

## Dharmette: Eightfold Path (5 of 10) Holistic Action

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Hello and welcome to this fifth talk on the Noble Eightfold Path. And today's topic is the fourth fold, right action. Maybe it's a little bit simplistic or silly, but I love the idea that as we go through the Eightfold Path, we're unfolding a piece of paper or cloth that's really tightly folded up into a small, little tight bundle. Then we're unfolding it, freeing it, letting something become more open and clean and available for the wider world, available for ourselves. Living with the Eightfold Path is not a limitation, but rather it's moving into something that's more unlimited, unlimited in its freedom, unlimited in not having any kind of tight boundaries that limit who we are. The Buddha just said that what limits us, what creates boundaries, is an excessive preoccupation with me, myself, and mine.

Excessive preoccupation with attachments and clinging and ill-will and hostility and desires. To understand, begin to appreciate that there is another way of living. The Eightfold Path is, at the heart of it, not a prescription of what we're supposed to do, but a description of how we live when we're free. When we have this deep, deep sensitivity that includes all of who we are. We really know, we recognize. We take the time, we have the space, we have the practice, we have the capacity to stay in the present moment fully enough to recognize that right here there is also freedom.

Right here there's also a kind of presence that allows a fullness of intelligence, of care, of love, of respect for others, respect for ourselves to be available. We're not going headlong into the future. We're not going swept up by the beliefs and the angers, the hurts, the frustrations, the desires that we might have. But we understand there's a much better thing to do, to open up wide, to feel all of it, and to know, to sense, to experience freedom right here, to experience compassion and goodwill and love and care, not as something we're supposed to do, but something that we naturally kind of feel if we really bring all of ourselves into this situation.

And when we do this, and know that there's a real world of difference between collapsing, collecting, tightening up around the activities that cause suffering, that cause stress versus not doing so, and staying connected to that capacity that doesn't suffer. Either because we see it right next to it—clinging, suffering, absence of clinging, absence of suffering, they're both there—or more importantly, we see that the global awareness that holds both is itself a kind of freedom.

It's itself a whole different category of freedom, of peace. And that leads us to avoid doing things that harm ourselves, limit ourselves, that we lose touch with something profound that we know. At the same time, we don't harm others. Because we know harming others harms them, they're like us. And we don't want to harm other people and limit their lives. Partly because if we do that, we know we're limiting ourselves.

We're so deeply connected to others. We can't kind of relate to others in any kind of way without that reinforcing, building, creating a certain kind of inner landscape for ourselves. We're responsible for this inner landscape, right? By what we act on, what we do. So the fourth step of the Eightfold Path, I call holistic action, usually called right action. I love this, that right in the middle of the Eightfold Path, is this emphasis on action.

The Buddha was a teacher of action. This is not about a passive life, a passive life in the forest or in a cave or something. This is how we're going to live in this world. The Eightfold Path is about being in the world. It's not about retreating from the world, but it is about retreating from greed, hate, and delusion. It is about finding an alternative way of living and participating in this world.

So here we come to the holistic action. What is the action that takes into account the whole? The whole of ourselves, the whole of the social situation, the whole of the consequences and the ripple effects of our actions. Here there's three things that the Buddha defines as holistic action, and they're all listed in the negative. Sometimes people are surprised by how often many of the goals in Buddhism are described as the absence of something. That does two things: it's very concrete, very specific, the action of something—you don't do this—but also it leaves wide open the alternative.

Almost like it doesn't need to define the alternative. If you do this, then you can just live your life in this open way. You don't have to have a particular code of conduct that you're supposed to do this, but rather you live then into the world from this holistic view. So the three things that are called holistic action, and it is a kind of activity, even though it's an absence, is not killing, not killing living beings. It's a radical thing, right? It's a revolutionary thing, given how much killing of beings is part of human life.

Killing other human beings, killing animals. The whole killing is so central to much of what humans do. Whether this teaching of not killing is meant to be universal—to no animals at all, no humans at all. Is there just wars or just killing? Is there appropriate? This is a complicated question. It's a question of the heart, not the mind.

So what happens when the heart is expansive? We know we have to take care of many things that are maybe in conflict with each other. Many of us will have to grapple with this, but I love it that people are grappling with this teaching. Don't kill. It's the first precept. Don't kill. For the Eightfold Path, right action is not a precept. It's not a command. It's not a... Rather, remember, it's a description.

So something about a liberated heart, something about a deep sensitivity of a heart that a person is not going to kill. Some people, it's a gradual process that they've come, they found, okay, not now, not this, not this. I remember when I was yet quite young, we used to go fishing. At some point, I just couldn't do that anymore. No more fishing. I didn't want to kill the fish. So not to kill.

The second is not to steal. It's usually worded not to take what is not given. If it belongs to someone else, don't take it unless it's offered. Again, many of us don't steal overtly, but perhaps the lifestyles we live, the products we consume, that we buy, somehow have been procured in ways that maybe are not ethical. Then there is, the last one is avoiding sexual misconduct. This is more nuanced and certainly complicated, but the idea here is you don't cause harm through your sexuality. What sexuality, sexual behavior looks like is left quite open as long as it's not causing harm.

So all three of these—not killing, not stealing, not causing sexual harm—involve not harming, not as... You can adopt these as a precept. You can adopt these as a training, as you kind of logically feel this is really good, really important. You can be devoted to it, dedicated to it, out of faith. But as an Eightfold Path, this fourth fold has opened up to a deeper sensitivity that we understand something profound about the nature of the heart, the mind, and what happens when we get involved with the kind of unwholesome mind states, the unwholesome clinging attachment, that is required in order to kill, steal, and engage in deliberate sexual misconduct.

We really know, and it's not a matter of following a precept or a rule, it's following the peace, the freedom, the deep love that exists within us, that becomes a guide for how we live our life. Of course, there might be times when we have strong feelings of hostility, and you might even feel like you want to kill someone, at least as metaphorically. You might feel strong feelings of wanting to take something, steal, or be involved in sexual misconduct. Of course, human

beings have all kinds of thoughts and impulses. As we open the folds of the mind, the more it's folded up, the more we don't see what goes on, the operating principles. The more we unfold the mind, unfold the heart, and we see clearly, we see how harmful it is to ourselves to close up again, to tighten up again, to get all folded up and preoccupied with something, and to be able to live an unpreoccupied life, and to stay unpreoccupied, to be able to see the Eightfold Path as an expression of our freedom, right? More than no path to freedom.

So right for a holistic action. So we'll continue on Monday and with the rest of the folds. And thank you for being part of this.