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RELIGION

Urgyen Sangharakshita  
**The Buddha's  
Noble Eightfold Path**

An Introduction  
Read by **Kulananda**



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# The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path

## An Introduction

Written by **Urgyen Sangharakshita**

Sitting under a tree one full moon night on the hot and dusty plains of Northern India at the height of the dry season, two and a half thousand years ago, a man called Siddhartha Gautama made a huge spiritual effort. Summoning up his prodigious powers of concentration, developed through years of ascetic practice, he turned inwards, seeking to uproot whatever it was in his human nature that stood between him and the experience of complete freedom that for all of those years had been his goal.

Coursing ever further into the depths of his own mind, courageously confronting, one after another, his own inner demons, recognising and overcoming them, Siddhartha finally achieved that goal. In the last watch of the night he attained complete liberation. Having taken his seat as an ordinary human being, Siddhartha arose at dawn as a Buddha – one who is Awake. He had ‘woken up’ to the true nature of existence and was irreversibly freed from all the limitations previously imposed on him by the inner forces of craving, aversion and delusion.

The Buddha devoted the rest of his life to teaching others how they too might follow his

path and arrive at that same goal. Adapting his teaching to the needs and circumstances of those he encountered, he travelled the length and breadth of Northern India and, tradition tells us, what he often taught is what we now know in English as the Noble Eightfold Path. From that time onwards, wherever Buddhism took root – in India, Sri Lanka, China, Japan, Tibet or the countries of South East Asia – the Noble Eightfold Path continued to be taught and practised.

The Eightfold Path starts by addressing the issue of our views – the ideas, beliefs and opinions we hold about the world, ourselves and others. Depending on these we turn towards the world with various feelings, intentions and aspirations, and so we speak, act and make our way in the world.

According to the Buddha, if you want to be free you need first of all to address these matters: your views, your feelings and intentions, your speech, your actions and how you make your way in the world. These cover the first five stages of the Path. You should also make a conscious effort to grow and develop, to cultivate your awareness and to develop your skills in meditation: the last three stages of the



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Path. And if that sounds really easy, I've not made my point, for the Eightfold Path is a training in the complete, unqualified, reorientation of our deeply intransigent being.

In *The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path*, Sangharakshita presents a commentary for our time. When it appeared in print, the original title was *Vision and Transformation* and this describes, in essence, his approach. He demonstrates that the Eightfold Path is not a list to be studied, but a path to be followed. An Englishman by birth, Sangharakshita's personal practice of the path and his years of teaching in both the East and the West has enabled him to return to the original Pali sources and reconsider the Eightfold Path in contemporary terms. Rooted in the tradition by his years of training in the East, Sangharakshita nonetheless brings to the tradition a very modern and practical view of the Path, informed by elements of Western psychology, art, religion and culture.

Right at the start, he takes a new look at the translations used to describe each stage of the Path. Instead of Right View, as the first stage is often translated, he suggests Perfect Vision. Instead of Right Intention, he suggests Perfect Emotion. This fresh, radical approach to these teachings brings them alive, making them more immediately relevant to our contemporary situation.

Again and again, Sangharakshita reminds us that a merely conceptual understanding of the Path, valuable though it may be, is not

enough. We have to approach it not just from the head but also from the heart – even the belly. The responses he evokes are therefore heartfelt and visceral. He pulls off the truly unusual feat of being simultaneously scholarly and vivid; deeply traditional and yet bang up to the minute.

As it developed, the Buddhist tradition schematised its doctrines in an endless variety of lists. Lists upon lists, and lists within lists, and Sangharakshita doesn't shy from this approach. In fact, he embraces it. So here we have not only the Eightfold Path, but also the Four Noble Truths, the Three Characteristics of Conditioned Existence, the Four Shunyatatas, the Four 'Sublime Abodes', the Five Shilas, the Five Dharmas and so on and on. Far from being a dry catalogue, however, each of these lists is brought skilfully to life and their application to our contemporary situation is drawn out with wit, charm, and penetrating metaphor.

But what shines out of this commentary, sometimes quite startlingly for me, and what makes it so valuable, is Sangharakshita's own deep personal commitment to live out the implications of these doctrines to the full. As he ranges across the Eightfold Path, commenting from the breadth of his knowledge of the Buddhist tradition and his panoramic grasp of Western intellectual, artistic and cultural traditions, it is this wholehearted – and deeply challenging – personal commitment that speaks to me again and again. Just as the archaic torso of Apollo confronted the poet Rilke with the

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flatly imperative demand: ‘You must change your life’, so Sangharakshita’s commentary, imbued throughout with his own deep existential engagement with the topic, calls upon us too to make a voyage of personal change and discovery.

There is nothing merely theoretical here. Every word is an invitation to change, an invitation to each of us, in our own way, to begin to live out the fullness of our particular potential. Sangharakshita’s espousal of Buddhism for everyone – not just for monastics

or other ‘spiritual professionals’ – has a particular resonance in the West today. In *The Buddha’s Noble Eightfold Path* he amply demonstrates that this broad, all-inclusive approach need never compromise the fundamental Buddhist challenge to make every moment an opportunity for personal spiritual transformation. And that, in the end, is the very essence of the Path.

**Notes by Kulananda**



**Sangharakshita** is a unique figure in the Buddhist world. After the Second World War, he spent 20 years in India, most of them as a monk in the Theravada tradition but practising and studying with teachers from a range of Buddhist traditions. This has led him to write on all the major aspects of the Buddhist tradition, drawing inspiration from them in the light of both contemporary scholarship and his own spiritual life. In doing so, he has discerned the core teachings that underlie the tradition as a whole, and seeks to re-express these in ways that are relevant, coherent, and spiritually vital. He has now been teaching Buddhism for over 50 years through lectures, writing, and recordings. This broader perspective is also an underlying aspect of the Western Buddhist Order, the worldwide Buddhist movement he founded on his return to the UK in the late 1960s.

Cover picture courtesy AKG Images

Urgyen Sangharakshita

# The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path

## An Introduction

Read by **Kulananda**

The Eightfold Path is the most widely known formulation of the Buddha's teaching. It is ancient, reaching back to the Buddha's very first discourse, and it is highly venerated as a unique treasury of wisdom and practical guidance. The teaching of the Eightfold Path challenges us to grasp the implications of that vision, and asks us to transform ourselves in its light. Like the teaching itself, this work covers every aspect of life.



**Kulananda.** A leading member of the Western Buddhist Order, which he joined in 1977, Kulananda is an experienced practitioner of Buddhism and meditation, and he is author of several books, including *Principles of Buddhism*, *Western Buddhism*, and *Mindfulness and Money*. He is based in Cambridge, where he teaches at the local Buddhist centre.

CD ISBN:

978-962-634-416-3

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Produced by Nicolas Soames  
Recorded by Daryl Chapman at RNIB Talking Book Studios,  
London  
Edited by Sarah Butcher

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Total time  
3:40:03