

## The Purpose of the Eightfold Path—an Introduction

### Intro

One of the hardest parts about coming up with Dharma talks is figuring out where to start. It's said that when the Buddha first attained enlightenment, he did not want to talk about it with others, because he thought that he would not be understood. This is not to say that he thought others could not attain enlightenment, but that he didn't know how to tell them about it. Sitting here in front of you, as a painfully unenlightened individual, that problem is equally difficult—*Where the hell do we start?!*

That's a question Ron, Adeesha, Sam, and I have been rolling around in our heads all summer—*Where do we even start, and where do we go?* Ron had a really smart idea: we'll start where the Buddha started, and use that as a guide for what we'll be discussing here. Actually, I think Ron got that idea from a series of talks by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi, but I think the idea is essentially the same.

So, this semester's series of talks is going to be based around the Eightfold Path of Buddhism. As many of you know, the Eightfold Path is the guide to enlightenment that the Buddha first taught upon attaining it himself: it is what gives us direction in a world that sometimes can be seemingly directionless; it is a checklist towards contentment and happiness.

However, we won't *just* be talking about the Eightfold Path, but will be using it as a guide for our talks—we will use it as a system of organization to discuss many other parts of Buddhism. But by using it, we'll be able to understand the core of Buddhism while discussing all the other ideas and theories which surround that core.

### What's the Eightfold Path?

The Eightfold Path is, as I mentioned, the path that Buddha laid down for others to attain enlightenment, and is the path that he followed himself. It is not something he arbitrarily created, but it is a series of life lessons he learned over the course of his own life. The Eightfold Path is a system which shows us the way to **Wisdom, Ethical Conduct (Morality), and Mental Development.**

It is:

- 1) Right View
- 2) Right Intention
- 3) Right Speech
- 4) Right Action
- 5) Right Livelihood
- 6) Right Effort
- 7) Right Mindfulness
- 8) Right Concentration

*Wisdom* (Right View/Intention) is seeing the world for how it is; *Ethical Conduct* is the physical manifestation of that wisdom in how we interact with others; *Mental Development* is the qualities of meditation which will allow us to have and retain *Wisdom*.

Although we call this the Eightfold *Path*, it is not a step-by-step sort of path. It does not happen in any order, but rather all at once. I once heard Adeesha excellently compare each part of the Eightfold Path to a strand, and when woven together, the strands form a strong rope. Although each part of this path seems to be a small thing, together it has wonderful results. Namely: freedom from suffering.

### **What the Eightfold Path Is and Is Not**

I'm sure many of you upon hearing words like "ethical conduct" being thrown out are little hesitant to like the idea of *another* set of rules. But really, these are not *rules*, so much as sound pieces of advice.

The Eightfold Path, like many other parts of Buddhism, is not a command, but an outline for what a good life should look like. *We are not servants to the Path, but the Path is offered to help us.* It is not a "Thou-Shalt," but a "Hey,-You-Might-Wanna..."

### **Why We are Using the Eightfold Path as a Model**

If I had to say there was some core, condensed teaching on Buddhism, I would say that the Eightfold Path would be that teaching, as it contains many other teachings. This is why we are using it for a model—but we will go beyond the idea of it being a core text as well. Hopefully, we'll be able to talk about philosophically complicated and interesting ideas like karma, rebirth, and such, but we will not forget the most important aspect of Buddhism—freedom from suffering, or enlightenment.

I think it is normal for us to get attracted to the beautiful complexity of Buddhism sometimes—the philosophical issues brought up by karma, by reincarnation, by mystical stories and rituals (mostly in my own tradition)—but I think it's important that we recognize *why* these things exist. They do not exist, as we've grown accustomed in the academic world: to complicate life, or to exist as intangible and abstract theories. *They exist as part of a system to remove suffering.*

And really, if I had to sum up Buddhism in one phrase, it would be that: *The Systematic Removal of Suffering.* What we are going to tell you in this chapel here is not just things for you to think about, but things that will hopefully be applicable to your life—it will be things that will lessen anxiety and fear, and increase contentment and compassion.

As H.H. the Dalai Lama says: Religion must be *useful* and applicable. If it does not help you in the day-to-day, what is the point? So for us, The Eightfold Path and all that it entails *is* the point. So, now that I've stressed the importance of the Eightfold Path, I'm excited to discuss it with everyone more in the weeks to come.