

Eightfold Path (7 of 10) Holistic Effort

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Gil Fronsdal

Hello, and welcome to the seventh talk on the Noble Eightfold Path. This time it is the sixth factor, which is usually called “right effort.” I am calling it “holistic effort.” Here is where, for my mind – my love of words and wordplay – calling it holistic is related to what, for ourselves, is whole and the wholeness of ourselves.

The primary, kind of, simple definition of holistic right effort is to engage in those activities, those actions, that are wholesome – that are part of the whole – and to avoid those activities that are unwholesome – that are not part of the whole.

It turns out that when there is anything we do with clinging, it cuts us off from the whole because of its preoccupation, the focus, the tension that is there. Anytime there is hatred, it cuts us off from the whole. Anytime there is greed, anytime there is delusion – ignorance of the whole – then we are cut off from the whole.

But there are certain things that connect us to the whole – that are part of the whole. One way the Buddhist tradition calls that is wholesome effort: to do what is wholesome – to do what is healthy. The thing about this holistic effort, the effort we are talking about here primarily, is activities of the mind. Or, if you prefer, the activities of our inner life. So that it is not just the mental, in a sense. It is heart-filled. It is bellyful. It is all of we are on the inside.

Only we can be the final, ultimate caretaker of our inner life. If we do not care for it, if we do not care for our inner life and support it to flower, to grow, in satisfying, meaningful, happy, beautiful ways, it maybe won't. Maybe then it just has to do with the vagaries of experience – how it feels on the inside – and maybe how we feel on the inside will be somewhat shallow.

Winning a lottery – winning lots and lots of money in a lottery – might bring a lot of thrill, excitement, kind of joy and happiness, but it probably is not so deep. It is said that most people who win big lotteries are less happy a year later than they were before. But to discover how to win the inner lottery, how to tap into our capacity for a deep sense of well-being, an upwelling sense of well-being... So right effort, holistic effort, is to be able to make that distinction – to see clearly that this is debilitating and this is enlivening. This is unhealthy. This is healthy. This undermines the quality of my inner life. This enhances it.

There is a learning to make a distinction that is really important in the Dharma. Some people might complain that this is dualistic, and maybe so, but sometimes having a very simple dichotomy to find our way with, it is just a lot easier to find our way.

If you are biking someplace, to make the biking easier, you want to bike where the asphalt is smooth and flat. If part of the road is all bumpy with holes, with potholes, to be able to distinguish between where it is smooth and where it is not just makes for good biking – safe biking.

That is all you need to know, maybe, in the moment: where it is smooth and where it is really rough. So, where is it smooth on the inside? Where is it calm? Where is it peaceful? Where is it inspiring? Where is it bringing you full of joy? Where is it nourishing? Where does it fill you with a sense of goodness?

This is what we are caretaking and learning how to do here. It is a hard thing to do because some people think that their thoughts, their inner impulses, their emotions, their feelings... they are so identified with them, that they can't stand outside of them and see them as being contingent – see them as being adjustable – seeing that we can find a way to live from the wholesome.

Some people are so embedded in fear, or anger, or aversion that they even have a relationship to their aversion: they have aversion to the aversion. So it just kind of perpetuates itself.

The idea in Buddhist practice is to discover how to meet experience in a healthy way – in a wholesome way. One way we do that is not to identify, not to define ourselves by anything in the inner life. It is part of us, for sure. We are taking responsibility. We are tracking it. We are knowing it. But we are stepping out of it so that the way we see the world is not as if we are embedded in it – as if we *are* sadness or grief; we *are* anger; we *are* something.

In the language of the Buddha, it is not a mind that is angry, it is a mind with anger. It is not a mind that is greedy, it is a mind with greed. As soon as you add the word “with”, it is like stepping back and then seeing the whole picture from a place of awareness. But awareness that, hopefully, you can adjust just enough, calmly, clearly, so that it is enjoyable – it is healthy. It feels almost like medicine for you to be calmly and clearly knowing, “Oh, this is what is happening.”

There is a lot of fear, there is a lot of anger, but the capacity to step away from it, to glance at it, to gaze upon it calmly... this is a phenomenal thing to do. Then maybe to evoke generosity, to evoke kindness, to evoke faith and confidence... there are a lot of positive inner qualities that are part of the whole.

When I was young in Buddhism, I had this idea that it was best not to do anything at all, but just to be aware – that anything else is manipulative, anything else is being too busy, anything else is a kind of greed for something.

I think that idea served me well because I really learned to step away and not be reactive – not be caught in what I was trying to do. But a time came when I got to see clearly that I am the custodian of my inner life, and it is possible to bring forth wholesomeness. It is possible to recognize when there is goodness – when there is inner health – to recognize it and to support it, to let it grow, to expand it, to suffuse myself with it. Not because it is greedy, but because that is what it wants to do.

The wholesome, kind of, wants to grow, wants to have its freedom to move through us and fill us to become part of the whole – to be the whole.

So, part of this Noble Eightfold Path is to become the custodian of our inner life and to be able to distinguish the activities of the mind that are unhealthy, or debilitating, or drain us, or make us tense, stress us – to see what they are and to be able to put them aside, or to be able to know they are coming and say, “No, no, thank you. I don’t need to do that. Nope, don’t need to do that.”

On the other side, to be able to recognize, “Oh, now, look at that.” Now it feels good in there. It is a nice place. It feels healthy and wholesome. It is not dramatic. It is not something good enough to tell my friends, but it is nice. Let’s, kind of, support this. Let’s not get distracted from it. Let’s not get pulled into all the things I have to do and all the things I have to react to – to not feel at home and settled in this wonderful way of being. Let me grow and let me find a way of how to live from this healthy side of myself so that I can stay close to it.

Can I take care of all my responsibilities from this healthy inner life? If I am calm and peaceful, can I take care of everything from that place? Or do I have to sacrifice it and get tense in order to take care of everything? I hope that what you learn is you do not have to sacrifice your calm and peace. Nothing is worth doing that for, because you can do things better calmly and peacefully.

So, we are training ourselves in... the language here is “effort, engagement,” but it is a form of action or activity. Action maybe suggests too much willpower over it. Activity is more what is happening on its own. But these two come together because we have some role in adjusting our inner life.

If nothing else, maybe we can't change what is happening, but we can change how we are relating to it – how we meet it with awareness – and that can make the world of difference. That awareness meets it calmly. That awareness meets it stepping away and has a bird's-eye view of the situation: “This is me confused.”

That awareness makes space for the experience. That awareness and mindfulness calmly knows what it is, without spinning out in a lot of thoughts. That is an action that we can do, and do it in such a way that we feel nourished by it – feel inspired even by it.

It is possible to do things in a beautiful way on the inside, in an artistic way, like developing a craft. There is no reason why you can't develop your inner life in the same way as you develop a physical skill with your hands or your body with a lot of training – a lot of training. But you can develop something in the mind. You can develop the wholesome qualities of mind – the wholesome activities of mind – in order to meet the world, to encounter the next moment.

This is not Pollyannish. It is not overriding what is going on here, but rather learning how to meet whatever is happening in an honest and clear way – in a way that inspires you – that is healthy and trains oneself so it becomes, kind of, second nature.

I am inspired by the people who do have physical limitations, but somehow this physical limitation does not limit them.

I met a woman once who, her right arm, I think, only went down to the elbow, and her left arm did not really have a hand. It had something like a little thumb, like a little stub with a teeny thumb. I watched her write something with a pen, with both arms. She had beautiful handwriting. It was exquisite. So I commented and just said, “That is beautiful handwriting.”

Maybe she is used to comments like that or something. But she just lovingly said to me, “It’s all in the mind.”

I guess people say things like that to her because they do not expect someone with hands missing and arms missing to be able to write well. So her explanation, “It’s all in the mind.”

Your mind is a powerful thing – your mind and how you care for it. You *can* care for it well. That is what holistic effort is about: learning to do that work.

So, thank you very much. We have two more factors of the Eightfold Path: right mindfulness and right concentration – or wholesome mindfulness and wholesome concentration. Thank you.