

A Noble Path

June 17, 2011

Notice the change just now. There was a lot of rustling to settle down. Now that we're settled down, things are a lot quieter, and you can hear the subtle things you couldn't hear when everybody was rustling, moving around.

It's a good image for the mind as it settles down. It's only when the mind gets really quiet and in place that you can see its subtle movements. You can see what they're made of, where they go.

This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration and try to get really good at it: so that we can sense the subtle things going on in the mind and see where they drive us; what they do—and then what we're going to do about them, how we want to handle them, which things we want to hold onto, which things we want to put aside, which things we want to develop.

The main thing to develop, of course, is the path. That's the basic image in the Buddha's teachings. That's the one he starts out with, and it's the one he ends with. He starts his first sermon by saying, "There is this path that avoids the two extremes." It's not as if it's on a halfway mark in a continuum. It's actually off the continuum entirely. The two extremes are the pursuit of pleasure and the other is weighing yourself down with pain. The path that we're following is not just a halfway splitting the difference. We're not pursuing sensual pleasure or pursuing pain. We're going to *use* these things. We're going to use pleasure and we're going to use pain for something else entirely: the ultimate happiness. But it's the path that gets us there. That's the image the Buddha uses.

When he taught his last disciple, Subhadda, again he used the image of the path. Subhadda had asked him, "Everybody in the world who claims to be awakened: Are all awakened, or only some of them, or none of them?" And the Buddha said, "Put that aside. I'll teach you the Dhamma." Then he went on to say, "Any teaching that has the noble eightfold path will have people who are awakened." It's one of those rare cases that where, having put a question aside, he actually answered it. He said, "It's only here in this teaching that you're going to find this path."

So this is the basic image for all the teachings, even his teachings of right view, in which he sets out how we're supposed to understand things. We understand things for the purpose of putting an end to suffering, for the purpose of walking the path. He doesn't talk about the real nature of things in and of themselves, whether they have a real nature or don't have a real nature. But, he said, if you

learn to look at things in this way and act on it, this will lead you to the end of suffering.

So as we follow this path, it's good to think about some of the implications of being on the path. The main one is that it leads to a goal. We are going someplace. Sometimes you hear the idea that the path *is* the goal, but everything the Buddha taught suggests that they're radically different. The path is something you do; something you develop. The goal is something you realize, and then you're at the end of all duties. The four noble truths: Each of the truths has a duty. The third truth, which is the realization of nibbana, is something you realize. But then from that point on, there's nothing you have to do with it, or do for it. It's there.

But to get there, the path is something you've got to develop. It's composed of activities. The end of the path involves the end of desire; the end of hunger. But while you're on the path, you've got to have the desire to follow the path. You've got to figure things out. You've got to think things through. You've got to work on your energy. All of these are things you've got to develop.

So the path and the goal really are two radically different things. The path is something fabricated. The goal is unfabricated. The path doesn't cause the goal. It takes you there. The traditional image is of a road leading to a mountain. The road doesn't cause the mountain, and the road doesn't look like the mountain at all. And the road doesn't take you there. You have to follow the road. It's your actions that are going to get you there. Once you're there, you don't have to do anything more. But while you're on your way, you do have to work on things. You have to develop the strength to stick with the path.

Sometimes it's good to remind yourself this is a noble path. As the Buddha said, it's the *ariya-magga*, *ariya* meaning noble, *magga* meaning path. The qualities we're developing on the path are all good qualities, honorable qualities. We're not here just for pleasure regardless of the consequences. We realize that our actions have consequences, so we want to behave in a responsible way—so that our pursuit of happiness doesn't harm anybody: doesn't harm ourselves, doesn't harm other people. That's what makes the path noble.

Years back, I was asked to write a review of a book on positive psychology. The magazine that asked me to do this said, "Look at it from a Buddhist perspective." When I sent in my review, the editors were surprised, they said, that I had chosen the perspective of karma. In other words, in our pursuit of happiness, we have to think about what the karmic consequences will be: How is this pursuit going to have an impact on other people? How is it going to have an impact on ourselves? And even though this was a Buddhist magazine, they said that that perspective

had never occurred to them. They were expecting something more like emptiness or whatever.

But it's the teachings on karma that form the beginning of the path: the realization that your actions do have consequences. The path itself is a kind of karma. The Buddha said it's the karma that puts an end to karma. You've got to do it, and you look at the consequences of what you're doing.

The path factors were listed in the chant we did just now, from right view all the way down to right concentration. They're all good qualities that we're working on: abandoning unskillful behavior, developing the powers of our mind so that we're clear, observant, and truthful, and the mind is focused. It can gain a sense of rapture from within that doesn't have to take anything away from anybody else. Our resolves are all good resolves when we're on the path: the resolve not to be led around by the nose for sensual desires, the resolve not to harm anybody, not to harbor any ill will for anyone.

These are all noble things, regardless of how people treat us. As the Buddha said, even if bandits were to savagely cut off your limbs with a two-handled saw, we're still supposed to start focusing on them with thoughts of goodwill and from there, to spread goodwill for the whole cosmos. Even in a case like that, we're not supposed to wish ill for anybody.

So it's a noble path, and it's a good thing to take pride in the fact that you're on this path. When the Buddha was teaching Rahula, he told him when you notice that you actually have done something skillful—your thoughts, your words or your deeds have not harmed anybody at all and have been conducive to the well-being of yourself and others—you should take joy in that fact, because it's not a small thing to develop that kind of skill. So as we work on concentration, it's not just a matter of the techniques for getting the mind centered, but it's also a matter of the values that allow the mind to get centered as well: the realization you're not harming anybody. You're developing your inner resources in a way that is actually helpful to others.

In some teachings, they make a sharp distinction between a path that's focused on your own well-being and a path that's focused on the well-being of others. But as the Buddha pointed out, when you're really developing mindfulness, developing concentration, you realize that you cannot harm anybody if you want to develop these qualities of mind. He even observes that if you're stingy, you can't develop these qualities of mind. If you go around harming people, you've got to deal either with denial or with remorse, and that's not conducive to getting the mind still, either. So it's not the case that you can forget about the rest of humanity and just pursue your own well-being selfishly. The pursuit of your own

true well-being involves considering the well-being of others: being generous where you feel inclined to be generous, where you feel inspired, and making the promise to yourself that under no conditions are you going to harm anybody. As the Buddha said, this is a gift of unlimited safety.

There's that verse in the Karaniya Metta Sutta where the Buddha says that just as a mother would risk her life to protect her only child, you should protect your attitude of goodwill. This doesn't mean you're going to go out and cherish everybody the same way she would cherish her child, or to fight off every injustice that's going to happen to everybody. You'd die before you could complete that mission. The Buddha says that the way you give protection to everybody is to make sure your precepts are pure. You make a promise to yourself that you're not going to harm anybody under any conditions; you're not going to kill anybody, steal anything, have illicit sex with anybody, lie to anybody, or take intoxicants in any situations. The fact that you're making that clear-cut promise to yourself and that there are no exceptions is what gives universal protection.

So it's by focusing on the quality of your own goodwill and making sure there are no exceptions in your goodwill: That's how you nourish those precepts. So that's what we have to look after as a mother would look after her child. We look after the attitudes of the mind, our resolve not to harm anybody. That's a noble resolve.

So this is not a selfish path at all. In fact, one of the motivations for following it all the way to the end is that when you've completed the path, any gift that's given to you will bear extreme fruit for those who give it. This is your expression of gratitude for all those who've helped you: that you want to make sure they enjoy the fruits of their generosity many, many times over. There's no place at all in the Canon where the Buddha says you practice the path selfishly or just don't worry about others, just go for your own well-being. It's impossible. He gives the image of two acrobats. One acrobat is standing on the shoulders of another, and the one on the bottom says, "Okay, you look after me, and I'll look after you, and that way we'll both come down safely." And the assistant on top says, "No, that's not going to work. I'll look after myself, and you look after yourself. And in doing so, we'll be protecting each other."

The happiness that comes from virtue, generosity, and meditation is not a happiness with clear boundaries. Your practice is bound to have a good influence on other people. The best influence that it can have, of course, is to inspire them to practice as well, because this is the part where each of us is responsible for ourselves. We can't go out and save other beings, because we're each suffering from our own lack of skill. So each of us has to develop that skill. You can't make

others skillful. You can provide them with an example and give advice. But for the actual care and attention, mindfulness, alertness, and all the other qualities that are needed to develop that skill, that's something they'll have to stir up from within themselves.

We ourselves have the example of the Buddha. As he said, if it weren't for him, nobody would be following the noble eightfold path. So the fact that he provides this example, that this is possible for human beings to do: We give the same gift to one another as we practice.

So it's good to take joy in the fact that we're on a noble path. We're developing noble qualities as we follow the path. The goodness of the path is not saved for the end. As the Buddha says, it's good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end.

As with any path, there are going to be difficulties along the way. He never promised that it would be easy. But it's always good. That's why it's worth sticking with it. As he said, even if tears are running down your cheeks, you still stick with the practice because you're on a path that goes someplace really good. You don't want to sacrifice that goal for the fleeting pleasures that would come from straying off the path for a while.

So keep reminding yourself how rare it is that you can follow a path that's as noble as this one. And keep on walking.