

## *Consistently on the Path*

*October 29, 2019*

In the Buddha's analysis of the causes leading to suffering, there are three things that follow immediately on ignorance: bodily fabrication, the way you breathe; verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself; and mental fabrication, the feelings you focus on and the perceptions you hold in mind, the images you give to yourself of the world and of yourself. As long as we do these things in ignorance, they're going to cause suffering. If we bring some knowledge to them, they can form the path. But we have to do it consistently. Otherwise the path begins to develop but then we cut it off.

It's like planting a seed. Say you plant a seed for a large tree, and when a tiny shoot comes out, you say, "This is not the tree I want," and so you cut it back. If it's a strong seed, it may send up another shoot. But you cut it again. After a while, it'll begin to run out of strength.

So you have to learn how to protect the path that is formed when you do these things in knowledge and awareness, because especially those two latter fabrications—the way you talk to yourself and the way you picture things to yourself—are going to determine your actions. And for you to learn how to have a consistently right view, which is what verbal fabrication and perceptions can create with knowledge, then your actions will all be consistent with the path, and the path will have a chance to grow.

So look into the way you talk to yourself. When a conversation in your mind begins to veer off in the wrong direction, can you bring it back to the right direction? You've got to learn how to internalize the teacher, and learn how to side with that inner teacher rather than rebelling against it. The teacher will talk to you in a certain way and will recommend certain perceptions, and you've got to find where in your mind are the other voices that want to hold onto other perceptions that will pull you away, saying that the path is too difficult, that taking the precepts demands too much, or that concentration demands too much. You've got to learn how to change those voices, change those perceptions, and do it willingly.

This is why, when the Buddha analyses the way the path develops, there's one analysis where he says that there are three factors that circle around all the other factors: right view, right mindfulness, and right effort. Right view is basically a series of perceptions that let you see the path as the best path there is. The question of how to put an end to suffering is the big question in life, and the path is the answer—along with all the details that follow from that. That's right view. Right mindfulness is what keeps that view in mind.

This can be the governor of your practice, in the same way that a machine has a governor: the part of the machine that makes sure it doesn't run too slow, it doesn't run too fast, that it runs consistently just right. The Buddha defines this as the duty of mindfulness, that when you see that there's a skillful quality in the mind that could be developed and it's not there, you remember that it should be developed. If it's there, you remember that it should be protected.

You've got to keep this in mind, and keep reminding yourself, again and again, so that you don't go slipping off and siding with the side of ignorance. You want to keep pulling yourself back to the side of knowledge, and this is why you need right effort. If you have just the views and just the mindfulness, they don't go anywhere without the effort. And the effort is not just brute force. An important part of the effort is generating desire, talking to yourself in a way in which you want to stick with the practice, to develop skillful qualities, and to protect what you've got. Because, as the Buddha said, all things are rooted in desire, and this applies very much to the path. It's not going to happen unless you generate the desire for it and you desire it consistently.

Otherwise, the little shoot comes out and you just cut it off. You say, "This isn't the big tree I want, I want a big tree right away." That's not going to happen. You'll have to learn to remind yourself: Where do big trees come from? They come from little shoots, little shoots that are protected, especially when they're weak. They need water, they need sun, they need shelter from extremes. In other words, you've got to use some restraint. Certain ideas come into the mind or you hear other people's ideas, and you have to figure out which ones you have to filter out.

There's a teaching from psychologists that you have to be open to all things, but that's really not very wise. There are a lot of wrong views out there. There are certain issues with regard to which, obviously, you can't say for sure that you know. You can't know for sure that the path is true until you follow it. You can't know for sure that you really do have choices in your actions. After all, everything could be just a huge illusion. But you also know that as you allow for those views to sneak in, they destroy any desire to follow the path. As the Buddha points out, it's wisest to take a bet on the views that would give power to your actions and expand the range of what you think can be done by action.

Of course, that's going to require more of you, because the actions that lead to the end of suffering are more than just ordinary, everyday punching in the clock, putting in time, going home. They require a constant effort. Constant mindfulness. But you learn how to motivate yourself. You could just punch in the clock and do what society tells you to do, but what can they promise to you? Not much. They don't expect much out of you, so do you want to limit your expectations for yourself to what the society outside expects out of you?

They just see you as a potential consumer, maybe a worker, although nowadays it's getting strange. They don't want workers but they want consumers, and when you can no longer consume and no longer work they're done with you. They throw you away.

Whereas right view doesn't throw you away, unless you throw it away. You've got to hold to it consistently. That means that, as it runs up against contrary perceptions you've picked up from who knows where, you've got to generate the desire to side with right view against those old perceptions. It's only then that the path can pick up momentum.

In other words, you've got to stick with these things. Ajaan Lee has an analysis of the path in which he says that there's the right path and the wrong path. The worldly path, he says, tries to straddle both. And of course, it goes nowhere. Because one path leads in one direction, and the other path leads in the opposite direction. When you straddle these things, you just get caught in the back and forth. You can't move in any real direction.

So when you make up your mind that you've got to stick with the path and see it through, only then can it show its results. Only then can the little seed turn into a tree. You've got to remind yourself of how much you want that tree. And learn not to scoff at little sprouts as they come up. See them as potentials. Learn to perceive the path as something you enjoy doing and not as an onerous task.

Because what is the Buddha asking you to do? He's asking you to be virtuous. You can have the pride and self-esteem that can come with virtue. When people try to tempt you—with their money or their rewards, their recognition, or their whatever—to do something against the precepts, and you can say no, that means you've got a precept that's worth more than whatever amount of money they were offering, more than any amount of recognition.

There may be people who say we can't eat self-esteem, but even though it's not sustenance for the body, it *is* sustenance for the mind. You've got to learn how to appreciate that sustenance. Otherwise, the mind is left hungry as the body gets to feed. You keep feeding the body, and feeding it, and feeding it, and finally it dies on you anyhow. Whereas the mind doesn't die. But without virtue, it's going to survive thin and weak. That's not a good kind of survival. The wise investor always invests in the things that are going to last for a long time. And the investment here has to be continual. Stick with it, stick with it. Practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma and not in accordance with your mood—or in accordance with convenience.

There are times when it's going to require some sacrifices. So learn to see the sacrifices as noble and as something you enjoy doing—that you enjoy gaining in nobility. Because when the Buddha talks about generating desire, it's not grudgingly. You want to learn how to talk to yourself in such a way that

you really enjoy sitting and meditating, you enjoy holding to the precepts, you enjoy trying to figure things out. Develop your ingenuity so that you can gain the rewards of discernment. When you can perceive the path as something enjoyable, that makes it a lot easier for you and for the people around you.

So remember these three things that have to circle around the path to keep it going: right view, right mindfulness—mindfulness as a governing principle—and right effort in generating desire to follow through with your right views. That way, you can continually bring knowledge and skill to the way you talk to yourself, to the way you picture things to yourself. The word *vijja*, in Pali, the opposite of *avijja*, or ignorance, means both knowledge and skill. That is, *avijja*, ignorance, can also mean lack of skill. We're working on a skill here. It's like learning how to play the piano. The first time you touch the keys it may sound kind of awkward. You say, "I don't see anything beautiful coming out of this." But if you put in the time, put in your powers of observation, and learn how to talk to yourself, generate desire to keep at it, keep at it, keep at it, keep at it, the results are sure to come.