

Eightfold Path-Right Knowledge

December 3, 2020

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

freedom, suffering, clinging, release, patience, impatience, actualize, cultivate

Gil Fronsdal

We now come to this penultimate talk on the Eightfold Path.

This Eightfold Path is a path to freedom. It is an expression of freedom. But then there comes the freedom itself.

A few times in his teachings the Buddha adds two more steps, aspects, or factors to the Eightfold Path. These are right knowledge or right understanding and then right release or right freedom.

The first is liberating knowledge. There is this idea that there is an insight or understanding, a kind of direct knowledge not learned from a book. It is not something you have to figure out or believe. It is not something you have to find by reasoning your way to it. Rather, it is knowledge that comes from direct experience – the direct experience of what is suffering and the release of suffering.

To really understand suffering is the simplest knowledge that is at the heart of Buddhism. We practice being present for suffering, not to cower, recoil, or attack it. We practice having the ability, and the stability to be present for when we feel despairing, upset, angry, or frustrated. There are all kinds of ways in which we suffer – some small, some big. We work to have the stability to see suffering clearly. With that stability, at some point, we are able to see freedom.

We see the release from suffering. The knowledge of that is right knowledge. The right understanding is part and parcel of this eightfold path. It is also the result of it.

People with no experience of liberation engage out of faith with the eight factors of the Eightfold Path. We engage out of faith while receiving instructions from the tradition, and teachers. We do it out of faith and it is a good thing. Hopefully, we quickly get personal experiences that teach us, "Oh, this is true. I now have my own way of knowing. No one has to teach me anymore." We are able to feel the goodness and wholesomeness of it.

We keep moving in this wholesome, supportive, healthy direction until we get a clear experience of freedom *from* suffering. In the United States, I think we have to distinguish between freedom *to* and freedom *from*. There is a strong idea that we should be free *to* vote, assemble, shop, and do all kinds of things that Americans want to do. This can lend itself to a certain kind of conceit.

In this free-to-movement, having an unlimited credit card to be free to shop might be a great thing. We would feel a lot of ease in shopping if we had unlimited funds for our credit card. If we had unlimited funds to spend and buy and buy and buy, we would have no awareness of how we are actually caught, enslaved, or imprisoned by our desires. Because we can act on them freely, we don't see that the desires control us.

In Buddhism, freedom is freedom *from* clinging, *from* being caught. We let go of the inner forces that some people want to freely express. We realize we have actually lost ourselves in this free expression to shop unlimitedly. We have lost ourselves in the freedom to express our opinions unlimitedly because we have free speech.

The idea is to learn to free ourselves from the compulsions inside. We free ourselves from the very forces inside that lead to suffering. They may lead to suffering right away or down the road when they get frustrated.

At some point, we begin to see how suffering and the freedom from suffering works. We begin to experience

clinging and the release from clinging. We might see it in small ways. We might see that we were impatient, and then we could let go of that impatience. We feel "Wow, this is a much better way to be. It is not so dramatic. Why add this tension to my life when I don't need to." We could just be patient, or we don't even have to be patient, we just have to let go of the impatience.

We begin tuning into the experience of having something that brings tension, suffering, pain, or all kinds of things that fit into this suffering category. We then have an experience of letting it go. There is freedom from it. Then we start tasting for ourselves what the Buddha is about. We start becoming our own teachers in a sense of the path of freedom.

For beginners, the Eightfold Path is putting in place a healthy sense of self and a healthy way of living in the world so we don't have any remorse. We don't have any self-criticism. We don't get caught up in doing things that are wrong speech, wrong actions, or wrong ways of thinking. We are putting together a healthy sense of self so we can let go of it all with ease. We can see more clearly where freedom is.

As freedom goes further along this Eightfold Path, the experience of it is so qualitatively distinct that it could almost take our breath away. It is like, "Wow, that's the potential." It is not just letting go of impatience at a traffic light. There is a phenomenal release of self and self-concern. There is a release of the deepest ways in which we're attached or organize our lives. And it's, "Wow, this is good." Then we really know the full potential of this freedom.

We know a full experience of the heart's freedom. We now have this as a reference point. Then we become increasingly sensitive to all the different ways we cling. This is part of the ongoing path. We develop a greater and greater understanding of the subtler and deeper ways in which clinging, attachment, and wanting limit us, and keep us from being free.

Because we have had the experience of a very full freedom, we have a heightened sensitivity to it. It's like having clothing that we have been wearing for a long time. We don't really ever wash it, and it has gotten really dirty. We don't even notice it is dirty. More dirt doesn't show any more than all the other dirt.

Finally, the clothes are completely clean – 100% clean, like new. Then we know that this is what it can be like all cleaned. We can see clearly when it gets a little dirt on it. The mind can be that way as well.

The right knowledge that comes at the end of the Eightfold Path, is the dramatic and fuller knowledge, "Oh, this is what freedom can be like." It gets our attention because it shows a potential for psychological health and the health of the heart. It is so palpable and compelling. It now seems so much more important than the many other things that people are caught up in, think are important, or think that they must have.

At some point, we learn this sense of freedom is the safest thing going. It is not something to be afraid of. It is a place of safety. It is a place from which we can take care of ourselves. It is a place from which we can have a healthy perspective of what's important. No matter what happens, we realize, "I am responsible for some degree of my inner happiness and peace. No matter what happens, I don't have to give that up. I can go through the world with that reference point of peace - that sense of inner health and freedom. I can use that to make wise choices for how to live and what to do."

The Eightfold Path has a whole different orientation with the knowledge of freedom; the knowledge of release; the knowledge of liberation; and the knowledge of letting go. Then not as a beginner, but as someone who knows what freedom is, we start on the Eightfold Path again.

The Eightfold Path then becomes a way that we live that begins to express, manifest, or actualize this freedom in our lives. The Eightfold Path is an actualization of freedom. We cannot have wrong view, wrong consideration, wrong speech, wrong action, wrong livelihood, wrong effort, wrong mindfulness, and wrong concentration if we are actualizing freedom.

So right knowledge, right understanding is a knowledge or understanding that we have through our direct experience. The book we are supposed to read to understand the Eightfold Path and right knowledge is the book in our hearts, the book in ourselves. Developing this mindfulness and a strong sense of awareness of what is happening is so that we can read the book of freedom that is within. Once we can read that book and

have that knowledge, then the Eightfold Path opens in a whole other way. It becomes what we actualize, as opposed to what we are cultivating.

So, thank you very much. We will finish this whole series tomorrow with the related topic of right release, or right freedom. Thank you.