

Introduction to Buddhism Part 4: The Noble Eightfold Path

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So good evening, everyone. And probably should be all but louder. Let's see. Is that loud enough now? Not still not loud enough. I think that the Let's see. That's probably that's good.

So since beginning of the year, I've been giving an Introduction to Buddhism series of Dharma talks, and this is the fourth one in the series. And today, I want to talk about the Eightfold Path, the Noble Eightfold Path. This is the set of practices that are probably most associated with Buddhism: Theravāda Buddhism, early Buddhism. And there are eight sets of practices, and so they're called together. They comprise something called the path, the *magga*, and sometimes are called the noble eightfold path.

And this word noble is a very powerful word in Buddhism, and it refers to not the nobility of the eightfold path, but the association of the eightfold path with noble people. It's the eightfold path of the noble ones or the noble one. And when a person becomes awakened, when they've somehow been liberated from greed, hate, and delusion, liberated from their attachments, then they have become a noble person. And it's understood to be a transformation that it bestows on a person a certain kind of nobility, a certain kind of a dignity or value that is held up in great esteem in Buddhism. Not to just esteem people, but to really recognize the tremendous benefit and value of being someone who has uprooted some of the negative forces that can affect the mind and the heart as we live here. And it's all too easy to go round the world around our life with all kinds of negative influences getting the upper hand of us.

You know, it's not I want to be petty exactly, but it's certainly easy to end up in rush hour traffic and start getting irritated and being annoyed and impatient. And that would be considered a kind of negative, kind of unwholesome kind of quality. Living in it, that impatience and irritation would be considered a form of suffering oneself. You know, you hurt, you hurt

yourself if you do that. And greed is considered to be a kind of negative thing because it hurts the person who is greedy, and so it goes on and on. Hatred hurts the person who is hateful.

And so the idea to really, it's possible to change in a sense, to make a dramatic language, a change of personality, change our character, or change the underlying operating system of what motivates us and moves us through the world. So we don't have to be stuck with the usual ways of being irritated or angry or resentful or annoyed, or just kind of judging, critical of, judgmental of things in a kind of harsh way, or to be annoyed or angry, or to be filled with greed and desire and craving and wanting and addiction. And those can be all small things, and they can be huge, monumental things. Some of them are deadly for oneself and for other people, tremendous forces in our lives, in our society. Most of what we probably—the newspapers would go out of business if people stopped acting in negative ways. That's kind of with a part and parcel of most news on the front page just because someone was operating under greed, hate, and delusion.

And to uproot that really is a radical transformation and change. And so it's called noble—a noble person to retain that. And it points to the idea that what Buddhism is looking for is, in fact, a personal change. It's not a message of just simply accept your life as it is, relax, chill a bit, you know, just kind of like you who just kind of live in a kind of steady, in an intentional way, and just be cool with everything. That would be, I think, a characteristic, or would be a kind of diminishment of the full potential of what this religion is about, which is a kind of involves a transformation, a change, to really become a different person in the process of doing it.

And so this eightfold path is a path to that change, and it's also the path to being that change. And what I mean by that can be explained by there are three different levels of the eightfold path, three different phases. The first one would be that someone who is not a noble person, someone who has not been transformed, hears about the possibility of somehow else suffering less, maybe even coming to the end of their suffering. They have some idea that Buddhism offers a set of practices and teachings that really will help their life. And so, for every reason, they kind of give the tradition a bit a benefit of the doubt, and they try out the practices. Many people here in the West will start off with a Buddhist practice by doing meditation.

In other cultures, other factors of the eightfold path are emphasized. Often times, it's the ethical pieces of the eightfold path that people start doing first, and then later they get around to do meditation. There was an inspiring story that an event that I had where many years ago, almost twenty-five, thirty years ago, I was teaching a class on Buddhism to everyone. There

was a Buddhist, and there was one woman who, you know, was relatively new to the group. And I asked her one day if she meditated, and she said something that really struck me. I was kind of surprised. She said, not yet ready and worthy to meditate. I'm preparing myself so that I'm worthy of meditation itself, and acting like what you have to prepare yourself. You know, make yourself worthy, and I don't go start you now. It's a great thing. Just begin.

And so she was kind of cleaning up her ethical life, making sure she lived in a wise, a kind, ethical way, and be stabilized in that, be steady in that, so that then she was kind of ready to do this meditation path. And whether that's needed to do it, that sequence, I don't know. Maybe for her it was, but that's one traditional way to do it. And I was really inspired by the faith, dedication, and the seriousness she gave to the path of practice that she would actually try to clean up her ethics before she would take it into her meditation class. And now many people know us, they do the other way around. They do meditation, and through meditation they discover in themselves a different way of wanting to live.

And then in that different way of living, then they become interested in the ethical teachings of the Buddha, not because ethics are obligatory, but because the ethical path now represents the inner integrity, the inner goodness that we're discovering. And it's a way we want to live because it seems like the sanest way to live. So someone comes to whatever reason they come to Buddhism, and they are interested in trying it out. And some people will hear, "Well, I try out the eightfold path, these eight sets of practices." If so, then it's a path to liberation. A person practises them to some point, and they recognize in themselves the eightfold path. They recognize in themselves something about what these eight practices are about.

So that they don't know—no longer something you're importing from the outside, something you have to do and learn and everything, but rather you recognize, "Oh, that's really at the core of who I am. That's really inside." Living that way by eightfold path, that really is kind of a—I recognize myself in them, or they recognize something deep inside of me corresponds to these eight sets of practices. Not perfectly, but there's something that corresponds. So they are no longer something outside, but they become inside of ourselves. Then, as a person, then starts fleshing this out, filling it out for themselves, taking what they found inside and expanding it, becoming more whole in it, integrating into their whole being, their whole life. Then at some point they come to the third stage, a phase of the eightfold path, and they become the eightfold path.

So first we import it, then we recognize it in ourselves, and then we become it—the eightfold path. And it's when we become the eightfold path that the more technical, noble eightfold path has been realized, you become a noble person. And the second phase, there is an idea

that there's ordinary people, and then there's two stages of maturation. In the eightfold path, it is recognized from the ancient times, and it's the most common way the Buddha talked about spiritual maturation was through these two stages. So first is an ordinary person, and then the second stage the person is called a trainee, someone who's training, a *sekha*, and then at the third stage is called a *asekha*, a non-trainee. Usually they say someone who's beyond training, someone who no longer needs to train because they become the Eightfold Path.

And so in this idea that when we recognize the Eightfold Path in ourselves, then we become a trainee. That's, in a kind of very technical language, say it that way. So you don't get discouraged in a technical sense. A person begins their Buddhist practice when they recognize the truths of Buddhism are in themselves, "Oh, why didn't you know it's there? So I've always been there, but I didn't know it. And now I know what it is for myself." And when you know it for yourself, rather than from a book or from a Dharma talk, then you know what you are working with, you know what it's about, and then you can begin actually doing because you really know now. You can do the training, start doing the training in some more embodied or integral way.

And so three phases. And you see a little bit of this in the word, that their word is used as a kind of prefix before each of the Noble Eightfold Path factors. Each of them is called—the Pāli word is *sammā*, and usually it's translated as right. And so the first of the eightfold path is called right view, *sammā-diṭṭhi*. And then using the English word right is rather unsatisfactory for a good number of people in the West who don't want to be right and wrong. They want to be. And so some people, some Buddhist teachers now, rather than saying right, will say wise—wise view, wise action, all these things.

But the word *sammā* can mean right in the sense of proper, or what's good, what's proper, what works. It's also a little bit of a powerful word, and it could also mean complete. So it's having a complete view, having the complete ethics. Having the complete meditation, having—it's complete, so complete has a very different feeling than right. It could also mean something like coming together, to unify, especially in the Sanskrit version of the word. And so to come together, to unify. It's the unified practices. It's the practices as they work together to create a whole of being in touch with something that has great value inside of ourselves.

So we're looking to take these eight practices and make ourselves whole, make ourselves complete, make ourselves proper in a certain way. And so then we either engage in the practices, or we recognize themselves, and we develop them within us. So these eight sets of practices. The first one is called right view, the kind of maybe you could say the right per-

spective. The second one is right attitude. The third is right speech. The fourth is right action. Then right—it's usually said in English right livelihood, but that's a little confusing. I'll say more about that—right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

And right view, when you're importing it in the beginning, is just what you learn, perspective you learn to bring to your practice. When you've come to the next level, when you recognize it in yourself, then it becomes not imported, but something you really see in yourself, really understand for yourself personally. Direct experience. And what we can do—a number of things we can know deeply. One of them is that we can know that if you cling to something, if you really hold on tight and are attached, that you will suffer. There's no way around it, partly because clinging itself is a kind of suffering.

And you know, you can have, feel that when the clinging is really intense, really holding on to something, really wanting it. Or you can see it in someone else. They hold on to something, and it's, you know, a challenge for everyone else. This is suffering. You can see it in them. And so this idea of really knowing for yourself, seeing for yourself that if you hold on tight to something, you are craving something, or you're resisting it really hard, how that hurts. It's, you know, certainly valuable to see. More valuable is to experience for yourself what it's like to release the clinging, to really let go of it, and to experience the peace that comes when we are no longer holding on tight.

And I think that's one of the reasons some people like meditation. In ordinary life, we go around and we're kind of working ourselves up or busy doing all kinds of things, and there can be a lot of preoccupation, a lot of contraction, a lot of worry, a lot of anxiety, a lot of exhaustion, and constant activity of desiring or wanting or protecting or hiding or angry or something. And meditation—to have these stressful states relax and quiet down for some people is a revelation. There is another way to have this relaxation, this letting go happen in a very dramatic way. So you really recognize, "This is really at the heart of who I want to be or who I am, to be free in this way, and have this deep inner kind of peace," and to know that for yourself, and know that this is possible, is to have right view: "Oh, I can know this now, and I want to."

This is not this way in which I am no longer so contracted, so afraid, so angry, so greedy, so consumed with my thoughts and ideas in past and future. But since all this has been cleared away, the heart's been kind of emptied of all this extra negativity. And lo and behold, I have a good heart in there. Lo and behold, there's some goodness or peace. Or there's something that feels like it is healthy, something deep inside that feels that it has integrity or authenticity, or it has at-homeness. Then we've kind of come home to ourselves in some deep way,

and to have experienced something like this. Maybe initially it's, you know, just a hint of it: "Well, this is good. This feels right. This is where I want to live. This is how I want to have my life, or what I want be the centre of my life."

I don't want to have greed, desire, fear, preoccupation, distracted mind be my, you know, where I take up residence and where I live my life. I want to take up residence in this settled heart where I can feel at home in something like that. And so to be changed enough by the practice to taste this possibility inside of oneself. Then we have, then the trainee has a right view because they know something for themselves. And probably most of you, if you've meditated for any length of time, have touched something. Otherwise, you wouldn't keep meditating—something that is of value. Something about something shifted for you or settled for you. You're open for you that this is good, this is great. So now you know something. You know there's something you want to, something inside of you. You recognize something.

And so then you're interested in, "How do you fill this out? How do you continue? How do you develop this further?" Well, it happens. It helps if you have the right attitude. And so to recognize that some attitudes are not helpful, and some attitudes are helpful to have, and we train ourselves to kind of cultivate the attitudes which are useful. The attitudes of ill will, of aversion, of being kind of mean and annoyed with everyone else or oneself, is not an attitude that is conducive towards this right view, towards this freedom or this peace that we can experience.

The attitude of wanting sensual pleasures—just always want to be comfortable and pleasures and have just pleasant experiences and lots of sex and whatever it might be. None of those things are wrong. But to be consumed by those things—actually, if you have it in touch with some sense of deep inner well-being, you can actually feel that the pursuit of sensual pleasure actually clouds it over. You can lose touch with something that's better than sensual pleasures. The pursuit of them, at least the craving for them, and a meanness, attitude of meanness also doesn't work as a way of kind of giving voice or giving space for this new way of living.

So what attitudes are useful? And one of them is attitudes of kindness. Another is attitudes of compassion and non-harming. Another one which is not so popular automatically is an attitude of letting go, of renunciation. But once you come to know for yourself what it's like to let go of stressful states of mind, then you understand how good it is to let go, not as a way of diminishing ourselves and ending up with less. There's a way of—when you know the Eightfold Path in yourself, then letting go is actually enhancing of oneself, almost like we get

bigger by letting go in the right way. If the goodness inside of you is known, and what you're doing is letting go into that goodness, it just grows.

So that understanding how certain attitudes that we carry with us—we walk around with certain attitudes, and that whatever we're doing are sometimes influenced by the attitude, the lens of attitude that we have. Part of the eightfold path is to begin seeing if we can shift our attitudes about things, shift towards kindness, towards non-harming, shift towards letting go rather than wanting more. Then we also begin understanding that how we speak is actually quite important. Most people speak more than they steal or kill. We do a lot of talking, and talking turns out to be very influential. It has a big impact on ourselves and a big impact on the world around us. And how we speak affects whether we're in touch with this beautiful place inside and come from it, or whether we obscure it and hide it.

So if we talk in mean ways, we obscure the goodness inside. We lose touch with it. If we talk the truth, we reveal it. If we talk lies, we obscure it and lose the connection to it. If we talk in support of kind ways to other people, it tends to encourage and really come from that place inside. That goodness inside can grow. If we talk in mean ways to people, then it closes down. And so this idea of being careful with our speech—not necessarily because we're too moralistic to do so. But for a trainee who knows something and recognizes something in themselves, right speech has a lot to do with living in integrity or living in harmony with this. What we know that we want to support inside of ourselves. We want to enhance it and grow it, develop it.

And then there's right action, which is explained as not killing, not stealing, and not engaging in sexual misconduct. And again, it's possible to look at those as being ethical in nature. But if you say it's ethical to do those things, many people see them as something almost external rules that now you have to follow. And for the trainee, it's not a rule, but rather, it's a recognition that if you do those things—kill, steal, or engage in intentional causing harm through your sexuality—that's one of these things. These are things which obscure and close down the connection we have to this inner peace, well-being, what we've recognized. And so then it becomes kind of natural to not do those things. If what we want to do is come from this place of goodness inside, and if we want to grow it, then the eightfold path and right action is the way to do it.

Right Livelihood—the fifth factor of the eightfold path—is more like the right way of life. In English, many people think of livelihood as their work, their career, how they make money. And then when we retire, someone doesn't have a livelihood any more. Or if you're a student, you have to worry about livelihood because you know you haven't gotten round to it yet.

And rather, it's the right way of living in the world, kind of general way in which we live our life. So someone who's retired has a way of living, how they participate in the world and consume and produce, and, you know, do what they do. And a student also has a livelihood, a livelihood, the way of life of a student. And so for people, that's kind of like a big part of our life as to how we live. So we want to live in a way that's in harmony with this possibility of freedom, inner freedom that we can have.

Again, for someone who is not a trainee, it might sound like just we learn these teachings, we learn these ideas of what is right way of living, and then we kind of take it on because told it's a good idea. But what's really exciting is when we become a trainee, when we've recognized something inside of ourselves. We know something for ourselves, and we can feel and recognize that behaving in a certain way, living our life in a certain way, that's oblivious of the harm our way of life has or the benefit, oblivious of the harm it causes to others, or living in a way that how we live is benefiting the world and leaving the world a better place. That really—one way diminishes our inner freedom and goodness, the other way enhances it.

And then the sixth step is called right effort. And that's where this idea of having some inner reference point is really important. Because when you really are in touch with yourself, you can feel how some mental actions, some things we do by body, speech, and mind darken that inner light, and other things we do brighten the inner light. Some things we do harm us, some things we do free us and bring us benefit. So to start being really sensitive, more and more sensitive to how we act in the world, and what we do, and what we're trying to accomplish, and what we're trying to—you know, it's so something simple like how you drive your car. You drive your car in a way that by the time you get your destination, you're kind of jangled because you're, you know, zipping around all the other cars, honking your horn, rushing through yellow lights, whatever you can do. You know, trying to get out of this, you know, from stop sign, screeching your tires, and riding the bumper of the person in front of you. And you know, just, you know, those kinds of ways of driving does not support the growth of this deep inner place of peace and well-being. There is probably no other way of driving which does.

And so to be sensitive, really feel the difference between that, and to avoid those activities that diminish the inner well-being, and to develop those and do those which enhance it. And this is a fascinating part of the eightfold path, to actually become very careful, sensitive, and careful. And more and more and more things you do, how you do what I'm doing right now. Is it enhancing me in a good way, and bringing more freedom, bringing more good qualities

to me, or is it diminishing my good qualities, my good character? And that can be as simple as how you choose to sit in a chair—not to point my fingers at anyone here at all. Just what came to my mind, and it was one of the consequences of spending three years in a Zen monastery was when I came after three years in a Zen monastery, where much of the daily life is choreographed—how you stand, how you sit, how you eat, how you bathe—and all the stuff is like, you know, describe what you do, and like a dance. And I left, and certainly I didn't have to do the correct behavior. And what it did for me was say, I have a lot of choice. I didn't know I have so much choice that I—and literally I have a choice. I was kind of surprised I have a choice about how I sit in a chair. It never occurred to me when I was younger. I just sat in a chair, didn't think about it. And I could see that how I sat in a chair affected my presence, how attentive I was or not attentive, how much I felt more confident and how much I sunk in and lost my confidence.

And so this right effort—you can pay attention, you can become sensitive to the impact your behaviour has. And the more settled and grounded you are, the more that reference point for that feeling, and being guided by that, can occur. Right Mindfulness—it's the core practice we do, a harmonious mindfulness, unified mindfulness, complete mindfulness, the ability to really be present for our life. In some ways, mindfulness can be understood as presence, to really be present for experience, to recognize and to know it, to bring our awareness into our life. And awareness has lots of really good qualities, a lot with benefits. One of them is when you're really settled in, awareness functions a little bit like creating space, breathing room for what is good inside of us to flourish.

When we are distracted and not mindful, cut up and lost, it's kind of like a recipe for what is unhealthy or negative or not useful inside of us to flourish. It's kind—I liken it to a, you know, if you have a curtain or covers over a greenhouse, and it's hot and humid in the greenhouse, and no light comes in, it's a recipe for mildew and mould and all kinds of strange things to grow. Not the plants you want to have grow. But if you move the curtains away and have the sunlight come in, then that kind of makes it too hot and dry or something for the mould and the mildew. And so then the plants you want to have light, then they can grow. Somehow that's what mindfulness does. It's that powerful for us, that kind of like the light of awareness develops and enhances the best qualities inside of us. The lack of attention tends to foster the growth of what is kind of negative and not healthy in us.

We don't see what's unhealthy, and we don't see it, and it's there. It tends to have a heyday. It's more easier for it to kind of continue unabated. With mindfulness, it's seen, and then we have more choice, "Oh, I don't do that," and then we have room for other things to happen.

And then finally there's right concentration. And right concentration is a practice of becoming really unified, of not being fragmented from ourselves, but kind of gathering together all the disparate parts of who we are and making them whole, so that this inner well-being, goodness, freedom will be discovered. That may be a kernel at first, can fill itself out into all parts of who we are. Concentration has many benefits in practice, but this one of being unifying, the gathering together, so that there's a chance for all these different parts of ourselves to work together in harmony with this level, this inner peace, well-being, freedom that we've discovered.

And then, as that becomes fuller and fuller, then at some point it becomes stable inside of ourselves. And a person is said to become no longer a trainee, beyond training, when they have become the eightfold path. And what that means is that it isn't that you have imported something outside and become—you now someone you are not, but rather all the kind of attachments we have that are the obstruction to the free expression of the eightfold path that lives in us have been removed. That you no longer need to be trained means that inner goodness has flowered so fully that of course you are not going to harm. Of course you are not going to do the things which harm yourself—the wrong effort. Of course, you might naturally want to be present, because being present and mindful is kind of like, you know, at some point becomes the most natural and satisfying thing to do. It's who you are rather than something you have to practice. Of course, you'll be concentrated if the conditions are there, because that's a way of coming home to oneself. Of course, you have right speech, because anything else—it just doesn't occur to you, you know, just it's not. It's not who you are any more to have it.

And so there's a metaphor or analogy, kind of simile, that the Buddha uses that kind of represents the power, maybe, of doing this eightfold path. He said that in the high Himalayan mountains, there's a species of *nāgas*. A *nāga* is kind of like a serpent, and up there in the high Himalayas they acquire lots of strength. They become strong, and then when they're strong enough, they begin flowing down the creeks, streams, the rivers, through the lakes, out into the vast ocean, where they become expansive or great and abundant in their body, to become physically great and abundant. So that's the analogy. Then the Buddha said, in the same way, a person who is established in virtue by practising the eightfold path will similarly flow into and become great and abundant in their mental qualities, in their inner qualities of being. And this idea that this path is one that makes us abundant in good inner states of being, inner qualities. The state makes us, in a certain way, kind of great qualities. It's not a path to becoming master nobody. Sometimes in Buddhism, there's a lot of empha-

sis on letting go and not-self, and letting go of self and all that, and it's a little bit of a mess that can be heard as a message of that. You don't, on account, you're not supposed to have any impact on anyone. You must be almost invisible. The opposite is the case that people who become noble have no conceit, so they don't certainly—and they've no attachment to self. They don't use the language or the ideas of self to organize themselves and how they go round the world. So that's what not-self means, but they have become abundant. There's a greatness or expansiveness in people who have become free. And the expansiveness, the greatness, has to do with that little kernel that was recognized in themselves, that made them a trainee, has now grown and grown and grown in them, and it becomes who they are. And so there's a feeling of abundance, not a feeling of, you know, lack. And so the eightfold path is the way to become a great serpent, if you like that.

And so the eightfold path, they're beautiful qualities, beautiful practices that if you can first just practise them, practise them long enough, that at a sincerely enough that you begin recognizing something that's always been there in you, just waiting, something that you recognize. When you finally begin to relax, open up, settle down, somehow start kind of finding yourself living in the world differently than you were before. And then you become a trainee. Then you know—then no one can take it away from you. Then the Buddha can come back, and he could walk into IMS and say, "You guys, I was wrong. That's, you know, it's all wrong. Just forget everything I taught," and you will just look at him and say, "Well, OK, might be OK for you, but I know something for myself. I have this little seed inside of something really special, something in its many ways. It could be called, you know, freedom, peace, well-being, a place of home, integrity, authenticity—many ways different people call it something else. But it's still something we recognize inside of ourselves. And so, Master Buddha, well, it's okay. I know something, and I'm going to take that what I know, and that's going to be the perspective I use for how I live my life, my view, my right view, and I'm going to grow it and develop it, because that seems like one of the most wonderful things to do in life. And it'll make me, hopefully, a person that will leave the world a better place."

The Noble Eightfold Path—so I hope that this practice that we do here will help you not so much be a different person, but for you to discover who you really are, and then let that flower in a beautiful way. May the Eightfold Path become you, me. Thank you.