

Bodhi Leaf Publication No. 32

The Threefold Division of the Noble Eightfold Path

Piyadassi Thera



BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY



The Threefold Division of the Noble Eightfold Path

by

Piyadassi Thera

Buddhist Publication Society
Kandy • Sri Lanka

Bodhi Leaves No. 32.

Reprint from *The Buddha's Ancient Path*

With the kind permission of the publishers, Rider & Company, London.

BPS Online Edition © (2010)

Digital Transcription Source: BPS Transcription Project

For free distribution. This work may be republished, reformatted, reprinted and redistributed in any

medium. However, any such republication and redistribution is to be made available to the public on a free and unrestricted basis, and translations and other derivative works are to be clearly marked as such.

The Threefold Division of the Noble Eightfold Path

W

hile lying on his deathbed, addressing the disciples the Buddha said: “The Doctrine and the Discipline (*dhamma-vinaya*) which I have set forth and laid down for you, let them, after I am gone, be your teacher.” [1]

From this it is quite clear that the Buddha’s way of life, his religious system, comprises the doctrine and the discipline. Discipline implies moral excellence, the taming of the tongue and the bodily actions, the code of conduct taught in Buddhism. This is generally known as *sīla*, virtue or moral training. The doctrine deals with man’s mental training, taming of the mind. It is meditation or the development of Mental Concentration, *samādhi*, and Wisdom, *paññā*. These three, Virtue, Concentration and Wisdom, are the cardinal teachings which when carefully and fully cultivated raise man from lower to higher levels of mental life; lead him from darkness to light, from passion to dispassion, from turmoil to tranquillity.

These three are not isolated reactions, but integral parts of the Path. This idea is crystallised in the clear admonition of the Enlightened Ones of all ages —“Cease from all evil; cultivate the good; cleanse your own mind.” [2]

These oft-quoted but ever fresh words convey briefly the Message of the Master indicating the path to purification and deliverance. The path, however, is generally referred to as the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo*). Though some prefer to call this the Ariyan Eightfold Path, it may be noted that the term ariyan does not stand here for any race, caste, class or clan. It simply means noble or excellent.

The Eightfold Path is arranged in three groups: Virtue, Concentration and Wisdom (*sīla, samādhi and paññā*). [3] This Path is unique to Buddhism and distinguishes it from every other religion and philosophy.

The eight factors of the Path are: [4]

1. Right understanding (*sammā-dīhi*)
 2. Right Thought (*sammā-saṅkappa*)
 3. Right Speech (*samma-vācā*)
 4. Right Action (*samma-*
- } Wisdom Group (*paññā*)

- kammanta*)
5. Right Livelihood (*samma-ājīva*) } Virtue Group (*sīla*)
6. Right Effort (*samma-vāyāma*)
7. Right Mindfulness (*samma-satī*) } Concentration
8. Right Concentration (*samma-samādhi*) } (*samādhi*)

Referring to this Path, in his First Discourse, [5] the Buddha called it the Middle Path (*majjhima paṭipadā*), because it avoids two extremes: Indulgence in sensual pleasures which is low, worldly and leads to harm, is one extreme; self-torture in the form of severe asceticism which is painful, low and leads to harm is the other.

Living in the palace amidst song and dance, luxury and pleasure, the Bodhisatta [6] knew by experience that sense pleasures do not lead mankind to true happiness and deliverance. Six years of rigorous mortification, which he, as an ascetic, so zealously practised in search of purification and final deliverance, brought him no reward. It was a vain and useless effort. Avoiding these two extremes he followed a path of moral and mental training and through self-experience discovered the Middle Path consisting of the three groups.

In this essay a brief account of the three groups and how they aim at promoting and perfecting a path that consists of eight factors will be discussed.

It must always be borne in mind that the term 'path' is only a figurative expression. Though conventionally we talk of treading a path, in the ultimate sense the eight steps signify eight mental factors. They are interdependent and interrelated, and at the highest level they function simultaneously; they are not followed and practised one after the other in numerical order. Even on the lower level each and every factor should be tinged with some degree of right understanding; for it is the key-note of Buddhism.

Let us first hear these words of the Buddha:

“O monks, it is through not understanding, not penetrating four things (*dhamma*) that we have run so long, wandered on so long in this round of existence both you and I, And what four? Virtue, Concentration, Wisdom and Deliverance. But when these four things, O monks are understood and penetrated, rooted out is the craving for existence, destroyed is that which leads to renewed becoming, and there is no more coming to be.” [7]

Further says the Master:

“Concentration (meditation), O monks, supported by virtue brings much fruit, brings much advantage. The mind supported by wisdom is wholly and entirely freed from the intoxication of sense desires, from becoming, and ignorance.” [8]

These sayings of the Buddha explain the function and the purpose of cultivating Virtue, Meditation and Wisdom. Deliverance means living experience of the cessation of the three root causes of evil, Greed, Hatred and Delusion or Ignorance (*lobha, dosa, moha*), that assail the human mind. These root causes are eliminated through training in Virtue, Meditation and Wisdom.

Thus it is clear that the Buddha’s teaching aims at the highest purification, perfect mental health, free from all tainted impulses.

Now this deliverance from mental taints, this freedom from ill, lies absolutely and entirely in a man’s own hands, in those of no one else, human or divine. Not even a Supreme Buddha can redeem a man from the fetters of existence except by showing him the path.

The path is: Virtue, Concentration and Wisdom,

which are referred to in the discourses as the threefold training (*tividha sikkha*) and none of them is an end in itself; each is a means to an end. One cannot function independently of the others. As in the case of a tripod which falls to the ground if a single leg gives way, so here one cannot function without the support of the others. These three go together supporting each other. Virtue or regulated behaviour strengthens meditation and meditation in turn promotes Wisdom. Wisdom helps one to get rid of the clouded view of things – to see life as it really is – that is to see life and all things pertaining to life as arising and passing away.

It is now quite clear that in the interplay of doctrine and discipline (*dhamma-vinaya*) or knowledge and conduct (*vijjā-carana*) the two constitute a single process of growth. “As hand washes hand, and foot washes foot, so does conduct purify wisdom and wisdom conduct.” [9] This fact may be borne in mind by students of Buddhism, as there is a tendency, especially in academic circles, to regard the teachings of the Buddha as mere speculation, as a mere doctrine of metaphysics without practical value or importance.

The Buddhist way of life, however, is an intense process of cleansing one’s speech, action and thought. It is self-development and self-purification. The emphasis is on practical results and not mere philosophical speculation, logical abstraction or even

mere cogitation.

In strong language did the Buddha warn his followers against mere book-learning thus:

“Though he recites the sacred texts a lot but acts not accordingly, that heedless man is like a cowherd counting others’ cattle (not obtaining the products of the cow). He shares not the fruits of the tranquil man.

“Though he recites only a little of the sacred texts but acts in accordance with the teaching, abandoning lust, hate and delusion, possessed of right understanding, his mind entirely released and clinging to nothing here or hereafter. He shares the fruits of the tranquil man.” [10]

These are clear indications that the Buddhist way of life, the Buddhist method of grasping the highest truth, awakening from ignorance to full knowledge, does not depend on mere academic intellectual development, but on a practical teaching that leads the follower to enlightenment and final deliverance.

The Buddha was more concerned with beings than with inanimate nature. His sole object was to unravel the mystery of existence, to solve the problems of becoming. This he did by comprehending in all their

fullness the Four Noble Truths, the eternal verities of life.

This knowledge of the truths he tried to impart to those who sought it, and never forced it upon others. He never compelled or persuaded people to follow him, for compulsion and coercion were foreign to his method of teaching. He did not encourage his disciples to believe him blindly, but wished them to investigate his teaching which invited the seeker to 'come and see' (*ehi-passika*). It is seeing and understanding, and not blind believing, that the Master approved.

To understand the world within, one must develop the inner faculties, one's mind. The Buddha says: "Mind your mind." [11] "The wise tame themselves." [12]

Today there is ceaseless work going on in all directions to improve the world. Scientists are pursuing their methods and experiments with undiminished vigour and determination. Modern discoveries and methods of communication and contact have produced startling results. All these improvements, though they have their advantages and rewards, are entirely material and external.

Within this conflux of mind and body of man, however, there are unexplored marvels to occupy men

of science for many many years.

Really, the world, which the scientists are trying to improve, is, according to the ideas of Buddhism, subject to so much change at all points on its circumference and radii, that it is not capable of being made sorrowfree.

Our life is so dark with ageing, so smothered with death, so bound with change, and these qualities are so inherent in it—even as greenness is to grass, and bitterness to quinine—that not all the magic and witchery of science can ever transform it. The immortal splendour of an eternal sunlight awaits only those who can use the light of understanding and the culture of conduct to illuminate and guard their path through life's tunnel of darkness and dismay.

The people of the world today mark the changing nature of life. Although they see it, they do not keep it in mind and act with dispassionate discernment. Though change again and again speaks to them and makes them unhappy, they pursue their mad career of whirling round the wheel of existence and are twisted and torn between the spokes of agony.

After all, a scientist or a plain man, if he has not understood the importance of conduct, the urgency for wholesome endeavour, the necessity to apply knowledge to life, is, so far as the doctrine of the

Buddha is concerned, an immature person, who has yet to negotiate many more hurdles before he wins the race of life and the Immortal prize of Nibbāna.

For an understanding of the world within, science may not be of much help to us. Ultimate truth cannot be found in science. To the scientist, knowledge is something that ties him more and more to this sentient existence. That knowledge, therefore, is not saving knowledge. To one who views the world and all it holds in its proper perspective, the primary concern of life is not mere speculation or vain voyaging into the imaginary regions of high fantasy, but the gaining of true happiness and freedom from ill or unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*). To him true knowledge depends on the central question: Is this learning, according to actuality? Can it be of use to us in the conquest of mental peace and tranquillity, of real happiness?

To understand the world within we need the guidance, the instruction of a competent and genuine seer whose clarity of vision and depth of insight penetrate into the deepest recesses of life and cognize the true nature that underlies all appearance. He, indeed, is the true philosopher, the true scientist who has grasped the meaning of change in the fullest sense and has transmuted this understanding into a realisation of the deepest truths fathomable by man—

the truths of the three signs or characteristics (*ti-lakkhaṇa*): impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, non-self (*anicca, dukkha, anattā*). [13] No more can he be confused by the terrible or swept off his feet by the glamour of things ephemeral. No more is it possible for him to have a clouded view of phenomena; for he has transcended all capacity for error through the perfect immunity which insight alone can give.

The Buddha is such a seer, and his path to deliverance is open to all who have eyes to see and minds to understand. It is different from other paths to salvation, for the Buddha teaches that each individual, whether layman or monk, is solely responsible for his own liberation.

Mankind is caught in a tangle, inner as well as outer, and the Buddha's infallible remedy, in brief, is this: "The prudent man full of effort, established well in Virtue, develops Concentration and Wisdom and succeeds in solving the tangle." [14]

The Buddha's foremost admonition to his sixty immediate Arahāt disciples was that the Dhamma should be promulgated for the welfare and happiness of many, out of compassion for the world. [15] The whole dispensation of the Master is permeated with that salient quality of universal loving compassion.

Sīla or Virtue, the Initial stage of the Path, is based

on this loving compassion. Why should one refrain from harming and robbing other people? Is it not because of love for self and others? Why should one succour the poor, the needy and those in distress? Is it not out of compassion for those others?

To abstain from evil and do good is the function of *sīla*, [16] the code of conduct taught in Buddhism. This function is never void of loving compassion. *Sīla* embraces within it qualities of the heart, such as love, modesty, tolerance, pity, charity and happiness at the success of others, and so forth. *Samādhi* and *paññā*, or Concentration and Wisdom, are concerned with the discipline of the mind.

As stated above, three factors of the Eightfold Path (Nos: 3, 4 and 5) form the Buddhist code of conduct (*sīla*). They are: Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood.

Right Speech is to abstain (a) from falsehood and always speak the truth; (b) from tale-bearing which brings about discord and disharmony, and to speak words that are conducive to concord and harmony; (c) from harsh and abusive speech, and instead to speak kind and refined words; and (d) from idle chatter, vain talk or gossip and instead to speak words which are meaningful and blameless.

Right Action is abstention from (a) killing, (b)

stealing, and (c) illicit sexual indulgence, and cultivating compassion, taking only things that are given, and living pure and chaste.

Right Livelihood is abandoning wrong ways of living which bring harm and suffering to others: Trafficking (a) in arms and lethal weapons, (b) in animals for slaughter, (c) in human beings (i.e. dealing in slaves which was prevalent during the time of the Buddha), (d) in intoxicating drinks and (e) poisons; and living by a profession which is blameless and free from harm to oneself and others.

From this outline of Buddhist ethics, it is clear that the code of conduct set forth by the Buddha is no mere negative prohibition but an affirmation of doing good—a career paved with good intentions for the welfare and happiness of all mankind. These moral principles aim at making society secure by promoting unity, harmony and right relations among people.

This code of conduct (*sīla*) is the first stepping stone of the Buddhist Way of Life. It is the basis for mental development. One who is intent on meditation or concentration of mind must develop a love of virtue; for it is Virtue that nourishes mental life and makes it steady and calm.

The next stage in the Path to Deliverance is Mental Culture, Concentration (*samādhi*), which includes three

other factors of the Eightfold Path: they are, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration (Nos. 6, 7 and 8).

Right Effort is the persevering endeavour (a) to prevent the arising of evil and unwholesome thoughts that have not yet arisen in a man's mind, (b) to discard such evil thoughts already arisen, (c) to produce and develop wholesome thoughts not yet arisen and (d) to promote and maintain the good thoughts already present.

The function of this sixth factor, therefore, is to be vigilant and check all unhealthy thoughts, and to cultivate, promote and maintain wholesome and pure thoughts arising in a man's mind.

The prudent man who masters his speech and his physical actions through *sīla* (virtue) now makes every endeavour to scrutinise his thoughts, his mental factors, and to avoid distracting thoughts.

Right Mindfulness is the application or arousing of attention in regard to the (a) activities of the body (*kāyānupassanā*), (b) feelings or sensations (*vedanānupassanā*), (c) the activities of the mind (*cittānupassanā*) and (d) mental objects (*dhammānupassanā*).

As these factors of the Path are interdependent and co-operating, Right Mindfulness aids Right Effort and

together they can check the arising of unwholesome thoughts already entertained. The man vigilant in regard to his actions, verbal, physical and mental, avoids all that is detrimental to his (spiritual) progress. Such a one cannot be mentally indolent and supine. The well-known discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness (Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta) [17] deals comprehensively with this fourfold Mindfulness.

Right Concentration is the intensified steadiness of the mind comparable to the unflickering flame of a lamp in a windless place. It is concentration that fixes the mind right and causes it to be unmoved and undisturbed. The correct practice of Samādhi (concentration or mental discipline) maintains the mind and the mental properties in a state of balance. Many are the mental impediments that confront a yogi, a meditator, but with the support of Right Effort and Right Mindfulness the fully concentrated mind is capable of dispelling the impediments, the passions that disturb man. The perfectly concentrated mind is not distracted by sense objects, for it sees things as they really are, in their proper perspective.

Thus mastering the mind, and not allowing the mind to master him, the yogi cultivates true Wisdom (*paññā*) which consists of the first two factors and the final stage of the Path, namely, Right Understanding and Right Thought.

Right Thought includes thoughts of renunciation (*nekkhamma-saṅkappa*), good will (*avyāpāda-saṅkappa*) and of compassion or non-harm (*avahiṃsa-saṅkappa*). These thoughts are to be cultivated and extended towards all living beings irrespective of race, caste, clan or creed. As they embrace all that breathes there are no compromising limitations. The radiation of such ennobling thoughts is not possible for one who is egocentric and selfish.

A man may be intelligent, erudite and learned, but if he lacks right thoughts, he is, according to the teaching of the Buddha, a fool (*bala*), not a man of understanding and insight. If we view things with dispassionate discernment, we will understand that selfish desire, hatred and violence cannot go together with true Wisdom. Right Understanding or true Wisdom is always permeated with right thoughts and never bereft of them.

Right Understanding, in the ultimate sense, is to understand life as it really is. For this, one needs a clear comprehension of the four Noble Truths, namely: The Truth of (a) Dukkha, Suffering or Unsatisfactoriness, (b) the Arising of Dukkha, (c) the Cessation of Dukkha and (d) the Path leading to the Cessation of Dukkha.

Right Understanding, or penetrative Wisdom, is the

result of continued and steady practice of meditation or careful cultivation of the mind. To one endowed with Right Understanding it is impossible to have a clouded view of phenomena, for he is immune from all impurities and has attained the unshakable deliverance of the mind (*akuppa cetovimutti*).

The careful reader will now be able to understand how the three groups, Virtue, Concentration and Wisdom, function together for one common end: Deliverance of the Mind (*ceto-vimutti*), and how through genuine cultivation of man's mind, and through control of actions, both physical and verbal, purity is attained. It is through self-exertion and self-development that the aspirant secures freedom, and not through praying to and petitioning an external agency. This indeed is the Dhamma discovered by the Buddha, made use of by him for full enlightenment and revealed to the others:

“Virtue, and concentration, wisdom, supreme freedom,

These things the Illustrious Gotama realised. Thus fully understanding them the Buddha, Ender of Ill, the Teacher, the Seeing One utterly calmed, taught the *Dhamma* to the monks.” [18]

In spite of the scientific knowledge that is steadily

growing, the people of the world are restless and racked with fear and discontent. They are intoxicated with the desire to gain fame, wealth, power and to satisfy the senses. To this troubled world still seething with hate, distrust, selfish desire and violence, most timely is the Buddha's message of love and understanding, the Noble Eightfold Path, referring to which the Buddha says:

“This is the path itself,
For none other leads
To purity of vision:
If you follow it and so confuse
King Māra, all suffering, will end.
Since I have learned how to remove
The thorns, [19] I have revealed the path.
You yourselves should (always) strive,
Tathāgatas only teach.
Those who walk in meditation [20]
Free themselves from Māra's bondage.” [21]

Notes

1. See [The Wheel No. 67/9](#) *The Last Days of the Buddha* (Parinibbāna Sutta), Part VI. [\[Back\]](#)
2. *Sabba pāpassa akaraṇaṃ—kusalassa upasampada, Sacittapariyodapanam-etam buddhanasāsaṇaṃ.* Dhammapada 183. [\[Back\]](#)
3. Majjhima No. 44. [\[Back\]](#)
4. Ibid. [\[Back\]](#)
5. Known as 'Setting in Motion' the Wheel of Truth (Dhamma-cakkappavattana), Saṃyutta N. V. 420; Vin I 10. [\[Back\]](#)
6. Skt. *Bodhisattva*, one who adheres to or is bent on (*satta*) the ideal of enlightenment or knowledge of the four noble truths (bodhi). It is specially applied to an aspirant for full enlightenment (*sammā-sambodhi*). [\[Back\]](#)
7. Dīgha N. 16 [\[Back\]](#)
8. Ibid. [\[Back\]](#)
9. Dīgha N. 4. [\[Back\]](#)
10. Dhammapada 19,20. [\[Back\]](#)
11. Dīgha N. 16. [\[Back\]](#)

2. Dhammapada 80. [\[Back\]](#)
3. The true nature of the five aggregates, or mind and body, is grasped and seen in the light of these characteristics. Such seeing is known as insight (*vipassanāññāṇa*). [\[Back\]](#)
4. Saṃyutta N. 1, 13. [\[Back\]](#)
5. Vinaya Mahāragga. [\[Back\]](#)
6. Vism: Sīlaniddesa. [\[Back\]](#)
7. See *The Wheel* No. 19. [\[Back\]](#)
8. Aṅguttara N. II 2; A. IV 106; Dīgha N. II 123. [\[Back\]](#)
9. Thorns of passionate desire and so forth. [\[Back\]](#)
10. Both concentrative calm (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*). [\[Back\]](#)
11. Dhammapada 274, 2:6 [\[Back\]](#)

Table of Contents

Title page	2
The Threefold Division of the Noble Eightfold Path	4
Notes	22