The Eightfold Path and Liberation

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 58:34

I'd like to start this evening by following on from the comment this morning in the question and answer session about listening to Dharma talks. No matter what style the Dharma talk is, it's helpful to stay connected with your body during the talk. It's a practice. Listening to a Dharma talk can be a practice of hearing meditation—but not the kind of hearing meditation where we completely let go of content. Rather, it's the kind where we see how the content lands for us. So I'd suggest during this talk that you stay in tune with your lived experience while listening.

Because of the nature of my mind, the mind that I live with, this will be a fairly structured talk. But don't let that fool you. This kind of talk can take us a little bit more into our minds, and so I'd like to encourage you to stay in the body, stay in the lived experience, see how it impacts you. Dharma talks aren't so much about getting the whole thing, getting the whole flow. There may be one or two words or a phrase that resonates with you here and now. Or there may be a phrase that comes to you a year from now in your meditation, and suddenly that phrase makes sense and you can apply it in your practice. The experience of working with Dharma talks is not necessarily a linear process, even though this will be a fairly linear talk.

When the Buddha was a young adult, about twenty-nine years old, he had a sense that there was something he needed to discover. He had come into contact with suffering, what he considered to be the problem of our human condition—this fact that we struggle, that we live trying to be happy, and yet it seems as if happiness is endlessly slipping out of our grasp. So he left his home and his family at about the age of twenty-nine and went out in search of what he hoped would be an answer to this problem.

He spent about six years searching, studying with the teachers of his day, and finding that while their teachings led to very peaceful states of mind, they didn't answer his question. So he explored in his own experience: What is this suffering? What is this dukkha, the Pali term that we usually translate as suffering? And he came to a very deep, transformative understanding about this process at work in our minds. He realized for himself the possibility that this process of suffering could come to an end.

After he had this recognition, this realization, he looked out at how people were living. The story says that he surveyed in his mind how people were conducting their lives. He saw that people were living in a way oriented toward what they thought would make them happy. But from this new perspective he had come to, this new understanding around what suffering is and how it works in our minds and hearts, he saw that in their very act of trying to be happy, they were doing the very things that would keep them tied to this process of suffering. And so out of compassion he began to teach what he had understood, what he

had learned—this transformative understanding.

In his awakening, he saw that there was a new orientation, a shift of perspective that could be brought to our experience. A fairly subtle shift. In fact, when he first contemplated teaching, the story goes that he thought, "This Dharma that I have understood is very subtle, very hard to see. I would try to tell people about it and they wouldn't understand, and that would be vexing. So maybe I'll just sit here and enjoy this peace." Then the story goes that a deva came to him and said, "No, for the benefit of all beings you should teach. There are beings with but little dust in their eyes that could understand your teachings." And so he began to teach what he understood.

The framing of his teaching, not surprisingly, is oriented around this question of suffering. The Four Noble Truths, which Mary spoke about the other night, are framed in terms of suffering and the end of suffering. Sometimes the Four Noble Truths are stated simply as truths: this is suffering, there is a cause of suffering, there is a cessation of suffering, and there is a path leading to the cessation of suffering. But as Mary Grace pointed to the other night, the Four Noble Truths are actually practices. There are tasks associated with each of them. The Buddha said we should understand suffering. We should let go of the cause of suffering. We should realize for ourselves the possibility of freedom from suffering. And we should cultivate the path leading to the ending of suffering.

This Eightfold Path is really the Buddha's prescription for happiness. He said that if you follow these practices—the Eightfold Path being comprised of eight factors that can be seen as practices, eight practices that support us in our journey—you can understand and solve this problem around suffering for yourself. It's not a problem anybody else can solve for us. The Buddha understood the possibility for himself, and in seeing the possibility for himself, he offered this path to us.

he could be free from suffering. He understood by inference that this was not something confined to him alone, that others could also understand this and have this same transformative realization.

In this talk, I'd like to explore the Eightfold Path, which as I said is a set of practices guided by wisdom to encourage us to act and train our minds in a certain direction. The Buddha said following this path will lead us to this same understanding that he had.

I like to talk about the Eightfold Path, but not in the standard way perhaps. This isn't going to be a standard Eightfold Path talk. I'm actually going to do a very brief overview, and what I'd like to do following that is explore how it is possible that this path does what the Buddha claims it will do. How can it lead us to the ending of suffering? That's the exploration I'd like to make this evening.

The Eightfold Path has eight factors in it, and one of the ways of exploring this teaching divides those eight factors into three groups or aspects. The first two factors of the Eightfold Path are in a group that we could call the wisdom group: wise understanding and wise thought, or wise intention. The second group is associated with ethical conduct, comprising the factors of wise speech, wise action, and wise

livelihood—ways to bring ourselves into harmony with the world. The third group is what I'll call the mental cultivation or mental development aspect, comprised of wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration.

The Eightfold Path in its standard ordering begins with wisdom—wise understanding, wise intention. It starts from needing to understand something about this dukkha, this suffering. This is the orientation around what the Buddha was trying to solve, and so the wisdom he is offering us is wisdom about this dukkha.

I'd like to speak for just a few minutes about this because we haven't really talked too much about dukkha itself. This suffering that the Buddha said we can be free of is not the suffering of physical bodily pain. That, he said, will continue. As long as we have a body, there will be that possibility of unpleasant bodily experience. So that's not the kind of suffering he said we'll become free of.

But he did say that in his transformative understanding around suffering, what he realized was that mostly what we call suffering is actually a product created by our own minds. It largely happens to us because we are in conflict with the way things are. Gil talked about non-conflict being part of our path, being our path. Dukkha comes about because we're in conflict. Things are happening and we don't like them. We resist them. We want to get rid of them, fix them, change them. Or we want to hold on to them. We like them, we want to keep them.

Because of the nature of the way things are, trying to hold on to things leads to what somebody called rope burn. You're trying to hold on to something that is changing, slipping through your hands, and it burns to try to hold on to that.

One of our main delusions is that we think happiness comes from figuring out a way to arrange the world so that it's the way we'd like it to be. That's what we think happiness would be. And so we end up pinning our hopes for happiness on the world, on things that are completely unreliable.

Rilke, the great German poet, expressed this in one of his poems. This is an excerpt:

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

That's the poignancy of our existence. We are endlessly trying to arrange the world, endlessly seeing it break down, and feeling the pain of that—taking it personally. What did I do wrong that the world changed and I couldn't arrange it properly? It's not personal.

It's the way it is.

One of the key turnings or shifts of perspective that the Buddha had—my understanding of the shift of perspective—is that he really began to understand this process of being in conflict with the world as the very cause for that suffering. When there's a sense of wanting things to be other than the way they are, in

that very wanting, there is already dissatisfaction. It is the wanting itself that creates the dissatisfaction.

When we turn and see that, the mind begins to understand that it is its own doing that created that wanting. And it begins to understand that letting go of that wanting is a pathway towards freedom from suffering. We begin to see that the process of suffering is a process created by our own minds. The vast majority of what we call suffering—even suffering around physical pain—the vast majority of what we call suffering is created by our own minds.

This is actually really good news. It may not sound like it, but it is. Because it provides the opportunity for us to change our minds. If suffering was inherently out in the world, if it was something outside of us that created that suffering, there would be no hope. But it is a process in our minds that can be understood and freed.

This wisdom, this shift of perspective, is the wisdom that we need to have an understanding about. At first, just an intellectual understanding, just hearing the teachings. Very few of us, I think, would come to this understanding that wanting is actually the source of our suffering without having somebody point this out to us. "Look at this," he said. "Look at this process in your mind. See what happens."

The first two aspects of the Eightfold Path point us to this wisdom. At first it's a wisdom that we take in through hearing—hearing dharma talks, reading books about the Dharma—we start to learn some of what the Buddha offered. If that resonates for us, then we begin to think about it, think about how it resonates for us, think about how it might be understood. This is another form of wisdom. First there's this received wisdom or borrowed wisdom, and then we take it in and begin to massage it in our own understanding.

If it resonates for us, then we may begin to act on it. We may decide, "Some of this makes sense to me, so maybe I'll try this." Or if you're like me, it was more like, "Well, nothing else I've tried has made any sense. I guess I'll see what happens if I try this." So the intention is formed to explore these teachings. That sets us into motion, sets the path into motion. These first two aspects initially are about having us actually take the first steps. We hear, we understand, and we begin to act. We begin to engage with the teachings.

The second group in the Eightfold Path is the ethical section—harmonizing our relationship with the world: wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood. We live in accordance with ethical guidelines, harmonizing our relationships with the world, living in peace with other selves, with other people, inclining the heart towards non-harming.

We've been engaging with these aspects of the Eightfold Path here on retreat. Every day you have been engaging actually with the entirety of the Eightfold Path. That's part of what I want to point to in this talk: that the factors of the Eightfold Path are lived. They're not just an idea. You're actually living them.

You hear the teachings right now. We're practicing wise understanding to some extent. I'm exploring my understanding of the teachings with you. You're exploring it in your own minds as you're listening. So

we're exploring this first aspect of the Eightfold Path.

All through the day we are committed to the precepts—to non-harming, to refraining from taking life, to refraining from taking what's not given, refraining from sexual misconduct, refraining from false speech, refraining from intoxicants. These are aspects of the components of wise speech and wise action. And wise livelihood—we are living wise livelihood here on retreat. You're like temporary monks and nuns here. You've renounced your homes. You've come here to be secluded.

You are living a Dharma life. This is a beautiful thing. You are living wise livelihood every moment of your day here.

The last three factors of the Eightfold Path—the mental cultivation or mental development aspect—comprise the factors of wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration.

So why do we need mental development? This connects to the understanding that the suffering we are experiencing... suffering is kind of a strong word in a way. The dukkha that the Buddha spoke about is usually translated as suffering, but when we think of suffering, we often think of something pretty big. Dukkha has a very broad range of meanings. It can mean anything from the most obvious suffering—losing a partner or being in an accident with great pain and misery—to the subtlest kind of feeling that things are just a little bit off. You know, that's not quite the way I like it here right now. That's dukkha also. We might not call that suffering, but it's dukkha.

From this understanding that dukkha is created by our minds, the Buddha's mental training helps to counteract the patterns we have around suffering. So we look at our minds. We begin to understand how they work. We start to see how this process of dukkha functions in our own experience. This is a lot of what we're doing here on retreat. Moment by moment we're looking at our experience. We see the way our minds are scattered or jumpy. We see when they're expansive. We see when they're contracted. We see when they're frustrated and angry and bitter and prideful—the whole range of emotional states that we go through. We watch the processes of our mind and we start to get familiar with the habits of our mind, the patterns of our mind. Especially those mental habits that are propelled based in not being aware—the habits and patterns that have been practiced over years in our lives. Patterns of anger or frustration or procrastination or disappointment, or pick your favorite.

So we get to see these patterns. The mental cultivation provides a container in which we can start to really see them, see how this suffering is created, see how our mental habits work.

These three aspects—wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration—work together. Wise effort is the effort to stay connected with our experience moment to moment. It takes some effort. And we also, informed by wisdom, informed by this understanding of what dukkha is, of what suffering is, begin to see and understand that there are certain states of mind that tend to lead us towards suffering, and other states of mind that tend to lead us more towards happiness. The effort we engage with is the effort to

cultivate those states of mind that lead us away from suffering and to let go of those states of mind that lead us towards suffering.

We make the effort to be present, and mindfulness is part of that effort. We're making the effort to be aware, informed by this wisdom, this understanding of what's helpful and what's not helpful. Mindfulness keeps us connected with our experience in the present moment. It also helps us to understand and recognize which states are helpful and which states are not helpful.

The combination of effort and mindfulness together creates a stability of mind, a kind of continuity of attention. It's that continuity of awareness—if you're just aware for just a moment, if you're just mindful for just a moment, there's not that much that you can really see very clearly. But when that mindfulness starts to be present for longer stretches of time, the mind starts to be able to clearly see into how things happen. That very continuity starts to reveal the process at work. We begin to understand that process through having the mindfulness be more continuous. And this continuity of mindfulness is the concentration.

So the Eightfold Path is a set of practices, and we're practicing them all here. Moment by moment we're engaged in these practices. It's not abstract actually. These practices support living with a little bit more ease. And there is the understanding that these practices go further than just ease in our lives. They actually can allow us to experience that deeper shift of perspective that the Buddha offers. Freedom. Freedom from suffering. A deep, deep kind of happiness and peace.

So what is this freedom? Sometimes we call it enlightenment. The Pali term is nibbana, Sanskrit nirvana. The Buddhist understanding of what this freedom is, what this enlightenment is—its simplest definition is actually really straightforward. The Buddha said that suffering is a result of greed, aversion, and delusion acting in our minds, and that freedom from suffering is the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion in the mind.

I'll read you some texts from the Pali Canon about this quality, or this—what is this nirvana, nibbana? This is a set of different texts, but they flow together, so I'll read them all together:

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 nothing 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.

There are a couple of pieces in there that I'd like to point to that particularly inspire me. One is the possibility—the definition, essentially, of nibbana here as experiencing no mental pain and grief. If you can just imagine what that might be like. What that might be like—no mental pain or grief.

And the other piece: This is nibbana, immediate, visible in this life.

These two pieces together point to an understanding, a transformation that happens in the midst of our lives. When I first heard about this enlightenment thing, I kind of thought it must mean some big mind-blowing experience, and after that, then everything would be great. Maybe I'd just be drifting off in some beautiful space somewhere.

This definition—immediate, visible in this life, experiencing no mental pain and grief—is something I can envision having perhaps in the midst of work. This is inspiring to me, this possibility. To me these words say this isn't something otherworldly. This transformation happens right in this life, right in the midst of our day-to-day experience. That that's possible. That sounds like some of what is being pointed to here—the possibility of transformation within our lives, not separating from our lives. Transformation occurring through our lives.

So since this understanding of nibbana is that it's the absence or the releasing of, the cessation of, the ending of greed, aversion, and delusion, we might ask: How does the Eightfold Path help us come to the ending of greed, aversion, and delusion?

Greed, aversion, and delusion are understood to be basically the roots of all the kinds of mind states that proliferate, creating our experience of suffering. They're what we call the root defilements. Defilement is a translation of a Pali term, kilesa. Maybe defilement sounds like a kind of yucky word. But greed, aversion, and delusion—it would be nice to be able to let go of them. They're understood to be the things that defile the mind or keep it from purity, keep it from clearness. Defilement to me has that image of making something impure or not clear.

There's a teaching around the defilements that they're like different layers of how they manifest in our experience. The most obvious layer of how these defilements come up for us is in our behavior—that we act out of greed, aversion, and delusion.

They express themselves through hostility of speech or harshness of action—basically, in ways that cause harm in the world, engaging in harmful behaviors. So that's one level, one layer of how these defilements manifest in our minds, in our experience, through acting out.

The next, more subtle layer is when they arise in our minds but don't get expressed in action. This is the

arising of greed, aversion, and delusion—the arising of anger, frustration, judgment, hostility, pride, exuberance, boredom in our minds—but where they don't somehow come out into our behavior.

This is largely where our practice actually lies. We commit to a stillness of posture so that we can see this level. Essentially, that's part of the practice—in the commitment to stillness, we begin to see this level of defilement before it comes out into our behavior. This is pretty powerful to be able to see.

The most subtle level of the defilements is something called latent tendencies. This is where these qualities arising from greed, aversion, and delusion are not being experienced in our present moment experience—they're not actually happening for us in the moment—but there's an underlying tendency for that pattern to erupt.

I think we all have a sense of this. Particular favorite patterns that we've practiced a lot in our lives. For me, it was anger. I cultivated anger very well. And at times when that pattern wasn't active, there was a sense—maybe you have this sense for yourself too—that its not being activated was partly a product of conditions. If something happened that I didn't like, it would be very easy for that pattern to be triggered.

So this is that level of latent tendency. It's not active in our mind stream at the moment, but it's mostly a matter of conditions whether it comes up or not. It could arise almost at any time, easily activated.

When we look at these three levels of defilement alongside the three aspects of the Eightfold Path, each aspect addresses one of those levels.

The most obvious level of acting out is met by the practices of wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood—committing to those ethical precepts. We counter the tendency toward acting out. In a sense, we use the precepts almost as mindfulness bells. If we start to see the tendency arise in our mind to break one of those precepts, it halts us. It's like, "Wait a minute, that's not the way I want to be living." And so the three aspects of ethical conduct support our not engaging in that level of defilement.

This is pretty powerful, actually. It has a rebound effect on our mind as we cultivate the precepts. As we cultivate wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood, there's a positive rebound effect on our mind. Cultivating non-harming rebounds on our mind as a kind of compassion. Cultivating not taking what's not given rebounds on our minds as honesty and contentment with what we have. So the practices of ethical conduct support reducing one layer of the defilements—the most obvious layer.

The aspect of mental cultivation—wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration—also helps counter this tendency toward acting out. Because what happens as we start to observe our patterns and habits, our favorite habitual tendencies of mind, is that as we get familiar with them, we start to see them before they lead us into action. As we get familiar with those feelings associated with whatever our pattern is—anger, for instance—the feelings then become a trigger, a trigger to wake up.

That's what I've seen in my experience. The more I pay attention to those patterns, the more when the

pattern arises, it starts to bring mindfulness along with it. And so that helps us recognize, "Oh, there's that pattern. No, I don't want to act on that." We also reduce the transgression aspect by cultivating wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration.

This aspect of mental cultivation also counters the tendency toward the arising of defilements in our minds. One of the ways it does this is through the cultivation of concentration. As we practice and begin to get a sense of the continuity of mindfulness, as the mind becomes more steady, we start to have periods when the hindrances—the qualities that John talked about this morning—stop coming up. And that's a really great experience. It feels really good when the hindrances stop coming up. So we get a taste, a little taste of what it's like to have that freedom from the defilements.

But that's a temporary kind of freedom, because it's conditioned on that continuity of mindfulness. It's conditioned on the concentration kind of holding those tendencies at bay. Still, it's very powerful for us to get a flavor, a taste of that freedom from the defilements.

The subtlest level of defilement—the latent tendencies—requires a kind of radical shifting in our mind, a turning. Because those tendencies, those latent tendencies, are underlaid by a very powerful force of ignorance. And ignorance is not uprooted simply by concentration. It takes wisdom to uproot ignorance.

This is where that first aspect of the Eightfold Path, the wisdom aspect, comes in. Now the wisdom that we bring at first, that wisdom of understanding and reflection, that's not powerful enough to uproot ignorance. That wisdom informs our practice of wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration. And as that wisdom and the mental cultivation come together, we begin to understand more directly for ourselves the truth of that borrowed wisdom.

So we see directly for ourselves these moments of freedom. We see a releasing, a letting go around how we've been clinging to these processes of suffering. Our view begins to change.

The path essentially begins and ends with wisdom. Initially it's an intellectual understanding, but that intellectual understanding, coupled with the path of cultivating mindfulness and concentration with effort, leads us to deeply understand the truth of those teachings—the teachings of impermanence, the teaching of unreliability, of not-self. The mind begins to understand that the way we've been trying to be happy... and this is not theoretical, this is not book knowledge.

We see in a moment—we may see wanting come up in our minds. We see that feeling of dissatisfaction that comes with that wanting. We feel the pull to satisfy that wanting, and yet we watch, we observe. We may see that wanting vanish in a moment. And seeing that vanishing, we directly understand—it feels like being let go from a vice grip. We see directly in that moment the truth that it is the wanting that has created that dissatisfaction. It's not the not-having of whatever it is that we wanted. That's not what creates the dissatisfaction. It has nothing to do with the thing that we think we want. It has to do with the wanting itself.

In that moment of actually seeing that, of having enough continuity of mindfulness and concentration, just observing our patterns, we see how they are put together. And in seeing that, the mind begins to release around them. We experience moments of insight, shifts of perspective around patterns.

We may see simple shifts, which I know most of you—probably all of you—have had: a kind of shift around some difficult pattern. "Oh, this is just anger." Rather than it being *my* anger, rather than it being something that I've done or need to fix or change—"Oh, this is just anger. This is just a process"—becoming much easier to hold. That kind of shift of perspective, seeing anger just as a process. We see little moments, shifts of understanding.

These moments help us to gradually turn our minds toward this understanding—the understanding of the Four Noble Truths, the understanding of suffering, the understanding that the cause of suffering is this craving. Turning our mind toward that understanding. Gradually, small moments, gradually turn our minds in this direction. It takes time.

There's an analogy—I know many of you have heard this analogy, it's one of my favorite analogies—the Buddha gave around our practice. He compared the practice of being attentive to our experience to a shipwreck. Think about the parts of the ship strewn around the beach. Day by day, the sun, the sand, the wind, the water work on those parts. Think of the rope, the rigging. Day by day, if you go back and look at that rope, you're not going to see much change. But come back after six months and try to pick up that rope, and it may fall apart in your hands.

Moment by moment, small moment by small moment, mindfulness, effort, and concentration, supported by wisdom, begin to wear away at the way we misunderstand how happiness can be found. It shifts our perspective.

And one thing that's helpful to remind ourselves about is that insights are impermanent. We have a moment of understanding, and in that moment—it may even be more than a moment, it may be a few minutes or even a few hours of being in a space where you can just see your patterns and it's not a problem. And it seems so obvious. How can I not see this? And then, a few moments later, suddenly there's your anger and it's like, "Oh, that person shouldn't have done—wait a minute. I'm caught again. What just happened?"

This is a phenomenon we all have to accept. It's not a mistake, actually. It's not that we've done anything wrong. And sometimes we can second-guess our insights. We think, "Well, it must not have been real if it went away." But it is. It is a moment. It's come together out of conditions, and you've been able to, for a few moments, see and be aligned with how things are, with the truth of how things are—not in resistance, not in conflict with the way things are. For a few moments you've been able to do that.

While it doesn't stay, while we can't live in that perspective for the rest of time—most of the time, I'd say, most of the time we have a shift like that and it goes away—what it has done for us is it has taken that

borrowed knowledge we've learned and integrated it so that it is something we have actually understood. It's no longer borrowed wisdom. We may not be able to live out of that wisdom, but there is a knowing of that wisdom.

What I've seen in my own practice is that little by little, the accumulation of those kinds of openings has led me to be able to call on that knowledge. It's like, "Oh yeah, okay, I see this pattern coming up. I see I'm caught by this again." But I don't take it quite so personally. It's like, "Yeah, I know that there's a kind of misperception going on here. There's a confusion going on. There's a delusion happening in the mind that it is caught by this." The mind can be aware of that because it knows this alternative perspective is possible, even though it can't live from it.

And so we just meet our experience from that perspective. And over time, over time, it begins to be easier to see when we're caught by these misperceptions, by this confusion of where happiness is to be found. And slowly we begin to understand what it might mean to live free of mental pain and grief.

Let's sit for a moment.

Thank you for your attention.

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