

# 2014-01-05 The Eightfold Path

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eightfold path, suffering, four noble truths, freedom, buddhism, life, mind, path, people, seizing, arise, deep, attitudes, attachment, thirst, cultivate, called, capacity, year, drive

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Good morning. Can you hear okay? So, yes. So I have one announcement and that is in Sunday, two weeks from today, insight world aid will have a presentation about its work and how to be involved. Inside world aid is a service organization that was born out of our community here as its own nonprofit has been involved already with a service project two week project in Cambodia and projects around the Bay Area. So if you're interested in such things, I think I said 123, I think nine 19th of January. So I'll take the opportunity to welcome you to the new year. And to wish you all a good year. It's kind of a kind of a ritual of our culture. To mark this time of year as the beginning of something new, a new year, and with that to consider a little bit letting go of the old and the beginning of the new and to set that intention for the new year. And I think it's a great thing, this idea of starting over, not be burdened by and carry with us so much of the weight of the past and kind of start with a kind of fresh start and start to new. There's a kind of freedom to that then it's kind of possibility of new possibilities with that kind of attitude. It's a kind of a cultural artifact that we do this because it's, you know, it's the Gregorian calendar doesn't Mark any particular important day January 1 doesn't there's no cosmological significant. It's just kind of a made up thing. That's some, I guess a bishop Gregory made up this And we've been happily or not so happily going along. And if you're not so happy about going along, it's, there's a lot of different in the Bay Area's rich with all these different cultures. And so if you don't like that particular New Year, or you'd like more of them, or you or if you, you had it you started off this new year, but you didn't like, like the start, you can get lots of opportunities, because there's lots of different countries have different New Year's, Chinese New Year's and Thai New Year's and Indian New Year and all kinds of new year's to the course of the year. So, but it's kind of nice that this new year also marks a little bit here in the northern climates, the beginning of moving towards the light during a period of darkness. And so kind of going ahead into this new life towards the light and we're fortunate I think it's a time to come Our good fortune, said in Buddhism that it's a very fortunate thing to be born a human being, and that it's good to celebrate and appreciate the good fortune of the human birth. They say it's very rare to be born as a human being. So if you can do this kind of calculation, here's how rare it is. If there is a blind turtle in the middle of swimming in the middle of the ocean, and once every hundred years, it surfaces, its head up to the surface of the water. And in that same ocean, if there is a log that has a hole in the middle log, the chances of that turtle surfacing once every hundred years, its head up through the that log hole is the same chances of you being reborn as a human. Though it's pretty rare it says so congratulations.

So here we are. And it's custom here at IMC that the first talk I give first Sunday of the year is on the Four Noble Truths. So I'd like to continue that. And it's a nice talk for the new year because it's a talk that sets the direction for people that this is the intention. This is the orientation for the Buddha Dharma. And Buddhism has and it's good to be reminded of that. One of the good things to be reminded as well, is that Buddhism does not does not exist, apart from people who practice it. So you know, I could talk forever about Buddhism. But there's no Buddhism in my talking about it. Any more than you sit at home

with an easy chair reading a travel book about a country that you've never been to. The book is not about not the country, right? It's not so You might never go to that country.

Buddhism only exists as a territory we enter into that we abide in if we practice it. And so, in the new year when we talk about Buddhism, we talk about the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, as they practice that we enter into and set the course. The way that it's come down to us kind of the lore of Buddhism, is that the first teachings the Buddha gave after his awakening was the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. And whether that's really the case or not, there's some doubt but it's a nice myth, at least that this is what he began to teach. And it was his attempt to try to not just explained but not more than explained, but to describe means a way for other people to experience the same thing he experienced on the night of his awakening. So it was his travel book in a sense that if we travel, if we go to that territory, go to that country, then you have a chance of experiencing what he experienced the freedom that he had. And so this is what you know, this first teachings. And so it begins with the four what's called the Four Noble Truths. And as truths, they're not philosophical truths. But again, there are truths about traveling in this territory, how to how to find the territory and how to travel it. And it begins by emphasizing what in Pali, the ancient language is called dukkha and dukkha as most commonly been translated to English as suffering, though it might not be the best translation Some people are translated as stress. A common translation is unsatisfactoriness. But one of what's nice, but unsatisfactoriness maybe more than stress, maybe more. So maybe the suffering is that unsatisfactoriness is seen as an evaluation, that we make a situation. And so it kind of easier to see that we have some role to play in valuating something as unsatisfactory and from a different frame of reference different perspective, something might be quite satisfactory, something which is an unfortunate challenge while you're having it and you wish you didn't have it. A year later, you look back and say that you're a better person because of that and it was quite fortunate that you went through that challenge, it was satisfactory in a certain way. So you kind of re evaluate things different ways. And the importance of this is that whatever the Buddha meant by dukkha it is pointing to Something inside of ourselves something that we're doing some activity of mind or heart that is not fixed, is not stuck is not this is how it has to be. But some inner activity of mind that we have some ability to change. And we can change it radically, so that the dukkha is no longer there for us. So the feeling or the sense of devaluation that things are unsatisfactory, doesn't impinge on us and limit our inner freedom, the sense of stress is not there. So that doesn't, doesn't cover over our capacity for being profoundly at ease or at home. That the suffering that their mind kind of conjures up and lives in. Doesn't have to be there to cover over tremendous capacity for happiness and well being and So, the Four Noble Truths begins by a very simple statement for the first noble truth. And that is that there is suffering. Another way of saying it is that or there is another way of saying it is that in this world that we live in, we will have suffering, there's the experience of suffering, does not say that everything is suffering, that life is suffering. It's basically saying that there will be or there is, in this whole kaleidoscope of experience that we have as human beings. Part of that will be suffering. Some people experience a lot of it. Some people not not as much, but everyone will experience it sooner or later, unless you're free.

So that's just a honest, meant to be an honest, grown up recognition of the human condition and some people find it such a relief to come into a body of teachings and practices where the challenge of life, the difficulties, the suffering, is not pretty Dover is not avoided or denied. There isn't kind of romantic idea that, or some idea that Oh, yes, it's bad enough here, but in a future life, things were better or things aren't so bad because I don't know, there are rainbows and, and everything is okay. And but it could have honest, direct kind of willingness to say when they're suffering here. Let's look at it. Let's be with it. Let's recognize it. So that's kind of the beginning is that kind of honesty. And the second noble truth is about the court though usually is described as the origination or the cause or the conditions out of which, that suffering and dukkha that stress arises and here it is. Again, the fingers are pointing back

to ourselves over and over again for the purposes of freedom, inner personal psychological freedom. The arrow is pointing to us, as opposed to pointing it outside. Now, we're not blame. We're not caught up in blaming anyone else we're not caught up in assuming other people are responsible for our happiness or on happiness. They might have a role to play. But if we're caught up in externalizing, the conditions for it, the causes of it, it blinds us can blind us to our role. And the whole task of Buddhism is not to deny the role other people have the responsibility for what they do. But that's not where a path of freedom is found. That's only where a path of relief is found. You can get you know, you get people off your back if it's a relief. But but really kind of find the path you to kind of be willing to do this very radical thing. It's very radical to turn 180 degrees and really look deep inside and see where what what are you doing what's going on here. And so the cause of suffering is described with a word in Pali called the said tanhā. And tanhā seems to be a common ancient word for thirst. And so we think of thirst or like hunger. If you're really thirsty, there's kind of a drive and need a push for something with thirst for power, thirst for money, that thirst for, you know something, and it's more than it's almost addictive in quality. And it's, it's compulsive, something is taken over, something takes over. And we're kind of there's momentum of force within us. That's driving us. Another word that I like for this thirst that's often used craving, because craving is not just a desire is desire where there's compulsion, and or drivenness behind it. compulsion driven is means that, you know, it takes over. And we don't have so much choice, we can't just let go of it easily, because it has a power of its own. And so to tell people, you know that you're responsible for your suffering, and you have to let go of your thirst. It's kind of a disservice to them, because of how, you know it's a compulsion or drivenness and addiction attachment, which is something we often have very strongly connected to identified with. And so, you know, it's hard to let go of some deeper things. It's easy to let go of small things, but deep things, it's hard. The way the description of the second noble truth is classically given is that thirst is connected to delight in existence. delight in certain kind of delight and pleasure that we want. I think the assumption is that human beings are often driven by a drive for some kind of pleasure, satisfaction, and some kind of delight. And so many things we do is in the pursuit of that. And that can be quite powerful, quite intense. And I think the, I don't know that one of the strongest represented representations are this kind of thirst and drive and compulsion. And drive for pleasure is a sexual drive. Very intense, right? A few of you may be when you were teenagers can remember how strong that drive can be. And so what does it take if the if that's really what causes the suffering?

What does it take to attain the third noble truth which is The truth that it's possible to bring a cessation of the, of the suffering caused by craving. That's a third number second, like the good news in Buddhism, because it's not easy. Then there's the fourth noble truth, which is the path a full path to lead to the cessation of that suffering, that craving. And the Eightfold Path is a comprehensive path of how to develop your character. So that your character is is attuned is tuned or refined or developed. So you have the capacity and the ability to let go and this deep way down through the centuries, a very important part of Buddhist practice has been character development. And whether it's developing the perfections, what's called the par and these are other things, but not just letting ourselves be who we are and say, Well, I'm just gonna accept myself as I am and just learn to let go. That's nice. But, but to really develop ourselves or create ourselves or shape ourselves, shape the mind and the heart into such an instrument, where it has the ability to see deeply, it has the strength of character that allows us to let go, because it's frightening to let go. It's frightening let go of some of the things that you know, one of the strongest drives, of clinging of craving has to do with attachment to self attachment to life. And the idea of letting go of attachments to self self identification of all kinds, even the attachment to life. Seems some people impossible. seems ridiculous seems like right, very frightening. And so it takes a certain kind of strong inner character, personal strength to be able to stand up against The edge of that possibility of letting go and know you're going to be okay have a confidence that it's okay to let go and the steep way. So the Eightfold Path is a comprehensive way of cultivating oneself and developing

oneself so that the deep inner work can be done. It begins by the first one of the eight folds are there I'll start with the word, right. Eight, right ways are factors. And some people get turned off by the idea of right. Because that's right and wrong. But it's not meant to be right as opposed to wrong. And kind of, I don't know in a judgmental way, but rather it's right in the sense of having the right tool for the job. And so you know, you don't want to you know, you don't want a screwdriver if what you're doing is I don't know what but you know, certainly you don't want a jackhammer if what you want to do is to screw in the screw if you're on my glasses, right? So you need a screwdriver, not a jackhammer. So you want the right tool. So you want the right tools to do this work of freedom. And the first right thing is having the right orientation or the right perspective. Because if you want to study something and find something accomplished something, you want to look in the right place for it. You could look in the wrong place, and you'll miss it entirely.

And because Buddhism, the path of freedom that Buddhism is, pointing to, or Buddhism is associated with religions, associated with all kinds of spirits, other spiritual traditions, it's very easy for people with a wide range of religious ideas and exist in our world to get confused about where the path really is. I, you know, so I mean, I don't know if this is a fair contrast, but I came across people, some people recently who were really into the power of crystals. And maybe crystals are powerful, I don't know. But you're not going to find that that path to freedom and personal cultivation and character development and personal freedom in the crystals. And maybe they're useful vitamins might be useful. And maybe vitamins are useful to creating a healthy body they can walk the path, but that's not where the path is found. And so in this complexity of all the different options, you go into a spiritual bookstore, you may look at your options of belief And ideas and it's pretty amazing. It's dizzying. And it's not uncommon for, you know, I think for this, you know, anybody everyone believes so much believe something, but to look around and see at some of those beliefs, geez, how can someone believe that? The I think the one of the strengths of Buddhism in this right view is it points us to the most direct perspective, orientation of our lives for understanding freedom from suffering. And the most direct way to do it, is to appreciate your suffering. to notice it, to stop for it. The bumper sticker for Buddhists there I stopped for suffering because if you stop for too long Look at it, the study it, then you have a chance to understand it more deeply, then you have a chance to get there to the roots of it. So, there's a lot of things you can do that are very nice to do, but they don't help you with your personal investigation. There's not a direct path. So the right the right, first step of eightfold path is right view called, which is to use the perspective, the framework of the Four Noble Truths to understand your life. There are other understandings which are useful to have as well. But for walking the Buddhist path, it's that particular frame of reference will help you be on the path. So the reference point is be interested in where you have either suffering or stress or feelings or sense of unsatisfactoriness and stop and appreciate that so that you can begin understanding that the cause of it. Can you be then then the second thing is to begin studying the second noble truth, which is, in what ways are you clinging? What ways are you attached? And then if you can either let go and experience the cessation of it, or if you can't let go, which is difficult, right? Then walk the Eightfold Path. So it begins by view begins with an understanding. So what's nice is it's not a metaphysical understanding. It doesn't involve supernatural beings and realities and transcendent realities. it off, it starts with something very ordinary, that all human beings encounter, and I think know how to encounter their suffering. Then, in order to walk this path and part of the character development, is it you want to approach it the path or engage in this process of self discovery and freedom with useful attitudes, right attitudes, so it's called Write intention. There are certain ways of thinking that are more conducive to lead if you want to become free. There are certain ways of thinking that are more helpful than other ways of thinking. And it's more helpful to have an attitude of compassion and attitudes of cruelty. It's more helpful to have attitudes of kindness than attitudes of hostility. And it's more helpful to think about letting go than it is to be caught up in sensual cravings.



So, to cultivate attitudes of compassion, to cultivate attitudes of loving kindness and kindness, and to cultivate willingness to live likely to let go to simplify to open up, not to hold on so much. These are useful attitudes to have. And so the question is how do you cultivate and develop those out attitudes, how do you develop in such in such a way that they're sincere, authentic, they're not just kind of covering over what's there and pretending that you're being kind and compassionate. That's important task of the Eightfold Path. And then with those first two steps, right view and right intention, then we begin walking the path and the schema of the Eightfold Path. It begins with our behavior. Because our behavior we do is sometimes easier to get to adjust. Then what goes on deep in our minds and our hearts. And so, if you are involved in killing people, you should stop. Don't do it. If you're involved in stealing, you should really stop. If you want to be free, spiritually free. Stop stealing. Stop taking what is not Given, if you really want to be spiritually free, don't harm other people with your sexuality can't be free if you do that. If you want to be free, Stop lying. And if you want so that those are the four primary ones, it's indifferent. So it's called the right action. not killing, not stealing, not lying and no sexual misconduct. Are they the third step of the Eightfold Path? right action? No, I had a little bit wrong. It's not stealing, not killing, not stealing and no sexual misconduct are considered right action. Because not lying and right speech is the next factor of the Eightfold Path, the whole factor by itself. So if you want to become free, you know, Stop lying. So it's kind of a, I know it's a big, I know these things kind of heavy and you're all these requirements. Have you? Are these Buddhists they have all these obligations requirements, they're kind of party poopers you have to stop kill it, you have to stop killing and except it's stealing. And, you know, it's kind of unfortunate but anyway, it's it's the way it is. I think that if you want to be free, that's what it takes. It takes something from require something from you. And it's probably most of you are not involved in killing and stealing in obvious ways. Part of the task as we mature, is to actually consider these in more subtle ways as well. They were involved ways in which somehow we're involved in behavior which causes harm to the world around us. And these are these right action and right speech, not lying and the other ones are always starting to live our life so that our lives don't cause harm. A very high requirement in Buddhism for this character development where this inner cultivation that'll set the conditions there, so that we can move They look deeply inside of ourselves and do the freeing work is to live a life that doesn't cause harm. And it's essential for the deeper and deeper levels of or higher, whatever you call it higher, deeper levels of the path of Buddhism. Because as practice develops, the heart and mind becomes more and more sensitive, more more refined. And even the subtle movements of causing harm, become a clear blockage in to the possibility of going further into the realms of freedom. So if you really want to go into freedom you need to there has to be a life of harmlessness exploring and developing that. So there's a right action, there's a right speech, and then there's a right livelihood. These are the three kind of behavioral parts of the Eightfold Path. And then the last three parts of the Eightfold Path Have to do with the mind the heart and beginning to care for that to cultivate and develop a high quality, inner life. And without our inner life is agitated, stressed out. It's very hard to have the clarity to really see deeply into where the attachments are, where the clinging is, and how to let go.

And so there's last three factors are right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Right effort is to make the effort to start being the caretaker, for the quality of your heart and mind and not to so if you do things if you have behavior or attitudes or inner inner intentions, motivations, that clearly are diminishing the quality, the goodness of your inner life, do your best to stop doing those things. If you know things that enhance the quality of your heart and mind, do those things, to be the caretaker of the quality of your inner life. And don't think big too big because it can be quite intimidating. And many people in the West have such strong negative self opinions than any attempt to talk about, look at where you're maybe causing yourself to have a poor quality mind makes you feel even worse. Because not not a bad person, a bad person. But the idea is to let go of those tendencies that drag us down and pick up those tenuous perspectives or understandings that lift us up and make us feel happier and

lighter, clear, more settled. So it's a whole art to learning right effort to make the shift to be the caretakers of our inner life. To do that, really well requires to factors, mindfulness and concentration. Mindfulness has the capacity for heightened self understanding, self monitoring, self awareness. And without greater and greater self awareness. We can't expect to be able to go deep into the heart to see what's really lodged there and how this works. So we can let go. And then the last is concentration, and concentration, especially concentration and mindfulness together are such beautiful qualities turns to the highest quality of the mind that you can ever attain. Short of freedom is a mind which is luminous, clear, mindful, mindfully economists and concentrated there's a purity and a pristine quality, to, to awareness to the mind when it's deeply, deeply settled at peace. Quiet, still. vibrantly alive. That can't be there. If the mind is caught up and agitated by its thoughts concerns, what I want and what I don't want. I'm seeing how I don't seem our resentments are planning. It's quite a phenomenal thing that the mind has the capacity to get quiet and pure quiet and concerned with anything whatsoever. And that unconcerned mind is kind of like looking into a beautifully still and pure and clean Mountain Lake, where there's no ripples on the surface and no muck in the water. And you can see right down to the bottom is so clear. So the same way with our minds, we cultivate and develop ourselves so that we have a good quality good character. blameless character. So when we sit down to meditate, there's no agitation there, we can get concentrated and see deeply. And in that clarity of the mind, we can go down right down to the roots of really see what's happening. And that then it sets the stage for awakening. So this is the path and Buddha was first enlightened. If when he first started teaching, he came out and he pointed to this as a path of practice to follow. If we follow it, and it takes maybe a while, cultivate, cultivate our character cultivate our capacity for insight for concentration for stillness. Then we have then insight can arise deeper forms of insight.

And the insight that the Buddha had the night of his awakening is described in terms that are very similar to the Four Noble Truths but are distinct The night of his awakening, it said that he described describes it himself. He says, My mind was still peaceful, soft, clear, malleable, imperturbable and with that imperturbable imperturbable still pure mind, I directed my attention to my attachments, like clinging and I saw this is suffering. This is the arising of suffering. This is the cessation of suffering. And this is the means to be free. And this very simple formulation sounds like the Four Noble Truths but it's enough meant to be the Four Noble Truths, no way it's described as a path and things to understand. It's meant to be direct insights. Into You see, a movement of pain or stress or suffering or anything at all. The same formula is used for all kinds of things, you see it. You see, because things are impermanent, things arise and pass, you see that it arises. And it's quite something to see. Your attachment, your pain, your suffering, your stress, get born. It's quite something to watch a thought get born. Because often we don't. We're kind of operating on the surface of our life or in the generalities of our life. In the same way that if you catch her in Burma, he said, If you look at a row of ads for the distance, it looks like a solid line, black line. But if you get close to those ads, you'll see that they're actually segments is Wonderland Wonderland Wonderland. But the mind has a capacity to kind of generalize and see things as being solid when they're not really solid. And so we live in a life where we feel that our depression or anger, resentments, or despair, or whatever is going on for us is solid. Because we haven't actually been able to get still enough and clear enough to see the segmented quality how arises and they pass moment by moment. We don't get slow enough, we don't slow the film down enough to see that all there is on the movie screen are still shots. But once they'll shut after another 16 a second or whatever they do, and but the mind has constructs movement out of it. There's no movement on screen. Right? You know that right? I hope you know that. When you go to the movies, there's absolutely no movement on the screen. It's your mind that constructs that movement. You know, because it blends everything together. And so we get quiet enough and then remarkable thing to see the birth, the arising of suffering, and not just see not just to see it's arising and passing, they're rising of a thought, I am something to rising them into an entity. All these things just arise and not inherent in the universe or thoughts or concerns with the mind is about our suffering, to see the birth

of it. And then to see in the wake of that birth, it seizes. It comes to a complete stop. You have a thought and if we live in our thoughts and assume that our thoughts are true all the time. It's very easy to kind of be blinded by the thoughts to not realize that a thought is just a thought. And we don't see that. In we think that what the thought is about lingers and stays and weighs on us perhaps. But to see a thought being born, and to see it sees, means we see that in that moment of seizing, there's nothing there. There's nothing there to oppress us nothing there to hold on to nothing, no attachment in that moment. And so that's what the Buddha saw. Not just arising and passing of things, he saw there rising and the seizing and in that seizing there was freedom. In that seizing there is no identification. In that seizing there is no attachment in that seizing there is a radical freedom and because I was having that insight was the lamb to experience of freedom.

What happens sometimes is when you see the arising and the seizing fully, it's kind of like in the space after the seat in when things are seized. that gap, that space that it's kind of like the mind's tendency to hold on to anything. The mind's a consciousness, lets go of itself. consciousness itself arises and passes. It's kind of like consciousness constantly holding on to things wanting the next thing wanting a next thing, looking searching, reacting. But when consciousness doesn't even look for itself doesn't even hold on to itself. Something in our hearts and minds can just drop away radically. fall away. In zen, they talk about the bottom from the bucket falling open. The floor just drops out. So radical falling away of attachments of clinging all kinds of things, even of consciousness oddly enough, and then the Buddha saw, this is the way to freedom. This is the this is the means. So, the, the teachings on the Four Noble Truths are they understandings and practices that prepare us for this deep insight of realization prepares us for this momentary experience, stillness and quiet. Where we're relaxed we feel at home we're at peace, and we can see in the moment, right down to the bottom of the lake. And in that purity and clarity, we can see something arise. A thought arise an impulsive Rise of desire rise, I can see it arise. And we can see that it also ceases totally for a moment. And then that momentary seizing and letting go, there can be a whole dropping away. That can happen. That cannot happen if we're constantly wanting the next thing wanting the next thing looking and reacting. And that experience of this radical letting go or freedom that the Buddha experienced was the beginning of 2500 year tradition that you're part of. It was a was a radically radical experience of transformation that leads to the deepest human capacity for freedom, for peace and for compassion. So the Eightfold Path it's The beautiful path. The foreign teaching the Four Noble Truths are wonderful teachings. And if you're so inclined, if this sounds meaningful to you, you could spend the year hanging out with them, getting to know them better studying them exploring them. But remember that if you're all you do is study them in the books, that it's a little bit like studying the travel books. He has to get into the territory. So if you can figure out this year, how you can enter the territory of the Eightfold Path and make it make it really make it your own. Then this path is a really good path. And however far the journey takes you, it's a really good, really good journey. No amount of effort is wasted. Okay, so thank you all. Happy New Year.