

Eightfold Path – Right View (3 of 3)

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Keyword Summary

Provisional right view, conventional right view, liberative right view, verified right view, projections, self, happiness, impermanence, consequences, counting breaths, clinging, attachment, freedom, highly-spirited child

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We will continue with the theme of the Eightfold Path. This is the third and final discussion about the first factor of the Eightfold, that of right view. I have made a distinction between what I call “conventional right view,” and “liberative right view,” the view that is liberating. We could also think of conventional right view as provisional right view, and liberative right view as verified right view.

When someone is brand new to the spiritual life, to Buddhism, or a self-reflective life, they might take on the Buddha’s teachings provisionally, “Let me check it out. This seems to be what they are saying.” Someone might even tell you, “Believe in this or take this point of view provisionally.” That provisional or conventional right view is initially a provisional belief.

The heart of that belief is the idea that our actions are consequential. What we do is quite important and will bear fruit. It influences the world and us. It is useful to pay attention to that and take it into account. It is particularly useful to understand actions and their consequences from the perspective of what is wholesome and unwholesome, what is suffering and not suffering, what is healthy and not healthy, and what actions are harmful and not harmful. This is the distinction that is made.

Initially one might provisionally believe that certain things are wholesome or helpful. For example, we are told to believe that not killing, not stealing, not engaging in sexual misconduct, and not lying are wholesome. If we don’t already know that, then please accept that belief provisionally. Act as if it’s true.

The idea is that if we act in this way, at some point this belief becomes verified for us. We see for ourselves, “Oh, this belief is right. I am so much better off not killing, stealing, or lying. My life is happier, more open, and less stressed.” We see there is a difference between wholesome and unwholesome.

This understanding becomes more subtle and precise over time. We become aware of actions that are more subtle than gross violations of the precepts. The idea is that we are moving toward a verified understanding.

The liberative right view could also be taken as a belief: a deep understanding of how thoroughly things are inconstant, impermanent, and changing. It is easy to hear Buddhist teachings and take this as a belief: “Now we must believe that everything is impermanent,” and then we want to argue with it. At the most, as a belief, it is a provisional belief that may be useful to think about.

Yes, things change – “Let me take into account that things change. They’ll be different from what I expect. They’ll be different than they are now. Sometimes they’ll be better. Sometimes unfortunate things will happen.” This constant change is built into the structure of human life and into reality. It is a belief that might be useful for people who believe everything is fixed.

The main idea is that this belief is supposed to be verified. Right view can be liberating only when it is verified and we see it clearly and know it for ourselves as a direct experience. The whole thrust of right view is that it is the view that brings liberation and freedom to the mind.

The important aspect of right view is not that you have the view, the perspective that everything is changing. Its real importance is that it is a catalyst for freedom. The next steps of the Eightfold Path open to us when we experience this freedom.

We will begin next week with the second factor of the Eightfold Path, usually called “right intention.” I am going to call it “right consideration.” It has a lot to do with how we live our lives. Steps three, four, and five discuss how we relate to others. There is a direct correlation between how we experience liberation for ourselves, and how we want to live our lives. That experience of liberation flows out of us in relation to other’s lives.

For now, the idea is that a deep seeing of impermanence, inconstancy, and change can be a catalyst for the mind to become free. In the meditation we just did, I encouraged you to count your breaths. Sometimes staying on track with counting the breaths can be difficult. It is easy enough to count to ten. When we repeatedly count to ten, if the mind is not concentrated, we will often see that it easily wanders off. Sometimes we can hardly get half a count in before the mind gets pulled into its thoughts.

We can actually feel the gravitational pull and the glue of thinking and concerns about what is important. This is a very important thing to see. We start seeing the power of the thoughts and ideas the mind gets caught up in. We come back to the counting and then we get pulled again.

We can feel the pull of thoughts and ideas. But we don’t just feel the pull, we can also see how we latch on to ideas, thoughts, fantasies, stories, memories, and plans. There is a feeling of latching on. In Buddhist language, that latching on, getting hooked, or grabbing is called “clinging” or “attachment.” It can be mild, or it can be quite strong.

One of the features of this clinging or latching on to ideas is that we also latch on to our projections. We latch onto our interpretations of our thoughts and ideas and project them onto reality. There are three primary projections that this liberating practice of inconstancy and impermanence is meant to free us from.

One projection we have is that things are permanent and will always be this way. I will always be this way. That person I am talking to will never change. They will always be exactly like my idea of the person. We project all kinds of ideas onto other people.

We now have a better – not good enough yet, but a better understanding of the racism, bias, and prejudice that exists in our society. We can see the tremendous harm that happens with the projection that someone is just this way permanently – this is who they are. We don’t see all the different facets and the changing nature of people.

Or this day is this way – I have told this story about my son when he was quite young. He was what is called a “highly-spirited child.” Highly-spirited meant he needed a lot of work and a lot of attention. One day my wife and I were hovering over him trying to manage something that seemed difficult. My wife looked up at me and said, “We’re having one of those kinds of days.”

As soon as she said that I realized I had been unconsciously projecting onto the situation that this was going to last forever. If you had asked me or I had thought about it, I knew it wouldn’t be forever. The attitude of permanence made the situation so much more difficult. As soon as she said, “It’s just that kind of day,” that freed something in me. I said, “Oh, this is how it is now. It won’t be this way later.” We project the idea of permanence. If we can see how much change there is, we can begin loosening up our grip on the projection of permanence.

We also have the idea that certain things are happier than they are. We project our expectations of happiness and our desire for happiness and pleasure. Certainly, we want happiness in Buddhism. But expecting and chasing happiness usually involves projecting ideas, expectations, and dreams on top of things.

It can be innocent enough to do this. In meditation, if we are trying to track the breath, and our mind gets strongly pulled into these ideas, then we can see our mind is not free. The mind is caught.

The third projection is a projection called self. This is the projection of ideas we have about who we are or who other people are. We get stuck in these ideas, judgments, histories, and identifications. Of course, some identities are appropriate, but here again, we can use the litmus test of staying on the breath. Are we able to stay focused and hang in there with our breath? This shows us how much we latch on and get caught by our identities, ideas, definitions, and judgments about ourselves.

As we can stay with change and see change, we can see that things that are always changing and unfolding don't fit very nicely into our projections of permanence, happiness, suffering, or our projections of self.

We want to see change and impermanence in a direct, deep way like in meditation, where we are really flowing. The opportunity is to settle in, concentrate, and be very still. The opportunity is to not just get calm in a nice, meaningful way. We want to start feeling how everything is vibrating, flowing, streaming, and changing. It loosens up the grip of our projections.

As we see the projections and see how we latch on to ideas, it becomes easier to want to let go and not hold onto some of them. We realize it is not so wholesome, helpful, or healthy to be hooked onto ideas. It is much healthier to be able to think in a relaxed, open, creative, and responsible way without getting stuck in our thoughts, latching on, getting glued to them, or stressed about them.

For the Buddha, the primary insight that is liberating is the insight into inconstancy and change. We see that in the breathing. Breathing is an inconstant, changing stream of repeated phenomena and sensations. It is streaming and flowing. Observing the breathing can be a wonderful way to begin dipping into the stream of change and impermanence. The breath can show us how we latch on and get caught in these projections. The grip on the mind of these projections and ideas begins to loosen.

As this grip loosens, we progressively get more and more free, open, and relaxed. That makes all the difference in the world. As the heart and the mind become freer and freer, it sets in motion another whole way of living, being in the world, and being in ourselves, which is born out of liberation. This is born out of whatever degree of freedom we have.

This leads to the next steps in the Eightfold Path. The next four steps have a lot to do with how we live with others, and our relationships with them. We will look at how freedom has social connotations and how it affects the way we live in the world.

We will start on Monday with right intention or right consideration. It is a wonderful coincidence that right intention, which has to do with compassion and kindness, will be discussed as we enter into the election days ahead. I hope that these topics will be supportive in the potentially challenging days ahead.

So, thank you. I wish you well. Please be safe and remember that you don't have to get locked on to whatever the mind thinks.