Right Understanding and the Noble Eightfold Path

The conceptual structure of the Noble Eightfold Path provides the ways and means for realizing the potential for Awakening presented by the Four Noble Truths through the cultivation of Wisdom. The icon for the Eightfold Path is a wheel with eight spokes. Each spoke represents an element of the Path, divided into three categories: Wisdom, Virtue, and Discipline. Wisdom has two elements, Right Understanding/Right View, and Right Intention/Right Aspiration. Virtue has three elements: Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. Discipline involves three skills: Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. This talk will focus primarily on Right Understanding, and subsequent talks will review the remaining elements of the Path.

The Dharma Wheel is a potent iconic representation of Buddhist thinking and action—the image is circular, but wheels are obviously built for travelling and carrying something valuable. Wheeled vehicles were “new technology” in Northeastern India during the time of the Buddha and the origination of the system we call Buddhism. The use of those vehicles was probably reserved for the “upper class”, and, perhaps, the carts necessary for transporting goods in the emerging market economy. This would make the icon impressive for those who saw the image. Until the Greeks arrived centuries after the time of the Buddha, the primary iconic representatives for Buddhism were either a footprint (Walking on paths was normal until wheeled vehicles required wider passageways) or the Dharma Wheel. When the Greeks arrived, Buddhist iconography began to include images or statues of a sitting or walking Buddha, following the Greek style of representation.

A more important feature of the Dharma Wheel is how the spokes of a wheel operate, supporting the weight of the vehicle and cargo between the axle and ground; when the wheel is turning, the weight is supported by whichever spoke is vertical. The wheel revolves around a hub, which is affixed to the axle of the vehicle. Interestingly, some commentaries note that the word dukkha (doo-kah), translated as suffering (I prefer distress and confusion) was introduced into India by the nomadic Aryans several generations prior to the life of the Buddha, for whom wheeled travel was important. Here is an understanding of dukkha associated with wheeled vehicles as described by Joseph Goldstein on page 289 of “Mindfulness—A Practical Guide to Awakening”:

The word *dukkha* is made up of the prefix *du* and the root *kha*. *Du* means "bad" or "difficult". *Kha* means "empty". "Empty", here, refers to several things—some specific, others more general. One of the specific meanings refers to the empty axle hole of a wheel. If the axle fits badly into the center hole, we get a very bumpy ride.

I would add that sometimes, because of the poor fit between the axle and the hub, the wheel falls off, especially when the Path is uneven!

The concepts of the Noble Eightfold Path are studied as a linear process, with one spoke leading to another. We think in a linear way, so this is useful for studying the concepts—however, we live in a complex nonlinear reality, so the dynamic rolling action of a wheel indicates a more holistic approach to the process of Awakening. This dynamic process is part of Right Understanding, which I will now review.

Right Understanding

The Pali word for Right Understanding is *Samma Ditthi* (sah-mah dee-tee)—*samma* is translated as *correct* or *proper*, and *ditthi* as *view, belief*, or *concept*. The term Right View is often used as an alternative to Right Understanding. The word *right* in English can have a judgmental tone, but *samma* is better understood as *wholesome* or *appropriate*, in the spirit of the Noble Eightfold Path. In his book, “Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness”, Henepola Gunaratana uses *Skillful Understanding* to describe this element. The word *noble*, by the way, in the time of the Buddha, referred to inherited clan associations--a person’s nobility was inherited, and their karma was determined by the cultural requirements of one’s clan. The Buddha repurposed the word noble to indicate one’s ethical approach to life, stating that nobility depended upon one’s character as determined by virtuous speech, action, and livelihood, not by one’s birth status.

Right Understanding has two manifestations—the first is conceptual, which describes the nature of cause and effect: When we think and act under the control of craving and clinging, the effect is dukkha, the “very bumpy ride. The second manifestation is direct experiential knowledge. This insightful knowledge is woven into the language of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness Discourse. Here are two excerpts from the discourse, translated by Bhikkhu Nyanamoli:

Here, there being sensual desire in him, a bhikkhu understands: ‘There is sensual desire in me’; or there being no sensual desire in him, he understands: ‘There is no sensual desire in me’; and he also understands how there comes to be the arising of unarisen sensual desire, and how there comes to be the abandonment of unarisen sensual desire; and how there comes to the abandonment of arisen sensual desire, and there comes to be the future non-arising of abandoned sensual desire….

Here there being the mindfulness enlightenment factor in him, a bhikkhu understands: ‘There is the mindfulness enlightenment factor in me’; or there being no mindfulness enlightenment factor in him, he understands: ‘There is no mindfulness enlightenment factor in me’; and he also understands how there comes to be the arising of the unarisen mindfulness enlightenment factor, and how the arisen mindfulness enlightenment factor comes to fulfillment by development.

The first, focused on the hindrance of sense desire, emphasizes understanding how the arising of the hindrance comes to be, understanding how the abandonment of the hindrance comes to be, and understanding how to decrease or eliminate the likelihood of its recurrence. The second quote emphasizes understanding how the absence or presence of the mindfulness enlightenment factor comes to be, and, very importantly, understanding how the mindfulness enlightenment factor can reach its highest potential for Awakening.

The concept of Right Understanding also involves realizing anicca (ah-nee-chah), impermanence, dukkha, the inevitability of distress and confusion due to craving and clinging, and anatta (ah-nah-tah), the absence of an enduring/autonomous self. Stated differently, *Right Understanding involves the process of investigating how the selfing story comes to be and the consequences of that quality of being*. In contemporary psychological terms, Right Understanding involves mentalizing, which Anna Freud, Sigmund’s daughter and a well-respected psychoanalyst defines as “**The imaginative activity of making sense of the actions of oneself and others on the basis of intentional mental states such as desires, feelings and beliefs.”**

There is a strong emphasis on the importance of Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood as guiding principles for the creation of a more wholesome self, which allies with Right Intention through the training provided by Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. The Buddhist principle that denies the existence of an enduring/autonomous self means that we are constantly creating and recreating self-states, which can be misunderstood as nihilism, which fundamentally devalues human existence. Buddhism understands that we are making life up as we go along, based on cultural norms and previous experience, but are social creatures, and there are prosocial values in the principles of Right Speech, Action, and Livelihood, and these values are fundamental characteristics of Right Understanding.

Another aspect of Right Understanding involves cultivating clear awareness of the way greed, aversion/ill-will, and ignorance/inattentiveness affects our choices, quite often outside our awareness. Contemporary neuroscientific research provides more foundational information regarding how these three karmic influences operate in the brain. Various neural pathways operate in a coordinated way through what researchers call the Default Mode Network (DMN). Subjectively, this can be noted as the stream of thoughts that occur in an undisciplined mind. This stream is driven by affective processes and accompanying cognitive associations that become “personalized” through craving and clinging. The lack of introspective awareness and affective discipline that is cultivated can be associated with ignorance/inattentiveness and is often dominated and energized by greed and aversion/ill-will.

Another association of neural interconnectivity is called the Salience Network (SN), which “…has been implicated in the detection and integration of emotional and sensory stimuli, as well as in modulating the switch between the internally directed cognition of the [default mode network](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Default_mode_network) and the externally directed cognition of the [central executive network](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Central_executive_network).” (Downloaded from Wikipedia May 16, 2023). The word *salient* describes *the emergence of a sensory or cognitive stimulus that is important enough to pay attention to*. This quality of alert, investigative attention is a key part of insight meditation practice and contradicts the effects of ignorance/inattentiveness.

The Central Executive Network (CEN) is another association of neural pathways critically potent regarding self-regulation. Research suggests that regular mindfulness meditation allies the CEN and SN in ways the more effectively regulate the self-absorption of the DMN. This information supports the descriptions of Wisdom in the Noble Eightfold Path. Wisdom is process awareness and is primarily focused on how the conditions of the mind create the experience of selfing. Greed, aversion/ill-will, and ignorance/inattentiveness create an “enchantment” regarding the various ways the mind makes the emotional/cognitive phenomenon personalizing, the attachment to the view that there is an ego that must be defended or gratified.

The combined interactions between Right Understanding and the other elements of the Noble Eightfold Path constitutes a process awareness that can deconstruct the attachment to that view and systematically transform one’s life away from negativity and towards wholesomeness, initially regarding lifestyle choices and, ultimately, providing liberation from dukkha—Samma Vimutti.

Right Understanding does not guarantee that we will learn to always have the correct solution to the challenges we face regarding the choices that are made. One of the attributes of the First Noble Truth is *viparinama dukkha* (vih-pah-ree-nah-mah doo-kah), translated as *the distress and confusion that occurs because of unanticipated circumstantial changes*. As I get older and become more frequently less able to remember names or forget where I put my keys, my mindfulness practice doesn’t prevent forgetfulness, but rather provides a way to be more at peace with forgetfulness and then, perhaps, more effective at coping with the consequences of forgetting.

It is helpful to imagine that Wisdom is like a coin—one side is Right Understanding and the other is Right Intention. Understanding supports the cognitive process, and Intention requires the cultivation of affective awareness. The combined actions of the two are aligned by the ethical, prosocial effects of Virtue--Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. The capacity for introspection and self-regulation is provided by Discipline--Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

The “fulfillment by development” of the seven enlightenment factors described in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness Discourse, is the ultimate maturation of the Noble Eightfold Path, and has been described in the commentaries as the *Noble* *Tenfold Path*, is manifested through the direct experience of Awakening. At this stage, *Samma Ditthi* matures into *Samma Gn*ana (sah-mah nyah-nah), translated as *Right Knowledge*—direct, experiential realization of Wisdom. *Samma Sankappa* (sah-mah sahn-kah-pah), *Right Intention/Aspiration*, the other element of the Wisdom aggregate of the Path, matures upon Awakening to *Samma Vimutti* (sah-mah vih-moo-tee), *Right Liberation*. This involves the realization of Nirvana.