# The Eightfold Path and Freedom

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 53:57

When the Buddha left home at twenty-nine years old, he was in search of an answer to a problem. He felt the problem of our human condition. He framed it in terms of suffering—he saw that there was a great deal of this suffering in the world and wanted to understand it, wanted to understand if it was possible to be free from this suffering.

In his exploration over the next six years, he came to a very deep understanding. The night of his awakening, he found that it is possible to become free of this suffering. But he also saw that the understanding he had come to was very subtle. It was hard to see, hard to penetrate this understanding.

And yet out of compassion for human beings, he decided to go ahead and teach. Because when he looked out at the world after having this recognition, having this realization about suffering and happiness, he saw that people were engaging in activities trying to be happy. Most of our activities are in some way trying to make us happy and free from suffering. And yet they were doing the very things that led them into suffering over and over again. And so out of compassion he began to teach what he had understood.

The basic framework for his teaching is the Four Noble Truths, and it is framed in terms of this problem. The first noble truth is yes, there is suffering—the acknowledgement that yes, there is suffering. The second noble truth is the understanding that there is a cause for this suffering, and that cause is within our own minds. Suffering isn't coming at us from the outside world. The suffering that we experience is a result of a process in our own minds. And because it is created in our own minds, it is possible to be free of it. There is a path that we can follow that will lead us to this freedom from suffering.

This path, the Eightfold Path, is part of what I'd like to explore tonight. But I'd like to explore it in the context of how it leads us to the ending of suffering—what that means and how it is possible.

The Eightfold Path is really what we could call the practical side of the Buddhist teachings. It is a set of practices, things that we engage with and act on, to realize and understand for ourselves what the Buddha understood when he became awakened. Following this path is said to lead us to the ending of suffering.

I'd like to start with a brief overview of the Eightfold Path and then talk about how this path connects to freedom from suffering, to liberation. How does this path lead us to awakening?

The path that the Buddha described has eight components to it, as you would expect, and it's divided into three aspects, three different groups. There's the group of wisdom, which contains two factors of the Eightfold Path: wise understanding and wise intention. The second aspect is what we could call the ethical section of the Eightfold Path, comprising three components: wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood.

The third section is what we could call mental cultivation or mental development, and it is comprised of wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration.

The first two factors—wise understanding and wise intention, the wisdom aspect of the Eightfold Path—acknowledge that there's a radical shift of perspective that we need in order to come to the deep understanding that the Buddha discovered for himself. This understanding is around suffering, around this dukkha: how it's caused, how we can be free of it, and what it actually is.

We've talked about dukkha quite a bit during the week, so I'm not going to go over that too much more. But what I will say is that this wise understanding is essentially framed in terms of the Four Noble Truths, which is actually quite interesting. Wise understanding is the first part of the Eightfold Path, and the Eightfold Path is the last aspect of the Four Noble Truths. And the first aspect of the Eightfold Path is the Four Noble Truths. It has a cyclic nature to it, and I'll come back to that.

Initially, this wise understanding is a kind of intellectual understanding, an intellectual exploration. We hear about the teachings of the Four Noble Truths. We hear about this dukkha, how it's caused—we've talked about the wanting, the wanting things to be other than they are, as the source of this dissatisfaction in our lives.

This understanding begins with hearing about the teachings, hearing this new perspective on what dukkha is. It's not out there. There's something going on in here. When we are suffering, there's something going on in our minds. This is a radical shift of perspective, not something that most of us would have come up with on our own. The Buddha is offering this as a teaching for us.

So we begin with wise understanding as a teaching. And this teaching begins to inform us, perhaps, if we resonate with it. Those of you who are here, I think there is some connection with this teaching. There begins to be a sense of maybe there's something possible here. For me, when I first met these teachings, I was in a state of such despair.

It was kind of like my sense was simply, does anybody know some way out of this despair? And that's said to be the beginning of the search. The question that the Buddha proposes is that when there is suffering, the question naturally arises: does someone know a way or two out of this suffering? And the Buddha is proposing, "I have found a way."

So it's a bit of a leap of faith for us to take these teachings in and to have the sense of confidence that yes, this did work for the Buddha—maybe it will work for me. Initially we go on borrowed trust, borrowed faith, borrowed confidence. We begin with a kind of intellectual, perhaps reflective, acceptance—or at least curiosity and interest and willingness to explore these teachings.

And this perhaps begins to motivate us to engage with the practices. So this motivation touches into the second aspect of the Eightfold Path: wise intention. From the wise intention to engage in these practices, we begin to reorient our lives. We see that this suffering is not our own problem alone—it is widespread.

Everybody has the same struggles. And we start to have a sense of connection with other beings and a wish not to add difficulty to their lives.

So this begins the movement into the next aspect of the Eightfold Path, which is the aspect of ethical conduct. The intention to engage in the practices and teachings also moves us into an intention to behave in ways that don't contribute to the suffering of the world. We start to act and be committed to non-harming, to peaceful conduct. This second aspect of the Eightfold Path—the aspect of ethical conduct—comprises wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood. It is about harmonizing our relationship with the world, coming into peace, living peacefully, with a heart that is open and connected to other beings, a heart that inclines towards non-harming.

The third aspect of the Eightfold Path, the mental development component, is comprised of wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration. And we might ask: why do we need mental cultivation? This comes back to what the Buddha said about dukkha. The understanding about this dukkha is that it is happening because of the way we relate to the world. We want things to be other than they are. We want pleasant things to stay. We want to get rid of things that are unpleasant. We think that if we could only arrange the world in the way that would suit us, that would be happiness.

And so this belief that we could arrange the world to suit us doesn't come into alignment with reality very well. It proves itself to be a mistaken notion. There's a poem that illustrates this beautifully—an excerpt from Rilke's Eighth Elegy:

*And we, spectators, always, everywhere, turn toward the world of objects. It fills us. We arrange it. It breaks down. We rearrange it, then break down ourselves.*

This is our life. And it is this belief that we can rearrange everything that is the source, in a way, of this dukkha. It is something in our own minds—a mental mistaken notion. And so the need for mental cultivation, which can begin to reorient our minds in a way that is more in line with truth.

So we look at our minds, we see how they work. This is really what we've been doing here. We have been practicing the sīla aspect of the Eightfold Path through the practices of the precepts and non-harming, and we are engaged with the cultivation of wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration. This is what we've been doing in our sittings, in our walkings. We observe our minds. We see the scattered, jumpy mind. We see the habits of mind that are propelling this jumpiness, this agitation.

The mental cultivation of wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration begins to bring our minds into some settledness. It begins to allow us to see how these mental habits work. These three work together, as I hope you've been seeing over this week. There's the effort that we make—wise effort—which allows us to stay connected to our experience in the moment. Wise effort is connected to the motivation to cultivate skillful mind states and let go of unskillful mind states. Mindfulness is what allows us to recognize what's skillful and what's unskillful.

It allows us to stay in the present moment, connected with our experience, seeing our experience moment after moment. And these two together—wise effort and wise mindfulness—allow the mind to settle down. It is the bringing together of effort and mindfulness that leads to concentration, that leads to stability of mind. And this concentration begins to show us how our minds work.

So that was the briefest of overviews of the Eightfold Path. I sometimes do that in eight weeks.

The next piece I want to talk about is freedom. The Eightfold Path is a set of practices that are said to lead to freedom, to liberation. So what is this freedom? I've talked about it as freedom from suffering. The Buddhist understanding is that suffering results from unwholesome mental energies, and the Buddha boiled it down to three mental energies that are at the root of our suffering: greed, hatred, and delusion. He said all of our struggles come down to those three. The definition of freedom from suffering is the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion.

I'd like to read you some texts about liberation, about freedom. The Pali term is *nibbana*, Sanskrit *nirvana*, which is the one more familiar in the English lexicon. This is really what we can think of as enlightenment, awakening, freedom, liberation—they all mean the same thing. These texts I'm going to read are from different sources in the Buddhist texts, but they flow together, so I'm going to read them as one:

*The extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion—this indeed is called nibbana.*

*Enraptured with lust, enraged with anger, blinded by delusion, overwhelmed with mind ensnared, man aims at his own ruin, at the ruin of others, at the ruin of both, and he experiences mental pain and grief. But if lust, anger, and delusion are given up, man aims neither at his own ruin, nor at the ruin of others, nor at the ruin of both. And he experiences no mental pain and grief. This is nibbana immediate, visible in this life, inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise.*

*And for a disciple thus freed, in whose heart dwells peace, there is nothing to be added to what has been done, and no more remains for her to do. Just as a rock of one solid mass remains unshaken by the wind, even so neither forms, nor sounds, nor odors, nor tastes, nor contacts of any kind, neither the desired nor the undesired, can cause such a one to waver. Steadfast is her mind. Gained is deliverance.*

*This is peace. This is exquisite. The resolution of all fabrications, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbana.*

I want to highlight a couple of pieces from this. One is where it says, "If lust, anger, and delusion are given up, man aims neither at his own ruin, nor at the ruin of others, nor at the ruin of both, and experiences no mental pain and grief." That description is essentially equated to enlightenment, to freedom—experiencing no mental pain and grief. Just imagine what it might be like to live with no mental pain and grief. It's not saying that there won't be unpleasant physical experience. But if there is no mental reactivity to that unpleasant experience, it's a completely different thing. This is part of the promise,

essentially, of the practice. This is possible: no mental pain and grief.

The other thing that truly inspires me is where he says, "This is nibbana immediate, visible in this life." This is something that is possible for us to cultivate in this life—the absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion. When I think of the word enlightenment, it seems like something I don't quite know what it means, like merging into oneness with all things. It doesn't seem like a place you would be living, going to work from. But the absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion—I could envision going to work, perhaps, from that state. And that's what he's saying here: visible in this life. It's integrated into the world, this possibility for awakening. We don't have to remove ourselves.

The Buddhist texts also give a number of similes for nibbana. In one place, they're gathered all together, and it sounds like a poem, so I'm going to read them to you:

*The unfashioned, the end, the effluentless, the true, the beyond, the subtle, the very hard to see, the ageless, permanence, the undecaying, the featureless, non-differentiation, peace, the deathless, the exquisite, bliss, solace, the exhaustion of craving, the wonderful, the marvelous, the secure, security, nibbana.*

The unafflicted, the passionless, the pure, release, non-attachment, the island, shelter, harbor, refuge, the ultimate.

Since the source, the root of our suffering is understood to be greed, aversion, and delusion, we might ask how the Eightfold Path helps to bring them to their end.

These three are, as I said, the root causes for essentially all the states of mind that lead us into suffering. They are the three things that lie at the very bottom of all the reasons why we struggle. The Pali word the texts use for this is *kilesa*, usually translated as "defilement." These three are the root defilements of the mind.

Now, that's a somewhat unusual word—defilement. It doesn't sound very appealing. But then again, greed, aversion, and delusion are not very appealing either.

There's a teaching around these defilements that describes different layers to them, different ways they manifest in our experience. The most obvious or grossest layer—we could call them impurities of mind, or states of mind that lead to suffering—is when they create such a strong state of mind that we begin to act them out. This is called the layer of transgression. We actually act out of greed, aversion, and delusion, which means we may be breaking the precepts, engaging in harsh speech, being unkind to people, basically engaging in harming behaviors. That's the most obvious layer of defilement.

The next layer down is a little more subtle. It's called the layer of manifestation, where these defilements come up in our minds, come into consciousness, and we experience them—anger, frustration, aversion, annoyance, greed, eagerness, excitement, anticipation. We experience all of these things that keep us

off-center, out of balance, off-kilter. But we don't necessarily act on them. This is actually where much of our practice lives. We sit in meditation and we notice what comes up into our minds.

The most subtle kind of defilement is called latent tendency or underlying tendency. This is where the movements toward greed, aversion, and delusion—and all their manifestations—are not present in the moment. We're free of them in the moment, and yet the tendency toward them still exists in our mind.

I'm sure you all have a sense of this. We all have patterns that are very deeply ingrained, things we get hooked into over and over again. It might be a pattern of loneliness or depression or anger. Whatever it is, we all have patterns we're hooked to. And we know there are times when we're not in that rut. It's as if there are ruts worn into our mind. There are times when we're not in those ruts, and we see, "Oh yes, I'm fine right now. That depression isn't here. That loneliness isn't happening." But we know, we have a sense, that if conditions were to change, that pattern would reappear. It's not active, but it's like there's that rut worn into our mind. And if conditions bring us close enough to the edge, we're going to drop right into that rut, and it's going to be hard to get out again.

We can think of this almost as neurological patterns—that's how I understand it. If that pattern isn't being fired at the moment, it's not active, it's not happening. But because the pattern is still there, it doesn't take much for causes and conditions to come together and activate it. Then we're caught again.

So the three sections of the Eightfold Path each address one of these layers. The most obvious layer is met by the ethical component of the path: wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood. As we engage in those practices, we refrain from acting.

They tend to counter our movement to act out on these defilements. So they begin to counter those tendencies to act out. In this way, that grossest level of defilement is met by the ethical component of the Eightfold Path.

The mental cultivation aspect—wise effort, wise mindfulness, wise concentration—this also counters the tendency to act out on our mental defilements, on greed, aversion, and delusion as they rise in our mind. Through the seeing with wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration, as we see these things come up in our mind, we see the movement. We can actually begin to see the movement to act out and recognize, "Oh, there's that intention to act, and I don't have to do that. I don't have to go there." So the practices of mental cultivation also support our not acting out at what they call the transgression level of the defilement.

The aspects of mental cultivation also counter the arising of these qualities in our minds. They begin to provide tools to support their letting go. And there are two ways that this happens.

There's the cultivation of concentration through which the mind gets more stable, and through that stability of mindfulness and concentration—just being with experience moment after moment—it seems like there's not room for these defilements, not much room for greed, aversion, and delusion to come up.

What happens is that we move into a place in this concentration that is called the bliss of seclusion. When the concentration becomes quite strong, the hindrances I spoke about the other night don't have anywhere to have a foothold. And so we become free for periods of time when the concentration is strong—free from some of these strong defilements. The concentration supports this, at least for moments or times when we're free from those defilements.

And it feels really good, you know. When we touch in or taste that kind of concentration when the hindrances are at bay, it's like, "Oh yes." It gives us a taste. It begins to give us a taste of what it's like to be free from those defilements. The mind really likes it. It's very nice to not have those qualities coming up in your mind. You begin to get a taste of that freedom.

And that is a temporary kind of freedom. The concentration is a constructed state, and it falls apart. With it, we see that as the concentration falls apart, all of these difficulties, these defilements, will just come right back. So the mental cultivation helps us to get a taste for what it's like to be free from these defilements, but concentration alone is not powerful enough to really uproot the third level of the defilements—the level of the latent tendency, those patterns that are deeply wired into our minds.

For the subtlest level of defilement, it takes a radical shift of understanding, a radical shift of perspective—that shift of perspective the Buddha found the night of his awakening—to eliminate this underlying tendency toward greed, aversion, and delusion. Such a fundamental reshaping of understanding comes through wisdom, and it's not an intellectual form of wisdom. It can't come through thought. It comes through a direct understanding.

So I want to talk a little bit about that direct understanding and also about the deepest root of the defilements, which is ignorance. Deep at the base of these tendencies, this latent tendency for greed, aversion, and delusion, is this quality of ignorance.

Our usual understanding of what ignorance means is something like lack of knowledge—a passive lack of knowledge, just something we don't have. If we'd had it, then we wouldn't have that ignorance. But the ignorance that underlies these latent tendencies is actually a much more insidious kind of ignorance. It's actually an active misunderstanding of the nature of reality. We have some fundamental misperceptions that we are living with all the time, and they impact how we perceive things, how we view things, how we relate to things.

The three primary misunderstandings are: we take what is impermanent to be permanent; we take what is unsatisfactory as a lasting source of happiness to be a lasting source of happiness—or another way to put this, we take what is suffering to be happiness; and we take what is not self to be self.

So, taking what is impermanent to be permanent. We all think we know that things are impermanent.

We do know that at an intellectual level. And yet we don't behave that way. We don't act that way. At some level deep in our minds, we are functioning from the place that we believe things are permanent.

The grossest example of this is the delusion that many of us have—I know some people who didn't have or don't have this delusion—that essentially we are immortal. There's a famous quote in the Mahabharata, the Indian epic poem. In one part of the poem, one of the characters is asked, "What is the greatest wonder?" And the character responds, "That every day we see that beings die, and yet believe ourselves to be immortal. That is the greatest wonder."

And it is true. This delusion we have around our own mortality is the grossest example of how we take what is impermanent to be permanent. But there's an even deeper level to this, because our moment-to-moment experience—actually, there's nothing in our experience that lasts for longer than a split second. Nothing. Nothing lasts.

This kind of touching into impermanence is not something that is really possible at the realm of our ordinary perception, our ordinary daily life perception. It really takes seeing through a mind that is clearly concentrated and mindful to begin to perceive this truth of how impermanent things are. So as we train with wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration, we actually begin to touch into that truth much more experientially. We experience our lives as just being this ever-changing flow of experience, with nothing lasting for very long.

The second misperception is taking what is unsatisfactory to be happiness. This is closely related to the misunderstanding around impermanence. Because essentially, the impermanence of things, the fact that things are so in flux, means that there's no way we can find happiness by holding on to them, or by constructing or creating something, because it's just going to disintegrate.

In the belief that things have a kind of permanent quality—maybe not forever permanent, but at some level, some kind of permanence—we impute a sense that we can hold on to things. "I can hold on to this relationship, or I can hold on to this house." But the truth of impermanence makes the reality that there is nothing in our experience that could possibly be satisfying as a place to hang our hat and say, "This is what's going to make me happy."

As we observe this in our experience, again through wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration, we see that impermanence inherently means there's nothing that's going to be satisfying to try to hold on to. And actually, we discover something even more remarkable: what we are trying to hold on to—we see in our exploration of this misperception around suffering and happiness—we see that the suffering is created in our minds by trying to hold on to something. So we start to see that it is in our minds that the suffering is created.

But what's even more amazing is that we see that what we're trying to hold on to is also created by our minds. What we're trying to hold onto is concept. There's nothing out there in the world that can actually be held onto, because everything in experience is in such a constant state of flux. Our concepts create this illusion of permanence. And if you actually look at your experience of what you're holding onto, you'll see that it is an idea.

Now, this maybe sounds strange or unbelievable. What I'd like to suggest is that you don't have to believe this, but explore in your own experience: What is it that you are holding on to? What are you actually holding on to?

And this third one—taking what is not self to be self. This one's really hard to understand in a way, because it's so counter to what our experience seems to be. I'll try to shift your perspective a little bit on this.

There is a process going on in each of us. There's a process here, an Andrea process, and there are processes that each of you have. And there's a separation between those processes. It's not like I'm going to confuse this process here with that process there. So there is something happening. But we mistakenly impute a kind of solidity—again, it's back to that permanence notion. We mistakenly impute a solidity to the process. There's no thing that is inherently carrying through the entirety of that process. It is just a process, kind of like a river, just the flow of water, change. You can't really say what the river is. You can't take a bucket of water out of the river and say, "That's the river."

The water in the river is continually changing. You can't even say that the riverbed is the river. If there was a riverbed without the water, it wouldn't be the river. And the riverbed itself can change—if there's a flood, the ground of the riverbed can shift entirely. Our lives are like this river. There is a process, and after the fact, we impute a sense of "that's me." This idea that there is a solid me here is a mistaken understanding.

There are natural laws that govern this process—laws of cause and effect. If you think about a tree, how does it come into being? It starts with a seed. There are natural laws at work: that seed is planted, and if it gets moisture and sun, it will eventually sprout. If it's in a good situation—not going to get mowed over by a lawn mower or eaten by an animal—it has a longer time, perhaps, to grow into a tree. There are natural laws that govern the movement of that seed from seed to tree. There's no being in there doing that. This seems a little easier for us to see in terms of a tree—that it's just a process, a natural process governed by natural laws. And that's what we are. We are processes governed by natural laws. No particular being here.

As we explore our experience through wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration, these truths begin to penetrate. We begin to have insights around these misperceptions. We begin to directly recognize the impermanence of experience. We begin to directly recognize the unsatisfactoriness of anything as a reliable source of happiness. And we do begin to see this process nature of experience. The wisdom moves from being an intellectual understanding to an experiential recognition—what we could call an insight.

You might see a pattern in your mind, an emotional pattern of anger, for instance, arising in a moment. There's a way in which we impute permanence to that when it's happening. "Oh yes, I'm the angry person." We identify with it. It becomes me, becomes who I am. But when we're watching this pattern with mindfulness, with concentration, with those three aspects of the Eightfold Path, we might at some

point actually see that pattern suddenly vanish. And then we see—it's startling when we have an insight like that. When something vanishes in our experience, it's like, "Wait a minute, where did that go? I thought it was such a real thing." These are actual moments of recognition: of impermanence, of unsatisfactoriness, of not-self. And these moments begin to wear away at the misperceptions, because for a moment we clearly see from a different perspective. We clearly see that there isn't anything we can hold onto.

This path is a gradual one. When I first got into this practice, I used to think there was going to be some mind-blowing insight and then ever after I was going to be happy. It's much more gradual than that. There are little moments of seeing clearly: "Oh, impermanence. Oh, that's dukkha." Or the recognition of just the process nature of experience—no one here. Just little tiny moments of that. And these moments have conditions that create the container for such insights to arise. Insights themselves are impermanent.

They are there for a moment, and when it's there it's like, *wow, this is so obvious, how can I not see this?* And then moments later—*huh?* There's this kind of disbelief. *How could... did I really see that?* There almost can be a disbelief in what we saw, because it seemed so clear and so obvious, and then yet suddenly it's not clear anymore.

So that space of insight is impermanent. When we have those little moments of insight, it's not like we live there forever after. We have a recognition into impermanence, and it's not like we live in that space of living that truth forever after. But there has been a kind of shift in our minds—a shift in that perspective, a shift in understanding that informs us.

We will get caught again in these very same misperceptions. Over and over again we'll get caught in these same misperceptions. And yet, having had those insights, there's a way in which an understanding has shifted underneath. Even if we're not experiencing it, there's a knowledge. *Oh yeah. I'm caught by this belief that things are permanent, or I'm caught by this belief that there can be satisfaction in life.* The misperceptions have been revealed to us, and so they don't quite have the same power to fool us quite so much anymore.

And so we can have a little more ability to just hang out with the struggle. Just, *okay, I know this is dukkha. I feel this dukkha. And I understand that there's a misperception operating here, which the mind isn't quite able to really deeply see at this moment. So I'm just going to hang out here and see what I can learn. How is the mind holding on here?*

These small insights begin to shift our perspective, begin to offer us the taste of freedom. Because in those moments of insight, there is a freedom. When there's that recognition—a true recognition of the process nature of experience—what a relief that there's no me here. No self, no problem.

We begin to get a taste of this: what it means to live with no mental pain or grief. For small moments, we get that taste.

So let's sit for just a moment.

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