The Noble Eightfold Path is also known as the Middle Path (majjhimā paţipadā), because it avoids two extremes:-

1. Indulgence in sensual pleasure which is low, worldly and leads to harm.
2. Self-torture in the form of severe asceticism which is painful, low and leads to harm.

Living in the palace amidst song and dance, luxury and pleasure, the Bodhisatta knew by experience that sense pleasures do not lead mankind to true happiness and deliverance.

Six years of rigorous mortification, which he, as an ascetic, so zealously practiced in search of purification and final deliverance, brought him no reward. It was a vain and useless effort.

Avoiding these two extremes he followed a path of moral and mental training and through self-experience discovered the Middle Path which is arranged in three groups:-

1. Wisdom (paññā)
   1. Right Understanding (sammā-diţţhi)
   2. Right Thought (sammā-saṁkappa)
2. Virtue (síla)
   1. Right Speech (sammā-vācā)
   2. Right Action (sammā-kammanta)
   3. Right Livelihood (sammā-ājíva)

1. Concentration (samādhi)
   1. Right Effort (sammā-vāyāma)
   2. Right Mindfulness (sammā-sati)
   3. Right Concentration (sammā-samādhi)

The term ‘Path’ is only a figurative expression. In the ultimate sense the eight steps signify eight mental factors. They are interdependent and interrelated, and at the highest level they function simultaneously; they are not followed and practiced one after the other in numerical order.

Every step should be tinged with some degree of right understanding, for it is the key-note of Buddhism. The Buddha says-

“*O monks, it is through not understanding, not penetrating four things (dhammā) that we have run so long, wandered on so long in this round of existence both you and I. What four? Virtue, Concentration, Wisdom and Deliverance, but when these four things, O monks, are understood and penetrated, rooted out is the craving for existence, destroyed is that which leads to renewed becoming, and there is no more coming to be.”*

*“Concentration, O monks, supported by virtue brings much fruits, brings much advantage. The mind supported by wisdom is wholly and entirely freed from the intoxication of sense desires, from becoming, wrong views and ignorance.”*

These sayings of the Buddha explain the function and the purpose of cultivating Wisdom, Virtue and Mental Development. Deliverance means living experience of the cessation of the three root causes of evil: Greed (lobha), Hatred (dosa) and Delusion or Ignorance (moha), that assail the human mind. These root causes are eliminated through training in Wisdom, Virtue and Mental Development.

**Wisdom** is the understanding of the Four Noble Truths, the understanding of interdependent origination, and the like. It is achieved first through the cultivation of good conduct, and then through the cultivation of mental development.

**Morality** is the foundation of all qualities, all virtues and all attainments. It creates an inner sense of tranquillity, stability, security and strength.

**Mental Development** serves as a guarantor of the observance of the precepts, and assists in the real objective of seeing things as they really are. It prepares the mind to achieve wisdom.

**Right Understanding**

* Right understanding removes ignorance.
* It is insight, penetrative understanding or seeing beneath the surface of things.
* There are two types of understanding:-

1) Acquire by ourselves;

2) Acquire through others.

* Means of acquiring right understand:-

1) Observe and study;

2) Examine intellectually what you have observed and studied;

3) Mediate on what you have examined and determined intellectually earlier.

* Right understanding is divided into two levels-

1) **Ordinary level** is concerned with correct appreciation of the relationship between cause and effect, and pertains to moral responsibility for our behavior.

2) **Higher level** is concerned with seeing things as they really are, and pertain to the ultimate goal of the Buddha’s teaching.

* Understanding the causes of suffering are attachment, aversion and ignorance.

**Right Thought**

* Cultivate renunciation to remove attachment, and cultivate love and compassion to remove aversion and anger.
* Renunciation is developed by contemplating the unsatisfactory nature of existence, particularly the unsatisfactory nature of pleasures of the senses.
* Love and compassion is developed through recognizing the essential equality of all living beings. Like us, all living beings fear death and tremble at the idea of punishment. Understanding this, we should not kill other living beings or cause them to be killed.

* Recognizing all living beings desire happiness and fear pain just as much as we do, we have to actively cultivate the wish that all living beings be happy and free from suffering.

**Right Speech**

* Harsh word can wound more deeply than a weapon, whereas a gentle word can change the heart and mind of even the most hardened criminal. So, we must control, cultivate and use our speech in helpful ways.

* Backbiting or slandering is divisive. It creates quarrels between friends, and it creates pain and discord in society.
* Not to abuse others with harsh word. In fact, we should speak courteously to others, as we would like them to speak to us.
* Not to engage in idle talk like malicious gossip that is, diverting ourselves and others by recounting people’s faults and failings.
* Speech should be used constructively for communicating meaningfully, uniting people, encouraging understanding between friends and neighbors, and imparting helpful advice.
* The Buddha once said “*Pleasant speech is as sweet as honey; truthful speech is beautiful like a flower; wrong speech is unwholesome like filth.”*

**Right Action**

* In the Dhammapada, ‘*All living beings tremble at the prospect of punishment; all fear death and all love life.’* Hence, keeping in mind the principles of equality and reciprocity, we ought not to kill.
* Respect for property means not to rob, steal from, or cheat others. Those who take what is not given by force, stealth, or treachery are guilty of breaking this precept.
* The employer who does not pay his employee an honest wage, commensurate with the work performed, is guilty of taking what is not given.
* The employee who collects his salary but shrinks his duties is equally guilty of lack of respect for property.
* Respect for personal relationships means to avoid sexual misconduct or adultery; or avoid sexual liaisons with people who are liable to be harmed by such relations; or avoid abusing of the senses.

**Right Livelihood**

* Earning a living in a way that does not violate the basic values of respecting for truth, for the welfare of others, and for life, property and personal relationships.
* Five kinds of livelihood are discouraged:

1) Trading in animals for slaughter

2) Dealing in slaves

3) Dealing in arms

The above three violate the value of respect for life.

4) Posions

5) Intoxicants such as drugs and alcohol

The above two have no respect for lives and welfare of others.

These five contribute to the ills of society and violate the values of respect for life and for the welfare of others.

**Right Effort**

* It must be controlled, balanced and not too tense, too forced, and conversely, it should not be allowed to become lax.

Right effort is a controlled, sustained and buoyant determination.

* To be vigilant and check all unhealthy thoughts, and to cultivate, promote and maintain wholesome and pure thoughts arising in a man’s mind.
* The persevering endeavor:-

1. to prevent the arising of evil and unwholesome thought that has not yet arisen in a man’s mind
2. to discard such evil thoughts already arisen
3. to produce and develop wholesome thoughts not yet arisen
4. to promote and maintain the good thoughts already present

**Right Mindfulness**

* Mindfulness is awareness or attention. It means avoiding a distracted or cloudy state of mind.
* It acts as a kind of rein or control upon our minds.
* It keeps our minds from becoming too entangled with sense objects and with the unwholesome mental states that arises.
* The application or arousing of attention in regard to the:-

1. activities of the body (kāyānupassanā)
2. feelings or sensations (vedanānupassanā)
3. the activities of the mind (cittānupassanā)
4. mental objects (dhammānupassanā)

**Right Concentration**

* The practices of focusing the mind single-pointedly on an object. The object can be either physical such as flame, an image or flower; or mental such as love and compassion.
* When single-pointed concentration on an object is achieved, the mind becomes totally absorbed in the object to the exclusion of all mental activity – distraction, torpor, agitation, and vacillation.
* The intensified steadiness of the mind is comparable to the un-flickering flame of a lamp in a windless place.
* It is concentration that fixes the mind right and causes it to be unmoved and undisturbed.
* The correct practice of concentration maintains the mind and the mental properties in a state of balance.
* When we have achieved single-pointed mind, we are then ready to join concentration with wisdom in order to gain enlightenment.

**References:-**

**(1) The Tree of Enlightenment by Peter Della Santina**

**(2) The Buddha’s Ancient Path by Piyadassi Thera**