

# Eightfold Path Introduction (1 of 2)

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

The Noble Eightfold Path, asceticism, middle way, *sammā*, *micchā*, Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration

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Greetings. Today I'll offer a general introduction to the Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path, also called The Noble Eightfold Path, is sometimes seen as the core formulation of Buddhist practice. It is seen as the path that we engage in as we practice. The word “path” has the connotation that the practice we do is onward leading. It takes us along a beneficial path of spiritual growth that develops the qualities of heart, mind, and body that lead to concentration. “Concentration” means the ability to be settled here in the present moment. The path leads to liberation and freedom from our suffering (the ways that we “hold on” or “resist” that bring us stress or tension).

If you go to an Introduction to Buddhism class, The Eightfold Path will be presented as a core teaching of Buddhism. It will be presented as something that “Buddhists do,” as the fundamental teaching of Buddhism, and as a beginners’ teaching. There might be some truth to that if you look at the teachings of the Buddha, but overall the Eightfold Path is not really a beginner’s practice. The Noble Eightfold Path is a unified whole.

There are eight stepping stones to The Eightfold Path which all come together in a person who becomes mature in this practice. There might be individual steps along the path, and in that sense, they can be seen as stepping stones to the wholeness of the path. However, these eight stepping stones are not sequential, but rather, are integrated into a unified way of being in the world. This idea of a unified way of being in the world is seen in the first sermon the Buddha gave in which he highlighted the Eightfold Path in a particular way. [ *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, SN 56.11]

The story goes that before his enlightenment, the Buddha practiced with a group of five other ascetics and they did ascetic practices. One huge aspect of ancient Indian religious life was the belief that asceticism – tormenting oneself, not eating, living with a lot of restraint and deprivation – was a way to purify oneself. The idea was that we had to purify ourselves of all hindrances, defilements, and clinging to come to a place pure enough to become liberated.

The Buddha practiced asceticism for many years and found that it was a dead end. Once he discovered his path to awakening, he went to find his five companions so he could tell them about his discovery that asceticism didn't work and that there was another way to liberation. When his ascetic friends saw him approaching they said, “Gotama has reverted back to a life of indulging in sensual pleasure. Let's not give him any attention; let's not stand up for him or say hello to him, since he has left the true spiritual life.”

But as the Buddha approached these five ascetics, there was something about his peacefulness that was quite compelling and they couldn't help but stand up and greet him. They arranged a seat for him on the ground where they were sitting and he joined them.

The Buddha started off by saying that there is a middle way between asceticism and indulging in sensual pleasures. That was a big dichotomy that the ascetics and others were living with. One choice was to be in the world indulging in and devoted to sensual pleasures, and the other was to be an ascetic and reject or deny any sensual pleasure.

Tradition says that the first teaching the Buddha gave was that there is a middle way between self-denial and self-indulging. That middle way is The Eightfold Path. When the Buddha was enlightened, he offered these ascetics a different way of living. The Buddha represented this alternative way of living or being in the world between self-denial and self-indulgence.

In one sense, it is a middle way between self-indulgence and self-denial or asceticism. But “middle way” might not mean it is in the spectrum halfway between. It might be that it is a third way or an alternative way to live. For the Buddha, the eight aspects of The Eightfold Path are a way of living that a spiritually mature person actually lives, not because they are taking on these practices but rather, because these eight practices come naturally out of them and express who they are.

The eight practices of The Eightfold Path in English are usually called “Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.” I want to emphasize that the word “right” (*sammā* in Pali), which is repeated eight times, is the opposite of *micchā*, which means “wrong.” (Wrong View, Wrong Intention, etc). “Wrong” implies that what motivates our actions, speech, or view of how we see the world is motivated by greed, hatred, or delusion. It’s motivated by craving and clinging.

In the same way, unethical behavior in Buddhism is also said to be rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion. These forces within of excessive clinging, craving, and thirsting are deleterious to ourselves and, through our actions, deleterious to others. The Eightfold Path is how a person lives or what naturally arises in a person when there is no clinging, no greed, no hatred, and no delusion.

The Buddha was liberated from craving, and clinging, and attachment. It didn't make him aloof from the world but rather, it made him someone who lived in the world through this middle way. This was his first teaching about The Eightfold Path,

Over time, The Eightfold Path was also seen as a wonderful stepping stone to liberation and to becoming spiritually mature. These different steps can be taken up individually. They kind of encapsulate eight different sets of practices taught by the ancient and modern Buddhist tradition. These eight sets of practices encompass the fullness, richness, and completeness of what Buddhist practice is traditionally understood to be.

It is changing now, but decades ago people who practiced *vipassanā* had the idea that mindfulness meditation was the be-all and end-all. They believed that if you just meditated and practiced mindfulness enough, you would solve everything and everything else would be taken care of. But there was no sense of practicing in daily life. There are other people who think that living an ethical life is the whole thing – that just being strictly ethical and following the precepts is the point. Other people who emphasize wisdom (right view, right understanding, etc) really think that is what it takes. Then there exists a whole conflict

about who has the true practice between people who emphasize concentration over mindfulness versus mindfulness over concentration.

In the Eightfold Path, all these different things are integrated into one whole, suggesting that, as we engage in Buddhism and learn all these different sets of practices, we are becoming whole. The practice addresses all of who we are, not just part of who we are. “All of who we are” is summarized into three different aspects: wisdom, ethics, and meditation. Wisdom has to do with our understanding of things – the orientation, perspective, or frame of reference we’re using to understand our lives. Ethics has to do with our behavior in the world and how we impact others and the world around us. Meditation or cultivating the mind has to do with a deeper aspect of transforming the heart in a way that allows liberation to happen.

The first two steps of the Eightfold Path have to do with wisdom or understanding. The next three steps in the path have to do with ethics. The last three have to do with meditation and cultivating the mind. The whole path involves wisdom, action (or how we are ethically in the world), and developing and maturing our inner life and mind through meditation and other kinds of inner practices.

For people who are beginners, understanding wisdom and the rationale for how this path works is important. For people who are spiritually mature, what’s important is a deep insight that makes it obvious that this is a way of living that frees us from suffering and the ways in which we operate in the world that cause suffering through attachment and clinging.

Engaging, exploring, reflecting on, contemplating, and practicing the Eightfold Path is phenomenally rich and beneficial in so many different ways. It eventually touches all aspects of our lives in a useful way.

That's a general introduction today to the Eightfold Path. I will continue more introduction tomorrow and over the next few weeks we'll take our time and go through The Eightfold Path. Hopefully, you will appreciate its value in all its details and all the different practices that it entails. You will get a sense of how it helps to make whole Buddhist practice as well as you as a practitioner.

Thank you and I'll see you tomorrow.