

Mind Training in the Noble Eightfold Path

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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Tonight I'm going to continue the series on the Eightfold Path. This is the last in a series. The first talk was about how the Eightfold Path is a training that we can follow to diminish and eliminate the sources of suffering. Greed, hatred, and delusion can be uprooted with the Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path, as the name suggests, has eight elements. These eight elements are put into three different groups, or trainings, often given as ethics, wisdom, and mental development. I did [a talk on] ethics, last week was wisdom, and this week is mental development, the last one in the Eightfold Path.

Usually, I don't like to clump so much stuff into one single talk, but in another setting I was requested to do this series, and it's been good for me. I've enjoyed thinking, "Okay, let's look at these things more from the 10,000-foot view rather than the worm's-eye view." So we're looking at these factors a little bit with the big picture. And it's perfectly fine if you don't know what the Eightfold Path is. I'm going to talk about these three elements that are in there: right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

I'm using this word *right*. It's not this moralistic right, where everything else is wrong. It's more like if you're thirsty and you want to drink some water, it's helpful to have a glass, a cup, or a mug. It's not so helpful to have a fork if you want to drink some water. So we could say that a cup, glass, or mug is right and a fork isn't. It's more, "What's the most helpful? What's the most appropriate?" I like "most helpful." So *right* sometimes gets translated as *wise* as a way to get us away from this idea of right versus wrong. But I learned it this way as *right*, and it comes out of my mouth this way very often. It's probably decades of practice. It still comes out that way. So I'll probably say both *right* and *wise*. And now that I have this cup in my hand, I'm going to take a sip of water.

Right Effort

We could say right effort, or wise effort, which is the first factor I'm going to talk about this evening, runs through all the other path factors. Not only does it run through the path factors, it runs through so much of our life. That is, if we want to make this movement from aspiration, or being inspired, to transformation—actually having a difference—then there's some energy that needs to get put into the system, so to speak. We have to apply some energy. We have to apply some effort if our spiritual practice, or anything in our life really, is to be anything more than just thoughts.

There might be a way in which we hear about the Eightfold Path, we hear about Buddhist practice, and say, “Oh, okay, that sounds nice,” and then don’t do anything about it. Then it’s just something that sounds nice, and the transformation that’s possible doesn’t happen.

This is not uncommon for a lot of people starting in the practice. It used to be reading books, but now it’s probably listening to podcasts or using an app on the phone. We used to call these “bedside Buddhists.” They’d just read a lot of books [that get kept on the bedside] and get inspired, and then read the next book and the next book. There’s no end to the things you can do.

It’s not just about Buddhist practice; it’s about everything: eating better, going to the gym, all these things that we know we should do or would like to do. It requires some energy, some effort, if we really want there to be a shift, a change. I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know.

Without effort, our life is more about following the habits of our life, going down the path of least resistance. Maybe the habits lead us to a place where we want to go, and maybe they don’t. But if we want to change them, it requires some effort.

One way that we might understand right effort, wise effort, is with this classic teaching that we find in the suttas: right effort has four elements. I like to remember them as PACK, P-A-C-K. (I need a lot of mnemonics with all these lists.)

The first part of Right Effort is not just “apply yourself and strive and get it done.” That would be great if it were that simple, but it’s not always so straightforward. Apply effort where? Doing exactly what?

So, PACK. First is **prevent**.

Prevent what’s unhelpful from arising, if you can.

An example is that maybe it’s late at night and you need to sleep. It’s time for you to sleep, but then you have this idea, “Oh, I’ll just check my email one last time.” You get your phone, and then it’s this and then that and, before you know it, half an hour, an hour, an hour and a half. This idea of prevent is that you might feel this feeling, “Oh yeah, maybe I’ll just check my email one more time,” and maybe you just put the phone down. Just recognizing, “Okay, before I go to sleep, maybe it’s not good for me to be looking at my phone, creating a to-do list, or whatever it might be that is agitating before I’m trying to go to sleep.”

So this idea of prevent is just to have the wisdom to know, “If I want to sleep well, I’m not going to do things that are agitating right before sleep.” If I want to have more freedom, then those things that cause constriction, that cause delusion, that cause all the things that get in the way of freedom—as best we can, we prevent them from arising.

Then the A is **abandon**, because sometimes they arise anyway.

Sometimes you find yourself with your phone. This has happened to me. I've thought, "Okay, I better take care of this before I go to sleep." And oh my goodness, it's terrible, because this leads to that, which leads to this, and I better look at that, and then all this other stuff.

So abandon is when you recognize, "Oh, this isn't helpful." Can we put it down? Can we stop when you find yourself in something that's just not helping you have the life you want to have? This is not easy. So often we just want to keep doing what we're doing, and maybe part of why we're doing it is because we want to be numb. We want to disconnect from the stress, from the agitation. There's this way in which we want to just be on the surface, but to apply a little bit of effort requires that we dig a little deeper in some way.

It's not always easy. But it starts with this recognition: "Okay, can we set the intention?" These things that we know are not helpful.

If it were easy, there would not be an obesity epidemic. There would not be drug addicts who don't want to be drug addicts. If it were easy to stop, then we would have done it already.

But this isn't about striving and pushing as hard as you can. It's not about that, because striving and pushing is just another way in which suffering can show up in the world.

So this Wise Effort includes balance. Instead of striving as hard as we can, it has ease and spaciousness with it.

This is a practice. How do we do that? How do we move forward in a way that we want to move forward without pushing, but also without disconnecting?

I know for me, earlier in my professional and academic life, I found myself either on or off. I was either striving so hard or completely disengaged in some way. So this has certainly been a practice: how to apply gentle pressure. I don't know if pressure is the right word. Gentle effort. Gentle effort.

Maybe I'll offer as an example mindfulness practice. I'm going to talk about mindfulness in a moment, but with mindfulness of the breath, we set the breath as the anchor, and then the mind drifts away because that's what minds do. Then we very gently, simply come back to the breath. We don't bounce on the breath and punch the breath or anything like this. The mind drifts. We notice, "Oh yeah, I'm over here," and we just come back.

Effort is like this. It's a simple, gentle coming back. It doesn't matter how many times we have to come back. It doesn't matter. The intention is just to come back.

So Wise Effort: PACK. Prevent, abandon, and the C is **cultivate**.

Cultivate what is helpful.

I was just talking about mindfulness, and that's an example of cultivating. But if you want to be practicing with speech in a way that supports healthy relationships, you might set out, "Okay, I'm going to cultivate this. I'm going to recognize some of my triggers in which I find myself lashing out or speaking unwisely, and I'm going to cultivate something here in particular because it will support my life going in a direction I'd like it to go."

So C is cultivate those helpful, wholesome things that are not present, to help make them present.

Then the K is **keep**. Those helpful things that are already there, let's maintain them. Keep them there.

If you have a regular meditation practice, or you're coming to a meditation center, and you're finding these helpful, keep doing them.

It's so easy to think, "Oh, I feel better now, so I'm going to drop these things." We so often do that. But here we're saying, "Okay, let's maintain those things."

So wise effort: prevent those things that are not helpful from arising. If they've already arisen, abandon them. If you find yourself without things that are helpful, cultivate helpful things. And then keep those things that are helpful around.

It's kind of neat and tidy in the way that the Buddhists talk about this. Of course, it doesn't show up neat and tidy in our lives like this, but it can be really helpful to think about: What is helpful? What isn't helpful?

Right Mindfulness

This idea of what is helpful and what isn't helpful is part of where the next factor comes in, and that's **mindfulness**.

If wise effort, right effort, is about letting go of entanglement and supporting release or freedom, then we could say right mindfulness is about noticing what is entangling and what leads to freedom.

How do I know when I'm entangled? What does it feel like? What does it look like? What is the experience?

Because it doesn't matter if you know everything about right effort and PAK if you don't ever notice when you're lost in things that are not helpful. Or you don't even notice when you're experiencing things that are helpful and allow yourself to savor those moments, to really experience those moments.

We could think of mindfulness as a headlamp. Maybe a flashlight. A headlamp seems more fun because your hands are free and I associate it with hiking, whereas a flashlight sometimes can be work, trying to get things from behind the refrigerator or something like this.

There's a way that mindfulness naturally follows from effort in this list of the Eightfold Path, because we can't prevent what we don't notice. We can't abandon what we don't recognize. We can't cultivate if we forget it's even possible to cultivate. And we can't keep what we don't even see is there.

One of the classic teachings on mindfulness has a number of domains in which we can rest our attention. The reason we have different domains is because mindfulness is really for our entire life. But sometimes it's helpful to call out specific domains because we might find ourselves bringing mindfulness only to the places that feel the most comfortable and neglecting to notice things that are uncomfortable.

Those times in which we spoke harshly to our partner or our kids or a co-worker, and then we tend to forget about those. Or the times in which we are doing something that's unhelpful.

These four classic domains are preserved in the ancient teachings. It's not exactly how we would divide up our experience today. We would probably use different words, but thousands of years ago, they had a different idea of the human experience.

The first one is mindfulness of the **body**, which we do a lot of here at IMC. I don't do guided meditations here on Monday nights, but often when I am doing guided meditations in other settings, I'm almost always guiding people to be mindful of their bodily experience, including the breath, the sensations of breathing.

Part of the advantage is that it's happening here and now. The breath and the body are tangible. We can literally feel them. Sometimes you can put your hand on your chest to help with mindfulness of the breath, just to connect with it.

That's the first domain.

The second domain is **feeling tone**. Is something pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant?

Sometimes this is helpful. Sometimes it's, "Oh my gosh, what's happening?" We're confused. We feel a little bit lost. It can be helpful to say, "This is unpleasant," and just notice that it's unpleasant without having to attach a label to it, figure out what's happening in the mind, or find it in the body.

Sometimes it's really helpful: "This is unpleasant." There's a way in which that simplifies everything down to, "Oh yeah, this is unpleasant."

Then you'll notice the next beat: the mind wants to say, "No, I don't want things that are unpleasant."

This is human. This is what all humans do.

The third domain is **mind states**. What's going on in the mind? Is there this sense of, "No, get this away from me"?

Or is there a sense of, "I need more. I just need more of everything. I need more freedom. I need more time. I need more space. I need more food. I need more everything."

There's this way in which we can find ourselves filled with this sense of lack, and we're just trying to find more and more and more.

Or maybe there's a mind state that feels really appreciative, full of gratitude.

The other day I went hiking at this place, and a friend of mine who doesn't live in the area was here. I was showing the area to her. She had never been there.

I was just feeling, "Oh, it's so great to be here in California." My friend, who lives in a cold place, kept saying, "I can't believe this is January. I just can't believe it." She was taking off all these warm jackets.

I just feel so grateful here in the Bay Area. There are so many beautiful places to hike. There are so many places to be outside, if you want to, that are accessible and easy.

I was filled with gratitude. I noticed I was appreciating everything. "Oh, a banana slug. Look how cute they are." I was happy with my hiking boots. "I just love these boots."

Just this kind of mood.

We can also have mind states that are spacious and filled with gratitude and appreciation. That can be one of the things that, when it's there, we can maintain.

What is that for? Because it helps us not be so tight and stuck on everything that's wrong. There are things that are wrong that are happening. Of course there are. But there are also things that are right. So often we're just looking at the problem things.

So there are four domains for mindfulness: body; feeling tone, which is pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant—shortcut, neutral—so pleasant, unpleasant, neutral; third is mind states, a general attitude or mood or orientation.

Then the fourth one gets translated in so many different ways. I'll use the word **patterns**. Some patterns that we have.

The word is *Dharma*. But this word Dharma turns out to mean all kinds of different things in different ways. In this fourth domain, a lot of the Buddhist teachings get put in there. It's a big category.

For those of you who are familiar with this, I'll say the seven factors of awakening, and then the hindrances—things that get in the way of awakening. These are two different patterns which we might find.

But we could also look at this word *patterns* more as habits that we have, things that we experience over and over again. These domains of mindfulness can help us notice some of these patterns that we have.

Mindfulness is like the headlamp that helps us know where to apply our effort. And we're applying effort so that we can find more freedom, so that we can make this shift from aspiration to transformation.

When we apply some effort—and again, it's wise effort; I'm not meaning striving and bearing down all the time. Sometimes that can be helpful. But I think as a society we do a lot of striving in this sense of "attain, attain, you have to do more." So often we bring that to our meditation practice.

I'm not going to emphasize that. Sometimes it's appropriate, but effort is often more of a gentle effort. Consistent, but gentle.

Right Concentration

If we bring this gentle, consistent effort to our mindfulness in any domain—it doesn't matter which one—then there's some settledness that will happen. It will happen naturally.

The mind starts to get collected. There starts to be this unification, less distraction. There's this settling down and unifying that's really pleasurable.

There's a sense of, "Ah, here. Just here."

There's a way that you can feel really embodied and pleasant.

You might have an experience similar to this when you're doing one of your favorite activities: gardening, cooking, walking, hiking. There isn't this strong sense of, "Okay, I have to fix this. I have to do that. I have to do that."

Instead, you're enjoying adding the spices at the right time, and the feeling of being in the kitchen, if it's enjoyable for you, with tools that you like. Maybe you're going to make a meal that is somebody's favorite meal, and your love for them is getting expressed through the cooking.

Something like that. That feeling of being undistracted.

Sometimes dance can have this quality. Playing musical instruments, being part of a musical ensemble of some sort. There can be this sense of settledness, collectedness, and just doing what one is doing.

That's one way we can understand this collectedness, this unification.

It also arises in meditation.

As there are fewer and fewer distractions—and I'm using the word distractions, but it could also be some of those quiet, maybe not so obvious ways in which we have these leanings toward wanting to do something or pushing something away—we can have this attitude or mind state of, "I want something different."

When there's that mind state of wanting something different, we're having an experience and we're also imagining something else that we want. There's this going back and forth: "This thing is happening, but I want *that* thing to happen. This is still happening. I'm not having that thing."

That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about when this wish for that other thing softens, goes away, and you're just here with your experience.

Usually when this happens, the experience is pleasant. Just finally, "Here. With this." Whatever it might be.

And we can intentionally cultivate it. This would be one of the wise efforts.

Mindfulness of breathing. Metta practice. Sometimes we can do it just with being mindful of being mindful, the experience of awareness, resting with that sense of awareness again and again and again.

The mind wanders and we keep coming back. The mind wanders, we keep coming back. Then the mind starts to wander less and we're with the mind more and more. Maybe it wanders a little bit and comes back.

This usually takes time.

I was going to say it's most common, but I haven't interviewed everybody. I'll say it's pretty common that the first time people really experience this collectedness, and the pleasure and ease that arise with it, is on a retreat, when there's meditation session after meditation session after meditation session. The mind really starts to get more and more collected.

This collectedness, this unification, this non-distractedness, is not just for its own sake, even though it can be a powerful experience to finally feel a sense of rest.

We can really see clearly then.

With this headlamp of mindfulness, if there's some concentration there so we're not distracted, then we can see what we can't see when we're busy.

In the same way, if you want to look for birds and you have binoculars, it's easier to be looking rather than looking all around. It's hard to find the birds otherwise.

So concentration helps with mindfulness, which helps with insight.

Insight

We're the Insight Meditation Center, so this insight is about seeing that things are changing.

Everything's changing. There aren't exceptions. The time frames are different, but things are changing.

When we see that in a really deep way—not in an intellectual way, but in a deep way—then there's a part of us that does some letting go.

And this letting go brings more freedom and ease.

With wise effort and mindfulness and concentration, we also start to have the insight, "Oh yeah, there's this real sense that things just aren't quite right. I'm always looking for things to be better."

Nothing ever seems to be a lasting source of happiness. Something is pleasurable and I might feel happy, but then it goes away.

Then we start to see how much we've been searching, searching, searching our whole lives for a place where finally all the ducks are lined up and they stay lined up forever.

We start to realize, "Oh, that doesn't exist. It's not possible. It never will exist."

When we start to recognize that in some deep way, then there will be this type of letting go.

But it's not just hearing somebody like me say it. You have to have this experience. You have to be looking to fix everything that's difficult and then realize, "Oh my gosh, as soon as this gets solved, there's another problem and another problem and another problem."

You could spend your whole life with your entire life as one long to-do list.

Instead, what's being pointed to here is allowing some collectedness so that we can see clearly the more subtle ways in which we've been searching for ease, searching for freedom, subtle ways that we've been agitated that we didn't even notice, and let those go.

Then the last classic insight that effort and mindfulness and concentration allow us to see is that there isn't a self that's orchestrating all of this in the way that we imagine.

There isn't this core, stable entity at the center of everything.

Instead, it's a whole collection of experiences that are happening.

It feels like there's a center there, but when we look for it, we won't find it.

Again, you don't have to believe me on this. This is an encouragement to bring some curiosity about that to yourself, with your own practice, your own experience.

With these three insights into the changing nature, the unsatisfactory nature, and the fact that there isn't this permanent core essence at the center that's directing things or owning things, this deep letting go allows for a shift in the way we experience the world.

This deep shift allows the problemness of so many things to drain away.

It doesn't mean everything's totally different. It just means they stop being problems. They're just what's happening.

And we take care of what needs to be taken care of in a way that doesn't have agitation associated with it, but instead in a way that's, "Oh, this is what's next. Okay."

Review

So the Eightfold Path, these eight elements broken into three trainings, is a way to help us find these insights, to help us find this greater freedom, this ease.

Tonight I talked about the last training: effort, mindfulness, and concentration. Those are the last three of the eight.

The whole list of eight is View and Intention. Noticing suffering and noticing the ending of suffering is view. Intention is choosing to turn toward what reliably brings more ease and away from what reliably brings suffering. That's the first training, wisdom.

The second [training] is ethics: speech, action, and livelihood. Speech that brings ease not only to ourselves but to others. The obvious one is not lying, but also speech that is timely, beneficial, and kind.

Action: not killing, not stealing, being careful with our sexual energy so that we don't cause harm, and not taking intoxicants. I missed the fourth one—speech.

Then livelihood: in the things that we do in our life, not causing more and more harm.

View, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, concentration.

The Eightfold Path is a way to bring freedom. More and more freedom.

Maybe I'll say one thing I appreciate about this Eightfold Path. I said the factors in order, but it's just an order in which they're said. It touches all areas of our life. So you can start wherever it's easiest.

Just start somewhere.

It doesn't have to be anywhere in particular. Choose whichever thing feels compelling or interesting, something you want to work on. Don't feel like you have to do all eight at the beginning. Just start with that.

May you find your way with the Eightfold Path, that you might find more peace, ease, and freedom.

Thank you.

And now I'd like to open it up to see if there are some comments or questions.

Questions and Comments

Question: The Dharma requires a lot of effort. How do you make right effort without striving too hard?

Diana Clark: You become sensitive to suffering, because when you're striving too hard, that's more suffering. When you feel, "Oh my gosh, this is awful," there's a feeling of, "Okay, maybe there's too much striving here."

This is definitely a practice, and it's something that took me time to learn. How many podcasts and books are out there about how to do more? There's this real sense of "push and do more."

But implicit in that "push and do more" is this sense that everything you're doing is wrong, or whatever you're doing isn't good enough. And that's not the way to more freedom.

So this is definitely a practice: to notice when the suffering is there. I'll also say it's not all pleasant. Just because it's unpleasant doesn't mean we shouldn't do it.

Maybe a guide for something that's unpleasant is: Are we learning something from this unpleasantness? Sometimes the effort is unpleasant. Sometimes it is leading to suffering, but if there's a feeling of, "Well, yeah, I'm learning something here. I'm understanding something about myself or my motivations," then that's the way forward. But is this helpful?

Participant: It's just that I lie to myself about things like that. Sometimes I think I'm growing and learning and becoming more enlightened, but I'm probably just striving too hard. So I guess with time comes awareness, more practice comes more awareness. Is that what you're saying?

Diana Clark: Yes. And here's the bad news. Often what happens—and I speak for myself here too—is that I pushed and pushed and pushed and strived and strived and strived until I thought, “Oh my God, this is awful. I just can't do it anymore.”

Then there's this kind of giving up. “This is awful. I'm not going to do this anymore.” There's a certain surrender that happens, and when that happens, something new opens up. But you can't tell yourself, “Okay, I'm going to surrender now and it'll be fine.”

All of us have to find that for ourselves. It's definitely experiential. You might be on a part of the path where you're still learning what your limits are and what striving is. It's part of the path.

Anybody else have a comment or question?

Question: One thing I had a question about, which came up during the mindfulness part, was: Can we be aware, mindful, of latent tendencies?

Diana Clark: I would say by definition we can't. Latent means they're there, but we don't see them. It turns out to be okay because they express themselves. They get expressed sooner or later. Whenever the conditions are right, they come up.

So using my logical mind, I would say that by definition, not so much.

Anybody else have a comment or question? Maybe back there.

Question: Could you repeat the abandon part of PACK?

Diana Clark: If you find yourself in the midst of doing something that's unhelpful, can you stop?

Participant: Great. Thanks.

Question: Do you have any advice on the abandon piece? I know for myself sometimes I get hooked on something, and continuing to be hooked feels better than stopping and becoming aware, because when that happens there's a realization of the shame, or, “Oh, I really shouldn't have done this,” and there's a flood of judgments. So the abandon piece is something I really struggle with once I get caught in something.

Diana Clark: Yeah, thank you. This is such a good point.

You said that you don't want to stop doing it, or maybe be aware of it, because then there's this flood of shame or, “Oh my gosh, why did I do this?”

And then we don't like that feeling. Of course we don't. There's shame and, “Why did I do that?” So then we distract ourselves with something else.

But if you can take even just a few moments: “Oh, here’s that regret. Oh my goodness, I’m never going to get out of this. Why did I do that? I know better.” All the mean things we can say to ourselves.

If you can allow yourself to feel that in a way that doesn’t tip you over into overwhelm, but you can feel the real yuckiness of it. Really feel, “Oh yeah, this is awful. I don’t know why I do this.”

And then do something so that you don’t get stuck there. Do something else, whatever that might be. Hopefully something that’s wise and supportive.

Because the mind and the body will learn that they don’t want to feel that yuckiness. It will start saying, “Oh yeah, I don’t want to do this because it’s going to lead to that terrible feeling.”

But we can’t talk ourselves into it. If you could talk yourself into it, you wouldn’t do it. You would just say, “Yeah, I’m going to stop this.”

There’s a way in which the mind and the body have to recognize, “Oh yeah, this leads to suffering. It leads to real discomfort.”

So we have to allow ourselves to feel that discomfort, which is exactly what we don’t want to do.

This is maybe why there’s some effort here.

Participant: I guess I really have to experience how bad it feels so that I’ll learn how bad it feels and maybe learn not to do that again.

Diana Clark: Yeah.

Participant: Got it.

But experience it not in a way that is overwhelming or throws you off for days. Just in a way of, “Yeah, this is kind of terrible, actually.”

Participant: Thank you. That could be a hard balance to strike.

Diana Clark: Yeah.

Participant: If it’s overwhelming, that’s even more terrible. Does that mean it’s more effective?

Diana Clark: No, because when you’re in overwhelm, wisdom is not available. When you’re just in overwhelm, that’s not where we’re going. That’s not what this practice is about. The practice is about finding our way with what’s helpful and what’s not helpful. To help us abandon those things that aren’t helpful, but that we find ourselves doing, we have to really—not just intellectually, but really—understand, “This is not helpful.” So if you find yourself thinking, “Oh my gosh, this is awful. Why did I do that?” then I would say: Feel your feet on the ground. Really

be present. Feel your feet on the ground. Whatever you're sitting on, feel the pressure against the body. Bring your attention to the sensations of breathing. This way you stay here in the present and think, "Wow, okay, I have regret that I did that. That's uncomfortable." You don't have to do it for very long. A few minutes. Then get up and do something else.

Participant: So if I'm understanding correctly, instead of feeling it fully, it means grounding myself a little bit and feeling a little bit of it, and then hopefully I'll get more comfortable with it with time.

Diana Clark: And with time you'll stop doing that, and you won't have that experience. But also, I would say so much about this practice is increasing our capacity to be with discomfort. Discomfort is a part of life, and it's amazing how much we bounce off of it, trying to do anything but that.

Participant: Thank you.

Diana Clark: You're welcome. You're welcome.

Okay, I went two minutes over. I hope you all forgive me, thank you for your patience.

Wishing you a wonderful rest of the evening and safe travels home. Thank you.

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