

## *A Passion for the Path*

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Sometimes the question comes up that when the Buddha listed the four noble truths why did he list the cessation of suffering before the path to the cessation of suffering? The answer is in the third noble truth. He's not simply stating the fact that there's a cessation. He's also stating a principle. The cessation comes when you develop dispassion for the cause of suffering. In other words, you have to attack suffering at the cause, which is the craving that leads to becoming: craving for sensuality, for becoming, non-becoming. Once the Buddha established that principle, then he taught how to develop that dispassion through the factors of the noble eightfold path: That's the fourth noble truth.

That then, of course, leads to the next question, which is actually more important. How does the fourth noble truth attack the cause of suffering? How does it attack craving? How does it help us develop dispassion for craving? The two most important factors in the path in this regard are right view and right concentration. Right view points out that the objects of the craving that would lead to becoming—the five aggregates: If you cling to them and crave them, they're going to be suffering. Why is that? Because they're fabricated and you're holding on to something fabricated. But there's also suffering in the fact that it's not worth holding on. In fact, if you cling to anything, the clinging is, in and of itself, suffering. That's what you have to see. It's a value judgment that you're going to have to make. And you're going to have to convince yourself that it's true by testing it. You can hear about right view again and again and again but if you haven't tested it, it's not going to have the effect that the Buddha wanted—or the effect that you want if you're really intent on putting an end to suffering.

That's why we have to develop right concentration. When you do, you see that this is the best state of becoming you can create out of those five aggregates. And yet it's not good enough. Ultimately, the effort is not worth it. In the meantime, it's very much worth it, but there will come a point where it's not worth it anymore. That's the point we have to bring the mind to. After all, the path as a whole is created out of aggregates. There has to come a point in the practice where you've developed the path and then you have to let it go. Otherwise, you're still holding on, you're still clinging to aggregates, and there's still going to be suffering.

So you work on developing concentration, getting it as good as possible. This is why we develop a passion for the path even though we're trying to develop dispassion for the aggregates. We have to substitute our passions for other things with a passion for the path: a passion for the practice, a passion for concentration. You want to do this really well, as well as you can.

Ajaan Suwat would repeat this instruction again and again: Don't just go through the motions. Don't play around with this. Try to do this as well as you can. That's the quality of ardency that leads from mindfulness into concentration. You really want to put your whole heart into it. Then you want to develop the right resolve that goes along with it, the resolve that makes up the mind to focus on a happiness that doesn't involve sensuality, doesn't involve harm to anybody. Where are you going to find that? Well, in concentration. And all the other factors of the path contribute to this.

Right effort tries to generate the desire to do this well. So if you're sitting here dallying around with the breath a little bit, then wandering off to entertain yourself with something else and then coming back, the path isn't going to have its effect. You have to prove to yourself, on the one hand, that this is the best thing the mind can create. It's the best state of becoming you can experience: the mind in concentration. And you have to see at the same time the extent to which you've fabricated it.

That's where right view comes in to keep reminding you: When the mind settles down in a nice state of concentration, it's not there for free. In other words, it's not there without effort. When you get really good at it, it begins to seem more and more effortless, but there still is the effort that goes into maintaining it. And for a long time you can say, well, it's just a minor effort. It doesn't require that much and the rewards are great. But you have to keep asking yourself, "Could there be something better? Where's the stress here? Where's the effort that goes into maintaining this? Is there something that doesn't require that effort?" That's the question that right view keeps asking as you maintain the mind in concentration.

So do your best because that's what makes the path work: by having a passion for doing it. What the Buddha is doing is that he's trying to wean you off all your other types of passion by substituting this object of passion for the time being, along with all the elements that can go into motivating you: a sense of heedfulness, that you really need to do this well; a sense of compassion for yourself; a sense of pride in your craftsmanship.

Ajaan Lee has a nice comment on this. He says, “There are only four jhanas, yet we still can’t catch them by the head or the tail. There are people who can run corporations with thousands of workers or run farms with thousands of acres, yet here we have only four jhanas. Doesn’t that make you embarrassed if you can’t get them down?”

So have some pride in what you’re doing and try to really do it well. Because it’s in the element of putting your whole heart into it that you’ll be able to prove to yourself that, yes, this is as good as it gets. Fabrication can take you only so far. That’s when the mind will begin to incline to something unfabricated. Up to that point, it’s happy to content itself with fixing its concentration meal for the evening and saying, well, that’s good enough.

As the Buddha once said, the secret to his awakening was, one, that he would not let up on his effort and, two, that he would never let himself rest content with skillful qualities. In other words, no matter how good his skills got, if they could be better, he was going to try to develop that higher level of skill. So set high standards for yourself. You never hit higher than you aim. So aim as high as possible.

And think of the Buddha’s words about how, if you really love yourself, this is what you do. You follow the path. You stick with it, regardless. But it requires doing your best. That’s what makes the path work. That’s how it attacks the cause of suffering. Otherwise, the mind keeps thinking, “This is good enough.” Or, “It doesn’t get any better than this, so I might as well not try.” With that attitude, it’s never going to make the leap. Because we’re so used to the things that the mind puts together that the idea of finding happiness in something that’s not put together is a little scary. But when you push put-together things to their limit and see that it’s still not good enough, that’s when the mind is willing to open up to something better.