

## The Noble Eightfold Path, Talk 3

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This is the third talk on the Noble Eightfold Path. Today I will be talking about the moral discipline group, which consists of Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. In the Serene Reflection Meditation (Soto Zen) tradition, the 16 Precepts would need to be included in what we think of as moral discipline. These are the Three Refuges, the Three Pure Precepts and the Ten Great Precepts. As Right Understanding deepens, as we are able to let go of whatever arises, and trust more, following the guidelines set out on the Path and in the 16 Precepts becomes what we would naturally do. Right Understanding leads to Right Thought and they both lead to Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. If in our thoughts we indulge in greed, anger and delusion, our speech and actions will be very much influenced by that. We all have our karmic tendencies, our habits, our conditioning, views, etc. We have the self to look at and let go of as best we can. Even when we have some experience of the Truth, we still have much work to do and need these guidelines to help us.

In studying the Eightfold Path what comes through very clearly for me is the Buddha's great compassion. He is truly teaching us how we can find the cessation of suffering and the joy of awakening. It isn't easy to follow this Path and we need to be very kind to and accepting of ourselves.

Bhikkhu Bodhi says something interesting in his book, *The Noble Eightfold Path*: "Though the principles laid down in this section restrain immoral actions and promote good conduct, their ultimate purpose is not so much ethical as spiritual. They are not prescribed merely as guides to action, but primarily as aids to mental purification. As a necessary measure for human well-being, ethics has its own justification in the Buddha's teaching and its importance cannot be underrated. But in the special context of the Noble Eightfold Path ethical principles are subordinate to the path's governing goal, final deliverance from suffering." In the deepest sense moral discipline is not for the sake of becoming a better "self" but for the sake of being one with the Truth or Buddha Nature, living from our Buddha Nature, letting go of all that gets in the way, and acting as a Buddha would act.

Bhikkhu Nyanasobhano points out in his book, *Longing for Certainty*, something in my mind that is similar: The Venerable Ananda once asked the Buddha about the benefit and advantage of good moral habits. The Buddha replied that it was nonremorse. I think we can all relate to this and its opposite, which is, of course, remorse. Questioned further about the benefit of non-remorse, the Buddha said the benefit of non-remorse is gladness, which leads to rapture, to tranquility, happiness, concentration, realistic knowledge and vision, revulsion and dispassion [towards clinging to worldly things that are impermanent and create suffering], and the

knowledge and vision of deliverance. “Clearly the Buddha is describing here not just the blessings of miscellaneous virtues but a definite progression of wholesome states which leads on to full emancipation [or awakening]. The morality, the consistently good behavior which he so often emphasizes, certainly has many good consequences in the development of a person’s character and in pleasant relations with other people; but it is interesting that here the Buddha singles out non-remorse as its particular benefit and advantage. Why should what seems merely a lack of something be deemed noteworthy? Let us consider the mental effects of self-restraint, moral discipline, and honorable adherence to noble standards. When one is training oneself in this way, evil causes are removed. There is then no regret, no guilty apprehension or grief based on ignoble deeds. Not doing harm, not causing misery to living beings, one has no fear of bad consequences, no self-disgust, no regrets to struggle with. This is a perfectly natural result. Being conscious, moreover, of having done right, having strived to become a better person, one feels mental relief and lightness— a kind of freedom which is a positive blessing in itself.”

When we keep to the Precepts as best we can, trying to let go of the grip of our karmic tendencies, we lessen the misery caused by their breakage. We all probably know the mental suffering caused by breaking the Precepts, especially if it is done deliberately. As we go on, we see in more subtle ways how much our thoughts, speech and actions affect our level of suffering. Moral discipline can then be seen as how we act outwardly and also how we become inwardly. Moral discipline allows us to be in harmony with ourselves and with others; it helps us to cleanse our karma and not create more karma. It allows us to be at peace.

Now I would like to focus on Right Speech, the third path factor. Five of our Ten Great Precepts are concerned in some way with Right Speech: Do not say that which is not true, Do not sell the wine of delusion, Do not speak against others, Do not be proud of yourself and devalue others, and Do not defame the Three Treasures of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

The Buddha taught that there are four types of speech that must be avoided when one wishes to know the Truth: false speech or lying, saying that which is not true; slanderous speech; crude or harsh speech; and idle chatter. The four types of speech to cultivate are: truthful speech; uplifting, kind speech; gentle speech; and moderate, useful speech. In *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness*, Bhante Gunaratana describes what the Buddha said about truthful speech: “The Buddha described the guidelines by which he himself decided whether to speak or remain silent. If he knew something was untrue, incorrect, or not beneficial, he would not say it. ‘Such speech [the Buddha] does not utter,’ he said. If he knew that something was true, correct, and beneficial, then “[the Buddha] knows the time to use such speech.” When his words were true, correct, beneficial, and timely, the Buddha spoke regardless of whether his words would be ‘unwelcome and disagreeable to others’ or ‘welcome and agreeable to others.’ Deeply compassionate and fully focused on people’s well-being, the Buddha never spoke only to be a ‘people-pleaser.’” [Bhante Gunaratana goes on to say]: “We can learn much from his example. When I am tempted

to speak words that do not meet the Buddha's guidelines, I remind myself that I gain nothing by speaking, nor does anyone else gain, and nobody loses by my keeping quiet." This Teaching is something well worth contemplating. It encourages compassion and consideration for others.

To follow the Buddha's guidelines for Right Speech, one needs to be very mindful. Nobody gains anything when we react negatively without thinking first, to what someone has just said to us. It just creates more suffering for everyone. Mindfulness gives us the opportunity to see what we are about to say and refrain from saying it if it is harmful. It is the non-existent, insubstantial self that feels threatened and feels a need to defend and protect itself. And it is the self we are trying to let go of.

I read that truthful speech (that is beneficial and timely) is very important to our training because we are seeking the Truth in following this Path and to deliberately lie goes against that very Truth we are seeking. Besides being very harmful to our own training, it can be very harmful to others. Venerable Master Hsing Yun says in his book, *Being Good*: "Lying is particularly reprehensible because lying is a deliberate attempt to increase delusion. Most people are already lost in delusion; to deliberately add to the problem is to turn away from the bodhisattva way and from the infinite compassion that inspires it. Lying is very damaging because it ruins trust and it causes honest people to doubt their own intuitions. The Buddha called lying one of the ten evil deeds and he made it the subject of one of his five basic precepts." I know for myself how lying and deceit can confuse the mind of those who are lied to and cause them to doubt their own instincts. I think that it's pretty obvious what slanderous speech and harsh speech are like. But idle chatter may need some explanation. Master Hsing Yun quotes from the *Yogacarabhumi Sasta* about idle chatter: "Idle speech can be defined as one of the following: false speech, ill-timed speech, speech without significance, speech employing inaccurate terms, thoughtless speech, raucous speech, disorganized speech, pointless speech, speech with no larger meaning, or speech that contradicts the Dharma. Idle speech gives no value to others. It is a waste of time to listen to. One who frequently engages in idle speech is in danger of creating dangerous attachments to this world of delusion." Whether speech is considered idle chatter or not depends in my mind on the motivation and purpose of such speech. When our speech comes from a good motive and is grounded in our training, then I wouldn't call it idle chatter if we are simply talking with each other and enjoying each other's company, relaxing with others, promoting friendship, helping someone to feel comfortable. If it isn't really grounded in our training and is self-centered, comes from a feeling of neediness, a desire to get people to like us, reassure us, admire us, or just to hear ourselves speak, then it is good to look at these inclinations and think before we speak. When we speak from a sense of neediness, worthlessness, wanting reassurance or something from others, we are denying our own completeness just as we are, denying our own Buddha Nature. We're reinforcing the delusion that we don't have all we need already.

The fourth Path factor is Right Action. According to the Path, Right Action would include

refraining from killing, stealing and sexual misconduct. Not indulging in intoxicants is sometimes included as well. If we added “Do not be angry,” all our Precepts would be included in the Eightfold Path. Right Action is not only thought of in terms of refraining from that which causes harm, but doing that which encourages harmony and the well-being of ourselves and others. We do that which encourages compassion, caring about others, respect for all things. The Brahmaviharas or what has also been called the Four Immeasurables could be considered part of Right Thought and Right Action because they can arise naturally from our Buddha Nature and can be encouraged through our ongoing training. They are: lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy (rejoicing in the good fortune of others, and equanimity. The Six Paramitas can also be studied in terms of Right Action. They are: generosity, Precepts, patience, vigor, meditation, and wisdom, which we can encourage and are also the natural result of our training. We can practice the Paramitas no matter how we may be feeling. Rev. Master Meian has often encouraged us to be kind.

Another aspect of Right Action is “doing that which needs to be done.” What needs to be done does not mean making a list and then trying to get everything on that list done, but doing what truly needs to be done, that which comes out of our meditation, the coming together of compassion and wisdom. This would include the willingness to do what needs to be done, because we don’t always want to do the “right” thing. We may want to rest instead or do something we might find more enjoyable, easier or less stressful. And yet there it is in front of us calling to us. I’ll give you an example of what arose for me yesterday morning. I have been so focused on preparing this series of talks that I have felt I can’t do anything else. I can’t volunteer for other things that need doing, or only minimally. And then this morning I realized that this attitude was encouraging Right Action. Perhaps this talk I’m working on doesn’t have to be perfect or the most wonderful talk ever, and it is more important to be less focused on myself and my talk and more aware of what is needed within the community. Everyone is very busy and I need to help out. It is seeing the bigger picture and not being so focused on what I might think is so important or my worry over not getting something done. It doesn’t help to talk about Right Action when I’m not practicing it. It’s also trusting that what truly needs to be done will get done if we open to compassion and wisdom, when we get our own agenda out of the way. What prevents us from doing what is “good” to do at this moment? Worry is a big factor, also fear, our karmic tendencies; greed, anger and delusion, pressure, getting locked into something, opinions, caring what others think about us, trying to please. Meditation, mindfulness and the willingness to see our humanity and shortcomings with kindness can help us to overcome these obstacles. Also seeing the results of our actions, the suffering we create for ourselves and others can help us see what we are doing and motivate us to change.

The fifth Path factor is Right Livelihood and this factor could use some explanation. Bhikkhu Bodhi says: “Right Livelihood is concerned with ensuring that one earns one’s living in a righteous way. For a lay disciple the Buddha teaches that wealth should be gained in accordance

with certain standards. One should acquire it only by legal means, not illegally; one should acquire it peacefully without coercion or violence; one should acquire it honestly, not by trickery or deceit; and one should acquire it in ways which do not entail harm and suffering for others. The Buddha mentions five specific kinds of livelihood which bring harm to others and are therefore to be avoided : dealing in weapons, in living beings (including raising animals for slaughter as well as slave trade and prostitution), in meat production and butchery, in poisons, and in intoxicants.” Any occupation that would require someone to break the Precepts should be avoided. Even with avoiding the occupations mentioned by the Buddha and others we might think of in the 21st century, it is not always clear if certain work situations are Right Livelihood. Some work in and of itself might be considered Right Livelihood, but the conditions in the workplace are not suitable and encourage someone to break the Precepts. I spoke with one of our lay trainees a number of years ago. He had worked in an office where it was encouraged to be deceitful, to lie to clients. He had taken the Precepts and didn’t want to lie; however he didn’t know what would happen to him if he went against what was expected. He finally made the decision not to lie or be deceitful. He just quietly went about his work honestly without judging or criticizing others. People first wondered about him, but then gradually they were drawn to him and they stopped lying as well. The whole atmosphere in the office changed.

You might find it helpful to read the section on Right Livelihood in *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness*. Bhante Gunaratana gives some good advice about how to know if work is Right Livelihood or not. Some questions he recommends asking yourself are: “First is my job an inherently wrong occupation? That is, does it cause harm by definition?... Second, does my job lead me to break the five moral precepts? [For us it would be the 16 Precepts.]... Finally, are there other aspects of my job that disturb me and keep my mind from settling down?” Rev. Master Daizui mentions in *Buddhism From Within* another aspect of work that might be worth looking at: Is the work I’m doing utterly useless? It may not be doing any harm, but does it do any good whatsoever? I would add that the important thing about work that is Right Livelihood for you is to remember to do the training within your work situation and not to see your work as separate from the rest of your life.