

Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation and Overview of the Teachings of the Buddha

Session Six: The Noble Eightfold Path - The Middle Way Dependent Origination Morality and The Precepts The Paramitas

1. The Noble Eightfold Path

The Fourth Noble Truth is that there is a path that leads to the end of suffering. That path is called The Noble Eightfold Path. It is also known as the Middle Way. A wonderful discourse on this path is in Bhante Gunaratana's book, "Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness". Since craving is the cause of suffering, The Noble Eightfold Path is a gradual training to achieve the elimination of craving. Remember that we have duties associated with each of the Four Noble Truths and the duty towards the Fourth Truth, the Noble Eightfold Path, is to develop it. The eight steps in the path are divided into 3 groups that build upon each other: wisdom, morality and concentration.

Wisdom: Step One - Skillful View

Step Two - Skillful Intention

Morality: Step Three - Skillful Speech

Step Four - Skillful Action

Step Five - Skillful Livelihood

Concentration: Step Six - Skillful Effort

Step Seven - Skillful Mindfulness

Step Eight - Skillful Concentration

These 8 steps are not like steps on a ladder. They are more like the strands of a cable that requires the contributions of all for maximal strength. However, at the beginning some degree of sequence is inevitable. Initially one needs some wisdom to determine what is moral. And morality is needed before concentration can be developed. But with concentration comes a better ability to see reality (wisdom) and with wisdom comes a clearer understanding of morality etc. So each step supports each other step and leads one to higher spiritual development.

Skillful View means understanding the Four Noble Truths (see sessions one and three) and the law of cause and effect (dependent origination). Although Buddhism

encourages us to use Skillful Understanding, also known as Skillful View, as a guide for our thinking and behaviour, it doesn't endorse dogmatic adherence to views, even if they are right, because that leads to acts of fanaticism and militant piety, indoctrination, persecution, war, etc. Thich Nhat Hanh is so concerned about this issue that the first three precepts in his Order of Interbeing address this. The 3 precepts are:

1. Do not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist systems of thought are guiding means; they are not absolute truth.
2. Do not think the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolute truth. Avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. Learn and practice nonattachment from views in order to be open to receive others' viewpoints. Truth is found in life and not merely in conceptual knowledge. Be ready to learn throughout your entire life and to observe reality in yourself and in the world at all times.
3. Do not force others, including children, by any means whatsoever, to adopt your views, whether by authority, threat, money, propaganda, or even education. However, through compassionate dialogue, help others renounce fanaticism and narrowness.

Not forcing our views on others is considered being morally right. The second way to be right is factually. Buddhism considers being right by not forcing your views on another as more skillful than being right factually. There are 4 ways to be right and wrong:

1. I say $1 + 1 = 2$, you say it is 3 and I try to push you to believe it is 2. I am right and wrong ie. factually right but morally wrong.
2. I say $1 + 1 = 2$, you say it is 3 but I don't push you to believe me. I am right and right.
3. I say $1 + 1 = 3$, you say it is 2 and I try to push you to believe it is 3. I am wrong and wrong.
4. I say $1 + 1 = 3$, you say it is 2 and I don't push you to believe me. I am wrong and right.

So example 4 is considered more skillful than examples 1 and 3.

Skillful Intention. Skillful intentions lead to positive kamma and unskillful intentions lead to negative kamma. There are three types of skillful thinking / intentions which are the foundation for benevolent moral actions:

1. Generosity
2. Boundless love
3. Compassion - a quivering of the heart in response to the suffering of others and the effort to relieve others of their suffering.

Skillful Speech, Action and Livelihood represent the vocal and physical manifestations of our intentions which in turn are conditioned by how we understand or

view what is arising.

Skillful Speech has four aspects:

1. Abstain from falsehoods - be truthful.
2. Abstain from slander. Use speech that heals divisions and promotes harmony and friendship.
3. Abstain from harsh speech. Use speech that is blameless, pleasant to the ear, lovely, reaching to the heart.
4. Abstain from frivolous or vain talk. Use meaningful, purposeful, useful and timely speech. Abstain from uttering what is true if it leads to harmful consequences.

Skillful Action has three aspects:

1. Abstain from injury to life and all forms of violence. Cultivate love and compassion to all creatures.
2. Abstain from taking what is not given. Cultivate honesty and purity of heart.
3. Abstain from wrongful gratification of sensual desires through sexual misconduct.

Skillful Livelihood. At the time of the Buddha, this guideline was to avoid trading in weapons, human beings, living beings (butchery), poison and intoxicating drinks. One was to avoid deceit, treachery, fortune-telling, trickery or usury (lending money at an excessively high rate of interest). In summary, avoid any occupation that involves harmful consequences to others.

Skillful Effort is the effort to eliminate unwholesome dispositions and to cultivate wholesome dispositions. See session four for a detailed discussion.

Skillful Mindfulness is like an inward mentor watching over and guiding all mental activity. To do this the mind must remain in the present, free from all judgments. The aim of Skillful Mindfulness is to give proper moral direction to all volitional (willed or intended) acts.

Skillful Concentration is unifying the mind so it is calm and clear. This is a prerequisite for wisdom as only a properly concentrated mind can see things as they truly are.

The Noble Eightfold Path can be followed in varying degrees of intensity. If one cannot follow it fully, one can follow it as far as possible. This concept is beautifully portrayed in Thich Nhat Hanh's book, "For a Future To Be Possible".

Addendum:

The reason it is so hard to understand the Four Noble Truths is we can't see through our concept of a self. The Buddha realized that there is no permanent essence to our self. We are a verb, not a noun. We are an impermanent process conditioned by past

experiences. We seek our happiness from the sensory world....from beautiful sights and sounds, fragrant smells, delightful flavours, soothing or stimulating touch, interesting thoughts/ideas. Yet all of these are impermanent. We are constantly putting out energy to seek new, pleasurable sensory experiences to maintain our happiness. As we age, it gets more and more difficult to expend this energy to find sensory happiness.

The Buddha is offering an alternative....letting go. And surprisingly, this letting go results in a blissful happiness that is beyond the most pleasurable happiness the sensory world can offer. But how do we know this? We can only take it on faith from the descriptions of the Buddha and the stories of his students. So, in the meantime, we live our lives in the sensory world, minimizing our suffering by minimizing wanting what reality doesn't offer, by being kind and generous and compassionate to ourselves and others and, on faith, spending time in meditation. There we receive tastes of what the Buddha taught....the taste of peace and happiness from letting go of wanting. This spurs us on to further practice. And one day, we experience the truth of the Four Noble Truths for ourselves. Then we are truly on the path to the end of suffering. Until then, as Ajahn Sona said, "Don't worry about it." Live your life in a way that feels right to you. Don't force yourself to give up sensory experiences because that's what is expected of a Buddhist. The wish to pursue sensory experiences will naturally fall away as you experience tastes of the Four Noble Truths. You'll have a "been there, done that" feeling towards sensory experiences. Or, the interest is just gone as in a child who has grown and is no longer interested in their favourite toys of a few years ago. As your contentment and pleasure from your meditation practice grows and your urge to engage in seeking pleasures from the sensory world diminish, you have just gained yourself a cheap retirement, as Ajahn Sona says!

With complete letting go, described as Awakening/ Enlightenment/Nibbhana (Nirvana) there is no more rebirth. Rebirth requires wanting/desire. Desire causes rebirth. So, if you'd like to be reborn again....no problem! Your wish for rebirth will ensure that it happens. On the other hand, especially if you have insight into past lives..... innumerable past lives, you may have the feeling of "been there, done that" and have no desire for rebirth. If this is accompanied by complete letting go then you will not experience a rebirth. However, if you have a wish to not be reborn, that is a desire, and desire causes rebirth. So, you will be reborn!

This point makes it clear that this Noble Eightfold path is not about hating this life in the sensory world. It is about experiencing happiness. But this happiness has a different cause. It is not from sensory experiences. It's from letting go. As the Dalai Lama said, this Noble Eightfold path is the "Art of Happiness". Happiness is our goal. As laypeople, as we experience the peace and happiness from letting go, we gradually and naturally change our source of happiness from the sensory world to letting go. And with the happiness from letting go comes the letting go of a sense of self, so there is no self to be concerned about rebirth. There is just happiness, contentment.

2. Dependent Origination

Dependent Origination means that what happens / arises (originates) in this

moment depends on what has happened previously. We are conditioned by the past. If we have no awareness of these conditioning factors we can go through life being ruled by unconscious factors. This puts us in danger of unconsciously creating suffering for ourselves. If we “wake up”, that is become aware of these conditioning factors we can choose to make the effort to steer our life on a course that leads towards happiness and away from suffering. The word buddha means awake. The Buddha “woke up” and “saw” what caused suffering and pointed the way out of suffering to us. The way out of suffering that he had discovered is The Noble Eightfold Path. Since ignorance is the starting point of dependent origination and suffering is the final point, ignorance is the cause of all the subsequent steps between it and suffering. So if ignorance is eliminated, all the steps leading to suffering are eliminated. Ignorance means ignorance of the 3 characteristics of all conditioned things (see session 3).

Because of this discovery, that our efforts can have an effect on our experience, Buddhism differs from those who believe in determinism. There are two types of determinism, theistic and kammic (karmic). Theistic determinism maintains that everything is due to a Creator God and kammic (karmic) determinism maintains that everything is due to past kamma (that there is no opportunity to change your kamma). Buddhism also rejects the view of strict indeterminism (no cause and effect, just random happenings).

The Buddhist understanding of reality also differs from the ideas of eternalism and annihilation. Eternalists believe in a temporary physical body but a permanent soul. This belief has led some people to the practice of self-mortification because of the additional belief that freedom of the soul is inhibited by its bondage to the flesh. Annihilists identify the self with the body so believe the self is annihilated with death of the body. Believing there is no possibility for moral retribution in an afterlife or a rebirth, gives one less support for leading a moral life. Thus there is a greater likelihood to base one’s life on sensual indulgence rather than a moral code.

Buddhism differs from the above two beliefs by its doctrine of dependent origination which states that the arising of everything depends on past conditions with no unchanging self behind all the changes (no soul). Existence is in a state of constant change. There is no independent self impervious to change (soul), nor is the observable self completely annihilated at death (belief in rebirth - that the moment of one’s death conditions the beginning of the next life).

The Buddhist practice of the moral life is based on rejection of self-mortification and sensual indulgence. Avoiding these two extremes, it steers a middle course called the Middle Path or Middle Way, alternate names for both The Noble Eightfold Path and the doctrine of Dependent Origination. The Middle Way advocates making the effort to lead a moral life by recognizing the positive consequences of moral actions.

There is a detailed explanation of Dependent Origination in chapter 8 of Mechele Calvert’s book, “Explorations in Awareness”. And a clarifying example is found in “The Beginner’s Guide to Insight Meditation” by Arinna Weisman and Jean Smith on pages 88 - 96.

3. Morality

There are 2 levels of morality:

1. Morally good actions motivated by the desire for one's own personal benefit. Even though these actions are motivated by self interest, they also contribute to the well being of others.
2. Morally good actions based on generosity, boundless love and wisdom. These are termed "skillful" actions because they create good mental health and lead one towards enlightenment.

Moral evil exists at three levels:

1. "Asleep". Here evil exists as a latent tendency, a potential. We are not aware of it.
2. "Arising". This is when we get "triggered" and experience turbulence of our emotions.
3. "Going beyond". This is when we react to our turbulent emotions with unskillful vocal or physical actions.

Level three, "going beyond" is the most dangerous level but the easiest to bring under control. The Buddhist scheme of moral cultivation begins at this third level. This is achieved by the steps of Skillful Speech, Skillful Action and Skillful Livelihood of The Noble Eightfold Path. **The five precepts** are guidelines to help you achieve control of level three. The precepts are:

1. Abstention from depriving a living being of its life
2. Not taking what is not given
3. Abstention from sexual misconduct
4. Abstention from false speech
5. Abstention from taking intoxicating beverages which impair our diligence and vigilance.

The precepts don't represent all moral violations but they constitute 5 of the most dangerous ones. An updated wording of these precepts is appended to the end of these notes. This wording was taken from Thich Nhat Hanh's book, "For a Future To Be Possible".

Here are some moral guidelines to help us with the precepts:

1. Self-comparison. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.
2. Examine the consequences of what you intend to do from 3 different points of view:
 - a) Will it result in self blame?
 - b) Will it be censored by the wise people in society?
 - c) Is the act in accord with the Moral Norm?

The concomitants of a higher moral sense are moral shame and dread. Where these two are lacking there is no civilization.

Control of level two, "arising" of turbulent emotions is achieved with calmness

(one pointedness of mind) which is achieved by the 3 steps of Skillful Effort, Skillful Mindfulness and Skillful Concentration of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Elimination of the first level, “asleep” (latent evil) requires the uprooting of the causes of moral evil (which are greed, hatred and delusion) with wisdom, achieved by the 2 steps of Skillful Understanding and Thinking of the Noble Eightfold Path.

4. The Paramitas

The Paramitas are the 10 perfections or virtues of the heart. These virtues are initiated by compassion and guided by wisdom. They are the characteristics of enlightened beings. By cultivating the paramitas we move ourselves along the spiritual path towards enlightenment. Many of the paramitas are components of the Noble Eightfold Path. They are:

1. Generosity - there are four types of generosity: the giving of material things, the giving of Dhamma (the Buddha’s teachings), the giving of kind and gentle words and creating a life in harmony with the Dhamma.
2. Morality - a gift of safety to others and the bliss of blamelessness for self.
3. Renunciation - of clinging to sense pleasures.
4. Wisdom - which leads to a decrease in suffering.
5. Energy - comes from effort and the effort is towards eliminating the three roots of moral evil, greed, hatred and delusion (about reality).
6. Patience - this gives us the space to respond rather than react to what arises in life.
7. Truthfulness - levels the playing field. Everyone has the benefit of equal information. This leads to intimacy.
8. Determination - steadfastness in learning the Dhamma and persevering in our spiritual practice.
9. Boundless love - the antidote to all forms of anger.
10. Equanimity - even-mindedness in the face of every sort of experience. It is not cold indifference. It is mental imperturbability so one can be fully involved in any situation life brings without being overcome by emotional mental states.

These qualities are gifts that people give each other. They are mutual gifts; the giver and receiver both benefit.

Sylvia Boorstein has written a book on the paramitas titled, “Pay Attention, For Goodness’ Sake”.

**The Five Precepts
also known as
The Five Mindfulness Trainings**

(This wording was developed by Thich Nhat Hanh and his students)

1. Reverence for Life

Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I vow to cultivate compassion and learn ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking and in my way of life.

2. Generosity

Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing and oppression, I vow to cultivate loving kindness and learn ways to work for the well-being of people, animals, plants and minerals. I vow to practice generosity by sharing my time, energy and material resources with those who are in real need. I am determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others. I will respect the property of others, but I will prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on Earth.

3. Sexual Responsibility

Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct, I vow to cultivate responsibility and learn ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families and society. I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without love and a long-term commitment. To preserve the happiness of myself and others, I am determined to respect my commitments and the commitments of others. I will do everything in my power to protect children from sexual abuse and to prevent couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct.

4. Deep Listening and Loving Speech

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I vow to cultivate loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve others of their suffering. Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I vow to learn to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy and hope. I am determined not to spread news that I do not know to be certain and not to criticize or condemn things of which I am not sure. I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord, or that can cause the family or the community to break. I will make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.

5. Diet for a Mindful Society

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I vow to cultivate good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family and my society by practicing

mindful eating, drinking and consuming. I vow to ingest only items that preserve peace, well-being and joy in my body, in my consciousness and in the collective body and consciousness of my family and society. I am determined not to use alcohol or any other intoxicant or to ingest foods or others items that contain toxins, such as certain TV programs, magazines, books, films and conversations. I am aware that to damage my body or my consciousness with these poisons is to betray my ancestors, my parents, my society and future generations. I will work to transform violence, fear, anger and confusion in myself and in society by practicing a diet for myself and for society. I understand that a proper diet is crucial for self-transformation and for the transformation of society.