

## Wise Understanding

By Rebecca Dixon, Alameda Sangha, Nov. 3, 2018

Welcome to this course on the Eightfold Path. I'll be giving a talk on a part of the Path during each of the next eight months. If you want an overview of the Eightfold Path, you might listen to my talk by that title in June of last year. I also recommend the short book by Bikkhu Bodhi entitled The Noble Eightfold Path. You can download a pdf online, or get a kindle or paperback version from Amazon. I especially want to welcome members of the Deaf Community, and thank Judi for making this course accessible.

Tonight we're covering the first part of the Eightfold Path, which is given different names. Many 21<sup>st</sup> Century Westerners object to the more literal translation, Right View, because it sounds dogmatic to them – as if some high authority is saying, “This is how you have to see things.” So let's start with my making quite clear, that is not at all what this is. Buddhism doesn't ask us to adopt *any* set of *beliefs*, and it certainly doesn't encourage clinging to any. It strongly *discourages* that in favor of continuously investigating what's true in the moment. I call the first part of the Eightfold Path “Wise Understanding.” It just says that the Buddhist path is about suffering, or dukkha, and how to end it.

There are objections about calling it Wise Understanding, too, because “wisdom” is often regarded as something almost mystical, a personal quality that you have to acquire in some mysterious way. When I use the word “wisdom” in a dharma talk, I'm referring to a function of our minds that can also be translated from the Pali as “discernment.” It's seeing the difference between this and that; for our purposes tonight, it means seeing “this causes dukkha & that doesn't.” When we understand the teachings in this first part of the Eightfold Path, they will help us discern what leads to suffering in our lives, and what frees us from it.

As we grow up, we acquire ways of understanding things that, when you put them together, form our view of the world. Some of those ways of seeing things, or views, are not factually correct. A common view throughout history is that acquiring things we want will make us content. Many of our views are misunderstandings about *how* things make us happy or unhappy.

Often, all these views don't fit together very well. But, we've come to rely on them and we seldom question them. So the first teachings of the Buddha sought to help us out with this, by pointing to a way of seeing the truth of how things are now, and to discern what's good or bad for us.

Wise Understanding has two major teachings. The first is the law of cause and effect. It's easy to understand that everything that exists in this moment has come into being as the result of causes and conditions that preceded it. The traditional way of teaching causation is the idea of karma. In his second chapter in The Noble Eightfold Path, Bikkhu Bodhi says that karma, or worldly consequences for intentional conduct, is a "mundane right view." It's like an inducement for unsophisticated lay people to behave themselves, and apparently it *sort of* functions that way in the East, like the notion of sin *sort of* does in the West.

The other great teaching of Wise Understanding is what Bikkhu Bodhi calls the "Superior Right View." It's called the Four Noble Truths, which he says this is primarily for monastics. Ironically, in the West, few lay practitioners accept the notion of reincarnation which is so central to traditional teachings on karma. Also, most of us are far more interested in the Four Noble Truths and in the understanding we can unpack from them about dukkha – the unease, dissatisfaction, distress, unhappiness and downright emotional suffering in our lives – or "dukkha." We shouldn't forget the part of Wise Understanding about karma, though, with its emphasis on causation, because that **is** how things work. What exists now was brought into being by what has occurred before. If you have dukkha, something caused it. But what?

This is what the Four Noble Truths tell us. First, they point out what should be obvious but, remarkably, seldom is. Most of us have times when we *suffer*. This is true although we really wish it weren't. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Noble Truth tells us dukkha is *caused* by our tendency to cling to our notions of how we want things to be, despite that fact that things just aren't that way. So now we have Noble Truth 1) the problem and Noble Truth 2) its cause. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Noble Truth tells us that this problem has a solution. And the 4<sup>th</sup> Noble Truth specifies that solution: the Eightfold Path.

So the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path contain each other. To get the benefit of the Eightfold Path, we have to understand why we're following it. What is its *purpose*? It's to solve the problem of dukkha – to free us from what keeps us from being happy. That's a risky way of putting it, because most people think that *things* or *events* make them happy, and I don't want to play into that. What we see from the Four Noble Truths is that the cause of our dukkha is definitely not things or events external to ourselves. It's our own clinging to things that can't be held on to... which is *everything*, because everything is *impermanent*. The entire universe is constantly changing, from the atoms to the galaxies.

Our first task with the Four Noble Truths is to understand suffering – to overcome our desire to just escape the experience of it, to anesthetize or distract or deny our way out of feeling dukkha. We need instead to look it right in the face, with the discernment to see: this is suffering, what I'm experiencing is dukkha. This isn't a one-time exercise, either. This is a multi-level understanding that we acquire over the length of our practice, seeing more and more subtle forms of dukkha that can occur even during the bliss of deep concentration, and beyond. Dukkha is with us until the last moment before complete Enlightenment, like a little bubble that finally bursts, liberating us. That final bursting of our misunderstandings, all those mistaken views we've clung to, is what's called Nirvana.

As we seek constantly to understand dukkha better, we can see where our misunderstandings of how things work have led us astray. We might flatly deny our suffering because we believe it amounts to admitting that we're failures. Or we assume that if we're in love that means we're happy, when our infatuation can mask warning signs in the relationship. The number of false beliefs or views that we can have is incalculable. But there is an autocorrect for them, and that's the 2<sup>nd</sup> Noble Truth: the *cause* of discontent is that we're *clinging*. And underlying what we cling to is our mistaken views.

We waste an inconceivable amount of brain energy trying to make sense of our inconsistent understandings of how our hearts & minds work. And we don't need to. Trying to do that just reinforces the mother root of all our mistaken views: the sense we have of our selves as separate, continuously existing things. The really good news is that we don't *have* to reconcile all our conflicting attitudes.

It's simple. We just need to know that when we're unhappy it's caused by attachment to things or events. And that's it. That's all we need in order to follow the Eightfold Path to freedom from dukkha. We can just forget any other explanation for our suffering, like who said or did what or what we've gained or lost and why we feel the way we do. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Noble Truth is that when we're suffering it's because we just aren't accepting the truth of how things are now. We're fighting reality, clinging to how we think things *ought* to be. Dukkha is caused by clinging: by the cravings and aversions that arise from ignorance, or, in other words, any and all of our misunderstandings.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Noble Truth says we can put an end to dukkha. Somewhat frustratingly, the Buddha never talked about happiness, or said what Nirvana was *like*, except to say that it was the end of suffering. Just take a minute to see if you can imagine what that would be like, to have no distress in your days. To always feel at ease, no matter what happened. See if you can breathe into that feeling: to always feel at ease.

You can have that; we all can. This is what the 3<sup>rd</sup> Noble Truth tells us, and I have to ask, why not? If we built our world view wrong, with lots of mistaken ideas, and it can all be fixed by one simple view – that our suffering is caused by clinging, why not go for it? But, how?

The answer to that is the 4<sup>th</sup> Noble Truth, and the rest of this course. It's a process, and we have to practice with it. A lot. The Buddha laid out a multi-faceted practice for us, and it's called the Eightfold Path.

Now that we Understand what it's all about – suffering – we need to be clear about our *Intention* in following the rest of the Eightfold Path – but we'll cover that next month.

For this coming month, it would be wise to look at ideas you have about happiness and suffering. Maybe just name them, jot them down and come back when you observe them arising in your mind again, perhaps more clearly. Do they cause you dukkha? Or do they support a sense of ease? Are they consistent with the Four Noble Truths? If not, can you let them go?

Please don't expect to experience Nirvana, the burning out of all clinging, to happen as a result of this month's practice. After all, there are seven more parts of this Path. Let's follow them together.