

# 2020-10-26 Eightfold Path Introduction (1 of 2)

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

eightfold path, buddha, practice, asceticism, clinging, sensual pleasures, buddhist practice, liberation, living, buddhism, ascetic, life, mindfulness, wisdom, middle, path, sense, aspect, indulging, noble eightfold path

## SPEAKERS

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So greetings and so on this Monday I'll begin a new series of talks. And for the next few weeks I'll do talks on the Eightfold Path. And today I'll do just a general introduction to the Eightfold Path.

So the Eightfold Path, sometimes called the Noble Eightfold Path, is sometimes seen as being the core formulation of Buddhist practice. It's seen as the path that we engage in as we practice. And the path has the connotations that the practice we do is onward leading. That somehow it takes us along a beneficial path of spiritual growth. A beneficial path of developing the qualities of heart and mind and body that lead to concentration. Concentration meaning ability to really be settled here in the present moment. And leads to liberation. Leads to freedom from our suffering, freedom from the ways in which we hold on or resist in a way that brings stress, brings tension to us.

Sometimes, if you go to an Introduction to Buddhism classes, the eightfold path will be presented as a core teaching of Buddhism. And it'll be presented as kind of as something that this is what Buddhists do. This is the fundamental teaching of Buddhism and it's kind of for beginners. If you look at the teachings of the Buddha, there might be some truth to that. But overall the teachings of the Buddha, the Eightfold Path is not really a beginner's practice. But the Noble Eightfold Path is something that's a unified whole. They all work together. They all kind of come together in a person who becomes mature in this practice. And so, the stepping stones to this eightfold path, as a whole, might be the individual pieces of the Eightfold Path. In that sense the Eightfold Path are stepping stones to the totality, the wholeness of the Eightfold Path, where they all aspects of eightfold path are not steps one after the other, but rather are integrated together and unified as a unified way of being in the world. And this idea of a unified way of being in the in the world, a way of being in the world, is seen in the Buddhist tradition, the story is that in the first sermon the Buddha gave, one of the first things he did was highlight the Eightfold Path in a particular way. The story goes that before his enlightenment, the Buddha practiced with a group five other ascetics, and they did ascetic practices with one huge thrust

of, or aspect of ancient Indian religious life was some people believed that asceticism. Somehow tormenting oneself, stopping to eat, living with a lot of restraint, a lot of deprivation, was a way to purify oneself of all one's hindrances, all one's defilements, all the clinging we had, and purify ourselves of all this stuff. To come to a place where pure enough to become liberated.

So the Buddha practiced that and for many years. And found that it was a dead end, it didn't really work. And then he discovered his path to awakening. He then went to find his five companions to tell them this new discovery he had. That asceticism it didn't work and there's another way to liberation. And when they saw him approaching, his ascetic friends said well, you know, the Buddha Gautama has left the spiritual life. He's kind of reverted back to life of indulging in sensual pleasure and let's not give him any attention. Let's not stand up to him, let's not maybe say hello to him, since he's left the real way or something. But as the Buddha approached, there was something about his peacefulness that was quite compelling for these other five. And they couldn't help themselves but to stand and greet him. And they arranged the seat for him on the ground where they were sitting and he joined them. The Buddha then started off by saying, there is a middle way between asceticism and indulging in sensual pleasures. And that was a big dichotomy that the aesthetes and others we're living with, is on one hand, the choice was to be in the world with indulging in sensual pleasures, devoted to sensual pleasures. And the other was to really reject that and be an ascetic and deny any sensual pleasure. And the Buddha, the first teachings that tradition says the Buddha gave is there is a middle way. The middle way between self denial and self indulging. And that middle way is the Eightfold Path. And here he is, the Buddha was enlightened. And he's offering these ascetics a different way of living. And that he now represents. The Buddha represented this alternative way of living, of being in the world, from self denial and self indulgence. And he called it the middle way. So in a sense, it's the middle way between self indulgence and self denial or self asceticism, tormenting. But the Middle Way might not be quite right in the sense that it's in the spectrum, halfway between. It might be a middle way that's a third way. That's an alternative way to live. And these eight aspects of the Eightfold Path, they are this way of living that's the middle way. And for the Buddha, it's the way that a person who's spiritually mature actually lives. Not because they're assuming these practices, taking them on. But rather these eight practices expresses who they are. It comes naturally out of them because the opposite of the Eightfold Path is called the wrong, you know, opposite of them. So the Eightfold Path or things like eight ... I should have told you what they are. There are usually in English called right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.

And in saying all that I wanted to emphasize the right. Eight times that word right is repeated, sammā. And I'll talk more about this. But the opposite of it is miccha. And it's wrong view, wrong intention, wrong each of them action. And, the wrong aspect implies that what motivates our action or speech or view, how we see the world. It's motivated by greed, by hatred or delusion. It's motivated by craving and clinging. And so, in the same way, unethical behavior in Buddhism is also said to be rooted in these forces within that are deleterious to ourselves, and through our action, deleterious to others. Greed,

hatred and delusion. Excessive clinging and craving and thirsting. And the Eightfold Path is what naturally arises in a person, how a person lives when there is no greed, hatred and delusion. When there is no clinging. And so for the Buddha, he was liberated from craving and clinging and attachment. It didn't make him aloof from the world, but rather it made him someone who lived in the world through this middle way. So that was his first teaching about the full path.

Over time, the Eightfold Path was also seen as a wonderful stepping stone to liberation. To becoming spiritually mature. And these different steps can be taken up individually. And they kind of encapsulate eight different sets of practices taught by the ancient Buddhist tradition, and the modern one as well.

And so eight sets of practices. And those eight sets encompass the fullness and all the richness and the kind of completeness of what Buddhist practice is traditionally understood to be. So there's a strong sense in – sometimes I've seen, it's changing now, but you know, some decades ago – that the people who practice vipassana practice had this idea that meditation, mindfulness meditation, was the be all and end all. If you just practice mindfulness enough and meditated, everything else would be taken care of. You'd solve everything. But there was no sense of practicing in daily life. There are other people who think that living an ethical life is the whole thing and just being strictly ethical. And following the precepts is the point. Other people who emphasize wisdom, right view, right understanding, and really think that's what it takes. And so then there's a whole thing about people who emphasize concentration or mindfulness. And there's a mindfulness concentration conflict that exists between who has their true practice or the right practice. But in the Eightfold Path, all these different things are integrated in one whole, suggesting that as we engage in Buddhism and learn all these different sets of practices, in a certain way we are becoming whole. The practices is addressing all of who we are, not just part of who we are. And though all of who we are is summarized into three different aspects. Wisdom, ethics, and meditation. So, wisdom has to do with our understanding of things, the orientation, the frame of reference we're using to understand our lives, the perspectives we use. Ethics has to do with our behavior in the world and how we impact others, the world around us. And meditation or cultivating the mind has to do with a deeper aspect of really transforming the heart in a way that allows for liberation to happen.

And so the first two steps of the Eightfold Path have to do with wisdom or understanding. The second step, the next three steps in the path have to do with ethics. And the last three have to do with meditation and cultivating the mind. What the wholeness of it is, then involves wisdom; action, how we are ethically in the world; and developing and changing our inner life, maturing that inner life. Our mind through meditation and other inner kind of practices.

So the Eightfold Path is for people who are beginners understanding wisdom, and the reason why, the rationale for how this works is important. For people who are spiritually mature, it's a deep insight that makes it obvious that this is a way of living that frees us and is free of suffering, free of the ways in which we operate in the world that do cause suffering, free of attachment and clinging. And so to

engage in and explore and reflect on and contemplate and practice the eightfold path is phenomenally rich and beneficial in so many different ways. And really touches eventually all aspects of our life in a useful way and by practicing and seeing and learning.

So, that's a general introduction today to the Eightfold Path. And I will continue I guess more introduction tomorrow. And over these next few weeks we'll take our time and go through the Eightfold Path and hopefully you will appreciate its value in all its details and all the different practices that it entails. And you'll get a sense how it helps make a whole of Buddhist practice and a whole of you as a practitioner.

So thank you and I'll see you tomorrow.