A Path for a Noble Desire

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The passage we chanted just now, setting the wheel of Dhamma in motion, was when the Buddha introduced his basic teachings, his very first sermon. He started with the Noble Eightfold Path. It’s interesting that he would depict his teaching as a path, not just a body of descriptions. It was a set of instructions to follow. As he pointed out, everybody lives a life of a path. We’re going someplace. Whether we know where we’re going or not, that’s sometimes the scary thing. We think we’re on a path to a nice place. It turns out it takes us someplace else. And every path involves desire. We may hear that the Buddha said desire is a bad thing. But it’s actually part of the path. It’s there in right effort. You cultivate desire. You generate desire. You work on your motivation to follow this path. Because without the motivation, it’s not going to happen on its own. Some people say that if you have any idea that you’re doing the path, it’s wrong view. The Buddha had wrong view. As he would say, the path is for you to do. He simply points out the way. And the eight factors of the path are basically noble versions of the factors that go into any path where you have a serious desire and you follow through with it. Noble in the sense that this path leads to something deathless. As he said, there are two types of search in life. The ignoble search, when you search for happiness in things that can age, grow ill, and die. And the noble search, when you search for something that doesn’t age, doesn’t grow ill, that’s deathless. Which is why he didn’t just call this path the Eightfold Path. It’s that noble Eightfold Path. They distinguish it from other Eightfold Paths. Because in every path for desire you have to have a view about what’s worthwhile in life. And the way things act in life. And they have to be resolved that you’re going to think in ways that are in line with what your desire is. You have to act and speak and conduct your livelihood in a way that is in line with that desire. You have to make an effort to abandon anything inside you that would get in the way of finding that desire and encourage anything that would get you there. You have to be mindful. In other words, you have to keep this in mind. If you’re really serious about what you’re aiming at, you can’t just drop it and forget about it. And you have to be concentrated on what you’re doing, focused on what you’re doing. So that’s a pattern of any path that leads to something you desire. You could say, if you wanted to be wealthy, you have to have a view that wealth is important. You have to have a view about how it can be found. And you have to learn how to think in ways that would be in line with finding that wealth. You have to act, speak, conduct your livelihood in ways that would go for that wealth. You have to make an effort in that direction. You have to be mindful to keep it in mind. And be focused on what you’re doing. But that’s an ignoble search, an ignoble path. We’re looking for a noble one. In this case, it starts with right view. What makes it right is that if you act on this view, it would lead you to the Deathless. This is what makes all the factors right when they work together. You look to see how does the mind learn how not to keep on going for things that are subject to aging illness and death. And the important thing is that you see that your other ways of searching for things lead to suffering. And the suffering is clinging to ideas, clinging to any mental state, any physical state. And why do you cling? You want to feed. You’re feeding on these things. And this is why the teachings are so counterintuitive. Because we tend to think that the way we look for food in life, whether it’s physical food or mental food, is how we find happiness. But the Buddha is saying, “No, this is how we suffer.” He points out how we go for things and they give us some satisfaction. He doesn’t deny that there is some satisfaction in these things. If there were no satisfaction at all, we wouldn’t go for them. We go for them but then they disappoint. And then we go for them again and they disappoint again. There’s a story in the Canon. The young monk who ordained out of faith in the Buddha. He came from a wealthy family. He was still young and healthy. And one day he was in the pleasure garden of a king. And the king asked him, “Why did you ordain? You were young, you’re healthy, your relatives were still alive, you still had wealth.” Because in the king’s mind, people would ordain only if they’re really hard-off. And the monk said, he listened to four Dhamma summaries from the Buddha. “The world is swept away. It does not endure. It offers no shelter. There’s no one in charge. The world has nothing of its own. One has to pass on, leaving everything behind. And it’s a slave to craving.” So the king quizzes him about these teachings. And Radhabala, the monk, points out to him, that the life of the king exemplifies these things. He used to be strong, but now he’s so old and weak, that he means to put his foot in one place and go someplace else. And even though he’s king, when he has a serious disease, he suffers from the pain. He can’t order his courtiers to share out the pain, so he feels less. Subject to aging, illness, and then, of course, death. Even though he’s wealthy, he can’t take his wealth with him. So the young monk is beginning the king to reflect on these things. But then the king says, “What does it mean to be a slave?” Because kings don’t want to be slaves. The idea of being a slave is very unattractive to them, offensive to them. Radhabala, the monk, says, “Suppose there was someone from the east who came and said, ‘There’s a kingdom to the east, which is wealthy, but its army is very weak. You could take that kingdom. Would you go for it?’” And here the king’s 80 years old. He’s been reflecting on the fact that he’s getting old, sick, he’s going to die. The king says, “Sure, I’d go for it. How about a kingdom to the south, a kingdom to the west, a kingdom to the north, how about a kingdom on the other side of the ocean?” “Sure, sure, sure, in every case.” And we look at the king, and he seems pretty ridiculous. Even having reflected on aging, illness, and death, he still goes for wealth that he won’t be able to take with him. Yet, that’s how we are. We crave happiness, and we look for anything and say, “I can give a little bit of happiness and a lot of pain.” And we hold on, and we go for more. That’s the basic message of the first two of the Noble Truths in Right View. The message of the other two truths is there is an alternative, and there is a happiness that doesn’t die, a happiness that doesn’t disappoint. Once you’ve found it, you’ve found it. It doesn’t leave you. And here’s a path that takes you there. That’s the message of Right View. And based on that, then all the other factors of the path follow, all the way up to Right Concentration. Because for this message to really sink into the mind, you’ve got to get the mind focused. You’ve got to give it a sense of well-being that doesn’t depend on things outside. This is not the goal of the path. After all, it is part of the path. But as you develop a sense of well-being, just by the way you breathe, sitting here with your mind quiet, it gives you a different perspective on the other things that you’ve been going for. And you realize that a lot of the things you’ve been pursuing are exactly as the Buddha said they were. They give a little bit of pleasure, and then they follow up with abandoning you. And if you thought that that was all there was in the world, you’d go for it. There’d be no question. But here the Buddha’s saying there’s something else. There is a noble happiness. And it can be found by following this path. The Buddha lays out duties with each of these paths, excuse me, with each of these truths. The truth of suffering is something he says you should comprehend. To see that it does lie in the clinging. The cause of suffering is not things outside, it’s your own craving. The cessation of suffering would be the end of that craving. And you can get to there. You can realize that by developing the path. So this is the basic framework for the Buddha’s teachings. He calls it a path. It’s going to take you someplace if you follow it. And so the Buddha takes that basic pattern that we have for any serious desire and he applies it to the goal of the deathless. So it’s not just an eightfold path. It’s a noble eightfold path. We make ourselves noble by following it. Because we’re finding happiness that doesn’t cause harm to anybody. It requires that we be very mature. We have to grow up. We have to step back from our ways of looking at things. Things that we’ve been feeding on all along. And ask ourselves, is it really satisfactory? So you step back and you ask questions. This is how you grow up. So learn how to step back skillfully, in a state of concentration, so you have a sense of well-being as you step back. And really work on the questions you ask yourself. Because this is what makes us noble. This is what makes the difference between following a path that’s ignoble and following one that’s noble. It’s how skilled you are in asking questions. This is what makes the difference between just sticking with your old ways and gaining new insights. Learn how to ask the questions that come from these four noble truths. Where exactly are you clinging? Where exactly is your craving? What motivates it? What’s the allure in those things that you crave and cling to? What are their drawbacks? Isn’t there something better? That’s the main message of these teachings. There is something better. There’s a path that leads there. And it’s a path that you can follow. That’s what the Buddha points out. Now it’s up to you to follow it. He gives you confidence that you can do it. And you have to overcome your own doubts about it that make you feel that you’re not confident that you can do it. Because otherwise you’d miss out on a really good opportunity.

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