

Four Noble Truths: *Paṭipadā* (4 of 5)

The Eightfold Path

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Summary Keywords

Suffering, cessation, clinging, letting go, liberation, factors, mindfulness, concentration, causality, consequences, beginners, advanced practitioner, *sīla*, precepts, craving, ethics, harmlessness, compassion, goodwill, kindness, generosity, wisdom, simplicity, non-attachment, description, prescription, right view, right intention, right action, right speech, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration

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Today we are coming to the end of this series on the Four Noble Truths. In this penultimate talk, we are talking about the fourth noble truth.

I want to say again that there are many interpretations of the four noble truths. They probably all exist because someone found them beneficial. Different interpretations are beneficial in different contexts or situations in our

lives. When we know different interpretations, we have a bigger toolbox with which to meet and respond to life wisely.

This is the most common interpretation of the Four Noble Truths: there is suffering in the world. It is not that life is suffering, but to the degree to which there is suffering, the suffering has a cause. That cause is represented by the word “craving.” It is the clinging, the compulsive kind of wanting that exists for human beings. This could be an addiction or an attachment. The cessation of suffering involves letting go – the abandonment, or the putting down of that craving, clinging, or attachment.

This is not easy to do. These attachments that we have can be very deeply rooted. They can even be subconscious. We can't even see some of the ways that we are attached. Sometimes we know we are suffering, but it is just a big mass of suffering. We don't see the causes and conditions for it. We are just feeling lousy and bad.

Because of the challenges of letting go deeply and experiencing freedom from suffering, there is a path. There is a set of practices a person can do that sets the conditions in place that begin clearing the field, and help us to settle. The practices help us to see deeply and clearly. They help the mind develop its capacity to see

more and more deeply into what is going on. Then we can come to the place of liberation. In the Four Noble Truths, that path is represented by the Eightfold Path. The practice for the cessation of suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path.

It is the “path of the noble ones.” It is a path for those who become ennobled. It is the path toward freedom. It is a wonderful set of eight practices that are not beliefs that we have to believe, but practices that we do that begin changing how we are. They help change the conditions for who we are. They allow us to live in a more contented, settled way.

The middle parts of the Eightfold Path have to do with ethics, with *sila*. They have to do with our behavior – to live by the precepts, and to speak without causing harm. They encourage a livelihood that doesn't cause harm. It is easier to be relaxed and feel good about ourselves if we live a life of harmlessness. We don't have the agitation, the regrets, and all the things that make it hard to settle.

It is useful to go about the world with the right attitude and the right intention. Going about with the intention of being hostile, unfriendly, or greedy for pleasures is not conducive to living if a person wants a life that is settled, quiet, or calm in the mind. It is not helpful if a person

wants to open up and connect deeply inside to find freedom from suffering.

The second factor of the Eightfold Path is right intention or right attitude. This is sometimes defined as having an attitude of compassion or an attitude of harmlessness. It is harmlessness, or an attitude of non-ill will – goodwill, kindness, or friendliness. It is not like you should do this, or that it is a requirement. If we want to create the conditions for a mind and heart that is settled enough to be present for experience, it helps if we live with these attitudes or intentions.

It is helpful to cultivate mindfulness. It helps to be settled and practice a lot of mindfulness. The more we practice, the more prepared we are for the difficulties of life. To start being mindful when things are difficult might be too late. We won't have the inner strength to do so.

The same thing applies to concentration. Developing the mind's capacity to be focused, calm, unified, and present is one of the great pleasures of life. It also helps us to encounter suffering and encounter ourselves in a deep, effective way.

Right effort is the endeavor to live well.

I am going through them all quickly and out of order. The first one is right view. Right view has many

interpretations or explanations for what it is. This again has to do with context. The core understanding is that right view is seeing the world through the framework of the original idea of the Four Noble Truths: there is suffering, the arising of suffering, and the cessation of suffering. Seeing the arising and ceasing of suffering is the way forward. This is more of a meditative experience. It is deeply being with the arising and passing of experience. That is the classic idea of right view.

The Buddha gave other ideas of right view. Some of them are more practical for everyday life. An important teaching of right view has to do with causality or consequence. It is the idea that what we do has consequences.

Our actions and speech leave traces or results. If we act with skillful intentions, then skillful qualities will be supported and developed. If we do unskillful things, unskillful qualities are developed and suffering occurs. If we act with hate, the results of hate are not pleasant. If we act with love, the results of love done wisely have good consequences. Generosity and wisdom are cultivated.

What we do and how we do things are not inconsequential. Even what we think and how we think about things is not inconsequential for the purpose of becoming free. This is not a moral obligation or a moral

judgment on things. If we are interested in the path of freedom, it is a very practical concern. If we are interested in freedom from suffering, then we want to take a lot of care with how we behave and the conditions we set in place. We should be careful to put good consequences into place.

This could be as simple as driving to work. When we leave at the last possible minute, we always feel harried. The consequences of that choice are that we get to work harried and we are not particularly kind to others. We are not so happy when we get there. Perhaps we could leave home five minutes earlier so we could drive in a relaxed, calm way. That sets the conditions for better circumstances, and it supports our continuing to be attentive and to practice as we go through our life.

The idea is that all these sets of practices are very wise things to do. It is useful to learn these eight sets of practices and have them under our belt. Develop an understanding of them and pick them up at different times, and under different circumstances. They can be good for beginners in Buddhism. They are good for people who have been practicing for some time, and they are good for people who are quite experienced in Buddhism. The Eightfold Path is always part of the path of Buddhism. This Eightfold Path defines the core practices of Buddhism.

This interpretation I am sharing today of the Eightfold Path is good for beginners. Know your suffering. Know the cause. Whatever way you can, let go of that cause. If you can't let go of it, or if you want to go further on this, cultivate the Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path is a prescription of what to do. The Eightfold Path is also presented as a *description* of what liberated people are like. Once a person becomes free of attachments and clinging, the Eightfold Path describes or defines how they live their life. This happens without a person actively doing it because it is the absence of clinging that leads us to these good things. Without clinging, there is no unethical behavior, as Buddhists define this. When you let go of clinging, you will follow the ethical pieces of the Eightfold Path.

Interestingly, we have the Eightfold Path for beginners, and for the people who are awakened. The Eightfold Path represents both the life of the beginner and someone advanced. I like to think that the practice that we do – practicing with the Eightfold Path, meditation, or any of it – mirrors or contains elements of the goal of freedom itself. One way to practice is to allow ourselves to practice so that the means contain part of the goal. The means and goals are not considered separate from each other. Allow the goal to inhabit or to be embodied in the very means of how we practice.

This means that we are very careful to not cling as we do our practice. We are not being ambitious, selfish, conceited, or hard on ourselves. We are not allowing ourselves to feel disappointed or critical of how we are doing. That represents going in the opposite direction of the practice.

When we include the goal in the means – even for a beginner – we take on these practices with an open hand, with lightness and gentleness. We practice with a radical simplicity, without needing or wanting our practice to be a certain way. We are not pushing, or clinging to have it be a certain way. We enter into the practice with generosity, openness, clarity, and calmness. We practice with whatever degree of non-attachment and non-clinging we can have.

In particular, we practice with gentleness, openness, and non-clinging to the clinging that we have. As we do this practice, we learn to recognize and see much more clearly what is going on for us. It is an introspective practice. We see our clinging, hostility, greed, and all the things that we have. Rather than using that to suffer more, we try to meet our clinging and be touched by it. We hold it gently, kindly, and supportively. We don't get involved with it, and we don't condone it. We also don't criticize it or get contracted, angry, or mean about it.

The Eightfold Path is both a beginner's practice and an advanced practitioner's practice. It is the life of those who have let go of clinging. It is also the area where we practice non-clinging right from the beginning of practice. Right from the start we practice with right view, right intention, right action, right speech, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

This is what we do, but let's be careful with how we do it. Let's do it with determination, clarity, dedication, and with love, but also without further clinging. We don't need to use it as material to be critical of ourselves. If at the heart of Buddhism is the desire to end suffering, if it is a path to end suffering, please don't use Buddhism and Buddhist practice as another reason to suffer. That doesn't make any sense.

As you engage in Buddhist practice and the Buddha's teachings, please be careful that you don't suffer because of it. Don't use it as something to be critical of yourself or critical of other people (they are not living up to the Buddhist standard). Always keep this close: we are walking the Eightfold Path – the path of Buddhism – so we don't suffer.

The goal is found in the means. This may be only a hint in the beginning, but the goal grows, develops, and expands as the means incorporate the goal more and more. Rather than a goal out there in the future, the

goal is already here. We are expanding it. We are developing it and growing it until it is fully mature in us.

Thank you very much for today. Tomorrow will be the last talk of this series on the Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths. Tomorrow I will take a little time for questions. If you want to stay and ask some questions in the chat that would be wonderful. Thank you.