

Dharmette: Eightfold Path: (4 of 10) Holistic Speech

Gil Fronsdal

October 16, 2025

Keywords: Eightfold Path, Noble Eightfold Path, right view, right speech, right action, dukkha, non-reactivity, holistic awareness, non-harm, Buddha

So hello and welcome to this series of talks on the Eightfold Path, and sometimes called the Noble Eightfold Path. Sometimes I translate it for myself as the dignified Eightfold Path. That we sit with a certain kind of dignity, value, as if we're worthwhile or worthy. And this dignity of the Dharma, of the Eightfold Path, a lot of it comes from our capacity to be aware of ourselves and the world with a wholeness, a wholeness, holism, holistically. Everything included. And that's a means by which we start living the goal of the practice.

The goal is to be free in the middle of everything, and learning how to be free in the middle of ourselves, in our challenges, our attachments, our reactivity, by standing tall, metaphorically, and being, yes, yes. Not yes that we agree with things, but yes, this is the whole works. This is the whole. This is what I'm waking up to. And the value of this waking up to the whole is we can see clearly then what is healthy and unhealthy, in how we operate, in what goes on in the mind, in the heart.

And we can see it clearly without being judgmental or diminishing ourselves or undermining ourselves or feeling bad about ourselves. We don't give ourselves, and without giving ourselves away to any one thing, without kind of selecting part of the whole in which to get lost in or to be narrowed by, but the whole. And in doing that, to see that there is suffering, and there's the absence of suffering, the freedom from it, side by side. To see it, there are ways in which we do get caught, to do give ourselves away. But we see it side by side with how we don't do it. There's space, there's stillness, there's openness, there's non-reactivity next to the reactivity.

It may be that the non-reactivity, the spaciousness, is actually bigger than any way in which we're preoccupied or caught by anything at all. And so that's what the first noble, the first noble, first part of the Eightfold Path is, right view, is to have a view, a holistic view of it all.

And in doing that, we understand that being caught, being, to cling, to be reactive, narrows the scope, that that's a way we lose ourselves. We give ourselves away in a certain way. And we regain ourselves by having an awareness that can include it all. And this awareness that can include it all, I think of as what is most sacred in Buddhism, that there's nothing that's considered undesirable, unwanted, or for the purposes of being aware.

What's most phenomenal is this open, spacious, expansive awareness that has a capacity to recognize and see everything without being caught by it. Just see it. And that a lot means that we don't longer get caught by greed, hatred, and illusion. We don't get caught by ill-will and hostility and sensual desires. We're more oriented, the second fold of the Eightfold Path, to holistic orientation. Be oriented towards freedom from sensual desire, more oriented towards freedom from ill will, freedom from hostility, kindness, goodwill, compassion.

And with that orientation then, it begins then to guide us in how we live our lives, and how we live our social lives. In the whole world that we live in, that we sit in the middle of our own whole world, is, in a big part, is a social world, one way or the other. We live in dependence, live in relationship to all the many people that sustain us, support us, connect with us. There's immediate family perhaps or friends perhaps, but there's a whole field of people who provide us with food and bring food to the stores so we can eat. I feel very grateful for the people who are stocking the shelves in the supermarket for me, who are there helping me check out. They're an important link for me to be able to feed my family.

Right? And I'm grateful for that link. I'm grateful for what they make possible. And so we live in the social world. And so when we have this orientation towards non-harm, towards non-hostility, non-ill will, that shapes how we speak. And so the third fold, the eightfold path, the eightfold path, the third fold that we're unfolding, to open up to the wholeness that's tucked away in all these folds, is holistic speech.

To speak from that sense of whole, that's inclusivity at all, that gives us its orientation to a whole, healthy possibility of being in the world, a way that keeps us whole. A way, so if we tell lies... It's very hard to tell a lie without clinging or resisting or shutting down or disrespecting or shutting out the hearts of others. And so this holistic mode, its orientation is not to limit itself. We don't limit and hurt ourselves, so we don't lie. There's no malicious speech.

We don't speak in ways that harm other people, that creates divisiveness and harm and hurts people. And because if we do that, we're clinging to something. We're actually limiting ourselves. We're giving ourselves away. Even though it seems like we're really ourselves, really powerful and really, I mean, our anger really exists, that's who I, now I really know that I'm here. It can feel that way, and that's one of the reasons why people give themselves over to

hostility.

And to judgment and criticism because it feels like they're being empowered or they're really existing. They are someone now. But in fact, from the holistic point of view, we've lost ourselves. We've given up on ourselves. And so the holistic view lends itself to not avoid malicious speech, harmful speech, and then also to avoid harsh speech. Harsh also is speech which has a kind of sting in it, has a way in which it's kind of painful to hear.

And it might not exactly be kind of formal hostility, malicious speech, but just a tone of voice is so sarcastic or so intense or so hot and fiery and pointed. The Buddha talks about people having knives in their tongues. Maybe in the modern world we say bullets in our tongues, that the words are the arrows, the words are the bullets that come off our tongue. So to not speak harshly, but to speak kindly, to speak in a way that is pleasant to hear, and supportive to hear, and relaxing to hear for other people. Yeah. And the fourth aspect of this speech, in terms of holistic speech, is to... It's a little hard. We don't really quite know how the Pāli means, but don't talk frivolously. Don't talk kind of mindlessly in a way that loses touch with others, loses the human connectivity, the wholeness that's there. You can certainly have idle chatter. Sometimes this one's called no idle chatter.

But there can be idle chatter that actually makes us feel very connected. It's a way of kind of finding our way and being connected in a simple, light-hearted way that feels very good. But nothing frivolous, nothing mindless. We lose that connection both to ourselves and to others. So in this holistic speaking... So what you're seeing here is that all the how we speak, where this third factor of the Noble Eightfold Path is, is clearly informed by the holistic view and the holistic orientation.

And this points to how important it is to practice. The Eightfold Path was primarily, it rose in the Buddha's mind, not because he knew how to do it before he was enlightened, but it arose in the Buddha's mind after he was awake, that he understood that this view, this orientation leads to how we live in this world actively, fully, not disconnected from the world, not disconnected from ourselves, but live in the world free and fully here. And there's no need to diminish ourselves or belittle ourselves or apologize for ourselves, as there's no need to assert ourselves or have conceit or to champion ourselves in some kind of selfish way. The middle way between self-denial and self-assertion is to be fully present with all of who we are. And doing that then, when we speak... words which are true, speak words which are supportive and healing and beneficial, uniting people.

When we speak words that are soothing and settling and relaxing and trustworthy in tone, and when we speak words that are said mindfully or clearly, those words are being broadcast

from a very clear signal, very clear broadband, very clear, like fully there, where they convey so much more than what the words mean. They convey this wholeness, this completeness, as if I'm whole and you can be whole, like I'm fully here. If we diminish ourselves in any kind of way, then the words don't carry as much strength. If we speak with a lot of self-assertion, we also kind of diminish the other people and they don't hear. But to be fully present in our fullness, wholeness, and then speak with others, and have our speech be truthful, healing and unifying, kind and gentle, and meaningful.

This is the way that the Eightfold Path arises from deep within. It's not something we have to assume or believe we're supposed to do, but we have the evidence for how important this is because we've become awake to the wholeness of who we are and we know for ourselves how good it is, how natural it is to speak holistically. It's a good way. Whole speaking, holistic speaking. The third step, the first third unfolding of the Eightfold Path. And then tomorrow it's right action, which also, that right action, what I'm saying this week is a holistic action, which is one more way to keep unfolding the way we've been folded up, so we become freer and freer in how we live our life in this world. So thank you very much. And may you pay attention to your speech today. May your speech be coming out of your whole. Thank you.