

*Carole Poppleton* believes that the application of Buddhist principles to the teaching of ESL and other languages can empower students

## Language Learning on the Eightfold Path

**I have been working as an English teacher** — literature, composition and primarily English as a Second Language (ESL) — for almost twenty years. I have been fortunate to work at a progressive art college for the past thirteen years, and my students are mostly from Asia: Korea, Japan, China, and Taiwan. Because of my affinity toward and affiliation with Asian cultures, I began to learn about various spiritual practices that permeate these countries such as Confucianism, Taoism, and especially, Buddhism. The beauty of the texts, the subtle yet dense messages contained in Buddhist koans, and the focus upon the individual as part of a greater whole intrigue me.

While I am not officially a practicing Buddhist nor do I pretend to understand all of the complexities of Buddhism, I do attempt to integrate many of the ideals of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path into my own life and thus into my teaching practice. I have found that adhering to some of the Buddhist suggestions for living are helpful within the language classroom, and can assist my students to gain confidence and skill along their path toward English language-acquisition in all its forms.

As ESL teachers, how many times do we hear a student apologize for their work, fearful to share it with us or the class because “it is not good...it is too full of errors.” Likewise,

how many students sit silently through a class afraid to open their mouth and share their ideas? The effort at correct speech and the terror of errors, or misunderstandings paralyze otherwise bright and intellectually curious students. Within my classrooms, I do my utmost to foster a supportive, safe and inviting environment, one where a student’s affective filter is low, to cultivate language production; I do this by attempting to create a calm and harmonious environment that builds upon some of the suggestions found in the Buddhist Eightfold Path.

### **Basic Principles of Buddhist Thought**

Buddhist principles rest upon the fact that all of life entails suffering, or more precisely, “imperfection” or “difficulties.” I think most of us can attest that life is full of challenges, but it is how we address them that either sustains or lightens our load. The Four Noble Truths state that 1) The cyclical nature of life is to suffer, to deal with frustrations and “unsatisfactoriness” 2) Our pain is caused by our minds, which cling to attachment, anger and ignorance and thus create delusions 3) We can move beyond these limitations by changing our minds and how we view our life/world 4) The steps to reach this level of comfort and being are found by following the Eightfold Path.

For many students, producing in English (writing or speaking) causes “suffering.” It is a laborious task that requires great mental exertion, and hours of time and energy. Since I teach college-level, most of my students are already quite proficient in English; however, this proficiency can vary greatly as many still struggle to speak up in a discussion class, to interpret texts, and to compose strong, developed essays. By the time many reach me, they have already learned that “they write badly” or “they speak poorly.” Many agonize about their ability to function within the mainstream academic classroom and are overwhelmed by a dialogue-based curriculum. My goal is to assist these students in finding their voice, in building their confidence (and hence skills) to verbalize their ideas and to concretize them in clear prose. Yes, this is ESL work in an academic sense, but I believe it is also psychological and spiritual. As a teacher and mentor, I hope to instill in my students a love of learning, a solid practice of inquiry and a belief that they can and do have important things to say — in English.

While all the steps on the Eightfold Path do not address issues that effect English writing and speaking directly, I feel its advice in regards to effort, mindfulness, and meditation particularly germane to language learners and educators.