The Path Reflects the Goal

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

Tonight I'd like to talk about the path and frame it within the context of the Four Noble Truths.

The Four Noble Truths are a central teaching that the Buddha offered. I think of it as really encapsulating the wisdom, the understanding that he came to on the night of his awakening. As he said, "It is only suffering that I teach and its end. Both formerly and now, it is only suffering I teach and its end."

It's no real surprise that because this question of suffering was what motivated the Buddha on his search, the framing of one of his core teachings is really centered around dukkha, this question of dukkha. Dukkha, of course, is usually translated as suffering, but has such a broader and deeper connotation than that word usually conveys to us. Some other translations help convey the depth and breadth of its meaning: dissatisfaction, unease, stress, struggle. Dukkha comprises the subtlest little sense that something's off, as well as the biggest struggles of our lives.

The Buddha looked out at the world and saw, with a kind of poignant seeing, that we are all struggling, and within that struggle, the very things we do to try to release ourselves from it just keep us enmeshed in it.

And so his framing of the Four Noble Truths—the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the end of suffering, and the truth of the path leading to the end of suffering—frames his understanding both of the struggle we get caught in and the way out. The first two Noble Truths I think of as our usual relationship with the world, the struggle, the cycle of suffering and craving. The first noble truth is the truth of suffering. The second noble truth is the truth of the cause of suffering, the craving. We usually live our lives in this cycle, the cycle of dependent origination, how suffering is created in our experience. Not the struggle of the pain of our circumstances, but the struggle of our reactivity to those circumstances—essentially what we're adding to our circumstances. This is what the Buddha saw that we could be free of: what we add to our situation.

So the first two noble truths really describe how we are usually caught in our lives. We've talked about this over and over, so I'm not going to talk about it much right now.

The third and fourth noble truths really proclaim the possibility of freedom: the truth of the end of suffering, and the truth of the path leading to the ending of suffering. First he proclaims the possibility of freedom, of the ending of suffering, the ending of our inner holding, our inner struggle. Then he offers the path leading to that ending. The practice is the Eightfold Path, the practices that we engage with to lead us to the end of suffering.

The Four Noble Truths are framed in terms of cause and effect, and this is a central aspect of the wisdom that the Buddha offers us. There is a cause to suffering: the craving in our minds, wanting things to be other than they are. Again, that wanting things to be other than they are is not the same as the wish to rid the world of injustice. But it is the inner railing, the inner sense that the mind cannot be at ease unless the world is different.

This is what the Buddha saw. He saw it's possible for the mind to be at ease even while the world is caught in its worldly winds. This blending between the ultimate and relative takes us to the place where we wish to alleviate suffering, wish to extend ourselves in the relative world to make change, and yet not be caught up in anger, aversion, greed, and delusion while we do that.

The possibility of that freedom is proclaimed in the second half of the Four Noble Truths. The Fourth Noble Truth, the truth of the path leading to the end of suffering, is the cause of freedom from suffering. In this framing, the Second Noble Truth identifies craving as the cause of our suffering. The way out is understood to be following the path, engaging with the practices of the Eightfold Path, which will lead us, step by step, to the ending of suffering.

The Buddha used, in a way, the medical model of his day in framing the Four Noble Truths. The first thing you state is what the illness is, what's the disease. The illness is suffering. Then you state the cause: what is the cause of that illness? The craving is the cause. And what's the prognosis? Is it possible to have a cure? Is it possible to be cured of this illness? He says emphatically, yes, it is possible to be cured of this illness. The Eightfold Path is the prescription, the medicine that we take, the activities that we do to free ourselves, to cure ourselves of this illness.

We are such a medical culture—we want pills for everything. Certainly if somebody came along and said, "Here's a pill, take this pill, you'll be done with suffering," most of us would do it. The Buddha is offering us the tools to do this, to free ourselves. And yet it is very difficult for us to pick up this path.

We do try. We let go. We try again. We let go.

So the path—the Eightfold Path—I'd just like to review it in very broad strokes: what this path is, this cure that the Buddha offers us, this prescription. The factors of the Eightfold Path are wise understanding, wise intention, wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood, wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration. Really, they are all practices. Every one of them is an activity that we can engage in, and they work together.

I like the name "Eightfold Path" because it makes me think about folding. Imagine putting all the names of the Eightfold Path on a piece of paper and folding it all up—they all touch each other. If you're cultivating one aspect of the Eightfold Path, you're probably cultivating two or three of the others at the same time. It's not like you cultivate the first one and then move on to the second. As you're cultivating any one of them, you're engaged with the others.

So the path, in a sense, even though it is folded in this way with each of the parts connected to and touching all of the other factors, there is a kind of way we can look at it as being linear. And I'll talk about it in this way just briefly.

Wise understanding and wise intention, as the beginning of the path, point to the fact that we need to have some knowledge or wisdom of where we're going. We don't just start on a path, start on a journey, without some sense of what the journey is about. Our journey is about freeing the mind from suffering. And the very definition of wise understanding—one of the key definitions—is that someone who understands, understands the Four Noble Truths.

So this is kind of interesting because the Eightfold Path is the last element of the Four Noble Truths, and yet the Four Noble Truths is the first element of the Eightfold Path. There are cycles within cycles within cycles, all within the Buddhist teachings. Part of the way our path unfolds is through cycles.

We learn a little bit, and this is the way wisdom begins on the path. We start by hearing something, learning something. It's not a full-blown deep understanding when we step onto the path. Perhaps we've heard somebody say something, talk about something, and there's a little resonance for us. It's like, "Wow, that makes sense to me." I know for myself, when I kind of hit bottom in my life, the teachings of suffering began to make a lot of sense. And so there was a willingness to begin to listen.

We begin our path by hearing the teachings and reflecting on them. And then we begin to engage, if they make sense. If reflecting on them, these teachings begin to make sense—we hear something about suffering, we hear something about practice. For myself, the very first little bit of wisdom that I heard was: maybe it's helpful to, rather than act on your emotions, observe them. And that didn't make much sense to me when I first heard it. It made almost no sense to me. Anger was the main thing I was dealing with, and it's like, why would I want to pay attention to my anger? Why would I want to turn to that?

But as I said, I had kind of hit bottom, and so I was willing to try anything. And actually I pretty quickly saw the wisdom of turning to observe experience rather than acting out of it.

So we step on the path, we hear something, maybe even just a very small bit of wisdom. The wisdom of the Buddha, I see, is very dense. You just need a little bit of it—a little piece of that wisdom—and if it resonates with you, you can go a long way with just that. Because all the wisdom of the Buddha is so interpenetrating, so intertwined.

We hear the wisdom, we may start to act, engage. And this is wise intention, the second aspect of the Eightfold Path. We step onto the path with hearing some teachings and then begin to engage. Our intentions become oriented, aligned around those wisdom teachings. We start to be curious about what it might mean to engage with our reactivity in a different way.

So we have perhaps a little mental shift through the hearing of wise view, wise understanding, moving us towards a different way to engage in the world: wise intention. And one of the keys in wise intention is

this—because our whole exploration is really around suffering and how suffering could end, one of the key explorations becomes: how can we not contribute to suffering in the world?

And so this points to the next three aspects of the Eightfold Path: wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood. The intention towards non-harming becomes a very beautiful and central part of our path, and that intention towards non-harming is expressed in these three factors.

Really, this aspect of the Eightfold Path is about harmonizing our relationships with the world, with other people—engaging in ways that don't create suffering, as best as we can. Living peacefully, cultivating this heart of non-harming. I think Joseph said it so beautifully last night, the quote from the Dalai Lama: as a practice, be kind whenever possible, and it's always possible. This really encapsulates the sense of the ethical component of the Eightfold Path.

The last three aspects of the Eightfold Path are about cultivating our minds. We can look at wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood as cleaning up our relationships with our fellow human beings. And the last three—wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration—as cleaning up our relationship with our own mind, looking at how we purify and understand the ways our mind gets caught in itself.

Both internal and external events can create this suffering. We see this sitting here in the hall. It becomes easier to see the internal events that create suffering. There's not much going on here, and yet our minds—you sit in the hall and we see our minds create something. The mind picks up something that happened five years ago and starts chewing on it, and then we start feeling the frustration and the anger and confusion around that, and we're off in a storm. We see this over and over again.

One of my friends was one of the early practitioners at the Forest Refuge. She made the comment that the Forest Refuge is relentlessly perfect. It's just so perfect that you have no way to blame the environment. Now that may not be the case completely here, but we do get to see how we react to the things that are coming up in our minds. And there are also things that happen externally that we react to. Mental development helps us to see both how we react to the internal and the external, and to see how greed, aversion, and delusion—the reactivity of our minds—compounds our struggles.

The factors of effort, mindfulness, and concentration really work together. I don't think we can truly tease them apart. When you're cultivating wise effort, taking the effort to cultivate what's wholesome and let go of the unwholesome, it takes mindfulness to do that. It takes mindfulness for us to engage in effort wisely. It takes effort to stay connected to our experience in the present moment. To cultivate the skillful and let go of the unskillful, to recognize the skillful and unskillful—that's where the mindfulness comes in.

Bringing mindfulness and effort together cultivates concentration. Again, I won't go into this in detail, but those two together create the continuity of mindfulness that allows concentration to come into being. Concentration results in the sustaining of mindfulness over time, which takes both mindfulness and effort together.

Mindfulness joined with concentration and effort—this is really what we've been doing day in and day out here on this retreat. And you have all seen the value of this. You have all seen the possibility of understanding that comes when we bring the perspective of witnessing how our minds react, observing it rather than acting on it. We see how the mind is contributing to its own struggles, and the mind begins to let go.

In a way it feels kind of magical to me, this power of mindfulness and wisdom together, which comes with concentration. The wisdom of the practice is really revealed in the continuity of mindfulness. And the wisdom frees. The mind sees through the mindfulness and the concentration; the mind sees its own contribution. It sees how it adds to our internal climate a state of mind that is not necessary. And the mind, in seeing that—seeing that it's contributing to its own unhappiness—actually begins to understand how to let go of that struggle.

It's not actually something we can figure out how to do. At least in my experience, I remember sitting in this hall, suffering greatly over something or other, feeling so caught by the mind. And the mind kind of screamed within itself: I would let go if I knew how. And I had no idea how to let go.

In that place, our practice is to meet the suffering. The meeting of that suffering, the meeting of that struggle, is what gives the mind its education in how to let go. This is the teaching that Joseph so clearly and beautifully articulates: that we tend to want insight into suffering without experiencing suffering. It doesn't happen that way.

We gain understanding by meeting the suffering—not by reacting to it, but by meeting it. And this is what those three aspects of the Eightfold Path—wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration—give the mind the stability to do.

As this unfolds, what begins to happen is that we see clearly, so clearly, how the mind can let go of what it adds: the wanting things to be other than they are, the wanting to get rid of things, the confusion in our minds. The seeing of that letting go itself is often experienced as a release—a shift of perspective, an ease comes into being. Sometimes the experience that's there—the anger, the confusion, the frustration, the pain in the knee—maybe that doesn't change. But the mind lets go of its grip on having it need to be some other way. And that shift gives the mind the recognition, the understanding: there's another way. That shift is a shift of insight.

This is how the Eightfold Path is itself a cycle. Because that wisdom we started with—the wisdom of understanding suffering and understanding the cause of suffering, seeing how the cultivation of the path leads to letting go—that becomes a lived experience, not an intellectual one. The wisdom of our practice becomes lived and real to us, not hypothetical, not intellectual, not speculative. It becomes understood in our bones.

To me, this is resonant with what Guy talked about the other night, although perhaps in a different

context. He talked about clarifying the view—I believe those were the words he used. And to me, the Eightfold Path is the practice we use to purify, to understand our minds, to understand the truth of what's initially intellectual understanding of wise view, wise understanding. The teachings of the Eightfold Path, the teachings of the Four Noble Truths, the teachings of dependent origination, the teachings around greed, aversion, and delusion, the teachings around what's skillful, what helps us move away from suffering, what helps us let go of these unskillful states of mind—we cultivate these in our practice and the understanding begins to dawn: they're not just a good idea, they're a way to live. And we live from that perspective.

So the practice of the Eightfold Path deepens our understanding of the Four Noble Truths, deepens our understanding of perhaps aspects of dependent origination, deepens our understanding of greed, aversion, and delusion and how they catch the mind, deepens our understanding of what's skillful, deepens our understanding of what's unskillful, what we should let go of. With that understanding now being a lived experience, it kind of spurs us on to keep going. And so the path is a cycle. We gain some lived understanding of that truth and it sends us back into wanting to keep looking, keep understanding.

We're actually living the Eightfold Path here on retreat, all the aspects of it. Wise understanding and wise intention are being lived through the exploration of our conversations in the practice discussions, through the question and answer in the morning, through the talks. There is that offering of some of the wisdom of the Buddha in this first way I talked about—the intellectual, reflective understanding of the teachings. Also, another way to understand wise intention and wise understanding is simply this: you are here. You've been here for nearly six weeks. If that's not an expression of wise intention, I don't know what is.

Wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood here on retreat are cultivated through our engagement with the precepts. Essentially, we are living wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood here on retreat. Moment by moment, we can understand these as being fulfilled. As one of my Burmese teachers, Sayadaw Ujanaka, said, you're fulfilling the ethical component of the Eightfold Path by abstaining from wrong speech, wrong action, wrong livelihood. Your livelihood here on retreat is essentially being temporary monks and nuns. Your livelihood here is practice—the most beautiful livelihood.

Wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration—of course you're living those day by day, moment by moment. The most obvious aspects of what we're practicing moment by moment here on retreat are those three. And then there are the moments of understanding, moments of wisdom, insight that reveal the truth.

The Four Noble Truths are, as I stated, often talked about in terms of this cause and effect relationship where the second noble truth causes the first noble truth, the truth of suffering. Craving causes the suffering. The fourth noble truth, the truth of the path—engaging with the path, cultivating the path—leads us towards realizing the ending of suffering.

There's another way to reflect on the Four Noble Truths, I think, a slightly different perspective. And that

comes with looking at the actions that the Buddha associated with the Four Noble Truths. Each truth has a particular task that we are encouraged to engage with. The truth of suffering is meant to be understood. The truth of the cause of suffering—craving—is meant to be abandoned. The ending of craving, which is the cessation of suffering, is meant to be realized. And the path is meant to be cultivated.

The tasks associated with the Four Noble Truths I see as a kind of map laid on top of the Four Noble Truths to give us a way out. The first two Noble Truths—understand suffering and let go of the cause of suffering—give us a way from the perspective of our usual life, which is caught in suffering, caught in the struggle, driven in effect by the cause of suffering.

So starting from where we are, from that place, the Buddha suggests: understand suffering. The way we understand suffering is by bringing the Eightfold Path to our moment-to-moment experience. As we apply the Eightfold Path, the task of applying the Eightfold Path is really to understand suffering, this First Noble Truth.

Something that's really struck me so many times in my practice is that as I'm willing to meet the suffering—almost a surrender, you know, surrender to "this is the way it is, I guess I need to observe it, I guess I need to be with it, meet it, explore it, get to know it"—as I let go of the resistance to the struggle and bring the factors of wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration joined with the wisdom of wise understanding, what I see is that when suffering is fully understood, when the mind connects without resistance, with mindfulness and wisdom, with effort and mindfulness and concentration, the wisdom coming to bear on it—when suffering is fully understood, the cause of suffering is naturally abandoned. It happens. It's not something our sense of "me doing something" has to do.

And so in this way, we can see that the task of the First Noble Truth, the understanding of suffering, leads to the Second Noble Truth, the abandoning of the craving. The abandoning of the craving—as the craving is released, that right there is realizing the ending of suffering, the Third Noble Truth. So our practice begins where we are, right in the middle of our suffering, bringing the Eightfold Path to bear on understanding suffering, and the rest of the path unfolds from there. First Noble Truth: understand suffering. Second Noble Truth: abandon the craving. That happens. Abandoning is a fruit of our practice. Abandoning is a fruit of the understanding. The realization of the freedom is a fruit of the abandoning.

And so looked at in this way, the tasks associated with the Four Noble Truths put a different spin on the Four Noble Truths—kind of sequential, one step to the next. Understand suffering, abandon the cause, realize the ending. So those first three make sense to me in terms of this kind of step-by-step unfolding.

And I have to point to Stephen Batchelor here because he's the one who really gave me the interest in exploring the Four Noble Truths from this perspective. It led me to think—and Stephen Batchelor pointed out—that it struck him as very odd that the Four Noble Truths, being one of the central lists of Buddhism, wasn't structured like a list in the normal way that Buddhist lists are structured. Most of the lists that the Buddha offered, many of the lists at least, have a kind of directionality to them where the initial ones are

the early things that we cultivate and learn, and then they build on each other.

The seven factors of awakening, for instance. We cultivate mindfulness and investigation and energy, and then the interest arises in the settling of the mind—calm and tranquility and concentration and equanimity. And in a way, the equanimity of the factors of awakening is a kind of—I wouldn't say it's the goal of the seven factors, but it is understood as being a kind of deeper quality. And so often the lists in the way the Buddha offered them head in this step-by-step way. At least they can be understood in that way.

And so Stephen Batchelor said, but this one, the Four Noble Truths—what would it mean for the Eightfold Path, cultivating the path, to be the ending of the path? The ending, or the kind of penultimate, the ultimate result of the Four Noble Truths?

And so I reflected on that some and explored, thought about this. The first three I can really see, based on these tasks associated with the Four Noble Truths, how they lead step by step from one to the next. But cultivating the path, that last one—that's a bit interesting to think about. And my reflection was: what can I learn from thinking about this in this way?

I'm going to point to something that Bhante mentioned the other night. He talked about how in the first stage of awakening called sotāpanna, stream entry, there was a place where the stream meant the Eightfold Path. I looked up that reference. It is the Buddha and Sāriputta discussing what sotāpanna means, what stream entry means. The Buddha is quizzing Sāriputta. The Buddha says, "What is the stream?" And Sāriputta responds, "The Noble Eightfold Path is the stream." And the Buddha then says, "And what is a stream enterer?" And Sāriputta responded, "One who possesses the Eightfold Path."

So in this teaching, in this framing of what awakening is, one who has entered the stream, one who is awakened to that degree, possesses the Eightfold Path. That's in a sense the definition of, or what the awakened person is like—living the Eightfold Path. And so the Eightfold Path, while it definitely is described as the way that we engage, how we practice, how we understand suffering through cultivating the factors of the Eightfold Path—and yet the Eightfold Path isn't simply gone with awakening.

My understanding of that teaching—that someone who has entered the stream possesses the Eightfold Path—is that they're living the Eightfold Path. It's a natural thing. It's not something they have to try to do. It's a natural unfolding that one lives the path when one has let go of suffering. And so from that perspective, the letting go, the releasing, the realizing of the ending of suffering puts us in a place of simply living the path.

This is also described in terms of full awakening, where there are a few more pieces to what one possesses. The Buddha was asked, essentially, what are the qualities of an awakened person? And he responded that an awakened person possesses the right view of one beyond training, the right intention of one beyond training, the right speech, action, and livelihood of one beyond training, the right effort, mindfulness, and concentration of one beyond training, and the right knowledge and right deliverance of

one beyond training. Those last two—knowledge and deliverance—are translating the terms *jnana*, which essentially means the realized knowledge, the insight knowledge, and *vimutti*, which means release.

So one who is free, naturally—my understanding of this—is naturally living the Eightfold Path.

One interesting way to explore what cultivating the path means from this perspective: We obviously cultivate the path in our engagement with our struggles. We are cultivating wise effort, wise mindfulness, wise concentration, strengthening those capacities. But for one who is free, naturally living the Eightfold Path, one way we can understand that person as cultivating the path is to think about what a path actually is—think about the image of a path. There are all these paths here in the woods, and those paths are created because people have walked on them. It is the very walking on the path that keeps it clear and available.

And so we can appreciate those who have gone before us, who have realized the ending of suffering, who have walked the path, who are continuing to walk the path, are keeping the path clear for us. They're continuing to cultivate the path for our benefit.

There's a text—one of my favorite texts—that also points to this notion of how the path we're walking is the path we will walk if we become awakened. It's not different. The text is called the Aṭṭhakavagga. It's an old text found in the Sutta Nipāta. Most Pāli scholars feel that it's one of the earliest—both early in the sense that it hasn't been altered too much over the years because the language is quite archaic, but also that it seems to be a teaching from fairly early in the Buddha's teaching career. They think this because it's one of the few texts actually referred to elsewhere in the suttas. People will talk and say, "Oh, have you memorized that text? Do you know the Aṭṭhakavagga? Can you quote that?" The Buddha praises someone who's able to speak that text. So it was an early text, and it has a different flavor to it.

This text is basically sixteen poems about clinging—that's the main theme: clinging and letting go of clinging. The way it approaches this is by describing what somebody is like who's living in the world suffering and clinging, describing what somebody is like living in the world without clinging, and then describing the path of how one might get from one to the other.

The first thing I'd like to share with you is a description of how an awakened person is described:

"Tell me about the Supreme Person," a questioner asks.

"A person who is free of wishes before the body's destruction, who's not tethered to the past, who cannot be reckoned in terms of the present, and for whom there are no yearnings for the future.

A person who is not angered, not frightened, not boastful, not fretful, who gives wise advice, who is calm, restrained in speech, who is indeed a sage.

A person who is not attached to the future, who does not sorrow over the past, who finds solitude amidst sense contacts, and is not guided by fixed views.

A person who is retiring, not deceitful, not covetous, not greedy, not impudent, not arousing contempt, who does not engage in malicious speech.

A person who does not relish pleasure, who is not arrogant, who is mild and of ready wit, who is not credulous, who by nothing is repelled.

A person who does not take on the training in hope of material gain, who is unperturbed if they get nothing, who is not hampered by wishes and not greedy for flavors.

A person who is even-tempered, ever attentive, who does not suppose that in the world they are equal, superior, or inferior, who is free of conceit.

A person for whom there are no tethers, who knowing the truth is not tethered in any way. This is someone I call peaceful."

To me, something that stands out about that description is that it's very—almost normal. I don't mean normal in the sense that you see people like that all the time, but it's a description you can understand. It's very this-worldly. The description of someone who is awakened is given in terms of how they are in the world.

Not frightened, not angered, not boastful, doesn't imagine themselves to be equal, superior, or inferior. It's a description of how somebody is in the world—a description of the training.

Here is a description of the training. The question posed is: speak about the path of practice. And the Buddha responds:

A person should not have covetous eyes. She should close her ears to ordinary chatter. She should not be greedy for flavors. She should not cherish anything in the world. In whatever way he is affected by sense contact, he should not lament over anything. He should not long for continued existence. He should not tremble amidst danger. She should be meditative, not footloose. She should desist from worry. She should not be indolent. She should live in lodgings where there is little noise. He should not sleep too much. He should be devoted to wakefulness and keen endeavor. He should abandon laziness, deception, merriment, various kinds of amusements. One should not be a boaster, should not speak scheming words, should not cultivate impudence, should not utter quarrelsome speech. One should not be drawn into telling lies, should not be deliberately treacherous, should not despise others for their way of life or wisdom or precepts and practices. If ascetics or ordinary people irritate her with their talkativeness, she should not respond harshly, for the peaceful do not retaliate. Knowing the Buddha's teachings, an ever attentive person who investigates it should train in it. Knowing the extinguishing of the illusion of self as peace, one should not be negligent in applying Gautama's teachings. The unconquered conqueror realized the truth through his own insight, not through hearsay. So with regards to the sublime one's teaching, one who is diligent should constantly venerate it by following his example.

That, I think, is really the key: follow the example. Someone who is free is worthy of emulation.

The other line that I really resonate with is "should not respond harshly, for the peaceful do not retaliate." If you want to be peaceful, behave peacefully. The path reflects the goal. How we are supports that movement in the direction of peace.

The Eightfold Path is not just a set of practices—it's really a description of how a noble life is lived. I find that very inspiring.

Last night, Joseph also pointed to something that I thought captures exactly the crux of the matter: the Buddha's teaching in brief, which Joseph likes to highlight, that the Buddha said over and over again—nothing should be clung to as I or mine. That could be a summary of the path. Nothing should be clung to as I or mine. The result of the path, the freedom, is the not clinging.

The path reflects the goal.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.