

On Circles

Active addiction feels like a wretched circle, rhythmically turning until it has played out all its motions. Breaking free involves forming new habits and routines that are different and more appealing than the old behaviors. Circles replacing circles.

A circle has no beginning. We have to enter it somewhere to get our bearings, and that entry point is arbitrary. It is not a truth about the thing itself. This is how language works, how instruction works, how the mind takes in something new. We need a place to start, so we start somewhere and grow from there.

Circles are also complete in a specific sense. Take any part out and the circle is no longer whole. Not broken necessarily, but no longer covering the full territory it was designed to cover. This is different from a list, where removing an item still leaves a list. A circle is a system where every element is load-bearing. The completeness is the point.

We experience this with physical learning. Learning to ride a bicycle, or trying to teach someone how, demonstrates the difficulty of presenting a circle as a sequence of steps. The learned skill is all of the steps happening at once. Balance, leg movements, hand coordination, posture, vision, each contributing to the whole. It isn't possible to do just one of them and call it riding, and it is unlikely all of them will come together well when first starting out.

In recovery we meet many such circles. We learn them in pieces because we have to, but understanding them as circles changes how we experience them.

The eightfold path is presented as eight individual practices, but they are a whole. One path, eight folds. The sequencing is a necessary teaching convenience. It is not a list. Wise action without wise intention is just behavior. Wise speech without wise understanding is just careful talking. In practice all eight are always present or absent together, each one conditioning the others. As with a bike, some days will show greater ease in some folds than others, and that is okay.

Once we start to see lists as circles, they begin appearing in every framework complete enough to close on itself. In Buddhism the four foundations of

mindfulness (body, feeling tone, mind states, phenomena) form one such circle, a self-complete map of experience that leaves nothing out. Dependent origination is another: the teaching that nothing arises without conditions and nothing persists without conditions, described as a chain of twelve links that closes on itself. Other recovery traditions have found the same shape. The twelve steps form a cohesive circle, each step building on and supporting the others, looping back when twelve points back toward one.

Drawing a circle creates two spaces: inside and outside. Within the eightfold path, the inside is the territory of practice: conduct, attention, and understanding all oriented in the same direction, each aspect supporting the others. Outside is where the three poisons operate unchecked, where habit runs without awareness. The boundary between them is not a wall. We cross it constantly in both directions. Practice is less about staying inside and more about learning to recognize which side we are on, and finding our way back.

This is where the metaphor of circles begins to bear fruit. Addiction was never just a bad habit. It was always more: a complete system, every element reinforcing the next, which is why willpower alone was never enough to break it. Renunciation and abstinence can create space to break the old circle, and mindfulness helps us see when the old circle is starting to turn again.

A circle can only be replaced by another circle. Recovery, however it manifests, is not a list of improvements but a complete alternative - a different system, where every element supports the others. It does not require understanding all of it to begin. It only requires entering somewhere and starting to move. The shape reveals itself through practice, study and sangha as we go.

We learn the shape in pieces because we have to start somewhere, but where we start is not binding. The point is the whole shape, held together, none of it finished, all of it available. We are never done with any part of these new circles, but they are no longer wretched. That turns out to be pretty good news.