

The Noble Eight-fold Path as Mundane Path and as a Constituent of Supra-mundane Path - A Philosophical Interpretation

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Abstract

The Noble Eight-fold path (EFP) is one of the foremost teaching of the Buddha which depicts a middle pathway excluding two major extreme conducts. Both Suttanta-piṭaka and Abhidhammapiṭaka explain this as a practice of eight components which are constituted by three collections, that leads to the cessation of all dukkhas of life. This paper provides a philosophical interpretation on the EFP elucidating that how is it to be produced as the mundane path and discusses philosophically the reason for involving six constituents at once in the mundane path. Further this paper examines how does EFP apply as a constituent of supramundane path discussing the involvement of all eight components within the supramundane realm of consciousness. This involves an examination of the validity of traditional argument for Eight-fold path as against the Five-fold path depicted in Vibhaṅgappakarāṇa (Vbh) and provides an interpretation thereon.

Introduction

The Noble Eight-fold path (EFP) named as Majjhimāpaṭipadā (Middle pathway) is the foremost teaching of the Buddha as the pathway that everyone must follow in order to attain the Nibbana. This is taught by the Buddha as the middle pathway that leads to the cessation of all dukkhas of life and explained in various discourses in various ways. This noble path has been discoursed in Suttanta-piṭaka for example in Mahāsati-paṭṭhānasutta of Dīghanikāya, in Mahācattārīsakasutta of Majjhimanikāya, in Dhammachakkappavattanasutta of Saṃyuttanikāya, as well as in number other suttas. The Vbh of Abhidhammapiṭaka summarizes all the explanation in Suttanta-piṭaka and provides an inclusive explanation thereon. Further it has laid down a five-fold path as well. The Pali commentaries also provide a vast knowledge in order to elucidate this pathway. Visuddhimagga (Vism) interprets the EFP as the fourth noble truth, whereas Sammohavinodanī (VbhA) also provides a further elucidation.

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This endeavor is to provide a philosophical interpretation to the EFP according to the Pali Canon and related commentaries in order to resolve that how is EFP to be conducted as a prior practice to the attainment of Nibbana and how does it apply as a constituent of supramundane path.

Research Problem

How is to interpret the EFP as a mundane path and as a constituent of the supramundane path?

Research Methodology

As a qualitative research, this is an analysis of EFP described in Pali Canon and authenticating of interpretations thereon in Pali commentaries. The comprehensive interpretation on EFP is in the VbhA and therefore this investigation mainly refers VbhA, whereas other commentaries including Vism also analyzed. This interpretation is mainly based on Mahāsatipaṭṭhānasutta which is a key discourse on EFP and relevant significant elaborations in several other suttas for example Mahācattārīsakasutta, Cullavedallasutta were also referred. Based on these discourses, tested hypothesis was; EFP is discoursed by the Buddha as a mundane path and as a constituent of supramundane consciousness.

Results and Findings

Most of the explanations of EFP in Suttanta-piṭaka depict the pathway which leads to the cessation of all dukkhas of life and therefore it is a line of conduct to be followed by everyone. As described in Dhammachakkappavattanasutta, there are two wrong directions that should not be followed by a Bhikkhu and EFP is the middle pathway which is the correct practice leading to the cessation of all dukkhas of life. This fact is described in various suttas in various ways for example in Mahāsatipaṭṭhānasutta it is explained as the pathway of escaping dukkhas, in Mahālisutta as the pathway to accomplish the four supramundane fruits, in Mahāsīhanādasutta as the method to know and identify the Samaṇa Gotama, in Dhammadāyādasutta as the way of terminating greed and hatred, and in various other suttas as the pathway of cessation of born (jāti), decay and death (jarāmaraṇa), state of existence (bhava), attachments (upādāna) and craving (taṇhā). This noble path involves eight right conducts, such as Right views (sammā diṭṭhi), Right aspirations (sammā saṅkappa), Right speech (sammā vācā), Right action (sammā kammanta), Right mode of livelihood (sammāājīva), Right effort (sammā vāyāma), Right mindfulness (sammā sati) and Right Rapture (sammā samādhi), and all these conducts are constituted by three collections, such as Virtue (Sīla), Concentration (Samādhi) and Wisdom (Paññā).

Nonetheless Abhidhammic analysis for the EFP and the interpretations in Pali commentaries thereon manifest to application of EFP in two instances, i.e. as

a mundane path which is conducted prior to attainment of the supramundane path and as a constituent of supramundane path. Further Vbh depicts a five-fold path emphasizing the extra performance of those five conducts, and VbhA resolves a debate existed between the Mahavihara fraternity and Vitaṇḍavādī (false debaters) on this five-fold path and eight-fold path.

Conclusions

As the pre-conduct leading to Nibbana, everyone must practice EFP, but out of them all three abstinences i.e. Right speech, Right action and Right mode of livelihood are not constituted at once as the mental factors of one mundane consciousness. Therefore, the mundane path constitutes only maximum of six components in one cluster and only when the supramundane path is attained, all eight components are constituted. The depiction of a five-fold path in Vbh is to elucidate the extra performance of these five factors against wrong speech, wrong action and wrong mode of livelihood. Therefore, the noble path at the stage of supramundane consciousness is obviously constituted in the Eight-fold path.

Keywords: Pali Canon, Pali Commentaries, Abhidhamma, Majjhimāpaṭipadā, Eight-fold Path

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