

# The Eightfold Path

## Introductory Note

*Zen Master Soeng Hyang (Bobby Rhodes)*

The eightfold path was taught by the Buddha to help us find the way out of our our confusion. This way can be explained, but will never be perceived unless we are able to grab the great question "What am I?" and not let go. Our human consciousness is very complicated; the path is right in front of us; WAKE UP!

As we read the teachings from some of our teachers, let us bow to the tremendous effort, care and sincerity that went into each offering. The Kwan Um School's process, which can eventually put a student in the position of having the title Ji Do Poep Sa or Zen Master is long and arduous. Once the responsibility to teach at those levels is given, the appointed teachers are required to sign something we call the teachers' compact. This compact is unique in the realm of Zen institutions. The teachers, regardless of where they live in the world, agree to be a part of a whole. We agree to act together, to follow the forms and teaching tools that were were taught to us by our founding teacher, Zen Master Seung Sahn. Any significant changes are made together. Acting and staying together in this way requires a large amount of trust. Without practice, this trust can erode, and our ability to listen to each other can erode.

As I write this, I realize how tremendously grateful I am to our founding teacher, who set up this model of what he called "put it all down and act with others." Our international Zen school is a product of sincere practice. This practice opens up our ability to truly understand the eightfold path not through words but through our true selves. So as you read these teachings offered from around the world, realize how precious is the vehicle that brings them to you. May we always walk the path with courage and gratitude.

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## Right View

*Zen Master Bon Hae (Judy Roitman)*

The first step on the eightfold path is right view. *Right*, of course, doesn't mean the opposite of left. It means correct. *View* here doesn't mean "oh what a pretty view." It means viewpoint, how you organize your perceptions.

In the Theravada tradition, correct viewpoint means to see everything through the lens of impermanence. Things arise, they stick around for a while, they disappear. Everything is changing all the time. No matter what you are seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, you are aware of its impermanence. No matter what your situation, you are aware of its impermanence. Whatever you are thinking about, you are aware of its impermanence. Your thoughts themselves are impermanent, and you are aware of this. Ideologies are impermanent. Relationships are impermanent. War is impermanent. Peace is impermanent. Your life is impermanent. The sky is impermanent. Even earth. Even space. Time, by definition, is definitely impermanent.

That's the Theravada version of correct viewpoint: everything is impermanent.

A long time ago I read an exchange in which someone began to ask Zen Master Seung Sahn a question by saying, "Since everything is impermanent . . ." and Zen Master Seung Sahn immediately interrupted, "Where did you hear that? Everything is originally emptiness!" Which brings us to the Mahayana view of correct viewpoint.



*Photo: Nick Gershberg*

In the Mahayana tradition, correct viewpoint means to see everything through the lens of emptiness. Everything is empty. No matter what you are seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, you are aware of its emptiness. Your situation is fundamentally empty. Everything you think about is empty. Your thoughts themselves are empty. Ideologies are empty. Relationships are empty. War is empty. Peace is empty. Your life is empty. The sky is empty. The earth is empty. Space is empty. Time is empty. Even emptiness is empty. But this is not nihilism. Emptiness is not the same as nothing. It is not the void.

We can try to understand emptiness intellectually. But then we're just being seduced by grammar—*emptiness* is a noun, so there has to be some *thing* it represents. That is a well-known philosophical trap known as reification, inventing some kind of reality because there's a word for it. Also, the adjective *empty* isn't like green or purple. *Green* and *purple* are adjectives that distinguish things—some things are green and other things are purple and still other things are neither—but *every* thing is empty. What can an adjective mean when it applies to everything?

The Mahayana view understands all this. It understands that emptiness is not a thing. It understands that saying something is empty is not like saying it is green or purple. Emptiness/empty is a tool for overthrowing our conceptual thinking, so trying to understand it conceptually isn't very helpful. Sometimes we say “no self nature” to explain emptiness. But Sanskrit has two different words: *sunyata* for emptiness, and *anatman* for no self nature. They are not quite the same. Metaphors are more helpful. Zen Master Seung Sahn used the metaphor of cookie dough—everything comes from emptiness in the same way that you can make tree cookies and house cookies and soldier cookies and dog cookies out of the same cookie dough. Another metaphor comes from quantum physics: quarks and leptons and bosons continually flicker in and out of existence not only *in* space, but *of* space. That is, it is the nature of space to continually produce sub-atomic particles that instantaneously disappear, just as it is the nature of emptiness to produce the manifestations of form we see all around us—form is emptiness, emptiness is form. Both of these metaphors (cookie dough, space) of course fail because they still have some *thing*—cookie dough, space. Metaphors are helpful, but the only real way to really perceive emptiness is to practice hard. To *attain* emptiness. To carry it in our awareness like the air we breathe.

That's the Mahayana version of correct viewpoint: everything is empty.

In the Theravada version of correct viewpoint, everything is seen through the lens of impermanence. In the Mahayana version of correct viewpoint, everything is seen through the lens of emptiness.

But why have any lens at all? The sky doesn't say “I am impermanent” or “I am empty.” Your dog doesn't say that

either, or your shoes. Human beings like to make stuff up, so they say things like that, but it just gets in the way.

So we come to the Zen version of correct viewpoint: correct viewpoint is no viewpoint. No viewpoint means completely open. Completely open means don't know. Whatever you see, hear, smell, taste, touch, think is exactly what it is. You don't have to know anything about it in advance. In fact you *don't* know anything about it, or about anything else, and you never will. Your world doesn't need to be run through any filters, except of course the natural filters our bodies supply (for example, we can't see light waves that are too high or too low on the electromagnetic spectrum, and we can't hear sounds that are too high or too low).

A long time ago I was sitting a solo retreat and suddenly I felt I was possessed by a demon. Everywhere I looked, it wasn't me looking, it was the demon looking through my eyes. It was terrifying. I felt that if I woke up the next morning with the demon still inside me, I would have to check myself into a mental hospital (because that's how our culture deals with demons). But I kept up my retreat schedule—sitting, chanting, walking, bowing. And then, while doing walking meditation outside on my small porch, my view of the trees shifting as I walked past them, and I realized that nobody looks out through my eyes; the world comes in through my eyes. And the demon vanished.

This is correct viewpoint, right view. Letting the world in completely. No viewpoint. Only don't know.



## Right Resolve (a.k.a. Right Thought)

*Zen Master Hae Kwang (Stanley Lombardo)*

The noble eightfold path is traditionally divided into three parts, with steps one and two, right view and right resolve, paired together as the first group and termed *prajna* (wisdom). The next three steps—right speech, right action, and right livelihood—are grouped together as *sila* (morality). And the final three—right effort, right mindfulness, and right samadhi—are collectively referred to as *dhyana* (meditation). Instead of a straight-out series of steps that begins with right view and culminates in samadhi, the path as a whole can be regarded as a kind of loop trail, with wisdom growing out of meditation practice and leading to correct function in this world, and then continuing around in a deepening cycle. Or the eight steps can be regarded as eight practices that we should try to cultivate simultaneously. In either scenario our practice has no beginning and no end. When we look at the noble eightfold path in this way, the second step, understood as right resolve, is crucial to the whole system, because without a strong resolve nothing happens, there is