

Different Paths Go Different Places

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There's a story in the Canon where a monk is sitting in a little hut out in the forest and his meditation isn't going very well. Off in the distance, he hears the sound of music. The village is having a festival. People are dancing, singing, and playing instruments. And he gets depressed. Here he is alone, having no fun at all. He starts envying the villagers; they at least know how to have a good time.

A deva comes and appears to the monk. She says, "Do you realize how many people who've been dancing and singing are now going to hell? They really envy you. Where you are is on a pathway that goes up. Their pathway goes down."

The point here, of course, is that the practice is not always enjoyable, and there are a lot of things you have to give up. But it is a trade. And it's up to each of us to decide exactly how much we want to trade, remembering that our choices have consequences.

Most people would like to believe that every path out there goes up to the top of the mountain, which bears no resemblance to actual geography at all. There are very few paths that reach the top of the mountain, and there are a lot that just kind of wander around through the lowlands, go up a bit and then go down. Some of them lead down to the ocean; some of them lead off the edge of a cliff; some lead down into Death Valley and you get stuck. So it's not a matter of going into the store and just choosing which path you want, guaranteed that each one is going to take you where you want to go.

This is part of the Buddha's knowledge, realizing that different paths go in different places. There is the path to the end of suffering. There's also a path to heaven. There's a path to rebirth as a human being. There's the path leading to rebirth as a dog or another common animal, and then down to the lower realms. Some of the paths start out enjoyable and then go bad. Others start out bad and then go to a good place. Others start out good and go to a good place. So you can't take your likes and dislikes or your preference for an easy path as any real guide.

You have to decide where you want to go. What do you want to do with your life? Or think about the end of your life: What kind of life would you like to look back on? What kind of choices would you like to look back on? And be willing to make a trade. There are cases, as the Buddha says, where you're practicing the holy life and tears are running down your face out of frustration, out of discouragement. He says that even then it's best to stick with the path, because

this path at least is a way out. The other paths you might take all lead back in—to come back again and again and again.

Of course, it's not the case that the path out is always going to be difficult. But the Buddha does note that for some people the path is going to be easy and quick, and for others, it's going to be easy and slow. For others, it's going to be painful and quick, and for still others it's going to be painful and slow. If we could choose the one we wanted, we might say, "Well, I'll be willing to go for pleasant and easy and long, maybe. Might have a good time along it. Or I might decide I want to take the short one."

We all want the pleasant path, but that's not something you can choose. You have to look at the kind of mind you have and what it responds to. If it turns out that you have to follow the difficult path, that's the situation you're stuck with. But again, if you decide you don't want to follow the path because it's difficult, think of the path that you'd be following then. There may be some easy things, but paths go on and on and on.

I was talking to someone who was complaining about how long the path to awakening seemed. I said, "Well, think about the path to *not* awakening—how long that one is." It doesn't really end. It just goes on and on and on, again and again and again. So the path to awakening always is shorter and involves a lot less suffering. The Buddha once picked up a little pinch of dirt. He asked the monks, "Which is greater, the dirt in the great Earth or the dirt that I have in my fingers here?" Of course, it was the dirt in the great Earth that was much larger. He then said that in the same way, for someone who has gained stream entry, the suffering left to that person is like the little pinch of dirt. For someone who hasn't, it's like the entire Earth.

So the path to not-awakening is not the pleasant path it seems, or the easy path, or the short path. The path to awakening is always the shorter path and always the one that involves less suffering. There's that passage where the Buddha says that if you could make a deal where they're going to spear you with 100 spears in the morning, 100 spears at noon, and 100 spears in the evening every day for 100 years, but you'd be guaranteed awakening at the end, he said it'd be a good deal. And when you finally did attain awakening, you wouldn't think that you had attained it with pain and suffering. The joy, the total happiness that comes from awakening, is so great that it would blot out 100 years of 300 spears a day.

This image helps to keep things in perspective when you're thinking about how difficult the path may be and how uncertain. Even when it goes through difficulties, it's still a bright path. And it's not that this is the only life you would choose where you have to make a trade. Every life is a trade. Some people take the

trade that leads to wealth, but they have to sacrifice all kinds of other things that have genuine value. Often people don't think about it, but they're making a trade all the time. There are lots of things they're selling off at fire sale rates. Goodwill, compassion: These get sold off. Discernment, patience, persistence, mindfulness, and concentration: All the good qualities of the mind get sold off in most people's lives. So it's a question of making a wise, intelligent trade.

We see the pleasures that other people are enjoying, but we can't see their pain. This is why, when looking at other people's lives, sometimes we think, "Well, that looks like an easy life. That looks like a nice life."

Think of that story of the king who became a monk. He'd sit under a tree, exclaiming, "What bliss! What bliss!" The other monks were concerned. They thought that he was reflecting on how happy he'd been as a king and was now missing his kingly pleasures. So they informed the Buddha.

The Buddha called the monk into his presence and asked him, "Why is it that you're sitting under a tree exclaiming, 'What bliss! What bliss!' What do you have in mind?" And the monk said, "Well, I think about when I was a king and at night, I'd go to bed. And even though I had guards posted in the palace and outside the palace, in the city and outside the city, in the countryside, even outside the frontiers, I was still afraid, for fear that someone would come in and either try to take everything I had, or kill me, or both. But now I sit under a tree with my wants satisfied. I see no danger from any direction at all. My mind," he said, "is like a wild deer— totally free. That's why I exclaim, 'What bliss! What bliss!'"

The king had to make a trade. If he was going to keep his power and keep his wealth and keep all of his pleasures, he was going to have to put up with all that fear. So he traded it for things that nobody else wanted. When you have things that no one else wants, you don't have any danger. This is one of the advantages of living in a monastery where we don't have beautiful buildings. People come and nobody seems jealous.

Ajaan Lee talks about this: how safe you are when wearing thrown off rags and making robes out of thrown off rags. Think back to the time of the Buddha: They would actually take those thrown-off rags off corpses, wash them, boil them, and make their robes out of that. As Ajaan Lee says, that kind of clothing has no dangers at all because nobody else wants it.

So learn to look at the advantages of living a life of renunciation. You're living with things that nobody else is jealous of. And you gain a wealth that nobody else can steal: all the treasures of conviction, virtue, a sense of shame and compunction, your knowledge of the Dhamma, generosity, discernment, and the food of good concentration. Nobody else can take these things away from you.

These are treasures that are safe. The treasures out there in the world, as the Ajaan Lee likes to say, are like the gold chains that people wear around their necks. This is very common in Thailand. If you have a gold chain around your neck, people will try to steal it. They'll hurt your neck as they pull it off.

That's a good image for the wealth in the world. If you have status, people are going to be jealous of your status. When you get praised, people are going to be jealous of you because you're praised. And those things are not really yours anyhow. People can come and just take them away. After all, they're the ones who give you the wealth; they're the ones who give you the status or the praise. They can change their minds at any point. But if you have the wealth that you can develop within, as Ajaan Lee says, it's safe because nobody else knows it. They can't even see it.

Ajaan Maha Boowa comments that this is one of the drawbacks of the Dhamma in the sense that if people *could* see the treasures of a noble one's mind, everybody would want it. You can't take it out and show it to people. But it's also an advantage. You've got something that nobody else can see, and that really gives true happiness that's safe. There are things you have to give up in order to gain that, but everything in the world is a trade. There's a risk in every choice.

So you look at the odds. As the Buddha said, you can assume that your actions do have consequences, and when you live by that assumption, you don't lose. Even if it turns out your actions have no consequences—that it's all illusory—at least you're living in a mind with good intentions. There's a sense of honor that goes with that. That's why he calls that assumption a safe bet.

Of course, there's also the risk that the path may be long. It may not be as easy as you'd like it to be. But remember, the path to awakening is always much shorter than the path to non-awakening. And the sense of true, unchanging happiness that comes as a result blots out any difficulty in the path.

So the choice is yours. What kind of trade do you want to make? Because we're always making trades, and we're always gambling with every choice we make. So make your trades and place your bets as wisely as you can.