

## **The Buddha's Eightfold Noble Path**

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What if... by contemplating your own thoughts, actions and feelings, and by noticing their causes and effects, you could establish ease and confidence in life?

What if... without belief, supposition, or ideology, you could find out how you get stressed and frustrated, and put an end to all that?

At any rate... since you are living your life, you might as well pay attention to it. Why not fully awaken to what is happening in and around you?

In exploring these possibilities, millions of people throughout the world use the teachings of the Buddha. Some shy away from calling themselves Buddhists, feeling that such a label might compromise the authenticity of their inquiry. From a Buddhist point of view there is no problem with this: the main point is to listen to the Buddha's teachings, mull them over, put them into practice and feel out the results. The teachings, called the Dhamma, are likened to medicine, and everyone who practises Dhamma can choose the medicine that they need, in accordance with the nature of the problem that needs curing. But the general theme that covers all Dhamma teachings is that they are aspects of the Four Noble Truths – of dukkha, or suffering, its origin, its ceasing and the Path which leads to the end of suffering. This is called the Noble Eightfold Path.

The eight factors of this Eightfold Path are Right View, Right Intent, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. I'll give details on these factors later, but the first and most important point is that they are a way of living. They are not philosophical concepts, beliefs, or descriptions of an Ultimate Truth, or Divinity. They lead to an Awakening to Ultimate Truth, but do not define it. The Buddha's realisation was that the experience of ultimate Truth was consonant with the ending of dukkha. And dukkha -- whether this be depression, anxiety, frustration, or a more general sense of pointlessness-- concerns us all in the here and now of our lives. It's not a matter of belief. Nor, in Buddhism, do you have to believe that there is such a thing as liberation or Ultimate Truth; just put an end to suffering and stress, and you'll know Truth for yourself.

So the Buddhist approach is through direct experience, of which the first thing to consider is where both our innermost pain and our most reliable sense of well-being are to be found. Circumstances such as illness or good fortune come and go; but what lingers with us are internal conditions- a sense of being trusted and at peace, or of having regret or hatred gnawing away at our hearts. If we have peace of mind, we can weather through the rough patches; but guilt, hatred or depression can cloud the brightest day. A millionaire or a king can be beset with worry and mistrust. And a penniless monk like the Buddha can dwell in ease and fulfilment. Suffering and its cessation lie in our minds and hearts.

Mind and heart: we have an awareness that is affected by and responds to experience. This awareness is what the Buddha would encourage a listener to attend to when putting the teachings to the test. In dialogue he would encourage the inquiry: how does it feel if someone abuses you, kills your friends and relatives? Is that suffering or not? And how is it when people treat you with generosity and kindness? And if you act in either of these ways, which brings about the results that will give you most well-being? So using your own wisdom, how should you best act? Applying reasoned inquiry in this way, the Buddha would sketch in the outline of his Dhamma.

However, for myself as for many people, Buddhism began with meditation. I'd graduated from University, had a head full of ideas and just as many questions as to what life was about. Before following a particular career, it seemed best to get my own take on what I really wanted. And how to achieve it. So I travelled around, trying this and that, and after a few years headed East to see what some soul-searching would uncover. I eventually arrived in Thailand, and happened across a class in Buddhist meditation being given in English. It seemed to be worth a try. The venue was a room in a Buddhist monastery that had a few mats to sit on and nothing much else. It was lit by a lamp, which was placed next to the meditation teacher who was sitting up front beside a window. He was a Westerner, and was wearing the ochre-brown robes of a Buddhist monk. Being a monastery in the tropics, there was no glass in the window, and flying ants were coming in, attracted to the light. A few fluttered over the monk, but I noticed that as he spoke, he wasn't put off by the ants fluttering over his arms, and just occasionally picked one carefully off his face if it seemed to be in danger of going into his mouth. He wasn't getting agitated, and he picked each ant off with specific awareness of its fragility, without losing the thread of what he was talking about. In the same situation, I would have killed a few ants, got irritated about the lack of glass and definitely lost the gist of what I was talking about. But the stress that I would have got into would have been self-induced: the ants weren't actually doing any harm. It was just a matter of responding to the sensation with full awareness rather than reacting to it. That was a good introduction to what meditation was about; and in a larger sense what the Buddhist Path was all about.

In a nutshell, the Eightfold Path can be seen as covering ethics, meditation and understanding. In the class in Thailand, that meant don't kill flying ants, be with what's happening, and guide your responses with an understanding of how to let go of the stress. Easy enough in theory, but I could see that I needed some training. Meditation takes us to where we're really being affected, but that's where we tend to react blindly. To respond clearly to experience, we need to establish guidelines. The foundation for such guidelines is Right View.

Right View is the recognition that what we do counts. We're not in a pre-determined cosmos, we can be effective. We can be a source of benefit or harm for ourselves and others; and such a responsibility is not so much a moral obligation as a mandate: if we develop clarity and kindness, we can live with that kind of mind. If, however, we sustain prejudices or indifference, we become narrow and insensitive. We can act clearly and be at peace with ourselves, or we can act out of compulsion, and get stuck. Because compulsion leads to addictive behaviour and loss of personal authority. And in all cases, the chances are that we'll end up being associated with people who mirror our attitudes. So Right View is the recognition that our own integrity has to be the centre of our lives. And that feels empowering.

Right Intent, sometimes called Right Thought, proceeds from that understanding of cause and effect; it means setting up the intention to bring around skilful results through body speech and mind, and to relinquish the unskilful ones. This is the foundation of the teachings on action, or kamma, as it is called in Buddhism, of which mental intention is the agent. Since actions of body and speech proceed from mind-states and emotions, if we can get the mind and heart clear, we can both act from a place of balance, and be able to discern the results of our actions. This is the case with Right Speech and Right Action. We give up deception, stealing and violence, and cultivate honesty and words that are worth treasuring. Right Livelihood means avoiding trade in arms, prostitution, animal slaughter; and it also broadens out into how one shares one's life with others. Our relationships with other people profoundly influence our minds, so on occasion, the Buddha gave attention to husband-wife relationships, parenting, mutually supportive norms for employer and employee; as well as on the benefits and qualities of friendship.

For myself these Path factors came together with the decision to spend time on retreat in a monastery, and after a while, to take on an open-ended commitment to training as a Buddhist monk. And as well as

morality and meditation, friendship is a big part of that. The teacher and fellow-monks are the friends who support you with companionship in the training, and the lay followers are the friends who provide encouragement as well as the food and the simple requisites that a monk or nun needs. In turn the monastic community supports the laity with teachings, and example. It is a micro-society based on mutual respect, compassion and generosity.

Right View, Right Effort and Right Mindfulness underlie every other factor. For example with Right Speech, one starts with Right View by recognising that how one talks affects others. We can bring something of value into someone's mind with a well-attuned remark, or we could ruin their day. We could be left with regret and mistrust, or with openness and peace of mind. From there Right Effort, means doing the work of steering one's actions, while Right Mindfulness entails being fully there with what we do or say and what effects it has. And the result is we avoid distress and participate in something of immediate benefit. This is the process of the entire Eightfold Path.

Mindfulness and the last Path factor, Right Concentration, take us into the domain of meditation, the cultivation of awareness. These factors are often what people are usually struck by in Buddhism, because they offer a powerful deepening of the inner life, possibilities of great serenity and joy and the unconditioned peace that is called Nibbana. And this deepening begins and is maintained with mindfulness - which entails being simply and purely present to what is going on.

If I go back to that first meditation class in Thailand: the monk gave us some advice on how to sit upright in a state of relaxed alertness, and start paying attention to the sensations that accompanied the process of breathing. I couldn't have followed more than a breath or two before my mind was wandering. In fact it was careening on a wave of speculations, memories, and analyses. Every now and then I would steer my attention back to the breath sensations, and be able to maintain that for a few seconds before a fresh tide of thoughts came washing in. This is pretty much the standard beginner's meditation. Nevertheless, what struck me deeply was that here I was witnessing my mind. And that was strangely peaceful, even reassuring: somehow I didn't have to make anything out of my thoughts, or even out of my mind. It was just something happening. Moreover, if I was witnessing my mind, who was I, and whose mind was this?

The Buddha reckoned these to be unanswerable questions. Whatever you think or say you are -- that is just one more event passing through your mind. No, the point is that there is always this present awareness, and what passes through it is changing and not what you really are. But the more you centre on that present awareness, maybe using a focal point like the sensations of breathing to help you do that, the steadier and clearer you feel. You can let go of the impulses and sensations that come up, or, as I learnt later, you can focus on them and allow the steadiness of awareness to bring them into harmony. Which is what happens. That is, with practice you can stop struggling with your body and your moods, and that very quality of non-struggle starts to infuse and settle them. So: bringing attention into the present is mindfulness, and the result, a steadiness that pervades the body and mind is concentration, or samadhi. Samadhi is not a concentration that you do, it's a centred and pleasurable unity that occurs as a result of Right View, Right Effort and Right Mindfulness.

Although the practice of mindfulness and concentration is immensely remedial in terms of clearing out stress, worry, and obsessive moods, it has a further development; which is the understanding that liberates the practitioner from the very source of suffering and stress. This understanding, called insight, both attunes you to the ephemeral nature of what is happening, and puts you in touch with the steady ever-presence of awareness itself. Sensing this time and time again, an involuntary shift takes place: your centre moves to that pure awareness. In daily life, you can act from that awareness with compassion and clarity; and in meditation, you can let all the events subside, and dwell in a bright, unhindered presence. This leads to

Nibbana, the fulfilment of the Eightfold Path. As you get to sense this, even in glimpses, you don't get caught up in hankering or dejection; there's no frustration, no need to defend, and nothing you have to prove. Just this is an end to suffering and stress.

For me personally, this is the best option that human life affords. But as the Buddha recommended, it's up to each of us to know it for ourselves.

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I would like to dedicate whatever benefits may arise from this talk to my first teacher, Phra Alan Nyanavajiro.