

Still Learning

Bringing Buddhism to life for your school

Teachers' Notes

The Noble Eight-fold Path

The Noble eight-fold path is the path that the Buddha gave us for becoming enlightened. It is very practical, focussing in on all the main areas of our life and helping us to transform each of them.

It is divided into the 'path of vision', and the 'path of transformation'. The 'path of vision' consists just in the first stage, 'Right Vision'. The rest of the stages make up the 'path of transformation', through which we transform the rest of our lives in the light of our vision.

1. Right Vision

This means having some insight into the way the world really is, and how we want to be. It might mean that we have some experience of feeling very connected with other beings, or that we have realised the truth of suffering for ourselves, or how much our acts of kindness or cruelty affect others. (Also see 'The 3 Laksanas' - perfect vision is seeing the truth of these to some extent.)

2. Right Emotion

This means developing positive emotions, like love, compassion and gratitude. This stage is very important, because if we don't want to do something then we probably won't do it. If we do then it will feel like a duty and we will become resentful of it. So we need to develop emotions that are positive and help us to achieve our vision of how we want to be.

3. Right Speech

Our speech is very important because we speak a lot. Our speech has the power to hurt people or make them very happy, so we need to choose our words carefully.

The Buddha said that we will be happier if we always tell the truth, and that the words we use should be kind. We should avoid gossiping and talking about people behind their back, and saying anything that will cause people to fall out with each other. When we speak we should think about whether what we are going to say is helpful for the person hearing it.

Food for thought...

VISION: Have I ever felt unhappy with the way the world is, or the way that I have behaved, and wanted it to change? Have I some idea about what I would like to change into?
Is there someone I admire who I would like to be more like?

EMOTION: How do I act when I'm asked to do something I don't really want to do? How is it different when I really want to do something? Am I more likely to do something if I really want to do it?

SPEECH: Have I ever been spoken to in a way that has hurt me or helped me? How did it feel?
How would the world be if everyone always spoke kindly to each other and told the truth?

4. Right Action

This means behaving ethically. The Buddha gave lists of how to behave ethically, and one such list is 'The Five Precepts'. ('Precept' means something like 'guideline'.)

The Five Precepts are:

1. To avoid harming other beings.
2. To avoid taking what is not freely-given
3. To avoid craving
4. To avoid false speech
5. To avoid taking intoxicants that cloud the mind.

The positive versions of the precepts are:

1. To perform acts of loving-kindness.
2. To be generous.
3. To be still and content and live a simple life.
4. To be truthful.
5. To be aware.

The Buddha didn't talk about actions being right or wrong, but called them 'skilful' or 'unskilful'. This is because it is very hard to behave perfectly, but we can practise improving our behaviour so that it gets better and better, like practising a sport or a musical instrument.

(See Teachers' Notes on 'The Five Precepts' for more information.)

5. Right Livelihood

What people do for a living is very important, as this will usually be what they spend most of their time doing and so it will have a big effect on them.

The Buddha gave us a list of livelihoods that we should avoid because they cause harm to other living beings. Modern-day equivalents would include working in the armed forces, making or dealing in weapons, butchery, and even the advertising industry (because it fuels the craving of other people).

Instead we should try to engage in work that helps others. Sometimes our work is explicitly about helping other, such as being a teacher or a doctor, but it is possible to be helpful and positive and have a good effect on others in most kinds of work.

Food for thought...

ACTION: Do I agree that living by these precepts would make me happier? How does behaving unethically make me feel? Do I feel better when I behave in line with the precepts?

Is there one of the precepts that I would find especially hard to keep? What might be the effect on me and others if I decided to try to keep that precept?

LIVELIHOOD: Why might working in a way that harms others make me unhappy? What do I spend most or *my* time doing? How does this effect how I feel?

6. Right Effort

We need to make a constant effort with our spiritual practice if we are to become Enlightened. We need to constantly work on our minds to encourage positive thoughts and feelings, and to remove negative ones.

The Buddha told one of his disciples that we need to behave like a well-tuned lute string: if our effort is too strong we will be like a string that is tuned too tightly, and make a horrible noise. But if we don't make enough effort, we are like a string tuned too loosely, and we still make a horrible noise. Our effort needs to be perfectly balanced.

7. Right Awareness

It is very difficult to change our behaviour or work on our minds if we don't notice what we're doing or thinking, so developing awareness of them is very important. Meditating helps us to do this, as well as avoiding doing things that make our mind seem dull, like drinking alcohol or taking drugs.

There are other things we do that make us less aware and dull our minds, like watching lots of television, surfing the net, or playing loads of computer games. It's not that any of these things are bad, but we need to notice the effect they have on us, and be careful that they are not making our minds dull and making us less aware.

8. Right Meditation

Meditation helps us become more aware and develop positive emotions. When we are in this state we are more likely to see the truth about the way things are, and become Enlightened.

Food for thought...

EFFORT:

Do I normally put lots of effort into things I do, or can I be a bit lazy?

Do things usually turn out better or worse if I put lots of effort into things?

Does it make sense what the Buddha said about the lute needing to be the right tightness to get a good result?

Can I think of a time where I might have put too much effort into something, or not enough effort?

AWARENESS:

What does it mean to have a dull mind? What does it mean to be 'aware'? Which of these states do you enjoy more?

What things might I do that make my mind dull? What things might I do to make me more aware?

MEDITATION:

What effects did the stilling exercise have on me?

How would I feel if I were to do a stilling exercise every day?