

The Noble Eightfold Path: Mental Development (factors 6-8)

Tonight I'd like to speak about the part of the Noble Eightfold Path that deals with mental development.

To recap, you may remember that two weeks ago I gave a talk on the Four Noble Truths. The first is the truth of *dukkha*, or dissatisfaction. The second is that *dukkha* is caused by desire, or craving. The third truth tells us that *dukkha* can be eliminated by eliminating desire. The fourth truth describes the path leading to this removal of desire. This is called the Noble Eightfold Path.

Last week, Kat spoke on the two aspects of the path relating to wisdom: Right View and Right Intention. Right View encompasses an understanding of the law of *kamma* and of the Four Noble Truths. These are basic things that we need to understand (or at least provisionally accept) in order to get a good start on the path. Right Intention describes the mental factors that should be present in our mind: renunciation, or letting go; loving kindness; and harmlessness. Right Intention is a good lead-in to the first of the three aspects of the path dealing with mental development: Right Effort.

Right Effort

One account of the Buddha's enlightenment (MN 19) begins with Gotama (not yet the Buddha) dividing his thoughts into two groups: those relating to sensual pleasures, ill-will, and cruelty in one group and a second group containing thoughts of renunciation, kindness, and harmlessness. He found that the former thoughts led to negative results and that the latter group led to positive results.

Specifically, he saw that the negative thoughts "lead to my own affliction or to the affliction of others or to the affliction of both. They obstruct discernment, promote vexation, and do not lead to Unbinding." He observed the opposite for the positive thoughts. ("Unbinding" refers to the cessation of *dukkha* as described in the Third Noble Truth.)

Right Effort describes the practice of actively cultivating wholesome thoughts and eliminating unwholesome thoughts. It means taking responsibility for what is in your mind.

Right Effort has four aspects: we need to cultivate positive qualities, maintain those positive qualities, eliminate existing negative qualities, and prevent the arising of new negative qualities.

The language that the Buddha uses in describing these tasks is interesting. With reference to each task, he says that the practitioner “generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts his intent” (SN 45.8). Many people get a little confused when they hear about the Four Noble Truths and think that all desire is bad. This is an example of a positive desire.

In terms of formal practice, we use meditation on desirable mind states (especially *metta*, or loving kindness), as an exercise in the positive aspect of Right Effort.

Right Mindfulness

The second part of the mental development triad is Right Mindfulness. I think most of us know that mindfulness plays a central role in Buddhist practice. It is defined in the suttas as incorporating four aspects: mindfulness of the body, feelings, the mind, and mental objects. These aspects are dealt with in detail in an important text called the Satipatthana Sutta. Talking about all that would take hours, so tonight I’m just going to describe mindfulness in general terms.

I’d like to quote Bhante Gunaratana’s description of mindfulness:

“Mindfulness is paying moment-to-moment attention to what is. A mindful mind is precise, penetrating, balanced, and uncluttered. It is like a mirror that reflects without distortion whatever stands before it.”

When we practice mindfulness, then, our goal is to observe what is, without prejudice or commentary. We do this both in our formal practice, and in our normal lives. Our goal should be a state of continual mindfulness no matter what we’re doing.

Right Concentration

The third aspect of the Path that I want to mention tonight is Right Concentration. This is another case of difficult translation. The Pali word is *samadhi*, which has a different connotation than the English word “concentration.”

In English I might say that I’m concentrating very hard as I’m studying for a test or writing a computer program, but that kind of concentration isn’t *samadhi*. *Samadhi* implies a single-pointed concentration that is both relaxed and alert.

While mindfulness should be developed both on the cushion and in the rest of our lives, *samadhi* is primarily a matter for formal meditation practice, especially breath meditation. When we allow our attention to rest for a period of time on a single object, we are countering our natural tendency toward mental proliferation. Our minds normally don’t just observe—they offer commentary on what we’re

observing and they follow associative paths to other objects that may not even be present. *Samadhi* allows the mind a rest from all that activity.

The Buddha's teachings and their commentaries contain a lot of elephant metaphors. One of these has to do with taming the mind through *samadhi*. In taming an elephant, one ties it to a post (presumably a really big one). The elephant will at first make a fuss, trying to pull away in all directions and wasting a lot of energy. This is like the normal behavior of our minds.

Eventually, the elephant will realize that it can't escape and will calm down. At that point the trainer can safely approach the elephant and teach it to perform useful tasks. This reminds us that while *samadhi* has a certain value of its own, it is also important because it clears the way for greater mindfulness and insight. I followed the traditional order in discussing these three factors, but in some ways it might have made more sense to discuss *samadhi* first, since it is a skill that aids immeasurably in the other two aspects.

Again, Bhante Gunaratana described of the mindful mind as "precise, penetrating, balanced, and uncluttered." That state is difficult to attain without some degree of calm and discipline developed through *samadhi*.

Conclusion

So that's my quick overview of the Buddha's three-part teaching on cultivating the mind. We practice Right Effort to incline the mind thoughts of letting go, kindness, and harmlessness. We practice Right Mindfulness to observe phenomena as they actually are in the present moment. We practice *samadhi* to develop calm, mental balance, and discipline.