

The Eightfold Path: Wisdom

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Hi Everyone, my name is Kat. I am senior psychology major and philosophy minor here at IC. Today, I am going to talk a little about the Eightfold Path: and more specifically: Wisdom. But before I get started let me back up a little bit and say a few words about the Eightfold Path. As Ron showed us last week, the Eightfold Path is the fourth noble truth which teaches us how we can remove suffering. The Eightfold Path can be divided into three overarching sections: Wisdom, Ethical Conduct (which is also known as Morality) and Mental Development.

Tonight, I am going to focus on the Wisdom aspect of the Eightfold Path. Wisdom can be broken down into two smaller categories: (1) Right View (which is also known as Right Understanding - Samma Ditthi) and (2) Right Intention - Samma-Sankappa.

So, what exactly is Right View? In general, it encompasses the idea that each and every one of our actions has consequences. There are two different sub-categories of Right View: (1) Mundane Right View and (2) Superior Right View.

Mundane Right View refers to the law of karma. However, in common everyday language we tend to use the word karma incorrectly. We usually think of karma as an effect: Your friend makes fun of you for something or says a sarcastic remark and then stubs his toe into the corner of a desk, and then you say, "That was karma" and you stick your tongue out at him. But that isn't what we mean by karma in buddhism. Here, karma is an action. So when you do, say or think something that is karma. Ron has a really good quote about this in one of his previous talks from the Thai teacher Ajahn Chan. He writes:

"Karma is action. Karma is clinging. Body, speech, and mind all make karma when we cling. We create habits that can make us suffer in the future. This is the fruit of our attachment, our past defilement."

So as we can see, karma is not an effect but instead an action. Often times, karma is motivated by clinging and attachment (which as we learned last week is the source of suffering).

Each and everyone one of our actions has consequences or perhaps a better word to use here is results (because consequences usually has a negative connotation). Sometimes the results of our actions are easy to see: You surprise your roommate by washing all the dishes (even though its not your week to do so) and you feel good when you see how happy and surprised your roommate is about it.

But sometimes the consequences of our actions aren't as easy to see because it may take awhile for the results to manifest and the results may not be something that seems either directly or obviously related to the action in question.

It is also important to remember that the results of karma that we are experiencing right now are not only the product of what we did and thought a few minutes ago, but is also influenced by what we did last week and last year, and even stretches as far back as the beginning of time (idea of rebirth).

Karma is important because it helps to inform our moral decisions by helping us to realize that our actions have consequences. There's a really good quote from "Word of the Buddha" that sums this up:

"Beings are the owners of their actions, the heirs of their actions; they spring from their actions, are bound to their actions, and are supported by their actions. Whatever deeds they do, good or bad, of those they shall be heirs."

Superior Right View speaks to the importance of an understanding of suffering and the end of suffering as described within the Four Noble Truths: (1) There is suffering (2) Suffering has a cause (3) Suffering can be removed (4) The Eightfold path which is how we go about to remove suffering.

So, now that we've covered a little bit about Right View, I am going to say a bit about Right Intention (Samma-Sankappa). Right Intention describes mental states that we should actively cultivate within our lives: Renunciation, Goodwill and Harmlessness.

In Buddhism, renunciation is not seen as something that deprives us, but instead as something that helps to liberate us (from being slaves to desire so that we can overcome suffering). Renunciation doesn't have to entail becoming a monk or a nun. Lay people, like us, can also do it (although its not as stringent). As a lay person you could for example

set aside 10 minutes a day where you turn off all your electronics and meditate. You could also participate in an Uposatha Observance day where you would observe 8 precepts instead of 5.

In terms of cultivating goodwill you could engage in acts of generosity. For example, you could donate money to a charity, or volunteer your time once a week to help tutor middle schoolers with math homework, or maybe share your DS 3D with your sibling. You could also work to cultivate metta as known as “loving-kindness” which can be thought of as the opposite of allowing your thoughts be governed by anger and aversion. Metta can be nurtured in a variety of ways including by practicing “Metta Meditation.”

In order to help cultivate the mental state of harmlessness - which entails refraining from doing harm (physically, mentally and emotionally) to others - one can work to develop compassion. Compassion can be thought of as the opposite of being cruel, violent and aggressive toward others.

In sum, the Wisdom aspect of the Eightfold path is comprised of two smaller components: Right View and Right Intention. Each of these aspects is important and can help us on our path to end suffering.