The Eightfold Path In The World Of Today

The talk presented on September 26, 2018 initiated a series of discussion regarding how the Four Noble Truths can be practiced successfully even in this very stressful time in our culture. Last week the discussion reviewed the multigenerational conditioning that developed over the 20th century. Following that, a brief review of the first three of the Noble Truths; this discussion reviews the Noble Eightfold Path.

First, there is the traditional understanding, using quotations from the Pali Canon. Following the traditional rendering I will offer the modifications I have developed over the years of my studies and practice. It is the obligation of each generation of practitioners of these teachings to consider them in the context of current cultural conditions and whatever level of understanding each individual may develop. Some of my derivations are likely repetitions of other contemporary students of the Dharma, as I have done much reading and listening over the last 35 years. I am also quite confident that whatever I write down in these notes is an imperfect rendering of the true value of the Dharma…I’m working on that!

**WISDOM**

RIGHT VIEW

“And what is right view? Right view, I tell you, is of two sorts: There is right view with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions [of becoming]; there is right view that is noble, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path.

“And what is the right view with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions? ‘There is what is given, what is offered, what is sacrificed. There are fruits & results of good & bad actions. There is this world & the next world. There is mother & father. There are spontaneously reborn beings; there are contemplatives & brahmans who, faring rightly & practicing rightly, proclaim this world & the next after having directly known & realized it for themselves.’ This is the right view with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions.

“And what is the right view that is noble, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path? The discernment, the faculty of discernment, the strength of discernment, analysis of qualities as a factor for awakening, the path factor of right view in one developing the noble path whose mind is noble, whose mind is without effluents, who is fully possessed of the noble path. This is the right view that is noble, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path. *Majjhima Nikaya #117*

As my practice continues, I perceive the labelling of this element of the Path differently. I consider a more workable term to be CLEAR AWARENESS. This understanding parallels the concept of *sampajanna* (sahm-pah-jahn-yah), translated as clear *comprehension*. This is a quality of awareness that is not distorted, sluggish or agitated in functioning. This level of awareness can be receptive to insights of impermanence (anicca), the absence of a separate, autonomous self (anatta) and the distress and confusion that is the result of craving and clinging (dukkha). This level of awareness also clearly perceives the working of karma, that of cause and effect regarding all human decisions and actions.

RIGHT RESOLVE

And what is right resolve? Being resolved on renunciation, on freedom from ill will, on harmlessness: This is called right resolve. *Majjhima Nikaya #141*

With this level of clear awareness, attention is channeled through BENEVOLENT INTENTION, which is a rewording of the traditional terminology listed above, along with an alternative of RIGHT INTENTION, or RIGHT ASPIRATION. The traditional understanding of this factor, a person renounces the normal structures of life to become a monk or nun, dedicated to cultivating the heart and mind through meditation practice and extreme ethical discipline.

We don’t live a renunciate lifestyle, so the temptations of life in this consumer culture are ever-present. The conditioning of this culture is amplified significantly by contemporary media, that is, commercials and the internet. This doesn’t eliminate the opportunities to discipline the mind and live an ethical life. What is clear is the importance of clear awareness in discerning which choices we make that are organized through the filters of lovingkindness, compassion, generosity, tolerance and patience.

**VIRTUE**

RIGHT SPEECH

“And what is right speech? Abstaining from lying, from divisive speech, from abusive speech, and from idle chatter: This is called right speech.” *Majjhima Nikaya #141*

The ethics of Right Speech also involve a sophisticated situational and timing considerations (The term *Tathagata* [tah-tah-gah-tah] is how it is said the Buddha named himself; it is translated as “thus gone” or “master of suchness”):

[1] In the case of words that the Tathāgata knows to be unfactual, untrue, unbeneficial [or: not connected with the goal], unendearing & disagreeable to others, he does not say them.

[2] In the case of words that the Tathāgata knows to be factual, true, unbeneficial, unendearing & disagreeable to others, he does not say them.

[3] In the case of words that the Tathāgata knows to be factual, true, beneficial, but unendearing & disagreeable to others, he has a sense of the proper time for saying them.

[4] In the case of words that the Tathāgata knows to be unfactual, untrue, unbeneficial, but endearing & agreeable to others, he does not say them.

[5] In the case of words that the Tathāgata knows to be factual, true, unbeneficial, but endearing & agreeable to others, he does not say them.

[6] In the case of words that the Tathāgata knows to be factual, true, beneficial, and endearing & agreeable to others, he has a sense of the proper time for saying them. Why is that? Because the Tathāgata has sympathy for living beings.” *Majjhima Nikaya #58*

As a psychotherapist as well as a meditation teacher, I include clear awareness of internal narrative, the “selfing story” as an important consideration in the practice of Right Speech. We live in a culture that often distorts or exaggerates reality for commercial and political advantage. This is why clear awareness, combined with Right Effort, is essential for the realization of Awakening.

RIGHT ACTION

“And what is right action? Abstaining from killing, abstaining from stealing, abstaining from sexual misconduct. This is called right action.” *Majjhima Nikaya #141*

The original meaning of karma in the Buddhist world is *action*. Our behaviors are the most obvious manifestations that demonstrate the presence or absence of Wisdom. One of the key training points of Buddhist practice is clear awareness of *cetana* (chay-tah-nah), *volition*. Even when a person’s internal narrative is conceptually aligned through Right Speech, there is a significant vulnerability to acting out in ways that are not kind, compassionate, generous, tolerant or patient.

RIGHT LIVELIHOOD

“Monks, a lay follower should not engage in five types of business. Which five? Business in weapons, business in living beings, business in meat, business in intoxicants, and business in poison.

“These are the five types of business a lay follower should not engage in.” *Anguttara Nikaya III.208*

Our culture is radically more complex than any other time in human history. For most humans in the past, life was more consistent and contained, lived mostly in villages and families traditionally followed some sort of lifestyle intergenerationally. There is often a stark separation between work life and home life, most often including some commuting time, which has significant impact on us. I prefer to consider this category as RIGHT LIFESTYLE, and it includes what we do from waking up to bedtime. How do we manage recreation? How do we maintain physical and mental health? How do we negotiate relationships at work and at home? How about finances? How do we participate in the larger culture through politics and civic participation? These are all important considerations in creating the conditions conducive to the process of Awakening from a Buddhist perspective.

**MENTAL TRAINING**

RIGHT EFFORT

“And what is right effort?

“Here the monk arouses his will, puts forth effort, generates energy, exerts his mind, and strives to prevent the arising of evil and unwholesome mental states that have not yet arisen.  
“He arouses his will... and strives to eliminate evil and unwholesome mental states that have already arisen. He arouses his will... and strives to generate wholesome mental states that have not yet arisen.  
“He arouses his will, puts forth effort, generates energy, exerts his mind, and strives to maintain wholesome mental states that have already arisen, to keep them free of delusion, to develop, increase, cultivate, and perfect them.  
“This is called right effort.” *Majjhima Nikaya #141*

I prefer to consider Right Effort as *channeling energy*. Wherever one’s attention is focused is channeling, and when attention is operating, the neural pathways that are activated are being energized by glucose and oxygen. The practice involves being mindful of what pathways are being energized and discipline the attention away from unbeneficial tracks and maximizing the feeding of beneficial tracks. In modern psychological terms, this function represents *impulse control training* or *self-regulation*.

In the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path, Right Effort is what regulates the cultivation of Virtue, and virtue creates the internal ethical balance that fosters the process of Awakening.

RIGHT MINDFULNESS

“And what is right mindfulness?

“Here the monk remains contemplating the body as body, resolute, aware and mindful, having put aside worldly desire and sadness;  
he remains contemplating feelings as feelings;  
he remains contemplating mental states as mental states;  
he remains contemplating mental objects as mental objects, resolute, aware and mindful, having put aside worldly desire and sadness;  
“This is called right mindfulness.” *Majjhima Nikaya #141*

This is how the Noble Eightfold Path represents the Satipatthana, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. It functions to monitor internal processes in support of Right Speech, Action and Lifestyle.

RIGHT CONCENTRATION

“And what is right concentration?

[i] Here, the monk, detached from sense-desires, detached from unwholesome states, enters and remains in the first *jhana* (level of concentration, Sanskrit: *dhyāna*), in which there is applied and sustained thinking, together with joy and pleasure born of detachment;  
[ii] And through the subsiding of applied and sustained thinking, with the gaining of inner stillness and oneness of mind, he enters and remains in the second *jhana*, which is without applied and sustained thinking, and in which there are joy and pleasure born of concentration;  
[iii] And through the fading of joy, he remains equanimous, mindful and aware, and he experiences in his body the pleasure of which the Noble Ones say: "equanimous, mindful and dwelling in pleasure", and thus he enters and remains in the third *jhana*;  
[iv] And through the giving up of pleasure and pain, and through the previous disappearance of happiness and sadness, he enters and remains in the fourth *jhana*, which is without pleasure and pain, and in which there is pure equanimity and mindfulness.  
“This is called right concentration.” *Majjhima Nikaya #141*

Contemporary students and commentary suggest that the earliest understanding of the Noble Eightfold Path functioned to produce radically altered levels of consciousness called Jhana. As the Dharma evolved over time, more emphasis was placed on vipassana, insight into the conditioned nature of subjective experience. This created a different approach to Awakening, and suggests that self-state organization, particularly for those of us who are not renunciates, involves a coordination of stable attention combined with the intention of cultivate beneficial self-state organizations that manifest kindness, compassion, generosity, tolerance and patience. The graphic below can provide a visual understanding of that process. Current commentary suggests that setting aside the hindrances and cultivating samadhi/passadhi, stable attention/tranquility is sufficient.

**DYNAMIC INTERACTIONS OF THE EIGHTFOLD PATH**

***WISDOM***

**BENEVOLENT INTENTION**

**CLEAR AWARENESS**

***VIRTUOUS ATTENTION***

***MENTAL DISCIPLINE***

**SPEECH**

**ACTION**

**LIFESTYLE**

**CONCENTRATION**

**MINDFULNESS**

**CHANNELING ENERGY**

***SELF-STATE INTEGRATION***

***SELF-STATE LIBERATION/AWAKENING***

This brief review provides support for an ongoing series of discussions regarding how one can cultivate self-state integrative processes despite the complexity, distress and confusion that is so evident in the world now.