

# *The Ennobling Path*

*August 17, 2008*

The path we follow is called a noble path, both because the activities of the path are noble activities, and because it turns the people who follow the path into noble people. In other words, it's ennobling. It fosters noble qualities in the mind—qualities that make us mature, that make us adult. Qualities that in Ajaan Lee's image place us on a throne, so we're not slaves to craving out there, bending under the whip of wherever our desires may send us. It's a path that puts us in a position where we're above the desires, above our cravings. We can direct them, seeing which desires are skillful, which desires are unskillful. And learn the persistence and wisdom that enable us to follow the skillful desires and put the unskillful ones aside, seeing what truly is in our own best interest.

In other words, we sort through the imperatives our appetites place on us, and the imperatives that society places on us, learning to figure out which ones really are skillful. We need to sort out both areas because we come here with a head full of all kinds of notions—from what our parents have told us, our teachers have told us, and the mass media have told us, and our basic desires, our hungers, our appetites. That combination can be particularly dangerous because there are parts of society that would want us to follow our appetites. What was that old commercial? "Obey your thirst" so that you buy our Sprite or whatever. We have to put ourselves in a position where we can sort through those things. What lessons have we learned from society are good lessons, what impulses do we have that are good impulses? How do you foster those and how do you learn how to say No to the bad lessons and the bad impulses, the ones that are unskillful?

It's interesting that the Buddha's take on maturity is very similar to what psychotherapy has to say about maturity: the good functioning of the wise ego. Its teaching parallels a lot of the Buddha's teachings. We're often told that ego is a bad thing. Ego, in the sense of egotism or selfishness, *is* a bad thing. But the ego in the sense of learning how to function in a way that figures out what is really in your true best interest, and learning how to filter out your impulses and the voices of society: That's a very necessary function. It has to be developed if you're going to be able to stay on the path.

Psychotherapy talks about five healthy ego functions. Tonight I'd like to talk about three. All five of them have parallels in the Buddha's teachings, but these three in particular work together in ennobling the mind.

The first one is anticipation: You're able to look ahead into the future and see the results of your actions. This is a sign of a healthy ego so that you don't simply give in to your spur-of-the-moment impulses: the desire for the quick fix, the inability to delay gratification. Someone was telling me that psychotherapists have discovered that children who are trained to delay gratification do well in life. Well, that's one of those obvious things we don't need psychotherapists to tell us. You see it all around you. Kids who are encouraged to give in to their impulses are the ones who have real trouble in life. The ones who learn how to tell themselves, "No, this is not good right now; I've got to put aside my desire

for the immediate pleasure for a longer-term pleasure down the road”: Those are the ones who function well in life.

And it’s an important part of the practice. You have to see the danger that comes from giving in to your desires. In Buddhist terms, that’s heedfulness. As the Buddha said, heedfulness lies at the basis of all skillful qualities. It was so important that it was his final lesson before he passed away. You realize that there are dangers waiting out there. If you act in certain ways, they are going to have bad consequences, both for yourself and for the people around you.

So you want to develop that ability to look at your actions and see where they lead to down the line. Think, for instance, of the consequences of breaking the precepts. It’s so easy to break a precept, especially when you feel that you’re put at a disadvantage by the precept. We saw all that insanity after 9/11, where people were willing to throw morality out the window because they were so scared. There was even that Buddhist teacher who said, “This principle that hatred is never appeased by hatred, that it’s only appeased by non-hatred, i.e. goodwill,” was totally useless. Didn’t have any practical application when things were so uncertain. Actually, though, that principle was designed for times when people really are seething with hatred, when they have to be reminded that you can’t put aside your principles in a situation like that. When life is in danger, your first impulse may be not your best impulse at all. You need clear-cut precepts to keep reminding you that under no circumstances would you kill, steal, have illicit sex, lie, or take intoxicants. That’s why the precepts are so simple, to be easy to remember in difficult situations.

And they are meant to remind you to be heedful. Think about the consequences of your actions and learn how to foresee danger. That ability is what makes you mature and it helps to ennoble you so you don’t give in to your impulses. Once you see that something is going to be unskillful down the line, you have to learn how to suppress it if that desire is coming up in your mind. We don’t like the word suppression. We tend to confuse it with repression. Repression is the unhealthy way to react to unskillful mental states. In other words, you pretend that they’re not there. And because you pretend that they’re not there, you’re in huge denial. Large parts of your awareness get cut off. Those impulses are allowed to fester in their little hidden corner of their little locked up room. But they don’t stay locked up for long. That’s why repression doesn’t really work.

Suppression is something different. It’s the ability to say No to a desire as you know it’s happening. You know it’s there but you simply learn how to say no. Now the approach here is not, “Just say No.” The Buddha gives you ways of thinking that help you say No: the two qualities that he says are treasures of the mind, the protectors of the world—a sense of shame and a sense of compunction.

Shame is when you have enough self-respect to be able to tell yourself: I don’t want to do that because it would be beneath me. This is where a strong sense of self is very helpful; a sense of self respect is very helpful here. And it includes respect for your teachers and all the people who’ve helped you along. You’d be ashamed to have them know that you had done that particular thing, or you’re ashamed of yourself that you’ve taken your good training and simply thrown it away. And so shame here is not a debilitating sense that you’re a bad person and that you are ashamed of yourself. It’s a sense that you’re a really good person.

You've received good training and yet you might be thinking about following a bad action, so you realize it's beneath you. It's not in keeping with what you know to be true. That sense of shame is very helpful in suppressing unskillful desires.

Compunction is the ability to foresee a dangerous or to foresee an undesirable result of an action and say, "I just don't want to go there." This quality is based on goodwill for yourself, realizing that the little bit of pleasure that comes from an unskillful impulse now is not really worth all the danger, all the sorrow and suffering, that will come down the line. You care for yourself. This is where you show good will for yourself. This is why it's also possible to translate this quality as "concern." In other words, you're not apathetic. You don't have a "who cares?" attitude. You care. Because you realize that once you've done something unskillful, you can't buy it back.

There is that line in the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam: "The moving finger writes, and having writ moves on. Nor all your eloquence nor wit can lure it back to erase half a line. Nor all your tears wipe out a word of it." In other words, the moving finger that writes the story of your life is you, your choices. You're the one who is writing the story. And if you've written a bad action in the story or a bad chapter in the story, you can't go back and erase it.

So keep this in mind: that your actions do have consequences and you really do care about yourself. You don't want to destroy your happiness. If you can develop that sense of concern and compunction, together with a sense of shame, they really help you to say No to unskillful desires.

When you're saying No to these things, you've got to find other things that you can say Yes to. That's what the third principle is about. It's called sublimation. You take your desire for pleasure and channel it in skillful ways. This is why we have the practice of right concentration. That's the aspect of the four noble truths where the Buddha talks very openly about pleasure, rapture, a sense of fullness in the body, allowed to spread and permeate throughout the body, the way the cool water of a spring can fill an entire lake. Or lotuses growing immersed in the lake are thoroughly saturated in the water of the lake. It's really intense pleasure, really intense sense of well-being. And when you can tap into that, it makes the ability to operate on heedfulness, a sense of shame, a sense of compunction, a lot easier. You're not just denying yourself. You're learning where to channel your desire for pleasure in a skillful way.

The Buddha's realization that this was the path came after he had spent six years undergoing all sorts of self-inflicted tortures, afraid of pleasure of any kind. When he realized that that wasn't the path, he asked himself, "What might be the path?" And he remembered the time when he had been practicing jhana. He hadn't been intentionally practicing jhana, but had just sat under a tree when he was a child and his mind naturally settled into the level of the first jhana, with a sense of rapture and ease.

So he asked himself: Could this be the path? And he had an instinctive answer: Yes. "But that pleasure," he said, "Why am I afraid of that pleasure? After all, it's blameless, it's not harmful. It's not unskillful." So he made up his mind not to be afraid of it. That was the first factor of the path that he realized. If you're going to be doing concerted work on your mind, you have to be able to tap into a sense of well-being whenever you need it. Otherwise the work gets dry. As

Ajaan Fuang once said, the meditation loses its lubricant. Like an engine that runs out of oil, it just seizes up.

For the path to stay alive, for you to stay on the path, requires being able to tap into this sense of well-being. Simply sitting here breathing in, breathing out, it feels good all over the body. That's the skill of right concentration. That's where you sublimate your unskillful desires and you direct them here. There is a phrase someplace in the Canon, I don't know exactly where, where the different levels of right concentration are called "the sport of the noble ones." This is where they have their fun. They find their pleasure, they find their sense of well-being, they find their enjoyment here.

So remember: The process of getting the mind to settle down should be an enjoyable process. If you find that it's getting dry, learn how to think in ways that give it a little more moisture, a little more lubricant. The Buddha talks of a person working on the process of establishing mindfulness, either in the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, mind in and of itself, mental qualities in and of themselves. You focus on these things and sometimes it gets dry, and he says, there's a fever in the body, or a fever appearing in the mind. Even though these are the themes of right concentration, you're not finding them very easeful or rapturous. So he says to focus on a topic that you do find inspiring. It might be the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha; qualities of generosity, goodwill, any of the *brahmaviharas*; the practice of virtue. Contemplate these things until the mind feels inspired. Once it gets lubricated, you can settle down with the breath again. And you find that the mind is willing to settle down and be still.

So the practice of concentration is designed specifically to give you that sense of pleasure whenever you need it, because the work of insight is sometimes very difficult. The mind is going to resist unless you learn how to put it in the right mood.

All of these skills are the skills of a mature mind. The ability to anticipate danger, the ability to say no to unskillful desires, and the ability to channel your desires for pleasure in a harmless direction are all noble activities that bring dignity into our lives.

Years back when I first came back to the States, I was giving a Dhamma talk one night, and there was a Russian emigrée in the group. And I had mentioned the topic of dignity in the talk. After the talk, she came up to me and she said, "You know, I've been in America all these years now. I learned the word dignity when I was studying English in Russia but I've never heard the word dignity come out of an American's mouth until today." That's something to think about.

This is why we so sorely need this path in our country, this ennobling path. That's why we so sorely need it ourselves, because it's the only way that we're going to find a happiness that's noble, harmless, blameless, a happiness that allows us to maintain our dignity and our nobility.

So this is a very precious path. Learn to value it. And allow it to do its work on you, so that whatever noble qualities you have can be brought, as the texts say, to the culmination of their development.