

Householder Series:
The Eightfold Noble Path
-- Right Speech

The next steps in the Eightfold Path, have to do with what's called Uprightness of Heart, how to live in an upright way, not crooked, or bent, or wobbly, or something like that.

Don Juan teaches and talks very often in his writings, in his speaking with Carlos Casteneda, about choosing "a path with heart," -- about picking a way of practice and a way of life, and that one question needs to be addressed: Is this a path with heart? Is this one that I can follow and live according to, and live in harmony with the deepest longings of my heart?

Each path with heart, whatever we've chosen as our path, has a particular foundation or support. Support for what? What do we really want in our spiritual practice or in the path that we may have chosen? What do you want, what do you want for the world around you? Think about it. What do we want for the world around us, and then what do we want for ourselves? Often the answer is the same, a bit more peaceful, more loving, a little wiser, or taking it all less seriously. I don't mean no anger or no fear -- that gets a little too idealistic -- but perhaps in our world and in ourselves, not to be so caught in it, not to get caught into where it leads, as it does in the world, to so much violence, sorrow and hatred.

Do you have a sense of what you want, just a little bit, for the world or for yourself? How do we get this? The foundation or support for a path with heart, or a world with heart, rests on the foundation of a basic harmony of our being. For if your life is out of harmony, there won't be peace, or there won't be compassion, or there won't be wisdom. What does it mean, this basic harmony? Well, if it's missing, if it's not there, it's difficult to see clearly and we suffer because of the pain of our conflict with the natural laws around us.

One of the laws of every path with heart is the law of non-harming. Harmony means an absence of excessive greed, hatred and delusion. It's a very specific definition. Excessive greed, hatred and delusion means so much greed, or so much hatred, or so much ignorance, that we act through them in ways that harm other beings or that harm ourselves. It's really the same, because if you hurt someone or something, what happens? Generally, you feel bad and you suffer. They feel bad. Often they get you back later, or they say, "Your karma gets you back in some fashion; it happens back to you." It's not that this is sinful or bad or anything -- it's one of the principles of how this game operates.

Harmony has a positive meaning as well. It means a nurturing of that karma of joy, or serenity in truth, or integrity, so that our speech and our actions -- our being in the world -- manifests from the heart. It's called *sila* in Sanskrit, uprightnes of heart.

There's a beautiful *Jataka* Tale about a beautiful and wonderful young man in ancient times, who went to a far-off university in India, away from his family, and he was telling his professor why his

family life had been so happy, and why his own life had been so happy. The professor told him that his only child, his son had died. The young boy said, "That doesn't happen in our family, children don't die, people don't die young." The professor was just aghast. "How could that be? It happens all over to everyone." The boy said, "Well, there's something special in our family, and for the last many dozen generations that we've recorded, no one has died young." So the professor became very intrigued, especially since he was grieving over the loss of his own child, and he took a pack, put on his traveling clothes, and left the university to go back to the town where this boy lived, to visit his parents, and discover why people in that family did not die young.

There's a beautiful poem that comes from this particular *Jataka* Tale. He went in to meet the father and he told the father, "I've come with terrible news. Your boy who is in my care at the university was struck by illness and has died." The father laughed. Very unusual, amazing, how could this be! And the professor said, "Why are you laughing?" The father's eyes were really bright and he smiled and he said, "Because the people in our family don't die young." He said, "It must be some other boy. It can't be my son." The professor took out some bones from this bag and said, "See these, this is your son." They were really some sheep bones that he brought along. The father laughed, "Oh, they're sheep bones; they're not the bones of my boy." He says, "How can you be so sure? How do you know?" The man laughed a really heartfelt deep laugh, very joyful. He said, "Because we've recorded generation after generation in our family that children don't die young. The professor said, "Why is this so?" Then the man began his poem.

Because every morning when we rise,
we rise with care,
and we take time in the morning to contact each
person in the family and see that they are well,
and speak with them
And every day when we rise we look after the
animals that are part of our family and we see to it
that they are fed and cared for and that they're
not in distress.
And every day when we begin our
conversations with people,
we take care with our words, and we speak
only that which is sweet, and that which is true,
and that which is helpful.

And because of this, people in our family
do not die young.
And every day when we go to work,
in our fields, or in business, or in commerce, we
act in ways which are kind to the other people,
which are honest, and have integrity,
and because of this the people in our
family do not die young.

And every day we look around
us in the community
and we see if there is someone or
some being in need,
and we give what we are able to
share and help them. Because of this,
for many generations
the people in our family do not die young.

He goes on and on with this poem. And it's so sweet, it's like nectar to listen to. It's nectar because it's true. It's not necessarily speaking about chronological age and death, but again it's talking about the heart and what it means for the heart to be awakened or open and to live in that way. That's what it means to be alive.

When your heart is closed it's like you've already died in some way. When I listen to the story or read it, I just feel such delight in thinking what power it has for us to begin to live our life in a harmonious way. This is called *sila*.

The first two steps of the Eightfold Path are Right Understanding and Right Attitude. Last week we talked about openness, of discovery, of playing with our life rather than being in a rut, of being willing to investigate and look at the laws of our life and the world around us.

Now *sila*. *Sila* on one side means restraint, non-harming. On the other side, its positive dimension is loving, caring. My teacher Achaan Chaa used to love to talk about *sila*. He would just light up, and he would go on for hours, and he would be so happy talking about a virtuous heart. We hear so little about it in our culture, in our time, and yet it's so important. It's the foundation of any path with heart. And it's beautiful. It's like the heart gets cleansed by our true words, by our virtuous action. It makes our life upright and strong.

Right Speech is the next step of the Eightfold Path and it's the first of the three steps that speak to this uprightness of heart or virtue, *sila*. Speech has enormous power.

There's a story of a Sufi master, a healer. He goes into this household one day where there's a sick child, and there are people gathered around. He goes over and he passes his hand over the child and he says some sacred words, a kind of prayer, and he says, "Now you will be healed." The parents are very grateful, but a really disbelieving and somewhat aggressive man says, "How can you heal a child just by saying some words, all this healing and this spiritual junk"? The master turns to him and looks him in the eye and says, "What do you know of this? You are an absolute fool. You know nothing!" He says this in front of all the other people. The guy becomes enraged and he turns red and he is shaking with anger. And the master says, "Wait a minute, sir. If a word of mine has the power to make you turn red and shake with anger, why should not a word also have the power to heal?"

We speak a lot in our life. We talk so much to each other. Words have tremendous power. They have the power to put us to sleep. Do you know that one? "La, la, la, yes, yes, no, no," back and forth for

hours. Or they have the power to wake us up. Words of wisdom, words from the heart, words from the eye of wisdom can make all kinds of things clear to us, can help us to see, to let go, to discover, to awaken.

There are two principles to Right Speech, to this foundation of speech as the first aspect of uprightness of heart. The first is that our words be true. Truth is so sweet. If you know anyone who really speaks honestly and truthfully, admittedly sometimes they're a pain in the ass, but mostly one's sense of that person is a delight, that here's somebody I can go and speak to or listen to and hear that which is true. It's just wonderful.

There's a story of Mullah Nasrudin, the old wise man and fool, this kind of strange character. He puts up his booth. It's sort of like Lucy in "Peanuts." It says, "Psychiatric Assistance" or "Psychological Counseling -- two questions," or something like that, only instead of five cents it's five old dinars. It's really a lot of money. People think, "Gosh, he must be very, very good to charge so much money." So one person goes up to him, and takes out five old dinars and puts it on the counter. He says to Nasrudin, "Isn't that an awful lot to charge for just two questions?" Nasrudin looks back and says, "Yes, it is; and what's your second question?"

Two principles: First, that the words are true for Right Speech; and second, that they're kind or helpful, because it's possible to say what's true and not have it be helpful at all, what one might call "brutal honesty". "I'll tell you just what I think, whether it's helpful or not." The second principle is that speech be helpful, not only that it be true, but also that it speak in some way that's compassionate or kind or useful to someone.

What does communication do in our world? It makes society. Our society is built on communication. We're isolated individuals, in some measure anyway, even if perhaps cosmically we're one, but mostly we experience ourselves as separate. Our society, our friendships, our love, the laws, the whole world around us, is created by agreement through communication. It's very, very powerful. And when it's truthful, or it's honest, or it's genuine, it builds trust, and it builds a society of harmony with our friends, with our loved ones, with our family. When it's truthful, it opens a channel for our hearts to meet. When it's not, there's no chance for the hearts to meet, or very, very little. You probably know this in your relationships, don't you, that if you have stored things that you haven't communicated, stored resentments, what happens? Or if you have things that you've said that really haven't been true, that haven't come from your heart, that have been covered over, or were manipulative, or made to sound one way when they weren't -- what happens to that communion, that sharing, the space of love? It gets weakened or it disappears, for a little while anyway. It's not available to you. In many ways, the love between people that we live with or spend a lot of time with rides on the vehicle of our communication. If the communication is clear, or open, or truthful, where it's not held, where it's not stored, where there's forgiveness, then there's a real sense or communion.

Classically, wrong speech -- or what's not considered Right Speech -- is False Speech, or gossip. Most of you who have been to retreats have heard Joseph Goldstein tell the story of when he vowed not to gossip anymore for a period of time. He picked a month. And for him he meant in this particular vow not to speak about a person who wasn't there, even if it was a favorable thing, just

not to talk behind someone's back. He discovered this amazing thing, that 90% of his speech was eliminated. We spend so much time talking about third people, most of which is pretty useless.

So it's not false speech, not gossiping, which is very helpful, not back -- biting or undermining people, refraining from harsh or abusive language -- these are the classical things, but they really speak to speech as a vehicle for love, as a vehicle for communion, as a vehicle for awakening. What Right Speech does, it acts as a question: Can we start to become conscious all of these hours where we talk on automatic pilot? Can we make our speech become more useful to ourselves and to our planet? To that question, I ask: What do you care about, what do you want for the world and for yourself?

When we speak falsely, when we back -- bite, when we gossip, and all those other kinds of things, what makes us do that? Have you ever done that? Have you ever engaged in some kind of unskillful speech? Alright, so you know that. Now, look for a second -- for the process of awakening is in investigation. What makes us do that? Entertainment, justification, self-importance, anger, bonding. Yes, sometimes we do. We'll talk about somebody else and put them down because it makes us a little closer to this other person, or we do it for entertainment because we're bored. And God spare us in this culture if we ever had nothing to do and weren't entertained. It's horrible, you know! You come into someone's house and if they can't be with you, "Here, I'll turn on the TV. Would you like some music? Here's something to eat. You can read." Anything but just waiting and being bored. Terrifying thing!

There are all these reasons that we do it. Let's start to study it in our lives. Look at the moments. Don't judge it. We're just looking at the principles of what makes happiness. Happiness or harmony comes from understanding the principles of things. So this week let's also study speech a little bit -- start to look and see if you can find moments where you feel your speech isn't so skillful. Just look at what's cooking inside and what's going on when you do it.

I would like to change the name of Right Speech to "Speech from the Heart." What keeps us from speaking the truth, and with the value in what we know? What keeps us from speaking from the heart all the time? What does it? The society does, you know. I mean, it's not a very good example when you turn on the TV and most of what's there is false, or politics. It is 1984 after all, double -- speak. That's one thing. We're in the soup where nobody can speak straight, nobody tells the truth. It's a very hard thing, advertising. It's not just our society. Don't think it's just ours. Sure, in our society we hide death and paint up the corpses and lock away old people and mental patients so we don't have to look at them. We are a society which really suppresses a lot. We just want to look at young, attractive people. It's not quite the youth culture it was since the baby boomers are getting a little older now. We settle for what Time Magazine called, "active and attractive." Before it was, "Young and glamorous," and now it's just "active and attractive."

We still have a mass of youth in our culture, so there are all these things that we don't deal with. It's really the same in other cultures. I remember dealing with some Chinese merchants in Asia. Business is business, it has very little to do with virtue, generally. I went in this store and this Chinese merchant had these statues and I was interested in one. I said, "That's a beautiful Cambodian statue." He said, "It's ancient, fantastic, it's an antique." I said, "Are you sure?" He said,

"Oh, yes, yes; really, really old." He told me the whole story, where he got it. I said, "How much?" He said, "Oh, \$8,500." Wow, really fantastic. I looked at it, and I said, "I know this statue, this was made over in Ban Cheng Dow. I know where they make them, and it's a copy, and it's not an antique at all. It looks like an antique. But they make it in that village, I know that's so." And he looked at me and he said, "So how much will you give me for it?" Not a moment's hesitation. It was \$20 instead of \$8,500. It's not to put down Chinese merchants particularly because we all have that in us in some way. We all have that part.

What is it that keeps us from speaking the truth? The society that hides things around us, the American or the Chinese society? Why else don't we speak the truth? We won't be loved. Look what happened to Jesus. You have to be real careful. That's an extreme admittedly. We feel that. We're really afraid. If we're not loved, then what will happen? Then we'll be pretty much ostracized and abandoned. What happens when you're abandoned? You die, you know. So we better be careful and say the right things.

Why else don't we speak the truth? Fear of rocking the boat. Fear of rocking the boat outwardly -- people will get upset, also a fear of being exposed inwardly. If we really speak the truth at times we'll show our own judgment and fear and violence, and all those things in ourselves that we may not want to let out so much. It would be wonderful to let them out with a little less judgment, because the fact that we all hide them and keep them in is what makes wars. We don't know how to express ourselves, we don't know how to share, we don't know how to see things and let them go and not be caught. It gets bottled up in us individually and as a culture, and then we go to war. War is the expression of the fact that we don't know how to deal with the violence in ourselves. So if we don't like nuclear war, it's tremendously compelling and important to learn about the shadow, about the dark side of ourselves, of our being.

William Blake said:

If one is to do good,
it must be done in the minute particulars.
General good is the plea of the hypocrite,
the scoundrel and the flatterer.

If we want to do good, it has to be in our words to the people that we live with, and the people that we meet on the street, and the people that we interact with in the stores, and the people that we work with. If you want to stop nuclear war, pay attention to your speech, pay attention how and when your words are connected to your heart and when your words aren't connected to your heart, and what's going on when they're not. Without judging it, just study it, begin to look at it. Look and see what you haven't said. Stop for a second just now. Think about your unfinished business, because life, as you know, goes quickly and sometimes it ends quickly. Who haven't you said something to that you really need to, words of the heart? Just think about it for a minute. Think about it and see if you can see what stops you from doing it. A lot of times what stops us is we think we're immortal and that we'll get to it; that we'll live forever.

As Don Juan said:

The problem with you, Carlos, is that you think you have time.

To undertake a path with heart is to begin to realize how precious time is, and that we have very little.

So let's turn it around and instead of asking why we're afraid to speak -- we can study that in ourselves -- let's ask: What do we value, again, going back to that question. Our life is short. What do you really value? What do you want? Courage, freedom, love, wholeness, integrity, happiness, pleasure; what is it that you love, that you value?

When Gandhi was teaching about non-harming, non-harming of speech and action, *ahimsa*, the avoidance of harm to any living creature, in word or deed -- someone asked, "Well, couldn't one kill a cobra to protect a child or oneself?" And his reply was, "I could not kill a cobra without violating two of my vows: fearlessness and non-harming. I would rather try inwardly to calm the snake by vibrations of love. I could not possibly lower my standards to suit my circumstances. But I must confess, I could not carry on this conversation so serenely were I faced with a cobra in this room."

When we're reminded, most of us value integrity. It really lights up the heart to think about living in a way that comes from inside, where our actions, our words, and our inner being are connected. It's very precious. In the Buddhist tradition they're given as training precepts, training precepts which we practice. It's not some God -- given law that we must follow, but precepts which we begin to practice -- to begin to learn to live our life from our hearts, to live our life, as I said, with an uprightness of heart.

Don Juan said:

Only when the inner dialogue stops can the hidden parts of ourselves be seen and revealed.

We keep this endless speech going on inside, as well. We'll get to the internal dialogue in another few nights. Really, it's the external dialogue. We go "la, la, la" and someone else goes "la, la, la" and we're on automatic, and we're making friends or passing the time, or whatever, and not waking up enough -- not so much to others but to ourselves. Why do we do that? Why do we talk so much? When the inner and the outer dialogue is going on, it hides our loneliness, it keeps us from being bored, doesn't it? It keeps us from feeling afraid. It fills up all that space that's empty, that's scary. It also blocks our heart from opening in some way and from the width of growing. We grow when things get quieter and we can look.

Think about it for a second. When we meet someone, they say all the things that are happening to them, and we say all the things that are happening to us. You know, mostly what's going on, we're just saying, "Hi, I'm here! Are you in there?" That's about all, it's just making a little contact. We have all this elaborate ritual to do it. Or maybe if we're a little quieter we might be saying, "I love you," but that's a pretty scary thing to say, so we say a little here, and she says a little there, or whatever, and it keeps us amused, it's true, but it's a safe way of touching another person.

So I just suggest to you that we can learn in our practice to let our words come a little more directly from our heart. It's a wonderful thing to learn and it takes some practice.

So the exercise for this week has two parts. One is to look to see if there are occasional moments of unskillful speech, and just see what's cooking in there, what's going on that motivates it. See if you understand it, without trying to change it. Just look! Are you trying to make friends, or are lonely or angry, or whatever it is, or you don't want to rock the boat Look and see if you'd be afraid of what would happen if you did.

And its opposite side; see if you can pay attention when you speak the rest of the time, the best you're able, and listen to your heart. See if you can begin practicing letting your words come from your heart. A good clue for this is if you're in a conversation that lasts more than five minutes, so you've been talking for awhile, pause, or wake up for a second in the middle of it, and ask inside, "Now, what does my heart really want to say?" You're having this conversation. "What's in there that really wants to be said? Maybe I won't see this person ever again. What do I really want to say?" That can begin to empower your speech, to transform it from automatic pilot to the place where you start to wake up. It's fantastic. It's really wonderful to work with.

I want to close by reading part of the "Four Quartets" by T.S. Eliot, this wonderful, wonderful poet. In this section, at the end he's talking about speech and about his life as a poet.

What we call the beginning is often the end,
and to make an end is a beginning,
To make a beginning.
the end is where we start from
and every phrase and sentence that is right,
where every word is at home,
taking its place to support the others,
the word neither dissident nor ostentatious.
An easy commerce of the old and the new,
the common word exact with vulgarity,
the formal word precise but not pedantic,
the complete consort dancing together.

When every phrase and every sentence
is an end and a beginning,
every poem an epitaph,
and any action is a step to the block,
to the fire, down the sea's throat,
or to an illegible stone,
that's where we start.
We die with the dying.
See them depart and we go with them,
and we are born with the dead.
See, they're returned and bring us with them.

Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning, every poem an epitaph. Any action, a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea's throat.

If we could do just Right Speech we would change our lives, we would change the world, and we would become enlightened. Just in that. "Enlighten" means awaken to what we do and what's true, because to speak truly means that one has to touch one's heart, one has to listen to it, one has to be there. Then all the rest of what one calls The Path with Heart follows from that.