

## Dharmette: Eightfold Path (1 of 10) Path of Wholeness

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So hello and welcome to the beginning of a new series. And this series will go for two weeks, ten days, and it will be on the topic of the Eightfold Path. In a sense, I gave an introductory talk to this that you don't have to listen to, but yesterday morning, Sunday morning at IMC. I'm happy to continue now on this topic. The Eightfold Path is sometimes called the Noble Eightfold Path because it's intimately associated with the nobility or the dignity or the fullness or the freedom of the Buddha and the people who have followed his path. There's something very profound about this Eightfold Path.

There's a way in which we might consider that this is the most central, most important teaching of the Buddha. We see that, whether it actually happened or is how the tradition has recorded it, the very first teaching the Buddha gave was on the Eightfold Path. And the last teaching he gave before he died was the Eightfold Path. After he was enlightened, he went to find the people who he had practiced with before this who hadn't become enlightened to tell them his good news, to say that he had found what they were looking for. The first thing he said to them when he found them is that there is a middle way between indulging in the senses and denial of the senses, of asceticism. And what is this middle way? It's the Eightfold Path.

Usually, I'll recite what these are. Usually it's done in English with the word right. But it means something more like complete or consummate. Often in modern Buddhism, the Eightfold Path is kind of introduced as the beginning teaching for Buddhism, for beginners. In the time of the Buddha, it seemed like the teachings on the Eightfold Path were the end of the path. It was teachings relevant for people who are most mature along the path.

What's wonderful is that it functions both ways. To think that you know what the Eightfold Path is, because you've had them before, learned them before, is to not understand that

they're actually very advanced practices as well, or they represent the full culmination. Rather than calling each of the eight steps of the Eightfold Path right—right view, right intention—I like to, this two weeks, call them whole. There's a whole view. There's the whole attitude. I'll explain why I say it that way.

There's the whole speech. There is whole action. There is whole lifestyle. There is whole effort. There is whole mindfulness and whole concentration. Or wholesome, maybe, is a nice way to include the whole.

We'll go into this, but the idea is that it includes all of who we are. It's not meant to be exclusion of anything. This idea of not sensual desire, not being lost in that world, and not being involved in asceticism, included this idea of the whole path. The whole life is the lived life. It's the life that we live wholly and completely. And it's not a disconnection from life.

Before his enlightenment, the Buddha did practice the meditation practices taught by the great meditation teachers of his time, but two of them. Both of them taught what's called the formless *jhānas*. They taught the deepest form of experiencing a complete nothingness or complete neither perception nor non-perception, a kind of radical kind of non-experience of the usual world that we live in. The Buddha was offering something different. He was offering how to become whole and complete. Rather than the deep meditation practice into a kind of nothingness, it was a deep meditation into the fullness of who we are in the most unified, peaceful, harmonious way in which we can really experience this lived life of who we are.

So he began this. When he came to his fellow practitioners, who we assume were really good practitioners, he presented them the Eightfold Path. At the end of his life, he was dying. He was dying outdoors under the canopy of two *sāla* trees, majestic trees, kind of the redwood trees of northern India. People knew that he was dying and people came to see him and he allowed people to come to visit him. He was fading away.

There was a wanderer, a non-Buddhist seeker of truth, who heard that he was dying nearby and had heard that it was quite rare to have someone be born and be a Buddha and to be able to encounter one. So he went that night to visit the Buddha to ask his questions. He approached Ānanda, the Buddha's attendant, and said, I'd like to ask the Buddha a question. Ānanda said, no, no, he's weak, he's dying. This is not the time. So Subhadda, this wanderer, asked again. No, said Ānanda. He asked again. I think Ānanda said no a third time, which in ancient India was really a big deal. But the Buddha overheard this.

The Buddha said this in reply, Okay. The Buddha overheard this conversation between

Ānanda and Subhadda, and he called to Ānanda, Enough Ānanda. Do not hinder Subhadda. Let him see me. For whatever Subhadda asks me, he will ask in quest of enlightenment, not to annoy me. So then Subhadda was able to come to the Buddha and ask his question.

He asked the Buddha this question. All the wanderers, the seekers and the Brahmins who have their sects and have their followers, who are teachers, well-known and famous as founders of schools, and popularly regarded as saints, and he lists a series of them, have they all realized the truth as they all make out, or have none of them realized it, or have some realized it and some not? Yes. So he wants to know, all the other teachers besides you, have any of them realized the truth? So this is like a yes or no answer. Has any of them done this?

The Buddha replies this way. He often, when people ask him, what is the truth? Who is it that teaches the truth? He then answers, he doesn't want to answer that question directly, but he answers this way. Enough, Subhadda. Never mind. Whether all or none or some of them have realized the truth. I will teach you the *Dhamma*, Subhadda. Listen and pay close, and I will speak. Yes.

So rather than saying who has the truth, the Buddha is going to say, this is the *Dhamma*. This is the teaching that I have. Maybe in a sense he's saying, maybe this is the truth. So this is his last teaching before he dies. In whatever *dhamma*, in whatever teaching and discipline, way of practicing, in whatever *dhamma* and discipline, the noble Eightfold Path is not found, no spiritual seekers are found of the first, second, third, or fourth level of awakening. But such spiritual seekers can be found of the first, second, third, and fourth level of the *Dhamma* and discipline, there the noble Eightfold Path is found.

Now, Subhadda, in this teaching and discipline, the noble Eightfold Path is found, and in it are to be found spiritual seekers of the first, second, third, and fourth grade level. Those other schools are devoid of the first, second, of spiritual seekers who have attained these levels of awakening. But if in this one the monks were to live the life of wholeness, the world would not lack the enlightened ones. Here the Buddha is saying he doesn't want to engage in philosophy, doesn't want to engage in truth claims of the nature of reality, the nature of experience, the nature of metaphysics. He's saying it's the noble Eightfold Path that is not as a beginner practice, but the people who have actualized the Noble Eightfold Path in their lives.

Those who are living wholly and completely in this world, not apart from the world. Often Buddhist monks are considered to be monastics, are considered somehow being separated from the world. In a way they are, they're separated from the ordinary social life of the world

or commerce life or the ordinary ways in which people are kind of caught up in desires and aversions and preoccupations. But they're not separated, you know, they're still part of the world, a part of the whole, holding the whole, holding the whole world in their view, the whole world in their heart, I hope. And this wholeness is represented by the noble Eightfold Path. This Eightfold Path here, as I just said, represents the culmination, the first, it comes with some degree of awakening or being set free or deep realization.

Here is where this, not the Eightfold Path as a teaching appears, but the Eightfold Path appears as a maturation of the spiritual practitioner. We mature into the Eightfold Path. These people who are fully and wholly here in this wholeness, in this completeness, in this rightness, or this harmony of life. In the beginning of his teaching, at the end of his teaching, the last thing, bracketing the whole 40 years of his teaching, was this idea of the Eightfold Path as being central to what he had to teach. In doing that, the Eightfold Path is about a personal transformation. It's how we get transformed is not the truth that we hang on to. It's not hanging on to this is a true teaching, this is the true experience, this is the true state of mind in a sense.

It's not like a truth, but rather it's a whole way of being transformed. It's a personal change deep in the heart, deep in ourselves, where we become not divided, not caught, not attached in a way that limits us or makes us partial. But a way that by letting go of divisiveness, by letting go of the way we are at war with ourselves or conflicted with ourselves or caught in attachments, that we become whole. So that's what I'll do. We'll go through now the next eight talks, the Eightfold Path, and starting with the right view tomorrow. Then the tenth talk will be kind of a conclusion after these going through the eight. So, very important teaching, and hopefully that you'll understand that these are not only for beginners, but even for the most advanced practitioners of Buddhism, that these are extremely relevant and important. The Noble Eightfold Path. Thank you.