

## *A Sense of Adventure*

*October 20, 2007*

As you embark on the practice—and as you stay with the practice—it's best to think of it as a voyage of discovery. After all, the Buddha says that the goal is to see what you've never seen before, to realize what you've never realized before, to attain what you've never attained before. So you're going into the unknown. This means that you're going to have to deal with risk and uncertainty, which require an interesting mix of attitudes. On the one hand, you need a certain amount of confidence. On the other hand, you need humility. The confidence is confidence in your ability to deal with unknown factors as they arise. The humility is the realization that you can't expect everything to follow your preconceived notions. The path is going to stretch your imagination and ask more out of you than you might originally be prepared to give. So you need the confidence that Yes, you can do this and Yes, this is a good place to go. And you need the humility to realize that No, you don't know beforehand what it's going to be like. You have to be willing to learn.

Some people want to have all kinds of guarantees before they embark on this training, but you can't really guarantee anything. You can guarantee that when you reach the goal it's going to be good, but how much is that guarantee worth for someone who hasn't experienced it yet? Just one more thing to take into consideration. The Buddha, when he embarked on his quest, had no guarantee that all the sacrifice was going to be worth it, that he was going to find the deathless, or even that he was going to survive. But he had reached a point in his life where he realized that if he didn't at least try it, he would feel that his life had been wasted. And so for him it was a huge experiment. There was a lot of risk and a lot of uncertainty. And yet he was willing to take the risk and to face the uncertainty.

For us, it's not quite that drastic. We have people who've gone before. There's the question of whether we can trust them and believe them, but then look at the alternative: a life lived devoted to the pursuit of sensual pleasures, trying to squeeze happiness out of things that are going to die and that we'll have to leave in the end—if not before the end. So at the very least you say, "Well, there's a possibility here. Let's give it a try." Try to have that sense of adventure. Be open to new things and learn how to deal with uncertainties.

Earlier today we were talking about the maps for the jhanas. When you try to apply the map to your actual experience, it's going to be uncertain for a while. You read the description of directed thought and evaluation, rapture and all, and the question is: What do those terms correspond to in your actual experience? You may have some ideas, but they may be wrong. Is that going to stop you from practicing? It shouldn't. It should simply alert you to the fact that you're going to be dealing in uncertainties for a while. When you place labels on your experiences, they have to be post-it notes, signposts to use in the meantime until you get a better sense of the terrain. The surest of the signposts is the one for the fourth jhana—when the in-and-out breath stops and stays stopped for the duration of that state of mind—but that's all the way in the fourth. So how are you going to know the signposts for one, two, and three? Well, you guess for the time being and you attach a few notes here, a few notes there. And have the confidence that when you find something more certain, you're going to be in a position to rearrange the notes if need be.

The sense of adventure also means that you may have some anticipations of what's going to work and what things should be like in the practice. But right anticipation is not part of the path. Sometimes your anticipations can push things in the wrong direction. The Buddha's instructions are very precise, and pretty simple, and part of us doesn't believe anything that simple could really work. There must be some secret; there must be some way you can speed the process along. But sometimes in speeding along you derail yourself.

It's like sharpening a knife on a stone. If you're in too much of a hurry, you can ruin the blade. So you sit there very carefully rubbing it against the stone, rubbing it against the stone, making sure that the pressure is even all along the blade. Then you realize that you may be at this for a while. Part of the mind says, "Well, I'd like to have it done fast so I can go off and do something else." But there also has to be another part of the mind that says, "If you try to speed it up, you could ruin it. So keep doing what you're doing." Even though the results don't appear as quickly as you'd like, maybe the slow results are the ones that will be the most lasting. So you have to put your preconceived notions aside. Don't try to skip over the steps. The Buddha does teach a sense of urgency, but he also teaches patience. And you have to learn how to balance the two and be willing to learn new things.

This evening I was reading a study guide to some of the suttas that raised questions about different passages in the suttas that just didn't sound right to the author, or didn't seem to fit in with his preconceived notions. But there's always the question of whether our notions, rather than the passages, are wrong. There's a lot going on in the texts, maybe more than we realize. The Buddha was talking to people in a different time, with a different range of experiences. Sometimes he

was talking to people with extremely unusual meditative experiences. In other words, maybe he knew what he was talking about, why he had to address that issue in that particular way. Maybe the texts are accurately reporting what he said—even though they don't fit into our preconceived notions of what the texts would be like if they were written for a modern American audience.

So what you are asked as you read the Dhamma—and as you approach the practice as a whole—is to stretch your imagination a bit. It's not the case that the Buddha will be able to prove everything to you beforehand—before you're willing to act—so that you can act with confidence and full awareness of where you're going to go and how you're going to get there. You have to be willing to live with uncertainty and to put question marks against a lot of your assumptions. Remind yourself that your assumptions are the assumptions of a person with defilement, the assumptions of a person still suffering. Perhaps it would be in your best interest to put them aside for the time being instead of demanding that everything fit into your preconceived notions of how things should be.

And you should be willing to embark on this without a 100% guarantee that everything is going work out the way you want it to. Have a clear sense of the precariousness of your own position, of where you are right now. Where do you get your sustenance? Where does the mind gain its pleasures? Are those things solid and secure? When you go into the uncertainty of the path, are you leaving an area of true certainty and assuredness to go off into figments of someone's imagination? Or are you leaving the world of your current uncertainties to test some different uncertainties that ultimately promise something more certain than where you're staying right now?

This is why one of the basic principles in the practice is practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma—in other words, not in accordance with your preconceived notions, not in accordance with your ideas of what you want before you're going to commit yourself to the practice. Instead of reshaping the Dhamma to fit your notions, maybe you have to reshape yourself to fit the Dhamma. There is bound to be a period of discomfort, bound to be a sense of frustration when things are not quite working out the way you wanted them to. But you need the maturity to learn how to deal with that. This is not a path for immature people. It's a path for people who know that they are in a very precarious position already, and that their ideas and assumptions are especially precarious. But the ideas and presumptions of a materialistic worldview, which is what we were brought up in, offer a very limited range of happiness, whereas the Dhamma offers a lot more. It's simply up to us to decide whether we're willing to make the sacrifices and take the risk to see if the “more” is a reality, if what the Buddha had to say is true.

