

The Path to the Top

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Someone once came to Ven. Ananda and asked him, “Whose teaching is right? Whose teaching is wrong?” Ananda asked in return, “If someone teaches for the ending of passion or if someone teaches for encouraging passion, which one is right?” And the man said, “The one who teaches for the ending of passion.” “How about if someone teaches for the ending of aversion or if someone encourages aversion?” The man said, “The one who teaches for the ending of aversion.” “How about if someone teaches for the ending of delusion or if someone teaches for encouraging delusion?” And the man answered, “The one who teaches for the ending of delusion, that’s the right one.” So Ananda said, “There you are. You’ve answered your own question. Someone who teaches for the ending of passion, aversion, and delusion: That’s the one whose teaching is right. The person who encourages passion, aversion and delusion: That’s the one whose teaching is wrong.”

You notice here, the rightness or wrongness is not a matter of persons, it’s a matter of the quality of the teaching. But when we’re looking to choose a teacher, we do have to look at the person who’s teaching. That’s another series of questions that the Buddha encouraged people to ask themselves when they go to see a teacher, to look at that person’s behavior. Is this the sort of person who through passion, aversion, or delusion would claim to know something that he or she didn’t know? And to gauge that, you have to watch the person for quite a while; even then it’s not one hundred percent sure, but at least you’re heading in the right direction.

We look at the Buddha, the way he behaved, the way he talked. He doesn’t fit into some of our preconceived notions about what a teacher should be. There are some portraits of the Buddha where he’s just all sweetness and light, very gentle, very kind, who would never say anything harsh to anybody. But if you look at the record in the Pali Canon, there are times when he’s extremely aggressive in his arguments and he can be very harsh in his comments, especially with monks who’d been misbehaving.

Someone once called him on this. A couple of Jains got their heads together and came up with a question: Would the Buddha ever say anything displeasing to people? They got a prince to ask him the question. They thought they’d get the Buddha either way, because if he said that he would say something displeasing to others, then they could say, “What’s the difference between you and everyday normal people? What’s so enlightened about you?” If he claimed to not say anything displeasing to anybody, they’d say, “What about those comments you made about Devadatta, that he was destined to hell? That displeased Devadatta very much.”

So the prince went to ask the Buddha, but he realized it was late in the day and this threatened to be a long conversation, so he decided instead to invite the Buddha to a meal the

next morning. The next day, after the meal, he sat down, placed his baby infant on his lap, and asked the Buddha the question. According to the Commentary, the reason he had the baby on his lap was that if the conversation got difficult and he suddenly found himself in a bad spot, he might pinch the baby and the baby would cry and then he could put an end to the conversation.

But when he actually put the question to the Buddha, the Buddha didn't answer the question either way that the Jains had expected. He said, "That question can't be answered categorically," and the prince realized right there that the Buddha had outwitted the Jains. So he told the Buddha upfront that he had been put up to this by the Jains. Then the Buddha, before he gave his answer, gave an analogy. He said, "This baby son you have here. Suppose he got something sharp in his mouth. What would you do?" And the prince said, "I would hold his head with one hand and then I would make a hook with my finger on my other hand and stick it in his mouth and try to get it out, and even if it meant drawing blood, so that he wouldn't swallow it and suffer something worse."

The Buddha then said that, in the same way, there are times when he would see that it was the right time, the right place, to say something displeasing. But first he went down the list of his standards for what he would and wouldn't say. These consisted of a set of three questions. The first question was, "Is it true?" If it wasn't true, he wouldn't say it. If it was true, then he'd go to the next question, "Is it beneficial?" If it wasn't beneficial, even though it was true, he wouldn't say it. If it was true and beneficial, then he'd go to the next step: "Is this the right time to say something pleasing or is it the right time to say something displeasing?" If it was a pleasing statement but not the right time, he wouldn't say it. In other words, is it timely? If yes, he'd say it; if not, no.

Notice those three terms: true, beneficial, timely. Still, why would he say something displeasing? Because of his compassion. Sometimes the truth is harsh, and people need a harsh statement of the truth in order for them to understand it, in order for it to hit home.

That was the nature of the Buddha's compassion. He wasn't always gentle and sweet but he always did have the well-being of the other person in mind.

The prince went on to ask him, "Do you plan your answers ahead of time, thinking that 'If someone asks me this question, I'll answer that way or if someone asks that question I'll answer this way'?" In response, the Buddha gave him another set of questions. "You're known to be an expert with regard to chariots, right?" Like someone who really knows cars nowadays, you can imagine princes knowing chariots. The prince said "Yes, I'm well known as an expert in chariots." The Buddha said, "Do you sit around thinking, 'If someone asks me about this part of the chariot, I'll say this, or if they ask me about that part of the chariot, I'll say that'?" And the prince said "No. I just know chariots so well that when a question comes, I usually know the answer right away."

The Buddha said that in the same way he knew the Dhamma so thoroughly that he didn't

have to sit around and plan out answers to questions. It was through his thorough knowledge of the Dhamma that he knew which path was right and which paths were wrong. He said there are right paths and there are wrong paths, and he knew that because he had followed the path that got to the end of suffering.

Now, he saw that there were some variations on the path. Sometimes he'd explain it in terms of the noble eightfold path, sometimes in terms of the seven factors for awakening, the five faculties, the five strengths, or the four bases for success, but they all came down to the same thing. Each of them, as you analyze them, falls under the headings of the noble eightfold path. There are slightly different variations in terms of which factor comes first, which factor comes second, but the basic path is always the same.

The Buddha was like someone who's standing at the top of a mountain. He's tried all the paths up the mountain and he's realized there is actually only this one path that leads to the top. People standing at the base of the mountain may see a lot of paths going up the mountain and think, yes, theoretically, it is possible all the paths could reach the top. But when someone reaches the top, they know: There is only one way to get up here. The other paths either funnelled into the one path or wandered off someplace else.

There's this uncompromising quality to the Buddha's teachings. As he said, when you reach stream-entry, you know there's no other way to awakening than through the factors of the path. This may go against a lot of our preconceived notions nowadays—and not just nowadays. People had the attitude in the past, that it should be true that all kinds of paths are true. "Why should one person have the monopoly on the truth?" they would say. Well, some people are more dedicated than others. Some people test things more rigorously than others.

Someone asked the Buddha, "Are there many different versions of the truth? Is the truth multifaceted like that?" And the Buddha said no, there is only one truth. There are lots of what he called personal truths, but they're only partial. In the term *ariya-sacca*, which we translate as noble truth, *ariya* also means standard, true across the board. When Subhadda the wanderer came to see the Buddha on the very last day of the Buddha's life, that was the question he asked, too: Are all the people who claim to know the truth, actually teaching the truth or are they lying? Have they all awakened, or are only some of them awakened? The Buddha said, "Put that question aside. I'll teach you the Dhamma." He taught him the noble eightfold path. He said that any teaching that contains the noble eightfold path will have people who are awakened; any teaching that doesn't contain the noble eightfold path will not have anybody who is awakened.

Notice, the Buddha didn't treat it as a question of one person's truth vs. another person's truth. He treated it as a more impersonal issue. There's a standard pattern all across the board. It's personal only in the sense of whether the person tested the truth rigorously enough to know that this is the way to true peace, this is the way to true awakening, to the end of suffering.

Most of us are in the dilemma of living at the bottom of the mountain. There are lots of

people with their paths and they say, “My path goes to the top,” “My path goes to the top, too.” To us it seems nice and friendly, and a good way to avoid conflict, to be open to the idea that maybe everybody gets to the top. But if you’ve ever been up a mountain, you know that not all the paths get there.

It’s like that old statement all the rivers flow to the ocean. They don’t. The Humboldt River, the Sevier River flow into the Great Basin and just disappear. The water in the rivers evaporates, becomes clouds again, rains again. Next time around, that water has a chance to flow to the ocean, but not in that river. Maybe it falls into another watershed, gets down into the Colorado—but of course nowadays even the Colorado doesn’t get to the ocean. It gets only as far as the lakes between California and Arizona and evaporates again. Maybe next time it gets over to the Rio Grande watershed and flows down into the Gulf of Mexico. We all have the chance to get to the ocean someday, but it’s not necessarily the case that every river’s going to get us there.

So we’re stuck with that problem: If we haven’t been to the top ourselves, how do we know what gets to the top? Do we believe the Buddha? Do we believe somebody else? The Buddha said that the only point in the practice where you really know for sure is at stream-entry. Up to that point, you have to go on a sense of conviction, which is not totally secure. It’s not totally guaranteed. The Buddha gives an example of the role of conviction, saying that it’s like the rafters of a house. The rafters are going to be secure only when the ridge pole is in place. You have to put up the rafters first, then you put the ridge pole in the top, at least that’s the way they did it in those days. Conviction is like one of the rafters, as are persistence, mindfulness, and concentration. Only when you have discernment, which is the ridge pole, is the frame for the roof secure. So the only way you can know the truth of the teaching is to put it to the test until discernment arises—and it has to be a rigorous test.

As Ajaan Lee once said, you have to be really true to the teachings if you’re going to find out the truth to the teachings. If you’re not true to them, they’re not going to be true for you. So you have to ask yourself, “Which teaching seems most likely to lead someplace important?” You look at people who practice it, you look at the teaching itself, and then you have to decide. Nobody can make any guarantees for anyone else. No matter how much an awakened person can say it’s true, it’s true, it’s true, he or she can’t bring it out to show to other people. You can get an inclination by looking at that person’s character, but even then, that’s not proof. Although if you see somebody obviously abusing other people, misbehaving, that’s a sign they don’t know what they’re talking about, but ultimately the only proof is when you actually see the Dhamma inside yourself.

So there’s an element of risk-taking as you follow the path. But fortunately, the path is not one that asks you to do anything shameful or anything in a sloppy way, in a harmful way. These are all good qualities to develop in the mind: persistence, patience, endurance, mindfulness, concentration, discernment, compassion. The balance of these qualities as you develop them

in the mind is a good thing. So you don't lose out. What you may lose are a lot of the pleasures the world provides right now—sensual pleasures, everyday pleasures—but are those the things we were really born for? Are those the things that give meaning to life?

As Ajaan Suwat used to say, think of the sensual pleasures you had last week, where are they now? They go, go, go, and now they're just a memory. Sometimes the memory's nice and sometimes not so nice. When you think about where the pleasure's gone or when you think about the less than honourable things you did to get a taste of those pleasures, those are not pleasant thoughts. They're not like the happiness of the path which, as the classic statement says, is admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end. The causes are good, the results are good, and the ultimate goal is good.

So even though it may require some renunciation and some going without, the things you're going without are things that really don't have that much meaning or that much essence to begin with. But the qualities you build in the mind *are* meaningful. Those are your treasures. They bring you happiness in the present moment and security for the future.

So the choice is yours. What do you want to do with your life? What kind of life seems meaningful? The path has its ups and downs—sometimes it gets discouraging when you seem to just go through these cycles, up and down, up and down, up and down—but that's because the rafters are still wobbly. If you take these ups and downs as a good sport, you'll find that you can get past them. And then when things are secure, you'll be glad you did.