

## Right View

### The First Factor in the Noble Eightfold Path

*People threatened by fear go to many refuges:  
To mountains, forests, parks, trees, and shrines.  
None of these is a secure refuge; none is a supreme refuge.  
Not by going to such a refuge is one released from all suffering.  
But when someone, going for refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha  
Sees, with right insight, the Four Noble Truths:  
Suffering,  
The arising of suffering,  
The overcoming of suffering,  
And the Eightfold Path leading to the ending of suffering,  
Then this is the secure refuge; this is the supreme refuge.  
By going to such a refuge one is released from all suffering.*

— The Buddha (Dhp 188-192)

Behind almost everything we do, say, and think are views, some conscious and many not so conscious. Our views are the orientations, perspectives and beliefs with which we understand our self and our world. They are the basis on which we choose how to live our lives. Often our core views are so embedded and habitual that often they are not seen, and if they are known they are understood not as views but rather as the way things truly are.

Not all our views serve us. Many of the views, opinions, beliefs, and stories we live by are the basis for our suffering. To counter this, the Eightfold Path begins with Right View. This is a perspective or frame of reference that provides a simple, straightforward understanding for how to bring suffering to an end. Part of the great value of Right View is the direct and pragmatic way it shows the path to inner freedom. It points us to our direct experience, which is an important alternative to basing our life on what we cannot know for our self.

Buddhism emphasizes two forms of Right View. One is the standpoint that what we do, say, and think does not exist in a vacuum. Rather these have physical and psychological consequences that are related to their ethical nature; if they are

based on greed and hate, the consequences will be harmful. If they are based on generosity and kindness, the consequences will be beneficial. Whether or not this viewpoint is borne out 100 percent of the time, I think it is certainly true that if we live by this view, we are more likely to think, speak, and act in ways that bring us and others greater well-being.

The second kind of Right View is the perspective of the Four Noble Truths. These are four useful perspectives for finding greater freedom and happiness. If we want to suffer less, it helps to notice when we are suffering (the First Noble Truth); it's all too easy to be distracted from suffering by other preoccupations. These distractions do not get rid of suffering, they just cover over it, like papering over cracks in a wall. It is also useful to discover the attachments that create the suffering (the Second Noble Truth) so we can begin to let go of them. The understanding that it is possible to let go of these attachments fully and thereby end suffering (the Third Noble Truth) gives direction and encouragement that we can do so. And finally, knowing a way to create the appropriate conditions for freeing ourselves from our clinging (the fourth Noble Truth) orients us to the practices that can help, namely the Eightfold Path.

Integral to the Four Noble Truths is the idea that if we want to become free of suffering, it is helpful to notice what causes our suffering. If we want to overcome suffering but do not know where to look for its cause, we might pursue beliefs, practices, and external remedies that have nothing to do with the problem. The Four Noble Truths direct us to find the cause within our self. While conventionally and sometimes appropriately we might say that someone or some event in the world caused our suffering, the Buddhist path to liberation begins when we begin to take responsibility for what our inner, psychological contribution is to the suffering. In particular, the Four Noble Truths point to the role of our compulsive desires and cravings in giving birth to our inner suffering.

The Eightfold Path begins with Right View because this is the view that puts us on the Buddha's path to liberation. If we want to find the path, Right View teaches us that it makes sense to take responsibility for our actions and that if we want to

be free of suffering we can view our actions and experiences through the perspective of the Four Noble Truths.

Right View also guides us and safeguards us in practicing the other seven factors of the Eightfold Path. It guides us by keeping the purpose of the Eightfold Path in mind, namely liberation from suffering. It safeguards us when it reveals any suffering and attachment that may come from the way we practice the other path factors. When we become aware of these we have the opportunity to let go of the attachments and find a more useful approach to practicing.

Using the Four Noble Truths as the view for understanding our life is a lot about practicing with ease. By ease, I mean a felt sense of wellbeing and inner freedom. The more at ease we become, the simpler it is to notice suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. The more we use the Four Noble Truths to overcome attachments, the more we live at ease.

When people mature on the Buddhist path, the ease they experience becomes strong enough to naturally highlight the Four Noble Truths in their lives. An analogy is a white cloth—the cleaner the cloth becomes, the more obvious a new stain is. For this reason there is a long tradition of understanding the Buddhist phrase *cattāriariya-saccāni*, not as the “Four Noble Truths” but rather as the “Four Truths of the Noble Ones.” The grammar of the phrase allows for both meanings. For those who begin to use the truths as a wise view to live and practice, the four can be called the “Noble Truths;” for those who have experienced the peace of walking the path, they become a natural view to live by and so become the “Truths of the Noble Ones.” Either way, practicing Right View leads to the most profound and meaningful peace.

Additional reading:

- Chapters 1 and 2 in Bhikkhu Bodhi’s *The Noble Eightfold Path The Way to the End of Suffering*
- Chapter 1 in *The Issue at Hand*.

## Reflections and Practices for Right View

### 1-Inventory of Views (Week 1)

Spend a week noticing the primary views, orientations, or beliefs you live by. It could be useful to consider what, if any, deep, unnoticed views may underlie the more obvious ones. What role do views have in your life? What is your relationship to them? Which views do you have that are not beneficial for you? Which views are beneficial? As you consider these questions it can be useful to write them down in a journal and then later go back to re-read and re-consider what you wrote.

### 2-Keeping Ease in View (Week 2)

For this exercise it may be useful to understand the difference from ease and relaxation. Relaxation has more to do with the lessening of tension and stress; it is felt in contrast to tension. Ease has more to do with an inner peace and harmony that exists without any reference to tension; it is felt more as something that exists in-and-of-itself. Relaxation is a relief, ease is a state of being.

This exercise is to notice the times you have some sense of ease. Notice the small moments of ease that appear briefly throughout your day, perhaps even during stressful occasions. If you know how to bring more ease into your life, during this week do so, to whatever extent possible. What do you learn from this focus on ease? What does it highlight about your lack of ease?

### 3-Reflecting on Liberation (Week 3)

The Buddhist Right View is not a cosmic imperative to believe some truth. Rather it is a perspective that supports the goal of liberation from suffering, often called “awakening.” What beliefs do you have about liberation or awakening? Are any of these beliefs obstacles to practicing on the path of liberation? How important is the possibility of reducing and ending suffering for you? Are you motivated by other goals that may interfere with overcoming suffering? What ordinary or small experiences of liberation from suffering do you have in your daily life? What role can

these have in supporting your practice? Please spend a week reflecting repeatedly on these questions. If possible, have a conversation with a friend about them.

#### **4–Questions about Right View (Week 4)**

Then during this week, formulate as many questions as you can about the Right View factor of the Eightfold Path. These can be questions about the traditional teachings and questions about yourself in relationship to Right View. After a week of daily reflection on questions, write down the three questions that are most compelling for you. Then share and discuss your questions with someone else. While you are coming up with questions, you might reread this chapter or the first two chapters of Bhikkhu Bodhi's book on the Eightfold Path.