

The Unity of the Path

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The path we're following has eight folds, or eight factors, but there's a unity to the factors. When the Buddha talks about entering the stream, it's when all the factors flow into one another. They really do become one. But even in the beginning when you start out practicing, you often see that there's a smooth progression. It's not one step and then another step, but it's one step and then that first step gets included in the next and both of them get included in the next, spreading out their influence. They all flow into one another.

You start out with right view, but even before right view, there are certain qualities you want to bring. Generosity is one of them. You're happy to give, happy to share. You see that there's a definite worthwhile quality of mind that's developed as you share, because the practice as a whole is a kind of sharing. You're sharing your energy for the purpose of a happiness that's not going to harm anyone else and that will have something to offer to others.

When the Buddha talks about the motivations for practicing, one of them is that, if you're a monk and you reach the end of the path, the gifts given by those who have been supporting you will bear them great fruit. So your way of making sure that they benefit from your gifts is by practicing. That gives the practice an element of generosity. You're not going to let yourself get slack, because you realize that other people's happiness depends on your willingness to engage in deferred gratification and on completing the path. So you're not going to go for the quick fix. You're going to go for a means of happiness that may take longer to show their results, but they're totally harmless all around. That quality of mind is important to bring to the path.

In fact, when the Buddha prepares people to understand the four noble truths and the elements of right view, he starts out with generosity and builds up through virtue, the rewards of these activities, and then their limitations. Simply being generous and virtuous is not enough. There's more that needs to be done. Learning how to renounce your ordinary, everyday types of happiness and seeing renunciation as a good thing is quite an accomplishment in our culture. Learning how to see renunciation as a good thing is what prepares you for right view.

When we think about developing the different perfections—generosity, goodwill—these are not simply decorations that sit around on the side of the path. They're actually preparations for the state of mind you need in order to practice and to accept the fact that the four noble truths, which are the heart of right view,

really do focus on the main issue in life, which is that we're causing suffering and yet we don't have to. There's a way in which we can stop causing that suffering. Then we learn how to understand the other factors of the path as well. That's part of the understanding, part of right view. Then we begin to act on them.

To act on them, you need the right motivation. You understand that it's not enough simply to understand cause and effect. You decide that you want to use the principles of cause and effect to avoid things that are harmful and to develop good qualities in their place. That's what right resolve is all about: learning how to make up your mind that you will engage in renunciation.

Renunciation, here, means renouncing everyday sensual thinking, the kind of fantasizing we like to engage in about food, things we like to look at, things that we like to listen to, things we like to touch—all the fantasies that go in the mind surrounding sensual pleasures. That's craving for sensuality. You realize that it might be a good thing to resolve on getting your mind above and beyond all that. That's one way of dealing with the causes of suffering.

Then you develop the resolve not to harm and the resolve not to bear ill will. These two are related to compassion and goodwill. These are parts of your motivation based on right view as well.

Then those resolves flow into your actions: your speech, the things that you do with the body, and the way you develop your livelihood.

You look for ways in which you're doing harm through your speech and you realize: There's harm in lying, there's harm in divisive speech, there's harm in abusive speech, there's harm in idle chatter, sitting around and talking and talking with no clear purpose in mind. If nothing else, it wastes a lot of time.

What you're doing is taking your right resolve and you're applying it to the area of speech. You want to learn how to avoid these harmful kinds of speech.

You do the same with your actions. You avoid killing. You avoid stealing. You avoid illicit sex. These things are harmful. You try to avoid harmful forms of livelihood. What you're doing is carrying right resolve into your daily life, really looking to see if how you live is in line with the understanding that comes with the four noble truths: that if you give in to craving and clinging and ignorance, you're going to give rise to suffering. If you learn how to avoid harm, you're more and more on the path.

It's from here that you start going into the mind directly, because you realize that all your actions come from—where? They come from the qualities of the mind. Right effort starts with generating desire to prevent unskillful qualities from arising, as we chanted just now; to abandon them if they have arisen; to give rise to skillful qualities; and when skillful qualities have come, you try to maintain

them and develop them as far as they can go.

The act of generating desire relates back to right resolve. We're taking our right resolve and applying it directly to the qualities of the mind. We try to be intent. We try to be focused on what we're doing, not only when we're sitting here with our eyes closed, but also as we go through the day. Look at what you're doing. Look at the qualities of the mind that you're acting on. Which qualities are you allowing to sit around in the mind that really shouldn't be there? Which ones do you want to give rise to? Once those good qualities come, it's not just a matter of watching them come and go. You actually want to maintain them and develop them. That's what right effort is all about: the desire, the effort, and the intentness. These are three of the bases for success.

And, of course, this is all based on the understanding of what's skillful and what's not. That's the wisdom faculty there in right effort. Right effort is not so much a question of how much effort you're putting in, although that is one of the dimensions of right effort. More importantly, it's question of wisdom and understanding: what kind of effort would be most skillful right now? This goes back to right view. Right effort has to contain right view in order to be right. And it contains right resolve in the act of generating the desire to do these things properly.

Now, to maintain this effort, the mind needs to be solidly established to gain the strength that comes from good concentration. So the first thing you've got to do is find a place to establish it. This is what the four establishings of mindfulness are for. You have to keep something in mind in order to get the mind concentrated. As the Buddha says, you keep the body in and of itself in mind, or feelings in and of themselves, mind states, or mental qualities in and of themselves. You keep those things in mind. Then you bring the qualities of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. Mindfulness is the act of keeping in mind. Alertness is actually watching what you're doing. Ardency is the same as right effort. Remember, right effort also contains right view. It's there in the ardency that the previous factors of the path are contained in right mindfulness.

It's as if right effort is the kernel here, and mindfulness is the flesh of the fruit surrounding it. Or we can say that right mindfulness takes the factors of right view through right effort and gives them a place to stand. The alertness watches to make sure that you're actually doing this right and to gauge the results of your actions. This is where right view comes in. You evaluate things as to whether they're helping or not.

This is the skillful use of judgment. The term "judging mind" has so much bad press here in America, especially in Dhamma circles, when it really shouldn't. There's skillful judging and unskillful judging. We're trying to engage in skillful

judging, which is focusing on actions and their results, rather than focusing on what kind of person you are. We're focusing on what the action is and whether it's getting the results you want. If it's not getting the results you want, you go back and you try to figure something else out: What would be a better approach? This is not the final judgment of a judge in a court, trying to assign guilt or innocence. It's more the judgment of a craftsperson working on a project and realizing, "Hey, something's not going quite right here. We've got to go back and change what we were doing."

That type of judgment develops into evaluation. The mindfulness develops into directed thought. This is how right mindfulness flows smoothly into concentration. As the Buddha said, the four establishings of mindfulness are the themes of right concentration. Here we have another kernel within a kernel. Right effort is the kernel within right mindfulness, and right mindfulness is the kernel within right concentration. You might think of it as a pearl. You've got right view there as a little grain of sand, while all these other layers are the mother of pearl that gathers around it.

So your right concentration is directed by right view.

There's also a connection between concentration and right resolve, because remember: Part of right resolve is to abandon sensuality. It's only when you get the mind in a good solid state of concentration that it really is above its sensual concerns. The happiness of concentration is said to be a happiness of form or pleasure of form, i.e., the body as you sense it from within. It's only when you have this kind of pleasure, this kind of refreshment, that you really can learn how to go beyond your sensual concerns. As the Buddha said, if you don't have this higher form of pleasure that's more refined and deeper, then no matter how much you understand that the types of thinking that go into sensuality are unskillful, you're still going to go back to them because the mind is always looking for pleasure. You can't wait until you finish the path to finally say, "Okay, now I've got my reward." Right concentration is what gives you the refreshment and energy you need in order to carry through with the work of right view and right resolve all along the way.

As the Buddha shows, as you get the mind settled in concentration and you start looking for even a deeper sense of peace, a deeper sense of solidity, you start noticing that even the factors of right concentration are fabricated. They come and they go. They contain a level of stress that rises and falls. You can notice this either as you're in a particular state of concentration or as you move from one to another and you begin to notice that in moving, say, from one level of jhana to another, the sense of the breath changes. The activity or the level of activity in the

mind changes. You notice that the deeper level has less stress, less disturbance. This is the application of right view in the practice of right concentration.

It's not the case that the eight factors of the path are like eight different courses of study, as when you study biology and then you go study English then the social sciences, and what you learn in biology doesn't really apply to English, and what you learn in English doesn't apply to what you learn in the social sciences. That's not the way the path goes. Each of the factors is intimately connected with all the others. There's a natural progression. It's not by accident that the Buddha always says that everything starts with right view, because right view is what directs all the other activities.

So learn to see them as all containing one another. Right concentration, when it's really right, contains all the other factors: right view all the way through right mindfulness. The path really can come to oneness. It's when all the factors are coming together that they have the strength to break through to something that's not fabricated.

In fact, the elements of the path, starting with generosity all the way on up, are all expressions of the same thing. As Luang Pu Dune once said, it's a single path from the very beginning all the way up to the top. Ajaan Maha Boowa said something in a similar vein. When you gain awakening, you realize that this is connected back to generosity. There's a clear line of connection all the way through all the factors of the path, all the qualities that surround and underlie the path. It's all one thing clear through.

Keeping this in mind helps you stay focused so that you're not a mother chicken running after the baby chicks. It's not like putting crabs in a basket, where you throw a couple of crabs in and by the time you get the next crab, the first two crabs have already crawled out. That's not the way the path is. Or that's not the way it should be.

When you're really on the path, everything is gathered together right here into one. And it's when it's one that it has strength.