

The Noble Eightfold Path: The Buddhist Middle Way for Mankind¹

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1. Introduction

The Noble Eightfold Path is considered to be the heart of Buddhist traditional practice in the contemporary world. The Eight-Fold Path is the fourth of the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Truth of Suffering, the Cause of suffering, the Cessation of Suffering, and the Path leading to the Cessation of Suffering.² To comprehend the Four Noble truths is to comprehend all things as they really are. In order to attain this ultimate knowledge, one needs to walk regarding to the right path which will make one overcome pain and grief, and completely eradicate all suffering.

Herein, it is a critical survey of such significant doctrine among the Theravadin Buddhist scriptures particularly in the Pāli canon; The Mahā Satipatthānasutta of the **Dīghanikāya**, and the Saccavibhaṅgasutta of the **Majjhimanikāya** have described the Eightfold Path more in details. Accompanied by the Dhammacakkappavattanasutta of the **Saṃyuttanikāya**, and the **Vibhaṅga** as a viewpoint of abhidhamma. Furthermore, the exposition in the **Aṭṭhasālinī** is added at the end to clarify some aspect.

2. The Dīghanikāya³

The Noble Eightfold Path derived from Pāli term:- Aṭṭhaṅgika-magga or Ariya Aṭṭhaṅgika-magga in full form. It is, sometimes, means factors or constituents of the Path. In the Mahā Satipatthānasutta, the Exalted One stated “Aṭṭhaṅgika-magga” and pointed out each factor of the Path along with their sub-element:

And what, bhikkhus, is the Aryan Truth concerning the Way that leads to the Cessation of Ill?

This is that Aryan Eight fold Path, to wit:- right view; right aspiration; right speech; right doing; right livelihood; right effort; right mindfulness; right rapture.

I. Right View (Sammādiṭṭhi)

And what, bhikkhus, is right view?

- 1) Knowledge, bhikkhus, about Ill (dukkha),
- 2) knowledge about the coming to be of Ill (dukkha-samudaya),
- 3) knowledge about the cessation of Ill (dukkha-nirodha),

¹ Sanu Mahatthanadull, Ph.D., “**The Noble Eightfold Path: The Buddhist Middle Way for mankind**”, Selected Works in Buddhist Scriptures, Teaching Document, (IBSC: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2014) (Mimeographed).

² Vin.I.9; S.V.421; Vbh.99.

³ D.II.312-314.

4) knowledge about the Way that leads to the cessation of Ill (dukkha-nirodha-gāminī paṭipadā).

This is what is called right view.

II. Right Aspiration (Sammāsaṅkappa)

And what, bhikkhus, is right aspiration?

- 1) The aspiration towards renunciation⁴ (nekkhamma-saṅkappa),
- 2) the aspiration towards benevolence (abyāpāda-saṅkappa),
- 3) the aspiration towards kindness (avihiṃsā-saṅkappa).

This is what is called right aspiration.

III. Right Speech (Sammāvācā)

And what, bhikkhus, is right speech?

- 1) Abstaining from lying (musāvāda),
- 2) [abstaining from] slander (pisuṇāvācā),
- 3) [abstaining from] abuse (pharusavācā)
- 4) [abstaining from] idle talk (samphappalāpa).

This is what is called right speech.

IV. Right Doing (Sammākammanta)

And what, bhikkhus, is right doing?

- 1) Abstaining from taking life (pāṇātipāta),
- 2) [abstaining from] taking what is not given (adinnādāna),
- 3) [abstaining from] carnal indulgence (kāmesumicchācāra).

This is what is called right doing.

V. Right Livelihood (Sammā-ājīva)

And what, bhikkhus, is right livelihood?

Herein, O bhikkhus, the Aryan disciple having put away wrong livelihood, supports himself by right livelihood.

VI. Right Effort (Sammāvāyāma)

And what, bhikkhus, is right effort?

1) Herein, O bhikkhus, a brother makes effort in bringing forth will that evil and bad states that have not arisen within him may not arise, to that end he stirs up energy, he grips and forces his mind.

2) That he may put away evil and bad states that have arisen within him he puts forth will, he makes effort, he stirs up energy, he grips and forces his mind.

3) That good states which have not arisen may arise he puts forth will, he makes effort, he stirs up energy, he grips and forces his mind.

4) That good states which have arisen may persist, may not grow blurred, may multiply, grow abundant, develop and come to perfection, he puts forth will, he makes effort, he stirs up energy, he grips and forces his mind.

This is what is called right effort.

VII. Right Mindfulness (Sammāsati)

And what, bhikkhus, is right mindfulness?

⁴ Nekkhamma:- giving up the world; escape from sensuality; absence of greed; independence of sensual desire and pleasures; self-denial; self-abnegation. — Phra Brahmagunabhorn (P.A. Payutto), **Dictionary of Buddhism**, 16th ed., (Bangkok: S.R.Printing Mass Product Ltd., 2008), p. 333.

1) Herein, O bhikkhus, a brother, as to the body, continues so to look upon the body, that remains ardent, self-possessed and mindful, having overcome both the hankering and the dejection common in the world.

2) And in the same way as to feelings,

3) thoughts and

4) ideas,

he so looks upon each, that he remains ardent, self-possessed and mindful, having overcome the hankering and the dejection that is common in the world.

This is what is called right mindfulness.

VIII. Right Rapture (Sammāsamādhi)

And what, bhikkhus, is right rapture?

1) Herein, O bhikkhus, a brother, aloof from sensuous appetites, aloof from evil ideas, enters into and abides in the **First Jhāna**, wherein there is cogitation and deliberation, which is born of solitude and is full of joy and ease,

2) Suppressing cogitation and deliberation, he enters into and abides in the **Second Jhāna**, which is self-evoked, born of concentration, full of joy and ease, in that, set free from cogitation and deliberation, the mind grows calm and sure, dwelling on high.

3) And further, disenchanted with joy, he abides calmly contemplative while, mindful and self-possessed, he feels in his body that ease whereof Aryans declare “He that is calmly contemplative and aware, he dwelleth at ease.” So does he enter into and abide in the **Third Jhāna**.

4) And further, by putting aside ease and by putting aside malaise, by the passing away of the happiness and of the melancholy he used to feel, he enters into and abides in the **Fourth Jhāna**, rapture of utter purity of mindfulness and equanimity, wherein neither ease is felt nor any ill.

This is what is called right rapture.

As mentioned earlier that the Noble Path is a part of the Four Noble Truths. Consequently, a detailed description framework was contained in a part of “the Path” here in Mahā Satipatthānasutta. From the sutta, all eight factors of the Path start with the word “right”, which is translated from the word sammā of the Pāli language. The word Samma means “proper”, “whole”, “thorough”, “complete”, “ideal” and “perfect” etc. As such, it implies the Eightfold balanced training;

Right View⁵ denotes the right way of seeing towards the Four Noble Truth,

Right Aspiration⁶ implies the renunciation from the mundane life, a commitment to non-violence, or harmlessness towards all sentient beings,

Right Speech connotes the avoiding the four kinds of wrong speech,

Right Doing⁷ deals with the avoiding the four kinds of wrong doing,

Right Livelihood means supporting oneself by an ethical livelihood, or wealth obtained through rightful means,

⁵ Right view can sometime be translated as “right perspective”, “right outlook” or “right understanding”.

⁶ Right aspiration can also be known as “right intent”, “right intention”, right thought”, “right motives”, “right resolve”, “right conception” or “the exertion of our own will to change”.

⁷ Right doing can also be translated as “right action” or “right conduct”.

Right Effort⁸ means the effort to prevent and abandon the unwholesome, and to develop and maintain wholesome,

Right Mindfulness⁹ concerns with the practice regarding to the Four Foundations of Mindfulness,

Right Rapture¹⁰ involves with the four states of serene contemplation attained by meditation (Jhāna).

3. The Majjhimanikāya¹¹

Not only the Dīghanikāya but in the discourse on the analysis of the truths (Saccavibhaṅgasutta) of the Majjhima Nikāya that contained the explanation' framework of the Noble Path. At one time that Sāriputta Thera, the chief disciple of the Buddha, spoke to the monks about the matchless wheel of dhamma set rolling by the Tathāgata. The dhamma of the Four Noble Truths; the ariyan truth of anguish. . . of the ariyan truth of the course leading to the stopping of anguish.¹² He said the words:

*And what, your reverences, is the ariyan truth of the course leading to the stopping of anguish? It is this ariyan Eightfold Way itself, that is to say: right view, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right mode of livelihood, right endeavour, right mindfulness, right concentration.*¹³

The detailed explanations of Sāriputta Thera henceforth, are in line with what the Buddha has explained in The Mahā Satipatthāna Suttanta of The Dīgha Nikāya. Therefore, it will not be shown here again.

4. The Saṃyuttanikāya

The Buddha's verse in the first Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion (Dhammacakkappavattanasutta) of The Saṃyuttanikāya, shows the eight constituents of Noble Path namely;- "*right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration*"¹⁴ However, such Path is reckoned the middle way due to the fact that it escapes from the two extremes. The two extremes are, on the one side, sensual indulgence, on the other, self-mortification:

Bhikkhus, these two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth into homelessness. What two?

⁸ Right effort also be translated as "right endeavor", "right striving" or "right diligence".

⁹ Right mindfulness can also translated as "right awareness", "right memory" or "right attention".

¹⁰ Right rapture also known as "right meditation" or "right concentration".

¹¹ M.I.61., M.III.251-252.

¹² M.I.61., M.III.249.

¹³ M.III.251.

¹⁴ SN.V.421

- 1) The pursuit of sensual happiness sensual pleasures, which is low, vulgar, the way of worldings, ignoble, unbeneficial*
*2) and the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, unbeneficial.*¹⁵

It is evident that Buddha suggests his disciple to avoid of the two extremes. The Exalted One then says “Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathāgata has awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna”¹⁶ In addition, Phussa elders’ verse also shows “develop the eight-fold way”¹⁷, attaining the undying state.”¹⁸

Thus the Noble Eightfold Path is called the middle way. Because it escapes from the two despicable extremes, moreover it gives a common sense of “proper” that is neither too strict as extreme asceticism nor too lessen as extreme hedonism. As a consequence, to follow the middle path, the practitioners need to keep balance between body side and mental side by providing proper nutrition into our physical body, and training our mind according to the right path. Of this empirical study, human can attain an ultimate knowledge of the nature surround them.

5. The Vibhaṅga¹⁹

An analysis according to abhidhamma as stated in the Vibhaṅga:

- 1) Therein what is **right view**?

That which is wisdom, understanding, absence of dullness, truth investigation, right view, truth investigation-enlightenment-factor, path constituent, included in the path. This is called right view.

- 2) Therein what is **right thought**?

That which is mentation, thinking, thought, fixation, focusing, application of the mind, right thought, path constituent, included in the path. This is called right thought.

- 3) Therein what is **right speech**?

That which is avoiding, desisting from, refraining from, abstaining from, not committing, not doing, being guiltless of, not over-stepping the limit of, destroying the causeway to the four verbal wrong actions: right speech, path constituent, included in the path. This is called right speech.

- 4) Therein what is **right action**?

That which is avoiding, desisting from, refraining from, abstaining from, not committing, not doing, being guiltless of, not over-stepping the limit of, destroying the causeway to the three wrong bodily actions; right action, path constituent, included in the path. This is called right action.

¹⁵ SN.V. 421.

¹⁶ SN.V. 421.

¹⁷ Atṭhaṅgika-magga.

¹⁸ Thag. 980.

¹⁹ Vbh.235-237.

5) Therein what is **right livelihood**?

That which is avoiding, desisting from, refraining from, abstaining from, not committing, not doing, being guiltless of, not over-stepping the limit of, destroying the causeway to the wrong livelihood: right livelihood, path constituent, included in the path. This is called right livelihood.

6) Therein what is **right effort**?

That which is the arousing of mental energy, right effort, energy-enlightenment-factor, path constituent, included in the path. This is called right effort.

7) Therein what is **right mindfulness**?

That which is mindfulness, constant mindfulness, right mindfulness, mindfulness-enlightenment-factor, path constituent, included in the path. This is called right mindfulness.

8) Therein what is **right concentration**?

That which is stability of consciousness, right concentration, concentration-enlightenment-factor, path constituent, included in the path. This is called right concentration.

This is called the Eight Constituent Path. (As also are) The remaining states associated with the Eight Constituent Path.

From the abhidhamma aspect, the enlightenment-factors (Bojjhaṅga) were mentioned in some of the Eight Constituent Path.

6. The Aṭṭhasālīnī (Dhammasaṅgaṇī Aṭṭhakathā)

Right speech is beautiful or praiseworthy speech, a name for abstinence from wrong speech by the complete severance of misconduct in speech. It has comprehension as its characteristic, abstaining (from wrong speech) as its function, the putting away of wrong speech as its manifestation.

, **Right action** is beautiful or praiseworthy action, a name for abstinence from life-taking, and so on, by the complete severance of wrong action. Its characteristic is the production of, or striving after, or the rousing of associated states for good action, its function is abstinence (from wrong action), its manifestation is the putting away of wrong action.

, **Right livelihood** is beautiful or praiseworthy livelihood, a name for abstinence from Wrong livelihood. It has purification²⁰ as its characteristic, suitable maintenance of life as its function, the putting away of wrong livelihood as its manifestation. Or, the characteristic, etc., here are to be understood by what has been said on the three abstinences.²¹

The Eightfold Path is a path of Virtue, Concentration and Wisdom. There are three factors that develop virtue: 3) Right Speech 4) Right Action 5) Right Livelihood. Three additional factors contribute to the development of concentration: 6) Right Effort 7) Right Mindfulness 8) Right Concentration. The remaining two

²⁰ “of the living being, of associated states, or of life.” – see footnote 5, Buddhaghosa, **The Expositor (Aṭṭhasālīnī)**, Vol. II., tr. Maung Tin, (London: The Oxford University Press, 1921), p. 293.

²¹ DhsA. 217.

factors contribute to the development of wisdom: 1) Right View 2) Right thought. As shown in the following table:

The Noble Eightfold Path		The Threefold Training
1. Right View		Wisdom
2. Right thought		
3. Right Speech		Ethical Conduct
4. Right Action		
5. Right Livelihood		
6. Right Effort		Mental Development
7. Right Mindfulness		
8. Right Concentration		

The Noble Eightfold Path covers the threefold training: *sīla*; *citta*; and *paññā*. Moreover it simultaneously interrelate with the Four Noble Truths, that is to say the Noble Eightfold Path is the last constituent of the Four Noble Truths, the truth of the path, likewise the understanding of the Four Noble Truths are the first constituent of the Noble Eightfold Path, right view. Thus the two doctrines integrate one another in this manner.

Apart from the scriptures cited here, reader may study further on the commentaries as well as the *Visuddhimaga* (The Path of Purification) for a systematic exposition of the practice of the path.

7. Conclusion

The Noble Eightfold Path is known as “middle way” or “middle path” because of the right practical way. As such it lies between the two extremes; neither too lessen as hedonism nor too strict as asceticism. On the other hand, the Noble Eightfold Path covers the threefold training which is the teachings of the Buddha in a very large scale. This is a perfectly balanced Middle Way for mankind.

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