

Liberation

by Rebecca Dixon

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Tonight's talk is on Liberation. Not so much what it is, but how to get there, because the how explains the what. How to get there begins with the Eightfold Path. To those of you who have followed our course on the Eightfold Path from last November to now, congratulations. I should give you all Certificates of Completion. But you've earned something far more valuable. You have familiarized yourself with the concepts and practices the Buddha wanted to impart to you. Now they are yours and you know how to use them.

Now, for everyone, the course still exists on Alameda Sangha's web page, titled 2018-19 Eightfold Path Course. It's also accessible on RebeccaDixon.org, with links between the two sites. The course is designed for a month of practice on each of the Path's eight parts, with suggested exercises each week. The Path is not intended to be intellectually understood, but to be lived. To live it, we need to learn how, through practicing with it. If you have questions about any part of the course, you can use the Contact function on my web site – or my email address, if you have it. The course is laid out the way the Buddha gave it to us, from Wise Understanding to Wise Concentration, so it will make the most sense to work with it in that order. Of course, you can concentrate on one part for several months or years, but there's a big payoff for having a close relationship with the Path in its entirety. That payoff is Liberation.

The Path has a beginning and an end. It starts with our not knowing how to free ourselves from the inner suffering called dukkha, and it ends with that freedom being achieved. The suttas call our not knowing "Ignorance," often translated as Delusion, as in Greed, Hatred and Delusion as the core causes of dukkha. It plays a massive and wicked role in our overall wellbeing. Ignorance is not merely an absence of fact, but a kind of mental blindness that casts a veil of distortion over all our experience. It's like we start life with a wide open field of awareness and it's steadily compromised. It fascinates me to watch babies regard their world. They're totally absorbed in the touch, taste and appearance of things, and what happens when they do this, or that.

Among the first things babies learn are their relationships, and their name. Who meets their needs, holds them in comfort and love. The idea of "Me" starts to grow and they know what they want and they want it now, and that is so compelling that their awareness narrows down to that. Anger and dissatisfaction assert themselves in tears and cries. The root of Ignorance has been planted. That open field of awareness begins to shrink and warp. That baby, like the rest of us, has acquired the basic belief that they are a self and, as Bikkhu Bodhi puts it, "We assume we have an innate right to pleasure, and direct our efforts to increasing and intensifying our enjoyment with an anticipatory fervor undaunted by repeated encounters with pain, disappointment, and frustration."

Then there usually follow decades of mental and physical habits that further ingrain Ignorance and the suffering it causes into our minds. By the time we encounter the idea that we suffer, like everyone else, because of a very basic way we think, Ignorance has so thoroughly infiltrated our minds that the Buddha's first

two Noble Truths may be incredibly hard to accept. But some people do accept it. We just get tired of all that unhappiness. Then we learn the rest of the Four Noble Truths, that the clinging which causes dukkha can be ended and the way to do that is the Eightfold Path. And here we are.

We still suffer, though, don't we? I implore all of you, though, to look back. Do you have a better idea of why you tend to be unhappy in certain ways than you did when you started your practice? Have some of the habits that caused your dukkha fallen away? Are there more moments of peace and contentment in your life? Please, recognize, acknowledge and celebrate these changes, this *progress* that's happened. And please look for how your practice helped it come about. Why do I so often emphasize this looking back & comparing our lives then & now? Because each bit of improvement in our wellbeing is liberation from dukkha, and by giving the credit due to your practice, you encourage it to grow and earn more freedom for you.

After we've practiced with the *whole* Eightfold Path and lived it for a while, we begin to "get it" in a new way. We *continue* to practice with the Path, as the circumstances of our life demand. By that I mean that our very suffering will begin to guide us to open this chest of remedies we've acquired and pick out the intention, or action, or meditation practice that is wise in meeting this challenge to our wellbeing, and to others'.

As we use these remedies or tools, Insights that help end our dukkha will arise, often at odd moments during our day, just walking down the street or at a time that seems unrelated to our practice. Sometimes I get insights during meditation and I can clearly see what brought them into being, but often I have to intentionally look to see how my practice contributed to this untangling of my mind. We will start to walk the Eightfold Path as we would walk along any path, sometimes with a natural ease or, when the going is rough, with due care and attention. As we go along in our lives on the Path, we keep uprooting this or that cause of dukkha. Our liberation grows.

There are specific practices beyond the Eightfold Path. Different teachings take different approaches to saying just what they are. But from where the graduates our Eightfold Path course are now, the Path leads toward Liberation with a capital "L." That can feel daunting to some people, and you don't really need to think about it. Just keep walking the Path, using what you've learned about it. The two main things to stay conscious of as you go are suffering and the role of the self in it. You don't need anything additional to go forward from here. Life will provide you with plenty to practice with!

One way of looking at our practice beyond the Path is called the Noble Eightfold Path, which is the title of Bikkhu Bodhi's book. It's something different from the Eightfold Path in the course. Thanissaro Bikkhu says in his book, *The Wings to Awakening*, that what *ennobles* our Path is intensive practice with its first part, Wise Understanding, often called Right View. We intensively study our suffering: how the self and Ignorance assert themselves in craving and aversion to cause our dukkha. And, *and* we study how to end it.

We can examine this core assumption about our lives – that we "have" them – using some basic questions, while we're both meditating and going through the day. We just ponder: are we our bodies? Are we our thoughts, or emotions, moods, or attitudes? Our experiences? Our memories? Are our selves us as babies, as

young adults, or as senior citizens? If I had a massive stroke and lost most of my mental abilities, would I still be Me? Which abilities would I need to regain to be fully Me? What does that even mean? And how much of what we believe is projection about what others might think of us?

Relationships are probably the richest area to study dukkha. And that suffering is always tied right to our notion of our selves. Me + you = us. What does *that* mean? Can we identify where in that equation is our clinging, our suffering? Whenever we assume something – anything – about others, Ignorance casts a long shadow. It's hard to function without imagining others' thoughts and feelings, we believe. But is that true? Don't ask me for that answer. You may never find one. The richness of this exploration is in the questions we dare to ask, and how we can live fully without what we normally consider "answers."

In addition to interpersonal relationships there is what can be called our place – or places – in society. We always tend to want to improve these "places," often without very clear ideas of what they are. This whole realm of dukkha is closely tied to our expectations of society and ourselves. Desires that harden into expectation are like muscle cramps, painful and disabling. Not getting the rewards or recognition we feel we deserve can be an ocean of suffering, with a fresh wave of dukkha every day. It can be "their" fault, or ours, or both, ... or maybe there's an entirely different way to think of the situation.

If, as a result of our practice, we have insights into any way we might be contributing to our social discomfort, we might, courageously, confront the source of our expectations about ourselves. We need to be careful, though, not to just try to become some notion of our selves other than the one we already have. Both are just ideals, and unlikely to be realized. Complicating all this is the issue of identity, a social construct foisted upon us and as harmful to all members of a society as "self" is to us as individuals.

Sometimes we get so weighed down and hobbled by our cravings to be other than exactly what we are right now, it's enough to make the heart overflow with compassion. Many people feel it's their duty and right to change society. This is a wholesome effort, one I've made for most of my life. But it can be a quixotic mission, and when it's closely tied to a sense of self-worth, it can lead to discouragement, bitterness, and many other unhelpful states of mind.

Since November, I've had the honor of listening to people grapple with their minds' habits and how they cause suffering in themselves and in their relations with others. We all have mental formulations we've never questioned, where Ignorance has free reign. So many of us live with defense mechanisms that were fashioned by young children. These defenses don't really work for grownups and they cause trouble and then we apply the same unsuitable tools to deal with *that* trouble – and it just keeps snowballing.

Studying the Eightfold Path, practicing with each part of it means we can grasp *new tools* to fix these problems. Many students want to be told which tool to use. During the course I always suggested trying the one we were working with that month, but sometimes that one didn't tackle the problem. The path beyond the Path requires a curiosity about all the tools in the Eightfold box, and the patience to keep trying another or combining some.

We need to be willing to examine the views we hold, and catch the assumptions that prompt certain thoughts or urges. We may need heroic levels of patience to change deeply ingrained habits, especially if they're rooted in painful, ancient experiences. Maybe seeing a therapist would help. But always, keep looking back at your progress so far, to get the faith and determination to keep chipping away at monolithic patterns of mind and conduct. Take breaks if you need to, don't become obsessed or compulsive, and don't give up.

When we intentionally live with the whole Path in all of our experience, we're on the Noble Eightfold Path. Gil Fronsdaal often calls what's after the Eightfold Path the "Tenfold Path." It adds Knowledge and Release to the first eight parts. He says, "Right Knowledge is knowing first-hand the benefits experienced through living the path and the suffering experienced when we don't live the path." We should always be alert to those benefits, which can include greater peace, integrity, freedom and wellbeing. When we have gained these benefits by freeing ourselves from dukkha and then understand how this was done, that's the ninth part of the Path, the Wise Knowledge – recognizing the benefits and what led to them. The more our practice alleviates suffering, the more deeply we understand the cause and effect of dukkha and the more we are liberated.

It isn't uncommon to have some residual fear of letting go of the causes of suffering, especially where it concerns what Gil calls, "our most precious and tenacious attachment to self." He assures us, "Freedom from clinging doesn't diminish us." On the contrary, it breaks down the walls that have kept us squeezed into a small, cramped concept and lets us expand into the fullest engagement with all our experience. Some students asked me what it is we're supposed to let go *into*. Gil says, "letting go of clinging is letting go into peace."

Right Release is what can seem like a mystical notion of Liberation. But it's real. It can consist of dropping this and that harmful habit, all adding up to greater and greater freedom. Or it can be Nibbana, a permanent release of what causes all suffering. This Pali word means a "burning out" of the root cause of clinging, Ignorance itself. The suttas and the millennia of commentary in the different traditions of Buddhism lay out a variety of steps leading to this ultimate Liberation, and they're fascinating to scholars and advanced practitioners. But who knows what steps *you'll* be taking? My approach is to keep looking at the causes of clinging – craving, aversion and Ignorance – and appreciating all progress so far. For me, craving has diminished a lot, aversion somewhat less. And I'm so grateful for every link that's dropped from the chains of dukkha.

May you continue with determination and ever growing peace on the whole Eightfold Path, and beyond.

Thank you.