

Eightfold Path (5 of 10) Holistic Action

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Hello and welcome to this fifth talk on the Noble Eightfold Path. Today's topic is the fourth fold: right action. Maybe it is a little bit simplistic or silly, but I love the idea that as we go through the Eightfold Path, we are unfolding a piece of paper or cloth that is really tightly folded up into a small, little, tight bundle. And then we are 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 is moving into something that is 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 – an excessive preoccupation with attachments, and clinging, and ill-will, and hostility, and desires – and to understand, to begin to appreciate, that there is another way of living. And the Eightfold Path is at the heart of it.

It is not a prescription of what we are supposed to do, but a description of how we live when we are free – when we have this deep, deep sensitivity that includes all of who we are. And 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 is 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 are not going headlong into the future. We are not getting swept up by the beliefs, and the angers, the hurts, the frustrations, the desires that we might have.

But we understand there is 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 are supposed to do, but as something that we naturally, kind of, feel if we really bring all of ourselves into this situation.

And when we do this, we know that there is 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 right next to it we see 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 is itself a whole different category of freedom, of peace.

And that leads us to avoid doing things that harm ourselves, limit ourselves, that make us 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 are like us. And we don't want to harm other people and limit their lives – partly because if we do that, we know we are limiting ourselves.

We are so deeply connected to others. We can't relate to others in any kind of way without that reinforcing, building, creating a certain kind of inner landscape for ourselves. And we are responsible for this inner landscape by what we act on, what we do.

So, the fourth step of the Eightfold Path, I call holistic action – usually called right action. And 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 are going to live in this world.

The Eightfold Path is about being in the world. It is 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. And so here we come to 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.

So here there are three things that the Buddha defines as holistic action. And they are all listed in the negative. Sometimes people are surprised by how often many of the goals in Buddhism are described by the absence of something. This is an advantage and does two things. It is very concrete, very specific: the action of something – you don't do this. But also it leaves the alternative wide open. 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 means you are supposed to do this, but rather you live then in 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 is an absence – are not killing – not killing living beings. It is a radical thing. It is a revolutionary thing – given how much killing of beings is part of human life. Killing other human beings, killing animals – whole killing is so central to much of what humans do.

Whether this teaching of not killing is meant to be universal – no animals at all, no humans at all? Are there just wars, or just killing? Is there appropriate killing? This is a complicated question. It is a question of the heart, not the mind. So, what happens when the heart is expansive, and 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 is the first precept. Don't kill. For the Eightfold Path, right action is not a precept. It is not a command. It is not a... Rather, remember, it is a description. So, something about a liberated heart – something about a deep sensitivity of a heart that a person is not going to kill.

For some people, it is a gradual process that they come to: not this 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 is usually worded “not to take what is not given.” If it belongs to someone else, don't take it unless it is 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.

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 is not causing harm.

So, all three of these – not killing, not stealing, not causing sexual harm – involve not harming. 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.

And we really know. It is not a matter of following a precept or a rule. It is 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 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, we see more. The more it is folded up, the more we don't see what goes on, the operating principles. The more we unfold the mind – unfold the heart – the more 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 when we are able to live an unpreoccupied life, and to stay unpreoccupied, we are able to see the Eightfold Path as an expression of our freedom – more than a path to freedom.

So, holistic action. We'll continue on Monday with the rest of the folds. Thank you for being part of this.