Travelling the Eightfold Path Towards Insight and Liberation

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The Buddha realized something profound—he had a deep understanding of the possibility for freedom from suffering, that it is possible to become free from suffering.

What he realized first is that it's not possible to become free from pain, from physical pain, but it is possible to become free from mental distress. And so that is his orientation for us: How can he help us become free of any kind of mental distress? One of the definitions of freedom is experiencing no mental pain or grief. For me, that's a pretty inspiring sounding state—just the idea of experiencing no mental pain or grief. And that is essentially what the Buddha says is possible. He says he found it himself and says it is possible for us.

But after he discovered this, after he realized this idea, after he had this recognition of the ending of mental pain and grief in his own mind, he looked out at the world and he saw that people were living their lives in such a way that actually reinforced their own mental pain and grief. They weren't just living in a kind of neutral way, but actually they were living in a way that they thought would make them happy, but actually bound them more tightly to this cycle of being locked into patterns in our minds of mental pain and grief.

So what is this mental pain and grief? The term that the Buddha used is dukkha. The derivation of that Pali term is quite interesting. The first part of the word, "du," means something like "bad." And the second part of the word, "kha," has as its basic definition the center part of a wheel—the empty space in the middle of a wheel. So the term dukkha means a bad empty space in the middle of the wheel.

What does that mean? If we think about what that actually means, it means if you have a wheel that's got a bad empty space in the middle, perhaps that place where the axle goes through is too small. So it's too tight. It rubs. It's not an easy ride. There's resistance in that turning of the wheel. Or perhaps it's off-center, so that as the wheel turns, it kind of goes ka-chunk, ka-chunk, ka-chunk. Or maybe it's so loose altogether that as the wheel goes, the wheel falls off entirely.

These ideas give you a sense of the range of mental distress that's covered by this term. It can be a simple sense of something's not quite right—things are a little bit off here, just a feeling of not quite being satisfied with things the way they are. If it were just tweaked a little bit that way, it would be better. Could get rid of that, then things would be a little better. That's a kind of dukkha. The term is often translated as "suffering," but that seems a bit extreme for this definition of just a little bit of offness.

And this term dukkha goes all the way to what we do call extreme suffering—the times when the wheel is just falling off and we're not able to go anywhere, where we're experiencing massive suffering: loss of a partner, death of a family member, diagnosis of cancer in our own lives, a terminal diagnosis. These kinds of suffering—actually, from the Buddhist perspective, it's not the diagnosis of the cancer or the loss of the loved one that is the actual dukkha, but it's our mental response to it, our resistance to it, the sense that this is not the way it should be, and the fact that we suffer over that.

So the Buddha points to dukkha as being a problem in our own minds. It's not the things that are happening out in the world, but it's the way that we are riding with them. I think this is another reason why the wheel analogy is good, because it's the way that we're riding with the circumstances of life. Is there resistance? Is there a feeling of offness around it? That's where this problem of dukkha comes.

This is the problem that the Buddha was trying to solve. And he came to an understanding that it was possible to end this dukkha in his own mind. Fortunately for us, he also came to a recognition that there's actually a set of tools that we can use to help us free ourselves from this mental pain and grief.

The path that he offered us is the Eightfold Path. I'd like to speak a little bit about it—not in the kind of detail I might ordinarily do in a dharma talk, because I want to talk about how this path connects with this problem of suffering and how we can free ourselves, how this path supports freeing ourselves from this suffering. So I'll offer an overview of the Eightfold Path and then go back and talk about how it supports us to free our minds.

The Eightfold Path, as a kind of overview of the parts of the path: there's right understanding—I'll just name them first of all.

Right understanding, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

In offering these as a path, the Buddha is offering them as a set of practices that will lead us to the ending of dukkha. They're not something to simply read about—they're actually practices to engage with.

The path begins with right understanding and right intention. What this points to is basically that as the Buddha looked out and saw people engaging in actions, thinking it would make them happy, he noticed something. One of our main ways that we think we'll be happy is: "If I get what I want, I'll be happy." And engaging in things in that way, we do get a little bit of happiness from time to time. If we actually get what we want, there's a little bit of happiness. If we don't get what we want, there's immediate suffering—we recognize that as suffering. But if we get what we want, there's a little bit of happiness, and it's like, "Yes, that's the way it's supposed to be. That's how life is supposed to be. I'm supposed to get what I want, and that's how happiness comes."

So that's a kind of belief, a way that we operate in our lives, going from thing to thing, trying to get what we want. In a sense, we think that if we could line up a bunch of moments where we got what we

want—because we know that having what we want doesn't make us happy forever—but we do think that if we can get what we want endlessly, that is what happiness would be. And if I'm not able to do that, then there must be something wrong with me, or I've got to work harder, or I've got to be able to fix it or control things. So we have this belief around getting what we want being how we'll be able to be happy.

The Buddha looked at that and realized that actually this action of endlessly getting what we want just conditions more wanting to have the next thing. If you actually look in your experience, it's not so much that when we're in a state where we don't have what we want, it's not so much the fact that we don't have it that is the feeling of offness. In that moment of wanting something that we don't have, the feeling of offness is the wanting itself. And this is what he pointed to: it's not the not having that causes our suffering. It's the having of the wanting that causes our suffering.

So he started to point us through a shift of our view. This view that we normally think of in terms of how I can be happy is not going to serve us very well for a deep kind of lasting happiness. But if we instead orient ourselves around letting go of wanting things—wanting to have things that we don't have, wanting to get rid of things that we have that we don't like—this endless manipulating of the world to make it just the way I want it for a few moments before it falls apart and changes and then we rearrange again... That's our life: endlessly rearranging the world and watching it fall apart, rearranging and watching it fall apart.

The Buddha proposes that if we let go of the wanting to do all that rearranging, that's where a deeper happiness will come. This is his directing us in this very first aspect of the Eightfold Path. He says: shift your orientation. And the definition of this shift of orientation is understanding the Four Noble Truths.

The Four Noble Truths are: there is suffering; there's a cause for suffering, and that cause is this wanting, this craving, this wanting things to be other than they are—wanting to have things we don't have, wanting to get rid of things that we do have. So there is suffering, and there's this cause of suffering. Then there's the possibility—which he promises us from his own direct experience—that this suffering, this dukkha, this very subtle kind of suffering, can end. And there is a path that leads to its end.

So this is the reorientation. The Buddha says we shouldn't live our lives so much trying to figure out how to get what we want, as much as we should figure out how to let go of the things that are causing us suffering. That's the orientation towards happiness.

It's no surprise that given his burning question was "How can I end dukkha?" his whole orientation around wisdom has to do with the framing of understanding this dukkha. The Four Noble Truths are set out not just as truths to be believed in, but as actions to be taken. With each of these truths, there's an action that the Buddha proposes.

We need to understand suffering. By "understand it," he doesn't mean to think about it—to think, "Well, why am I suffering? This pattern that's coming up right now, this anger that I'm experiencing, that's deep

in my childhood. That comes from the time when my parents did this to me, and I know this is kind of how it's all formed." That kind of thinking about it is not what the Buddha means by understanding. He means understanding in the moment. What is this experience of suffering? His proposal is to turn towards the experience of this offness, this rub, this resistance, this feeling of catastrophe if it's that big.

What is the experience of suffering? What is it to be a human being experiencing this dukkha? This is the Buddha's proposal to us as part of our path: understand suffering, and let go of the cause of suffering—let go of this wanting.

This letting go may have an active quality to it. It may be that we can actively let go of something that we see isn't useful. But more often what we end up doing is hanging out with this feeling of suffering, this feeling of wanting things to be different. And in the very hanging out with it—if we hang out with it instead of acting on it—something shifts. If we act on that wanting, it just conditions the belief that the way to happiness, the way to satisfy that wanting, is to get what we want. If we take that action and get what we want, it conditions the belief that this is the way to happiness.

So this is a radical shift the Buddha proposes: to turn towards this feeling. What does it feel like to want something and not act on it for a change? What does that just feel like, this pull to want to get something or have something? If you watch it for a little while, you'll see that it ends. You'll see that it does pass. And when you see that, when you see that wanting end, you'll see that there's actually a very deep kind of relaxation in the letting go that happens. Once the wanting goes, there's no problem anymore. There's no dissatisfaction around not having that thing. It's the wanting itself that is the issue. It's the source of our suffering.

The third noble truth is the truth of the cessation of suffering—the possibility that the Buddha puts forward, the possibility that suffering can end. He says we have to realize this for ourselves. Nobody can do it for you. It has to be realized yourself. And the path to that is this Eightfold Path.

So this is our reorientation. Initially, as we meet this Eightfold Path, this wisdom that the Buddha offers us—this reorientation around letting go of the things that lead us to suffering and cultivating the things that lead us to a deeper kind of happiness—we have to take this somewhat on faith. We've heard this and perhaps massaged it a little bit in our minds, thought about it. And if there's enough of a sense of trust in the teaching, there may be a sense of, "Okay, I'm going to try this."

Because the Buddha is not proposing just a belief here. He's proposing actions. He's proposing practices. In putting forth this teaching of the Four Noble Truths, it's not simply, "Here, believe this and you'll be free." It's that if you believe this enough, you'll start to act on these truths, and then you will see for yourself the benefits of acting on them. Slowly, over time, a gradual letting go of our suffering unfolds.

Initially, it's out of hearing the teachings and reflecting on them that we begin to have the intention, the desire, the wish to engage in the practices. This is the second aspect of the Eightfold Path: the intention to

follow through on this teaching. Right intention is this intention to engage with these practices.

This intention leads us towards a movement to act in the world in ways that will, as much as possible, not cause suffering. Suffering is our guide here. It's the orientation we look toward. Is there suffering happening? If there's suffering happening, then we need to understand it, see if we can find what it is that we're holding on to, and let go of that cause. The orientation is around looking at where suffering is happening in our lives, in the lives of others.

With this intention to follow these practices the Buddha is suggesting, we start to engage in the world in ways that will not harm people—with ethical conduct. This is the second aspect of the Eightfold Path, the next three components: wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood. These lay out sets of practices that we work with in our relationships with others in the world.

They're all phrased in terms of abstaining—abstaining from certain things that would tend to cause harm. With wise action: abstaining from killing, abstaining from taking what's not given, abstaining from sexual misconduct. With wise speech: abstaining from false speech, from divisive speech, from harsh speech, from idle chatter.

Harsh, divisive, false, and idle. We look at where our speech and our actions are creating harm in the world. The Buddha points us to these areas. He says, if you find yourself getting ready to engage in harsh speech, it's a really high probability that it's going to cause suffering out there. So look at that.

These ethical practices aren't taught simply as "thou shalt not." They're really meant to be engaged with in a way of watching. When one of these things comes up—a wish to speak in a divisive way, perhaps saying "that person does this thing" to somebody else and kind of creating a division, us versus them—what's the motivation there? We begin to look at it when a desire for this kind of speech arises. The possibility of it causing harm is great, so what's motivating it? We begin to look in our experience at what's motivating that, so that we can, as much as possible, let go of behaviors, speech, and actions in the world that cause additional harm.

This ethical component of the Eightfold Path is really about harmonizing our relationship with the world. It's not about putting ourselves into a straitjacket, but really creating harmony, creating a peaceful living situation. With that intention towards non-harming, through the exploration of not harming others, we also begin to see how we engage in our minds before we reach out to harm others.

For instance, if you have anger in your mind and that leads you to want to speak harshly, you get to the place where you don't necessarily follow through on that harsh speech. Then you start to see that the anger burns. It burns us. As we begin to let go of the behaviors that cause harm, we start to see the internal states of mind that cause us harm.

This is where the third aspect of the Eightfold Path comes in. We start to cultivate our minds through the factors of wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration. This is mental cultivation. And this really

comes back to the crux of where dukkha comes from. We see that largely this unhappiness, this dissatisfaction, comes because of how we relate to the world—how we want to arrange the world, wanting to have things that we don't have, wanting to get rid of things that we do have. It's the way that we relate to the world. It's in our minds. Our relationship to the world is something that's coming up in our minds.

You can see how, given a situation, some people respond some ways and some people respond other ways. So it's not the situation that is the problem—it's our response to it. Since the whole crux of this dukkha is something that's in our minds, this mental cultivation begins to get at that problem. The vast majority of our struggles is created by some reactivity: liking something, not liking something, wanting to have something, wanting to get rid of something. So we need to cultivate a mind that can start to look at that.

Sometimes when we experience habitual patterns—and I think all of us have habitual tendencies, habitual patterns that we engage in over and over again—we see that this isn't helpful. Why do I keep doing this? Why do I keep getting so angry? Or why do I keep telling myself I'm such a bad person? We have these habits of mind, and we don't quite understand why we keep engaging in them. Sometimes we think, "Well, I must just be this way. It's hopeless. I can't possibly change this. I've been doing this for so long, there's no hope of changing it."

It's not true. It's possible to change our minds. It is absolutely possible to change our minds.

This mental cultivation that the Buddha teaches—wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration—these are the tools you need to change your mind. Wise effort is about looking at those qualities of mind that lead us towards unhappiness, towards this dukkha, this suffering, this off feeling. The three main qualities that lead us in that direction are a wanting to have something, a kind of greed; a wanting to get rid of things that we don't like, an aversion; and a kind of confusion around

Or a misperception around where happiness can actually be found. A misperception about how the world actually works, how reality is structured. That misperception is delusion—something I hope to explore a little more later.

We look at our minds and begin to see how they work. We begin to see that greed, aversion, and delusion lead us into this feeling of offness over and over again. And we begin to see that when we act out of non-greed, non-aversion, and non-delusion, this leads us towards more happiness in our lives, more peacefulness, more serenity.

So wise effort is about noticing when we're engaging in things that lead us more toward suffering or more toward happiness—cultivating those things that lead us to happiness and letting go of those things that lead us toward suffering.

This is beginning to observe in our minds, and this is the wise mindfulness aspect of the Eightfold Path: turning toward our experience, observing our experience. With a very honest approach—mindfulness brings great honesty to our practice, to our hearts—we turn and look at our experience and recognize

when we're behaving in ways that are not helpful. The mindfulness allows us to recognize what our minds are doing, and the teaching on wise effort guides us in the direction toward more and more skillfulness.

The combination of these two—effort and mindfulness—means making the effort to keep staying connected, keep exploring, keep observing. What is this dukkha? This very First Noble Truth, understanding dukkha, coming back to that—this actually is one of our big practices. We bring wise effort and wise mindfulness to bear on our experience. Much of the time that experience feels off, and that very exploration of that offness begins to re-educate the mind.

It's so interesting that when we actually pay attention with mindfulness to the way our mind is engaged in anger or frustration or whatever your favorite pattern is—depression or fear—when we turn to actually look at it... I remember when I first heard this teaching of turning to look at your difficulties, I thought, "What good is that going to do? Isn't that just going to make it worse?" To my surprise, I found out that actually, no, it didn't make it worse. It educated the mind.

What we tend to do is act out of those habits. We reinforce them by somehow believing that if I act out of this anger, it's going to hurt that person over there, and that's what will satisfy me. If I see them feeling as miserable as I feel, that's what will make me happy. We act on that, but we're not really noticing the suffering that we're experiencing in our own hearts because we're focused outwardly.

So this reorientation—turn around and look at the experience inwardly—it's a radical shift. What happens is the mind begins to see: oh, it's suffering in here when I'm experiencing that. As the mind sees that, and sees that actually this is something happening in the mind—this anger is coming up in our own minds—and the mind sees that this thing coming up in itself is creating this feeling of suffering in itself, it starts to let it go. Because ultimately our minds don't want to suffer. They don't want to be in pain. But we radically misunderstand where that pain comes from. When we turn and actually look at this dukkha itself, the mind begins to understand how to let it go. It begins to understand how it's causing it itself.

This is something you may have to take on trust at first, but if you play with it—in my very first few months of practice, it became really clear that this was true. It did not take long before I realized how true this was: that this turning toward experience, understanding suffering, is the very way, the very path to the letting go of it.

Wise concentration is the last factor of the Eightfold Path, but concentration isn't the aim of the path. The promise of the Eightfold Path is that we will become free of our suffering, free of this mental reactivity, this mental not-liking things to be the way they are. The concentration and the mindfulness together lead us to what I've been describing—how turning toward experience is the pathway through the suffering. The mindfulness and the effort together bring the mind to a place of concentration, of stability, of being able to hang out with these feelings. That's the concentration: that ability to be stable with experience.

And that concentration and mindfulness together begin to show us the truth of those initial teachings

from the very beginning of the path, where we started with wise understanding. I said we kind of had to take it as learning and reflection and then begin to engage. As we engage, as we actually connect with the practices, turn and look at our suffering and see that the way to end suffering is through meeting it, we get a verified understanding of these truths, of these Four Noble Truths.

The understanding of suffering is no longer some idea. It's a deep seeing of how suffering is created in our own minds. These practices come together to lead us back, in a kind of cycle, to an understanding of wise understanding and how the intention supports that understanding—at a deeper level. It's a verified understanding. And so we travel the path again in a kind of cycle: wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration lead us to a verified understanding of the wisdom the Buddha offers. It may not be the full verification of it, but it's a glimpse—yes, I understand how that works.

When I first saw how this all works, it was like, "Oh my gosh, this is incredible!" I could actually see how the mind was leading itself down the garden path to suffering. And seeing that, the mind started to just—poof—let it go. This is verification and direct experience of the first and second noble truths, and some of the third: the way the mind can let go of the things that are creating its suffering.

The deepening of wisdom—this path is traveled in a kind of spiral. I think of it as traveling in a spiral. The more that we understand through this engagement with our experience, turning toward our experience, willing to meet our suffering instead of reacting to it, acting on it all the time—the more we do that, the deeper our understanding of the Four Noble Truths goes. The deeper our understanding of suffering goes. The deeper our understanding of how our mind creates that suffering goes. The more we actually see that suffering let go, and the more we see the benefit of cultivating this path.

So we travel it in a kind of spiral, deepening with each turn.

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