

An Overview of the Path

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The noble eightfold path forms the framework for all the Buddha's teachings. It was the first topic he mentioned in his first sermon, and the last topic he mentioned in his last.

Shortly after his awakening, when he first taught the Five Brethren, he started by telling them that the eightfold path was the true way to awakening, that it avoided the dead-end extremes of sensual indulgence and self-torment. Then he explained the first factor of the path—right view—and at the end of his explanation Kondañña, the eldest of the five, reached the first level of awakening—proof that this really was an effective path.

Shortly before the Buddha died, Subhadda the wanderer asked him: Is it only in the Buddha's teachings that there are awakened people or do other teachings have awakened people as well? At first the Buddha put the question aside. He said: "Put that aside and I'll teach you the Dhamma." But then after teaching the Dhamma, he went on to say that only in teachings where the eight factors of the noble path are taught will you find awakened people. And only in the Buddha's teaching are all eight factors taught. So when he put that question aside, it was simply a matter of etiquette. Actually, he went on to answer the question, saying that this path is *The Way*: not simply *an* effective path. *The* effective path.

We like to hear that there are lots of different ways, lots of different paths to the top of the mountain. That gives us the option of choosing what we like without the fear of making a wrong choice. But if you've ever been on a mountain, you know that not all the trails lead to the top. Some of them wander off someplace else—down the mountain or off the edge of a cliff. And so when the Buddha, having been to the top, comes back to say that this is the only way up there, he wants us to give his words some credence. In fact, he says that one of the signs of actually attaining the first level of awakening is that you realize there is no other path. This is it.

So look at the factors. The first two are right view and right resolve; these come under the heading of discernment. There's also right speech, right action, and right livelihood; these come under the heading of virtue. And then right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration; these come under the heading of concentration. It's important to remember that each of these factors is a part of a path. It's meant to go someplace. Its purpose is strategic. We don't practice the path for the sake of arriving at right view or any of the other factors. We use right view as a factor in the path to take ourselves to release—or it might be better to say that we arrive at release, because a lot of "ourselves" doesn't get taken to release. It's going to get left behind as unnecessary baggage along the way.

Right view starts with conviction in the principle of action, that your actions really are important, and they do make a difference: that by acting on skillful intentions, you're going to meet with pleasant results; by acting on unskillful intentions, you're going to meet with unpleasant results. The Buddha has to start here with the principle of action because there were a lot of teachings in his time that denied the role of action. Some said that actions were illusory;

they didn't really exist. Others said that actions may exist but they don't really have an effect on anything. Another school of thought said that whatever you do is already predetermined so you really have no choice.

If you're looking for a path of practice that leads to the end of suffering, you can't adopt any of those views, because they make the whole idea of a path meaningless. The whole idea that your efforts could bring about an end of suffering would become meaningless. So the Buddha never approved of the teaching that things were totally predetermined by the past. If you really want to put an effort into ending suffering, you've got to accept the principle that your efforts, your actions, really do have consequences. Some people like the idea of determinism. It lets them off the hook—as long as they're doing relatively well. But when they're suffering, if you give them the choice, "Would you like the choice not to suffer?" they would probably say Yes. At that point they would *like* to have the power of choice.

The important point is that the simple power of choice is not enough. You've got to develop skills to go along with it. That's what the next level of right view is about: seeing things in terms of four noble truths—stress, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation—and developing the skills appropriate to each: Stress is to be comprehended, its cause abandoned, its cessation realized, and the path to its cessation developed. This means that all the factors of the path are skills you need to develop to bring about the goal you've set for yourself.

First, after right view, comes right resolve. You realize that unskillful actions are going to cause trouble, so you resolve not to get tied up in thoughts of sensuality, ill will, or harmfulness, because you know these thoughts, if you foster them, are going to take you down the path to suffering. Then you look at your actual actions. This is where right speech, right action, and right livelihood come in. To what extent do your words, your deeds, and your livelihood actually cause harm to other people? To what extent do they cause harm to yourself? The Buddha has you use this reflection as a way of developing honesty. For him, the prime virtue is the virtue of truthfulness. If you can't admit to yourself that the things you say or do are causing harm, or the way you gain your livelihood is causing harm, there are going to be huge blind spots in your mind.

So these factors of the path force the quality of honesty on you. If you want to follow the path, if you want to reach the end of suffering, you have to look very honestly at how you're living your life, and make changes in cases where you're causing trouble.

All these factors working together make it easier to meditate. Notice that effort, mindfulness, and concentration all come under the last heading of the path, the heading of concentration. The Buddha never talked about mindfulness as one kind of practice and concentration as something else. Recently, I was reading an author who said that because mindfulness and concentration are two different factors in the path, they must be radically different; otherwise the Buddha wouldn't have divided them into two different factors. The problem is that the author made them so different as to be antithetical: mindfulness was an open, accepting, non-reactive state of mind, whereas concentration was narrow and willful. It's hard to see how the two could go together. In fact he said that the practice of right mindfulness on the one hand and right effort and right concentration on the other hand are two separate paths—giving you a sixfold path and a sevenfold path to choose from. But that's not how the

Buddha taught them. As with all the factors of the path, he distinguished between them, but also showed how they blended into each other. Just as discernment shades into virtue, and virtue shades into concentration, right mindfulness and right concentration shade into each other.

To begin with, they're both part of a single heading: concentration. And as the Buddha described the relationship between them, the four establishings of mindfulness are the themes of concentration. These establishings are not just objects; they're sets of activities. You're ardent, alert, and mindful, focused on the body in and of itself, or feelings or mind or mental qualities in and of themselves, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world: That's the practice of right mindfulness. Included within that practice is right effort, the quality of ardency, in which you generate desire, focus your intent, and stay persistent in trying to prevent unskillful qualities from arising or to abandon unskillful qualities that have arisen, to give rise to skillful qualities, and then to maintain skillful qualities once they've arisen: That's how right effort gets folded into right mindfulness.

Right mindfulness then gets folded into right concentration when the mind is able to stay with this set of activities until it settles down, abandoning all unskillful mental qualities, all thoughts of sensuality. Sensuality here doesn't mean the objects of your desire. It means your desire or obsession for the desires themselves. That's a problem in the mind. We really like fantasizing about sensual pleasures, and it can set the mind on fire. But if you're mindful enough to abandon that kind of obsession, the mind can calm down and settle into strong states of concentration, where you really do stay focused just on the topic of your object of mindfulness, the activity of mindfulness.

Say that you're focused on the breath, working with the breath in various ways to make it a good place to stay. You can really get absorbed in that. This takes you all the way through the four levels of *jhana*, which constitute right concentration.

Those are the factors of the path, the main frame for what we're doing here.

So when you look at your life and look at your mind, to what extent is it actually on the path and to what extent are you allowing it to wander off into the brush? What qualities need to be developed? What qualities need to be abandoned? This is part of what the Buddha calls the customs of the noble ones—which are the values of the noble ones: that you learn how to delight in abandoning whatever you have to abandon, and to delight in developing whatever needs to be developed. The path involves a fair amount of abandoning. Right resolve involves abandoning unskillful thoughts. Right speech, right action, right livelihood, and right effort all involve abandoning unskillful activities, unskillful mind states. Right mindfulness involves abandoning greed and distress with reference to the world. The things you need to develop tend to be right view and right concentration, along with whatever skillful qualities you can manage, particularly the ones that help you to see where you're causing stress and suffering, and help to stop causing them.

All too often we're thinking about other things. We have other issues. And that right there is ignorance. Ignorance isn't just a matter of not knowing things. You know things, but you're looking at them in the wrong way, with the wrong priorities. And because your priorities are wrong, they make you do the wrong things.

You've got to develop the Buddha's sense of priorities. The big problem in life is that you're causing suffering even though you don't want to. All too often, you're causing suffering in areas that you would rather deny. That's why the quality of honesty and truthfulness is so important: so that you can look squarely at your actual actions and their actual results. That way you learn to be sensitive to whatever stress you're creating.

This is one of the reasons why we need to get the mind into concentration: so that our sensitivity as to what counts as stress gets heightened. Things you used to accept as normal, you begin to realize: "This really is a burden on the mind." Sensing that burden, sensing that it's not necessary: That's how you begin to gain some freedom.

The Buddha once said that of the factors of the path, right concentration is the main one, and the others are its accessories. Right concentration is the one we have to work at the most, to get the mind to stay with its one object, to learn not only the techniques of *how* to do this, but also the sense of values to remind you of *why* this really is important. Without this skill, you miss everything else. You can know about all the other factors of the path, you can read all about right view, but you can miss the whole point. I was reading a book recently by a professor of Buddhist Studies. And it was amazing: Here was someone who had devoted his career to studying the Pali Canon, and yet the whole book was very wrongheaded. He could quote all the passages but he just totally missed the point.

So it's not just a matter of knowing about the factors. You have to give them priority and master them as skills. The Buddha talks about different levels of discernment. To begin with, there's the discernment that comes from listening or reading, and the discernment that comes from thinking things through. And although it's important to master those levels of discernment, the really important level is the discernment that comes from actually developing skillful qualities in the mind. That's when you get hands-on practice.

And as you work on the factors of the path, they do their work on your mind. The mind becomes more sensitive, more alert to what it's doing, more open to the possibility that the suffering you're experiencing in life is not something you can blame on other people, or on conditions beyond your control. The essential suffering that's weighing down the mind is something that you've been creating through your own actions, and you can learn how to stop. That's what abandoning means. You realize that there's something you've been doing over and over again and you don't have to do it. So you stop.

The way to get yourself to stop is to see that these actions really aren't worth doing. Whatever pleasure you get out of them is nothing compared to the pain that you're causing. You have to see that fact in action, as it's happening, if you want to be able to drop that particular habit. And often the habits we have to drop are the ones we really, really, really like. Only by getting the mind a lot more sensitive will you be able to see through that liking, to see through the blindness and the ignorance that underlies it, so that you're willing to let go.

This is why we're sitting here with our eyes closed, focused on the breath. We're not off reading through the texts and trying to learn all we can about what the texts have to say. We're here looking at our own breath to see what our actions have to say—when viewed from the point of view of a mind that's centered, still, clear, stable here in the present moment. That's the point from which we can develop a more refined sense of where there's suffering and what

action it's coming from, so that once we really sees where it comes from, we can let go. We can stop.

This is how you develop a sense of disenchantment and dispassion for the actions that you used to feel enchanted and impassioned about. Your enchantment and passion kept you doing those things, so when you have no more passion for them, they stop. And their results stop in the present moment as well. The things that used to weigh down the mind all go away. As the Buddha said, at that point they don't even leave a trace. They may have been weighing down your mind for who knows how long, but when they're gone, they're gone. They don't leave any scars. They don't leave any marks. It's simply that you've been doing this to yourself over and over and over again. And you suddenly realize you can stop—and you would prefer to stop. That's it. The mind is freed. That's the freedom the Buddha is aiming his teachings at. Everything else is a means in that direction.

So try to make sure that you use the teachings for their intended purpose. That way you get the most out of them and you fulfill the Buddha's intentions in teaching them to begin with. There's that passage toward the end of his life where the devas were worshipping him with flowers, incense, and song, and the Buddha explained to the monks that this is not the way to really pay respect to the Buddha. You pay respect to the Buddha by practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma, which means that you learn how to look at sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas with the purpose of giving rise to disenchantment. You look for their inconstancy. You look for the stress that's involved in trying to find happiness in them. And you learn to see them as not self. That, he said, is how you pay true respect to the Buddha.

What does that have to do with the eightfold path? What does that have to do with the four noble truths? The way that you normally take the material that comes from your senses and turn it into suffering: That's the problem. You use the eightfold path to learn how to look into those processes, to see how you fashion the raw material from the senses into suffering, and to learn how to undo those habits. Because we've been clinging to these habits, we have to learn how to see what we're actually doing so that we can develop dispassion for those habits. The factors of the path are essential for strengthening the factor of right concentration, so that the mind is steady enough and still enough and sensitive enough so it can see what's happening.

So put a lot of work into the concentration. Many people ask, "How much concentration can I get away with? How little do I have to put into it?" And the answer is, put as much into it as you can, because right concentration is what puts the mind in a position where it can really see. From that position you can continue to develop the other factors of the path so that they all come together. That's how you gain the release that the Buddha intended for you.

After all, this is why the Buddha put so much effort for many eons into his quest for awakening, not so that devas would serenade him with the songs and strew flowers and incense from the sky. He wanted to find the skill that put an end to suffering. He wanted to be able to share it with others in such a way that they would actually feel inspired to put it to use and gain the same results. That was what inspired him through all those eons.

So try to use that thought to inspire yourself as well.