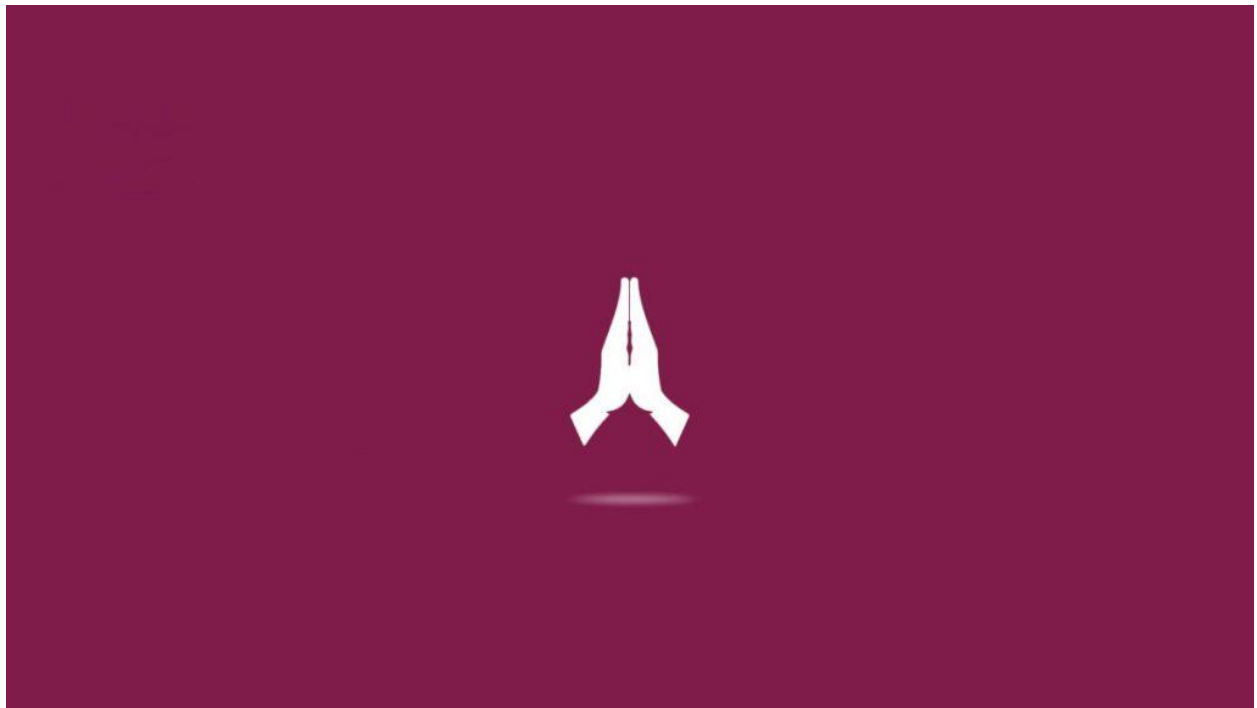


The Noble Eightfold Path

The Buddha's practical instructions to reach the end of suffering

By Walpola Sri Rahula

Walpola Sri Rahula (1907–1997), a Sri Lankan monk, was the author of *What the Buddha Taught* and a professor at Northwestern University.



Within the fourth noble truth is found the guide to the end of suffering: the noble eightfold path. The eight parts of the path to liberation are grouped into three essential elements of Buddhist practice—moral conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom. The Buddha taught the eightfold path in virtually all his discourses, and his directions are as clear and practical to his followers today as they were when he first gave them.

The Noble Eightfold Path:

1. Right understanding (*Samma ditthi*)
2. Right thought (*Samma sankappa*)
3. Right speech (*Samma vaca*)
4. Right action (*Samma kammanta*)
5. Right livelihood (*Samma ajiva*)
6. Right effort (*Samma vayama*)
7. Right mindfulness (*Samma sati*)
8. Right concentration (*Samma samadhi*)

Practically the whole teaching of the Buddha, to which he devoted himself during 45 years, deals in some way or other with this path. He explained it in different ways and in different words to different people, according to the stage of their development and their capacity to understand and follow him. But the essence of those many thousand discourses scattered in the Buddhist scriptures is found in the noble eightfold path.

It should not be thought that the eight categories or divisions of the path should be followed and practiced one after the other in the numerical order as given in the usual list above. But they are to be developed more or less simultaneously, as far as possible according to the capacity of each individual. They are all linked together and each helps the cultivation of the others.

These eight factors aim at promoting and perfecting the three essentials of Buddhist training and discipline: namely: (a) ethical conduct (*sila*), (b) mental discipline (*samadhi*) and (c) wisdom (*panna*). It will therefore be more helpful for a coherent and better understanding of the eight divisions of the path if we group them and explain them according to these three heads.

Ethical Conduct

Ethical conduct (*sila*) is built on the vast conception of universal love and compassion for all living beings, on which the Buddha's teaching is based. It is regrettable that many scholars forget this great ideal of the

Buddha's teaching, and indulge in only dry philosophical and metaphysical divagations when they talk and write about Buddhism. The Buddha gave his teaching "for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world."

Related: The Buddha's guidelines for simplifying life

According to Buddhism, for a man to be perfect there are two qualities that he should develop equally: compassion (*karuna*) on one side, and wisdom (*panna*) on the other. Here compassion represents love, charity, kindness, tolerance, and such noble qualities on the emotional side, or qualities of the heart, while wisdom would stand for the intellectual side or the qualities of the mind. If one develops only the emotional, neglecting the intellectual, one may become a good-hearted fool; while to develop only the intellectual side [and] neglecting the emotional may turn one into a hard-hearted intellect without feeling for others. Therefore, to be perfect one has to develop both equally. That is the aim of the Buddhist way of life: in it wisdom and compassion are inseparably linked together, as we shall see later.

Now, in ethical conduct (*sila*), based on love and compassion, are included three factors of the noble eightfold path: namely, right speech, right action, and right livelihood.

Right Speech

Right speech means abstention (1) from telling lies, (2) from backbiting and slander and talk that may bring about hatred, enmity, disunity, and disharmony among individuals or groups of people, (3) from harsh, rude, impolite, malicious, and abusive language, and (4) from idle, useless, and foolish babble and gossip. When one abstains from these forms of wrong and harmful speech one naturally has to speak the truth, has to use words that are friendly and benevolent, pleasant and gentle, meaningful, and useful. One should not speak carelessly: speech should be at the right time and place. If one cannot say something useful, one should keep "noble silence."

Right Action

Right action aims at promoting moral, honorable, and peaceful conduct. It admonishes us that we should abstain from destroying life, from

stealing, from dishonest dealings, from illegitimate sexual intercourse, and that we should also help others to lead a peaceful and honorable life in the right way.

Right Livelihood

Right livelihood means that one should abstain from making one's living through a profession that brings harm to others, such as trading in arms and lethal weapons, intoxicating drinks or poisons, killing animals, cheating, etc., and should live by a profession which is honorable, blameless, and innocent of harm to others. One can clearly see here that Buddhism is strongly opposed to any kind of war, when it lays down that trade in arms and lethal weapons is an evil and unjust means of livelihood.

These three factors (right speech, right action, and right livelihood) of the eightfold path constitute ethical conduct. It should be realized that the Buddhist ethical and moral conduct aims at promoting a happy and harmonious life both for the individual and for society. This moral conduct is considered as the indispensable foundation for all higher spiritual attainments. No spiritual development is possible without this moral basis.

Mental Discipline

Next comes mental discipline, in which are included three other factors of the eightfold path: namely, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. (Nos. 6, 7 and 8 in the list).

Right Effort

Right effort is the energetic will (1) to prevent evil and unwholesome states of mind from arising, and (2) to get rid of such evil and unwholesome states that have already arisen within a man, and also (3) to produce, to cause to arise, good, and wholesome states of mind not yet arisen, and (4) to develop and bring to perfection the good and wholesome states of mind already present in a man.

Right Mindfulness

Right mindfulness is to be diligently aware, mindful, and attentive with regard to (1) the activities of the body (*kaya*), (2) sensations or feelings

(*vedana*), (3) the activities of the mind (*citta*) and (4) ideas, thoughts, conceptions, and things (*dhamma*).

The practice of concentration on breathing (*anapanasati*) is one of the well-known exercises, connected with the body, for mental development. There are several other ways of developing attentiveness in relation to the body as modes of meditation.

With regard to sensations and feelings, one should be clearly aware of all forms of feelings and sensations, pleasant, unpleasant and neutral, of how they appear and disappear within oneself. Concerning the activities of mind, one should be aware whether one's mind is lustful or not, given to hatred or not, deluded or not, distracted or concentrated, etc. In this way one should be aware of all movements of mind, how they arise and disappear.

As regards ideas, thoughts, conceptions and things, one should know their nature, how they appear and disappear, how they are developed, how they are suppressed, destroyed, and so on.

These four forms of mental culture or meditation are treated in detail in the *Satipatthana Sutta* (Setting-up of Mindfulness).

Right Concentration

The third and last factor of mental discipline is right concentration, leading to the four stages of *Dhyana*, generally called trance or *recueillement*. In the first stage of *Dhyana*, passionate desires and certain unwholesome thoughts like sensuous lust, ill-will, languor, worry, restlessness, and skeptical doubt are discarded, and feelings of joy and happiness are maintained, along with certain mental activities. Then, in the second stage, all intellectual activities are suppressed, tranquillity, and "one-pointedness" of mind developed, and the feelings of joy and happiness are still retained. In the third stage, the feeling of joy, which is an active sensation, also disappears, while the disposition of happiness still remains in addition to mindful equanimity. Finally, in the fourth stage of *Dhyana*, all sensations, even of happiness and unhappiness, of joy and sorrow, disappear, only pure equanimity and awareness remaining.

Thus the mind is trained and disciplined and developed through right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

Wisdom

The remaining two factors, namely right thought and right understanding, constitute wisdom in the noble eightfold path.

Right Thought

Right thought denotes the thoughts of selfless renunciation or detachment, thoughts of love and thoughts of non-violence, which are extended to all beings. It is very interesting and important to note here that thoughts of selfless detachment, love and non-violence are grouped on the side of wisdom. This clearly shows that true wisdom is endowed with these noble qualities, and that all thoughts of selfish desire, ill-will, hatred, and violence are the result of a lack of wisdom in all spheres of life whether individual, social, or political.

Right Understanding

Right understanding is the understanding of things as they are, and it is the four noble truths that explain things as they really are. Right understanding therefore is ultimately reduced to the understanding of the four noble truths. This understanding is the highest wisdom which sees the Ultimate Reality. According to Buddhism there are two sorts of understanding. What we generally call “understanding” is knowledge, an accumulated memory, an intellectual grasping of a subject according to certain given data. This is called “knowing accordingly” (*anubodha*). It is not very deep. Real deep understanding or “penetration” (*pativedha*) is seeing a thing in its true nature, without name and label. This penetration is possible only when the mind is free from all impurities and is fully developed through meditation.

Related: What are The Four Noble Truths?

From this brief account of the noble eightfold path, one may see that it is a way of life to be followed, practiced and developed by each individual. It is self-discipline in body, word, and mind, self-development, and self-purification. It has nothing to do with belief, prayer, worship, or ceremony. In that sense, it has nothing which may popularly be called “religious.” It is a Path leading to the realization of Ultimate Reality, to complete freedom, happiness, and peace through moral, spiritual, and intellectual perfection