

Introduction to the Eightfold Path

It is as if a person, traveling in the forest, were to see an ancient path, an ancient road, traveled by people of former times. Following it, the person would see an ancient city, an ancient capital inhabited by people of former times, complete with parks, groves, and ponds, walled, delightful. Then going to the ruler of the country, the person would say, 'Your majesty, while traveling in the forest I saw an ancient path; I followed it and found an ancient city, an ancient, abandoned capital. Your majesty, restore that city!'

In the same way I saw an ancient path, an ancient road, traveled by the Awakened Ones of former times. And what is that ancient path, that ancient road, traveled by the Awakened Ones of former times? It is the noble eightfold path: right view, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. That is the ancient path, the ancient road leading to direct knowledge.

—The Buddha (SN 12:65)

The Buddha's teachings describe an accessible path to liberation. The ancient Buddhist metaphor of a path draws on the idea of a cleared passageway that allows one to move through an otherwise impassable forest. Just as we bring our entire body along when walking on a path in the forest, so a practitioner enters the Buddhist path by engaging all aspects of who he or she is. Yet there is an important difference between a physical path and the one described in the Buddhist literature. A physical path exists whether we walk on it or not. But the Buddhist path exists only in our engagement with it. We create the path with the activities of our minds, hearts, and bodies. All teachings about the Eightfold path are simply instruction indicating how we create the path as we go.

In one version of this metaphor of a path (quoted at the beginning of this chapter), the Buddha likens spiritual liberation to a long forgotten, overgrown city deep in the forest. Just as it is possible to reclaim and then inhabit this city once the

path to it is found, it is possible to live a liberated life when we have found and walked the path that will lead us to it.

Building on this metaphor of a forest path, the forest's dense undergrowth is like the many mental and emotional obstacles that limit our freedom. As human beings we have our own inner wilderness with its dangers and challenges, but we also have within us what it takes to be free of these dangers.

Because both the path and the obstacles to our freedom are found inside us, the Buddhist path requires us to take responsibility for our thoughts, attitudes, and actions. It builds on the principle that we can move towards liberation by disengaging from perspectives and behaviors that weigh us down, and replacing them with behaviors that lighten us and support us as we proceed.

The Buddhist path to liberation—the Eightfold Path—is made up of eight, interrelated practices. The names for these practices are each prefaced by *samma*, a Buddhist word usually translated as “right” or “wise,” but which can also mean “proper,” “complete,” and “in harmony.” When “right” is used as the translation, it is useful to think of it as meaning “appropriate,” as when we speak of having the “right” tool for a particular task. Because the path is made up of practices rather than beliefs, “right” does not refer to truths that we are obligated to adopt. It also does not involve moralistic judgments of right and wrong. I prefer to think of *samma* or “right” as meaning “helpful.” The eight “right” practices of the Eightfold Path are perspectives and practices that help us attain the inner liberation Buddhism teaches as real possibilities for each of us.

The first step on the Eightfold Path is Right View, a pragmatic perspective that guides us to the path itself. We can make an analogy with hiking. Hikers in the woods sometimes practice “orienteeing”—paying careful attention to specific details of their surroundings in order to find their way in uncharted wilderness. They must first have some idea where they are going so they don't wander aimlessly and end up getting lost. But even when the destination is clear, taking the most direct route may not be possible if it entails plunging into the densest, overgrown parts of the forest or over the steepest cliffs. By knowing what to pay attention to, a hiker can “read” the wilderness and discover clues for what is the best way forward. Simi-

larly, the eight factors of the Eightfold Path are both the clues for finding the path out of the wilderness of suffering as well as the path itself.

For the Buddhist path, the fundamental orienting perspective—called “Right View”—is being guided by the perspective known as the Four Noble Truths. Rather than getting caught up in opinions and abstract interpretations about what we are experiencing, in this approach we learn to first recognize any stress, discomfort, or suffering resulting from how we are relating to what is happening or *not* happening (the first Noble Truth). We then orient ourselves to notice our contribution to this suffering by discovering the ways we are caught in cravings or clinging (the second Noble Truth). Then we keep our sights and confidence on the possibility of bringing clinging and its resultant suffering to an end (the third Noble Truth). The final guidepost provided by the Four Noble is the Eightfold Path (the fourth Noble Truth) which is the easiest and clearest road to the liberation from suffering.

Right View is not meant to be the only perspective with which to view our life. Other perspectives are necessary for other purposes. For example, understanding cultural diversity provides important viewpoints for living in a diverse society; knowing what is expected at work is an important perspective to keep in mind and taking into account the developmental stages of children is important for parents.

However, in order to walk the Buddhist path to freedom, Right View is an essential ingredient. It is the perspective needed to find the path in the first place. It points us to what we are doing when we suffer and to how to stop doing this. Part of the value of this perspective is its pragmatic simplicity. It does not rely on any supernatural or mystical beliefs. We are not asked to believe or depend on something we cannot know directly for our self, in our self.

The remaining practices of the Eightfold Path are Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. These seven practices have a mutually supportive relationship with Right View. On the one hand, Right View helps us distinguish between the intentions, speech, ethical actions, livelihoods, and mental efforts that cause suffering and the ones that alleviate it. On the other hand, as we practice the other factors of the

Eightfold Path, it becomes easier and more effective to practice Right View: the more the path is cleared, the easier it is to find it.

The potential for practicing the Eightfold Path lies within us. When we practice the factors well, they transform us. They have the ability to reduce and even end our clinging, attachment, fear, hatred, and delusion. When this is done thoroughly, the Eightfold Path is not something we make effort to do. When we are free, there is nowhere we have to go to find freedom. Amazingly, when we live with this freedom, the Eightfold factors are no longer practices; they become the natural expression of liberation. The Eightfold Path becomes who we are.

A Life of Mutual Benefit

A wise person is motivated to benefit oneself, others, and both self and others.

—The Buddha (AN 4:186)

Some people live their lives focused primarily on benefiting themselves and those they feel closest to. Others are devoted to benefiting others, sometimes at the expense of themselves. For the Buddha, a wise person is someone who wishes for the good of everyone, oneself included. Our lives are so interconnected that it is not possible to truly benefit oneself while harming others; intentionally harming others always takes a toll on the heart of the person who harms. And we cannot be of much benefit to others if we neglect ourselves. The Buddhist path of liberation does not neglect either the self or others; it's a path that lays at the intersection of our self and the world.

The Eightfold Path balances caring for our self and others. Each path practice clearly benefits us when we practice them. They help us attain greater ease, integrity, wisdom, and freedom. At the same time, four of the path factors are practices that also bring benefit to other people. For instance, included in the second factor, Right Intention, is to live motivated by goodwill and compassion for others. The next three factors, Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood, are all concerned with being in the world in such a way that our speech, actions, and livelihood have a helpful, useful, positive impact on others.

In the practice of Right Speech the Buddha encouraged people to speak in ways that are truthful, reliable and trustworthy, choosing speech that “reunites those who are divided, promotes friendship, and speaks words that promote concord.” He also encouraged speaking about what is good and beneficial.

Right Action is defined as not killing, not taking what is not given, and not engaging in sexual misconduct. While doing these things alone provides others with the gift of safety, the Buddha went further by saying that in living a life that doesn't cause harm, practitioners should “abide compassionate to all living beings.”

For many people it is through their livelihood that they have the greatest impact on the wider world. The practice of Right Livelihood encourages us to be thoroughly ethical in our work and life pursuits. Exploiting or harming others through our work is antithetical to Right Livelihood.

While Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood are practices that have a positive impact on others, we ourselves also benefit when we practice them. One of the great sources of well-being and peace is a clean conscience. Our own ethical integrity can become a meaningful refuge for us.

The last three factors of the Eightfold Path—Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration—are usually understood as emphasizing care for oneself. All three factors focus on improving the quality of our minds and hearts. Right Effort involves learning to do those things that increase our wholesome states of mind. Right Mindfulness gives us the presence of mind to differentiate between what is wholesome and unwholesome. Right Concentration brings calm, ease, and peace.

The personal benefits that come from the last three factors of the Eightfold Path can also benefit others. This is because personal wellbeing is the wellspring for caring for others. As mindfulness and concentration help us be more settled and happy, we have increased motivation to care about others. With increased mindfulness and concentration comes increased empathy and appreciation of others.

Some people, however, may feel that *any* emphasis on benefiting our self is selfish. This could be the case if the effort of self-benefit is a myopic concern for one's own desires at the exclusion of others. However, such selfishness harms the person who is selfish. If we understand what brings and supports personal wellbeing, we will avoid being selfish. We would not pursue our own wellbeing at the expense of others.

In Buddhism, benefiting ourselves is not the same as acquiring pleasure, status, or wealth. It entails developing beautiful and wholesome qualities of the heart. It is cultivating the kind of inner goodness and peace that help make *how* we are in the world as helpful for others as *what* we do.

For similar reasons, we would not want to engage in activities that benefit others if doing so proved harmful to our self in any significant way. How can we really touch the heart of others if our own heart is not well taken care of?

A person focused on mutual benefit does not view life as a competition that only some people can win. Rather, in this approach, one considers what is best for the greater good, what the Buddha referred to in the quote above as benefiting “both self and others.” This is not a greater good that sacrifices the welfare of some for the welfare of the majority. This greater good is inclusive, using creative thinking that looks for ways to improve the lives of all.

Even though we might speak of certain factors as having particular benefit for oneself, on a deep level there is little distinction between caring for ourselves and caring for others. When we benefit others we are helped in return, not least because our actions strengthen wholesome qualities in ourselves. When we benefit ourselves through developing our integrity, our hearts, and our wisdom, we will inevitably have a positive impact on the people we come in contact with. Conversely, if we intentionally cause harm to others, we will sooner or later discover how this behavior also harms ourselves because of the pain that comes with such intentions. Also, others might retaliate. And, over time, no one can escape his or her conscience.

In practice, a life of mutual benefit does not mean that everything we do has to benefit everyone. If we think of it like that, we can tie ourselves in knots, feeling so overwhelmed we may either do nothing or do too much. The concept of mutual benefit means that when we care for ourselves in healthy ways we can be reassured that this is for the greater good. And when we care for others in healthy ways, this is for our own benefit as well. At different times, in different situations, as we act on different ends of the self-other spectrum, if we see these actions through the practices of the Eightfold Path, we are working for the greater good of all.

At times it is appropriate, and even important, to focus on caring for our self. Meditating every morning may be immensely helpful for the meditator. It can be as important a form of self-care as making sure we eat healthily, get enough sleep, and keep our body healthy. At the same time daily meditation may prepare us to care for others in calmer, wiser and more compassionate ways.

At other times it is appropriate to care for others; their needs may be greater than our own. On a particular day, we may have to skip our meditation session to tend to someone who needs our time or attention. One task of mindfulness practice, however, is to help us care for others without giving in to attitudes and reactions that undermine us. It is through careful attention that we can learn how to benefit others without harming ourselves.

To understand Buddhist practice as a life of mutual benefit is to clearly place our practice within the context of our social life. Even if we spend long periods of time in mostly solitary practice, there is always a social dimension to our practice. We don't walk the path of liberation for ourselves only. The Buddhist approach to living a wise life can be called "a life of mutual benefit." Quite simply, by benefiting others we help ourselves, and by benefiting ourselves we serve and support others. We practice for the sake of all beings.