

Right View

What Is Right View?

When the steps of the Eightfold Path are presented in a list, usually Right View is the first step (even though there is no "first" step). Right View supports wisdom. Wisdom in this sense is the understanding of things as they are, as explained in the teachings of the Four Noble Truths.

This understanding is not mere intellectual understanding. It is instead a thorough penetration of the Four Noble Truths. Theravada scholar Wapola Rahula called this penetration "seeing a thing in its true nature, without name and label." (What the Buddha Taught, page 49)

Vietnamese Zen Teacher Thich Nhat Hanh wrote,

"Our happiness and the happiness of those around us depend on our degree of Right View. Touching reality deeply -- knowing what is going on inside and outside of ourselves -- is the way to liberate ourselves from the suffering that is caused by wrong perceptions. Right View is not an ideology, a system, or even a path. It is the insight we have into the reality of life, a living insight that fills us with understanding, peace, and love." (The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching, page 51)

In Mahayana Buddhism, prajna is associated with the intimate realization of shunyata -- the teaching that all phenomena are empty of intrinsic being.

Cultivating Right View

Right View develops from practice of the Eightfold Path. For example, the practice of samadhi through Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration prepares the mind for penetrating insight. Meditation is associated with "Right Concentration."

Ethical conduct through Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood also support Right View through cultivation of compassion. Compassion and wisdom are said to be the two wings of Buddhism. Compassion helps us break through our narrow, self-centered views, which enables wisdom. Wisdom helps us realize nothing is really separate, which enables compassion.

By the same token, the wisdom parts of the path -- Right View and Right Thought -- support the other parts of the path. Ignorance is one of the root poisons that brings with it greed and ill-will.

The Eightfold Path

Triratna Buddhist Community New York City

The Role of Doctrine in Buddhism

The Buddha taught his followers not to accept his or any other teachings on blind faith. Instead, by examining teachings in the light of our own experience, we judge for ourselves what teachings we accept as true.

However, this doesn't mean the doctrines of Buddhism are optional for Buddhists. Many converts to Buddhism in the West seem to think that all they need is meditation and mindfulness, and that the many doctrines of the Four This and Six That and Twelve Something Else can be ignored. This frivolous attitude is not exactly Right Effort.

Walpola Rahula said of the Eightfold Path, "Practically the whole teaching of the Buddha, to which he devoted himself during 45 years, deals in some way or other with this path." The Buddha explained the Eightfold Path in many different ways, to reach people in different stages of spiritual development.

While Right View is not about doctrinal orthodoxy, that doesn't mean it has no connection to doctrine at all. Thich Nhat Hanh says, "Right View is, most of all, a deep understanding of the Four Noble Truths." Acquaintance with the Four Noble Truths is a big help, to say the least.

As I explained earlier, the Eightfold Path is part of the Four Noble Truths; in fact, it is the Fourth Noble Truth. Right View is penetrating insight into the nature of reality as described in the Four Noble Truths. So, while Right View is something much more profound than merely understanding doctrine, doctrine is still important and should not be brushed aside.

Although these teachings do not have to be "believed in" on faith, they should be understood provisionally. The teachings provide essential guidance, keeping us on the path to genuine wisdom. Without them, mindfulness and meditation can become just self-improvement projects.

A grounding in the teachings presented through the Four Noble Truths includes not just the Truths themselves, but also teachings on how everything is interconnected (Dependent Origination) and on the nature of individual existence (the Five Skandhas). As Walpola Rahula said, the Buddha spent 45 years explaining these teachings. They are what make Buddhism a distinctive spiritual path.

"One is not following the Buddhist path if one feels that one is being driven along it like a sheep, rather wishing one could stray off and have a nibble on some succulent wayside shrub or flower."

~ Essential Sangharakshita P. 109