

The Noble Eightfold Path:

Right Livelihood

© Rick Hanson, 2006

"I teach one thing: Suffering and its end." -- The Buddha

Introduction

The Eightfold Path is the fourth of the Buddha's Noble Truths, and it is the way leading to the uprooting of the causes of suffering, and thus to increasingly stable and profound peacefulness, wisdom, virtue, and happiness.

Each of the eight elements of this Path is described by a word that is typically translated as "right" or "wise." Both meanings are useful to reflect upon regarding your own suffering and your yearning for its end. Each element of the Path is right, in the sense of being correct, moral, and a pointed instruction about how to live. Each element is also wise, in the sense of resulting from deep understanding and leading to good results. In keeping with the weight of tradition and the value of the sharp edge of the word, "right," that's what is used in this summary.

The heart of each element of the Path is **non-clinging**: the fundamental cause of the end of suffering.

[Note: Quotations are shown in italics, and in some cases have been edited for brevity, clarity, including female pronouns, etc. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from the Buddha are from Bhikkhu Bodhi's anthology, *In the Buddha's Words*, shown as BW with page number(s).]

Right Livelihood

Introduction

Some of the Buddha's general instructions on householder life are included here, particularly as they pertain to making a living or accumulating wealth. Obviously, many of the considerations of right livelihood and family life would not apply to monks or nuns, who are "homeless," celibate, do not handle money or own property, and never ask for payment of any kind.

Avoiding Wrong Livelihood

The Buddha talked about many of the central themes of his teaching in terms of their negation, such as impermanence, not-self, and non-clinging. He did the same in his explicit description of what constitutes right livelihood:

"These five trades should not be taken up: trading in weapons, living beings, meat, intoxicants, poisons." [BW, 126]

The Sources of Welfare and Happiness in the Present Life

Additionally, the Buddha offered guidance for how a householder should engage the world that have clear implications for right livelihood.

"Four things lead to the welfare and happiness of a family man or woman:

- *The accomplishment of persistent effort - Whatever may be the means by which a person earns a living, he or she is skillful and diligent.*
- *The accomplishment of protection - The person sets up protection and guard over the wealth acquired by energetic striving, amassed by the strength of his or her arms, earned by the sweat of his or her brow, righteous wealth righteously gained.*
- *Good friendship - Wherever one dwells, one associates with people who are of mature virtue and accomplished in faith, moral discipline, generosity, and wisdom, and converses with and emulates them.*
- *Balanced living - A person knows his or her income and expenditures and leads a balanced life, neither extravagant nor miserly, so that income exceeds expenditures rather than the reverse. Just as a goldsmith or his apprentice, holding a up a scale, knows, 'By so much it has dipped down, by so much it has tilted up,' so a family man or woman leads a balanced life." [BW, 124-125]*

"Four other things also lead to a family man's or woman's welfare and happiness in the present life: accomplishment in faith, moral discipline, generosity, and wisdom:

- *Accomplishment in faith - The person places faith in the enlightenment of the Buddha*
- *Accomplishment in moral discipline - The person keeps the five basic precepts (no killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false or harmful speech, or intoxicants leading to carelessness)*
- *Accomplishment in generosity - The person dwells at home with a mind devoid of the stain of stinginess, freely generous, open-handed, delighted in relinquishment, devoted to charity, delighting in giving and sharing.*
- *Accomplishment in wisdom - The person possesses the wisdom that sees into the arising and passing away of phenomena, that is noble and penetrative and leads to the complete destruction of suffering." [BW, 125-126]*

Note the framing of faith, morality, etc. as accomplishments, as character traits in which one can become increasingly effective, skillful, and masterful. This reflects the fundamental theme in Buddhism of a progressive process of growing skillfulness. In other words, we all have the opportunity for spiritual realization - even of the

highest sort - and we are the ones who are responsible for making use of that opportunity.

The Proper Use of Wealth

"With wealth acquired by energetic striving, amassed by the strength of his or her arms, earned by the sweat of his or her brow, righteous wealth righteously gained, the noble disciple undertakes four worthy deeds:

- *He makes himself happy and pleased and properly maintains himself in happiness, and he does the same for his parents, wife and children, workers and servants, and friends and colleagues.*
- *He makes provisions against the losses that might arise on account of fire and floods, kings and bandits and unloved heirs; he makes himself secure against them.*
- *He makes the five kinds of offerings: to relatives, guests, ancestors, the king, and the devas [religious spirits].*
- *He establishes a lofty offering of alms to those ascetics and Brahmins [noble beings] who refrain from vanity and negligence, who are settled in patience and gentleness, who are devoted to taming themselves, to calming themselves, and to attaining Nibbana - an offering that is heavenly, resulting in happiness, conducive to heaven.*

For anyone whose wealth is expended on other things apart from these four worthy deeds, that wealth is said to have to waste, to have been squandered and used frivolously. But for anyone whose wealth is expended on these four worthy deeds, that wealth is said to have gone to good use, to have been fruitfully applied and used for a worthy cause." [BW 126-127]

Avoiding the Dissipation of Wealth

"Wealth has four sources of dissipation: womanizing, drunkenness, gambling, and evil friendship." [BW 125]

The Happiness of a Householder

"There are four kinds of happiness which may be achieved by a layperson who enjoys sensual pleasures, depending on time and occasion:

- *The happiness of possession - When a person thinks, 'I possess wealth acquired by energetic striving, amassed by the strength of his or her arms, earned by the sweat of his or her brow, righteous wealth righteously gained,' he or she experiences happiness or joy.*
- *The happiness of enjoyment - When a person thinks, 'I enjoy my wealth and do meritorious deeds,' he or she experiences happiness or joy.*
- *The happiness of freedom from debt - When a person thinks, 'I am not indebted to anyone to any degree, whether small or great,' he or she experiences happiness or joy.*

- *The happiness of blamelessness - When a person thinks, 'I am endowed with blameless conduct of body, speech, and mind,' he or she experiences happiness or joy.* [BW 127-128]

How to Cultivate Right Livelihood

- Mindfulness of the body - By remaining aware of the body, you can stay present with the people and the activities involved in your work.
- Not clinging to self - By relaxing attachment to "me and mine," by not getting identified with views, by seeing oneself and others as simply parts of one whole thing, then one will be more likely to be caring and moral in one's work.
- Avoiding harms to oneself and others - We typically focus on avoiding harms that have to do with outcomes, with the results of our work, and that is certainly good. Additionally, consider avoiding the harms that have to do with the process or manner of our work, such as how we represent ourselves in the world, or do business, or speak with customers or colleagues.
- Tend to the mental dimension - Note the frequent reference to blameless conduct of mind. It's relatively easy to act well in one's speech and outward behavior. But being blameless in thought or inner feeling: hmm, that is a much greater challenge - yet having a blameless mind will probably bring much greater benefit to you and others than blameless speech or behavior.
- Focus on the fundamental causes (and that's all anyone can really do):
"Buddhism teaches us to make earnest efforts in the things we do, but our actions should not be mixed with desire. They should be performed with the aim of letting go and realizing nonattachment. We do what we need to do, but with letting go. We do our work according to our responsibilities [rather than because of a wish to get something]. If we act like this, we can be at ease. . . . It's a matter of making causes. If the causes are good, the result is bound to be good. If we think like this, there will be lightness of mind. This is called right livelihood."
 Ajahn Chah, Being Dharma, pps. 118-119