

What Path Are You On?

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Close your eyes and watch the breath. Try to stay with the breath all the way in, all the way out. Try to keep your mind right here. If the mind starts wandering off, ask it, “Where are you going?”

Because when you're with the breath, you're on a good path. This is the path that leads to stillness of mind, to peace inside. As the Buddha said, it leads to a good destination, both in this lifetime and in future lifetimes. After all, each of us is on a path. The problem is sometimes we don't realize what path we're on.

The Buddha says he's in a position where he can see where people are going in their lives. If they stick with the particular path they're on, he knows where they're going to go. There's the path that leads to hell. There's the path that leads to the realm of the hungry ghosts, the animal realm, human realm, the devas. There's the path that leads to nibbana. He compares these to different types of paths in the world. There's the path that goes to a pit of burning embers: That's the path to hell. And sometimes you don't have to wait until the next lifetime to see how the way you're thinking, the way you're acting leads to a lot of suffering. There are other paths that, say, lead to a shady tree, or to a shady tree next to a lake – those are the paths that lead to the human and the deva realms, in which you have more pleasure. Finally there's the path to nibbana, which leads to total pleasure, the ultimate pleasure.

You have to ask yourself: What path are you on? It has to do with your precepts, it has to do with the way you're behaving. Most of us think of our paths as career paths. But you also have to ask yourself: In the course of that career, what are you doing in terms of the precepts? In the course of your daily life, what are you doing? Those are your real paths, because those have much longer consequences, much more important consequences.

When the mind is with stillness, it's on a good path. When it leaves the stillness, you have to ask yourself, “Where are you going?” You want it to leave only when it has good reasons. All too often the mind just wanders around, and who knows where it's going? It doesn't have any idea, it just wanders randomly. Or it starts going to some particular topic which may not be to its best interests but it likes thinking about it. You have to ask yourself, “Is that the path I really want to follow? Where's it going to take me?”

The Buddha himself said he got on the right path by looking at his thoughts, not in terms of what they were about, but in terms of what was motivating them and where they would take him, what they would lead to. You have to always think in these terms: Where is this going? Where is this going?

You want to make sure that you're on a good path. If you're not sure about the path you're on, bring the mind back to stillness. That's a good path always, because you're in a much better position to observe yourself.

So think about this: You're always on a path going someplace. The question is, where is it leading? And if you're too interested in how much you like what you're thinking about or doing or saying, without thinking about the consequences, that's a dangerous path. You have to look at the consequences down the line. That's what right view is all about: realizing that our actions have consequences, both now and on into the future. So be very careful about what you're doing, because that's your path. You want to make sure that it's a path that goes upward.

As the Buddha said, some of us are born into darkness, some of us are born into light. Born into darkness means we're born into difficult situations; born into light means we're born into good situations. But then we go either into darkness or light. Where we're going doesn't depend on how we come here. It all depends on what we're doing right now. If our actions lead to a bad destination, that's going in darkness. We may have come in light, in good circumstances, but we can pull ourselves down. OR the other way around: If we come in difficult circumstances but we go in a good destination—in terms of being generous, being virtuous, meditating—that's going in light.

So no matter how you come, make sure that you're going in light, going in the right direction. Because our lives are leading in a particular direction, you want to make sure that the direction is good.