

Eight Folds, One Path

July 3, 2009

When you look at the factors in the noble eightfold path, it's interesting to note the order in which they come. The first two factors have to do with discernment, seeing that the big issue in life is suffering and stress, and particularly the kind of suffering that comes from our own thoughts. That right there tells you a lot: that this is a path where you have to look at your actions, look at your thoughts—although it may be wrong to make a distinction between your thoughts and your actions, as thoughts are a type of action, and our actions come from our thoughts.

This area of thinking and speaking and doing with the body is where the real issues of life lie, the things that we're responsible for. And fortunately, the fact that we're responsible for them means we can change them. If we were automatons or if we were driven by fate, we couldn't do anything about our actions. We'd just be sitting watching these processes happening without any control over them. So it's important to take a stand on this issue, that we do have choices. And we can change the way we act. Which means that suffering can be brought to an end. There is a path we can follow.

The next factor, which builds on that, is a factor in which you try to gain control over your intentions, the things that you resolve on. There are three things the Buddha advises: one, resolving on renunciation; two, resolving on non-ill will, in other words, goodwill for yourself and others; and three, resolving on harmlessness, in other words, developing thoughts of compassion. Because our actions come from thoughts, we have to get our thoughts in order before we can work on the rest of the path.

Think about your intentions. Do you search for your happiness in sensual fantasies or do you realize that there's a better happiness that comes from letting go of those things, not being attached to them? Do you search for your happiness in trying to get revenge on other people, wishing them ill, being careless about how you treat them? You've got to change those ways of thinking, because you realize that they're like boomerangs. They come back at you and knock you on the head.

So the first thing, when understanding that this is a path to put an end to suffering, is that you have to work on your intentions. Even though right resolve is a factor of discernment, it's also—as Ajaan Lee likes to point out—a factor of a virtue. In other words, you want your thoughts to be virtuous, harmless, the kind of thoughts that create an environment conducive to meditation. So don't assume that you can go around thinking very sloppily and carelessly throughout the day and then, when you can sit down, you'll be able to get the mind into good shape. You *can* bring it down through your force of your will, but it's not going to be the kind of concentration that really leads to discernment. It's the concentration that's built on denial, that's built on pretense.

So it does matter what you think. It's not that when we meditate we just turn off our thinking and it doesn't really matter what we're thinking before we turned off the thoughts. We have to very carefully consider how we look for happiness in sensual things and sensual fantasies, and remind ourselves that that's not the true source of happiness. The happiness that comes from sensuality carries all kinds of drawbacks and fosters all kinds of delusion. So we have to look for those drawbacks. See the kind of delusion that goes into sensual thinking, and

remind yourself that that's not what the best part of life is about. That's not where true happiness is going to be found. There's got to be something more.

As for ill will, this is where the practice of *metta*, or goodwill, comes in. Ask yourself, is there anybody out there, or anybody in here, that you feel ill will for, that you would be happy to see suffer? Then ask yourself, what would you gain from that person's suffering? Because as we all know, when people are suffering, they tend to lash out. When they feel threatened, when they feel insecure, that's when they do cruel and heartless things. If they aren't in a position to do cruel and heartless things now, they'll carry a grudge and look for revenge down the line. So why would you wish ill on anyone? It's better for the whole world that everyone learn the causes for true happiness and act on them. That's what you wish when you extend thoughts of goodwill.

The same with harmfulness: You've got to have compassion if you want your mind to be a good mind to meditate with. Is there anybody you'd like to harm? Ask yourself, do you want to have that kind of kamma? This is why right resolve builds on right view. You realize that the harm you do to yourself just keeps coming back and back and back again, like a boomerang that hits you in the head. You get angry at it so you throw it away to be rid of it, and of course it's going to keep coming back to hit you again.

So right view leads immediately to right resolve, the intentions around which you shape your life.

But the path doesn't just stop with intentions. The virtue of your intentions, the virtue of your resolves, actually has to show itself in the way you act. This is where the factors of right speech, right action, and right livelihood come in. And it's interesting that right speech comes before right action—in other words, the words you say are the first thing you've got to work on. You have to bring them in line with the principle of truthfulness, the principle of not being divisive in your speech, not being coarse in your speech, and not engaging in idle chatter—in other words, the kind of words you say simply to have something coming out of your mouth. As Ajaan Fuang once said, if you can't control your mouth, there's no way you're going to control your mind. And the precepts that are easiest to break are the ones having to do with speech. All you have to do is open your mouth, say a few words and there you are: You've broken a precept. If you go around chattering all day in ways that tell lies to yourself, tell lies to other people, how are you going to get the mind to settle down in a way that leads to true discernment, that allows it to give true reports to itself?

If you try to be careful about the things you say, the things you do, the way you look for your livelihood, these factors have an impact on the mind, and in particular on the ability of your concentration practice to give rise to further discernment. If the way you look for a living is harmful, you tend not to see it. You tend to deny that harm. And then when you're engaging in denial, how will your concentration be able to open up the dark corners of your mind, the areas that you tend to hide from yourself?

So you've got to learn how to think in ways that are virtuous, act in ways that are virtuous. That makes it a lot easier to focus in on the mind when you come to concentration practice. You're free from regret and you've been developing good habits. Being careful to act in harmless ways requires mindfulness; it requires alertness. That's because you have to keep this principle of harmlessness in mind and you have to be alert to notice what you're doing and saying, along with the results of what you're doing and saying, the implications of what you're doing and saying. This is why, when the Buddha wanted to teach the practice to his son, he started with

this principle of looking at your actions. And even before looking at your actions, he established the principle of truthfulness. You don't lie. He said that if you feel no shame in telling a deliberate lie, there's no evil you're incapable of doing.

In this way, looking carefully at your actions leads directly to the factors dealing with concentration. These begin with right effort: generating desire, *chandam janeti*, to abandon any unskillful qualities that have arisen, to prevent any unskillful qualities that haven't arisen from arising. In the words, if you know you're going to a situation where you tend to think and behave in unskillful ways, you prepare yourself. Train yourself to think in new ways and plan new strategies so that you don't react in your old unskillful ways in those situations. You also generate desire to give rise to skillful qualities that are not there yet, and to develop the ones you do have to their culmination. The standard phrase for right effort includes desire, persistence, and upholding your intent. These are three of the qualities listed in the bases for success, the Buddha's explanation for how to foster concentration. You start out by looking at the qualities in your mind, the qualities that influence your thinking, and talk yourself into wanting to think in skillful ways—*skillful* here meaning ways that are harmless, ways that are beneficial. So right effort leads directly to right concentration.

Notice that concentration practice doesn't start by just stopping your thought processes. You start by directing those processes in skillful ways. This requires you to be very honest with yourself: Where is this thought going? Is it imbued with right resolve or wrong resolve? If it's wrong, what can you do to put an end to it? If it's right, what can you do to encourage it? How can you make it even more skillful?

This is how you foster the factors of right mindfulness and right concentration. The formula for right mindfulness stresses three qualities: that you be ardent, alert, and mindful. The ardency here is the carryover of right effort into right mindfulness. You make up your mind to keep one thing in mind, or to maintain one thing as your frame of reference. It can be the body, feelings, states of the mind, or mental qualities, all viewed in and of themselves. You give the mind a constant frame. When it has a constant frame, it can settle down and see things a lot more clearly.

For instance, say you're going to focus on the breath in and of itself. The Buddha encourages you to become sensitive to the length of the breath, and to train yourself to be aware of the entire body as you breathe in and breathe out. This is important because when you get into the levels of right concentration, you have to take whatever sense of ease and pleasure they create and allow that to suffuse the entire body. To do that skillfully, you need to be sensitive to how the breathing process is experienced in the entire body. Wherever you see that it's coarse or forced, try to calm it down. Relax. Make it more soothing, refreshing. Only when things are calm and steady with one frame of reference like this can you see the subtle movements in the mind that you might have missed if you weren't focused. It's like the difference between riding around in a train and getting off the train. If you're riding the train, you look out the window and see that everything is moving. A river is moving, even trees are moving, the mountains are moving, because *you're* moving. If you get off the train and stand still on the ground, though, you see: Oh, the water in the river is moving. The trees may be moving a little bit in the wind, but the trees are solidly fastened to the ground. And the mountains are not moving at all. Then you see what actually is moving in relationship to the mountains because you're still. You have a frame of reference that's solid and still.

This practice of mindfulness tends toward right concentration, a full body awareness that takes any of the establishings of mindfulness as its theme. It'll be filled with a sense of ease, a sense of rapture. In the beginning you're thinking about the breath and evaluating it, but when the breath gets really comfortable, you can allow your awareness and the breath to fuse, to become one. In that oneness there's an even greater sense of rapture and ease. If the rapture becomes disturbing after a while, if you have a sense that it's just too much, you can tune in to another level of energy that's a lot more refined, a lot more easeful. You allow that to permeate the body. As things settle more and more into an equilibrium, you finally get to the point where you don't have to breathe in or breathe out. The breath energy in the body is full. Your awareness is very still, wide open, filling the whole body. Mind, body, and the still breath all seem one.

Training the mind in this direction makes it a lot more sensitive. You can look even more perceptively into the issue of right view: where there's stress; what's causing it. So the path loops around this way. Ajaan Mun, according to Ajaan Lee, made the point that these three factors of the training—discernment, virtue, and concentration—really permeate one another. The discernment that looks at the issue of stress and tries to develop skillful resolves contains an element of virtue within it. It also contains an element of concentration in staying focused on these as the important issues. The virtue that builds on right view and right resolve develops the qualities that lead to concentration: mindfulness and alertness. As for concentration, it has to partake of discernment and virtue in order to get anywhere. It is possible to get the mind into a strong concentration without much discernment, without much virtue, but that kind of concentration doesn't go far. It leads to all kinds of misunderstandings, as we see all around us, such as the idea that we have no free will, that whatever comes up in a concentrated mind can be trusted, that the precepts can be cast aside by someone whose mind is really concentrated like this. There can be a lot of delusion in a concentrated mind that's not imbued with the virtue and discernment.

But when concentration is built on virtue's honesty and discernment's sensitivity to stress and its causes, it becomes the sort of concentration that can lead to genuine release.

So all these things come together. All the different factors of the path partake of one another. Right concentration includes right mindfulness as its theme. Right mindfulness includes right effort in the quality of ardency. They all contain one another. In the same way, virtue, concentration, and discernment, which are larger categories, penetrate one another as well. It's only when you put them together like this that the path becomes right.

So even though there are eight folds to the path, it's all one piece of paper. It's all on the same page. And even though we may think of the practice as something you do when you're sitting here with your eyes closed, that's not the case. It's involved in everything you do throughout the day. Everything you do is part of a training, part of a practice. The only question is *which* training, *which* practice. As you go through the day, are you training yourself in these three trainings? Or do you have some other surreptitious trainings, trainings off the page, going along on the side? If you do, they're going to get in the way of the three trainings, eat into them, weaken them, sap their strength. They take the page of the path and tear it into shreds.

You're engaged in some sort of training all day long, whether you think about it or not. With everything you do, say, or think, you're training the mind in a specific direction. Even if you're training yourself in an unskillful direction, it's still called training the mind. Whichever the way the mind goes in its thinking, it bends itself in that direction, the same way you would

train a vine up a wall, bending it to the left or the right. So as you're making choices throughout the day, remind yourself that you're training the mind. Are you training it to stay on the path, or are you training it to stray off into other directions?

Because it's all one mind. The mind that gives the directions to speak, the mind that gives the directions to act and to think, is the same one that's sitting here and meditating right now. So as you go through the day, try to keep training it in the direction of the path, so that the meditation gives results.

The instructions that a preceptor gives to a new monk at the end of the ceremony are to train in heightened virtue, train in the heightened mind, train in heightened discernment. That's the focus of what we're doing here. And, as in the very last line of those instructions, try to perfect these heightened trainings with a strong sense of heedfulness, realizing that any choice that pulls you away from the trainings or runs counter to the trainings, is going to have its impact. Don't let yourself be careless.