

## Eightfold Complete Path

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Well, good morning, everyone. Is the volume okay for you all? Thank you. Thank you for being here. Yesterday, I hosted a conversation between a Palestinian and Israeli insight teachers. One of the things that sparked the topic for today was that one of them described some of the difficulty of Palestinians going into mostly Israeli insight meditation groups and retreats, which are a lot in Israel. They have a retreat center that hosts 100 people and do 45 retreats a year in Israel, so it's quite a big, active place.

But one of the challenges is that it was very interesting what I was told was that it's kind of built in, almost inherent in the Buddhism that's presented—the ethos, the way to package or organize or present Buddhism was very much, for insight meditation, shaped by the founders of the Western insight movement. There was a group of teachers, Western teachers like Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg, Jackie Mandel, and others who had practiced in Asia. In Asia, they had practiced in traditions of Buddhism where mindfulness meditation was emphasized more than anything else. It was a tradition that was really meant as a retreat tradition where people would go and do retreats. In the context of Buddhist Asia, they were teaching in a wider context where all the Buddhism was included.

So, you know, you don't have to include everything. I mean, I don't know if this is a silly example, but maybe in a country where there's no roads yet and no cars yet, no signs, no traffic lights, driver's ed has to include a lot. But in a country where all those things are established, driver's education can be just more focused, much more focused and narrower in what people are taught. So in these Buddhist Asian countries, so much of Buddhism was included. But these Westerners who came to practice there were introduced to just this intense mode of being on retreat.

So these teachers from the Middle East were saying, well, for people not acculturated in a kind of a Western ethos or Western kind of white kind of post-racism, counterculture, 60s

counterculture kind of world, that doesn't quite work to emphasize mindfulness. And what's useful is to emphasize the *Eightfold Path* that is much broader, not just sit and close your eyes and be mindful, but to orientation of how to live your life in the challenges of life, and the challenges that exist in Israel and Palestine are huge. Both these teachers talked about the ongoing physical danger they have of living in Israel with rockets flying literally over. One of them said that the rockets are flying over their home about 10 times a day. So, you know, living one mile from the Lebanese border. So, in that context, what does Buddhism have to offer?

So I'm very happy that here at IMC, one of the really strong offerings we do here is a year-long program on the *Eightfold Path*. And 100 plus people sign up for it every year. A lot of the senior practitioners and teachers at IMC are involved in mentoring people through it. I feel like it's a foundation for what we have to offer here. But it's been a while since, and we have a book on the *Eightfold Path* that's kind of pre-done. So I think we offer it somewhat, but it's been a while since I've talked about it on Sunday.

So inspired by yesterday's conversation, that'll be the topic, the *Eightfold Path*. So... So the context for the Buddha's first teaching the *Eightfold Path*, mentioning how important it is, because it was apparently the very first thing that came out of his mouth as a teaching after he was awakened. He taught about the *Eightfold Path*. So the context then for it was before he had gone forth to seek awakening. They say that, at least the legend is that he lived a luxurious life in palace. He was a son of a king and had this luxurious life that, you know, were very protected from the suffering and challenges of the world.

Maybe it's like someone growing up in some of the more mega estates here on the peninsula in neighborhoods where you don't see much beyond the neighborhood and private schools and things like that. And so he left that behind. And what was available to him at the time, there were no universities you go to, there were no... You know, there was no one was offering an *Eightfold Path* program. You could take for a year, once a month. And there was nothing, very little of the kind of things that we're used to. The only avenue for him to go forth and find a whole different way of living was to become a renunciant.

And the renunciant tradition was really a place, it was a tradition that was intensely engaged in learning, study, exploration, trying to engage in some of the major existential issues of human life. And that's where you went to study it. That's where you could do it and be supported because the culture around the time, they wanted to support people in that engagement. In the modern world, maybe we provide college scholarships for people to be able to go and study and learn and develop and do all kinds of things, go to medical school or...

You do a lot of things. Widows living in the Bronze Age... So it was pretty, you know, all the institutions we know that support people were not available.

But there was this cultural norm that people who went forth as renunciants then were supported with the basic necessities of their life. So it was a way of studying and practicing that was supported culturally. And it meant to be a renunciant life. And he, he, and, uh, And it said that one form of that renunciant life, there were two major versions of it. One was to be an ascetic and practice asceticism, somehow denying oneself pleasures, denying oneself food, denying all kinds of luxuries. And he did it to the point of coming to the edge of death.

He ate so little, he did so... And actually there were people, they say it in the ancient texts that some people actually found him kind of lying on the ground, emaciated, and people actually thought he was dead. It was that, you know, that... And he realized himself that he was just there on the edge. And he said, if I take, you know, paraphrasing, you know, just one more little step in the ascetic direction, I'm going to die for no purpose. There was no value in it. So he decided there has to be another way.

He did also, and during that kind of exploring time, he also went to study the second form of renunciation that was maybe major that he knew about, was not asceticism, but rather meditation practice. But the meditation practices that were known back then, at least the ones he studied, were ones that disconnected the human being, the meditator, from ordinary everyday life. In fact, it disconnected oneself from one's own physical and emotional life, taking people into very rarefied states of... of states where there was no perception or very little perception. There was no sense of the body, no sense of the world around you. It was a deep state of... I mean, some psychologists would hear these descriptions say, wow, that's dissociated.

And in fact, I meet people who, because of their tremendous difficulties, maybe growing up, have learned to dissociate, and they actually go into some of these rarefied states as a way of being safe or protecting themselves or something. So whether the Buddha was dissociating exactly is not so clear at all, but it was these deep states he learned that had no connection to our embodied life, our emotional life, our psychological life, or the life we have around us. So that was the background for him. Life of luxury, a life of radical asceticism, self-denial, and a life of this kind of meditation which is quite profound. I don't want to dismiss the value of it, but also it disconnects us from the embodied life.

It said in these ancient kind of stories of the Buddha that when he realized that these three ways weren't the way forward, he was kind of thinking, what do I do? And then he remembered a time when he was young, when somehow the conditions were right. It was a com-

fortable spring day. He was sitting in the shade of a nice apple tree, a rose apple tree. There was nice activities around him that didn't require anything of him, that he could watch kind of this festival going on in the distance. And he somehow dropped into a deep state of unification, of harmony, that was connected to the body for sure, connected to the world, but provided him with a lot of peace.

He gave it the name, the first *jhāna*, the first level of absorption. And... And this was very different. He remembered having that experience as a child, and he realized this is not asceticism. It's not disconnecting from the world and myself. It's not caused by luxury. I'm not indulging in—there's a joy and a well-being here, but it's not one that is born from living a luxurious life, getting a massage or having endless Netflix to watch. Right. And so he said, this is actually healthy. This is a healthy and appropriate well-being to have in this deep state of embodied connection to myself, settled here, and coming into kind of a harmony, deep harmony with our inner states. And yet this is the way forward. This is the way to the freedom from suffering I was looking for.

And so with that intuition, he followed those states and would open in those states to his awakening. Then he set forth to find someone he could teach what he had learned. And he had five companions who had other renunciants with whom he had practiced the ascetic life. And when he decided to stop being the ascetic life and to, you know, eat some rice, they were disgusted in him. Because now he was living a life of luxury. How could he? You know, so they kind of rejected him. But he thought that they would understand him. And in fact, when he found them, they first rejected him. But there was something about his peace, his joy, his kind of disposition, kind of the way he appeared to them, that they tried to ignore him. But they couldn't because he was so radiant.

And so they were willing to, at first they wouldn't listen to him. And he said, well, you know, I've experienced awakening. I've experienced what we were looking for. And they kept rejecting him. And he said to them, something like, have I ever made this claim before? Have I ever lied to you before? They said, no, no, you've never. Well, maybe you should listen. So then they were willing to listen. And the first thing he said, there is a middle... way between luxury, self-indulgence, and asceticism. There is another way. So that's how he began. That was the first thing he had to say to them.

But the way, the word way, *paṭipadā*, there is a practice, there is a way, there is a manner, there is a method. Was he teaching them a method to awakening? Yes. Or was he teaching them, look at me? Well, not like that, of course. I've discovered a way of living the awakened life. So it wasn't so much a way, too, but how to live in this world. And that's the middle way

between self-indulgence, in pleasures, and asceticism. And what is this middle way?

And for many years, I thought the middle way was the midpoint of a range between sensual indulgence and asceticism. And that was the fulcrum in the middle, the balance point. You had to kind of find that balance and keep staying in the middle. Yeah. But I don't think there's any reason that that's the reference point. It was called the two extremes, so that may be why I thought of it that way. But another way of understanding this word middle that goes along with other things that Buddha taught, it refers to the middle of the forest, of the jungle.

The path, the way forward and where to walk. And that's an opening, a path in the forest is a clearing that's absence of obstacles. If you go any way into the forest, I've been in forests where it was actually dangerous to walk in because there were no reference points for knowing where you were. I had once I went into the, I was in a kind of... side river to the Amazon, middle of kind of nowhere. And on my own alone, I left the river, which was a really clear place, and walked into the Amazon. And after about 50 feet going in, I became afraid. And I looked around, I said, wait a minute, there's nothing here that will tell me where I am and what direction to return. Everything is homogenous. Everything is so similar. And there was canopy so strong, I couldn't see where the sun was. And I was like, I'll never find my way back. And when I was younger, I was relatively good at being in the wilderness. And so I came back. So there was no path to follow. So this opening, this clearing.

And so there's this, you see this opening, you see the place to go forward where there's no obstacles. Whereas if you take the path of sensual indulgence or if you take the path of asceticism, it's full of traps. It's full, you'll lose yourself in that world and you won't find your way out. It's hard to find out. So then he said, and what is this middle way? And then he said, the usual way of saying this in English... is with eight different things. It's called the eightfold noble path, the noble eightfold path. And fold just means it's all one big thing, but you fold it up into eight folds. So you have to think of it as a whole, not as different parts. The word that used in the ancient language is *aṅga*, which means kind of eight member or eight arms or legs, appendages, the eight appendages. Because *aṅga* can refer to arms and legs as well. So it's all part of the same body.

And so then each of these eight, he refers to in the ancient language as *sammā*, S-A-M-M-A, which in English is usually translated as right. Right. which it's rare that an English speaker loves the word right. And then we have to explain, well, it means this and that just to make it right for us. But it's usually right, I like to translate it as right view, right attitude, right speech, right action, right lifestyle, way of living, right. right effort, right mindfulness, and right *samādhi*, unification or concentration. But it turns out the word right, the word *sammā*

has deeper, richer meanings in Pāli and Sanskrit than the word right does in English.

Another word maybe we don't want to use that is a fair translation of the word *sammā* is consummate. It's complete. It's fulfilled. It's the fulfilled folds of the path. It's the fully entered into. It's the complete. We become complete with them in a certain way. And so... And it refers in this sense not to individual practices we do, but rather how there's a kind of experience of fulfillment or wholeness or completeness that a person has who enters into this *Eightfold Path*. And the idea of entering into it is part of the language of it, as opposed to the language, you know, let's get busy. There's eight things to do. Okay. So the Buddha was, this is what he discovered. The first thing he taught.

And there's two ways that then he taught this *Eightfold Path* in the forty years that he taught. One way he taught it was as kind of practices you can do that lead to awakening. The other way he taught it is that it's how an awakened life is lived. There are eight ways in which awakenings expressed or manifested in a person who is awake, who has been liberated. And that's probably what he was saying when he first started teaching his five friends. He had just been awakened and he had just now offering a radically different way to live life than people had known or he'd known until then. This is the way that we can live. This is the way you can live. And maybe he knew right then and there that it had two functions. It was both a way to awakening and an expression of that awakening.

And so... It's a life of action. It's a life of being connected to this world, how we live in this world. The middle sections of it, right speech, right action, and right lifestyle, has to do with how we live in this world. It's not radically becoming an ascetic and radically stepping away from this world and having nothing to do with it. It's not getting lost in all the temptations of the world, but it's smack in the middle of it in a different way, in a way where there's an open path through it of freedom.

And the last three, right, effort is usually considered the psychological effort, the mental way in which we engage in what we're doing, and the mindfulness is more the inner world, and *samādhi* is more the inner world. So all three of these involve a very deep, clear connection to oneself. It's not a dissociation. I would like to say it's the opposite of that. It's a complete association, completely being present, knowing oneself thoroughly inside completely, not disconnecting, but discovering and expanding and growing into all of who our potential is.

And then the first two are called the wisdom factors of the *Eightfold Path*. And this is right view and right attitude. And the right view is fascinating with the core way in which the Buddha taught this. And this is also here where we see that the *Eightfold Path* has these two different functions, or two different orientations. One is this is the expression of someone who's free.

And it's also the path to just being coming free. So the first right view, right kind of orientation, right perspective that we want to bring, one teacher I know calls it the right framework, frame of reference.

There's many frames of reference that you can have in your life, and many of us have unconscious frames of references for how we find our way in the world. And this is a frame of reference that the Buddha offers that can help you find that middle way. And that is to... And I'll put it... I'll paraphrase it here. And that is, pay attention, really pay attention, Take seriously your suffering. And if that's a frightening word, take seriously the stress you live up with. And if anything, the bumper sticker in Buddhism, I stop for suffering. I stop for stress. We're not supposed to tolerate stress. We're not supposed to tolerate our personal suffering in Buddhism. We want to stop and pay attention to it and see it clearly. Right? so that we can see the alternative. We can see where there is no stress. We can see that space where the clearing in the forest exists, where there's no obstacles.

Suffering usually is the obstacle that is a result of an obstacle that we have created. Or at least that's the suffering we're trying to address in Buddhism. The obstacles, the jungles that we have created for ourselves. Through... grasping, clinging, craving, through tightening, through shutting down, through kind of narrowing the scope to our preoccupations. And so the orientation, the frame of reference in this first step of the *Eightfold Path* is, hey, pay attention to stress and the absence of it. Right there, there's a very powerful lesson, very powerful understanding of, and then take seriously that you have the capacity to live without stress. Or that seems to be too grand, impossible goal. Maybe you can live without some of your stress. Maybe there's some small things you can relax and let go of. Maybe you don't have to go look at the next Netflix film or the next, you know, sequel. You know, you've already been up until 2 o'clock in the morning. Maybe you can let go of that. There's less stress in that. So you can lower your standards so that it's doable. If your standards are too high of what the absence of stress is, that's stressful. Right? So, look, but look and notice.

And then when you know where you're not stressed out, where there's not stress, that becomes, that highlights when you now get stressed. That is a very, that's a key central insight in insight meditation. Right. when you're not stressed, when you're not suffering, when you're not caught, to notice when you do get caught, when that stress of being caught happens. And then you can ask yourself the question, is this worth it? Is it appropriate? Is this helpful? Is this useful? If you answer yes to all of those, then you have to ask one more question. Am I going to hurt anyone? I'm going to harm anyone if I do this. Don't harm anyone. But if you answer yes, yes, distress is good for me, it's healthy, and it's not harming anyone, then maybe

go ahead and do it. And it's true, sometimes there is stress. You know, exercise sometimes is stressful, and you're tearing your muscles. That's what they say these days, that you need to tear your muscles apart so the muscles can grow. I mean, it's such a violent idea. When I first heard this idea, I said, what? I'm injuring my muscles so they get stronger. So there might be appropriate stress to have in life. So we have to be a little bit, you know, understand human life. But the goal is to understand more and more all the unnecessary, harmful stress that we carry.

And it's one of the primary illnesses of modern society is stress. That I call it an illness because... You know, it's contagious. We pass it on to everyone else in our society. We, if we don't care for it, it grows and develops and expands. And it has all these secondary effects. You know, maybe you think it's like, no, no, it's a minor possibility, like a heart attack. Okay. and other things, all kinds of illnesses happen. That I think part of the source is the stress that people live under. People live under chronic stress, chronic tension, physical tension. So to begin really feeling, becoming your expert, becoming really, to really see where there's lack of stress, and that's one of the benefits of meditation. There's other things that can do that as well. And then you see... where you add stress to it. That's important. Look at that. I didn't have stress and now I do. What do I believe? What am I doing? What's my fear? Is there another way? And the Buddha was saying there is another way. There is another way to be in the world, to act in the world, participate in this world in a full, complete way that can be done without stress, without suffering.

And so for a person who is liberated, fully matured in this practice, they're not going to do anything based on clinging. Clinging is finished with them. And so these other factors of the *Eightfold Path* are usually, some of them are described as the absence of something. So right speech is the absence of harmful speech. It's hard to intentionally, deliberately engage in harmful speech without clinging to something. Someone who doesn't cling, it's going to be very hard to deliberately use speech to harm, to lie, and do other things. Someone who doesn't cling, it's very, very, very unlikely that they're going to deliberately kill someone or steal from someone or engage in sexual misconduct. And if someone who is not clinging to anything, chances are their way of living, their lifestyle, their livelihood is not going to be based on clinging. Maybe harder to understand, but... And also then we come to the sixth step of the *Eightfold Path*, which is a right effort.

And right effort's all about having the deep inner sensitivity to recognize... how some mental activities, thoughts, intentions, purposes, the ways in which our mental life fuels our speech, fuels our drives our actions in the world. Are those mental states, the mental activities, Are



they causing stress or the absence of stress? Are they nourishing us or are they undermining us, debilitating us? That's one of the roles of mindfulness, to be really attentive. The source of how we speak and how we act begins in our mind. And we really can see there. And there again, the idea is to, is a kind of a radical absence, the absence of clinging. And so someone who's liberated is not going to cling to have any clinging in their mind. So they're not going to pick up and engage in the kind of mental activities that leads to harmful speech and actions in the world. and right mindfulness and right concentration. Right concentration is a lot to do with what we don't do. The first instruction I got when I went to Thailand in concentration practice, I was told it's mostly letting go. You get concentrated by just letting go really thoroughly and well. So it's a kind of letting go of what? Tension, attachment, clinging. So someone who's awakened, this is how they live. Right?

And this is expressed in the ancient teachings that when someone has the first real kind of deep transformation inside where they understand how this really works, they really understand how stress works and the absence of stress possible in such a deep way that it's always not going to be a reference point for them. They can't not be the reference point anymore. that they, it said, now they've entered the current. They've entered a stream which is going to start carrying them to greater and greater freedom, greater and greater letting go of clinging and stress. And so someone asked, well, what is this current we're entering into? And he said it's the eight-fold path. At some point, the experience of non-clinging manifests itself. in this current within us of non-clinging, of behaving and living by these beautiful qualities. It's not what we do so much, but how we are.

However, these *Eightfold Path* is also what we do, and there's two ways in which we do them as practices. One, we just do them out of blind faith. We've heard that's a good idea. and we kind of trust this Buddhist stuff enough. Not to believe anything, abstract kind of truths, but I believe that maybe if I behave this way, this is good for me. Let me try it out. And it's safe to try it out because it involves action, activity, that I can see the consequence, the results in it for myself. So if it doesn't work, I'll stop doing it. You know, I'm going to get the proof. This can be provable that this is useful. So it's kind of a safe thing to do on faith.

Or it's not done on faith, but rather we start having this glimmer of insight about what I talked about, the stress and the absence of it. the absence of stress and watching what we're doing when we cling and grasp and how this is not a good deal. We know for ourselves it's not a good deal. And because of that, the other seven steps of the *Eightfold Path* make total sense. Of course, I don't want to act in the way in the world that involves clinging. Of course, I don't want to continue with the mental habits that cause more stress for me. Of course. It's not

that easy to do, but now the *Eightfold Path* becomes something that you take ownership of yourself. Because it's obvious to you. No one has to tell you. It's not an act of faith. You actually see the cause and effect that's going on, that you know this is how I want to live. These are the practices I want to live by.

So the *Eightfold Path*, with a big emphasis I wanted to do here today, is that this is the first teachings the Buddha gave that highlighted not a life of disassociation from this world. but was a life of really being connected to yourself, connected to this world, and how we live and act in the world, and how we respond to the world, is center stage for what Buddhism is about. It might look a little bit like we're leaving the world behind if we go on retreat, on a mindfulness retreat. It might look like that from the outside. The thing that becomes a bit of a surprise is how much you bring with you. You know, and sometimes you realize you didn't even know you were carrying the world so heavily on your mind. And now, okay, I guess I have to deal with this now.

So, for example, for me, the longest retreat I did, where I just mostly stayed in a room much of the time by myself was eight months. Eight months silent retreat. It was one of the best times in my life. It was really, really phenomenal. It had its challenges, but it was pretty wonderful. But in the depth of that concentration, when I was the depth of meditation, when I was really, really still, peaceful, quiet, it kind of felt like I'd reached the depth of my mind. I was having all still these thoughts. about my status, my place among my friends, what people thought about me. And I said, wait a minute. How did my social life make it, all my friends and activities and places I worked, how did they make their way into the depth of my mind? They shouldn't be in there. I was caught somehow. So I said, okay, I'm not going to go back to that world until I get all those people, all those things out of that deep, deep, peaceful, personal place in my own mind. So I made this vow, and then I came back, and now I'm part of this world. But hopefully, without too much of all of you... you know, somehow caught in the depth of where I can be free.

So those are my thoughts about the *Eightfold Path* today. So we have a few minutes. If anyone wants to make any questions or comments or protests?

Hi, Gil. Um, There's this namotasa, bhagavato, arhatta, sama, sambudasa. Hold it up like this. Oh. There's this phrase, namotasa, bhagavato, arhatta, sama, sambudasa. Is that sama, sambudasa? Is that the same *sammā*? Yeah. It is, huh? Yeah. Okay, cool. Because that is complete there, right? Yeah. Yeah. Cool, nice. Thank you. Are we complete? Yeah. Yeah. Thank you for your reflections.

Could you say something more about when silence is not right speech? Hmm. Well, yes.

Silence is a fascinating topic. I thought sometimes we should have a dictionary of all the different things silence means, and sometimes it's very harmful. Sometimes it's a way of profound disrespect of people, profound denial of their existence sometimes. Sometimes it's passive-aggressive. Sometimes it's lying. It's avoiding talking about the truth. So, yes, silence should be done wisely. And maybe silence can be considered socially that silence is an act of communication. And even if you think you're in a large group of people and you think no one notices you're there, it's a kind of a way of communicating something. And maybe it's the right thing. Maybe you're communicating interest. You're not speaking because you're really interested and curious. But also, you might be communicating something else. You might be communicating fear. And fear is a little bit contagious. So, is that okay answer? Yeah? Okay.

So we have a few minutes before the T will be ready and before the formal ending. Okay. that we have. Those of you who would like to stay for tea or those of you who would like to stay for a few minutes, maybe lovely if you would turn to someone near you. Maybe, you know, it could be one or two or three people. And just say hello and did this talk touch anything interesting for you? That, and, but, you know, or maybe just introduce yourself and you go. Whatever you'd like to do, you can go directly. But whatever you do, if you do stay, look around, make sure that no one's... everyone turned the opposite direction, you know, so someone not sitting there alone. We want to be inclusive of everyone here. And everyone's welcome to stay for the tea. It'll be ready in a few minutes. And I look forward to saying hello to more of you. So if you can say hello to each other.