



Vision and Transformation: The Buddha's Eightfold Path



Week 1 – Introduction and Perfect Vision

Welcome to the 'Buddhism – Going Deeper' 6-week course – we hope you will thoroughly enjoy it! Over that period, we shall be developing the themes that you have already covered if you attended a 'Buddhism Foundation' course, and we shall also have plenty of meditation practice, using the familiar techniques of Mindfulness of Breathing and Metta Bhavana.

The 'Buddhism' half of the course will look at a very famous formulation taught by the Buddha himself – the **Noble Eightfold Path**. You may well remember that the fourth of the **Four Noble Truths** is that of the 'path leading to the ending of suffering'. In the introductory course you may have encountered the 3-fold representation of this path, which consists of the stages of Ethics, Meditation and Wisdom. This time we shall study the more detailed model of eight 'limbs' – or, if you prefer, the eight spokes of the 'Wheel of the Dharma' which is the best-known symbol of the Buddha's teaching.



1. What you can expect

In looking at the Noble Eightfold Path, we shall generally devote a week to each of six of these limbs. Having said that, we'll combine Perfect Action and Perfect Livelihood in week 4, as the former of these has already been covered, through the formulation of the Five Precepts, on the 'Buddhism – Foundation' course. We'll also cover the last two limbs, Perfect Awareness and Perfect Samādhi, in the final week, as there is, in a sense, a limited amount that we can communicate in words and concepts about the latter.

We shall be using a short work by Sangharakshita as our recommended reading – it's 'The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path', published by Windhorse and available in the Buddhist Centre bookshop. If you want to do some background reading you may want to buy a copy – but this is optional! However, we'll be going beyond the material presented in the book, and talking about how we can apply the principles of the Noble Eightfold Path to living in our present culture. In this respect, it's essential that we don't just think of the Noble Eightfold Path as an interesting but academic study! Also,

we'll consider how Buddhists use practices like imagery, mantras and ritual to help them to develop an emotional response to the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha). Finding ways of engaging our emotions is absolutely crucial – as we observed in the Foundation course, we shan't change our lives from the basis of a purely intellectual understanding.

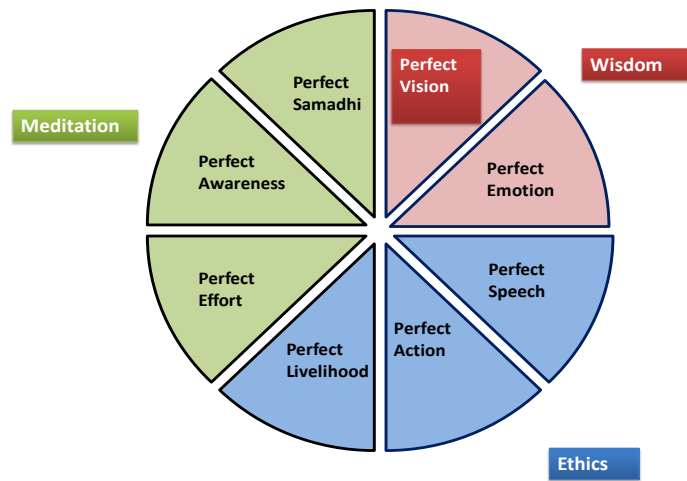
2. The Path of Vision and the Path of Transformation

The eight 'limbs' or 'spokes' of the Noble Eightfold Path are traditionally listed in the following order:

1. Perfect Vision
2. Perfect Emotion
3. Perfect Speech
4. Perfect Action
5. Perfect Livelihood
6. Perfect Effort
7. Perfect Awareness
8. Perfect Samādhi

In reading about the Eightfold Path, you may often encounter different terminologies to the terms given above. In particular, the adjective 'right' is often used instead of our 'perfect'. Traditionally, this reflects the difference between the 'mundane' Eightfold Path (using 'right') and the 'transcendental' Eightfold Path (using 'perfect'). The mundane version is followed by lay Buddhists throughout the Buddhist world; the transcendental one is a reflection of the behaviour of an Awakened being, and it's in this context, with Awakening seen as our ultimate goal, that Sangharakshita prefers to present the teaching. This will therefore be our own emphasis during the course.

There's a fairly straight-forward relationship between the Noble Eightfold Path and the Threefold Path which has already been mentioned. The area of **ethics** encompasses 3 limbs (3 to 5), while **meditation** covers limbs 6 to 8. Limbs 1 and 2 belong to the area of **wisdom**, even though they're the earliest ones – but read on for a bit more explanation of this apparently confusing order of things. The diagram overleaf gives an overview in terms of both the Threefold and Eightfold formulations.



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In Sangharakshita's analysis, there is a crucial division between Perfect Vision, which he also calls the **Path of Vision**, and the remaining 7 limbs, which can be called the **Path of Transformation**. This separation is highly significant. Perfect Vision entails our gaining glimpses of a 'higher reality' – glimpses that may serve as a wake-up call or even a shock, and awaken in us the desire to respond to what we have seen. The Path of Transformation, as its name suggests, is a comprehensive 'toolkit' by which we can maintain and develop this response, bringing ourselves ever closer to the greater reality we have glimpsed. This gives us a further understanding of why Sangharakshita uses the adjective 'perfect', instead of 'right', which doesn't have anything like the same weight in terms of implying a **radical change** in response to a **crucial vision**. In short, the Noble Eightfold Path enables us "...to bring the whole of our life up to the level of its highest moments". For someone whose ultimate goal is Awakening itself, this description of the path represents the only means we have to bring about the change between where we are now and that transcendental goal – this is why it is so important to honour the insights provided by the Path of Vision (however small or brief they may seem) by following the Path of Transformation.

There are very many ways in which Perfect Vision can occur to us. Examples might involve being profoundly moved by a variety of emotional experiences, either pleasant or painful. Such experiences might be triggered by our interactions with friends or relations, by beautiful natural surroundings, by reaching our emotional highs or lows, through experiencing works of art, through bereavement or other testing events, and many other sets of conditions. We shall discuss some of our own examples in the class. What they have in common, though, is that they give us a profound realisation that we are able to experience the world much more intensely than normal, as though a veil has been lifted, or sunshine has suddenly burst through layers of cloud. We sense a dimension of our lives, perhaps even of the world we inhabit, that is much more vivid, profound, and awe-inspiring than we normally recognise. These realisations, even though they may be brief and hard to describe, have an entirely different quality from our mundane, safe, predictable experience on which we are normally focused. At times like these we may even feel a strong inclination to turn our lives in the direction of our

Perfect Vision – but then a big problem arises. We have to admit that we are so bogged down in the mundane that it is easy to talk about change, but far from clear how we can actually commit to it.

Buddhism has no shortage of **conceptual** models to help us to tackle this problem – these include the teachings of the Four Noble Truths, the three marks of conditioned existence (*lakṣaṇas*), karma & rebirth and ‘emptiness’ (*śūnyatā*). Chapter 1 of ‘The Buddha’s Noble Eightfold Path’ gives a very brief overview of some of these ‘doctrinal’ concepts from the Buddhist tradition. Just as important, though, are those things that appeal to our **emotions** rather than to our intellects. For example, we may recognise intellectually that our life is impermanent and unsatisfactory, and that we have no fixed identity, but we can only really respond to these truths through making deep emotional connections with them. We are told that, in the time of the Buddha, people who heard his teaching directly were often so deeply moved that they were left in a state of disorientation. Sometimes they would respond to this shattering experience by uttering the formula of ‘Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels’ – in other words, making a profound commitment to **transformation** in response to the **vision** the Buddha had shown them. An example from the Buddhist scriptures goes like this:

"Wonderful, dear sir! Wonderful! It is as though you have set upright what was overturned, or uncovered what was concealed, or shown the path to one gone astray, or brought an oil-lamp into the darkness such that those with eyes could see. So too has the Buddha made clear the Dharma by various ways. I go for refuge to the Buddha and to the Dharma and to the monastic community. May the exalted one accept me as a lay-follower gone for refuge from henceforth for as long as I live."

Our response to our moments of enhanced vision may not necessarily be as radical as this one but, all the same, we might feel a strong urge to make fundamental changes in our lives. In the following weeks we shall look at how the ‘toolkit’ for transformation can help us to make our own response, investigating in their turns Perfect Emotion, Speech, Action, Livelihood and Effort.