

The Gradual Path of Skill

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The Buddha never said that we're innately good. He never said we were innately bad. The mind, when you look at it, has all kinds of ideas, all kinds of potentials, good and bad. The mind itself is neither.

Ajaan Chah has a nice statement where he says, "The mind isn't 'is' anything." You can't really define the mind as this, that, or the other thing. It's just the quality of knowing.

Ajaan Lee makes the comment that the mind is neither good nor bad but it knows good and bad, it develops good and bad habits, but eventually it learns how to let go of good and bad.

Pointing out that the mind is not innately bad means that we really can help ourselves. If the mind were innately bad, everything that came out of the mind would be tainted, unreliable. You'd have to depend on some outside force or outside power to save you from yourself.

But when the Buddha says we're not innately good, that means there's no spot in the mind that you can tap into where you know that everything that comes from this spot is wise, pure, and reliable.

So what do you do? You try to develop skillful qualities as best you can.

In fact, the process of developing skillful qualities is in and of itself a skill. And as with any skill, there are gradations.

Given the amount of virtue you can develop, and the amount of concentration, your discernment will get more and more subtle, more and more precise as you develop this skill. This is why the path is said to be gradual.

The Buddha's image is of the continental shelf off of India. There's a gradual slope and then a sudden drop-off. We all like the idea of the sudden drop-off. We'd like to go right there right away. But you can't get there without the gradual slope.

In other words, the potential for awakening is, in principle, always present. But it requires really subtle discernment to see it, and discernment is something that has to be gradually developed.

It plays a role in the entire path. It's not the case that you develop virtue and then move on to concentration and then finally get the chance to develop discernment. You need discernment as you're developing your virtue and you need to develop discernment in order to get into concentration.

If you don't understand what's going on in the mind, if you don't have

strategies for detecting the hindrances and dealing with them, then the mind's never going to settle down. Which means that you have to apply discernment all the way along, simply that it gets more precise, clearer, sharper, more all-around as the path develops.

How do you develop it? You develop by testing things, and you focus on your actions. You learn from your actions.

Ajaan Lee's example is of learning how to sew a pair of pants. The teacher will teach you, "Okay, this is how you cut the cloth and this is how you push the needle through the cloth. This is how you thread the needle."

But how the pants are going to look when you're done: That depends on your own ability to observe what you're doing. If you look at them and see that the stitches are uneven and the cloth was poorly cut, doesn't fit, what do you do? Do you give up? No, you just go back and you try it again. And you try to observe each time: What went wrong the last time around? That way, you can correct for it the next time.

Don't expect that your second pair will be perfect. It takes a while to figure out what to look for and how to judge what works and what doesn't work. And you'll find that as you get better and better at being a tailor, your standards of what qualifies as acceptable workmanship are going to rise.

Skill comes from being willing to make a few mistakes and then learn from the mistakes. The kind of person who never wants to admit a mistake is never going to make any progress in this path.

And the person who wants to have absolute guaranteed skill right from the very beginning is never going to make progress in the path, either. You have to be willing to make a mistake and then learn from it. That attitude is probably the most important part of the practice.

When the Buddha set out his teaching, he didn't make it depend on our innate goodness or whatever. It depended on our desire for true happiness. And the interesting thing is that he never defines what true happiness is. Why is that? One reason might be that as you practice, your idea of what qualifies as happiness and well-being is going to develop as well. You simply want to maintain that desire for a happiness that's not going to let you down.

Ajaan Mun's final sermon focused in on this. He talks about the different aspects of the practice as being different parts of an army. And as for the warrior and his weapon: That's the desire never to come back and have to suffer ever again. The desire not to suffer, which we all have, is what forms the foundation of how we can practice. The Buddha simply takes it to a level of skill, a level of all-around discernment that goes way beyond what the rest of the world would have

accepted. The Buddha had very high standards. And he wants you to have high standards, too, as to what you will accept as satisfactory happiness, what you will accept as satisfactory well-being.

He shows you step by step by step that this is better than where you were, and this is better than that, and this is better than that, step by step. And it's up to you to decide whether you're satisfied with the steps.

He himself said that the secret of his awakening was he never let himself rest content with the level of his skill.

So it's up to you to decide how far you want to go on the path. Nobody's pushing you; nobody's forcing it. The Buddha himself doesn't try to force it. After all, he never said that he was our creator. He can't lay down laws for us.

He speaks with the authority of an expert, someone who's found that there really is an end to suffering. Then, when you end the mind's self-inflicted sufferings, you solve all the mind's other problems as well.

So he points out the way, and it's up to us to ask ourselves, "How seriously do you want to be truly happy?"

That's a question that each of us has to answer for him or herself alone.