

The Fourth Noble Truth: The Eightfold Path

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 14:26

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa — Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble and fully Self-Enlightened One.

So we've been through the opening of this *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, which if you remember rightly means turning the wheel of the law. It's the first discourse that the Buddha gave, or at least it states the basic platform of his teaching which were the Four Noble Truths. And we went through the first noble truth which explains the truth of suffering, the second one is the cause of suffering, and the third one is the cessation of suffering, the end of suffering. So the fourth one is the noble path leading to the end of suffering.

And that noble path is right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The normal way that this is expressed is through these three divisions: *sīla*, *samādhi*, *paññā*, which means the ethical life, ethics, the meditation — meditation as a practice but also as something that subsists through our lives — and wisdom. It turns it around really, because the path comes wisdom first, then right effort, and then the meditation. So we'll do it the way it comes here anyway.

This right view, this right understanding, refers specifically to these Four Noble Truths and especially to the three characteristics. So it's actually seeing impermanence, becoming more and more aware of the impermanent nature of our existence, seeing the role of desire. Remember, this is the wrong desire. We're not talking about the desire to meditate, anything like that. We're talking about desire which is seeking happiness in the sensual world — seeking happiness in the sensual world.

You have to remember that the Buddha ethicized everything. From the Buddha's point of view, everything was an ethical problem. These days we don't see it like that. We see from psychotherapy, we see it as a medical problem, a mental problem. From the Buddha's point of view, everything is an ethical problem. And the reason is that right at the beginning, somewhere, we made this mistake. And the mistake is one of identity. This identity means that we consider ourselves to be human beings. This is a really very deep and profound mistake.

Thinking ourselves to be human beings, we're now trying to seek happiness in the human world, which is the sensual world. Now, as soon as we seek happiness in the sensual world, we begin to accumulate, become acquisitive, and that turns to greed. When you gain something and hold something, somebody else wants it, so you've got to protect it. So you're into aversion, you're into hatred, you're into conflict.

And if the other person's too big, you run for it, you interfere. So you've got these three fundamental positions. You've got one of acquisitiveness, collecting, greed, because that makes you feel safe. The more money in the bank you've got, the more safe you feel. And aversion and fear.

So there's your basic stance in life from the point of view of this wrong understanding. And therefore all our problems arise from that. On the positive side, of course, we have compassion, love, sympathetic joy and peace. And, of course, that takes us away from our problems. Then we form a very different relationship to life.

So, from the Buddha's point of view, all our suffering is based on this wrong understanding which produces an ethical situation. And that's why what we do is what determines our future. So this right view — that's what it means. It's beginning to understand that. And the other part of right view is to understand that the world we live in is the world that we create. There's no objective world — that's a myth that came up with our 18th century enlightenment and science. But the world that we experience doesn't have any objectivity. It's completely created by us. And we create an illusion that we can see the world as it is. But these days neurobiology is proving without any shadow of a doubt that we can only see the world the way we see it, within our own heads.

So once you realize that, then you realize that whatever information is coming in through the senses, what we do with it is completely up to us. So if we're living in an awful world, that's our problem. It's not anybody else's problem. And then we have to find a way out. So that's what we generally mean by this right view.

Now this right view, when it becomes a right view, not a wrong view, it's no good having it up there in the sky as an understanding. It has to penetrate, and the first penetration is into the heart, and that manifests as an attitude. And that's the second part. So it's no good saying, "Oh yes, everything's interconnected and interdependence" and then go around shooting people. It's got to descend into the heart as some form of interconnectedness, which means compassion. So that from the heart's point of view, interconnectedness is love, interconnectedness is compassion, sympathetic joy. If it doesn't, it just remains this cold philosophical idea that everybody's connected.

Now once it's moved into the heart, again it's a waste of time — it has to move out into the body. Once it moves into the body it begins to express itself. So that's where you get right speech, right action, and right livelihood. Now this right livelihood isn't strictly necessary because in a sense it's included in action, but the Buddha puts it there. And you've only got to consider what qualities your livelihood develops — what qualities livelihood develops in a person. So I mean just think of the qualities of a policeman: suspicious. And a teacher — a teacher always asks questions they can answer. They never ask one they can't answer. There's all sorts. So your profession, what you actually do, has a direct effect upon your character, your personality. Especially when you think that you spend probably the best energy of your life in it — eight hours a day, whatever it is. So you can see it has a direct effect. So he puts it as quite separate.

And perhaps another reason is that it's through livelihood that we act in the world. And that's our *kamma*. So that's how we go from right understanding into a right attitude and out through the world into right speech, right action, right livelihood.

Now the last three are to do with our mental state, state of awareness, and that's right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. This right effort of course is this right mindfulness you've got to catch. In our meditation we have this objective position within us where we're trying to investigate the psychophysical organism and try to find out what we're doing wrong, why we're so miserable. Now that's not what you take into daily life. Into daily life, you're not trying to watch yourself. When you're doing a job, when you're washing the pot, you're not trying to watch yourself wash the pots. If you do that, you just break a few and get very angry with yourself. You can't watch yourself adding up bills. You get them all wrong.

So you're not trying to take that objective position. You're trying to absorb into your action. And to absorb into your action in a way that isn't going to cause you suffering. So there are two qualities that you have to develop. This sense of attention. So that's your *samādhi*. That's your concentration. It's got to have the right attitude. So it's coming from care. The job itself you're doing has to be wholesome in itself, and you put yourself into it.

Now as you're doing something — say gardening, even a hobby like gardening — you might become aware of yourself as of a general self-awareness. So that arises naturally. We're not trying to develop that. Then you put your attention into the work. Now if you've gone into that work with attention and care and you absorb into that work, you lose a sense of self — there's nobody there doing it — and you lose a sense of time. So self and time are the same thing. Time, existence, self, they're all there as an objectivity which takes us out of the moment.

Now you can't help coming out of the moment and becoming self-aware, but you're not developing that. You're trying to develop this absorption, putting yourself right into what you're doing. Now, when you absorb into what you're doing, you are developing the qualities that that job is demanding. So, if you go into it with greed, if you go into it with indulgence, you come out with a dependency. And if you go into it with a pure heart, you come out with a pure heart.

So that's why it's so important that when you start a job, you just stop for a moment, get your attitude right — right attitude. Your understanding right. And then you give yourself to the job. And that's mindfulness in ordinary daily life.

And the purpose of the sitting meditation is to establish that sense of awareness, a sense of mindfulness within ourselves, so that in a sense, throughout daily life, there's also a connection with ourselves. So that we see, for instance, if you're talking to somebody, you're there with the first rising of irritation, just before you hit them. You can feel the little movement in the heart, because you're there. It doesn't move, it just stays there. But often, because we're not aware of it, it's growing up here around the back, and then

suddenly you find yourself shouting your head off.

So, to be like that, you've also got to be very relaxed. There's lots of — it's dreadful trying to develop this stuff. So you can see this Eightfold Path is actually to be taken both — the last bit, the right concentration, right effort, right mindfulness, goes to one side in terms of a process of self-investigation, which we call *vipassanā*, insight and all that, and the other side is this mindfulness that we take into right speech, right action, right livelihood. Now it all turns on itself.

Now you can see that from the Buddha's point of view, being a Buddha, one who knows, his own liberation came through an investigation. So that's why right view is at the top, the right investigation. But there are definite signs in the scriptures — I'm just now trying to gather all the information for this — that the same path of liberation can come through love, can come through the heart. And when it comes through the heart, it comes also through action. So this Eightfold Path revolves on itself. There's an entry point to enlightenment from any of these eight points.

In the discourse on how to develop *mettā*, this mindfulness, he ends off by saying, "By living with the heart of goodwill and mindfulness, you won't have to come back for another rebirth." In other words, that's the path to liberation also. And it's something that, I have to say, in Theravāda has been subdued a lot.

That ends this little section on the fourth one, the path leading to liberation, the path leading to enlightenment. And the next talk, the last one, I'll just read through because it ends up with a wonderful crescendo at the end, which we shall leave till next week.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you, by your deep understanding of the Eightfold Path, liberate yourselves from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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