The Tools of the Path

June 23, 2025

When the Buddha talks about the factors of the path, he lists them in the order in which you learn about them, not in the order in which you master them. You master them in the order of virtue, concentration, discernment. But when the path factors are listed, they start with the discernment factors, they start with the right view. Because that’s right view, not right knowledge. Some people say that the Buddha doesn’t have you accept anything unless you know it to be true. But you don’t really know the truth of suffering, or the cause of suffering, or the cessation of suffering, or the past of the cessation, until you’ve actually done these things. So when you first learn about it, it’s just right view. It’s that view that the Buddha recommends that you adopt for the sake of putting an end to suffering. You try it out, you take it as a working hypothesis. And you realize that it doesn’t express the entirety of the Buddha’s own views. Ananda Bendika, the householder, who was a stream-enterer at the time, was asked one time by a group of sectarians, “What are the Buddha’s views?” Here he was, a stream-enterer. He’d seen the truth of the Four Noble Truths. In other words, he’s actually had an experience of the cessation of suffering, a taste of it. But even then, he said, “I don’t really know the entirety of the Buddha’s views, or the entirety of the views of all the awakened monks.” So we think of right view as the Buddha’s directions to us specifically. This is how you want to look at the problem of suffering. See that it’s clinging to the five aggregates. It’s caused by craving, three kinds of craving. And it can be brought to an end through the Noble Eightfold Path, which attacks suffering at the cause, at the craving. So you start with that picture in mind, that understanding in mind. And then the second discernment factor is right resolve. What’s interesting is right resolve doesn’t attack all of craving. It attacks only the things that get in the way of getting into right concentration. In fact, that’s one of the duties of all the remaining factors in the path, after right view, to get you into right concentration. You adhere to the virtues of right speech, right action, right livelihood, because they are conducive to concentration. You act in ways that don’t cause any harm to anybody. As you come to sit down and meditate, there are no scars in your mind. You look back on the actions of the day, there’s nothing you have to regret. And at the same time, in developing these qualities of virtue, you’re focusing on what? You’re focusing on your intentions. That’s what makes the difference between breaking a precept and not breaking a precept. It’s the intention behind your action. So it’s focusing on your mind. Because concentration is what? It’s a solid, steady intention. So first you have to get sensitive to your intentions, and learn how to train them to keep them in line with the precepts. Those are the virtue factors. And then there are the concentration factors. You start with right effort. You develop the desire to get rid of any unskillful qualities that are there in the mind, and to develop skillful ones in their place. Then your right view comes in to inform you on how you do that and why you do that. As the Buddha said, some of the causes of suffering which you have to learn how to abandon will go away simply by looking at them. These are the ones that are there in the mind, because you haven’t been paying close attention. When you do pay close attention, you realize this is really stupid. You see no reason to follow those causes of suffering anymore, and they just go away. There are others, though, that are more deeply entrenched. In that case, you have to exert a fabrication. Now what are the fabrications? The Buddha talks about three fabrications, bodily, verbal, and mental. These have to do with the five aggregates that are suffering when you cling to them. So actually learn how to use these aggregates. Get hands-on experience in getting rid of unskillful thoughts. You see what kind of feelings lie behind the thoughts, especially if there’s a strong emotion. You look at the way you breathe to see if you can get out of the cycle of when the breathing aggravates the thoughts, when the thoughts aggravate the breathing. Of course, there are perceptions and thought constructs, consciousness of these things. It’s all there. You have to learn how to use these aggregates. You have to get rid of unskillful thoughts. This is going to be a lesson for concentration, because once the mind gets into concentration, you don’t just stay there. The whole point of getting into concentration is that in the process of getting into concentration, you begin to see for yourself what the Buddha saw. What is suffering? What is the cause of suffering? And the fact that there is a cessation. And you do that by seeing how the mind constructs its experience in the present moment. So if you’re constructing it in an unskillful way, well, you can reconstruct it by using those aggregates in new ways. This then carries on to right mindfulness, where you take as a foundation here in the present moment your sense of the body as you experience it. Try to be mindful to stay with this one object, the body, as you sense it. And then you’re alert. What’s going on, actually? Is the mind staying here or is it not? Like right now. Where is your mind? Is it with the breath? Okay, fine. Try to be really sensitive to the breath. This is the quality of ardency. And what is ardency? It’s basically right effort. Making concentration is like making a cake. You have your batter and then you fold different things into the batter. In this case, you fold the right effort into the right mindfulness. So here again, you’re working with those aggregates. As the Buddha said, when you’re being mindful of your breath, you have to be sensitive to how your feelings and your perceptions have an impact on the mind, how they fabricate your mind. And you want to talk to yourself in ways that are conducive to getting the mind to settle down. So again, you’re using the aggregates, you’re getting sensitive to these aggregates as you put them into practice, as you make use of them. So you don’t just reject them right offhand, saying, “Well, these are aggregates and clinging to the aggregates is bad, so I’ve got to let go of them.” First you have to learn how to use them properly. And in using them properly, you get really sensitive to how you’re relating to them. Then it goes into the concentration. That’s when the mind gets settled down. And here’s where the right view comes to inform you. You don’t just wallow in the pleasure of the concentration. You stay here long enough to enjoy it, to be nourished by it. Otherwise, any effort to understand it, isn’t solidly based. And you don’t have the nourishment that comes from the concentration. So allow yourself to be nourished. This is one of the lessons you learn out in the forest. If you’re going to survive in the forest, you have to have a sense of well-being inside. Then Chan Fueng talks about how when he was up in Chiang Mai during World War II, he was separated from Ajaan Lee. He was off on his own. And what made it bearable was the fact that he could get the mind into states of rapture every day, every day. When the mind is well-fed like that, then it’s a lot more willing to look at its unskillful sides, its defilements, not be bowled over by them, not try to deny them. The mind is much more in an even keel. So you can see, oh hey, there’s some lust here still, there’s some anger here still. And see them as a puzzle to be solved, rather than as something to be embarrassed about, or as something to indulge in. You’ve got something better to indulge in than the concentration. But you always have in the back of your mind those lessons you’ve learned from right effort and right mindfulness. When you’re in a constructed state, and you remember from right view, these constructions, they man out of the aggregates, and when you cling to them, there’s going to be suffering. And so one of the things you learn from right concentration is what the Buddha said about suffering is true, both in the sense of the fact that you are constructing and clinging to things, because with the concentration, what do you have? You’ve got the breath, which is form. You’ve got the feeling of pleasure you’ve created here, and that’s feeling. You’ve got the perception, your images that you hold in mind about the breath, thought fabrications, your intention to stay with the breath, and consciousness, which is aware of all these things. And the Buddha said, when you get used to being in a concentrated state, there comes a point when you begin to see the drawbacks of that state. You know, that five-fold analysis that he gives for getting past your defilements, seeing the origination, seeing the passing away, seeing the allure, seeing the drawbacks, finally gaining the escape through dispassion. Well, then you apply it to the concentration itself. Its allure, of course, is the sense of well-being that it provides, but its drawbacks are that it is fabricated. You have to keep working at it, working at it, working at it, maintaining, maintaining, maintaining. And it finally hits you that it wouldn’t be better if there was something that you didn’t have to maintain. When you develop dispassion for the concentration, then you can go beyond it. You can do this either by analyzing one specific level of concentration you’re in, or as you go from one level to another, you begin to see certain fabrications fall away. After you hit the first jhana, you can drop the fabrications of directed thought and evaluation, verbal fabrication. You go into the second jhana. When you leave the third jhana to go into the fourth, you stop bodily fabrication. The breath in and out breath stops. Everything is still. It feels very full inside. And you don’t stop the breathing intentionally or by forcing it. It’s clear that there’s no felt need to breathe. So either way, concentration is there to help you see that, yes, these things are fabricated, and this is as good as fabrication can get. This is as good as the aggregates can get. Yet you still want something better. And that third nimble truth promises that there is something better. That’s why you’re willing to let go. If this were as good as things could get, then you’d hold on. This is why we say when the Buddha was teaching not-self, he taught it to the monks, the five brethren, after they had seen that the third noble truth was true. Without having had that experience, it’s really hard to let go of things. Most factors of the path are aimed at getting you into concentration. But right view is there to remind you. You don’t want to stop at the concentration. You want to use the concentration to affirm the fact that, yes, you are creating your suffering, and suffering is the clinging, but you don’t have to do it. You can get free. So you affirm the truth of the four noble truths, affirm the truth of right view. But at this point it turns into right knowledge. Because remember, the right knowledge leads to release. Because the path, after all, is the means to a goal. I received an email today from someone who said they’d read the book “Skilling Questions,” and they’d detected there was this subtle undercurrent of goal orientation that may not have been intentional. I was tempted to write back, “Well, any fool can see that it’s goal-oriented.” The Buddha was the most goal-oriented person you can imagine in the world. It’s just that they’d learned that you follow the path. It gets you to where you want to go. Then you can let go of the path. You’re not here just to settle into the present moment as it is. You’re here to dig into the present moment, take it apart, see what lies on the other side of the present moment, and how it’s the present moment put together through those five aggregates. There are things that you’re doing, things that you’re clinging to, and whatever sense of agency you have in doing, or the sense of the self as a consumer in the enjoying of what you’re doing, that’s going to have to be let go of. But first you have to do it well. Then you can put it down. The image they use in the forest tradition is of a carpenter working on a piece of furniture. You use your tools, you pick them up, you put them down, you pick them up, you put them down, until the job is done. Then you put them down for good. As far as that particular piece of furniture is concerned, in other words, as far as your mind is concerned, then from that point on you see somebody else needs a chair, somebody else needs a table, you can pick those things up again. But you pick them up in a different way. Right now as you’re working on the tools of the practice, you have a sense that they are yours and they belong to you. People sometimes ask, “When you put aside your sense of ‘I am’ or ‘This is me, this is mine,’ how can you function?” Well, it’s the same way you can function as if you had tools that you possessed as yours, but then you decide to allow them to be common property. You can still use them, even though the sense of ownership is gone. You can still keep them in good condition. Why? Because you see that they’re good for people at large. So it’s not that you stop being motivated, or stop being able to act, when you totally let go. It’s that you no longer cling. The tools are still there. And John Lee makes this point that even though the Buddha let go of the path, he could still use the path in his work as Buddha. And that point applies to all those who are awakened. So don’t be afraid that when you let go of your sense of self that you’ll be hindered or unable to act. You can act with more skill. In whatever way you see is appropriate. This is the point where, as the Buddha said, he has nothing more to teach you. Until that point, though, you want to take on his path as your working hypothesis, take on Right View as the working hypothesis, and then develop all the other factors of the path. So you can see for yourself that that hypothesis actually is valid. It takes you to the goal that it promises. And that’s when you’ve completed the task the Buddha sets for you. And whatever other tasks you want to pick up after that, you pick them up in a way where you’re not weighed down.

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