

**Study Guide for MN 117**  
*Mahacattarisaka Sutta*  
**The Discourse on the Great Forty**

**THE EIGHTFOLD PATH**

The most well known description of the Buddhist path is the Eightfold Path. It is sometimes said that all Buddhist practices can be subsumed within the Eightfold Path. This is probably a bit of an overstatement. Within the Eightfold Path it is not easy to find a place for the more faith-based practices such as going for refuge or performing acts of devotion. Perhaps we can say that faith is a fuel for walking the path, however, faith does not itself make up the path.

The best standard description of the Eightfold Path occurs in MN 141, an optional reading for this month. MN 117 is important for illuminating some of the dynamics of the Eightfold Path. In particular, it describes two ways the eight factors work together, one linear and one non-linear. The non-linear approach understands how right view, right effort and right mindfulness help accomplish the practices associated with right view, right intention, right speech, right action, and right livelihood. The linear approach sees the eightfold list as progressive, with each factor being the condition for the arising of the next (MN 117.34). This sutta also adds two further factors to the traditional eightfold list that arise when a person is fully Awakened; anyone short of the full Awakening of an arahant has an eightfold path, arahants have a tenfold path.

The discourse emphasizes right view as being the primary eightfold factor because it makes it possible for us to distinguish between the ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ version of each of the path factors. Other suttas define right view in other ways. MN 9, for example, has 16 descriptions. It is probably important to realize that the word ‘right’ is not meant to mean ‘philosophically true’ as opposed to what is false. Rather, it should be understood pragmatically as what is proper or appropriate for a particular purpose; for example, when we speak of having the ‘right tool’ for a task.

In its discussion of what is ‘right,’ MN 117 differentiates between two ways the factors of the Eightfold Path can be called ‘right.’ One is when it is undertaken by someone who is not fully Awakened and the second is one that is ‘noble’ because it is associated with someone who is fully Awakened. Because someone who is not an arahant still clings, the good merit and results of practicing the Eightfold Path will still belong to the world of craving. Because an arahant is free of clinging, the Eightfold Path is categorized as belonging to a higher or superior world (*lokuttara* from *loka* – world and *uttara* – highest, superior, utmost). Bhikkhu Bodhi translates *lokuttara* as “supramundane”; Thanissaro Bhikkhu translates it as “transcendent.” The term is not common in the suttas but becomes quite important in later Theravada Buddhism. It is usually contrasted with what is *lokiya* or mundane/worldly (literally: like the world). Both *lokiya* and *loluttara* lend themselves to a range of interpretations. These important concepts will be discussed further in a later class.

Notes for MN 117:

This sutta contains a number of brief passages that are sometimes quoted to make a variety of teaching points. One example is the passage listing the mental activity used to define right intention (MN 117.14). The second in this list is *vitakka*, one of the important mental factors involved in the first *jhana*. Considerable controversy exists around how this should be translated into English because different choices reflect different understandings of what constitutes *jhana*. One side of the controversy understands the term to mean ‘applied thinking.’ The other side insists that no thinking is implied and that the right translation is ‘directed attention.’ In this passage Bhikkhu Bodhi translates *vitakka* as ‘thought’ and Thanissaro translates it as ‘directed thinking.’ Some people have argued that the list supports the idea that *vitakka* is a form of thinking rather than a way of using attention

This sutta is also quoted in discussions about what mindfulness means in the Buddha’s discourses. It is taught here as a support for the active practice of abandoning and entering (e.g. MN 117.9). This differs from the popular contemporary practice where mindfulness is defined as practice of non-reactive acceptance and presence to what is.

The Pali term Bhikkhu Bodhi translates as “ripening on the side of attachment” and Thanissaro Bhikkhu translates as “resulting in the acquisition [of becoming]” contains the important word *upadhi* (MN 117.6). The Pali Text Society Dictionary defines it as meaning a basis, foundation, or substratum. Thanissaro Bhikkhu translates it as ‘acquisition because the word seems to also mean baggage, belongs, or possession. Its most important usage points to the condition or basis which gives rise to rebirth and further existence, namely craving.

Reflections:

How might you better utilize the Eightfold Path to support your practice? How do you understand right view? In addition to what is discussed in the sutta, how do you think right view supports the other path factors?

MN 117 repeatedly encourages abandoning and entering. What has been your experience of abandoning and entering particular views, intentions, forms of speech, actions and livelihood? When is it useful to abandon certain views?

Optional reading: You are strongly encouraged to read MN 126 (on the role of aspiration with the Eightfold Path), and MN 141 (a standard exposition of the Eightfold Path). MN 44.11 (organizes the eight limbs of the path according to the three trainings of *sila*, *samadhi*, and *pañña*).

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*When, friends, a noble disciple understands suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the way leading to the cessation of suffering, in that way he is one of right view, whose view is straight, who has perfect confidence in the Dhamma, and has arrived at this true Dhamma.* MN 9.14