



WHAT MAKES YOU A TRUE BUDDHIST?

Summary of Dhamma Talk by Venerable K. Rathanasara on June 24, 2018

By definition, a Buddhist is one who takes refuge in the Triple Gem – doing so signifies that one wholeheartedly accepts the Buddha as the supreme enlightened teacher out of great confidence in the Buddha, accepts the Dhamma as guiding principles with understanding after scrutiny and analysis and not out of blind faith, and follows the footsteps of the Sangha who have shown that enlightenment is possible by following the Buddha's path. However, one becomes a true Buddhist by practice, not just by label. One who understands and practises the Noble Eightfold Path is a Buddhist by practice. Thus, these two factors together make you a true Buddhist – taking refuge in the Triple Gem, and dedicating to the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Buddha has openly taught the Noble Eightfold Path to all his followers – monks, nuns and lay persons – as the means to enlightenment. Although becoming a monastic can provide a conducive environment and conditions for spiritual practice, the Noble Eightfold Path is also applicable to lay persons living the worldly life. This path need not be practised in a secluded location or at a monastery, it is to be practised everywhere in your daily lives when you are with family, friends and colleagues. So how do you practise the Noble Eightfold Path in your daily lives? Upon analysis, the Noble Eightfold Path comprises eight factors that can be grouped into the development of three faculties: ethical, spiritual, and intellectual. This is the Noble Eightfold Path in brief and how we can practise:

Starting with Right Understanding, this refers to the understanding of the Four Noble Truths. The first noble truth is the truth of dukkha (unsatisfactoriness). Dukkha can be analysed and experienced from our body and mind, and understood through our daily experiences. In worldly life, we experience happiness as well as sorrow, pain and grief. The Buddha pointed out the defilements of greed, anger and delusion that cause these mental sufferings; He then consolidated these three defilements to one factor – craving. When you experience dukkha, you can find it within your body and mind. The cessation of dukkha is also within the body and mind, and the Noble Eightfold Path trains one to rid attachments and uproot defilements for the mind to become peaceful and calm. It is a very logical path and one only needs to dedicate oneself to training.

Right Understanding leads to Right Thought – thoughts of generosity, loving-kindness and compassion. When you understand that craving is the cause of suffering, you produce thoughts of generosity. When you understand that all living beings wish to be well and happy, you produce thoughts of loving-kindness. When you understand that all living beings have a fear for suffering, you generate thoughts of compassion, wishing all beings to be free from suffering.

Right Thought also produces Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. Someone who is full of generosity, loving-kindness and compassion will never inflict suffering on another living being. He will speak truthful words, words that unite instead of divide, words



that are gentle instead of harsh, and words which bring peace and meaning to life. He will behave in a wholesome manner – having refrained from killing, he will live compassionately; having refrained from stealing, he will live generously; and having refrained from sexual misconduct, he will satisfy his sense desires in an acceptable way. Such a practitioner will also earn his living in peaceful and righteous ways without harming the planet or any living beings.

With wholesome thoughts, speech and action, the practitioner progresses to develop Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. With right effort, the practitioner will not be lazy or waver in his practices, while right mindfulness and right concentration can be developed through meditation and various ways in your daily lives.

When you dedicate to practising the Noble Eightfold Path diligently, you will eventually breakthrough to the first state of awakening. With this first awakening, three types of delusion will be destroyed. The first delusion that will be destroyed is that of self-identity, what we regard as 'I', 'Me', 'Mine' or soul that cause self-centred desires. You will now see your body and mind and everything in this universe as conditioned and compounded, and you will see that what we call a "self" is actually nothing but clinging to the five aggregates.

Secondly, any delusion about the Triple Gem will be destroyed. Before awakening, we accept the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha out of faith – not blind faith, but faith based on understanding and analysis. However, this is still not based on our own personal experience. With the first state of awakening, any doubts about the Triple Gem will disappear, because you will see clearly for the first time based on your own experience that the Buddha is truly enlightened, the Dhamma is well expounded, and the Sangha are indeed liberated members on the good path. You will then become a firm follower of the Buddha.

Thirdly, any delusion regarding rites and rituals will be destroyed. You will realise that the Noble Eightfold Path is the only way to enlightenment, no other rites or rituals can lead to enlightenment. With the first awakening, it is guaranteed that you will eventually become enlightened. All these are achieved the moment you are awakened from the deep sleep of ignorance for the first time.

If someone were to climb up the mountain and say, "It is very safe, cooling and peaceful up here. Up here, there is no fear or agitation." The ones at the bottom of the mountain hear what the person says and want to give it a try to test the validity of the claim. If they take action and follow the path to climb up the mountain, they will also see for themselves, "Yes, what he said is true." This is a simile. The person who first reached the top of the mountain is the Buddha, the path is the Dhamma, and those who followed the path to reach the peak are the noble Sangha. The moment you achieve the first awakening, you will have progressed from merely believing based on faith, to actually seeing and experiencing it for yourself, doubts will disappear.

In summary, to be a true Buddhist, you need to not just take refuge in the Triple Gem, but also follow and practise the Noble Eightfold Path, only then can you be considered a true follower of the Buddha.