

The Noble Eightfold Path, Talk 2

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This is the second talk on the Noble Eightfold Path. Today I'm going to talk about Right Understanding and Right Thought, the first two steps or factors of the Path, which make up what is called the Wisdom group. The eight Path factors are: Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Meditation. These eight factors of the Path have also been divided into three groups:

1. The moral discipline group, made up of Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood.
2. The concentration group, made up of Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Meditation.
3. The Wisdom group, made up of Right Understanding and Right Thought.

This Path is not followed in a sequence, in other words, you don't master step 1 and then go on to step 2. When you take on this training fully, you end up following them all simultaneously. However, you do need to start with the Wisdom group.

The Wisdom group can be seen to come at the beginning and at the end of the Path. Right Understanding begins with a clear understanding on some level of the meaning of the Four Noble Truths and their significance in our lives. It can be difficult to take these Truths in completely when we first hear about them. We may start off in our search for the Truth with some cynicism, some negativity, some doubts. We can feel inadequate, unworthy or not believe that we have a Buddha Nature. As I mentioned in my first talk, it can be hard to believe that it is our greed, anger and delusion and how we respond to them that creates our suffering. We may just want to go straight to the Third Noble Truth, the Cessation of Suffering, and bypass looking at the self and the need to change. I know that I did. My suffering and confusion were so great when I first came to Shasta Abbey that I just wanted them to end and to find some peace. I wasn't that interested in looking at myself or making the necessary changes. However, over time I learned that this approach didn't work. Since we need to let go of all desires, we need to let go of the desire for peace or any experiences. Or we can be ready from the start to do whatever it takes to know the Truth. Fortunately we can start with what we are ready for and that might simply be the meditation practice or mindfulness in our daily lives. Or there may be other aspects of the Path that speak to us. But gradually we see that meditation alone or any of the other aspects of the Path alone isn't enough. All the aspects of the Path work together and need to be followed if we would know the cessation of suffering. We start with some understanding of the Four Noble Truths and as we continue in this practice our knowing becomes deeper as we know them through our experience, through the stillness of our meditation. We start to see how our thoughts, speech and actions actually do create our suffering. Understanding moves from a belief and trust to an intuitive knowing and seeing and a deepening of our faith. We start to see how our views, our conditioning, our thoughts, opinions, emotions, doubts, cynicism, etc. are just that, are not substantial, just arise and pass and hold no Truth in them. They are not how things truly are and are not who we truly are. There is something within ourselves and all beings that is our True Nature, our Buddha Nature, that which we long for. And as we start to know This and take refuge in It, we are more willing to let go of our clinging, our attachments, the desires and aversions of the self because we begin to know on a deeper level that holding on to

the self keeps us from knowing and being one with the Unborn and also, in the end, it feels much better to let go and know the emptiness of the self and the peace that comes with that. The Fifth Law of the Universe says that all beings have the intuitive knowledge of the Buddha Nature. It is always there helping us, calling to us without judgement. That is why we do this practice, why the Truth can resonate with us, why the Path can call to us.

Following this Path leads to the Knowing without doubt and the complete penetration of the Four Noble Truths. When the Buddha gave his first sermon on the Four Noble Truths to the 5 ascetics who had helped him during his period of self-mortification, one of them, Kondanna, awakened to the complete understanding of these Truths and could see things as they truly are. He must have been completely open and ready to hear and know these Truths. However for most of us it is a very gradual process, and we can have the same understanding that the Buddha had. We gradually understand, as it says in the *Scripture of Great Wisdom*, that all things, in their self nature, are void, unstained and pure (or empty). Each of us is not a permanent, separate, isolated, self. Rev. Master Daishin Morgan says the following in his book, *Buddha Recognizes Buddha*: “By entering into the depths of this emptiness, we awaken to the completeness of reality and its utter sufficiency. This gives rise to a deep gratitude that inspires a wish to help all beings. The interwoven nature of life reveals compassion and wisdom as aspects of reality itself. By sitting within conditions as they are, there can be a knowledge of what is good to do and the motivation to do it. More than that, there is an end to our isolation as separate beings, even as we live out our lives.” And Rev. Master Daizui says in his book, *Buddhism From Within*: “to the extent that we loosen up our grip on a self, we see that you and I are actually part of something larger: we’re both part of the same wonderful flow of space/time/being that everything is. This sense of oneness acts to deepen an individual’s empathy for other people and for all creatures. A person understands and experiences in a new way just how much it hurts inside when he or she harms someone else. Letting go of the notion of a separate self did not create this interconnectedness: it was always there. But it does enable one to be more acutely aware of it. And by becoming aware of just how interconnected we really are, a whole new level of insight opens up as to the causes of our core unhappiness. In addition to being aware of the unhappiness that arises from holding onto desires, a person has a new appreciation of just how much unhappiness comes from hurting other beings.... There is yet another consequence to allowing the notion of a self to drop away: joy. It is a joy that is somehow related to a sense of having come home, of being where one has always belonged, of waking up from the bad dream of ultimate aloneness.”

The Right Understanding that we gradually come to know is not something we can possess or hold onto. We do not become wise or gain anything. If we continue to train and let go of the self, we can touch on It, rely on It and be helped by It. When we let go of the self, compassion and wisdom arise of themselves. Even though there isn’t anything we can hold onto, there is a growing of faith and trust in the teaching itself and our ability to follow it. There is also a knowing of this refuge within on an intuitive level even during difficult or dark times. There is a knowing that we have to keep up our training even when our karma is arising strongly. I know this for myself now; I didn’t always know this and would act from my karma. Rev. Master Jiyu has said that we can put our hand in the river and know the flow of Enlightenment, but we can’t hold onto the water or grasp it in our hands.

Right Thought is the second aspect of the Path. We can think of it in terms of thoughts that lead us in the direction of Enlightenment, towards deepening our understanding of how things truly are. When we let our thoughts arise, abide and pass away of themselves in meditation, these kinds of thoughts (lovingkindness,

generosity, compassion, tenderness, benevolence, sympathy, joy) can arise of themselves. And they arise from a deeper place than our ordinary thoughts. They can be encouraged in many ways, but not by trying to manipulate ourselves into thinking them. It is very important to let our thoughts, whatever they might be, arise and pass of themselves and not judge some as good thoughts and some as bad thoughts. Several years ago I was having difficulty with one of the monks and found myself criticizing him a lot. When I went to our Hermitage for a month, I decided that I would be very mindful of my critical mind and when a critical thought would arise, I would watch it until it passed away without getting involved with it, which is how I have been working on my critical mind. I was able to do this and when I returned to the Abbey, I was pleased to see that I no longer felt critical of him and what arose in its place were thoughts of loving kindness and generosity. If I had gone back to getting involved in these critical thoughts, I'm sure that the thoughts of loving kindness towards him would have vanished. To be honest, this did happen to some degree. In simply letting the critical thoughts come and go, I became more in harmony with my Buddha Nature, and loving kindness and generosity could then arise of themselves. When we are having a lot of difficulty with someone and simply letting our thoughts arise, abide and pass away doesn't seem to be enough, we can do something more active by offering merit or thoughts of lovingkindness towards that person. This can help us to soften and break through the karma that is preventing us from being in harmony with who we truly are. I still struggle with the critical mind and am always trying to work with it. I find Right Thought to be one of the most difficult aspects of the Eightfold Path.

The Buddha taught this aspect of the Path as Right Intention: 1. the intention to renunciation, which doesn't mean you have to renounce the world and become a monk. It means the renunciation of, the letting go of, desire and craving; 2. the intention of good will; and 3. the intention of harmlessness. These intentions are in harmony with our True Nature and help us to set our feet on the Path. Although in our tradition of Buddhism we don't describe Right Thought in this way, it is what we practice in the form of meditation, mindfulness, the 16 Precepts and actually in all aspects of the Path. The kesa verse that we recite each day after morning meditation is our vow or intention for the day. "How great and wondrous are the clothes of enlightenment, formless and embracing every treasure. I wish to unfold the Buddha's teaching that I may help all living things." These intentions or vows can help to counteract the hold that our karma has on us, by showing us how to act in harmony with our True Nature instead of how we might be feeling at the moment.

One of the big problems with our thoughts is that we tend to believe what they are saying and this can keep us mired in our suffering and lead to creating more karma. Besides believing them, we also hold onto them and to the suffering they create. Our thinking deeply affects us; it affects our views, our understanding, what we do, how we live our lives and our level of suffering. As we go on in our training, even though our thoughts and feelings may still be very convincing, we have opened the door on doubting their reality or efficacy and we are more able to just be with them, letting them arise and pass away naturally. Sometimes we have contradictory or ridiculous thoughts arise and we just have to laugh at ourselves and not take the thoughts seriously.

In *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness*, Bhante Gunaratana, says: "It's no mystery that thinking can make us happy or miserable. Let's say you're sitting under a tree one fine spring day. Nothing particular is happening to you, except perhaps the breeze is ruffling your hair, yet in your mind you're far away. Maybe you're remembering another spring day several years back when you were feeling terrible. You had just lost your job, or failed an exam, or your cat had wandered off. That memory turns into a worry. 'What if I lose my job again? Why did I ever say such-and-such to so-and-so? No doubt this or that will happen, and I'll be out on my ear.

Now, I'm really in for it! How will I pay my bills?' One worry brings up another, which brings up yet another. Soon you feel your life is in shambles, but all this while you've been sitting under the tree!

"Fantasies, fears, and other kinds of obsessional thinking are a big problem for us. We all tend to lock into unhealthy thought patterns—grooves we have worn into our consciousness that keep us circling in familiar tracks leading to unhappiness." I read this a few days ago and the next morning I became aware of doing just this. There was something I really wanted to do. I was afraid that someone would put an obstacle in my way of getting what I wanted and then I was angry with that person and worried I wouldn't get what I wanted. I was just watching all this and could see how this train of thought could have affected how I felt for a while and how I acted. I had to be mindful enough to see what was going on, feel the discomfort of craving, anger and worry, not hold onto them and not try to change anything. And this kind of thinking happens all the time. The practice of mindfulness, meditation, remembering our intentions, the keeping of the Precepts and Right Understanding can all help with this kind of thinking. And also perhaps the memory that getting what we want does not in and of itself make us happy. Letting go and acceptance do lead to happiness. In the end the thing I feared didn't happen and I didn't get what I wanted either for another reason.

Many of our thoughts do not cause suffering in such a direct way but they also aren't helpful and keep us distracted from what is in front of us, perhaps what we need to look at. When we get lost in our thoughts, we lose touch with our Buddha Nature and that in itself can affect what we say and do. All aspects of the Path weave in and out of each other. Right Understanding as it deepens leads to Right Thought and Right Thought or lack thereof affects our Understanding. The Buddha told his disciples: "Whatever a bhikkhu frequently thinks about or ponders, that will become the inclination of his mind." This is something to think about especially if you tend to indulge in thoughts of greed, anger and delusion.

Rev. Master Daizui in *Buddhism From Within* mentions that reading and studying the Dharma can help with Right Thought. I find this to be true because when we read, listen to and study the Dharma it encourages our faith in the Dharma and Right Understanding and can open us to the Truth. Faith, Understanding and an open heart encourage us to do what needs to be done to cultivate Right Thought, to get ourselves out of the way, so it can arise naturally. In preparing this talk, I have been reading, studying and thinking about the Dharma. I have become more aware of my thoughts, my habits, my karma in doing so and I have been working harder on my meditation, mindfulness and keeping of the Precepts as a result of this.

I'd like to conclude with reading one of our invocations:

Right Thought will lead me on
To wisdom's holy height
And show to me the surest way
To pass through sorrow's night.

Right Thought will light me through
The shadows of this life;
'Twill ease my heart and peace assure
And free my mind from strife.

Right Thought will be my guide
Across life's troubled sea;
My pilot, compass, star and chart,
Right Thought shall ever be.

Right Thought will keep me on
The way to perfect peace,
The ferry to the other shore
Where all illusions cease.