

2017-01-15 Introduction To Eightfold Path

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SPEAKERS

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Good morning. Last week I talked about the Four Noble Truths. And I focused on the first of the three. And today I'd like to focus on the fourth, which is the Eightfold Path. And the Buddha talked a lot more about the Eightfold Path, then he talked about the Four Noble Truths. It's such a central key part of those early teachings that it's, you know, well, it's kind of like a center of gravity in many ways, in terms of how people interested in the practice, live their lives. And as an introduction to this topic, I want to say that I think it's quite remarkable. You know, maybe kind of amazing that we're sitting here, and we're gonna talk about teachings that are from 2500 years ago. I mean, that's a long time ago. And there's been a lot of creative religious ideas during that time. And since that time, then we no longer talk about. And probably if I started regularly here on Sunday morning, taught about the religion of my ancestors. I think the numbers would dwindle as quickly as I started talking about Thor and Odin, Valhalla, and you know, wonderful things like that.

So there's something about that spin sustainable about the teachings of the Buddha down through the centuries. And not only we still talk about them, but they seem to have a relevance in people's lives today. And one of the fascinating places we see this is how these teachings have leapt beyond the world of Buddhism into our sector of the world. And very popular in our society now and even more popular in Europe, is mindfulness practices that are secularly, offered Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, for example. And those teachings have their roots in these 2500 year old teachings. So why is it and so there's a timeless quality to these Buddhist teachings. And you can quibble a little bit around that, because on the edges of the teachings, there are still some creative ideas that exists that some people in the modern world are not interested in or seem kind of archaic. But at the heart of it, it still seems very relevant. And why is that? And one of the reasons for that is at the heart of Buddhist practice, and the Buddhist insight the Buddha had was insight or understanding of our direct experience, really direct experience in the present moment. And Thor and Odeon and Valhalla are not exactly part of our ordinary direct experience. And so it's not, you know, you'd have to kind of stretch or trying to find a connection to it to make find value. But Buddha kind of somehow was able to, or was interested or discovered value, in putting aside a lot of the religious ideas of his time. A lot of the things that many people in the modern world would not be interested in, and focus on something we all have in common. And that is, we have in common our direct experience through our eyes and our ears, our nose, our tongue, in our perceptions here. Now, our experience here now. And I don't know about you, the Buddha was the first to do this kind of emphasis. But since that time, there's been a few major figures in human history who've done something similar to that. Around the time, maybe the Buddha, I don't know exactly the date. But Epicurus in Greece did that. And he put aside the beliefs that the Greeks had in Gods, and in kind of rebirth, and all kinds of things that are not part of the direct, immediate experience, in favor of really connecting really being present for our life as it's lived. And I'll get back to maybe in a few minutes. Another person who kind of put aside a very important philosopher,

political thinker, an economist who put aside the religious ideas of his time, and came up with teachings in some ways at the heart, were based on the same principles that the Buddha was the English philosopher, John Stuart Mill, the father of utilitarianism.

And those those teachings of philosophy of mill is, lays at the foundation of modern democratic societies. All over the world in very important ways. And because he pointed to a common denominator, something we could all kind of agree on, or close to agree on, because it has to do with our direct experience much more than having to do with the supernatural or, or the transcendent or some place something we can't quite see and experienced directly. And then I would kind of suggest that another person in this kind of movement, to really kind of really foundational to these, especially in Western culture nowadays, is Sigmund Freud. And he also to a great extent, put aside a lot of the religious beliefs of the time supernatural, in favor of something close to direct experience. You can quick quibble with that. But I'll point to what he had to say. Because he emphasized the value of the pleasure principle. Epicurus emphasized the value of connecting to the happiness that's available here now and the pleasure that's here now. And then he got misinterpreted by the Catholic Church. And now we talk about Epicurean is someone who's indulges almost there's over interested in sensuality or pleasure. But for Epicurus, the focus on pleasure and happiness led him to conclude that the best most pleasurable happy life to live was a life of radical simplicity. And where you had a lot of opportunity to spend time with your friends. And so little bit, you know, like renunciant, lifestyle, and John Stuart Mill, he had also a happiness principle, the principle of the greater happiness for all. And he also and he focused his foundation for his both political, political ideas and philosophical ideas, had to do with principles of harm, what causes harm, and what God brings about happiness. So, all these people, the Buddha, Epicurus, mill, Freud, focused on direct experience, in the, in the relationship to pleasure, or in harm, happiness and harm. Because if you relate to direct experience, and you want to want to make that be your guide, how do you make that be the guide for your life, your personal life, your social life, political life? How can you find your way with that, you have to have some principles, some center of gravity that we can all agree on. And for the all these characters, it had to do with something that was experiential, that we can all feel in our direct experience, we kind of know when we're suffering, and we kind of know when we're happy. And that's something that, you know, you can quibble around the edges of that. But at the heart of it, this is important principles for human life and how we find our way. What was fascinating about John Stuart Mill, was that he really saw this principle of avoiding harm, and looking for happiness in a social context, and focused on the importance of looking for the greater happiness for all beings, rather than for only the individual. So he wasn't in strict individualist, you could maybe argue, and I'm going to argue against it. Or they say it this way, that some people who interpret the teachings of the Buddha interpreted in hyper individualistic ways. And I think even some modern Dharma teachers will modern practitioners still doing it in hyper individualistic ways, which makes some sense with a strong individualism in the West. But John Stuart Mill emphasized that if you if the principle is to his pleasure and happiness, in and of itself as an individual, then we wouldn't pay taxes. And we wouldn't serve on jury duties. And we wouldn't get up in the middle of the night to take care of a crying baby. You know, it's cozy here and warm, and I'm tired. And, you know, you know, it's unpleasant to get up and let the baby cry. You know, there's all kinds of things we wouldn't do. So he pointed out, you know, that kind of that, that there's a show social component to this happiness and harm principles that we take into account. And so he focused on the greater happiness of everyone, not just the individual.

And so this is a long introduction to get to the idea of four noble truths, the Eightfold Path, the four most noble truths at the heart, have to do with happiness and suffering, the direct experience we can have a feeling of unease or disease or feeling suffering, and the possibility of being free of that. And the great freedom from that is called the Maha Sukha, the great happiness. And so this is what makes this easy

is quite relevant for us, we're talking about things we can all experience and recognize in ourselves. And you don't have to buy into or accept supernatural beliefs, you don't have to accept kind of unusual, foreign religious ideas that are not really part of your life. But rather, the teachings are pointing back to your life as a way of finding a way within this life that you're living around these principles, which are kind of universal. And I like this very much that Buddhism focuses on something we all share a shared commonality or humanity, that we can all kind of use as a starting point for how we engage in a spiritual life, how we gave an engaging human life, and how we can engage in a social life living together. So way of finding commonality that gives us a shared language and a shared approach to life. And with that common focus on direct experience, and what causes harm, and what causes benefit for people and happiness, then we can start looking at differences and appreciating differences. But we have this common reference point that we can maybe find our way together within lives in some kind of harmony together in society. So the Four Noble Truths are simply the way it's most commonly interpreted these days, is that suffering is, is a frequent part of human life. And that the suffering has a cause. And that cause is our craving, which is an umbrella term for a lot of different things. And it's possible to bring to the end of that suffering, the end of that craving. And it doesn't say that in the formulation, the Four Noble Truths. But bringing suffering to an end, is this Maha Sukha said, great happiness, great peace. And then the fourth noble truth is that there's a way a path that leads to the end of suffering. It's not easy, just because you can end suffering doesn't mean it's easy to do. And so the Buddha offered a set of practices, that if you've engaged in these practices, they move you in the direction of freedom from suffering, to happiness, they are practice, and they create the conditions for welfare for ourselves and for the world around us, for our society. And these, it's called a path. And it's a word path is in the singular. And so some, so it said in English, the Eightfold Path, so it's like, you know, an eight lane highway, you know, you can't separate them from each other, they're all kind of on the same road. Sometimes we talk about them sequentially, one at one develops up to the other. But I think being a singular path, they all kind of, you know, they're together working together in ways. And these eight folds de planes are made up are usually divided into three categories. I think it's helpful to think about these three categories as a, before we get into the each one, the first, the first two are in the wisdom category. The next three are in the virtue or ethics category, our social category, social ethics. And the last three have to do with personal, mental psychological development. And that's called Samadhi, cultivation or Vedic meditation. So wisdom, virtue and inner development Samadhi, in this context, context. And so begins with wisdom, two factors make up the wisdom factor. And I like to think these two factors work together, they're like two sides of the same hand. And it's, it's almost, I think, it's very useful to think of them as inter integrated together.

The first is called right view, or the right orientation, it's that the right here means helpful, supportive for this, this process of bringing suffering to an end. And it's a little bit interpretive, what I say based on the teachings, but the way it's emphasized is that the right view is that understanding something about our direct experience, the focus has come to your direct experience. That's where the heart of it is. That's where the doors is, that's where the road is the path is to be found. Don't spend a lot of time with philosophy of Buddhism, don't spend a lot of time with the supernatural that Buddhism might have to offer on the edges of it, don't spend a lot of time with, you know, complex metaphysical ideas, relatively quickly get the idea, the hang of what Buddhism is about, and how it points you and support you into your direct experience. So that's, that's an orientation, that's a view that we look at, we try to understand so. So that's part of right view. And then within right view, in our direct experience, something gets a Buddha some of the insight that probably is the most important insight that Buddha had that's repeated repeatedly in his teachings is that things are impermanent. And so the right view, the right orientation, to help us find freedom from suffering, is to begin appreciating how deeply things are constantly changing in our lives. There's something about the nature of seeing impermanence and change, which is actually supportive for finding freedom and happiness. One of the implications of

things are all changing is, is that if you happen to be suffering, you don't have to be stuck in it. Things can change, they can begin to move or the fall or to resolve themselves in some way. And then, and then you want to look at the cause, you want to look at underlying attachments, underlying craving and clings resistances that are the structure of the kind of suffering Buddhism is looking at. And this is the kind of suffering we're looking at, is not the pain of the world that we might feel, but rather is how we contribute to getting contracted, being burden way down. suffering because of how we resist how we hold on how we cling crave, these obsessions that we might have. So that's called the right to you direct experience and permanence looking for the cause. And in and of itself, it could sound that this is a very personal world, your own experience, yours, your insight into impermanence, your insight into the causes. However, the Four Noble Truths, these teachings, don't use any personal pronoun. And I love this idea, that no personal pronoun in the original language. So just, we're interested in suffering anywhere we notice it, whether it's the world around us, so the world in us, we're interested in understanding how that can be loosened up and freed within us and around us. And that becomes clear with the second factor of the Eightfold Path, that's still under the wisdom category. So that it helps to have some wisdom or some understanding, without some understanding, we just continue business as usual. And so we begin with some kind of new understanding that we wanted, that makes sense to us that seems worth giving a benefit out to. And it's really no point but it's understanding wisdom, that maybe seems kind of natural, once we come back into our direct experience here now. So the second factor of, of right, of the Eightfold Path is usually translated to English as the right intention. I kind of like the word right attitude. And the right intention, clearly is social has to do with how we live in the world together. And because when it's explained what the right attitude is, it's to be kind and compassionate. And now it's possible to be alone at home and be kind, compassionate to yourself. And some people be good to learn that. But, but generally, it's something we do in relationship to other people. We and the idea is explicitly is

to avoid being cruel to others. And I guess to ourselves and avoid being having ill will or hate or hate towards others. So to be compassionate, to be non violent, and to be kind and also, to live simply. The language in ancient the Buddha uses renunciation to that but I like the word simply for us in our kind of lay lives. You know, maybe inspired by Epicurus sitting, he sat in his garden, in his he had a wonderful garden, apparently a little house and he would sit simple life in the garden, his friends would come and visit him and they'd sit and talk in the garden. Now is that pretty? Like, like, Is that good? Or is that like, there's important things to do? important things to buy. And so the idea of a simple, kind, compassionate life, is the attitude that seems to be supportive. If what we want to do is bring suffering to an end, we want to discover this great happiness, this great piece that the Buddha talked about. And I would argue that that's what John mill, John Stuart Mill was saying, as well, I don't think he was, he was saying in the 19th century, that, that societies, that the individual pursuing their own happiness at the expense of everyone else, is really going to make oneself happy. If you want to be happy, you have to live somehow, in harmony with others, and their welfare is important for your welfare. And for the Buddha, there was a mutual benefit principle, that if you benefit others, you benefit. If you benefit really, then you'll benefit others. And this is encapsulated in a fascinating little quote by the Dalai Lama. That is kind of provocative, so I'll just maybe I'll drop it on you. Be quiet for a moment. And then you can think about it later.

If you want to really be selfish, love others kind of puts a different spin on selfishness. And in fact, I think he's encapsulating something that exists in Buddhism, that we're not supposed to be selfish in Buddhism, exactly. But there's something about really, if you really want to take care of yourself, if you really want to be happy yourself, have compassion for others care for others. And that's something with Buddha more often I would add this Dalai Lama more often says that, he says, if you want to be happy, have compassion for others, this mutual principle, you can't just do it in yourself by yourself. And so this

wisdom principle of the Eightfold Path, focus focusing on your direct experience, the impermanence of it, the suffering, and the causes of it goes hand in hand, with our social life, the right attitude and how we live, and how we care for it. And as we care for our social life, those principles of suffering, the causes of it and freedom from it, can be found there as well. And that our contribution, the way we want to hopefully live a life is a life that does not cause harm, and actually does the opposite moves for the benefit of people. So the next three aspects of the Eightfold Path, are called virtue, the virtue factors, and they're clearly social, they clearly have to do with how we live our lives. Because as I've said, how we live our lives, and what happens in our society, comes back and affects us our welfare and well being depends on the well being of others as well. And I think that as we have more and more news from around the world, many of us have become more and more aware of the interconnectedness we have. And that, in fact, the happiness of people far away has an impact, or the suffering of people far away, has an impact on us. We live together in a common humanity deeply interconnected. And so to really follow a path of freedom and Buddhism, you can't just do it for yourself, you have to have some care and concern for the world around you. And so these next three factors have to do with that. So the first one is right, action, so to act in the world, in a way that doesn't cause harm. And there's three ways that are listed in this factor is avoid killing. That's kind of if you don't want to don't want to cause harm. That seems pretty obvious. Don't steal. Someone's harmed when they're stealing. And I remember when, many years ago, my wife had her car broken into and we live in San Francisco. And it was kind of remarkable to me, how deeply she felt violated. It really kind of touched her to the core, her fear placed in the world, how could she be in the world and who she was. It was a pretty powerful experience to have and then on the so I don't know how long ago was later a year later, she was held held up at gunpoint in San Francisco, and together with a group of friends, and so that, you know, you know, someone took their wallets. So, you know, this is, you know, shakes people to the core in a way that, you know, it's their life is very difficult afterwards. And it's kind of this deep pain and suffering. And what's so sad is that there's so much of this in our society. So many people experience these things in our world. And it's heartbreaking. And then not engaging in sexuality that causes harm. Being careful with that, those are the three ways of living action. The next three, the next one is called the right speech. And so how we speak is a big part of how we interact with the world around us with people. Most of us are not taking killing or stealing or beating people up. But our words are quite powerful, probably the most powerful way in which most of us are in relationship with other people. And so, speak honestly, avoid lying best you can. Occasionally there are white lies or occasionally there, you know, little exceptions that people like to emphasize, like when the bride says, you know, what do you think of my bride's dress? And what you think is, it's awful. You know, that's not the time to be honest. That's a time to be evasive. In a supportive and helpful way.

But the, but to be honest, and honesty is like the name of the game with mindfulness practice, mindfulness, honesty, is just mindfulness out loud, you know, if you want to practice mindfulness there, so that's so important to be honest, and then not have harsh speech, cruel speech, be careful with your speech. And then the third is right livelihood. How we have a livelihood, how we make a living, is for many people, a very powerful way, very significant way in which they impact a wider world, beyond their own family or their own groups of friends or something. And so be careful with what you do so that you don't cause harm. And no, you know, so all these things that I've talked about so far, are as relevant today. As they were 2500 years ago, I don't think I've said anything that seems too archaic, and acoustic. The Buddha kind of listed five things that he said, were considered wrong livelihood, because they cause harm, I don't think are can remember all five of them. But I was thinking about them this morning. And I said, oh, here, here we come to some places a little bit archaic is not relevant for anymore. And then my heart sank. Then I said, No, it's still still relevant today. So the ones that are relevant is not involved in weapons industry. not involved in selling of alcohol and drugs. not involved in killing industries that have to do with killing people might not quite be quite right, but not avoid it avoid

and not involved in the business of poisons. I think back in the ancient world, poison meant, you know, poisons to kill people. And then the one that I thought I remembered I had my heart sank, was Don't be involved in slavery, in the sale of human beings, trait of human beings. Because at first, you know, because unfortunately, it seems like maybe that's on the on the upswing, and there's there seems to be more of that's happening in the world than it was 30 years ago. And so these are the right livelihoods to be careful with us. And many people, many Buddhists who take this to heart, begin thinking about how their livelihood now they live, effects these things indirectly, an indirect ways in which they're supporting those kinds of things. And that's a whole complicated topic and a very personal topic to understand our relationship to it. It's so interconnected these days, it's hard to know exactly how to tease it apart. So again, so the very center of these eightfold path or so social. These three steps in the middle of currently social and Buddhist practice is really recognizes how deeply embedded We are deeply connected. We are to each other as a society as human beings, and it's not a path that's apart from how we live in the world with others and how we take into account. But it's still based on the, you know, the principle of avoiding harm and causing benefit to everyone. And then to really do this well, to really kind of be able to live in the world as a peacemaker, as someone who creates happiness and well being for oneself and others, then, and this is kind of where the, I think with Buddhism has the most to offer is that it has a technology of inner practice, we really kind of work to develop ourselves in the inside, to transform our hearts. And this is the Samadhi factor or the meditation factor of the Eightfold Path or the cultivation of inner development factor of eightfold path. And this is, we don't just read books, we don't have wishful thinking. We don't just kind of wait until lightning strikes that we suddenly somehow changed. But we start taking responsibility for our inner life in a way that no one else can do for us. No one else can change, really your heart and mind in a deep way and premier way you have to kind of be willing to be interested in that. And begin to learn how to be in the direct experience of your life in your heart and your mind. To see you can find your way through that. And so, there are three factors.

The first is called right effort. And here what it means is make the effort for the right things, the helpful things. And the wording of it, that the Buddha gave is do the things that are skillful, and avoid the things which are unskillful. And skillful is a wonderful word. And this literally kind of what the word means it's kind of skill of a craftsperson is the kind of skill that Buddha the word the Buddha used for skill. So we're become a craftsperson of our own lives, our own hearts. So do the things which are skillful, but skillful for the purpose of ending suffering, skillful for bringing happiness and well being into this world. And so, look at your mind, look at how you think, look at what you believe. Look at what you spend your time doing in your heart, your mind, your mood, your attitude. And is are you doing things which are helpful and skillful, or you're doing things which are unskillful. I look at my mind all the time. And I've learned to recognize when I have a thought train, which is not helpful for anyone, and I can pretty easily let go of it now. Not today needed. There was a time where I would spend hours on a thought train, and not even know I was. But if those hours were spent in a thought train, which was painful, was suffering, producing, I could get depressed, I could get grumpy, I could get hostile, all kinds of things, possible, kind of insidious ways of kind of that those thoughts of affecting my mood, my attitudes and my perception of the world. So we want to learn the ability to look deeply into what we're actually doing in the mind, what's going on, what are the choices the mind is making. And if the mind is making choices for ourselves, which are not helpful, and you can feel that, then you would take your hand off the hot stove, he's kind of like, I don't need to do that. In order to help us with that, we have the cultivation of mindfulness. So this is where we get really modern hypermodern. You know, and I say a little bit carefully because I'm quite impressed by how deeply and carefully modern psychology psychologists, clinical clinicians, scientists, are studying mindfulness and all the different aspects of it. And I'm beginning to feel like a little bit like the poor cousin. You know, who kind of doesn't really understand mindfulness anymore? You know, I kind of, you know, I, there was a time when I was caught, there was a time when I was kind of like, you know, there, you know, one of the experts, you know, really

understood well, and it's not like I forgotten what I knew. But the amount of research and understanding is raised ahead of you know, me. And so, you know, you can feel a bit sorry for me, and you know that. So, I'm quite happy with, you know, what's happening in our society. And you know, so it's really, it's hypermodern mindfulness is there nice. And so then cultivating mindfulness, which is kind of the heart of what we do here. And but what Buddhism also does, which is not so common in the secular mindfulness world, is the eighth step in the Eightfold Path. And that's right concentration. And that's developing our capacity for focus. But more than just focus, the ability to have a very stable, and still mind, to be so focused, so mindful, so present for our experience. And so aware of what's skillful and unskillful, in our minds, that we slowly begin to relax or let go of the forces of agitation, the forces of anxiety, the forces of craving, in the mind. So that force the distractions, quiet down and quiet down. It's kind of like what the exact analogy is a settling of mud in a forest, a pool. And then the pool gets really clear if you don't stare it up anymore. So in that way, the concentration factor is that which settles all the distractions of the mind, agitation is of the mind. And the reason for that is that, then mindfulness can really do its work because it's, it can see clearly and so, in Buddhism, the mindfulness and concentration are two part two partners, they're yoked together on the Eightfold Path.

So the Eightfold Path are an integrated set of practices that are meant to encompass I think all of our lives. And it's possible to look at whatever situation we're in in our life, personal life and social life, and see it through the framework or the Four Noble Truths. And see it through the framework of these practices that we can engage with, we can kind of ask ourselves, you know, is this kind is it not kind, is it compassionate is not compassionate? Is it causing harm? Is it not causing harm? Is it skillful, is it not skillful? And we can use these as questions to go into our, how we live, and what we do. So we become our own teachers. in discovering wisdom, in discovering virtue, and discovering how to cultivate our minds, it can be done. And doing that, then we come we create the conditions that make possible the third of the Four Noble Truths, which is that the language of the Buddha was very definitive. The ending the destruction, the cessation, the bringing to an end fully of suffering. It's kind of a powerful, the words really mean there's no equivocating in the language of the Buddha, that it's possible. It is possible, he said somewhere, if it wasn't possible, I wouldn't teach it. It is possible to do this deep inner world inner world work and find a heart and a mind that's not only deeply in peace for itself, but hopefully one that contributes to peace and well being for the world. We live in the full path of the Buddha 2500 years old. Like I shouldn't say this, but I'll say it anyway. It's like a good wine because better with age.

So thank you all.