

Eightfold Path (4 of 10) Holistic Speech

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Hello and welcome to this series of talks on the Eightfold Path – 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 are worthwhile or worthy.

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 holism, holistically – everything included. And that is a means by which we start living the goal of the practice.

The goal is to be free in the middle of everything. Learning how to be free in the middle of ourselves – in our challenges, our attachments, our reactivity – by standing tall, metaphorically, and being, “Yes!” Not, yes, that we agree with things, but, yes, *this* is the whole works. This is the whole. This is what I am waking up to.

The value of this waking up to the whole is that 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 – 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, or caught in, but seeing the whole.

And in doing that, to see that there is suffering, and there is the absence of suffering – the freedom from it – side by side. To see that there are ways in which we do get caught, we do give ourselves away. But we see it side by side with how we do not do it.

There is space. There is stillness. There is openness. There is non-reactivity next to the reactivity. It may be that the non-reactivity, the spaciousness, is actually bigger than any way in which we are preoccupied or caught by anything at all.

This is the first part of the Eightfold Path – right view – to have a view, a holistic view of it all. In doing that, we understand that being caught, clinging, being reactive, narrows the scope. That is 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.

This awareness that can include it all, I think of as what is most sacred in Buddhism: that there is nothing that is considered undesirable, unwanted, for the purposes of being aware.

What is 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. That means we no longer get caught by greed, hatred, and delusion. We don't get caught by ill-will and hostility and sensual desires. We are more oriented – the second fold of the Eightfold Path – to holistic orientation.

We are oriented towards freedom from sensual desire, or oriented towards freedom from ill will, freedom from hostility, and towards kindness, goodwill, compassion. And with that orientation, 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, 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 is immediate family, perhaps, or friends, perhaps, but there is a whole field of people who provide us with food and bring food to the stores so we can eat. I am very grateful for the people who are stocking the shelves in the supermarket for me – who are there helping me check out. They are an important link for me to be able to feed my family. And I'm grateful for that link. I'm grateful for what they make possible.

We live in this social world, and when we have this orientation towards non-harm, towards non-hostility, non-ill will, that shapes how we speak. So, the third fold of the eightfold path – the third fold that we are unfolding to open up to the wholeness that is tucked away in all these folds – is holistic speech.

To speak from that sense of whole, that is inclusive of all, gives us its orientation to a whole, healthy possibility of being in the world – a way that keeps us whole. 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.

This holistic mode, its orientation is not to limit itself. We don't limit and hurt ourselves. So we don't lie. There is no malicious speech. We don't speak in ways that harm other people – that create divisiveness, and harm, and hurt people. Because if we do that, we are clinging to something. We are actually limiting ourselves. We are giving ourselves away.

Even though it seems like we are really ourselves, really powerful, and our anger really exists – "Now I really know that I'm here." It can feel that way. That is one of the reasons why people give themselves over to hostility, and to judgment, and criticism. Because it feels like they are being empowered, or they are really existing. They are someone now. But in fact, from the holistic point of view, we have lost ourselves. We have given up on ourselves.

The holistic view lends itself to avoiding malicious speech, harmful speech, and also harsh speech. Harsh speech has a kind of sting in it. It has a way in which it is painful to hear. It might not exactly be formal hostility – malicious speech – but just a tone of voice, which 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.

The fourth aspect of this speech, in terms of holistic speech, is... It's a little hard. We don't really quite know what the Pali 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 is there.

You can certainly have idle chatter. Sometimes this one is called, "no idle chatter." But there can be idle chatter that actually makes us feel very connected. It is 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, or we lose that connection both to ourselves and to others.

In this holistic speaking, what you are seeing here is that 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 primarily 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. 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.

There is no need to diminish ourselves, or belittle ourselves, or apologize for ourselves, as there is 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, a 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 am whole and you can be whole, like I am 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 is not something we have to assume or believe we are supposed to do, but we have the evidence for how important this is because we have 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.

Whole speaking, holistic speaking, the third step, the third unfolding of the Eightfold Path. And then tomorrow it is right action, which what I am saying this week is a holistic action, which is one more way to keep unfolding the way we have 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 wholeness. Thank you.