message about how even the most beloved emblems of steadiness or endurance do change. It's a concept that is sometimes painful to grasp. We want to believe that things made out of granite will be there for us to explore whenever we want. In a world as fast, tumultuous, and committed to newness as ours, we're hungry for bedrock. For stability. For one or two monuments, institutions, or people to stay just as we remember them. You only have to look at how we continue to idolize the ageless James Dean, Jim Morrison, Marilyn Monroe, Andy Warhol or Kurt Cobain to see how this is true.

Even when we know change is inevitable--in our families, the groups we join, the schools we attend, in the places we visit--we bump into this desire for permanence. It's a deeply human longing, and one that Buddhism sees as the central obstacle to happiness. This religion, which the Dalai Lama has called "a way of looking at and living with reality," takes quite a pragmatic approach to this problem and offers a range of answers to help people cope with this universal
desire. In fact, this issue sits at the heart of the Buddha's first and most essential teachings, the Four Noble Truths, which are: The truth of suffering; the truth of the cause of suffering; the truth of cessation of suffering, and the truth of the path that ends suffering, also known as the Eightfold Path.

You might ask what's this business about four truths and eight paths? Simply put, it's a framework through which Buddhists understand or relate to reality and a system for living a happier and more fulfilling life.

According to Buddhism, life is inseparably tied to something called dukkha, which is the First Noble Truth. The Pali word is often translated as suffering, but it often connotes more of a basic dissatisfaction running through our lives. Sometimes this unhappiness erupts into the open as sorrow, grief, disappointment, or despair; but usually it only hovers at the edge of our awareness as an unlocalized sense that things are never fully equal to our expectations. This fact of dukkha, the Buddha says, is the only real spiritual problem. He tended to wave aside metaphysical questions that have preoccupied theologians and philosophers through the centuries as far less important. In fact, nearly all the Buddha’s teachings can be boiled down into recognizing suffering and finding skillful ways to end suffering to break the cycle of death and rebirth.

The Second Noble Truth concerns the causes of dissatisfaction. The Buddha pointed to three sources for this discomfort: physical pain; pain that arises from desire and attachment; and then the pain the develops from the being trapped in a karmic cycle.

The Third Noble Truth posits a much more hopeful view: that suffering on all these levels can end.

And that leads to the Fourth Noble Truth, which gives details of the Eightfold Path, a kind of practical guide toward the ending suffering. It's important to underline here just how ordinary these recommendations are, how grounded they can be in our lives. Through small, daily choices, the Buddha taught, people can alter their experiences for the better and radically change their environment.

The first of these Eightfold Paths is having the right view which means cultivating an understanding of things as they really are, including, of course, the Four Noble Truths.

The second is right intention which refers to the mental energy that controls our actions. It can best be described as a commitment to ethical and mental self-improvement as well as to helping others.

Third is right speech. The importance of speech in the context of Buddhist ethics is obvious: words can save lives, make enemies or friends, start war or create peace. The Buddha explained right speech is telling the truth, speaking in friendly, warm, and gentle ways and talking only when necessary. In our School’s context, one might even say it is a way of “speaking the truth in love.”

Right action, the fourth path, refers to deeds such as acting kindly and compassionately, being honest and respecting the belongings of others.
The fifth path is right livelihood. One should earn one's living in a wholesome way and wealth should be gained legally and peacefully.

Right effort, the sixth path, can be seen as a prerequisite for the other principles. Without effort, nothing can be achieved. In this case, it is the efforts which benefit others.

Number seven, right mindfulness, is the cultivation of thoughts with good motivations which naturally leads to a heightened awareness of one’s actions.

And that leads quite naturally to the eight path, right concentration. This one tells us to focus in a single-pointed fashion on positive thoughts and actions. It may come as no surprise that the Buddhist method of choice for the development of this final path is the practice of meditation.

Neither my brother nor I knew much about Buddhism at the time we hiked high up the mountain. We were confused, angry at our parents, and scared about all the changes that were beginning to take place. We were trying hard to climb through a difficult time, willing to take risks for the chance to get closer, physically and metaphorically, to something that we felt would make us feel a little better. What we really learned that day was far more tangible: descending on dirt and loose rock was a lot more difficult than climbing up on them. We were lucky to make it down with just a few scrapes. And by the time we returned to the trailhead, it was clear we had lot further to go on other kinds of journeys.

Even now, after years of working with and thinking through the implications of these straightforward but profoundly useful eight tenets, I am still drawn to solutions that involve external actions to compliment ones that involve internal choices. Every day offers the chance to practice all or a few pieces of the path, whether we are going to class, playing sports, or walking along a trail with a friend. When done with correct mindfulness, any activity can manage the stresses of day to day life as well as those moments when the earth around us seems about to fall apart. For me, the climb to the Old Man provides a helpful benchmark. The energy and desire to take risks that drove me there are still part of my character but Buddhism has helped me frame the complexities of the path in important ways.

Although it may sound counterintuitive, accepting the fleetingness of life, the very impermanence that the Old Man so dramatically showed us, provides me with the resolve to savor, enjoy, and profit from the only constant Buddhists perceive: that life as we know it will do nothing but change. The Buddha even taught that his own teachings are impermanent, that there will come a time when each of his followers must let them go. He likened his teachings to a raft that helps you get across a river. Once on the dry land of the other side, you'd be crazy to haul the raft along with you even though it had served you well. It did its job, and now you need to let it go.

But while still in the process of crossing the river, Buddhism reminds us to stay focused on the eight tenets of the path and practice its recommendations. We do this for the chance to learn acceptance that allows for growth through change, to live with the knowledge that we are here for a short period of time, and to take advantage of this particular life, this moment even as it passes.