

# The Noble Eightfold Path – *aṭṭhangiko maggo*

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translation from German into English Petra Aris



*Following this path, you will make an end of suffering.*

*Having discovered how to pull out the thorn, I make known the path.*

Dhammapada 275

The Noble Eightfold Path is a path of noble practice taught by the Buddha, which leads to complete liberation from all impurities of the mind and to the attainment of eternal peace, *Nibbāna*.

It is a path that makes it possible to recognize difficulties of existence clearly in a pleasant, beneficial way and to search for fundamental solutions, to find these and to put them into practice. By practicing according to this path, the laws that determine our existence become clear and can be understood. According to the Buddha's teachings liberation from suffering can be achieved by understanding our existence rightly up to its most subtle appearances.

If one wants to follow the Buddhist path of inner liberation, it is necessary to remember this path again and again in all circumstances of life. The more one practices according to this path, especially in intensive periods of practice (retreat), the more this path with its eight factors will be present in one's own stream of consciousness. It then offers appropriate solutions in all situations in life, which at the same time help step by step to achieve the goal of final liberation.

The factors of the noble eightfold path are:

Sammā diṭṭhi - right view

Sammā sankappa - right thinking

Sammā vācā - right speech

Sammā kammanta - right action

Sammā ājīva - right livelihood

Sammā vāyāma - right energy

Sammā sati - right mindfulness

Sammā samādhi - right concentration

The noble 8-fold path does not represent steps that are climbed one after another, but consists of interconnected factors. All eight factors can be present simultaneously, namely at the moment of path consciousness and at the resulting fruition experiences.

This noble eightfold path has the powerful potential to cut off all spiritual impurities without remainder by the four stages of awakening which are called paths (1. stream entry, 2. once return, 3. non-return, 4. Arahat). Only the spiritual impurities keep creating suffering within ourselves and in contact with others.

The eight factors of the noble eightfold path can be divided into **three trainings**: *Sīla* (ethics), *Samādhi* (concentration) and *Paññā* (wisdom).

The Buddha taught the Noble Eightfold Path (as well) in his first discourse after his awakening as well as in his last one on his deathbed, and also in many others. In the first discourse, he called it the **middle path** because it leads neither to excessive enjoyment of sensual objects nor to self-torment through false asceticism.

This noble eightfold path can only be practiced by oneself through the untiring work on one's own stream of consciousness. No one else can do it for anotherone. The inner development of the noble eightfold path brings about awareness of all activities in body, speech and mind. Awareness ranges from the development of comprehensive ethical behavior to the realization of the most subtle constituents of life in vipassanā meditation, based on deep concentration.

Ethical behaviour is the prerequisite for the development of concentration (8th factor), concentration is the prerequisite for the development of wisdom (especially 1st factor). The noble eightfold path is the fourth noble truth(1). The four noble truths are the core of the entire Buddha's teachings. They include the path of recognizing suffering (*dukkha*), i.e. difficulties and problems (1st noble truth), as well as finding out their causes (2nd noble truth) and overcoming their causes (3rd noble truth). They contain the goal of the teaching, namely the end of difficulties and problems, the end of suffering (*dukkha-nirodha*). As the fourth noble truth, they also contain the path which includes the recognition of suffering as well as its causes and leads to the realization of Nibbāna, the end of suffering. This path is the noble eightfold path. So this path has a central meaning in the Buddha's teachings as an applied path of practice.



## The Factors of the Eightfold Path:

### 1. *Sammā diṭṭhi* - Right View

At the beginning of the path a minimum of right view is necessary to practice the eightfold path, there must be an idea of the 4 noble truths: that there is suffering which has causes, that there is an end of suffering and a path leading to it. To a certain degree right view must also be there to allow the other path factors to develop in their task on the path to liberation. That is why right view has the first place in the noble eightfold path.

This initial right view of the Dhamma has to be evolved gradually with the help of the other factors of the path. So with the maturity of the *Sīla* (ethics)- and *Samādhi* (concentration)-factors right view becomes more and more *vipassana sammā diṭṭhi*, which is the prerequisite for the supramundane right view, or rather the realization of the noble eightfold path with path consciousness of the 4 stages of awakening.

Right view is thus both the beginning and the summit of the noble eightfold path. If one begins with little knowledge and belief and confidence, *sammā diṭṭhi* develops step by step into penetrating insight (*vipassanā-ñāṇa*) and then further with path knowledge to direct knowledge and seeing of the four noble truths.

Right view is therefore companion and guide for all other factors of the eightfold wholesome path.

Right view is finally a correct understanding of the Dhamma. This includes the understanding of existence and the laws according to which the different kinds of beings appear in the rounds of existence (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). Furthermore, with right view the perspective or laws which lead to liberation become clear.

In *MahāSatipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, DN 22, the Buddha describes right view as the understanding of the four noble truths, namely as insight knowledge (*ñāṇa*) of *dukkha*, insight knowledge of the causes of *dukkha*, insight knowledge of the cessation of *dukkha*, insight knowledge

of the path leading to the cessation of dukkha.

Right view also comprises the ability to discriminate between wholesome and unwholesome actions.

The first noble truth also includes the knowledge of all conditionally arisen phenomena as impermanent.



## 2. Sammā sankappa - Right Thought

In many Suttā right thought is defined as:

Thoughts of renunciation (*nekkhammavitakko*),  
Thoughts of non-ill will (*abyāpadavitakko*) and  
Thoughts of non-cruelty (*avihiṃsāvitakko*).

Thoughts of renunciation are wholesome thoughts that do not contain desire for sensual objects. Every moment of right mindfulness is a moment of renunciation.

Thoughts of non-ill will are, for example, thoughts of loving kindness (*mettā*).

Thoughts of non-cruelty are thoughts of compassion (*karunā*).

In summary, this is a matter of selfless, unselfish thinking.

Right thinking is strengthened by the first factor of this path, which is right view. The more right view develops in vipassanā meditation from direct experience, the wish for right thinking arises.

From right thinking follows right speech and right action. Thinking precedes speaking and acting.



## Sīla, Ethics

The factors three to five of the noble eightfold path belong to sīla, ethics. These include right speech, right action, and right livelihood.

Ethics can be understood as refraining from unwholesome deeds on different levels:  
 by rules or commandments,  
 through awareness, mindfulness,  
 through understanding,  
 through tolerance and  
 by effort.

Ethical behaviour involves the general mental factor of motivation or intention (*cetanā*) as well as factors such as non-craving, non-aversion, right view, restraint of the senses (*samvāra*), non-transgression, not letting gross impurities (*vitikkamma kilesas*) arise.

Motivation is the leading factor in all actions. It also brings the corresponding results. Here in the case of ethics it can be threefold:

low motivation: to gain a good reputation,

medium motivation: for merit,

higher motivation: to attain the goal of the Buddha's teaching, the end of all mental impurities (arahatship).

In other words, motivation can be  
 primarily for oneself,  
 primarily for the world,  
 primarily for the Dhamma.

For further information on ethics as Buddhist mental training see website:

Cetovimutti-theravada.org: [https://www.cetovimutti-theravada.org/images/Basic-Buddhist-Practices/Sila/sila-english\\_Cetovimutti-ChristinaGarbe.pdf](https://www.cetovimutti-theravada.org/images/Basic-Buddhist-Practices/Sila/sila-english_Cetovimutti-ChristinaGarbe.pdf)

### 3. Sammā vācā - Right Speech

The 4 factors of right speech are according to MahāSatipaṭṭhāna Sutta, DN 22:

1. abstinence from lying,
2. abstinence from slander and talk that leads to aversion, hostility and discord, talking behind the backs of others, gossip, chit-chat. To tell others about things that are to be kept secret,
3. abstinence from harsh, rude, coarse, malicious and abusive speech,
4. abstinence from useless and foolish chattering and jabbering.

Abstention and avoidance constitute right speech. So one should note that one establishes the practice of right speech when there is an opportunity to lie, slander or to frivolous or senseless gossip, to coarse speech, and one restrains oneself from speaking so.

Communication makes up a large part of social behaviour. Right speech can create trust, fearlessness, good social relations, friendship and harmony and, as a result, beneficial actions can be stimulated in oneself and in others while false speech leads to distrust, fear, strife, injury, separation, hostility, and finally to unwholesome actions.

The root of lying is mainly craving, craving for material advantage or creating an important personality. The opposite is truthfulness, sincerity.

The root of slander is aversion, often along with envy. Defamation is often coupled with lies. The opposite are words that lead to friendship and harmony.

The root of coarse speech is also aversion or anger. The opposite is gentle, friendly speech, which is supportive towards others.

The root of meaningless speech is ignorance and desire. The consumption of 'entertainment programmes' also belongs to meaningless speech.

Meaningful speech is to engage with the Dhamma, to talk about the Dhamma.

### 4. Sammā Kammanta - Right Action

Right action means abstaining from three physically performed unwholesome actions:

1. Abstaining from killing living beings
2. Abstaining from stealing and fraudulent businesss
3. Abstaining from sexual misconduct.

### 5. Sammā ajivā - Right Livelihood

According to MahāSatipaṭṭhāna Sutta, DN 22, right livelihood is avoiding unethical livelihood and earning one's living by right means. As well in the Mahācattārīsaka Sutta, MN 117, the Buddha describes right livelihood on the mundane noble eightfold path as overcoming wrong livelihood and earning a living through an ethical way of life.

On the supramundane path, right living means abstaining, renunciation, abandoning the wrong way of life. The prerequisite for the right way of life is right view, the understanding of the right or wrong way of life.

He describes the wrong way of life as hypocrisy, murmuring, fortune-telling, hinting, seeking further gain with the help of gain.

Right livelihood means avoiding the four unwholesome actions in words (see right speech)

and the three unwholesome actions through deeds (see right action) in order to earn a living. These include, for example, arms trading, slaughter, pimping, that is, earning a living in an unwholesome, unlawful way.

This includes killing beings, humans and animals for commercial purposes, as well as developing methods and means of killing living beings, such as weapons, insecticides, etc..

With regard to stealing, this includes material and intellectual theft. It also includes taking away or polluting other people's natural, vital resources such as water and air.

With regard to sexual misconduct, this includes prostitution and encouragement to do so, as well as human trafficking etc..

False speech in this sense are lies and slander for commercial purposes, as well as rough, aggressive words, as well as spreading of nonsensical writings, nonsensical audio and video material, as well as such which encourages other unwholesome actions, like killing, stealing, sexual misconduct.

Essential is the reflection as the Buddha advises his son Rāhula in the Ambalaṭṭhikārāhulovāda Sutta, MN 61:

*Would this action lead to my own affliction,  
or to the affliction of others,  
or to the affliction of both?*

*Is it an unwholesome action  
with painful consequences, with painful results?*

## 6. Sammā vāyāma- Right Energy, Right Effort

Energy or effort is necessary for the unfolding of all other path factors. This path factor is enumerated by the Buddha with the two other factors that are important to develop concentration (samādhi). Without right effort right concentration is not possible.

*Vāyāma* is synonymous with *virīya*. *Virīya* is also a constituent of the seven awakening factors, the five spiritual faculties, the five spiritual powers, the four bases for spiritual power.

Right effort is fourfold:

- Effort not to let unwholesome things arise that have not yet arisen.
- Effort to overcome unwholesome things that have already arisen.
- Effort to let arise wholesome things that have not yet arisen.
- Effort to maintain wholesome things that have already arisen and to bring them to full perfection and maturity.

These things are especially wholesome when performed with the intention to escape from the suffering of the rounds of samsāra.

Three kinds of unwholesome things are meant here:

1. *vitikkama kilesa*, coarse impurities, transgressions that can be avoided by keeping sīla,
2. *pariyuṭṭhāna kilesa*, obsessive, compulsive impurities that appear. They mainly refer to sensual pleasures. They can be avoided by correct mindfulness (sati) and by practicing samatha and vipassanā meditation. Through samatha meditation they are temporarily overcome at the time of practice. Through vipassanā meditation with the goal of path consciousness they are overcome through insight.
3. *anusaya kilesa*, latent impurities that are dormant in the mind and only come up when

the opportunity arises. These can only be overcome irreversibly through the stages of awakening, through the path experience. These impurities are deeply anchored in the stream of consciousness and most people are not aware of them as such. The taste of liberation from them can only be gained by practicing vipassanā intensively and effectively and by achieving insight through deep, subtle experiences in meditation.

## 7. Sammā sati - Right Mindfulness, Awareness

Right mindfulness is described in detail by the Buddha in the MahāSatipaṭṭhāna Sutta, DN 22.

There are the four foundations of mindfulness:

- Mindfulness of the body,
- Mindfulness of feelings,
- Mindfulness of consciousness,
- Mindfulness of the objects of the mind (Dhamma).

Mindfulness is the most important factor to be developed on the path of inner liberation and should be practiced continuously. It is the prerequisite for understanding life.

More detailed explanations on Buddhist mindfulness in German language can be found on the website [cetovimutti-theravada.org](https://www.cetovimutti-theravada.org):

<https://www.cetovimutti-theravada.org/144-home-de/dhamma-praxis/artikel-christina-garbe/186-achtsamkeit-samma-sati>

<https://www.cetovimutti-theravada.org/144-home-de/dhamma-praxis/artikel-christina-garbe/114-fuenf-spirituelle-faehigkeiten->

and in Christina Garbe: Achtsamkeitsübungen bei den alltäglichen Aktivitäten und bei der Gehmeditation.

Or Christina Garbe: Auf dem Weg zum Erwachen: Das Entwickeln der fünf Fähigkeiten

## 8. Sammā samādhi - Right Concentration

According to MahāSatipaṭṭhāna Sutta, DN 22, right concentration is the absence of the five hindrances:

*kāmacchanda*- craving for sense objects

*byāpāda* – ill-will

*thina-middha* - sluggishness/laziness

*uddacca-kukkucca* - restlessness/remorse

*vicikicchā* - skeptical doubt

and the development of the Jhāna factors, which are in the 1st Jhāna:

*vitakka* - initial application to the object

*vicāra* – sustained application to the object

*pīti* - joy

*sukha* - happiness

*ekaggatā* - one-pointedness (of the mind)

In the 2nd Jhana:

*pīti* - joy

*sukha* - happiness

*ekaggatā* - one-pointedness (of the mind).

In the 3rd Jhana :

*sukha* - happiness

*ekaggatā* - one-pointedness (of the mind).

In the 4th Jhana:

*upekkhā* - equanimity

*ekaggatā* - one-pointedness (of the mind).

In the discourse on concentration (Samādhi Sutta), SN 22.5, the Buddha says:

*“Bhikkhus, develop concentration. A bhikkhu who is concentrated understands things as they really are.*

*“And what does he understand as it really is? The origin and passing away of form; the origin and passing away of feeling; the origin and passing away of perception; the origin and passing away of volitional constructions; the origin and passing away of consciousness. ...”*

In MahāSatipaṭṭhāna, DN 22, the Buddha describes right concentration as jhāna-concentration. However we find altogether 40 objects in the Pāḷikanon which the Buddha recommends as approach to vipassanā meditation. One cannot attain jhānā with all of them. With some one can attain only access concentration. The main point concerning right concentration is that it should lead to satisfying, correct vipassanā meditation. Nowadays vipassanā approaches are based on the development of samādhi and vipassanā alternately. Through correct, continuous mindfulness samādhi becomes so strong that vipassanā can arise. If one would like to attain higher paths than stream entry (1st path), one needs to understand more and more subtle interrelations of our existence. The stronger the concentration, the clearer subtle things can be perceived and understood. Actually, the Buddha has always recommended the 4th path, Arahatsip. Only with the attainment of arahatsip all spiritual impurities in the corresponding stream of consciousness are overcome.

For *sammā samādhi*, right concentration, the mental factor *ekaggatā*, one-pointedness of the mind, is the most important factor. This mental factor can occur in wholesome and in unwholesome consciousness. Here, of course, it is only that one in wholesome consciousness.

## **Achieving Awakening with the Noble Eightfold Path**

With each path-consciousness, which lasts only one mindmoment, the whole noble eightfold path is accomplished and in this moment the first and second noble truth are overcome, the third is realized. Each path-consciousness arises only once in the stream of consciousness of a person.

Likewise, all eight factors of the noble eightfold path appear with each fruition consciousness (*lokuttara citta* - consciousness which goes beyond this world). Fruition consciousness can be experienced again and again by the awakened ones, when there are no mental defilements.

After all four path and fruition insights have been experienced by which arahatship has been attained, delusion is completely overcome and thus all other impurities, or the four noble truths containing the noble eightfold path are fully realized.

When awareness and concentration have reached a higher level in vipassanā meditation, the noble eightfold path is practiced in all its constituents:

The effort to maintain the wholesome things that have already arisen and to let those arise that have not yet arisen and develop them to maturity and perfection: this factor is practiced when the meditator mindfully observes each object in meditation, in the moment of seeing, hearing, touching, etc.

The possibility that unwholesome states of mind (can) arise is prevented when awareness, and mindfulness are developed without gap. Thus this factor is fulfilled.

If one directs one's mind onto the object and is aware of it, it is right mindfulness. Through uninterrupted awareness one develops right concentration. These three factors of the eightfold path, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, form the samādhi group of the noble eightfold path. From this samādhi state, which includes mindfulness, concentration and right effort, right thinking - namely to be free from sensual desire, ill will and cruelty - and right view are developed. These (at) last mentioned two factors form the wisdom group. Only with wisdom the three universal characteristics of phenomena (*anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness), *anatta* (non-self)) can be experienced.

All these five factors that belong to the samādhi and the wisdom group are simultaneously realized in vipassanā meditation. Likewise the three sīla factors are realized simultaneously as abstinences.

Thus in vipassanā meditation, when it has reached a certain maturity, the entire noble eightfold path is practiced in each moment of mindfully noting an object.

#### SN 45.2 Half – Upaḍḍhasutta

*Then the Venerable Ānanda approached the Blessed One. Having approached, he paid homage to the Blessed One, sat down to one side, and said to him:*

*“Venerable sir, this is half of the holy life, that is, good friendship (kalyāṇamittatā), good companionship, good comradeship.”*

*“Not so, Ānanda! Not so, Ānanda! This is the entire holy life, Ānanda, that is, good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship. When a bhikkhu has a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, it is to be expected that he will develop and cultivate the noble eightfold path.”*

#### SN 45.27. The Jug - Kumbha Sutta

*....Just as, bhikkhus, a jug without stand is easily knocked over, while one with a stand is difficult to knock over, so, bhikkhus, consciousness (citta) without stand is easily knocked over, but that with a stand is difficult to knock over.*

*And what is, bhikkhus, is the stand for consciousness? It is this noble eightfold path, ....*