

Wednesday Dharma Talk – Being the Eightfold Path

Hybrid Insight Retreat for Experienced Students

September 27, 2023

SUMMARY KEYWORDS *saṅkappa*, *Sariputta*, *Jāṇussoṇī*, [*Jāṇussoṇisutta*, AN 10.177], right view, rites and rituals, *jhānas*

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Some years ago, I heard a little saying that seemed very meaningful: “A spiritual life is first and foremost a life.” Applying it to Buddhism, a Dharma life is first and foremost a life. I don't know how you hear this, but I hear that it's a way of living, a way of being alive from now until the time you die. It's not a quick fix. It's not a little addendum to a life, where you add a little bit here and there with an app so you can go on to the important things of life. Dharma practice, as it was originally presented by the Buddha, was not meant to be a sideshow where you go off and have a good experience and come back and brag about it, like you would a vacation. It wasn't meant to be a short-term thing. It was meant to be about how we are and who we are as we go through this life.

Many years ago when I studied with a Zen teacher named Robert Aitken, people would ask him, as they often ask Buddhist teachers, “How do you integrate this practice into your life?” It's always a wonderful question. It means that they value something about the practice. It was very meaningful to me that he responded by saying, “What about integrating your life into your practice?”

Why not bring your life into Buddhism? The meaning of this, I think, is that it asks what's at the center of your life. What's the organizing principle for your life? It's possible to have this be something that happens here in this practice – not necessarily Buddhism as a religion or even as a teaching, but something we touch into, experience, or know, which becomes the center of our life. Maybe nothing else is more important, and everything has to somehow center around that.

So when you go back home, you tell your partner (if you have one), or one of your parents, or your kids – someone very important, “You're now the second most important thing. Dharma practice is the most important.” They might be alarmed or get jealous. But what you can tell them is that you love them but, “Well, the Dharma's first, and because of the Dharma, I love you much more. You're still second, but there's even more love.”

So do we live our lives based on constructs, comparing ourselves, measuring ourselves against all kinds of things? Or do we live our lives taking in what is happening, living with what is happening, responding to what is happening from the depths of our being? So if someone says to you, “You know, you're now second for me. But because of the Dharma, I love you so much more.” Do you take the love in, and say, “Oh, that's fantastic. Oh, there's even more now?” Or, “Oh, this is terrible. I can't take in the love now because I need to be first. Second best is not good. After all, life is competition.”

I don't think putting the Dharma first, putting our life into the Dharma diminishes our lives or diminishes their value in any way. I think it brings out the best in all areas of our lives. The idea that Dharma life is first and foremost a life gives us a long-term view. I talked recently with Jack Kornfield, who has been a big spokesperson for Buddhism in the West for a long time and a teacher for many people. He has been involved in creating some

of the meditation apps, but he's quite concerned about the idea that they make it seem as if Buddhism is quick and easy. Buddhism is a way of living that might be gradual. Maybe it's very gradual and therefore very inefficient. But if it was efficient, it might not be the Dharma.

One of the turning points in a Dharma life is acquiring right view. I use the expression "acquiring" intentionally, to contrast it with learning what right view is. You can read a book and memorize the classic teaching on what right view is, and now you know it. But to acquire right view is to become it. To acquire it is to not just know it, but to have seen it for oneself.

The most classic early Buddhist teaching on what right view is, is to see suffering, to know suffering – really know it, not holding back, not avoiding, and not attacking – really seeing suffering and knowing it so well that we can see its arising. If we see its arising and then see its ceasing, we know that it's part of the changing world. We don't have to always suffer. There is the option of suffering not being there, even if it's just briefly.

Maybe it becomes harder to assign the construct of self to something that arises and ceases – “This is who I am,” defining ourselves by something that comes and goes. But right view is not just seeing things arise and pass. The word is “cessation” here – arising and ceasing. The idea is to see the cessation of clinging so thoroughly, so clearly, that we see that this is good. This is the absence of suffering. This is freedom.

We see this so clearly that we understand that to be free, to be really happy with no trace of suffering, is really about letting go of clinging and grasping. The ancient teaching says that someone who really knows this thoroughly for themselves will no longer believe that virtuous conduct and spiritual practices (“rites and rituals”) are liberation. The second word is usually translated as “rituals.” It can sometimes mean a “vow, promise, or commitment,” but it also means “spiritual practices.”

Virtuous conduct is so important, but it's not liberation. Religious practices in and of themselves are not liberation. And if spiritual practices are focused on having experiences, experiences are not liberation. You can have catharsis. You can have great experiences of oneness. You can have great experiences of bliss. All these things are not the same thing as releasing the grip of clinging.

Acquiring right view happens when the experience of release is so thorough, so impactful, or registered so deeply in us, that we know, “Oh, *this* is freedom.” One of the things we can let go of there is the release from the constructs of self, from believing that these constructs are who we are. We see them as just another form of clinging. Then we have no doubt that this – letting go of clinging – is what it takes.

That is right view. For many of us, it's a gradual process. For many of us, there are more modest forms of letting go or release that give us a foretaste of what freedom is. They give us the sense that this is a good path, this is right. There's enough experience of dropping the stress of attachment and the stress of self for us to see this is the right direction.

When the release of clinging is thorough enough, something happens. It's as if the release creates empty space. It clears the room or clears the weeds from the flowerbed so something new can grow, and something else can appear. So the complete release of clinging doesn't leave us with nothing. It leaves us with the Dharma life living through us, instead of us living the Dharma life and practicing it. The switch from being the one who does the practice to the one who is being practiced is a phenomenal shift.

Earlier in the retreat I talked about entering the current of the Dharma, entering the stream. Someone asked *Sariputta*, “What is this stream that we enter into, the current that takes us along?” And he said, “It's the Eightfold Path.”

There's a story about a Brahmin in the time of the Buddha, *Jāṇussoṇī*, who apparently was one of the wealthiest people of his time. He had the ancient equivalent of the most expensive Bentley or Rolls Royce – a brand new chariot that was the latest model, painted white, with all white horses, and he was all decked out in white. There weren't that many chariots or horses back then. People were amazed at this sight. Even the white clothes were a big deal – they probably didn't have bleach in the ancient world. People would say, "Oh look, that's a divine vehicle. That's like a heavenly vehicle that's come down to the earth. Wow."

After seeing this chariot, Ananda went to the Buddha and said, "That is some chariot, you know. You should come down to the dealership and see it. It's like a divine vehicle."

Then Ananda said to the Buddha, "Is there a divine vehicle in the Dharma?"

The Buddha said, "Oh yes, there's a divine vehicle. There's a Dharma vehicle. There's a divine chariot. A Dharma chariot. It's the Eightfold Path. That's the divine vehicle."

One of the oddities about this metaphor is that the current is something that carries us along. The chariot is also something that carries us along, although we have to get into it, and we might have a role as a charioteer. So it's not like a Dharma race where you have to put all this work into running. You put yourself in something that carries you along.

The teaching goes on to say that this divine vehicle of the Eightfold Path arises. It is produced from inside the person[inside yourself]. That's where it comes from. Elsewhere the text says that as we practice, we become the Eightfold Path. So we become the stream. We become the current. Something inside of us is carrying us along. We become the Dharma. [*Jāṇussoṇīsutta*, AN 10.177]

In terms of right view, when one sees the arising and passing of suffering and clinging, really knows the ending, the cessation, and knows that *this* is the practice, *this* is the way forward, the text says that at some point, right view springs up. It flows up. It doesn't say that someone now understands right view, but that right view finds you. Right view emerges. When we have a clear enough experience of release, when we put down the burdens of self, the attachments to self, and the clinging enough to really be impacted by that, then right view emerges within us. We don't have to make it emerge. We don't have to call on it. Now it's there.

The Eightfold Path is often presented as beginning Buddhism – this is what the Buddha taught and this is what you should do. You do the Eightfold Path, and you should get busy. There are eight things to do. It might be true that in the Buddhist teachings, there is the idea that we practice the eight steps intentionally. But when letting go and non-clinging are clear enough and strong enough, then the Eightfold Path is not something we do, but something we are. Then we are the Dharma life. This is a phenomenal transformation. Now we have become something different than we were before. Something begins living in us that becomes a reference point, a motivation, a guide, and a support.

In terms of deep letting go, yesterday I talked about absence. Liberation is a radical absence. *Nibbāna*, (or nirvana) is an experience of deep release, a full letting go. It's as if you open your hands and let everything in your hands fall out, and now the hands are absent of any objects in them. You have released them. In the mind, there's a radical absence. The space has been cleared for a new life to be lived, which the Buddha called "the Eightfold Path."

I believe that in some of the teachings about the Eightfold Path the Buddha gave, it was used to describe one who is fully enlightened. When someone is fully enlightened, this is what you can expect. This will be how they are in the world, how they live. They'll have right view. They'll understand that right view is seeing the changing nature of reality, including clinging, or constructs, and releasing the grip of them. They know that *that's* the way forward.

The way a number of things in the Eightfold Path are worded, they are all things you don't do. The next step in the Eightfold Path is right attitude (right intention, right resolve, right thought), all translations of *sāṅkappa*. What is right resolve? Renunciation, letting go (which is maybe a little bit like doing, but it's going toward non-doing and letting go), non-cruelty, non-ill will, and non-harming. Many teachers, including me, are sometimes very quick to want to put those in positive terms – non-ill will means loving kindness, and non-harming means compassion. Sometimes they'll say that the right resolve is love and compassion.

That sounds good, except that's some *thing*. Non-ill will isn't nothing; it's the absence of something. It's an absence that might allow for love and compassion, but still, something has been released. Remember the glorious absence, the freedom from. Does that mean that we are not loving, kind, or compassionate? There was a man who came to the Buddha and said something like,

"You know, the way you are, you seem to be the embodiment of loving-kindness. Is it okay that I say that about you?"

"No, not really. I'm free of ill will."

"But you seem to be the embodiment of compassion. Is it okay to say that about you?"

"No. I'm free of cruelty."

The Buddha didn't want to be defined by some *thing*. Maybe it kind of looks like love and compassion. Maybe it's a sad commentary on our society that all you have to do to be seen as loving and compassionate is not hate and not be cruel. But maybe the Buddha's answer is more positive than that. A deep response to the world is available, and maybe it shouldn't be pigeonholed into a particular idea of love or compassion. He wanted us to keep our response free and flowing.

Right speech is also defined by the absence of things: the absence of false speech, the absence of slander, the absence of harsh speech, and the absence of meaningless, pointless speech. Again, there is an absence. Right livelihood is the absence of a series of livelihoods that cause a lot of harm to others in the world.

It may be a little bit strange and off-putting to talk about all these absences. But these are called "the right way of living, the right way of speaking, the right way of thinking or attitude." It's a way of being in the world that is meaningful, powerful, and significant, which comes out of liberation and freedom. If the worst thing is people saying you seem to be loving and you saying,

"No, I would rather you didn't say that," that's not too bad, is it?

Or, "You seem to be ethical."

"Well, it's possible, but maybe we don't think about it that way."

"But are you unethical?"

"No."

"Are you not unethical?"

"Yes."

"Are you ethical?"

"Can we not say that?"

Then we get to the sixth step of the Eightfold Path: right effort. It means avoiding wrong effort, unskillful effort, and unwholesome effort. Sometimes we're actively involved in abandoning it when it starts. We let wholesome efforts flourish. I love this because the text says to prevent unwholesome mental activity, unwholesome dhammas, and unwholesome ways of being from arising. Don't do what evokes them. If unwholesome ways of being arise, abandon them. We prevent and abandon them. This is what we do. With wholesome attitudes and states of mind that haven't arisen yet, evoke them. That's one word.

Then the text says, "Once these wholesome states have developed, have been evoked, maintain them, develop them, make them abundant, flourish with them." Four beautiful words. The contrast between these four words and one word for what to do once an unwholesome state has arisen is kind of dramatic. I love it. Yeah, Buddhism is all about letting go. There are right views about letting go, not lying, non-clinging, and not doing all this negative stuff. Then you come to right effort, and there are four words that emphasize developing this, almost celebrating this, and letting it grow. Not just grow – let it grow "into abundance." Sometimes the English translations flatten it, and we don't get the enthusiasm that sometimes exists in these texts. "Abundance" is an enthusiastic word.

If the Eightfold Path is who we are, then there's a way in which these positive states will appear. The unwholesome ones will appear too, but it becomes second nature and feels right to let them go. Letting them go feels like the best thing. It's not like a chore. No self is created around it. ("Oh, you know, I'm a terrible person because I had a mean thought.") It's like, "No – I want to let go of that." Keep it that simple. Don't make a self out of it. But there's also something in us that can want to let wholesome states grow – something inside of us that cherishes them, values them, appreciates them, allowing them to come into abundance.

Then there's right mindfulness, right *sati*. The classic description of this is:

To abide observing the body in the body, feelings in feelings, mind states in mind states, and dhammas in dhammas.

"To abide observing" is maybe doing something, but it's not doing much. When awareness gets strong, it's something that lives in us. It becomes less a practice, and more being home. To make a pun on the English translations, this is like becoming *possessed* by awareness. The pun is that there's a Pali word meaning "to be endowed with, or imbued with, or possessing *sati*." So we possess it. We're imbued with it. This is the kind of language they use for these things, not: now, we really practice. What does it take to be in the world and allow yourself to be possessed by awareness, or at least imbued with it, and endowed with it? (What a strange idea.) The Eightfold Path is not exactly a practice anymore. It becomes who we are.

Then we come to right concentration. The description of it is: it's the four *jhānas*. What that is supposed to imply for all of us is not so clear. If you take it literally, it means one thing. But it does mean that we have a natural capacity to settle, to become unified, and to be collected. Concentration states like the *jhānas* are phenomenal states of well-being that we have a capacity for.

Becoming concentrated has a lot to do with letting go. The first teaching I ever received about *jhāna* was when I first went to Thailand to practice. I think it was the first day I was going to sleep in a monastery there. There was some conversation. I thought the monk was dismissing concentration practice a little when he said, "Oh, it's just about letting go. That's all it is."

Just about letting go? Letting go is fantastic if what you're letting go of hurts, if what you're letting go of keeps you restricted and contracted. Then we no longer have the limitations of our fears, anxieties, desires, hates, and craving. When we no longer have those operating and have those let go, there's a coming together, a welling up, an opening up, a settling that is a natural process.

In the ancient text, with this settling comes safety. Maybe we become safe for ourselves, in case some of you are dangerous for yourselves. Isn't this good news? The ancient text of the Buddha says that with this comes confidence. They say that someone who has let go enough to have the Eightfold Path be who they are "walks in confidence, stands in confidence, sits in confidence, lays down with confidence." This is kind of a beautiful idea.

Having confidence is a kind of strength. One lives with a certain kind of strength. Buddha was a phenomenally strong character, a strong person. I like to believe it's not because he was endowed with that from birth, as if he had good genes for personal strength. I think that when we no longer have the constructs that limit us, our desires, fears, and ill will, and we have the confidence that comes from this practice, when the Eightfold Path is living in us, strength is what is there. Why not?

It is said that a person who has let go is a happy, peaceful person. Letting go doesn't make us a blank. To really let go, to really release, to let the mind release itself. To have awareness. To set awareness free. To let it be so free that it vanishes. This doesn't leave us as a blank. It allows the best of these phenomenal capacities that we are endowed with in life to come forth.

I remember a famous statement by Michelangelo. When someone asked him, "How are you able to make these beautiful statues from these blocks of marble?" he answered, "Oh, I just chip everything away that's not the statue." Maybe this practice is chipping away everything that's not you, everything that's not beautiful about you. Part of that beauty is the Eightfold Path that we become. It's beautiful to have someone who's not cruel, not mean, and not hateful. It's beautiful to have someone who doesn't lie, steal, or kill. It's beautiful to have someone who doesn't speak badly, harshly, meanly, or falsely. Someone is beautiful who doesn't give in to all their unwholesome qualities, but has learned to give in to their wholesome ones. It's beautiful when someone has the ability to be present with awareness. It's beautiful to be able to have the mind and heart gathered together into a concentrated state.

It's beautiful to not construct a self from any of that – to let it all be there. Imagine if Michelangelo had made the statue of David, or the Pieta, and then he went to the tailor and got some old clothes to cover them up again. Don't do that. Don't add all the layers of construction on top of your beauty. Don't claim that this inner beauty is you. It's not you. It's just beautiful. That's enough. Let it be. Let yourself be. Let it be a Dharma life. Let it be a life that slowly works you, and slowly you massage and work. Don't be in a hurry. That's greed. Don't be efficient with all this. That's probably just building more self. But do be wholehearted. That's allowing something wonderful from inside to emerge and to flow out. Every time you let go in a healthy way, think of it as a little chip in the hard marble that's going to reveal to you that you've become the stream. You have become the Eightfold Path. Maybe you've become the Dharma chariot. Finally, it's not about what you experience in terms of an experience, but it's how you walk through the world. May you walk through the world free. Thank you.