

The ancient path of awakened ones - The Noble Eightfold Path

In the world of Buddhism, there are various traditions and schools, each with its own doctrines and theories. This raises the question: what is the most fundamental and common doctrine of Buddhism? The answer lies in the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, which are inseparable and interdependent. As we correctly understand the Four Noble Truths, we will naturally be inclined to practice the Noble Eightfold Path. Sincere practice of the Noble Eightfold Path, in turn, leads to a deeper understanding of the Four Noble Truths. To reach the highest peak of spirituality, we must climb with these two legs—the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path.

Last time, we discussed the Four Noble Truths. This time, I would like to talk about the Noble Eightfold Path, the fourth of the Four Noble Truths.

Have you ever seen the symbol of the Dhamma Wheel, which represents Buddha's teachings? If you count the spokes of that wheel, you will find eight, representing the eight elements embedded in the path to liberation. "Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion" is the title of Buddha's first discourse after his enlightenment. In that first discourse, he taught the Middle Way and the Noble Eightfold Path in conjunction with the Four Noble Truths. According to Buddha, by avoiding the two extremes of craving sensuality and self-deprivation, one should pursue the Middle Way, which leads to freedom from suffering. He declared that the actual practice of the Middle Way is the Noble Eightfold Path (Ariya Atthangika Magga).

If we aspire to walk upon Buddha's path for the benefit of ourselves and others, a deep understanding of the Noble Eightfold Path and sincere practice of it are absolutely crucial. Buddha said, "This Eightfold Path is the ancient path traveled by rightly self-awakened ones of former times. Following it, I gained various supreme knowledge, such as the knowledge of the cessation of ageing and death and the direct knowledge of the cessation of consciousness." I interpret the cessation of consciousness as un-manifested, signless consciousness realised through deep Samadhi, compared to the brain-made conventional consciousness that depends on the six sense bases and six sense objects. Simply put, the cessation of consciousness does not mean a coma or dead state. It is the culmination of the ongoing sincere practice of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Additionally, Buddha stated that the Noble Eightfold Path is the way for the fading away of lust and the attainment of final Nibbana without clinging (SN 45:41-48).

Here are the eight stepping stones to cross over the hard stream of Dukkha:

Right View

Right Intention

Right Speech

Right Action

Right Livelihood

Right Effort

Right Mindfulness

Right Concentration

Let us share a little more detail on these elements:

According to Buddha,

Right View is the view based on the Four Noble Truths.

Right Intention is the intention of renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness.

Right Speech means abstinence from false speech, malicious speech, harsh speech, and idle chatter.

Right Action is abstinence from the destruction of life, taking what is not given, and sexual misconduct.

Right Livelihood is earning one's living by a right livelihood, having abandoned wrong modes of livelihood.

Right Effort is striving for a wholesome state of mind.

Right Mindfulness is mindfulness practice based on the four foundations of body, feelings, mind states, and phenomena.

Right Concentration is achieving the four Jhanas (four stages of Samadhi).

In Mahayana Buddhism of East Asia, the Noble Eightfold Path is also summarised as wisdom (1,2), morality (3,4,5), and meditation (6,7,8). These three categories mutually support each other like the legs of an easel, inseparably supporting each other. Only with a balanced and sturdy three-legged base can a pure white canvas be set up to create a beautiful painting. Similarly, only with a good balance of wisdom, morality, and meditation can our righteous life be possible.

Let us discuss each aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path in depth in the following editions.

With metta,

Bhante Anuttara