

THE EIGHTFOLD PATH the way to the end of suffering

*Not doing anything evil,
Undertaking to do what is skilful,
And purification of the mind and heart-
This is the teaching of the awakened ones.*

Dhammapada 183 (chapter 8, verse 5)

During this 8 week course we will be looking at the eightfold path, one of the oldest teachings of Buddhism. It is traditionally said to be what the Buddha first taught after he gained enlightenment.

He presented his path as the middle way of living skilfully through neither indulging or denying our experience. The eightfold path is a systematic course of practice which enables us to move from a state of bewilderment and suffering to insight and freedom. It begins with the first glimpse of a deeper view of life and unfolds into the transformation of our life through the stages of positive emotions, ethical practice and meditation.

We will be going through the 'limbs' of the path in this eight week course with a presentation each evening and plenty of time for discussion and questions.

1. week - introduction to the course and the 4 noble truths
2. week - perfect vision
3. week - perfect emotion
4. week - the path of ethics - perfect speech, action and livelihood
5. week - meditation 1 - perfect effort
6. week - meditation 2 - perfect mindfulness
7. week - meditation 3 - perfect samadhi
8. week - summing up and checking out
9. day retreat

Bhikkhus there are these two extremes that ought not to be cultivated by one who has gone forth. What two? There is devotion to pursuit of pleasure in sensual desires, which is low, coarse, vulgar, ignoble and harmful; and there is devotion to self mortification, which is painful, ignoble and harmful. The middle way discovered by a perfect one avoids both these extremes; it gives vision, gives knowledge, and leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbana.

And what is the middle way? It is this noble eightfold path, that is to say: Right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

Vinaya, Mahavagga, 1

READING LIST

Vision and Transformation - Sangharakshita

A series of lectures by the founder of the FWBO on the eight limbs of the path with plenty of anecdotes and illustrations from Buddhism and Western culture.

The Noble Eightfold Path, Way to the End of Suffering - Bhikkhu Bodhi

A brief guide through the path from a modern Theravada Bhikkhu (monk), with lots of references to the Pali Canon, placing the eightfold path in its traditional context.

The Life of the Buddha - Bhikkhu Nanamoli

An arrangement of Pali canon texts into a readable story of the life of the Buddha. See chapter XII for material on the noble truths and the eightfold path.

Pali Canon sources -

Vinaya, (Mahavagga 1, 1, 17-29), Samyutta Nikaya 56, 11.

You may find these texts on the web site Access to Insight -

www.accesstoinsight.org

THE EIGHTFOLD PATH the four noble truths

Suffering is important, not for its own sake, but because it is a sign that we are not living as we ought to live.

Sangharakshita, Crossing the Stream, p 173-181

This fact of dukkha, the Buddha says, is the only real spiritual problem. The other problems - the theological and metaphysical questions that have taunted religious thinkers through the centuries - he gently waves aside as "matters not tending to liberation." What he teaches, he says, is just suffering and the ending of suffering, dukkha and its cessation.

Bhikkhu Bodhi, The Noble Eightfold Path, p. 7

Buddhism does not begin with a premise or belief, it begins with an experience - suffering. The Buddha examined this problem through his core teaching that all things rise in dependence upon conditions, that actions have consequences. He borrowed a medical formula current in his day that identified a disease, its cause, the possibility of a cure and finally the treatment necessary to bring about this cure. He applied this to life's problem of suffering in the form of the four noble truths.

1. Dukkha, suffering or unsatisfactoriness; Buddhism does not say that everything is straightforwardly painful. We can easily disprove this by simple pleasure! But there *is* suffering in our life - there is "*old age, sickness, death, sorrow, lamentation, grief, despair, association with the unloved, separation from the loved and not getting what one wants,*" to quote the Buddha. Pretending it is not there does not stop the experience. There are three levels of increasingly subtle forms of dukkha -

a. Dukkha-dukkha, straightforward physical and emotional suffering or unsatisfactoriness; if you stub your toe or someone insults you, it causes you pain.

b. Viparinama dukkha, the suffering of change; something may be enjoyable now, but because we are attached to it and it won't last we are storing up suffering in the future. Knowing that the cost of our pleasures may hit us in the future or is affecting someone else will cause us unease and spoil our enjoyment.

c. Sankhara-dukkha, the suffering of existence; this is the subtle unsatisfactoriness that underlies all experience short of enlightenment. There is a deep yearning in us for something the senses and the ordinary mind cannot satisfy.

2. The cause of suffering is craving, thirst, attachment, greed. We suffer because we are attached to experience and want things to be other than they are. Attachment is seen as fourfold - to sense experience, to views, to ethics and religious observances as ends in themselves and finally to a fixed self-identity. It is important to see greed as part of a pattern along with hatred and the underlying spiritual ignorance that things are permanent and substantial. Only by seeing through this ignorance will we cease to crave.

3. Cessation of suffering - nibbana. The word nibbana means to blow out. Upon the cessation of ignorance and the attachment and aversion it causes we are no longer bound and the fire of suffering is 'blown out". It is important to reflect on this truth, otherwise looking at life's difficulties and sufferings without realising the possibility of change is just cruelty!

4. The path to this cessation. The eightfold path is *how* we practice Buddhism. Although there are many formulations of spiritual development in Buddhism, the eightfold is traditionally associated with the four noble truths. It is particularly useful in that it focuses on *what* to do. It outlines a number of practical steps to carry out in order to end suffering and move towards a more fulfilled life.

Tune in next week for more on the path.

THE EIGHTFOLD PATH

perfecting vision and emotion

1. PERFECT VISION or right view - samyag drsti, samma ditthi

*And should one live a hundred years devoid of insight and unintegrated;
Better still is one day lived possessed of insight, a meditator. - Dhammapada, 111*

*Whatever an enemy might do to an enemy, or a hater to those he hates,
A wrongly directed mind can do even greater harm than that. - Udana, 4.3*

The word samyag means whole, complete, perfect. Drsti means view; in Indian culture it is the word used for any philosophy or belief, they are all *views*.

Views either help or hinder spiritual growth. This is the Buddhist criteria of their 'rightness'. We can underestimate the powerful effect the views we hold have on our lives. If we hold firmly that we are useless and can't meditate, our attempts to practice meditation will be seriously hindered.

Perfect vision is the wisdom part of the eightfold path and is followed by the rest of the path - ethics and meditation. Yet wisdom is also the culmination of the three fold path (ethics, meditation *and then* wisdom). If we see the eightfold path repeating at deeper and deeper levels of realisation, we can see right view on different levels. As **right view** this limb of the path is the initial mainly conceptual outlook that leads us to practice the other seven limbs. These in turn deepen our understanding and so on in a spiral which culminates in a direct intuition or **perfect vision** of the true nature of things.

Here are some helpful views -

1. Actions have consequences, karma. This is an aspect of the basic view of conditionality. All experience arises in dependence on conditions. If we live by this view we will act skilfully in accord with the way things are and suffer less. We act kindly because it has an effect, we meditate because it has an effect. This doesn't take rocket science, just honest observation of our actions and an appreciation for the quality of our experience!

2. The 3 marks of conditioned or composite experience. All things are impermanent, lack any essential substance and are unsatisfactory.

3. The 4 noble truths. See last week.

We deepen right views into direct perfect vision through the three levels of wisdom - learning, reflection and meditative contemplation are dependent on conditions or 'put together', are impermanent, without any.

a. hearing or *shruta-mayi-prajna* - knowledge based on 'hearing', learning and understanding the teachings clearly on a conceptual level.

b. reflection or *chintya-mayi-prajna* - knowledge based on thinking; thinking through what we know. This is the stage of making the Dharma our own; making links and realising its implications in our lives.

c. meditation or *bhavana-mayi-prajna* - knowledge based on meditating; this is the direct contemplation of the Dharma and its realisation on a level deeper and more complete than the merely conceptual.

2. PERFECT EMOTION or right intention - samyag samkalpa, samma samkappa

For most of us the central problem of the spiritual life is to find emotional equivalents for our intellectual understanding. - Sangharakshita, Vision and Transformation, p. 36

*Whatever bliss in the world is found in sensual pleasures
And whatever there is in heavenly bliss,
These are not worth a sixteenth part of the bliss of craving's destruction. - Udana, 2.2*

This limb is often translated as 'thought', but the word samkappa is better understood as intention, purpose, plan or will. Sangharakshita uses the word 'emotion'. It is the motivation to practice; the oriented of our will and emotions towards the positive. Nice ideas and views won't shift us much if our motivations and desires are firmly steering us in a different direction. We need to want to practice Buddhism, we need to *find the emotional equivalent of our intellectual understanding.*

Greed, hatred and delusion sit at the heart of the unawakened experience, preventing us from realising bodhi, enlightenment. While perfect vision works on delusion - the veil of concepts or views, perfect intention works on the veil of kilesas - the defiled emotions of greed and hatred. Here are some right intentions or perfect emotions -

1. Non-desire, renunciation or contentment. This counters greed, the insatiable drive to have and consume that we major on in our society. The practice of contentment allows us to need less and to bring a deeper and more enjoyable awareness to what we are actually experiencing.

2. Non-hate, good will or metta. This is cultivated through the metta bhavana practice which counters hatred, reclaiming the energy we waste in irritation.

3. Non cruelty, or harmlessness, avihimsa. This is one of Buddhism's major emphases, embodied in the first ethical precept of abstaining from harming living beings. It is deepened by the practice of karuna bhavana, the cultivation of compassion, our empathy with suffering beings.

4. Generosity, the outgoing emotion of connecting with other beings through giving. This is the positive side of renunciation; our willingness to share possessions, time and energy rather than clinging to and hoarding everything for ourselves. We develop this emotion by just giving!

5. The 4 Brahmaviharas, or heavenly abodes. These are the four basic positive emotions - metta (good will), karuna (compassion), mudita (sympathetic joy) and upekkha (equanimity). There is a meditation practice on each of these. You will be familiar with the metta bhavana, the others are the development of the deeper implications of metta.

6. Sradhha, faith or confidence. In terms of the dharma this is the confidence that our practice works. It is the emotional attraction to and reliance on the good. Though it may be informed by intuition and reason, faith is only ultimately valid when known directly through our experience. Sradhha is deepened through devotional practices such as the seven-fold puja.

THE EIGHTFOLD PATH the path of ethics

3. **PERFECT SPEECH** - samma vaca

Better than a thousand meaningless words collected together is a single meaningful word on hearing which one becomes tranquil. - Dhammapada, 100

Like a beautiful flower, brightly coloured and scented, even so useful is the well-uttered speech of one who acts accordingly - Dhammapada, 52

Buddhism sees a person as threefold - body, speech and mind - and gives us ways of examining the ethical implications of our actions on each of these levels. This limb of the path deals with speech. Our words are powerful - the Buddha talks about our tongue being like a double edged axe cutting both others and ourselves.

We cultivate perfect speech through developing a more truthful, kindly, helpful and harmonious use of words. These qualities correspond to the 4 speech precepts (part of the 10 precepts undertaken upon ordination into the WBO) -

Abstention from dishonesty; telling it like it is - valuing what is true and speaking accordingly - not being ready to bend the facts to suit yourself or others.

Abstention from harsh speech; we talk to actual beings with actual feelings - kindly speech is considering our effect on others.

Abstention from frivolity; this isn't a matter of having no fun, its about not draining our energy through prattling endless rubbish. Life is short!

Abstention from divisive speech; not spreading discord and slander in order to divide people, and using our words instead to encourage harmony.

4. **PERFECT ACTION** - samma kammanta

All living beings are terrified of punishment; all fear death. making comparison with oneself, one should neither kill nor cause to kill. - Dhammapada, 129

Do not underestimate good, thinking 'it will not approach me'. A water pot becomes full by the constant falling of drops of water. Similarly the wise one little by little fills himself with good. - Dhammapada, 122

Perfect action is the everyday living out of our vision. Actions are considered skilful or unskilful (rather than abstractly good or bad), if -

1. they are motivated by generosity, love and wisdom or by their opposites, greed, hatred and delusion,
2. if they are carried out with consideration of their consequences or not.

The five precepts are specific trainings that allow us to turn around our behaviour from harmful to helpful in different areas of our life. They are traditionally presented in terms of abstaining from the unskillful, but Sangharakshita has put together positive correspondences stress the skilful we are moving towards. Here are both lists -

1. *I undertake the training principle of refraining from harming living beings (with deeds of loving kindness I purify my body),*
2. *I undertake the training principle of refraining from taking the not-given (with open handed generosity I purify my body),*
3. *I undertake the training principle of refraining from sexual misconduct (with stillness, simplicity and contentment I purify my body),*
4. *I undertake the training principle of refraining from false speech (with truthful communication I purify my speech),*
5. *I undertake the training principle of refraining from taking intoxicants that cloud the mind - (with mindfulness clear and radiant I purify my mind).*

5. PERFECT LIVELIHOOD - samma ajiva

Let the silent sage move about in the village as the bee goes taking honey from the flower without harming colour or fragrance. - Dhammapada, 49

Whoever offends against an innocent man, one who is pure and faultless, to that spiritually immature person the evil he has committed comes back like the fine dust thrown against the wind. - Dhammapada, 125

Our work takes up a large part of our life. Perfect livelihood is about making this time part of our practice rather than a hindrance to it – finding a way of working that carries our awareness and kindness from our meditation deeper into our lives. It is also about practicing our ideals in our social life – becoming more responsible and creative with the effect we have on the wider world.

Traditionally this is seen in terms of how we earn our living. The Buddha dissuaded people from trading in weapons, 'breathing things', meat, alcohol and poisons. In our complex, informed modern world we can see the implications of right livelihood in our effects on the world's economy and environment, (is driving a big fuel guzzling vehicle ethical?) and on the effects of our purchasing through fair trade, ecologically friendly products, etc..

In ancient India the average person had little political influence, the only social effect they had control over was trade. Today we live in a different world, we are deeply involved in our society, like it or not, and aware of the effects we are having – so for us this limb of the path has implications in our political and social life - the ethical dimensions of voting, representation and the possibility of getting involved in projects for environment and social change. One development in Buddhism in recent years has been the growth of engaged Buddhism, where some modern Buddhists have taken the view that it is not enough to sit with our eyes shut wishing nice thoughts and have become active in non-violent campaigns against such problems as global poverty, deforestation and human rights.

THE EIGHTFOLD PATH

with mindfulness strive on – perfect effort & mindfulness

6. **PERFECT EFFORT** - samma vayama

Then the lord said to the bhikkhus: 'Now, bhikkhus, I declare to you: all conditioned things are of a nature to decay - strive on untiringly.' These were the Tathagatha's last words. - Mahaparinibbana Sutta ,6.6, (D.N. 13)

Irrigators draw off water, fletchers straighten arrows, carpenters shape wood; the wise tame themselves. - Dhammapada, 80

The Buddhist path is active; despite modern Western notions of a laid back easy Buddha, practicing the Dharma takes consistent effort. The Buddha constantly exhorted his followers to strive in overcoming what was holding them back from fulfilment - see his last words above.

Effort is involved in the whole path; energy is required to practice any of the eight limbs. It is also conserved and generated by their practice - for example deepening our positive emotions stirs us to act for the good and stops our energy leaking away in empty craving and hate.

The four right efforts detail this -

1. **Preventing** - the effort required to stop new unhelpful mental states arising.

2. **Eradicating** - removing already existent unhelpful states.

(The five hindrances are a good summary of these, although usually studied in relation to meditation they apply to our general life. They are - sense desire, ill will, restlessness and anxiety, sloth and torpor, doubt and indecision.)

3. **Developing** - the cultivation of helpful, positive mental states such as loving kindness, generosity, stillness, simplicity and contentment, mindfulness, etc.

4. **Maintaining** - the effort of supporting and encouraging already arisen helpful states.

These four efforts can be compared to gardening. First you prevent any new weeds growing and remove any nasty established weeds, digging right down to the roots to prevent them re-sprouting. Then you plant the lovely roses and cabbages you desire, and maintain them as they grow and blossom.

Balanced effort is sustainable steady effort, the Buddha compared it to a well strung veena (lute), if the strings are too slack or too tight it sounds awful. Similarly if we make too little effort or too much in a way that is not coming from our depths, our spiritual practice is 'off'.

We need to balance rejoicing in the positive qualities we already have and want to maintain with the determination to develop new qualities and prevent and eradicate the negative. Otherwise we can become either disheartened or dully and statically content.

7. **PERFECT MINDFULNESS** - samma sati

Mindfulness is the way to the deathless, unmindfulness the way to death. Those who are mindful do not die, the unmindful are like the dead. - Dhammapada, 21

Mindful among the unmindful, wide awake among the sleeping, the one of great wisdom forges ahead like a swift horse outdistancing a feeble hack.

- Dhammapada, 29

Attentiveness or mindfulness is a core virtue upheld by the whole Buddhist tradition, from the anapanasati (mindfulness of breathing) of the Theravada to the tea ceremony of Japanese Zen. The development of mindfulness is the basic meditation practice - gathering and focussing our attention until we become fully present and actually experience our life and what is actually going on in it. It is this state that is called the deathless - unmindfulness is being dead to life. Mindfulness has an ethical quality in that it is about knowing what is skilful and what is unskilful and recollecting the consequences of actions. It also has an aesthetic quality - we can be aware of our world and appreciate it just for its own sake, taking it in on a level beyond the petty, grasping mind that sees things in terms of self-centered usefulness.

The four mindfulnesses are found in the Anapanasati and Satipatthana Suttas of the Pali Canon, the classic texts on this practice -

1. **Mindfulness of body** - knowing what our body is doing, being in touch with our 'bits and pieces'. The mindfulness of breathing is an obvious practice for this, as is body scanning.
2. **Mindfulness of feelings** - being aware of our response to people, things and thoughts; are we pleased, displeased or indifferent ?
3. **Mindfulness of states of mind** - being in touch with the quality of our mind and heart at any one time.
4. **Mindfulness of phenomena**, or objects of mind - knowing what our mind is focussing on and what it is 'holding'.

Sangharakshita in *Vision and Transformation* presents a similar list -

1. **Things** - noticing and appreciating the inanimate - the infinite, elusive beauty of each cornflake in the morning!
2. **Oneself** - in three dimensions - mindfulness of body, of feelings and of thoughts (see above).
3. **People** - the metta bhavana is a people-awareness practice. It is about learning to see people as other people, feeling and perceiving just like us and not as objects.
4. **Reality** - seeing into the depths of the world around us and being aware of its deepest implications. We can reflect on the qualities of the Buddha, or on one of his teachings until these qualities and truths sink in deep enough for us to see them imbued in the world around us.

Mindfulness takes time. We have to slow down enough to notice things. Give yourself the time to look and enter the deathless moment of awareness!

THE EIGHTFOLD PATH

body like a mountain, heart like the ocean, mind like the sky

8. PERFECT MEDITATION - samma samadhi

Those wise ones who are intent on absorption in higher meditative states and who delight in the calm of renunciation, even the gods love them, those thoroughly enlightened and mindful ones. - Dhammapada, 181

Be absorbed in meditation bhikkhu! Don't be heedless. Don't allow your mind to whirl about among sensual pleasures. Don't through heedlessness swallow a red hot iron ball and then cry out 'What torment!' - Dhammapada, 371

The word **samadhi** means being firmly fixed or established, in this case the mind wholeheartedly fixed or established in meditation. There are different levels of samadhi; either mundane concentration on an object or establishment in an enlightened state of awareness. There are terms for these differing depths.

Samatha - the experience of calm, where the mind becomes increasingly settled, integrated and absorbed in the object of concentration. This increasing integration is described in the four jhanas of form and the four formless jhanas (dhyanas in Sanskrit). Dhyanic states are characterised by the factors of concentration -

1. Initial thought - clear thought related to the meditation

2. Sustained thought - thinking consecutively in a directed manner

3. Rapture - energy release in the form of pleasant physical thrills coursing through the meditator's body

4. Bliss - an expansive experience of refined pleasure growing out of contentment

5. One-pointedness - the main quality of integration in our meditation, being wholly focussed.

All five of the factors are present in the first dhyana. As we move into ever more refined states they are harmonised and absorbed into one pointedness, first 1 and 2, then 3 and 4. (See Kamalashila's *Meditation* or Paramananda's *Change Your Mind* for details.)

Samapatti - attainments or signs - profound and unusual sights, sounds or bodily sensations that arise as a sign of concentration.

Samadhi proper - being established in enlightened consciousness, described in traditional Buddhism as the three samadhis -

1. Imageless - perfect freedom from all thoughts, in the sense of not being bound by concepts and thus able to see reality directly,

2. Directionless - not being pulled in any direction as one is no longer attracted by or repulsed from anything at all,

3. Voidness - full and complete realisation of the lack of anything substantial.