

To Understand the Path

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Ven. Sariputta once said that the four noble truths cover all the Dhamma, encompass all the Dhamma in the same way that the footprint of an elephant can encompass the footprints of all the other animals on land. So when you're practicing, it's good to think in terms of the four noble truths, not only what they are but also the duties appropriate to each. Right now, we're trying to develop the path, and as the chant just now said, it's important to understand the path.

If you look at the Buddha's teachings and compare the third noble truth with the fourth—in other words, the cessation of suffering with the path to that cessation—you'll notice that he doesn't say much about cessation, doesn't describe it in any great detail. In fact, two of the passages where he gives the most detail about it in Canon are very controversial. But those descriptions come so rarely, whereas the descriptions of the path are all over the place. In fact, even when the Buddha was describing the first and second noble truths, they're part of the path as well. They come under right view.

There's a lot about the path because the path is something you can do. It's something you can work on, something you can fashion. You can't fashion the cessation of suffering, but you can work on the causes that get you there. This may be one of the reasons why the Buddha didn't talk about it too much, because if you hear the descriptions about it, you're likely to try to clone it. Remember: We're not here to clone awakening, we're here to fashion a path, which is a different kind of thing. It's like the road to Yosemite and Yosemite itself. You try to make the road to Yosemite look like what you've heard about Yosemite, you'll have mountains in the way all the time.

So be very clear about the fact that we're on the path. And what do you do with the path? You try to develop it. The path involves both developing and abandoning. This is important, because sometimes we think that all we have to do is just let go of whatever comes up, and that's going to be the path. But some things that come up in your experience are actually parts of the path that have to be developed. For instance, right concentration is something you have to put together. You choose a topic to focus on—any of the four establishments of mindfulness—you think about it, and then you evaluate it. As with the breath: Think about the breath and notice how the breath is coming in, how it's going out, where it's comfortable, where it's not, what you can do to make it more

comfortable so that there's a sense of ease and well-being along with a sense of fullness or refreshment.

It's something you work on. When these states come, you want to notice why they come; when they go, you want to know why they go, so that the next time when they come, you can treat them with more skill. You don't try to clone the awakened attitude that says, "Whatever comes is going to go, so I'll just let it pass, let it pass, let it pass." You're not there yet. You need to develop the path.

In particular, with right concentration, try to give the mind a state of well-being from which you can work, because the work of insight, if it's not coming from a state of well-being, can be very disorienting, very alienating. Dis-identifying with all kinds of things, if you're not coming from a solid place, can leave you hanging, so that you don't know what to do, where to stay. The mind, as long as it still hasn't reached the cessation of suffering, still needs something to hang on to. You're meant to hang on to the path. And the work of insight works best when you develop a sense of ease and well-being through the concentration, so that you can look at your other attachments, realizing they're not nearly as nice as this one, so that your letting go is not neurotic, it's not alienating, it's simply the letting go of a wise person who's found something better.

So concentration is something you want to be attached to. As Ajaan Fuang once said, you want to be crazy about the concentration if you want to do it well. In other words, you really like it, you're really interested in it, you keep coming back to it again and again and again, trying to do it more and more skillfully.

So make sure that your concentration is right, because that's the other side of the path. Sometimes you get attached to states of stillness and then you just wallow in the stillness and wallow in the ease, in which case your concentration has abandoned all the other factors of the path, which means that it's not right anymore. One of the definitions of noble right concentration is any singleness of mind that's endowed all the seven other factors of the path, everything from right view through right effort and right mindfulness.

If you were to compare concentration with a seat, it's like one of those ergonomic seats they sell that are made to sit in while you work, the ones that support your back so you can do work long hours and still remain healthy. It's not one of those big beanbag seats that you just wallow in.

So when you're focused on the breath, try to do in such way that you stay alert, stay mindful, and that your attitude is not that you're going to wallow in the comfort, but you're going to use the comfort as a foundation. As Ajaan Fuang once said, there are basically two types of people who come to meditation: those who think too much and those don't think enough. The ones who think too

much are the ones who try to analyze everything beforehand, before they have a good foundation in the concentration, so their task is to focus on getting the mind as still as possible. That's the work they have to do: working on the stillness.

The ones who don't think enough usually tend to find it easy to get into concentration, but then once they're there, it's harder for them to use that sense of well-being, that sense of stillness as a foundation for analyzing what's going on in the mind. Those people have to be pushed into insight work. That's their work.

So focus on the work appropriate for your particular imbalance, notice where you are, and know when you have to turn left, turn right as appropriate.

There's that famous story about Ajaan Chah where he was accused of being inconsistent in his teachings, sometimes telling people not to focus on stillness, but to work totally on watching things arising and passing away, and developing equanimity and dispassion toward them, and in other cases telling people to work really hard on concentration.

Ajaan Fuang could be that way as well. I remember very early when I was first staying with them, there was another young monk who was there for a temporary ordination. He was going to get married, and his fiancée had insisted that he be ordained as a monk first before she'd be willing to marry him. So he ordained basically to please her. But on his last day at the monastery before he was going to head back to Bangkok to disrobe and get married, he was really regretting the fact that he was going to have to leave. He had come to enjoy his time as a monk. That night Ajaan Fuang gave a Dhamma talk saying, "We're not born alone. We're born with our responsibilities to our parents, responsibilities to those we care for," and particularly he talked about carrying on the family line—a long talk on responsibilities toward one's parents. So the next morning, the young monk left and disrobed, got married.

A few days later, Ajaan Fuang was talking to me—I forget exactly what the issue was—and he reminded me, "Remember you're born alone. Nobody asked you to come. You came of your own free will, so you're beholden to no one."

That time Ajaan Chah was accused of being inconsistent, he replied, "It's as if I see people walking down a road. Some people are drifting off to the left side of the road, so I tell them 'Go right, go right.' Other people are drifting off to the right side, I tell them 'Go left.'"

After all, we're on a middle path. For most of us, it's hard to stay on the middle. We tend to drift off to either side, just wallowing in ease or working ourselves too hard, pushing the insights before we're really ready for them. Our path turns into a path of sensual indulgence or a path of self-torment.

So try to notice where you are on that particular spectrum, and then do the work that's appropriate to bring yourself back into balance, because genuine insight, when it comes, is very orienting.

A lay Dhamma teacher once asked me, "When people gain awakening, what do you do when they find it disorienting?" My response was that insight, if it's genuine, isn't disorienting, it's very orienting, it's very grounding. So if you find that the insights are getting you disoriented, that's a sign that your foundation in concentration is not strong enough, the insights are forced. So you've got to work on your stillness.

On the other hand, if your concentration is so comfortable that you're just going to wallow in it, that's a different kind of disorientation. You lose your bearings, which means you've got work to do, directing your thoughts here, directing your thoughts there, working with the breath, trying to develop an ability to evaluate the breath, using the breath to create a sense of balanced concentration that's alert and mindful, or as they say in Pali, malleable and workable. In other words, you can actually do something with it, which means once the mind is still, you give it work to do in that stillness, work to do in that sense of well-being.

In this way, all the factors of the path come together. It's not a lopsided path, it's not a path straying off to the left or to the right. It's a middle path: balanced, appropriate for whatever is the situation.

When we talk about right effort, it's not so much a middling effort, it's the effort appropriate for what your particular problem is, whether you need to put more effort or less strain into the path. The rightness of the effort basically comes down to the type of effort that gives the right results.

So this is a path we develop and work on. It may not look like awakening, but after all, awakening isn't something you work on. It's something that comes when the path is been brought to fruition. This is one of those cases where you work on the causes, focus your efforts on the causes, and the results will take care of themselves.