

Eightfold Path (3 of 10) Holistic Orientation

October 15, 2025

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

anga, anukampā, karuṇā, mettā, sammā, sankappa, compass, orienteering, North Star, folding/unfolding paper, wellsprings

Gil Fronsda

Hello and welcome to this third talk on the Eightfold Path. I just finished this guided meditation that I hope offered you a sense of wonderful, delightful seriousness about how serious it is to meditate. But not taking it so seriously that it is dour or heavy, but serious so we are inspired to really show up and be present for ourselves in meditation, so that we have what it takes to be present in this world with an orientation of care and kindness, and goodwill.

This second factor of the Eightfold Path is usually called intention, resolve, occasionally I have seen “thought.” Usually they use the word right: right intention, right resolve, right thought. I am choosing to translate the word *sammā*, not as right, but as holistic, because it encompasses the whole of who we are. It is an attitude, or an approach, or an activity we do, that includes everything, the whole life – our whole lived life.

So today I am going to translate the second factor of the Eightfold Path – the Pali word is *sankappa* – as orientation: the holistic orientation.

I have spent a fair amount of time trying to understand what *sankappa* might mean. The way it appears in the suttas, it is the precursor – it is the condition that engages, or orients, or directs our thinking. So first, if I hear a sound, and I turn and orient my attention to the sound, then I have thoughts: “Oh that’s a car horn. That’s a train.”

If I go through the world wanting to buy something, there is an orientation. Many years ago, I wanted a futon couch. I wasn’t actively, consciously looking, but something inside of me was oriented to driving down the streets of the city noticing futon couch stores. There is, kind of, an attitude, a disposition, but it is more like an orientation.

There are three orientations for holistic orientation. The orientation to not be caught in sensual desire. So, freedom: orientation toward freedom, freedom from sensual desire. An orientation to kindness, goodwill. And an orientation toward compassion.

It is possible to have hostility towards someone, really feel angry and upset. But while we have those feelings, our orientation is to try to see how we can talk to them, be with them, without that hostility dominating our speech and our actions. We are not oriented – we are not being animated by the hostility. We are being oriented or animated by a whole other area that we are committed to that feels valuable. It seems much more important. We are not oriented around ill will for people. We are oriented towards goodwill.

It is like orienteering in the wilderness, where we might have a compass that orients us to going in the direction we want to go. We have that as the bearing. We are oriented in the right way. But now the terrain requires us to go in all kinds of directions – sometimes even backwards, and round and round, and up, and down, and sideways – because of the obstacles in the terrain. But we are oriented towards the direction by the compass, so we know where we are going. And we make choices with that in mind.

The first fold of the Eightfold Path, the first limb, is holistic view: the view that is able to take it all in, including how we suffer and where there is freedom of suffering; where there is clinging and where there is freedom of clinging, at the same time.

It is, kind of, standing fully, completely in ourselves, so we see it all. We have a holistic point of view. It is not easy, but this is what we are going to. This is what the practice is bringing us to.

Once we have this holistic view, we see that suffering, clinging, is not the whole story. We are no longer inclined to invest in our suffering, to identify with our suffering, exclusively. We are not going to invest anymore in clinging, or identifying with clinging, or justifying clinging, because we clearly see there is an alternative. It is already right here. It is part of us.

The stronger the mindfulness – the stronger the way we are really present – the more we will see that we are not defined by these negative mind states we can have. As we see that, we see there is another possibility. And that can give birth to having a holistic orientation: to be guided by it, be disposed towards, to be motivated by, to have intentions, have thoughts, have considerations in a certain direction.

The North Star is compassion, goodwill, *mettā*. The orientation is freedom from sensual desires. Not necessarily avoiding sensual pleasures, but not being caught in them, not being imprisoned by them, not being limited by them, to find freedom.

As the holistic view becomes stronger, the corollary of what follows is this holistic orientation that knows clearly what is better for us – that knows clearly what is the best that we can have; knows clearly where the deepest sources of life, the deepest sources of what animates us, can come from. And even though it might not always be there, we know well enough that we have it as our north star. We have it as our compass point.

Kindness, goodwill, well-wishing, *mettā*, care, compassion, *karuṇā*. These are not meant to be overlays onto our experience – like pretending or acting as if we have compassion and goodwill. They are supposed to be the opposite. They come from the wellsprings inside of us.

That is possible when we have the holistic view. Then there is a sense of the whole being complete. We start gathering all the pieces of ourselves together so that the best in us has a chance to inform us, to guide us, to show us the way.

For the Buddha, finding the way, finding the way to freedom, to a fulfilled life, to a holistic life, so that we feel fulfilled, deeply satisfied, involves freedom from sensual desires. Being oriented around that involves freedom from ill will, being oriented to well-wishing, to *mettā*, and being oriented away from cruelty, and instead being oriented towards non-cruelty, which the tradition calls compassion, *karuṇā*, and I call, *anukampa*, care.

The idea is that these are not beliefs that we take on. Though they could be, because these beliefs are maybe better than the alternatives. Rather, we have done the inner work to identify these qualities of compassion – goodwill, freedom from sensual desires – as being really healthy. It is the healthy sense of the whole. The healthy sense of integration, of inclusion. Nothing left out.

It is an alternative to clinging. As soon as we cling, we have things that are left out. As soon as we cling, we are separated from the whole. We now are narrowly focused, tight, limited.

This practice of mindfulness is to be filled and open up to the whole picture: the good, the bad, and the ugly. Everything can be included. And something very special happens then. Then, we have a chance to recognize the deep wellsprings inside: the wellsprings of our interpersonal relationships; the wellsprings of care, caring for our interpersonal lives, caring for the world around us, caring for it with goodwill, caring for it with compassion, caring for it without being caught in sensual desires.

So, the first limb of the Eightfold Path, right view, is primarily understood to be deeply personal. The second step of the Eightfold Path now begins to spread the lessons of the right view into our interpersonal life, out into the world. This is foundational to the whole Dharma.

It is not just to keep it personal, but also to let it radiate from us, or be inclusive of us as interpersonal beings in our interpersonal relationships, so that we are oriented towards compassion, oriented towards loving-kindness, oriented towards freedom. These orientations, these ways of setting the compass, these ways of having a north star, set the stage for the rest of the Eightfold Path.

So, holistic orientation, the second fold of the Eightfold Path. The word in Pali is “limb,” *anga*, for the Eightfold Path. But we say in English, eightfold. The image I have, what I think of, is that as we go through the Eightfold Path, we are unfolding the paper. It is folded eight ways, and now we are opening it up, and opening it up. If you have ever tried to fold paper into eight, by keeping folding it in half, no matter how big it is, the paper gets really tight and small if you fold it eight times in half. And this wonderful thing happens as we unfold it.

Thank you very much. I look forward to being here tomorrow.