Living the Eightfold Path

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 58:16

I'd like to start this evening by reading the first two paragraphs of the very first discourse the Buddha gave.

Thus have I heard. On one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling at Varanasi in the deer park at Isipatana. There the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus of the group of five thus: "Bhikkhus, these two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth into homelessness. What two? The pursuit of sensual happiness in sensual pleasures, which is low, vulgar, the way of worldlings, ignoble, unbeneficial; and the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, unbeneficial. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathagata has awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbana."

"And what, bhikkhus, is that middle way awakened to by the Tathagata, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbana? It is this noble eightfold path, that is: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This is that middle way awakened to by the Tathagata, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbana."

I like remembering that the first discourse of the Buddha, which is often remembered as being the discourse on the Four Noble Truths—which it is—begins with this enjoinder to practice the Eightfold Path. It is this Eightfold Path that leads to liberation. I think of the Eightfold Path as the practical side of the Buddha's teaching, or one of the practical sides. The teaching he offers is really a very practical one, and the Eightfold Path is his prescription for us to come to peace, to knowledge, to understanding for ourselves. As he says in this initial aspect of the discourse, this leads to nibbana—freedom, freedom from suffering, freedom from dukkha.

This is what I would like to explore tonight: a little bit about the Eightfold Path, just as a reminder of what these eight aspects are. You have all probably heard many teachings on the Eightfold Path. The key piece I'd like to explore is my understanding about how this path actually does its work on us—how, if we engage with it, if we practice these teachings of right understanding, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration, this will lead us to peace.

The Eightfold Path, instead of being seen as eight separate practices, is sometimes divided into three aspects: an aspect related to wisdom, an aspect related to ethical conduct, and an aspect related to cultivating our minds. The wisdom aspect comprises right understanding and right intention. The ethical

conduct aspect comprises right speech, right action, and right livelihood. The mental cultivation aspect comprises wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration.

In this typical ordering of the path, beginning with wise understanding and right intention, the path begins with some kind of wisdom, some kind of orientation towards what we are trying to do. In this case, the orientation the Buddha offers us is how we can free ourselves from dukkha. The beginning stages of the Eightfold Path involve understanding this dukkha—beginning to understand what this stress, this dissatisfaction, this suffering, this unreliability is, and how it's caused.

The way we struggle in our lives largely comes about because we are resisting the way things are, or we're trying to hold on to things to keep them the way we'd like them to be. We think, "If only I could arrange my world so that I could have everything I'd like and get rid of everything I don't like." Endlessly we engage in this activity. I think we don't really believe that any one thing is going to do it for us forever, but we do believe there's some way we can just keep arranging, keep getting what we want and getting rid of what we don't want, and that somehow we can hold it together on this teetering edge and have happiness that way.

Rainer Maria Rilke expresses the condition we find ourselves in. An excerpt from his Eighth Duino Elegy: "And we, spectators, always, everywhere, turn towards the world of objects. It fills us. We arrange it. It breaks down. We rearrange it, then break down ourselves."

The Buddha recognized that this endless rearranging, this endless trying to construct, create, hold on to things we like and get rid of things we don't like—this very process of arranging itself, the mind that thinks it needs to arrange—this is the source of dukkha.

Wise understanding begins with a recognition, perhaps even just a hearing of this: that the way we suffer, the way we end up dissatisfied in our lives, is largely about how our minds are working, this idea that we can arrange things to suit ourselves. Initially, wise understanding begins with an intellectual understanding. I talked about this last week—the three aspects of wisdom. We begin by hearing knowledge, hearing wisdom, taking it in, and then reflecting on it. How do I understand this? Does this make sense to me?

Wise understanding is largely about understanding dukkha, understanding what it might mean to recognize that our minds create this. The primary definition of wise understanding is that we begin to recognize and understand the truth of the Four Noble Truths: that there is suffering, that suffering has a cause, that it is possible for this suffering to come to an end, and that there is a path for that. This teaching of the Four Noble Truths really addresses dukkha, the problem the Buddha was trying to solve. It addresses dukkha. It addresses the cause of dukkha.

and understanding that there's this cause and effect relationship in our experience—when we engage in certain activities of mind and body, certain results happen.

The Four Noble Truths expresses this cause and effect relationship. As we engage in that rearranging activity, inevitably we end up suffering. Either because we're not getting what we want, we're not able to succeed in that process of rearranging, and suffering hits us immediately. Or we do get what we want—for a while we have a sense of happiness, thinking "I figured it out, this is right, this is it"—and yet the inevitability of the decay, the ending, the dissolution of conditions will lead to struggle, suffering, sadness, loss.

And so the Four Noble Truths acknowledges this cause and effect relationship. The understanding is that if we let go of the cause of suffering, it is this very letting go that leads us to the ending of suffering. And the path, the Eightfold Path, is what we can cultivate that will lead us to this ending.

When we hear this teaching, perhaps it hits us at a particular moment. For myself, hearing something of these teachings at a moment when I had really hit bottom, there was a sense of "there's somebody out there who seems to have a sense that there's a way out of this suffering. Why don't I try this?" Even though I didn't really understand. Even though I didn't have a sense of how it would work. There was hearing the teaching, having some confidence in what I was reading, what I was hearing—that this is possible, this freedom is possible.

This engages intention—the intention to act, the intention to step onto the path, to begin the practices. This is wise intention, the second aspect, the wisdom aspect of the path.

So we find ourselves interested in, exploring, engaging with practices, and the next aspect of the Eightfold Path offers us some fundamental grounding practices in ethical conduct. Again, because the fundamental exploration is around non-harming, around not creating dukkha, leading away from struggle and suffering, it makes sense that this ethical conduct is oriented towards non-harming. If we find ourselves engaged in activity that's harming, we are creating suffering, whether for ourselves or for others. And so this aspect of the Eightfold Path encourages us to engage in behaviors that are skillful: wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood.

I think of the ethical conduct aspect of the Eightfold Path as harmonizing our relationships with the world—and also harmonizing our relationships with ourselves. Because as that sutta Akinchino read some days ago, the sutta of the acrobats, the young little girl acrobat says, "By protecting you, watch out for yourself and I'll watch out for myself, and that way we'll protect each other." And the Buddha took it a step further, recognizing that yes, when we protect ourselves we protect others, and when we protect others we protect ourselves. Through protecting others through this conduct of the Eightfold Path—through wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood—we protect ourselves. We protect ourselves from remorse. We protect ourselves from unwholesome states of mind through acting skillfully.

So we explore this possibility of engaging peacefully in the world, living with a heart that inclines towards non-harming.

The last three factors of the Eightfold Path, in the mental development section—wise effort, wise mindfulness, wise concentration—the fact that mental development is considered part of the path is really necessary because it is in our minds that suffering is created in the first place. This is a real shift of perspective. Before we start training, before we meet the practice, before we meet this teaching, I think very few of us would question that having what we want makes us happy. So this mental training is about reorienting ourselves around where happiness actually comes from. And it takes some training.

This mental cultivation—wise effort, wise mindfulness, wise concentration—we look at our minds, we turn and explore what's going on, how our patterns work. We begin to see dukkha, we begin to see dukkha arising, with the instruction to understand dukkha as the orientation for wise effort, wise mindfulness, wise concentration. This is how wisdom comes into this aspect of the path. Our instructions for practice, how we apply wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration, is directly related to wisdom. Understand suffering. Look at your dukkha. See how it's created. Understand the cause. We begin, through the understanding of our dukkha, to really recognize how it's caused, that it is caused in our own minds.

This process of applying effort and mindfulness to our experience gives our mind an education. The organism itself begins to recognize, to learn that certain patterns of engaging, certain patterns of mind associated with wanting, with greed, with not wanting, with aversion, with confusion, with cloudedness, with misperceiving reality—that these things lead to or do not lead to well-being. And fortunately our organism wants to go towards well-being, so it starts to let go of those movements in that direction.

This very exploration—wise effort, wise mindfulness applied with this wisdom of the Eightfold Path—begins to lead us towards happiness. And the bringing together of wise effort and wise mindfulness begins to cultivate wise concentration. Continuity of our attention on our experience is one definition of concentration. And it is that very continuity of mindfulness that begins to reveal

how our minds do what they do—how our minds get caught by anger, by frustration, how our minds get caught by desire, by pride, how we get completely confused.

And so the mental development factors—wise effort, wise mindfulness, wise concentration—are the last three factors of the Eightfold Path, but they lead us back to wisdom. Not just intellectual understanding, but experiential recognition. I explored some of this last week: the ways we experience wisdom directly in our practice, the shifts of perspective, the seeing and the letting go. We experience for ourselves, and our organism begins to recognize what are the things we need to let go of, what are the things we need to cultivate to move towards happiness.

The Buddha pointed to this quite directly. He said, "Develop concentration. One who is concentrated understands things as they really are." So he's directly pointing to this last factor of the Eightfold Path, wise concentration, as leading to the ability to see clearly. And what does one understand as it really is? One understands as it really is, "This is suffering." One understands as it really is, "This is the origin of

suffering." One understands as it really is, "This is the cessation of suffering." One understands as it really is, "This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering." Develop concentration. One who is concentrated understands things as they really are.

So this points to how the Eightfold Path is a cycle. We develop our minds, we cultivate our ethical conduct, we develop our minds, and this supports our being able to see more deeply, which gives us a deeper actual wisdom, an actual meeting of wisdom.

We are living this Eightfold Path here on retreat, moment after moment. It's not an abstract thing. Actually, every moment you are here, you are cultivating these factors of the path. Just your presence here is an expression of wise intention, of wise understanding. The fact that you've chosen to come here and engage—when you sit, it's an expression of wise understanding and wise intention. What you are exploring, the way you see things, bringing wisdom to bear on your experience, then beginning to see that—this is wise understanding and wise intention.

Wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood—sometimes we don't think about how these are actively being cultivated on retreat. When I was in Burma, my teacher Sayadaw U Janaka gave a Dhamma talk about how we were practicing the Eightfold Path in every single moment of our practice. I found this really inspiring, actually, to recognize that I am walking the path through being here on retreat.

His explanation of how we were cultivating wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood is that they are fulfilled through abstinence. Primarily, wise speech and wise action are defined in terms of not engaging in specific speech and actions. The precepts that we take reflect many of them: refraining from killing living beings, refraining from taking what's not given, refraining from sexual misconduct, refraining from false speech. Mostly we're silent here, so we fulfill our wise speech through silence. U Janaka expressed wise livelihood as being the fact that you're here on retreat—you're living the Dhamma livelihood, essentially temporary monastics here on retreat.

It's helpful, I think, to recognize that these factors are active in our practice. We don't often think about things when they're absent; they don't land on us too much when they're absent. So it can help to reflect, to recognize: yes, my ethical conduct is being cultivated here.

And I see also that there is a wholesome side of the ethical conduct being cultivated as we practice here. We're actively cultivating generosity as we engage in our service work, our yogi jobs. This center would not function if you all did not participate in this. The bathrooms wouldn't get cleaned. The floors wouldn't get swept and mopped. The dishes would pile up in the kitchen. It would be a mess. And so as you're engaging in that—even just keeping your own room clean is an act of service for the next yogi that will come to take your space. This is an active cultivation of generosity, of kindness. Reflecting on your service here as being an active cultivation of the path—not just something to finish up and get done with.

If you can recall this service aspect—this quality of generosity, kindness, and compassion in what we're

doing here—it can truly support your practice.

The third cluster of the Eightfold Path comprises wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration. This is the most obvious aspect of what we're cultivating here: moment to moment bringing wise effort, infused with wise understanding and wise intention, to bear on how we pay attention to our experience. Moment after moment we explore: What's happening now? What's my relationship to this now?

We are doing this not as an abstraction but as actual practice. And so what's the point? The Buddha expressed it clearly in that first discourse. He says practicing this leads to peace, leads to liberation, leads to freedom, to nibbana.

Cultivating the Eightfold Path in practical ways tends to make us more contented in our lives. We end up having a more easeful life, with less reactivity. This is one benefit of the path. And yet it's also understood to lead to the deepest kind of peace—not just having a little easier time at work or in relationships, but deeply letting go of the roots of suffering in our minds.

So we speak of freedom, enlightenment, nibbana. That word *enlightenment* is out there in the world. I certainly encountered it in my twenties before I ever met the teaching of the Buddha, and I had some idea about what it might be. Usually the idea involved some kind of mind-blowing something or other, and then forever after somehow being disconnected from everything—floating around, not really... I don't know what I thought, but it didn't have much to do with living life, my sense of what enlightenment meant.

The Buddha's actual definition of nibbana is quite different. He says it's the absence of greed, the absence of hatred, the absence of delusion. To me, that's an inspiring definition. It doesn't sound like it's necessarily disconnected from living life. I could envision living life without those qualities. This brings enlightenment right into the world.

I'd like to read you two texts on nibbana:

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, one aims at one's own ruin, at the ruin of others, at the ruin of both, and experiences mental pain and grief. But if lust, anger, and delusion are given up, one aims neither at one's own ruin, nor at the ruin of others, nor at the ruin of both, and experiences no mental pain and grief. This is nibbana—immediate, visible in this life, inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise.

Visible in this life. To me, that again brings it into the world, into something that is not abstract, not a transcendent kind of thing—although the description here does say one experiences no mental pain and grief. In some ways that does sound transcendent. And yet we can imagine perhaps, even now, what it might be like to experience no mental pain or grief. That's freedom.

Since freedom is understood to be the absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion, we might ask: How does the Eightfold Path help us let go of these? How does this path help us come to the end of greed, aversion, and delusion?

These three are sometimes referred to as the three roots of suffering, the three root *kilesas* or defilements—the three root qualities, the activities in our mind that make us get caught, that lead us to suffering, to mental pain and grief. All the qualities of mind that put us into suffering are somehow rooted in these three.

The commentaries speak about the assorted kilesas as having a layered quality to them. Some are obvious, coming out in our behavior. Some are less obvious, arising just in our minds without manifesting in our behavior.

This is an interesting teaching to explore. The most obvious form of suffering comes out into our behavior—we act out through our speech, through our bodies. We perhaps actively harm somebody, we yell, we lie, we speak harshly, we harm with our sexual energy. These are ways we engage when we are not clear, when greed, aversion, and delusion manifest through our bodies. That's the most obvious layer of kilesa.

A bit more subtle is the layer of kilesa that, rather than manifesting in behavior, comes into our minds. We experience hostility, anger, frustration, pride in our minds but don't necessarily let it out into the world.

That's a subtler layer of kilesa, of defilement in our minds.

The most subtle layer of kilesa is called "latent tendency" or "underlying tendency." I think this is familiar to all of you. There's a way that some of our patterns, some of the most common ways we get caught, operate at this level. For myself, anger was one of those. I had a strong habit of anger, and it wasn't always operating—it wasn't always present. I wasn't always angry. But generally I had a sense that the anger was not present at the moment because conditions happened to be good for me at that time, and that it wouldn't actually take that much for it to arise. Somebody looking at me funny, or a computer breaking down—it doesn't take much before that anger flares up.

So this underlying tendency is like those ruts in our mind, or if you think of it neurologically, the patterns of neurons that maybe aren't being fired at the moment, but it might not take too much for something to trigger that pattern. We can think of the patterns in our neural circuits almost like these underlying tendencies—not active all the time, but there as a possibility. That's the most subtle kind of defilement.

Now, the Buddhist teaching addresses all of these layers—not just the layers that come out into our behavior and into our own minds, but actually this underlying layer as well. Each of the three sections of the Eightfold Path addresses one of these layers of defilement.

The ethical aspect of the Eightfold Path addresses the most obvious layer, the layer in which we act out.

When we are committed to engaging with wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood—committed to refraining from acting out—this supports us not to engage with the defilements that impel us to act unskillfully. So this aspect of the training supports us to let go of those bodily and verbal unskillful actions. The ethical aspect of the path counters the tendency towards transgression, towards acting out. In a way, we can use the precepts as a mindfulness bell. If we find ourselves getting ready to hit a spider on the wall, it's like, "Wait a minute, I'm engaging with the precepts here. Let me use one of those bug catchers instead and take it out of the room."

The mental cultivation aspect of the Eightfold Path also counters this tendency towards acting out, because we begin to see the arising of these qualities in our mind. We begin to see, "Oh, there's anger coming up." And the very seeing of that unskillful mind state arising gives us a choice about whether to act on it or not. So mental cultivation—wise effort, wise mindfulness, wise concentration—also supports not acting out of defilements. The seeing of the defilement as it arises in our mind gives us the choice. We turn towards the experience instead of acting on it.

Wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration also counter the tendency towards these qualities arising in our minds. We cultivate concentration, and as we cultivate concentration we begin to feel the bliss of not having the hindrances arise. Concentration holds the hindrances at bay—the qualities of ill will, of sense desire, of sloth and torpor, of restlessness, of doubt. As the mind moves into concentration, these qualities stop arising in our minds. So this counters the arising of these defilements in our minds. This feels really good—and it's temporary. Those underlying tendencies are not necessarily uprooted by simply resting in concentration. It puts us in a state where they're not active, but it doesn't necessarily alter the terrain underneath.

So the subtlest levels of defilement, these underlying tendencies—this is where the wisdom aspect of the path comes in. It really takes a radical shift of understanding to begin to loosen those underlying tendencies. And this fundamental shift, this shift of perspective, doesn't come just through thinking about the Four Noble Truths—reflecting on, "Well, this is dukkha, and this is what I did, and this is how it felt, and what I did last week, and maybe I should try this." It takes meeting dukkha directly, seeing the cause, allowing the release. It takes the direct experience. So effort, mindfulness, and concentration create the possibility, the ground from which wisdom can grow. And that wisdom begins to uproot these underlying tendencies.

These underlying tendencies are deeply connected with ignorance, with not understanding. Our usual definition of ignorance is something like a lack of knowledge—that we don't have some bit of information, a kind of passive state of just not knowing something.

The ignorance that underlies greed, aversion, and delusion is much more insidious than simply not knowing something. It's actually an active misunderstanding of reality. We walk through the world actively misunderstanding, misperceiving, misinterpreting experience through filters of perception.

There are three primary misunderstandings. We take what's impermanent to be permanent. We take what is unreliable to be reliable, as a place where we could actually find happiness. And we take what is not self to be self.

As we train the mind through wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration, we begin to see these misunderstandings. Little holes get poked through them. We begin to see at certain times that experience is in no way permanent—it is continually flowing and changing. There's nothing in our experience that could possibly be reliable because it's like sand slipping through our fingers all the time. Things don't even last for a moment. Because they don't last, they are inherently unreliable. We start to see this directly for ourselves, and this begins to undercut those misperceptions, those misunderstandings.

We take what is not self to be self. We misunderstand, we misperceive our own experience to be an enduring entity that has control over itself. And yet when we start to look at what we think this enduring entity is, we see that it doesn't last either. Look at what you are experiencing as "me." You'll find it doesn't last very long. We go through so many different iterations of "me" in a day, and we begin to see that they actually have very little relationship to each other.

One time on retreat, this seeing of how different selves have no relationship to each other became very clear to me. I was doing walking meditation in front of the retreat center and was replaying in my mind a scene from the morning question and answer period, having an argument with this person who was asking questions. I was noticing this. I could see it, and I was suffering over it too. This was not pleasant. I could really feel the identity around this, coalesced around being right. I was right. I was intelligent. I was analytical. I was argumentative. I was right. All of that. I could feel all of it, experiencing it, noticing it, recognizing it. I saw no way out of it but just kept experiencing it.

And then, as things happen, conditions changed. I was doing the walking meditation and a truck drove up—a big delivery truck that made a lot of noise. It banged and crashed, the door slammed, brakes squealed. In a split second, my mind shifted and said something like, "It's a truck! Oh my gosh, it's a truck!" The feeling was like I became a two-year-old, just reveling in the joy of truck. In that moment, there was simply no relationship between those two selves. It became very clear.

So explore what you take to be self. You'll see it doesn't endure.

We start the path with understanding, taking in knowledge, taking in teachings. We begin to apply them, seeing some things for ourselves—this wisdom, seeing some of the truth of the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience. We see that for ourselves. The wisdom begins to become internalized. And yet these insights too are often impermanent. We find ourselves in a space of understanding.

We see thoughts arise in our mind and we recognize these are just thoughts. These have no bearing on anything really. They're just thoughts arising and passing. There's experience coming and going. We find ourselves in a space where we're not getting caught by things. Somebody jumps ahead of us and gets the

last little bit of carrot in the salad and it's like, "Oh, look at that. Wow. Impermanence." We're in that space for a while.

And then maybe a day later, or even a few minutes later, something else happens and it's not there anymore. When we're in that space it can seem so obvious. It's just like, how can I not see this? How can I not recognize that the mind creates its own suffering? How can I not see this? It's so obvious. And yet, moments later, conditions change and it is no longer so obvious.

This doesn't have to be a problem. It's not a mistake. It is a change of conditions. And there is a way in which that wisdom has gone in. We've seen things from a different perspective. We have experienced it from a different perspective. And so we can now begin to recognize when we are not seeing it from that perspective.

It's kind of like we've seen things clearly. We recognize, "Yes, that's what white is. That's what white looks like." And then we begin to see when we're not in that space where things are flowing easily. It's like, "Oh, this is off-white. Or this is gray, even." So we begin to recognize that we're carrying misperception. We're carrying ignorance. We're carrying delusion with us.

Sometimes people ask me, how can you see delusion? Partly, you can start to see it as you move into these spaces of clarity. When you move back into a space of delusion, you now can see the difference. You now can recognize, "Yes, the mind is operating from a place of delusion right now. Okay, let me watch this. Let me take care here. I know that the mind tends to get caught when it's in this kind of space. So let me watch."

So it's not necessarily a problem. It's not a problem—we just continue. We continue, we continue, we engage with this path. When we've seen impermanence, unsatisfactoriness at a deep level, it gets easier to see through those misperceptions.

Living this path, exploring how to live this path, supports us to move towards that freedom—first in little moments, and then the promise, the direction the Buddha says this heads. It's like slanting, sloping towards the sea, this path. Leading towards freedom. Leading towards Nibbāna. In this very life.

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