

The Noble Eightfold Path to the Deathless

July 25, 2020

In every case when the Buddha explains the different sets that form the wings to awakening, he says that each set is developed by developing the noble eightfold path. This means that the path is central. It's the most important of the sets.

You can see this in the Buddha's teaching career. It was the very first of his teachings. He started his first teaching with the noble eightfold path as the middle way. And to the very last person he taught, he said that it's only in a teaching where you have the noble eightfold path that you're going to find anyone awakened.

The eight folds of the path are actually eight factors, and they come in three sets. The first two—right view and right resolve—form a set under discernment. The next three—right speech, right action, and right livelihood—come under virtue. And the last three—right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration—come under concentration.

What's distinctive about the path is that of the various sets of the wings to awakening, it's the only one that starts with discernment—the discernment of right view. Now notice, that's *view*, not knowledge. It's a view that you take on as a working hypothesis.

There are various ways in which the Buddha describes how the different factors interact, but he always says right view comes first. This may relate to the fact that in the second knowledge that he gained on the night of his awakening, he saw that people suffer pain and miserable rebirths or enjoy pleasant rebirths because of their actions. They act the way they do because of their views. So you have to start with the right view if you want to have the right actions that get the right results—particularly right view about which kinds of right actions lead to suffering and which kinds lead away.

Right view comes in two levels. There's mundane right view, which talks about the basic principle of karma and how it relates to rebirth. Then there's transcendent right view, which is the four noble truths. That, too, is an explanation of action. Actions of craving lead to the result, which is suffering. Actions of the noble eightfold path lead to the result, which is the end of suffering.

You have to *understand* that. In the beginning, you don't really know it. You haven't even had that view confirmed yet, which is why when the Buddha compared the path to a chariot, the two horses that lead the chariot are conviction

and discernment. The conviction is in these principles, a conviction strong enough that it inspires you try them out and act on them. The discernment lies in realizing that this is really a good set of views to take on as a working hypothesis.

As the Buddha said elsewhere, if you believe that your actions play no role in determining your happiness or your pain, then what motivation would you have to act in a skillful way—to put forth any effort at all or even to think about the consequences of your actions? That kind of view is a dead-end view. As the Buddha also said, when you don't know for sure, you want to adopt a view that opens possibilities and not one that closes them. You also hear him say that you can, through your own efforts, put an end to suffering. If you don't put an end to suffering, suffering can just keep going on.

From that right view come the other factors of the path. The Buddha compares it to a seed. If you have wrong view, he says it's like a seed for a bitter melon; you're going to get a bitter fruit. If you have right view, it's like a grape seed. You get a sweet fruit. You think about the power of your actions and realize that you have to make up your mind to follow a course of action that leads to happiness. And you're going to have to go against a lot of your old ingrained habits.

This is what right resolve is for. It's not merely an intention; it's a resolve. It's stronger than just everyday intentions, because intentions can come and go. They go one direction; they go another direction. But with right resolve, you make up your mind you want to go in a particular direction and you stick with it. You resolve on:

- Renunciation—in other words, putting an end to your desire for sensuality, seeing that renunciation would be a good thing, and then trying to act on that;
- Non-ill will—in other words, goodwill or equanimity whenever it's appropriate; and then,
- Harmlessness, which would be compassion.

You resolve on making these the motives of your actions consistently.

From these resolves come your actions: first your speech. You realize the harm that's done by lying, by divisive speech, by harsh speech, and idle chatter. You try to abstain from them. You see the harm that comes from killing, stealing, and having illicit sex, so you try to abstain from those as well. You see the harm that comes from wrong livelihood—engaging in a livelihood that either breaks the precepts or gives rise to passion, aversion, or delusion in your mind or in the minds of other people. So you abstain from wrong livelihood.

This is where you're actually carrying through on your resolves. And as you're carrying through, you begin to realize more and more that the important element is the mind. The mind's got to be trained beyond just simply having right view. You have to work on developing skillful qualities in the mind and abandoning unskillful ones; that's right effort. And you have to develop powers of concentration. That starts with right mindfulness and goes into the levels of jhana in right concentration.

Now, when you get at right concentration, it's not as if you're arriving at the end of the path. The path spirals around. Concentration then becomes a basis for more discernment. When the mind is still, it can see itself a lot more clearly, and you begin to see the suffering that the Buddha identified as the clinging-aggregates is there even in the concentration. Remember the other image the Buddha has of the path, which is that it's like a raft, a raft made out of twigs and branches. In other words, you take the same things that you cling to and create suffering, and you change them to a skillful kind of clinging that applies to the path.

You put aside clinging to sensuality or try your best to do that. But then you develop clinging to views, i.e., right view; clinging to habits and practices, the habits of the precepts—right speech, right action—and the practice of concentration; and even clinging to a doctrine of self—that you're able to do this. So as you're assembling the path, you need those three forms of skillful clinging.

But there comes a point where the path has been developed, and you don't need the clinging anymore. That's when you start to turn on the path itself, analyzing your concentration in terms of those five clinging-aggregates, seeing that it, too, is fabricated. No matter how good the bliss, rapture, and equanimity that come from concentration, they still have to be maintained. There's still an effort involved there. And they can fall away. You want something more secure.

Now, right view is what confirms that there is something more secure. It's in the third noble truth, the end of suffering. This is what encourages you to analyze the concentration and start taking it apart. You think of the Buddha's teachers, the two people from whom he learned the formless attainments. They were afraid that if they took apart their attainments, they'd have nothing. And it's amazing that the Buddha was able to take his own concentration apart. So now we have the example of the Buddha himself and his noble disciples, saying that you have to keep aiming for the unfabricated, and you will not be disappointed.

So when your attachment to the concentration and all the other factors in the path falls away, that's when you have your first taste of the deathless. It's at that point that the noble eightfold path has become complete. In fact, that's what the

definition of stream entry is: the noble eightfold path coming together, yielding the deathless. That's what confirms your views. This is why someone who's attained the stream is said to be consummate in view and also consummate in virtue. The first five factors of the path have been mastered. The last three have not yet been mastered; there's still more work to be done in concentration. And you have to move from right view to right knowledge for awakening to be complete. But for those first five factors, the stream enterer is safe.

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about different kinds of loss. There's loss of wealth, loss of relatives, loss of health. Those, he says, are minor. Then there's loss of right view and loss of virtue: Those are major. And that's an area where the stream enterer is secure. He or she will never lose right view and virtue, which is why the stream enterer's rebirths from that point on never fall below the human.

But for those of us who haven't fully reached the stream, for whom the eightfold path hasn't become complete, we're still in a position of danger. Our views could change. And once the views change, then virtue changes as well. As the Buddha said, the untrained mind can change direction so fast that there's no adequate analogy for how quick it is, which means that we have to be heedful. We have to try to put the path together, maintaining it as best we can, and keeping at it, at it, at it, because that's the only place where safety can be found.

Once the path is complete like this, then all the other wings to awakening are completed as well. You've got the basis for success in right concentration. You've got the four establishing of mindfulness in right mindfulness. You've got the four right exertions in right effort. All five of the faculties are there. All seven of the factors for awakening are there.

So the lesson here is: Work on your right view. Make sure you understand that wherever there's suffering, that's a big issue—but particularly the suffering that comes from clinging. And the clinging is not caused by things outside. It's caused by your own craving.

So when you're looking for the causes of suffering, you have to look inside. Find them. They're right here to be seen. They're nothing mysterious; they're nothing hidden. It's simply that we don't pay appropriate attention to them. They're in big, blank areas of the mind.

The craving comes from what? It comes from ignorance. And ignorance is not just "not knowing." It's looking at things in the wrong terms, focusing your attention in the wrong places. There's a passage where the Buddha compares consciousness to a magic trick. And the nature of a magic trick is that the magician tries to divert your attention from what he's actually doing. You focus

on something far away. You think you're paying careful attention to where he's paying careful attention, but actually he's doing something else. That's the nature of consciousness overcome by ignorance.

So we want to look into these areas where we think we know. Ask yourself: Does this knowledge really put an end to suffering? If not, it's not right view; it's ignorance. Try to locate the suffering in your clinging. Locate the cause of the suffering in your craving. That's when you're on the right path. And put together all the other factors of the path so that you can see these things clearly. Abandon the craving. That will put an end to suffering, because it's not the case that those clinging-aggregates are clinging to you. You're clinging to them. When you let go, they have no hold on the mind.

This is why the Buddha's image for awakening is a fire going out. In those days, they saw fire as clinging to its fuel. When the fire went out, it was because it let go. It wasn't the case that the fuel clung to the fire. The fire was doing the clinging and that's why it was trapped. But it wasn't trapped by the fuel; it was trapped by its own clinging. So when you're really willing to adopt the view that you're trapped by your own clinging, that's when you're beginning to plant the grape seeds in your mind, the seeds that lead to a sweet fruit. Nurture those seeds, and all the other factors of the path will grow as well. And they won't stop there. They'll yield the deathless.

They say that at stream entry you gain the Dhamma eye, in which you see that all things subject to origination are also subject to passing away. Now, that insight is going to occur to the mind naturally only when you see something that is not originated and doesn't pass away. After Sariputta gained the Dhamma eye, he went back to tell Moggallana, his friend. At this point, neither of them had ordained. Moggallana saw him coming from afar and he noticed that Sariputta looked like a different person from the one he'd known. His first question was, "Have you seen the deathless?" And Sariputta said, "Yes."

We practice this path so that we can see the deathless, too—something that lies outside of space, outside of time. When we have our first glimpse of that, that's when our right view becomes confirmed. The fact that that view is obscured by our unskillful actions: That's why we would never intentionally break the precepts ever again.

And you realize that when the aggregates fall away as you see the deathless, your awareness of the deathless is not annihilated. So there's no reason why you'd ever want to identify yourself with the aggregates again. The mind has been unfettered from three fetters. It still has some more to work on, but the really heavy fetters have been put down for good.