

The eightfold path: background information

The Eightfold Path are the eight rules that the Buddha taught that will help us think and act differently but also keep balance in our lives so that we are steady and not up and down. They are divided into three parts – wisdom (seeing things as they really are), morality (thinking and behaving in a positive way) and meditation (concentrating).

1. Samma ditthi = Right view.

This is sometimes referred to as right understanding and is when a person is aware of the reality of life. The Buddha described this as: 'the understanding of suffering, of the origin of suffering, of the extinction of suffering, and of the path leading to the extinction of suffering.' (Thera). It is, however, more than this. It involves a deeper appreciation of the wider implications of these realities in association with other Buddhist teachings such as the three characteristics of being, conditioned arising and the five khandhas.

2. Samma sankappa = Right (directed) thought or intention.

This is sometimes referred to as attitude or aspiration and is when a person aims to achieve the arising of only pure, wholesome and positive thoughts. It is a quality of consciousness that is unimpeded by obstructions. There is a direct link here to karma, in that intentions generate actions. Such thoughts or intentions are purely selfless, devoid of attachment and full of compassion. This wisdom can only be achieved through meditation.

3. Samma vaca = Right speech.

This involves truth and polite speech. It discourages lying or exaggerating and also cruelty to others through language. It is very broad, including the idea that at times it is right to be silent. On the positive side, it promotes purposeful, meaningful speech, conducive to spiritual development.

4. Samma kammanta = Right action.

This means that a person will not harm others in any way by violence or theft. This extends to a general awareness of others and encourages dana (giving) as a demonstration of selflessness. Sexual misconduct is to be avoided. In summary, right action promotes a good, moral life that initiates honourable, peaceful and beneficial conduct for others and oneself.

5. Samma ajiva = Right livelihood.

This means making a living that benefits others and that does not involve any harm. This also relates to a range of Buddhist teachings. In essence, five livelihoods are identified as specifically inauspicious: trading in poisons, human beings, intoxicating substances, weapons and flesh.

6. Samma vayama = Right effort.

This means a person is determined to avoid unwholesome or evil things. It is linked to the second part of the path, in that this discipline is required to avoid the arising of unwholesome or unskillful

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states of mind. This enables both stimulation and cultivation of pure, wholesome states of mind. The discipline underlined here is reinforced by moral precepts and a monastic lifestyle.

7. Samma sati = Right mindfulness.

This means to be fully aware of one's motives and reasons for doing something. According to Saddhatissa, this refers to 'gradually extending one's awareness until every action, thought and word is performed in the full light of consciousness.' In meditation, the foundations from which mindfulness is seen to operate include form, feelings and mental constructions.

8. Samma samadhi = Right concentration.

This means focusing the mind in meditation. It is complete detachment from the unwholesome states and an immersion into the four jhanas or absorptions of meditation. It is the ideal standard set by the Buddha, the middle way between extremes. It is a higher state of awareness and understanding. The monastic life nurtures this and concentration refers directly to Buddhist meditation.