

The Eight Fold Path

(Monthly Retreat August 7, 1999)

Today I will share with you what the Buddha said about the Eight Fold Path. You all are familiar with the Eight Fold Path, because you are practicing it when you practice Vipassanā meditation. So I do not need to explain in detail what the eight fold path is.

When you practice Vipassanā meditation you try to be mindful of the object at the present moment. You have to make an effort to be mindful of the object and the effort you make is one factor in the eight fold path, Right effort. With Right effort, you try to be mindful of the object and you are mindful of the object. That means your mind hits the object. Your mind hitting the object is what is called Right mindfulness. When that Right mindfulness becomes stronger, you calm down and your mind goes into the object and stay there for a certain period of time. That is called concentration. Concentration is one factor and this keeps the mind and its concomitant on the object. It does not let them be scattered and does not let them go to other objects so that is the nature of concentration or Samādhi.

When you gain Samādhi, your mind becomes calm. The mental hindrances are subdued. When mental hindrances are subdued and your mind becomes still, you begin to see the objects clearly, more clearly than before. You see the nature of these objects. You see that objects arise depending on some condition and you see these objects come and go. You see their impermanent nature. When you see the impermanent nature, you also see their Dukkha nature or suffering nature.

Suffering here means being tormented by arising and disappearing. When you see the impermanent nature and suffering nature of things, you also see the Anatta nature. That means you have no control over them, they arise and disappear at their own accord. You also see that there are only the mind that is making note and the object that is taken as an object. There is no other thing which can be called an "Atta" or "Atama" or "Soul" or "Self". That means you see the Anatta nature of things.

Seeing the objects clearly and so on are what is called Right Understanding, Right Understanding in the context of Vipassanā. In order for mind to be on the object, to be settled on the object, to understand or to see the nature of the object, you need one mental factor, one mental state that takes the mind to the object and put it on the object. That state that takes the mind and put it on the object is called Right Thought among the eight factors.

So among the eight factors you may have noticed that there is this factor called Right Thought. Here, Right Thought does not mean thinking. Its function is to put the mind on the object so that Understanding or Wisdom can see the true nature of the object.

Now you know that these factors are working together at every moment of mindfulness you practice. There is Right Effort. There is Right Mindfulness. There is Right Concentration. And there is Right Understanding and then Right Thought. So these factors are working together harmoniously at every moment of good meditation. These five factors are called "Worker Factors" or we may call them "Active Factors".

There are the other three that have to do with the moral conduct that have to do with Sila. They are Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. Strictly speaking, they are not present in the mind when you are practicing Vipassanā meditation. But they are accomplished when you take precepts. So they can be called an "Active Factors".

You do not get all these factors, especially the five factors working together in harmony at every moment of the practice of mindfulness. When you practice Vipassanā meditation, you are practicing the eight fold path. It is also called the "Middle Way", because the practice does not fall into either of the two extremes. One extreme is indulging in sensual pleasures and the other is inflicting pain on one's own self or one's own body. This middle way or middle path is discovered by the Buddha (or rather the Bodhisatta "Buddha-to-be") himself. He practiced and he got the best results of this practice. That means as a result of this practice he became the Buddha.

Buddha said that the eight fold path is the best among the paths. That means there are paths or roads and there are paths to rebirth in Brahma world and so on. Amongst all these paths the eight fold path is the best because it leads to the eradication of mental defilements; so it leads to the extension of suffering. And Buddha said this is the only way. There is none other for the purity of vision and we must make note of this statement. The verses are from the book called Dhammapada.

In Dhammapada Buddha said emphatically that the eight fold path is the only way and there is none other for the purity of vision. For the purity of vision means for the purity of Path and Fruition that means for Enlightenment. Buddha said this is the only way, there is no other way to gain Enlightenment.

In the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta, Buddha said this is the one way, this means the Foundations of Mindfulness. So this is the one way for the purification of beings and so on. That word "the one way" is interpreted in different ways. (1) It is called one way because it surely leads to Nibbāna and it does not fork into branches and so on. (2) It is called one way because it was trodden by the best: one who was the Buddha and so on. (3) It is interpreted to mean this is the only way.

There are people nowadays who do not like the interpretation "taking one way to mean the only way". They argue that just as there are many roads to reach a city there should be many ways to Nibbāna. So Satipaṭṭhāna or the eight fold path should be just one of many ways. But in this Dhammapada verse, Buddha emphatically said this is the only way and there is no other. So in order to reach Nibbāna, you must practice the eight fold path or the foundations of mindfulness. You can practice the eight fold path or the foundations of mindfulness in different ways.

In the discourse on foundations of mindfulness, Buddha talked twenty-one different ways to practice mindfulness. There is not just one way to practice mindfulness. There are twenty-one ways to practice mindfulness. But whatever the way is it must be foundation of mindfulness. It must be setting up of firm mindfulness on the object. Although there in the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta, people may argue that Buddha would not have said such a thing and so on, they can not say anything when they come to Dhammapada because here is it very clear

that Buddha said this is the only way and there is no other way for the purification of vision or for the purification of beings.

Also, in practice we understand that so long as there is mindfulness in our mind, so long as mindfulness is standing guard at the doors of eyes, ears and so on, no undesirable, unwholesome mental state can enter our mind. We can keep our mind pure by the practice of mindfulness. The moment we lose mindfulness, the moment mindfulness leaves the doors, then these mental defilements come in. Through practice we can easily accept that mindfulness is the only way for the purification of mind or to keep mental defilements away from our minds.

Buddha exhorted His to follow the middle path (the eight fold path) because only by following the eight fold path, only by practicing the eight fold path can beings attain the enlightenment, can beings get out of this Samsāra or the round of rebirth. Buddha said that this practice is the bewilderment to Māra, the Evil One. We can take Māra to mean the defilement. By the practice of the eight fold path, we can bewilder mental defilement (that means we get rid of mental defilements).

We can keep these mental defilements away from our minds. We can keep our mind secure so that mental defilements can not enter our minds. This is by the practice of this path, by the practice of the middle way. Now the middle way of the eight fold path and the practice of mindfulness are the same. Although we give two names to this practice, it is just one practice with different names. Whether we say the foundations of mindfulness or just mindfulness or the eight fold path we mean the same thing. So the noble eight fold path or the practice of the foundations of mindfulness or just mindfulness or the eight fold path, we mean the same thing.

The noble eight fold path or the practice of the foundations of mindfulness can keep mental defilements away from our minds. If we are successful with the practice of the eight fold path, on maturity of the eight fold path there will come enlightenment. At the moment of enlightenment yogis will be able to eradicate the mental defilements altogether. That means the mental defilements will not arise in their minds again.

This is the practice we should follow if we also want to keep mental defilement away from our minds. We want to keep mental defilements away from our minds because they produce suffering. Mental defilements are unwholesome kamma. And as unwholesome kamma they give unwholesome or painful results. If we do not want to get painful results in the future, we should avoid unwholesome mental states here and now. To avoid unwholesome mental states from arising in our minds to prevent them from arising in our minds we need to practice the eight fold path or the foundations of mindfulness.

Buddha said, "Entering upon that path you will make an end of suffering". If you practice this path you will make an end of suffering. You will get out of this world of suffering. You will realize Nibbāna.

Buddha said, "Having known by myself I have talked you this path". Now Buddha said I discovered this path by myself and then I have described this path to you. Buddha's knowledge of this path is not secondhand; it is His own knowledge. He discovered this method all by himself without the help of a teacher.

You know the Bodhisatta (Buddha-to-be) spent six years in the forest practicing austerities with the intention of reaching Buddhahood. But for almost six years he was following a wrong path, he did not get any nearer to his goal during those years. When he got know nearer to his goal although he had been practicing these austerities nearly six years he began to examine his practice and he found out that that practice he had been doing for almost six years was a wrong practice.

Then he searched for a right practice and fortunately he remembered an incident in his life when he was just an infant. At that time may be he was not even one year old. There was the ploughing ceremony attended by king himself in order to promote cultivation. Kings and his ministers took the plough and ceremoniously ploughed for some time. That was a very grand performance. When King Suddhodhana, Boddhisata's father went to participate in the ploughing ceremony he left his infant son in the care of the nurses. The prince was put under a tree and a curtain was put around it. The nurses wanted to see the ploughing ceremony and so they left the infant prince under that tree and went to see the performance of the king. When nobody was around Bodhisatta even though he was in infant sat up or set in cross like position and practiced breathing meditation. And it is said that he reached the first JhĒna. Later the nurses remembered about him and so they went back and they saw the prince sitting in meditation. They reported to the king. The king came and saw his son sitting in a meditated posture. The king bowed down to his own son.

The Bodhisatta remembered this incident and he decided that that was correct way, correct path. He practiced that correct path and as a result of that practice, he became the Buddha. It took only one night for the Bodhisatta to become the Buddha. After he discovered this correct way, he discovered the eight fold path. It took the Bodhisatta nearly six years practicing austerities because he was on the wrong path. Once he discovered the right path, it just took him one night to become the Buddha.

So Buddha said, "Having known by myself this path, I have talked it to you. Now I have talked this eight fold path to you and this path as described as the one removed the thorns of mental defilements. This path is able to remove mental defilement from your mind".

Then Buddha said, "But you yourself must make the effort. The Buddhas are only teachers". It is very important in Buddhism. You do not get anything free. You have to make effort yourself. You have to work out yourself to gain enlightenment. You yourself must make the effort. That means I cannot practice for you or I cannot give enlightenment to you as a gift. It is impossible. You yourself must practice. That is why we Buddhists always rely on ourselves to gain enlightenment. We cannot rely on any other person. We cannot rely on the Buddha, even the Buddha himself. What we rely on the Buddha is for the instructions, for the teachings. But after understanding the teachings of the Buddha we must practice ourselves. Unless we practice ourselves, we cannot hope to gain any spiritual results. It is very clear in Buddhism that we must make effort ourselves, we cannot rely on any other person for our enlightenment. By this Buddha recognized the potential in human beings or potential in beings. That is beings have the potential to work out for their own enlightenment. They are not to or they do not have or they cannot rely on any other person for their enlightenment. They are

capable of achieving enlightenment if they follow the teachings of the Buddha and do the practice themselves.

Buddha said, "You yourselves must make the effort. The TathĒgatas or Buddhas are only teachers". They can only teach you but they cannot practice for you just as a teacher at school cannot learn for the students, he can just teach them. The students must learn themselves.

Buddha said, "Those who practice this eight fold path experiencing the two kinds of JhĒnas will be delivered from the bond of MĒra". When you practice SatipaĒhĒna or eight fold path, sometimes you may begin with Samatha meditation or you may just practice VipassanĒ without practicing Samatha first. Whichever way you practice, you experience JhĒna. Now VipassanĒ is also called JhĒna. Path or Magga is also called JhĒna and Phala or Fruition is also called JhĒna in a sense. So in that sense, VipassanĒ is also JhĒna, Path is also JhĒna, Fruition is also JhĒna.

Buddha said, "When you follow this practice, you will experience these kinds of JhĒna. And then you will be delivered from the bound of MĒra". That means you will get free from the bond of mental defilements. You will be able to eradicate mental defilements. That is why in TheravĒda Buddhism, practice is important. We can never overestimate the value of practice because only the practice can lead us to gain insight into the nature of things and ultimately to eradicate mental defilements. Without this practice, we cannot hope to get any enlightenment. We cannot get in any achieve way the enlightenment we must make effort ourselves. We must follow the instructions of the Buddha so that we achieve our goal of getting rid of suffering, or getting out of suffering.

The eight fold path what we are practicing is not yet noble eight fold path. We can call it preliminary eight fold path, or just eight fold path. At the moment of enlightenment these eight factors arise again. At that moment they are called noble eight fold path because at the moment of enlightenment the person is changed into a noble person and all these eight factors take NibbĒna as object. When yogis are practicing VipassanĒ meditation, these eight factors take NĒma and RĒpa, mind and matter or the five aggregates as object. They have not reached the stage of the noble yet. But when they reach the stage of enlightenment, then these eight factors take NibbĒna as object. What we are practicing now is eight fold path which is preliminary tool the noble eight fold path. With the practice of the noble path, may we all attain NibbĒna, may we all be able to get rid of mental defilements in achieve the cessation of all suffering.

SĒdhu! SĒdhu! SĒdhu!

Sharing merit: We acquire a great amount of merit by the practice of meditation. When our minds are free from mental defilement, we are said to acquire merit. And most of the time through the practice our minds are free from mental defilements. So we gain a lot of merit. And it is good to share merits gained in this way with all other beings. Sharing of merit is letting them get chance to get merit themselves by having them rejoice at our merit. By sharing

merit our merit increase because sharing of merit is itself an act of merit which is included in DĒna or giving. And those who share our merit, who rejoice our merit, who say "SĒdhu, SĒdhu" at our merit, will gain merit themselves and they will get the happy results of this merit in the future. It is beneficial to both who share merit and who accept the share of merit. So let us share merits with all beings. please repeat after me and at the end you say "SĒdhu, SĒdhu, SĒdhu"

May all beings share this merit,
Which we have thus acquired,
For the acquisition of all kinds of happiness.
May beings inhabiting space and earth,
Deities and others of mighty power,
Share this merit of ours.
May they long protect the teachings.
SĒdhu! SĒdhu! SĒdhu!