

The Noble Eightfold Path

The noble eightfold path is the most standard description of the Buddhist way of practice. The Buddha taught it to his first disciples and to his last [§240; see original article cited at end of this excerpt], as well as to the majority of those in between. It is called noble because when all of its factors come together in a fully developed form, they stand on the threshold to stream-entry, the first of the noble or transcendent attainments.

The image of "path" used for the factors of this set has two major implications (which we have already encountered in II/D).

First, the image implies that these factors are means to an end, not an end in themselves; second, they lead to, rather than cause, the goal.

In the context of this set, this image has two levels of meaning: On the beginning level, the path is a series of qualities that one must consciously develop, step by step, in order to bring oneself nearer to the goal. On the ultimate or "noble" level, it is a convergence of those qualities, fully developed, within the mind at the point of non-fashioning, leading inexorably to the Deathless. On the beginning level, one must work at following the path, but on the noble level the path becomes a vehicle that delivers one to the goal.

The eight factors of the noble eightfold path fall under the three "aggregates" of discernment, virtue, and concentration (*pañña-khandha*, *sila-khandha*, *samadhi-khandha*): right view and right resolve fall under the discernment aggregate; right speech, right action, and right livelihood under the virtue aggregate; and right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration under the concentration aggregate.

Passage §105 states that although the factors of the noble path fall under these three aggregates, the three aggregates do not fall under the factors of the noble path. What this means is that not every instance of discernment, virtue, or concentration within the mind would count as a factor of the noble path. To begin with, there are such things as wrong virtue, wrong concentration, and wrong discernment [see, for example, §152]. Secondly, even right virtue, concentration, and discernment count as noble only when brought to a level of advanced development. This point is reflected in §106, which distinguishes mundane and noble levels for each factor of the path. Even though the mundane factors counteract blatant cases of wrong view, wrong resolve, etc., they still are conjoined with subtle levels of mental effluents and can lead to further becoming.

Nevertheless, one must first nurture the mundane levels of the eight factors before they can develop into their noble counterparts.

On the mundane level, the first five factors of the path correspond to the faculty of conviction. Right view on this level means believing in the principle of kamma and trusting that those who have practiced properly truly understand the workings of kamma in this life and the next. In the Buddha's words, this level of right view holds that "There is what is given, what is offered, what is sacrificed. There are fruits and results of good and bad actions. There is this world and the next world. There is mother and father. There are spontaneously reborn beings; there are contemplatives and brahmans who, faring rightly and practicing rightly, proclaim this world and the next after having directly known and realized it for themselves." What this passage means is that there is merit in generosity; the moral qualities of good and bad are inherent parts of the cosmos, and not simply social conventions; there is life after death; one has a true moral debt to one's parents; and there are people who have lived the renunciate's life properly in such a way that they have gained true and direct knowledge of these matters. These beliefs are the minimum prerequisites for following the path to skillfulness, as they necessarily underlie any solid conviction in the principle of kamma.

Mundane levels of right resolve then build on right view, as one resolves to act in ways that will not create bad kamma; mundane right speech, right action, and right livelihood result naturally as one follows through with one's resolve. Right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration on this level correspond to the faculties of persistence, mindfulness, and concentration. Right concentration, in turn, provides a basis for insight into the four noble truths, which counts both as the faculty of discernment and the noble level of right view.

Once right view reaches the noble level, it brings the remaining factors of the path up to the noble level as well. One of the striking features of this level of the path is that it consists primarily of discernment and concentration [see the "qualities that are to be developed" in §111], with the boundaries between the two increasingly blurred. The noble level of right resolve, part of the discernment aggregate, consists of directed thought, evaluation, and mental singleness, all of which are factors of jhāna. The noble level of right speech, right action, and right livelihood differ from the mundane levels of those factors in that the emphasis here is on the state of mind of the person abstaining from wrong speech, action, and livelihood . . .

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