



EVAM ME SUTTAM This is how I heard it

by Patrick Kearney

Week 5: The noble eightfold path

[§102] Monks, what is the noble eightfold path [*ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga*]? Right view [*sammā diṭṭhi*], right resolve [*sammā saṃkappa*], right speech [*sammā vācā*], right action [*sammā kammanto*], right livelihood [*sammā ājīva*], right effort [*sammā vāyāma*], right mindfulness [*sammā sati*], right concentration [*sammā samādhi*].

And what is right view? Knowledge with regard to stress [*dukkhe ñāṇam*], knowledge with regard to the origination of stress, knowledge with regard to the cessation of stress, knowledge with regard to the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress: This is called right view.

And what is right resolve? Being resolved on renunciation [*nekkhamma*], on freedom from ill-will [*avyāpāda*], on harmlessness [*avihiṃsā*]: This is called right resolve.

And what is right speech? Abstaining from lying [*musā vāda*], from divisive speech [*pisuṇā vāda*], from abusive speech [*pharusā vāda*], & from idle chatter [*sampahpplāpa*]. This is called right speech.

And what is right action? Abstaining from taking life [*pāṇātipāta*], from stealing [*adinnādāna*], & from sexual intercourse [*abrahma-cariya*]: This is called right action.

And what is right livelihood? There is the case where a noble disciple, having abandoned dishonest livelihood, keeps his life going with right livelihood. This is called right livelihood.

And what is right effort? [*samma-ppadhānas*] There is the case where a monk generates desire, endeavors, arouses persistence, upholds & exerts his intent: for the sake of the non-arising of evil, unskillful qualities that have not yet arisen; for the sake of the abandoning of evil, unskillful qualities that have arisen; for the sake of the arising of skillful qualities that have not yet arisen; (and) for the maintenance, non-confusion, increase, plenitude, development, & culmination of skillful qualities that have arisen. This is called right effort. [§49]

And what is right mindfulness? [*satipaṭṭhānas*] There is the case where a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself – ardent, alert, & mindful – putting aside greed & distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings ... mind ... mental qualities in & of themselves – ardent, alert, & mindful – putting aside greed & distress with reference to the world. This is called right mindfulness. [§30]

And what is right concentration? [*jhānas*] There is the case where a monk – quite withdrawn from sensuality, withdrawn from unskillful qualities – enters & remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born from withdrawal, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. With the stilling of directed thought & evaluation, he enters & remains in the second jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of composure, unification of

awareness free from directed thought & evaluation – internal assurance. With the fading of rapture, he remains in equanimity, mindful & alert, and physically sensitive to pleasure. He enters & remains in the third jhāna, of which the Nobles Ones declare, “Equanimous & mindful, he has a pleasurable abiding.” With the abandoning of pleasure & stress – as with the earlier disappearance of elation & distress – he enters & remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither-pleasure-nor-pain. This is called right concentration. [§150] [S.XLV.8]¹

The path

The noble eightfold path (*ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga*) is the list that sums up the training. It appears on its own in the wings of awakening, and as the fourth of the four noble truths. It also appears as the fourth aspect of its own path factor of “right view,” “knowledge with regard to the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress.” The path factor of “right effort,” found also as a faculty, strength and factor of awakening (here “persistence,” *viriya*), is the same as the four right exertions (*sammappadhāna*). The path factor of “right mindfulness,” found also as a faculty, strength and factor of awakening, is the same as the four frames of reference (*satipaṭṭhāna*). And the path factor of “right concentration,” found also as a faculty, strength and factor of awakening, is the same as the four *jhānas*.

The path also includes the three trainings of virtue (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*) and discernment (*paññā*). Right view and right resolve are classified as the discernment aggregate (*paññā-khandha*). Right speech, right action and right livelihood are classified as the virtue aggregate (*sīla-khandha*); and right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration are classified as the concentration aggregate (*samādhi-khandha*).

When the Buddha was asked by non-Buddhists regarding the purpose of the life his students lived under him, he often answered that it is lived “for the sake of the full understanding of stress (*dukkhassa pariññattham*),” and the noble eightfold path is the path (*magga*) or way (*paṭipāda*) to this end. This path is complete. While other paths may lead to heavenly worlds, only the noble eightfold path leads to *nibbāna*. Other paths have a degree of validity, but they all find their completion in the noble eightfold path. This path, in other words, is the essence of the Buddhist life. Or, as the Buddha says, “Both formerly and now what I teach is stress (*dukkha*) and the cessation of stress.” (Alagaddūpama Sutta M22.)²

Since the path is such a large topic, this week we will just look at a few of the issues that arise when considering it. First we will look at the relationship between faith (*saddhā*) and view (*ditṭhi*) as it appears in the path. We will examine the two levels of the path, mundane and *ariya*, and the relationship between desire and renunciation as it appears in the path factor of right resolve (*sammā saṃkappa*). And finally we will investigate the use of the image of “path” (*magga*) or “way” (*paṭipāda*) to describe the nature of Buddhist practice, focusing especially on the

¹ Thanissaro Bhikkhu (Geoffrey DeGraff). *The wings to awakening: An anthology from the Pali canon*. Barre, Massachusetts: Dhamma Dana, 1996: 177-8.

² R. M. L. Gethin. *The Buddhist path to awakening: a study of the bodhi-pakkhiyā-dhammā*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001: 203-4.

structure of the path, its linear and holographic aspects, and right and wrong factors.

Two levels of path

Thānissaro point out that the path has two levels, that he calls beginning and ultimate and the tradition calls *lokiya* (“worldly; mundane”) and *lokuttara* (“transcendent;” “supramundane”). This second aspect of the path is what makes it *ariya*, “noble.”

On the beginning level, the path is a series of qualities that one must consciously develop, step by step, in order to bring oneself near 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.³

The term “*ariya*” applies to anything directly associated with the world-transcending (*lokuttara*) discernment of the *ariya-sāvaka*, or “noble disciple,” any of the four “noble persons” (*ariya-puggala*) who participate, partially or fully, in awakening. These are the stream-attainer, the once-returner, the non-returner and the *arahant*. The step into the status of *ariya* is that of stream-attainer, who is one who has seen the four truths. This seeing of the four truths is itself right view at the noble level.⁴ So our definition at the top of these notes is a definition of *noble* right view, and indicates entry into the stream of awakening. Indeed, when the factors of the path come together at the level of noble, this either *is* the moment of awakening, or it operates as the vehicle that inevitably takes us *to* the moment of awakening.

[S107] The Buddha: “The stream, the stream,” it is said. Now what is the stream?

Sāriputta: Just this noble eightfold path is the stream ...

The Buddha: Well said, Sāriputta, well said. Just this noble eightfold path is the stream ... “Streamwinner, streamwinner,” it is said. Now what is a streamwinner?

Sāriputta: Whoever is endowed with this noble eightfold path is called a “streamwinner.”

The Buddha: Well said, Sāriputta, well said. Whoever is endowed with this noble eightfold path is called a “streamwinner.” [S.XLV.27]⁵

The path is made up of factors such as view, resolve, and so on, and for each of these there is a right (*sammā*) factor and a wrong (*micchā*) factor. This distinction between right and wrong of course is closely linked to the distinction between skilful and unskilful. So there is wrong view, which leads to further entanglement in *saṃsāra*, but there is also right view which leads out of *saṃsāra*. However, this distinction between right and wrong intersects with that between beginning, or mundane, and transcendent, or noble (*ariya*). Right view at the mundane level

³ Thanissaro: 173.

⁴ Gethin: 205-6.

⁵ Thanissaro: 183.

improves our position in the further becoming of *saṃsāra*, but cannot get us beyond it. Only the *noble* path factor of right view transcends *saṃsāra*. Ṭhānissaro says this is because mundane or beginning right view (as with the other path factors) operates at a relatively gross level. Only at the level of advanced development do the factors become noble.⁶ So at the mundane level right view is what allows us to see that we have a problem, and what we should do about it. And at this level, right view is very close to faith or confidence (*saddhā*).

Faith & view

On the mundane or beginners' level, view is intimately linked to the faculty of conviction, or faith (*saddhā*). Here is how the Buddha defines "right view" at this level:

There is what is given and what is offered and what is sacrificed; there is fruit and result of good and bad actions; there is this world and the other world; there is mother and father; there are beings who are reborn spontaneously; there are good and ethical contemplatives and priests in the world who have themselves realised by direct knowledge and declare this world and the other world. (Apaññaka Sutta. M60)

Ṭhānissaro comments:

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 in the next. ... 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 skilfulness, as they necessarily underlie any solid conviction in the principle of kamma.⁷

View is important because what we do is conditioned by what we think is real, what we think is really going on. In the beginning of the practice, still at the mundane level of the path, we do not and cannot see the four truths, so we cannot see that the Buddha's view of reality is correct. The Buddha's teaching represents a truth claim, one which includes issues such as what happens after death, and we have no basis to *believe* this claim. But the nature of the claim is such that it demands our attention. This is something we *must* find out about, and the only way we can find out is by embarking on the practice. This commitment is a leap into darkness, and this leap is an act of faith (*saddhā*). Not of belief, but of faith, which begins as a question which demands a response, the response of taking up the path. As we walk that path things begin to change, and we discover new ways of seeing and living. Challenge matures into confidence, the meaning of *saddhā* that Ṭhānissaro emphasises. Confidence is a recognition of what becomes perfectly clear, when we attend to it – when appropriate attention is sufficiently developed. The confidence of the mundane level of the path matures into the discernment of the noble level of the path.

⁶ Thanissaro: 173.

⁷ Thanissaro: 173-4.

Right resolve (*sammā saṃkappa*)

And what is right resolve? Being resolved on renunciation [*nekkhamma*], on freedom from ill-will [*avyāpāda*], on harmlessness [*avihiṃsā*]: This is called right resolve.

After right view in the eightfold path comes “right resolve,” *sammā saṃkappa*, sometimes translated as “right thought.” The first aspect of right resolve is “renunciation” (*nekkhamma*). What does this mean? Gethin explains:

The root *klp* means “to be in order,” “to be capable,” “to be suitable.” A *saṃkalpa* is literally, then, a “conforming,” a “(suitable) arrangement or adaptation.” However, the word is regularly used of a clearly formed thought or idea; it thus conveys the sense of “intention” or “purpose.” One might say, then, that *saṃkappa* is the gearing of the mind to whatever is its object in a definite and particular way. ... *Saṃkappa* is ... the way in which the mind applies itself to or thinks of various objects. Wrong thought turns towards various objects with thoughts and ideas of desire, hatred, or cruelty; right thought turns towards various objects with thoughts and ideas that are free of desire, friendly and compassionate.⁸

Saṃkappa refers to the *direction* in which we send the mind through our thoughts, intentions, choices and aspirations, from individual thoughts through to major decisions. Certain directions are “right” (skilful), while others are “wrong” (unskilful). We can see how freedom from ill-will and harmlessness is “right” in comparison to ill-will and cruelty, but as laypeople we might wonder why renunciation is necessarily a value. What is wrong with desire? Is this teaching relevant only for celibate monks and nuns, and irrelevant for laypeople?

The word usually translated as “renunciation” is *nekkhamma*. The tradition derives *nekkhamma* from both *niṣ-kram* > *naiṣkramya* = “leaving behind,” “turning away,” and *niṣ-kām* > *naiṣkāmya* = “without desire.” In either case, *nekkhamma* derives its meaning from what it opposes, *kāma*, “sensuality” or “sensual pleasure.”

Kāma has both a subjective and an objective meaning. It means both “desire” and “what is desirable.” In the tradition this distinction is expressed in terms of “desire as defilement” (*kilesa-kāma*) and “desire as object” (*vatthu-kāma*). *Nekkhamma* is “turning away” because it turns away from both desire and what is desired.⁹ “Turning away” is not the literal meaning of *nekkhamma* but its action, what it does.¹⁰

Meaning, in other words, is found here in function. Both *kāma* and *nekkhamma* are *dhammas*, “phenomena,” mere events that arise and cease dependent upon events other than themselves. *Dhammas* are not self (*anattā*), and they *mean* what they *do*, because in the absence of self and of what belongs to self, in the absence of identity, all that exists is activity. So the emphasis in the Buddha’s teaching is always on what *dhammas do*, for their activities are their nature, and it is in understanding their activities and the relationships between them that the practitioner can learn to replace unskilful actions with skilful actions.

⁸ Gethin: 193-4.

⁹ Gethin: 191-2.

¹⁰ Gethin: 192.

Just as *kāma* is both desire and object of desire, *nekkhamma* is a turning away from both desire and its object. Given the primacy in the Buddha's teaching of practice, and of what we would call psychology, I suspect the turning away from desire itself is paramount. In both cases the *action*, the activity, of renunciation is one of turning away, and the *result* of this action is the absence of desire or of desire's power.

When we examine our relationship to desire, we discover that we are addicted to both desire and the objects of desire, and the addiction to desire itself is probably deeper. We look to different objects at different times to satisfy desire, but what remains constant throughout life is the fact of our being driven by desire, convinced as we are that desire and its satisfaction is the only way out of our suffering. Hence the idea of *kilesa-kāma*, or desire as "defilement." *Kilesa* is derived from the verb *kilissati*, "to stick or adhere." Mud thrown at a white cloth "defiles" the cloth because it sticks to it. For the Buddha, the mind is "defiled" by what it is stuck to, what it clings to. And we are stuck to desire and the idea of desire.

What can renunciation teach us? That attempting to find happiness in the satisfaction provided by the five sense objects will ultimately fail. Renunciation is about giving up a dependence on desire itself, rather than the objects of desire, for we are more attached to desire than we are to its objects. If we are to give up desire rather than suppress it – to genuinely abandon desire because we have had enough of it – we must outgrow our infatuation with desire. Or, outgrowing infatuation with desire *is* renunciation.

And this approach to the meaning of renunciation comes from the first person aspect of the dharma. *Kāma* and *nekkhamma* have both subjective and objective aspects, as do other key terms in the Buddha's teaching. This is because his teaching is about *experience itself*, and experience always has both subjective and objective aspects, existing in mutual support. And again, at the centre of experience we find a "doing". What does desire do? What do the objects of desire do? What do we do, in regard to desire and the objects of desire? And when we speak of doing, we come back to the idea of path, for our actions have direction.

Path and destination

Why does the Buddha call his way of practice a "path" (*magga*)? Ṭhānissaro comments that the image of path implies that the path factors "are a means to an end, not an end in themselves," and that "they lead to, rather than cause, the goal."¹¹ In this way he seems to emphasise the distinction between path and goal, journey and destination, and in support he cites the famous simile of the raft.

§113. Suppose that a man, in the course of traveling along a path, were to come to a great expanse of water, with the near shore dubious & risky, the further shore secure & free from risk, but with neither a ferryboat nor a bridge going from this shore to the other. The thought would occur to him, "Here is this great expanse of water ... What if I were to gather grass, twigs, branches, & leaves and, having bound them together to make a raft, were to cross over to safety on the other shore in dependence on the raft, making an effort with my hands & feet?" Then the man ... would cross over to safety

¹¹ Thanissaro: 172.

on the other shore ... Having crossed over to the further shore, he might think, “How useful this raft has been to me! For it was in dependence on this raft that ... I have crossed over to safety on the further shore. Why don’t I, having hoisted it on my head or carrying it on my back, go wherever I like?” What do you think, monks: would the man, in doing that, be doing what should be done with the raft?”

“No, lord.”

“And what should the man do in order to be doing what should be done with the raft? There is the case where the man, having crossed over, would think, “How useful this raft has been to me! For it was in dependence on this raft that ... I have crossed over to safety on the further shore. Why don’t I, having dragged it on dry land or sinking it in the water, go wherever I like?” In doing this, he would be doing what should be done with the raft. Even so monks, I have taught you the Dhamma like a raft, for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of holding onto. Knowing the Dhamma to be like a raft, you should let go even of [skillful] qualities, to say nothing of those that are not.” [M.22]¹²

Gethin sees the image of path functioning somewhat differently. He emphasizes the similarity between journey and destination.

The *ariyo atthangiko maggo* [noble eightfold path] is the transformation of view, thought, speech, livelihood, striving, mindfulness and concentration into right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right striving, right mindfulness and right concentration. Thus the *ariyo atthangiko maggo* is at once where one wishes to arrive at, and the way one must go to get there. For the destination is not exactly something different from the journey; where one arrives is only the consummation of the way one has come.¹³

These differing emphases seem to depend in part on how the interpreter sees the structure of the path, including the relationship between its linear and non-linear aspects, and the relationship between the mundane and noble aspects.

Linear & holographic path

A path is linear, leading somewhere in a step-by-step manner. The noble eightfold path has both linear and non-linear aspects. For Thanissaro it works as both “a causal loop” (linear) and “a holographic formula” (non-linear). The linear aspect of the path is brought out in the following reading.

[S101] Monks, ignorance is the leader in the attainment of unskillful qualities, followed by lack of conscience & lack of concern. In an unknowledgeable person, immersed in ignorance, wrong view arises. In one of wrong view, wrong resolve arises. In one of wrong resolve, wrong speech ... In one of wrong speech, wrong action ... In one of wrong action, wrong livelihood ... In one of wrong livelihood, wrong effort ... In one of wrong effort, wrong mindfulness ... In one of wrong mindfulness, wrong concentration arises.

Clear knowing is the leader in the attainment of skillful qualities, followed by conscience & concern. In a knowledgeable person, immersed in clear knowing, right

¹² Thanissaro: 186-7.

¹³ Gethin: 207.

view arises. In one of right view, right resolve arises. In one of right resolve, right speech ... In one of right speech, right action ... In one of right action, right livelihood ... In one of right livelihood, right effort ... In one of right effort, right mindfulness ... In one of right mindfulness, right concentration arises. [S.XLV.1]¹⁴

Gethin cites the example of the Buddha's "progressive talk" (*anupubbī-kathā*) where he describes the path following the order of the three aggregates of virtue (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*) and discernment (*paññā*), such that concentration requires a foundation of virtue, and discernment requires a foundation of concentration.

Then the Blessed One gave a progressive talk ... namely talk on giving, talk on *sīla* and talk on heaven; he revealed the danger, elimination and impurity of sensual desires, and the benefit of desirelessness [or renunciation]. When the Blessed One knew that the mind of ... was ready, soft, without hindrances, uplifted, settled, then he revealed the special *dhamma*-teaching of Buddhas: suffering, arising, cessation, the path.¹⁵

But both Gethin and Ṭhānissaro also emphasise the non-linear aspect of the path, which Ṭhānissaro calls holographic. Gethin, for example, points out that the relationship between the three aggregates of virtue, concentration and discernment is not one of simple precedence. They are inextricably bound up with each other. He cites the relationship between virtue and discernment found in *Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta* [D4]:

Just as ... one might wash hand with hand or foot with foot, even so *paññā* is fully washed by *sīla*, *sīla* is fully washed by *paññā*; where there is *sīla* there is *paññā*, where there is *paññā* there is *sīla*; one who has *sīla* has *paññā*, one who has *paññā* has *sīla*; *sīla* and *paññā* together are declared the summit of the world.¹⁶

Here we have a more complex relationship between virtue, supposedly at the beginning of the path, and discernment, which is supposed to be at the end. Another question arising from this text is the role of concentration, in its general sense of meditation. Where is it? Is it the action of washing itself, the interface between virtue and discernment? In any event, it is clearly not the case that one factor of the path can be developed in isolation from the others. This is what Ṭhānissaro refers to as the holographic aspect of the path.

Holography relates to his [the Buddha's] discovery that skillfulness is developed by taking clusters of good qualities already present in the mind and using them to strengthen one another each step along the way.¹⁷

So the path develops in both a linear and a holographic way, and Ṭhānissaro argues that this is true of all the seven sets.

Even the "holographic" sets – the frames of reference, right exertions, and bases of power – contain implicit versions of causal loops, in that all three must follow the three stages of frames-of-reference meditation. Even the linear causal-loop

¹⁴ Thanissaro: 176-7.

¹⁵ Gethin: 208.

¹⁶ Gethin: 209.

¹⁷ Thanissaro: viii.

series – the five faculties and strengths, the seven factors of Awakening, and the noble eightfold path – contain implicit holographic formulae, in that the dynamic of their development is inherent in specific qualities or clusters of qualities: heedfulness in the case of the faculties and strengths, appropriate attention in the case of the factors of Awakening, and the cluster of right view, right mindfulness, and right effort in the case of the noble eightfold path.

The holographic pattern reflects the fact that all the skillful qualities needed for the path are already there in the mind and continually interact along the path. All that is needed is for them to be ferreted out and nourished, their coordination fine-tuned, and they can deliver the mind to the goal. The causal loop pattern reflects the fact that the process must take place over time, as specific qualities are stressed at specific junctures and strengthened by being put to use, and as different skillful qualities need to alternate in helping one another, step by step, along the way.¹⁸

To see how this might work in practice, let us look at how Mahācattārisaka Sutta (M117) analyses noble right concentration – or concentration functioning as a factor of the noble path.

Noble right concentration

[§106] And what, monks, is noble right concentration [*ariya-sammā-samādhi*] with its supports [*sa-upanisā*] & requisite conditions [*sa-parikkhāra*]? Any singleness of mind equipped with these seven factors – right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort & right mindfulness – is called noble right concentration with its supports & requisite conditions.

[1] Of those, right view is the forerunner. And how is right view the forerunner? One discerns wrong view as wrong view, and right view as right view. This is one's right view. And what is wrong view? "There is nothing given, nothing offered, nothing sacrificed. There is no fruit or result of good or bad actions. There is no this world, no next world, no mother, no father, no spontaneously reborn beings; no priests or contemplatives who, faring rightly & practicing rightly, proclaim this world & the next after having directly known & realized it for themselves." This is wrong view.

And what is right view? Right view, I tell you, is of two sorts: There is right view with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions; and there is noble right view, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path.

And what is the right view that has effluents, sides with merit, & results in acquisitions? "There is what is given, what is offered, what is sacrificed. There are fruits & results of good & bad actions. There is this world & the next world. There is mother & father. There are spontaneously reborn beings; there are priests & contemplatives who, faring rightly & practicing rightly, proclaim this world & the next after having directly known & realized it for themselves." This is the right view that has effluents, sides with merit, & results in acquisitions.

And what is the right view without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path? The discernment, the faculty of discernment, the strength of discernment, analysis of qualities as a factor of Awakening, the path factor of right view in one developing the

¹⁸ Thanissaro: 176.

noble path whose mind is noble, whose mind is free from effluents, who is fully possessed of the noble path. This is the right view that is without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path.

One tries to abandon wrong view & enter into right view: This is one's right effort. One is mindful to abandon wrong view & to enter & remain in right view: This is one's right mindfulness. Thus these three qualities – right view, right effort, & right mindfulness – run & circle around right view.

[2] Of those, right view is the forerunner. And how is right view the forerunner? One discerns wrong resolve as wrong resolve, and right resolve as right resolve. And what is wrong resolve? Being resolved on sensuality, on ill will, on harmfulness. This is wrong resolve.

And what is right resolve? Right resolve, I tell you, is of two sorts: There is right resolve with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions; and there is noble right resolve, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path.

And what is the right resolve that has effluents, sides with merit, & results in acquisitions? Being resolved on renunciation, on freedom from ill will, on harmlessness. This is the right resolve that has effluents, sides with merit, & results in acquisitions.

And what is the right resolve without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path? The thinking, directed thinking, resolve, mental absorption, mental fixity, focused awareness, & verbal fabrications in one developing the noble path whose mind is noble, whose mind with without effluents, who is fully possessed of the noble path. This is the right resolve that is without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path.

One tries to abandon wrong resolve & enter into right resolve: This is one's right effort. One is mindful to abandon wrong resolve & to enter & remain in right resolve: This is one's right mindfulness. Thus these three qualities – right view, right effort, & right mindfulness – run & circle around right view. [M.117]¹⁹

And so on for right/wrong speech, action and livelihood.

Mahācattārisaka Sutta (M117) teaches “noble right concentration” (*ariya-sammā-samādhi*) in the context of its relationship with all the other path factors. This relationship is a crucial aspect of its being “noble,” for without the support of the other factors *samādhi* is not *ariya samādhi*. The first *ariya magga* (noble path) of stream entry occurs precisely when – or because – the factors of the path come together in balance and maturity. This relationship of mutual support provides the non-linear, holographic aspect of the path. The section of the *sutta* given above shows this holographic structure that characterises the path up to the attainment of stream entry, the first stage of awakening.

Notice how right view is paramount. The path represents a journey, and to go on a journey we need to understand where we are now, how we got here, where we want to go, and how we plan to get there. Where we are now and how we got here is

¹⁹ Thanissaro: 179-81.

conditioned by wrong view; where we want to go and how to get there is conditioned by right view.²⁰

Regarding the first level of right view, it is clear that we need right view to even *begin* the path. In the words of the *sutta*, we need right view in order to be able to tell the difference between right view and wrong view. So right view comes first because it knows right view as right view, and wrong view as wrong view – and so on for the other path factors. This right view is of two types: (1) with *āsavas*, concerned with merit (*puñña-bhāgiya*) and resulting in acquisition (*upadhi-vepakka*); (2) *ariya*, without *āsavas*, transcendent (*lokuttara*), a factor of the path (*maggāṅga*).

But while right view has precedence because of its function of knowing and seeing what is wrong and what is right, in the actual task of abandoning what is wrong and causing what is right to arise, right view must be supported by right striving and right mindfulness. Thus the first section emphasizes that right view must in some sense lead the way because it is what “sees,” but three *dharmas*, namely right view, right striving and right mindfulness, continually interact with the other factors in order to promote them in their “right” aspect.²¹

It’s not enough to see something; we need to do something about it. Hence the role of “striving” or effort, and mindfulness; and of course these entail speech, action and livelihood. We make effort to turn from wrong speech, action and livelihood towards right speech, action and livelihood. And the mindfulness that guides this is right mindfulness. (Further, the turning away from wrong speech, etc., toward right speech, etc., is right resolve.)

Thus these three qualities – right view, right effort, & right mindfulness – run & circle around right view.

So we have two aspects of the practice presented here. First, we turn away from wrong view, etc., and turn towards right view, etc. And secondly, we attain noble right view, etc. This second stage represents “noble right concentration with its supports & requisite conditions.” And with the arising of noble right concentration, all the factors of the path are “ennobled,” and the practitioner attains to the *lokuttara magga*, the transcendent or supramundane path, which is awakening. Here, awakening to stream entry is meant.

On right and wrong

Finally, we will look further at the issue of “right” and “wrong” factors of the path, something that some western practitioners have problems with. Why the emphasis on “right” and “wrong?” Let us begin by looking again at a text that brings out the linear aspect of the path.

[S101] Monks, ignorance is the leader in the attainment of unskillful qualities, followed by lack of conscience & lack of concern. In an unknowledgeable person, immersed in ignorance, wrong view arises. In one of wrong view, wrong resolve arises. In one of wrong resolve, wrong speech ... In one of wrong speech, wrong action

²⁰ Gethin: 217-8.

²¹ Gethin: 218.

... In one of wrong action, wrong livelihood ... In one of wrong livelihood, wrong effort
 ... In one of wrong effort, wrong mindfulness ... In one of wrong mindfulness, wrong
 concentration arises.

Clear knowing is the leader in the attainment of skillful qualities, followed by
 conscience & concern. In a knowledgeable person, immersed in clear knowing, right
 view arises. In one of right view, right resolve arises. In one of right resolve, right
 speech ... In one of right speech, right action ... In one of right action, right livelihood
 ... In one of right livelihood, right effort ... In one of right effort, right mindfulness ...
 In one of right mindfulness, right concentration arises. [S.XLV.1]

These two sequences, beginning with wrong view and right view, remind us of the
anuloma (“along the hair;” “forward”) and *paṭiloma* (“against the hair;” “reverse”) sequences of dependent co-arising.

The Blessed One said, “What, bhikkhus, is dependent co-arising [*paṭiccasamuppāda*]? ”

“Ignorance (*avijjā*) conditions fabrications; fabrications condition consciousness; consciousness conditions name-&-form; name-&-form conditions the sixfold sense sphere; the sixfold sense sphere conditions contact; contact conditions feeling; feeling conditions craving; craving conditions clinging; clinging conditions becoming; becoming conditions birth; birth conditions ageing-and-death; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair come into being. Thus is the arising of this entire mass of stress. This, bhikkhus, is called arising (*samuppāda*).

“But from the complete fading away and cessation of ignorance, fabrications cease; from the cessation of fabrications, consciousness ceases; from the cessation of consciousness, name-&-form ceases; from the cessation of name-&-form, the sixfold sense sphere ceases; from the cessation of the sixfold sense sphere, contact ceases; from the cessation of contact, feeling ceases; from the cessation of feeling, craving ceases; from the cessation of craving, clinging ceases; from the cessation of clinging, becoming ceases; from the cessation of becoming, birth ceases; from the cessation of birth, ageing-and-death, grief, lamentation, pain, depression, and despair dissolve. Thus is the cessation of this entire mass of stress.” (S 2.1-2)

We can see that the emphasis on right view in leading the way in the positive cycle of *right* path factors corresponds exactly to the first principle of dependent co-arising, that ignorance gives rise to the conditions that lead to stress, and the cessation of ignorance gives rise to the conditions that lead to the cessation of stress. Gethin comments:

The significance of this is ... that we might speak of the law of *paṭicca-samuppāda* in the Nikāyas, and also of the law of the eight-factored path. These are ... two aspects of essentially the same thing, namely *dhamma*. According to early Buddhist literature the law of *paṭicca-samuppāda* is not something that can be avoided; it is the law of the universe and endures whether or not a Tathāgata arises in the world. Either the cycle of *paṭicca-samuppāda* will tend towards the accumulation of “this mass of *dukkha*” or it will tend towards its cessation; it cannot be otherwise. The “law of the eight-factored path” can be understood similarly. The eight factors embrace eight essential aspects of existence – eight aspects that cannot be avoided. As long as these eight aspects are *sammā* or “right” they continue to interact “properly” and move in a skilful

direction towards the cessation of *dukkha*. When they are *micchā* or “wrong” they interact wrongly and move away from the cessation of suffering.²²

The factors – and the mind within which these factors operate, which is defined by these factors – are always on the move, because reality is always on the move. So at any time – *now!* – we are either moving toward the accumulation of *dukkha* or we are moving toward the cessation of *dukkha*. But we are always moving. We are always on the path. It’s just a question of direction. And the direction toward *dukkha* is “wrong,” while the direction towards the cessation of *dukkha* is “right.”

The eight factors of the path are meant to be brought to a collective rightness or culmination. For the ordinary person (*puthujjana*) they are continually fluctuating – sometimes “right,” sometimes “wrong” – and for the *arahant* they are fully, firmly “right.”

Perhaps we have problems with the words “wrong” and “right” because we assume they entail a big father figure in the sky or on earth who decides what is right or wrong. But for the Buddha, “right” and “wrong” are inherent in the fabric of the universe; and “right” entails a *direction*, towards the cessation of *dukkha*; while “wrong” entails a *direction*, towards the accumulation of more *dukkha*.

Finally, the movement from “path” to “noble path” indicates a change in emphasis in our understanding of path. As we have seen, path implies journey, from here to there: this is the *what* of the journey, and at the beginning stage this is most important to us. For we are already travelling in the wrong direction, and need to change to the right direction. Noble path implies movement in the right direction, and so indicates a shift to an emphasis to the quality of the journey, its *how*, where the destination in some way *is* the fully matured journey.

²² Gethin: 220.