

# Success by Approximation

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When the Buddha taught the path, he said it leads to awakening; it leads to nibbana. But he didn't list awakening or nibbana as one of the factors of the path. The goal is one thing; the path is something else. That's why he used the image of a path. And unlike the relationship between craving and suffering, the path isn't the cause or the origination of the goal. It simply leads you there.

These points are important to keep in mind because all too often there's a tendency to think that you can get to awakening by cloning it. But awakening isn't something you can clone.

Instead, the Buddha has you think strategically. What actions can you do to bring yourself to the point where you arrive at awakening? They're very different from the awakening itself. There are *some* similarities. Concentration is very calm; wisdom is very clear; virtue can be pure. But their calm, clarity, and purity are all fabricated, whereas the calm, clarity, and purity of the goal are on another level altogether. You get there not by imitating the goal; you get there through a process of approximation.

Even though awakening can happen in a moment, and you're awakening to something that's potentially right here in the present moment, you still have to develop your discernment to detect these things, and that takes time. You have to develop your skill. As with any skill, it's going to go through levels of refinement. And it includes factors that are very different from the goal—things like the desire of right effort, which entails wanting to do things skillfully. And even though we're here to get rid of aversion, there has to be a certain amount of aversion, too. To begin with, you have to be averse toward the results of unskillful behavior. That aversion will eventually have to get honed down. But just because it's there doesn't mean that you're going in the wrong direction. You're learning how to approximate things.

It's as if we're digging for gold underground. You don't dig for gold with a gold shovel; you use an iron shovel or a steel one. Or it's like trying to get fresh water out of salt water. The salt water may be cool, and you want cool, fresh water when you drink it. But you don't go straight from cool salt water to the cool fresh water. You have to take it through heat first; you heat the water and distill it. Then it can cool down again.

So there are parts of the path where you really have to put in energy, and that's going to require desire. You're making concentration: creating a state of concentration in the mind. You're creating a state of becoming, in which you take on the identity of someone doing concentration in the world of the mind. That, too, requires desire. It's simply a matter of learning how to refine your sensitivity as to what's skillful and what's not. Which kinds of desires are skillful, and which kinds of desires are not? Which kinds of skillful qualities are appropriate for one particular situation, and which ones are appropriate for another?

Remember the teaching on the seven factors for awakening. The factor of mindfulness is always useful, but the other factors are meant to be emphasized at some times and not at others. The calming ones are useful for when the mind is feeling frenetic; the energizing ones, for when the mind is feeling sluggish. So even with skillful qualities, you have to learn how to make distinctions. Beyond that, there are levels of concentration, levels of equanimity, levels of right view. These things will progress as you go on the path, until the mind is totally free of passion and aversion. But to get there, you have to be passionate about the path. And your initial motivation may have a bit of aversion in it. You're averse to suffering: That's fine.

You read about some of the ajaans in Thailand talking about how they used some fairly unskillful mind states to deal with other unskillful mind states. Now as Ven. Ananda once pointed out, some unskillful mind states are totally useless on the path. Sexual desire is one that's totally off the path. As he said, the Buddha cut the bridge to that one; it plays no role on the path at all. Sensual passion of any sort doesn't play any role on the path. But there

are other things related to conceit and craving that *are* necessary. You have to want the goal, and you have to have the confidence you're good enough to do it.

Now conceit and craving bring with them some unskillful side effects; and as the path goes on, you're going to pare those down. But if you've got them, learn how to use them in a proper way. Ajaan Lee tells of how, when he was a young monk, he would get into meditation contests with the other monks to see who could sit the longest or do walking meditation the longest. And even though it was fairly childish, it still taught him some important lessons on how to sit and walk for long periods of time. It taught him patience and endurance.

Other ajaans talk about getting angry at their defilements, and that's perfectly fine. As you get more skilled, you begin to see where the anger is unnecessary and then you can drop it. But don't get waylaid by the type of thinking that criticizes you for being awfully passionate about your practice, or awfully attached to concentration, or awfully negative about a person you don't want to associate with. Well, if you realize that associating with that kind of person is going to take you off the path, you've got to be careful. Heedfulness requires that you learn to be wary.

We're often taught that the Dhamma's all about trusting. And it's true that you have to learn how to trust the Buddha and trust your desire for true happiness. But there are things you have to be wary of, both inside and out. I mean, that's what heedfulness means. So we're not being unkind when we decide that certain relationships have to be put on hold. And we haven't wandered too far off the path if we decide that we really are sick and tired of having our sensual desires take us over, and we want something better than that. That's how you motivate yourself.

So there are times when you use unskillful qualities to get rid of other unskillful qualities. Then, gradually, things will get more and more refined—especially as the path picks up momentum. The concentration itself becomes your motivation. The mindfulness becomes your motivation. Your insight becomes your motivation. All this is achieved by success through approximation.

So as Ajaan Lee points out in his talk on the various demons of defilement, some of them have their uses. You're a fighter as you meditate, and some of the most intelligent fighters are the ones who not only beat the enemy, but can also actually convert the enemy to their side.

You do have to be wary about these things. But as long as you're alert, you're heading in the right direction. After all, even good things have their dangers. Too much equanimity can be bad for your practice. The trick lies in learning how to deal effectively with whatever comes up. Knowing the danger and learning how to avoid the danger, you can learn to put a lot of things to use that would otherwise be denied to you. If you're sitting here trying to clone awakening, desire is denied to you. Craving, conceit—all those things are denied to you—and it means you're trying to follow the path without all the means needed for progress.

There's a kind of defilement that tells you, "Here you are trying to be peaceful, so why are you angry at your defilements?" That's defilement taking on the guise of Dhamma. You have to be very careful about that. So have your wits about you, look at things from all sides, and that's what will see you through.