

2020-11-10 Eightfold Path-Right Action (1 of 3)

Tue, 11/10 8:25AM • 17:16

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

eightfold path, harm, action, buddha, freedom, precept, consideration, kill, live, liberation, involved, monastic, life, insects, non harming, helpful, lie, suffering, heart, lay

SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Here we are with the continuing with the Eightfold Path. And today the fourth factor, which is a right action, samma kamma - samma kammanta. And in introducing this very important one because it really action means how we act in the world, what we do. Action is really central to the Buddhist teachings. The Buddha said to be a teacher of action. That how we act, what we do is so consequential. And so to be the caretakers of our action. To do it wisely and considerably. It's a really important part of it. And the fact that the Buddha considers what we do with the mind to be action as well, if there's really no way of getting around action. And so how do we act? What activities are we involved in, body, speech, and mind, that are for our benefit? That bring peace and well being?

So I want to take as I start this right action of next few talks, usually has to do with the precepts. And I'll say more about that in a few minutes. But I want to talk about just kind of the trajectory, the unfolding of the Eightfold Path. There is a logic, there is a process, there is a kind of a flow, psychological psychophysical flow, that is set in motion with right view. That we're following along the stream. And to understand that logic, or that flow, it may be helpful. And so at the very heart of what the Buddha's teaching is freedom from suffering. And that's kind of the enterprise, that's kind of the orientation, which everything is being understood. If a person wants to be free of suffering, then it's helpful to have the right view, the right understanding. And there are two types. One is the wisdom side and the other is the liberation view. And both of them lead in the same direction. The wisdom side is often what we acquire from books and teachers, second understanding. It's what we have to believe to some degree. And Buddhism doesn't require you to believe in rebirth, to believe believe in heavens and supernatural kind of things. It does require provisional belief that our actions make a difference. And the actions set the conditions in place for how things will unfold for us. And so if we want to be the custodian of our well being, we have to care for our actions and what we do. And there are those actions which are wholesome, and those which are unwholesome. Those which are helpful and not helpful. And so we choose the ones that are wholesome and helpful. And the rest of the Eightfold Path is a description of the wholesome healthy actions in which to be engaged in. And so we then pick up those. If we're just learning from the Buddha, then we go on to the next one there, right consideration. We consider, it's helpful to consider things from the point of view of not getting caught in sensual addiction, kind of a simplicity of being, of renunciation of those. It's good to be, it's good to be involved in non ill will. And the corollary of that is goodwill, is to live with friendliness and kindness. And it's healthy and wholesome to live harmlessly, to not cause harm. And the corollary of that is to consider a life of living that's

compassionate and caring. So this is the kind of the wisdom side we take this on. And we take on these practices and learn from the Buddha, this is what's wholesome. This is what's helpful.

From the liberation side is to practice deeply enough to begin understanding that there is freedom, the heart can be free, the mind can be free, of its attachments, its clinging, of the causes of suffering. And that you know, it's like when the heart sings and is completely open and soars like a free bird in the sky. To really be free. And when it has that sense of freedom, we experience that, then there's a different reference point for the Eightfold Path. From a clear enough, I like to say embodied experience of freedom and a direct experience of it. Now there's a whole different understanding of what's possible. And now, the reason to not be caught up in sensual desires, be caught up in ill will or caught up in causing harm, *vihimsa*, cruelty sometimes it's said, is because it diminishes our freedom. We lose our freedom in being involved in those because those are addictive behaviors, are compulsive, there's a loss, there's a closing down. The heart doesn't sing, the heart doesn't soar and fly in those activities. And feeling how it causes suffering for ourselves to be involved in sensual addictions, ill will, and cruelty. The movement is to start finding out how to not do that. How to pick up and be involved in other things.

Those movements, is so deep inside of us sometimes to cause harm, that we don't want to cause more harm by being critical of ourselves for doing so. But we want to learn how to step away and look at that whole thing with more freedom, with more openness, with more compassion and care. So we're not picking it up and fueling it and continuing it. So having some sense of freedom on the liberation path or the Eightfold Path, when you have some experience of freedom, that freedom then is brought to bear on the unhealthy, unwholesome motivations we might have. Hold ourselves free from them, don't get involved.

And then we see that the right consideration, the second factor, is intimately connected to not causing harm to ourselves and to others. And then we want to, without consideration with that reference point, that has a lot to do with how we speak. And so we want to be careful with our speech. And speak in kind, supportive, truthful ways.

And then we come to our actions, what we actually do and behave with our body in the world. And here the Buddha gave four descriptions or definitions of what right action is. And these four are very important for the monastic community, because they relate to the four most serious rules for Buddhist monastics. These are so serious that if a monastic violates the first of the first four rules or precepts, they're automatically no longer a monastic. And they can never become a monastic again. So for a monastic that's they're not to kill, they're not to in any kind of way steal, not to take what was not given, not be involved in any kind of sexual behavior, they're celibate, and not to lie. And these are so important for the monastics. For lay people those four are, three of them are the same, not to kill, not to steal, not to take what is not given, for lay people to the third one is not to engage in sexual misconduct as opposed to celibacy. And then the fourth is the same not to lie, not to tell falsehoods.

So rather than seeing these as being, excuse me, while I clear my throat. Instead of seeing these as being moralistic in some kind of abstract principle kind of way, that we're taking on from outside of us rules of how to live, ideally we see it as these are movements towards non harming. And we see how

wise it is to not cause harm, and how much it's part of our movement towards liberation, not to cause harm. And so the context is not is not obligatory. It's not this oppressive kind of feeling of someone looking over your shoulder. That you have to do it certain this way. But if what you want is to life that doesn't cause harm to self or others. If what you want to do is to preserve the real freedom that we discovered. Then it's really helpful to avoid killing or causing harm and avoid stealing avoid sexual misconduct and avoid lying. Well actually lying has already been covered by the third factor right speech. So the Buddha actually defines right action. He limited to those three. I was little bit wrong before, so not killing, not stealing and no sexual misconduct, for monastics celibacy.

What's interesting here is that the fifth precept is not covered the Eightfold Path, the precept to not engage in intoxication. Drugs or alcohol are not mentioned the Eightfold Path whatsoever. And that's because alcohol and drugs belong to a different category. They can cause a lot of harm to be involved in them, but not necessarily so. And so, if the main thrust of really living a harmless life, we want the emphasis is really this close in for this kind of thorough, if you want to be thorough on this. We want to relate it and do it with areas of our life are really clearly hundred percent have to do with causing harm and then avoiding doing that.

So the first one, not to kill, the Pāli expression, it can be not to kill breathing beings. Or something that's a little bit more can also mean simply not to harm or not to strike. So you wouldn't even punch someone out. You don't want to cause any injury to anyone. And it's not just people, but it's anything that's breathing. And so how thorough do we want to live our lives at that level of harmlessness? Do we kill animals and birds and insects and pests that we have? How complete do we want to be? How careful do we want to be? Buddhist monastics are supposed to be so careful that they don't want to kill anything in the ground, so that they're not actually allowed to do any gardening or farming because they're spade going into ground might kill worms and things in the ground. And it's not so much that are not supposed to kill the plant, but there's not supposed to kill the animals and what breathes in the soil. So how thorough do we want to be take this precept of not killing? And that's a very personal answer that everyone has to grapple with. And sometimes for lay people it becomes a question, where is the least harm? So if, for example, we have termites eating our home, where's the least harm? And is the least harm in in killing the termites? Or is the least harm in letting the termites eat our house and beginning destroy everything for us? For lay people there's much more complex consideration about this and trade offs that have to be given. It's kind of unfortunate to live this way. But it seems to be part of the lay human life. And the monastic life can allow for a much thorough going, kind of dedication to non harming. But for lay people, how do we find the balance? How do we find the right way to engage and live this life? I don't have good answers for that. What I love is that when people come to me and say, what about here? What about the insects? What about the gophers in my garden? I need food for my family? Or what about this and that? I'm kind of reluctant to answer for them and tell them what I think. But I love the fact that they're asking the question. And finding their way with us and making the best choice, knowing that there is maybe always going to be a trade off. And we have to decide where that trade off is in extreme situations, you know, the insects and animals and euthanasia and assisted suicide and all these kinds of questions. We have to kind of find our way by ourselves. But there are some areas that Buddhism i think is categorical around not killing. We don't kill human beings. And so it's very, very few times that Buddhism comes out, I think the Buddha comes down in so categorical way. We don't kill people. And so for the Buddha then, I think, there'd be no capital punishment. For the

Buddha, there would be no going to war. And all kinds of questions, all kinds of orientations or dedications that just raise a whole bunch of questions and considerations and protests and all kinds of things.

What I like to emphasize here is that the first precept, first right action, not to kill, is a subject of deep reflection, contemplation consideration. And regardless of what we decide to do, how we live our lives around this not killing thing? Can we really base our choice our decision? On the second factor the Eightfold Path. Can we base it on the consideration for non addiction to sensual pleasure and comfort, non involvement with ill will, and non involvement with cruelty? And even better, can we really base it on right view? And my most favorite is the movement of freedom. Can we base whatever choice we make, to really safeguard the deepest, most wonderful place of freedom that can exist in our own heart? To not give that up.

So whatever we do with this precept of not killing, in terms of animals and pests and things like that, can we really have a reference point to something deeper inside of us. Where we're really safeguarding the highest quality of heart, of mind, of well being, that a person can have. The Buddhist teaching is a radical teaching of radical non harming for self and others.

So the first of the right actions is not harming. And tomorrow I'll talk some about not taking what is not given. And then following sexual misconduct. So thank you, and may this day be a day that you reflect and explore and consider the thoroughness in which you would like to practice non harming in your life. And maybe you'll go out into the world and practice more non harming and speech, in body, and in mind. Thank you.