

Eightfold Path – Right View (2 of 3)

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Keyword Summary

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Warm greetings to you all. We will continue with this series of talks on the Eightfold Path, the Eight-Factored Path. Today is the second of three talks on the first factor, which is right view.

As I said yesterday, right view is not a belief, as in a proposition, tenant, or creed. Rather, as the word view suggests, it is a perspective or an orientation. It is a way of seeing, or a frame of reference for our experience and our life. In the discourses, the Buddha distinguishes between two kinds of right view. I call them “conventional and liberative right view.” The Buddha calls them “mundane and supermundane right view.”

Conventional right view has to do with understanding that actions have consequences. Some actions are helpful, supportive, skillful, and wholesome. Others are unhelpful, unskillful, and unwholesome. Some lead to what is wholesome and others to what is unwholesome. Some actions lead to suffering and some to happiness.

Appreciating that lets us choose the actions we do – what we say, and what we do. We start doing things more skillfully. One of those things is to meditate. Our actions have consequences even in meditation. We want to give some care to how we engage in meditation.

Liberative right view – the right view that brings liberation – has to do with sensitivity to change. Sometimes the Buddha describes change as things being different than they are. Things will change. The word “change” in Pali is sometimes called *anicca*. This is often translated in English as “impermanent,” but literally, it means “inconstant.”

One understanding of impermanence is that things will die at some point and will no longer be here. Many things will indeed end completely. But another understanding is that the flow of life, the ongoing river of life is inconstant. The waves and the current in the river are inconstant. They change and shift directions. They are not steady and constant, but they are not impermanent. The river doesn't just stop. Maybe when we die, our current of life may stop.

Right view encourages this sensitivity to things that are changing. Right view is the orientation, the frame of reference, and the insight into the changing nature of our lives. This is so important. I can't underscore how much this is emphasized in the teachings of the Buddha.

For the Buddha, this is probably more important than anything that you might believe. Some beliefs are okay, like believing that actions have consequences. In Vipassana practice, we are looking to get quiet, concentrated, and steady enough in our meditation for the changing nature of our experience to be revealed to us.

Experience is changing much more than we think. That is a bit of a pun because it is thinking that often gives things a sense of permanence. Thinking allows us to relate to things as some *thing* that is permanent, or unchanging.

I might think that I am having a lousy day. The concept of a lousy day is an idea that I can repeat to myself and hold on to. Every time I think about the day, I think it is lousy. Because my thinking is that way, it can seem like the day is lousy. If I fine-tune my thinking and look at what is happening moment by moment, not the global day, I discover that it is not constantly a lousy day. When I step outside into the sun on a cool day, it feels pleasant for a moment or two. When I look at the blue sky, it's pleasant for a moment or two. Then I go back to having a lousy time and thinking about something.

If I look more carefully, the lousy day has a lot to do with my evaluation of the day. My predictions, fears, memories, and critical thoughts about something, maybe myself, can create the sense of a lousy day. We can see that those kinds of thoughts are also coming and going and changing all the time.

Perhaps I am having a negative thought about myself, and then I get hungry. I start thinking about how nice it would be to have oatmeal for breakfast. For a few moments, I'm not thinking in a negative way. As long as we are caught in thoughts or oriented towards seeing through the filter of particular thoughts, it is easy to assume that things are constant or have a temporary permanence to them, as if this is the way it is.

Consider the issue of how we define ourselves. We might define ourselves one way, but things are changing. We are changing all the time, but we hold on to old ideas. I don't know about other people, but one of the curious things in my life is that my self-image is usually a few years behind. I often think of myself or see myself as being younger than I am.

In the idea I have, I change less than I am actually changing. If I hold on to the idea or resist the change because I have the idea it should be a certain way, there is suffering, and stress builds up.

Right view is to become attuned to the changing nature of phenomena, so we are no longer caught in the ideas we have. Ideas often impute more permanence than things actually have. Right view is to not be caught at all in the ideas. "Caught" is a word for being tied up in or entangled with ideas, concepts, stories, memories, or predictions. Sometimes we use the words "clinging, grasping, holding on, resisting, and stopping." In Buddhism, all those movements of strong drivenness, compulsion, craving, clinging, or attachment are understood to be forms of stress and suffering. They are forms that debilitate us, undermine us, limit us, and keep us from being free.

As we become attuned to change – when we see how much things are changing – it can become hard to keep holding on. Let's say I'm having a lousy day, but I go for a nice walk through a park where kids are playing. It is a sunny day and there are beautiful flowers, nice birds, and maybe turtles coming up from the pond. Maybe a white heron is standing there gracefully. As I walk through the park, I begin to let go of all the thoughts about this lousy day. I am free of those thoughts. At the end of lunch, when I go back, I might pick all those thoughts up again. If I can see their inconstant nature and how these thoughts come and go, I might not pick them up. The thoughts might return, but I don't pick them up. I don't get involved with them or fuel them. I learn how to be free.

The right view that the Buddha teaches about is seeing change and impermanence in such a way that we don't hang on to things so much. We don't come to fixed conclusions that this is how it is, in such a way that we create hurt, suffering, and stress. There can be more fluidity and ease with things if we're not picking up ideas and holding on to them, imputing more permanence and fixedness to things than is there. Things might still be challenging, but they are easier to navigate.

This is my attempt to explain why the Buddha's emphasis on experiencing and seeing insight into change and impermanence is such an important part of what he teaches. As we begin to see change in such a way that we start experiencing more freedom, then right view, the view of change, leads onward to the other factors of the Eightfold Path. It leads us to change how we live and behave.

Freedom begins changing our priorities and what drives and motivates us. The next steps of the Eightfold Path can flow naturally out of this liberating right view – the insight into the changing nature of our experience.

I will talk more about how to come to this insight tomorrow. It is not meant to be a belief. We are not supposed to go around reminding ourselves, "Oh, everything is impermanent, everything is impermanent." The idea is to actually see it. It is one thing to believe that the river always flows. It is another thing to be in the river or on the edge of the river and see it flow. That is where we want to be. We want to see the flow or be in the current.

I will end with a little story about the belief that things change. To know that things come and go can be a useful idea to carry with us in our back pocket. I know people for whom, if something happens, like they go out and discover they have a flat tire, the first reaction to seeing that is, "Of course, everything's impermanent. Everything changes" – instead of the reaction, "Oh, no, this shouldn't have happened."

This reminder that things are constantly changing, shifting, and impermanent can bring a little more ease when we encounter things that have changed in surprising ways.

There is a Sufi story of a man who goes to a Sufi teacher and says, "I have this ring here. Will you engrave some statement on the ring so that whenever I look at the ring it will help me to be happy and free?" The Sufi master takes the ring and has it engraved. The man comes back for his ring, and he puts it on. On the ring is written the phrase, "This too will pass."

Sometimes knowing this principle can help keep us fluid and keep us from getting entangled. For the Buddha, the point is to have insight – to be in the river or on the edge of the river, and really see that that is what is happening.

So, thank you and I look forward to our time tomorrow.