**OVERVIEW OF THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH**

The “operations” part of the Four Noble Truths is found within the Fourth Noble Truth and is traditionally called the Noble Eightfold Path. The First Noble Truth describes dukkha, the predicament all of us are confronted with—the inherent physical and emotional distress and mental confusion that is part of life. The Second Noble Truth describes the causes and conditions that create dukkha: We are all affected by instinctual drives that Buddhism calls *craving*, while the mind fabricates a built-in self-absorption that is called *clinging*. The Third Noble Truth describes lived experience that is liberated from dukkha, either momentarily, when the mind is liberated from distorted beliefs and impulsive emotional reactions, or totally, through the experience of Nirvana, consciousness that is totally free from any self-referencing experience.

This overview is intended to describe how the eight components of the Noble Eightfold Path operate as an interactive system that combines ultimate spiritual values, fundamental ethical principles, and the mental and emotional disciplines that enable realizations described in the Third Noble Truth.

The origin of the Noble Eightfold Path conceptual structure is attributed to the Buddha, and it is likely that there was such a person. If this is true, I believe he was the first psychologist of human history, as this system, rather than referring to any supernatural being or force that demands obedience and adherence to certain rites and rituals, (not disavowing any beneficial values laid out in those religious systems), stated clearly that a person’s salvation emerged from distinctly prosocial values, made manifest through strongly disciplined internal awareness, can lead to spiritual realizations.

Here is how Wikipedia describes the Noble Eightfold Path, downloaded on February 27, 2024:

The Pali term *ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga* ([Sanskrit](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanskrit_language): *āryāṣṭāṅgamārga*) is typically translated in English as "Noble Eightfold Path". This translation is a convention started by the early translators of Buddhist texts into English, just like *ariya sacca* is translated as [Four Noble Truths](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_Noble_Truths). However, the phrase does not mean the path is noble, rather that the path is *of the noble people* ([Pali](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pali_language): *ariya* meaning 'enlightened, noble, precious people'). The term *magga* (Sanskrit: *mārga*) means "path", while *aṭṭhaṅgika* (Sanskrit: *aṣṭāṅga*) means "eightfold". Thus, an alternate rendering of *ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga* is "eightfold path of the noble ones", or Eightfold Ariya Path".

Prior to the introduction of Buddhism, nobility was inherited, and spiritual progress depended upon how rigorously a person adhered to the religious rites and rituals prescribed by the Brahman priests, who interpreted sacred scriptures. From a Buddhist perspective, a person’s diligent application of the principles and practices described in the Noble Eightfold Path, rather than the clan she or he was born within, determines spiritual progress—a personal and psychological, rather than hierarchical sociocultural system. Stephen Batchelor has renamed this conceptual system as the “Ennobling Eightfold Path”.

I would add that the social and environmental circumstances that prevailed during the centuries since the time of early Buddhism are radically different than what humanity is exposed to today, along with neuroscientific and psychological insights regarding how one’s personality operates. This change requires a different understanding of how the Noble Eightfold Path system operates. This review will include this different view, within what is becoming understood as Secular Buddhism.

What is Secular Buddhism? A broad understanding includes views that don’t involve rites and rituals that are definitive functions of religious Buddhism. It is significantly a Western phenomenon and includes humanistic principles and scientific research as supportive considerations. There is an emphasis on cultivating skillful means for developing a meaningful life in a rapidly transforming world culture that requires different approaches to spirituality, and in that way, it is more focused on spiritual development rather than the religiously prescribed ultimate experience of Nirvana, without denying the potential of fully liberated consciousness.

Traditionally, the Noble Eightfold Path is described as having eight categories, arranged in an iconic “wheel” with each category and function represented by a spoke of the wheel. The hub of the wheel is the center point of these functions, representing the potential of the Third Noble Truth for liberation from dukkha. A wheel’s operation is dynamic, with each spoke carrying the weight of whatever is being transported—in this case, a personality—as a person travels down the path of life. This shows us that the operation of the Path is holistic, nonlinear, constantly changing through the course of life experiences. No singular function of the eight categories is the most important, but might be “load-bearing”, depending upon circumstances.

The Noble Eightfold Path has three subcategories: Wisdom, Virtue, and Discipline. I want to briefly review each of these categories, hopefully creating a basic understanding that will be elaborated over subsequent Dharma talks over the next several weeks. My review is intended to create a context for understanding how to apply the principles and practices of the Path from a secular, non-religious perspective, relevant to the demanding circumstances of contemporary life.

The following bullet points describe the subcategories of the Noble Eightfold Path:

**Wisdom** has two categories and represent the philosophical and aspirational components of the Path. The first addresses the problem of clinging, while the second depotentiates the power of craving:

*Right Understanding* involves developing clear awareness of karma, the law of cause and effect. The aspirational nature of this category emphasizes the importance of directly realizing the fabricated nature of self-experience, in order to develop ways of being that make manifest a well-integrated personality that behaves in ways that are pro-social and environmentally wholesome.

*Right Intention* involves the ability to manage emotionally impulsive reactivity mentally and behaviorally. As this capability is enhanced through disciplined practice, the mind becomes more serene and non-reactive to circumstances. As a result, behaviors are manifestations of pro-social intentions and are closely interactive with Right Understanding.

**Virtue** has three categories and represents pro-social aspirations and environmental responsibilities. Here is a quote from Albert Einstein that emphasizes the crucial importance of cultivating virtuous thoughts and actions during what is being called the onset of the Anthropocene Era of world history:

“Science has provided the possibility of liberation for human beings from hard labor, but science itself is not a liberator. It creates means not goals. Man should use [Science] for reasonable goals. When the ideals of humanity are war and conquest, those tools become as dangerous as a razor in the hands of a child of three. We must not condemn man’s inventiveness and patient conquest of the forces of nature because they are being used wrongly and disobediently now. *The fate of humanity is entirely dependent upon its moral development*.” (Italicized parts are by me.)

I believe that the moral development described by Einstein requires the integrated functioning of the principles and practices described in the categories of the Noble Eightfold Path.

The following are the virtue categories in brief, with comments about contemporary applications:

*Right Speech* involves the cultivation of speech that is truthful, kind, and supportive of effective interpersonal communications. A contemporary analysis of Right Speech might also involve a person’s internal self-creating narratives, fostered by the same wholesome intentions described in the Wisdom aggregate.

*Right Action* involves a person’s behaviors, organized around the principle of harmlessness and devotion to the betterment of society and the environment. It also involves the ability to refrain from unwholesome actions.

*Right Livelihood* is the traditional rendering describing how Right Speech and Right Action are integrated into daily life routines. I have been using a different descriptive term, *Right Lifestyle*, which is more contemporary terminology that includes how our lifestyle choices affect wholesomeness. This provides a broader perspective on quality of life that can include ecological and pro-social considerations. It also includes behaviors that are generally healthier physically and psychologically.

**Discipline** also has three categories. The preceding five categories describe aspirations for developing a more integrated and wholesome personality, as well as cultivating spiritual fulfillment. The following categories provide training for realizing the potentials found in the preceding five:

*Right Effort* involves the ability to channel the energy of attention and action away from dysfunctional thoughts and feelings in order to develop a more wholesome and integrated personality, creating the self-discipline that is the foundation from which spiritual development emerges.

*Right Mindfulness* is the most complex and spiritually potent of the eight categories. It is the manifestation of self-awareness, developed to its highest potential. The in-depth reviews of this category will describe the elements of another key conceptual system of Buddhism, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

*Right Concentration* involves the cultivation of heightened levels of attentional stability and emotional equanimity that are necessary to fulfill the potential of the Noble Eightfold Path for personality integration and spiritual realization.

Later commentaries describe the evolution of the Noble Eightfold Path to the Noble Tenfold Path. This version represents the fulfillment of the Path, transforming the functions of Wisdom as a result of realizing Nirvana: Right Understanding becomes Right Knowledge, and Right Intention becomes Right Release.