

Success on the Path

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To stay with the breath, you first have to *want* to stay with the breath. It's the first basis of success in the practice. Some people object to the idea that there's success and failure in the practice. But this is a path that leads to a goal. That's something we always should keep in mind: that we're going someplace. Willy-nilly, we're going someplace. We're heading to aging, illness and death—but you want to ask yourself, is that the place you want to head? Or the only place you want to head? The body does have to age, grow ill and die, but does the mind have to do that? Does the mind have to suffer from those things? Is there a place where you can go where you don't suffer from those things? As the Buddha said, it's not found by going anywhere in the physical universe. But it is found by going inside.

And the fact that there is that possibility, that potential for going in a direction that doesn't age, doesn't ill, doesn't die: that's why we have the Buddha's path. That's why there are the right factors of the path, and the wrong factors of the path. And that's why there's success and failure. If it were the case that there wasn't that potential for putting an end to suffering, that life was simply a matter of learning how to accept what's already here, then the practice would be very different.

But what the Buddha is asking you to do is to accept something else, that there is a potential to put an end to suffering. And it's going to demand a lot out of you. There is one place where he says that even if the practice involves suffering to the point where there are tears streaming down your cheeks, you stick with it, because the path ultimately does lead to a goal that more than makes up for all the tears. The few tears running down your cheeks are very few compared to all the tears you've been shedding already. If you drive up Interstate 5 along the coast and look out across the Pacific Ocean, you realize that there's a huge amount of water there. It stretches out to the horizon, and you know it goes far beyond that. And yet the amount you see is nothing compared to all the water in all the oceans, and all the water in all the oceans is nothing compared to the volume of the tears you've been shedding over all these many lifetimes. If you don't follow the path, there are probably going to be that many more tears waiting for you in the future.

So there are two reasons to have the desire to focus on the path. One is realizing that the path leads you away from a lot of suffering. There are many comparisons in the Canon. The Buddha picked up a little bit of dirt under his fingernail one time and said, which is greater, the dirt under my fingernail, or the dirt in the earth? Of course, the dirt in the earth was much greater. He said, in the same way, for someone who has seen the Dharma, has broken through the experience of the Dharma Eye—in other words gained the first level of awakening—the amount of suffering that remains for that person is like the dirt under the fingernail, whereas the amount of suffering that awaits those who haven't is like the dirt in all the earth. So that's one reason for following the path, is that it's a way to avoid an awful lot of suffering.

The other reason for engendering desire for the path is that it's a good path and it leads to a really good destination. The destination is something we can't see yet, but we can see the path. Right View, Right Resolve, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration: These are all good things to do. The Buddha is not asking you to do anything that you'd be ashamed of, not asking you to do anything that's going to be harmful to anybody. He's asking you to develop good, honest, upright qualities of the mind, things you can be proud that you can develop.

So as you think about the rewards of the practice, and all the dangers that the practice takes you away from, it can help give energy to your practice. This is why recollection of the Dharma is one of the recollections the Buddha recommends. He says that when you're focusing on one of the frames of reference, or establishing mindfulness based on the body, feelings, mind, mental qualities, there may come times when the practice starts getting difficult. As he says, there may be a fever in the body, or a fever in the mind. That, he says, is when it's good to put that topic aside and think about something inspiring. And the practices he recommends that are inspiring are recollection of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha; recollection of your own generosity, virtue; recollection of the qualities of the devas, thinking about the fact that you've been developing those qualities as well. And you think about those themes as much as you need to get rid of that fever in the body and the fever in the mind, to get the mind feeling inspired and uplifted.

In this way you develop the desire to get back on the path. It's not that these recollections are off the path, but they're supplementary reflections. They can get you back into the practice of Right Mindfulness, Right Effort, and on into Right Concentration.

When things start getting dry, remember that it's wise to gladden the mind to give rise to that sense of desire. It's part of learning how to read your own mind, to diagnose its diseases, and then provide the medicine it needs. If that the desire is lacking, stop and think: What would your life be like if there were no prospect of putting an end to suffering? Think of how fortunate we are that we have the path, that it hasn't been forgotten. We don't have to forge the path ourselves in a very uncertain world.

Think about the Buddha, about how uncertain things were at his time. A lot of people were saying that there was no way to put an end to suffering, that you should just accept things as they are. Others were saying that there was an end to suffering, but nothing you could do about it. It was just going to happen naturally, just like a ball of string unwinding and eventually you'd get to the end of the string. But in the meantime, you've got to put up with all the suffering that's entailed in what remains of the string. The Buddha had the courage not to accept either of those ideas. He thought, Maybe there is something that can be accomplished through human effort. And so he put his life on the line to test that idea. At present we have the example of many people in the past, the Buddha himself and all of his Noble Disciples. So it's not quite so uncertain. We may still have our doubts about it, but at least there's a path laid out. And a lot of very honest and upright people have said that it works.

When the practice gets dry, it's useful to think about these things, so that you can work through any hesitation you may have in focusing on the breath or any

reluctance, any sense of weariness. As Ajaan Fuang said, you lubricate the mind so that it doesn't seize up the way an engine would seize up when it runs out of lubricant. You give rise to the desire to stick with the path. From that desire develops persistence: the energy, the stick-to-it-iveness that's required in training the mind. After all, the mind has a lot of old habits. And it's going to take time and persistence to deal with these things.

So it's important to learn how to give yourself energy all along the way. Persistence as Ajaan Lee says, goes together with your powers of endurance. And the best way is to keep yourself on the path, keep yourself strong on the path, is not to weigh yourself down with unnecessary doubts about yourself, unnecessary complaints about how difficult things are. It's always good to focus on where things are going well, and not to keep obsessing about the things that are difficult or wearisome. We may distrust the Pollyanna approach of always looking for the bright side, but it makes the practice a lot lighter to keep reminding yourself that there are a lot of positive things about being on this path. And you find that they give you energy. You can save your doubts for your defilements. Learn how to be skeptical about your defilements. In other words, you really look at them and question the assumptions that get in the way of the practice.

Of course that means you have to learn how to recognize them. This is where the quality of *citta* or intent interest comes in. As you give yourself to the practice, look to see what keeps pulling you back: What nagging doubts do you have? What complaints does the mind have? Learn to question them. This is where *citta* merges in with *vimansa*, your powers of analysis, your powers of discrimination, your ability to question the thoughts that come into your mind. You can ask yourself, Exactly where does that thought come from? Can you identify the person who in your past would think in that way? Can you identify the tone of the voice that thinks in that way? Is it a tone of voice that you want to adopt? And you can look at that thought in terms of the issue of freedom. Do you want to be a slave to that kind of thinking?

This is one of the reasons we try to keep the mind with the breath: so that it can look at its thoughts with a certain of detachment, from a certain amount of distance, get some perspective on them. One really effective way of dealing with them is to refuse to go along with them and see how they complain. Then ask them, "Why should I believe that complaint?" And try to see what kind of reasons that part of the mind comes up with. Keep pushing your questioning until you find the point where the reasons break down.

When you can develop these four bases for success, you're in a position where you can be your own teacher, read the situation in the mind and not fall for it. Or to use another analogy, you're your own doctor. Learn to recognize the illness, and recognize the cause of the illness, and give the right medicine—because as the Buddha said, he merely points out the way. It's up to you to follow it. As a doctor, he is the one who prescribe the medicine. It's for you to find the various herbs that he prescribes and then to take the medicine. The Buddha can't give you a shot and cure your illness. But he can tell you what the right herbs are and how you take them. And he gives you some explanation of the cause of the illness so you can understand how the herbs are related to the cause. In other words, he teaches you how to become your own doctor.

So try to develop this sense of what's needed to be your own doctor, to be your own teacher, so that at the very least, the dialogue in your mind can be more helpful, more intelligent, more wise, and actually head in that direction that we want to go—to the end of suffering. At the very least, test to see if what the Buddha had to say is true. The only way you're going to know is if you give it a good honest serious test. If you don't give it that test, then all the sufferings of life begin to move in on you. They don't promise a way out at all. The denial of any way out: that's what's so insistent about the way life normally is. And that defilements that go along with that denial are what keep us trapped.

So we owe it to our desire for happiness to give the path a serious try. And to try to develop whatever qualities are needed to see us through.