

Wisdom and Meditation on the Eight Fold Path

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Of these Four Noble Truths is the Eightfold Path, sometimes called the Noble Eightfold Path. I didn't really talk about that last time, so I'd like to talk about it today. Thinking about the Eightfold Path today, I had a sense or relationship to it as if it's a living and breathing thing. As such, my relationship to it has changed over years, and my understanding has changed over years, and I will probably continue to do that. I was thinking that maybe I see it this way as a living, breathing thing because where the Eightfold Path is found is in each of us. We are living and breathing, and so it's really inseparable from us.

The idea in Buddhism is that the Eightfold Path expresses who we are when we're liberated and free. The Eightfold Path is a path for those people who would like to be liberated. They walk that path by how they are, the transformation inside, how we engage with ourselves and the world in a different way. So it's intimately related to who we are. If you don't listen so much to this talk about the Eightfold Path as if it's the Eightfold Path out there, and you could have a debate with it, or argue with it, or like it or not like it, you're welcome to do that if you want. But that's not the spirit in which I'm giving this talk.

The spirit is, my hope is that then, if I do a decent job, that you will maybe see it in yourself. That it lives in you as well. It's not something you have to import, but rather something you can recognize. The analogy for this Eightfold Path that I am quite fond of is a story that the Buddha tells. It's kind of, it is an allegory. He tells a kind of mythic allegory.

He says that back in the ancient world, there was, or at some point, there was a woodsman who would go into the woods, I guess, regularly. One day this woodsman came across little traces of an ancient road that had been thoroughly grown over in the woods, in the jungle. He was able to trace, to follow the traces of that road deep into the jungle, where he found an ancient capital, a palace that had been also overgrown. Maybe the way that they find, you

know, whole cities in the Yucatán or in Central America left over from the Aztecs. So then he went back to the monarchs of the realm and said, "Look, there's a road going into an ancient capital." The monarchs came to look, and they saw it, and they cleared it all out, and followed the road all the way to this wonderful palace, a capital in the heart of the jungle, and cleared it out, and went to live there, and everyone is happy ever after and now.

What I like about this story is that it's an allegory for the Buddha being the woods person, who found out traces of the ancient path. Then the Buddha goes and finds the royalty, the monarchs, to tell them about this. And guess who the royalty is? It's us, you know. People like us. It's our job to find it in ourselves, and to clear out the debris, or the overgrown vines and bushes, whatever that's covering it over so we can find this path in ourselves.

I take this to be a very respectful orientation towards each of us, that there's a sense of dignity and worth, nobility. I don't know if you like the idea of royalty that is there, that this is not a diminishing or seeing human beings as being not so important. It's actually, the whole idea of the Eightfold Path is because we're important, we're valuable or worthy, and we can really kind of re-inhabit something that all too easily gets covered over by too much screen time or other things. The Eightfold Path, there are eight sets of practices that can be seen as kind of the core sets of practices that we can do in Buddhism. These sets of practices are divided into three groupings. The three groupings are called the three trainings.

Buddhism has a lot to do with training. It's not so much about understanding. Learning is certainly an important part of it, but the primary emphasis in this early tradition is on practising. I was just reading essays by people who are training to be Buddhist teachers, and they were talking about how they're continuing to practice, and that's where the primary learning they're having, how the primary discovery and understanding of Buddhism comes from just being on retreat, doing meditation, doing their training. In this way, we're engaging in something, that we're involving ourselves in something that's more holistic than simply learning ideas, and so bring ourselves into it. So three trainings in which we bring ourselves into it and allow ourselves to be transformed.

These trainings are in ethics, in meditation, and in wisdom. Oftentimes it's said that the path begins with ethics, meaning the path begins by how we live in our social life, in our life, in the world that we live. We get in line, we get organized in our lived life, so our lived life doesn't cause harm. Not only that, but more than that, our lived life is one that brings benefit to the world, and the idea of our relationship to others. Relationship to the world lies in the traditional beginning of the path. Meditation is what many people associate Buddhism with, and then wisdom, also a Buddhism is often associated with.

But the wisdom, again, is not knowledge, like I get a lot of wisdom the more books I read, but rather is to have a certain kind of learning how to engage or developing a skill of the mind that the mind can discern or have insight into wisdom here and now. We see it now for ourselves. We don't carry it with us. We can be able to rediscover it in any situation we are in. There it is now. I understand.

So the three trainings today, what I am going to do is talk about first, the third training, the training in wisdom, and then the training in meditation, and maybe we'll leave the first one in ethics for next week, because it is a lot to go through in a short time, and also to give some emphasis on these. Now, the way that the Eightfold Path is laid out, the first two practices have to do with wisdom, the next three are the ethics, and the next three are the meditation. That's a different order than the three trainings, which is ethics, meditation, wisdom. This is wisdom, ethics, meditation. Many people have puzzled over why this is the case. So what I'll talk about today is the first set and the last set.

One of the reasons why it starts with the wisdom aspects is that wisdom is what we attain, what we acquire from doing the practice. Once we acquire a certain kind of penetrating or transformative wisdom, an ability to see, you can't live your life the same anymore, you will be changed. You'll live a different way, and you'll engage in meditation in a different way. So we start with wisdom, how we see, how we understand, so that our actions and our meditation, our minds, can change in a deep way, can move in the right direction. How do you get to that wisdom? First by doing ethics first, and meditation first.

This seems like a circular kind of chicken and egg thing. It's odd how it works. But it's not, because the traditional Eightfold Path is meant to be equally applicable to people who are beginning practice and people who've already been transformed by it. To be able to equally relate to it, the people who are transformed by it have a new insight, have a new way of seeing the world. That's where it all begins for them. Something has been awoken in them. That new vision of the world, new way of viewing the world, is the foundation for everything that follows: their ethics and their meditation.

So that schema is then applied to people who are beginners as well. That may be, you know, understand something about what the Buddha is teaching. Once you understand the basic, then it makes a whole bunch of sense to engage with the ethical part and to engage in the meditation part. So we start the path. The first of the Eightfold steps is called right view. Right view, like in English, the word view in ancient Pāli, in ancient Buddhist language, as with the English word view, has two meanings.

It means the view that you see, but it also means the opinions you carry: that's my view,

that's my opinion, or my understanding, or my philosophy, or something like that. It turns out that in ancient India the same word was used for both as well. This is very evocative, the idea that it has both its meanings to see and how we understand, because what we're really looking for in Buddhism is how to see. So we begin maybe with some understanding. But it's supposed to move into some personal, direct seeing we have for ourselves. So what do we see? What can we see?

What is it to be seen? What is a transformative seeing that the Buddha was pointing towards? There are a number of ways, many ways in which this can be understood. It's like maybe different angles from the same thing, or different sides of the diamond or something like that. So you'll hear different teachers and even me talk at different times about what this right view is. But in shorthand, it's the view, it's the orientation, the way of seeing that helps us to become free of suffering, liberate us from suffering.

This lays at the heart of what the Buddha was teaching: the possibility that the forces of suffering inside of us, a force inside of us of becoming contracted, being afraid, being caught up in greed, compulsivity, addiction, forces inside of us of being caught up in resentment and anger and hatefulness and such things, that these actually can be brought to an end. They can be brought to rest. They can be pacified. They can be settled. They can be removed. It's a remarkable possibility.

It's not like a great cosmic understanding of the universe, but it is certainly a great cosmic event that a human being has managed to resolve for themselves the kind of existential challenges of the heart that people in all ages, men all down through the ages, have been struggling with, and to really resolve that and be able to have a profound sense of peace in one's heart is a remarkable accomplishment. So right view is that which helps us to see in order to settle the heart, in order to free the heart of its suffering. What is it that we can see? This relates to the teachings last week of the Four Noble Truths. I said last week, the Four Noble Truth itself has different ways, different understandings. Certainly one of the aspects of the right view is to have the clear understanding or the clear experience that it is possible to have a peaceful heart or peaceful mind, to really see or understand the difference between a mind which is caught up in afflictive tendencies, caught up in tendencies which are harmful for ourselves and for others, and to experience for oneself a mind that doesn't have that.

That, the Buddha said, is revolutionary. Some, probably most of us, have had experiences maybe by accident of, you know, that we're really peaceful and happy in, you know, nothing's really troubling us. I think the Buddha suggests pay attention to that, and appreciate that this is a possibility, appreciate that this is a better way of living and being than being caught up

again and again and again in all the preoccupations, all the fears, all the ambitions, all the expectations and needs, and that human beings can get caught up in. Pay attention to that, and see that as a possibility, and be inspired by that: Wow, this is possible. It's possible to live this peacefully, or live this openly, or at ease, or settled, or at home with oneself, or at home in the world. Whoa, that's quite something.

Another with right view is to see that we thoroughly live in a world where things are always changing, sometimes changing for the worse, sometimes changing for the better, but things are always in a flux, always changing and moving in a certain kind of way. This idea of meditating and sitting still in meditation, paradoxically, and one of the purposes of it, we sit still to see how everything is moving, to see how everything is changing moment by moment, like sitting in the middle of the stream of life. There's something about really seeing and feeling the stream of change, of life moving and flowing, which, for the Buddha, was liberating, was freeing. We can maybe understand it that if you go, you're sitting at the River of Life watching it nicely go by you, and then you decide you want a piece of it, and so you take a bucket into the river and fill it with water, and go back to the village with a bucket. Look, I have the River of Life. You don't. Now you have a bucket of water, and you can't grab. You can't hold on to the river of life. As soon as you grab it, you've lost it.

So there's something about really, in a meditative way, seeing how, or another way, sometimes, if you know, human existence exists, someone dies. Things change in a radical way. That really shows people how much they were clinging to things and shows them, requires them almost to let go. So to change, to see change in such a way that change helps us to release the grip in the mind, the grip in the heart that we have. That's another aspect of right view. A third aspect of right view is the understanding that what we do is consequential.

What we do with our actions, what we do with our words, and what we do with our minds, our thoughts and beliefs—these are not inconsequential. Even if they go on in the privacy of your own mind, all these things carry with them momentum. All these things carry with them, are part of the conditioning aspect that conditions or shapes or forms the ongoing shape of our hearts and minds, that there's nothing, you know, everything conditions what follows. Everything shapes it in some way. So if you know, if you leave here today and if you can say you came on the train and you just miss the train when you get to the train station, so that happens. Trains are going by all the time, and most trains that go by the Redwood City train station, I have no thought about you. The train stop doesn't think about you and your timing, and the train doesn't think about it. It's just like the train station's completely free and liberated of your preoccupations.

When you show up with your, you know, "Oh look, the train left." Okay, that's it. That's nice. I guess that's, or it's unfortunate. Or it can be, "Gee, Gil Franz, they talk too long, and it's his fault that I missed the train, and you know this Buddhist. Be more mindful of the time." And you're just fuming about, you know, the Buddhist concept of time and all this stuff. Finally the next train comes by, but you've had a lot of time to be fuming, and so you, the train doors open, and you're still kind of preoccupied and caught up, and you're going to show the world something, and you kind of step—it's kind of high on the train—and you step up, and you miss it, and you fall to the ground, and terrible things happen. Maybe you're embarrassed.

So on the missing of that step, is it because of Gil Frank speaking too much? Or is it because you spent forty-five minutes at the train station with an attitude of fuming and being caught up and that no one else sees it? Everyone sees you sitting there quietly with your eyes closed. But inside, it's like you're doing all this mental proliferation, and it's so shaped how you were and how you saw the world and yourself and what you're doing that you didn't have presence of mind to really notice where the step is in the train, how you were thinking shaped how you went into the next activity. So I don't know if that was a good example, but I hope it's good enough. You can fill in all the blanks for all the different ways that our actions are consequential. They make a difference.

This is both the good news and the bad news of Buddhism. The bad news is that if you're not careful with what you say, do, and think, the consequences are unfortunate for yourself and maybe for others as well. But if you are careful, then the consequences can be better for yourself and for others. The reason why this is so important as Right View in this Eightfold Path is that because it's good news, it means that we can start doing the things that have created the right conditions, the better conditions, the better consequences for us, to help us move along the path towards freedom. So Buddhist practice, then, is to engage, like the Eightfold Path, as creating better conditions for it to really grow and develop in this movement towards freedom and wisdom and compassion.

So you come to a train station, you miss your train, you sit down on the bench, you see, you think about this Eightfold Path. "Well, I am irritated. I'm upset, okay? But that's okay. Let's look at it, right view. This is not really healthy for me to fume about being late. Trains likely come back because of that. So let me look at it, maybe this is a good time to meditate, maybe a good time to calm down and see what's going on." So I do that for my forty-five minutes, and the next train comes. When the train comes, it's, "Well, that's a beautiful, silver shining thing. And it came in so slowly. It just stopped right in front of me. Well, this amazing doors open. This, you know, this is pretty cool. I mean, this just everything seems so sparkle and

alive and still.” You step up into the train, and you notice the people who are there, and you just delight in seeing people on the train, and you find a nice seat, and you're really there to experience the whole thing.

So applying the Eightfold Path creates a very different train ride for this life of ours than if we, you know, can do some of the other unfortunate things that human people do. So right view is the first of the Eightfold Path. What's the orientation? What's the understanding? What's the perspective that we use? The perspective is based on the idea, yes, it is possible to live a life that we lessen suffering, bring suffering to an end. That's the view for that, the orientation towards that.

The second factor in the Eightfold Path, the second aspect of wisdom, nowadays I like to call right attitude. Sometimes it's called right intention, but I like right attitude, because an attitude is something you can bring with you to everything you do, no matter what other intentions you have, purposes you have, what you're doing in your life. The attitude with which we do it can contain these three qualities. It can have the attitude of non-harming, not to harm, and the word is related to the word some of you know, the Indian word *ahimsā*. There's a little different prefix, but it means the same thing, *vihiṃsā*. So the attitude of being non-harming in whatever you do, if that's all we do for our life, boy, what a different world we would live in.

The other is to do an attitude of kindness or friendliness to everything that we do, within everything we do. The third, which is a little bit maybe hard to appreciate the depth of its value, is an attitude of renunciation. So what does that mean? I think I'd like to just say it's an attitude of not being attached to whatever we're doing or whatever we're having, to not grip on to things, not hold on, but to appreciate that. There's something very wonderful about having an open, relaxed hand. The hand that's opened and relaxed is available to the world in many different ways than the hand that's knotted up in a fist.

So the same is true for the mind. In the attitude, let's go through whatever we're going to do, and we might even do it with great passion, the attitude of not gripping on to anything, not holding or not being attached. So that's right attitude to whatever we're doing, whatever we think is important to do. Can we do it with those three attitudes? Not to cause any harm, to do it in a kind, friendly way, and to not grip on to it.

So then we have Right Meditation, the last three steps of the Eightfold Path. The first one, it took me a long time to come around to translate it this way, because it's slow. It's an example, this living, breathing thing that keeps changing. But now I like to translate it as Right Effort. I used to think of it as right effort, but effort implies, in my mind, more the idea of the degree

of effort we make, you know, I have to really strive or push or something or be relaxed. But endeavor has more to do with what we're doing, or the purpose we're doing, the endeavor that we're engaged in.

It means the kind of activity we're doing and the purpose of it. The right endeavor is to find in a non—in the kind of, you know, you may informally on the streets of Redwood City as "Don't make it worse. Make it better." Whatever you're doing, don't make it worse. Make it better a little bit. More formally, how it's worded: If you are making it worse, stop. If you're not yet making it worse, don't start. If you are making it better, keep doing it. If you are not yet making it better, start.

This idea, this very simple kind of idea, is that you have some sense of what is better and worse. There is an evaluation. There is a vision, a view, a perspective in Buddhism that we would have some clear sense of what is better and what is worse. Sitting on the train bench, having missed the train, have some sense that you make it worse if you spend the whole forty-five minutes fuming about being late, you make it better by sitting there and meditating, for example, and to see that which is beneficial. It's not any different than stepping on a thorn. What is better here, to keep walking with a thorn in the soles of my feet, or pulling it out? It's better to pull it out.

So to have that orientation: Where is the harm done? Where is the lack of harm done, the improvement done? This is a very deep part of the Buddhist tradition, this early Buddhist tradition, the idea of real, of non-harming, the idea of not causing harm, not for oneself and for others. Orienting ourselves in life really around this perspective of harm and not harm, being harmless. Really paying attention to this in a careful way. Now, the classic language, Buddhism, is not about to make it worse or make it better, but uses the word, is it skillful or unskillful? The word sometimes translated into English as wholesome or unwholesome, and that has a little different connotations than worse or better, which is so vague.

What does that mean? Skillful means that is it helpful? Is it skillful for a particular purpose? Is it helpful for the purposes of freedom from suffering? Is it a skill we're developing? A skill is something you have to do over and over and over again, and so are we developing the skill set? Are we becoming skillful in this path towards freedom?

If it's unskillful, and you're doing it, stop doing it. If you're not doing anything unskillful, don't start. If it is skillful, keep doing it. If you haven't started doing something skillful, do something skillful. So again, sitting on that bench waiting for the next train, what is a skillful thing to do? What is the wholesome thing to do? What's the helpful thing to do? It's to let go of the fuming, the anger, the irritation. It's to maybe to find a very different mindset, to relax,

to settle, to unwind, to do something different that's skillful, wholesome, and moves you in the direction of peace, moving toward freedom. Not for that, only for that moment, but you're developing a skill. It's consequential what you're doing. You're developing yourself, growing.

It could be that you come to a meeting every Sunday for the next year. So for the next fifty-two weeks, and every time you just missed the train somehow or other, that's what happens. So you have fifty-two forty-five minute periods at the train station, and what you did was every time you went there, you did, let's say, you practiced loving kindness to all the other people at the train station, and you hated it. Didn't really like doing loving kindness for the first ten weeks. The next ten weeks, you were kind of OK with it. The next ten weeks, you kind of get a sense of what this loving kindness practice is. The next ten weeks, you kind of like, "Wow, this is actually quite nice, and I go on the train and I'm friendly." Then the last twelve weeks, like, "Well, this is like the best thing going." A year from now, that time would have just passed quickly, and you'd be so glad you did it. From looking from today out onto the next year, that's like you're here sitting there on the bench today, having missed the train, like, "Why should I do that? That's crazy." But you can develop it. You can grow and do the skillful thing.

Then there's right mindfulness, which is the seventh of the Eightfold Path factors, which, for now, as I just mentioned, very kind of simplistically, is cultivating the ability to be in the present moment. So we can really study what's going on. We can really see clearly what's going on here. We can understand a lot about life by not being in the present moment. But we can't really understand ourselves in a deep way unless we're really able to stay here, and really see without skirting away from what's happening moment by moment. That really allows us to see, have right view, allows us to have right attitude, allows us to have this right endeavoring. Is to really connect to what's happening here. For no other reason, that's where we see. We have choice, a choice to act differently here in the moment.

Then we come to the last of the Eightfold Path factors, which is right *samādhi*, often translated into English as right concentration. The word *samādhi* probably shouldn't be translated into English as concentration if we understand that to mean a singular, laser-like focus of the mind. The Indian word has very strong connotations of meaning, unification, becoming collected. I like the word integrated. *Samādhi* is a practice of integration, of integrating all of who we are so we all, because we become whole. We're not divided against each other, or divided in ourselves. We're not ignorant or blind to our aspects of ourselves, that all of ourselves comes together in harmony.

To be skillful, to have the right attitude, all of us come together in the service of this right view, and this idea of becoming whole for this purpose. Being integrated is a function of simplicity. It really helps with this process of opening and integrating and holding together. It's a beautiful thing to include all of ourselves. No part left out, all of us can be included in this path and the Eightfold Path. These eight sets of practices are all together. Each of them is a contribution to this process of integration, the fact that there are eight different things.

Some people might complain, "It's a lot of stuff to do. These Buddhists keep me busy." But on the other hand, we are multifaceted, multi-dimensional human beings, and these Eightfold Path, these eight sets of practices speak to all these different dimensions of who we are, different times, different ones of them are relevant. In doing them, that is, they all become whole. They all contribute to the whole. The symbol for that whole in ancient India is a wheel, a wheel which is well constructed, well rounded, it will roll beautifully and just keep rolling. If the momentum is there, nothing stops it.

So the idea that there's a dynamism, a dynamic aspect, this amazing path, when we become whole and live with it, that we begin to roll in our lives, spin our lives without any kinks, without any, as you know, oscillations, that there's a dynamism, and freedom and peacefulness that's represented by the still centre of the circle at the hub, the peaceful centre. So may you discover your peaceful centre of the wheel that you are, and may you set your wheel free so it can roll through this world freely, peacefully, for the health, the welfare, and well-being of all the people you encounter. May the Eightfold Path be for the benefit of beings. So thank you. And since we have the tea and we have a few minutes before the end, if you wouldn't mind turning to one or two people near you and just say hello, and maybe there's one little thing you'd like to say in response to this talk today.