

1. Introduction: Ascent Towards Freedom - the Eightfold Spiral Path

1. You're interested in Buddhist practice but want to know where to begin. Or you're already practicing but want to know where the path leads.
2. There are many descriptions of the journey on which practice takes us in early Buddhism.
3. It's very useful to have a map of where we're going. Perhaps the most famous of these is the Noble Eightfold Path.
4. It is said to be the path that leads us to freedom. The fourth of the four Noble Truths.
5. Awhile back I got a comment on one of my course videos here at the ODI from a viewer, who asked for me to produce "a deep dive on each component of the Eightfold Path" to show "the whats, whys, and hows, but also philosophy and real life applications".
6. That's what we're going to be doing in this course.
7. Mostly the Eightfold Path tends to be discussed as eight "path factors" that line up and direct us towards awakening.
8. Very roughly, they are described as leading from the basic ethical practices of right speech, action, and livelihood, to the more serious practices of meditation that culminate in wisdom.
9. However if we think about it, the path is only very vaguely linear.
10. For example, it begins in Right View, and yet in a sense, Right View is where the path ends: as our understanding of the dharma culminates in wisdom.
11. None of us really begin with "Right View".
12. So starting with Right View almost makes the path seem circular. It begins and ends with the same factor.
13. But if it's seen as a circle, it then seems like the kind of "path" from which we can't really ever escape! (Jones, p. 77).

14. Fortunately, each path factor can be seen at differing depths. This is a feature highlighted in one early sutta that we will be discussing in the course.
15. As we practice, we travel through each of the factors multiple times, seeing them in different ways as we come back to them.
16. As we continue around the path, we don't go through it in a straight line, nor in a closed circle.
17. This suggests a view of the path as a spiral: it's a circle that increases in height as it comes back to the various path factors multiple times.
18. Side note: some of you may be familiar with the notion of a "spiral path" involving dependent origination, discussed by the Buddhist teacher Sangharakshita, after the *Upanisā Sutta* (SN 12.23). (Jones ch. 4; Attwood).
19. This course should be thought of as independent of those ideas. While I have taken inspiration from that approach, I do not depend upon it for what follows.
20. In this course we will go through the path factors at varying levels, taking inspiration from the sutta on The Great Forty. (MN 117). This is a sutta that contains material from after the Buddha's lifetime, but that expresses distinctions in the path factors from which I have taken inspiration for the subject of this course.
21. We will begin with a "mundane" understanding of the factors, as they might be present to us in our ordinary, lay life. Many of us who consider ourselves Buddhist interact with the factors at this level.
22. We want to be good people. We try to be kind and understanding. We want success in the world too, which we know to come in general from being good people.
23. Then we will turn to a more "advanced" understanding of those same factors, seeing ways that they can be understood at a deeper level.

24. We will look at how monastics (at least in principle) are to practice following the same factors, and how we ourselves can take inspiration from their more dedicated practice style.
25. Are there lessons we can take into our own lives? Perhaps so.
26. We will also look at some of the deeper nuances in the factors: elements that aren't often discussed or highlighted. Factors that seem simple, obvious, or uncontroversial at first glance may contain hidden complexities or apparent paradoxes that can become material for our own self-investigation.
27. Finally we will turn to a truly "transcendent" understanding of the path, seeing it as culminating in one who has completed the journey and so manifests all the path factors at once in their thought and action.
28. We will see this as represented in the factor of Right View in particular. Seeing how in a sense Right View both begins and ends the path.
29. I will include suggested practices in each course lecture: material you can take into your own life and put to work as you engage with the material in the course.
30. **Practice:** what does the Eightfold Path mean to you? Consider the ways you practice with it, or don't! If you don't really have a good feel for the Eightfold Path, what does it represent to you? Why are you interested in it?
31. In our next lecture we will begin with a mundane understanding of Right View.

Dhivan Thomas Jones, *This Being, That Becomes: The Buddha's Teaching on Conditionality* (Windhorse, 2011).

Jayarava Attwood, "The Spiral Path or *Lokuttara Paṭicca-samuppāda*" in *Western Buddhist Review* 2013 (6). <https://thebuddhistcentre.com/system/files/groups/files/Jayarava-Spiral%20Path.pdf>

<https://suttacentral.net/sn12.23/en/sujato> Upanisā Sutta

<https://suttacentral.net/mn117/en/sujato> The Great Forty