

Admirable in the Beginning, Middle, & End

April 23, 2022

The Buddha's basic image for the teaching he taught was a path. It's a path you follow, and it has a goal. It's meant to take you someplace. The teachings are not there simply to entertain you or to impress you; they're to get you to look at the way you're living your life. As the Buddha noticed, everybody's following a path of one kind or another, but for the most part, people don't know where those paths are leading.

There are some paths that seem very nice, he said, but they can lead to burning pits of charcoal, cesspools—places you really wouldn't want to go. Other paths lead to a nice place under the shade of a good tree, or to a protected mansion.

So look at the path you're following, and then compare it with the path the Buddha recommends. As we chant every day, every day: This path is admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end.

In other words, you look at the theory, the way he describes it in the very beginning, and you see that it starts with a problem that really is worth solving: the problem of suffering. There are so many other philosophies, so many other religions that start with stranger problems, but this one starts with a problem that everyone can see is immediate: People suffer. The Buddha gives an analysis to show that the suffering comes from within—which means that you're in a position to change what it is that's causing the suffering.

There are so many people who say that the Dhamma is pessimistic because it focuses on suffering, but that's not the case at all. The whole point is that you can put an end to suffering, which is very optimistic. It gives you hope: There's a way out, and it's within your power to get there.

If somebody else were making you suffer and they were beyond your power, that would be very pessimistic. Or if it was simply built into the way things are that everybody has to suffer—a teaching that was actually taught at the time of the Buddha and is used sometimes today, saying that we live in this world of suffering, and we just have to learn how to put up with it, learn how to accept it, make your mind at peace, and it'll be okay: Well, it's not okay. Suffering is still suffering. To say that we're in that position is very pessimistic.

But the Buddha's saying that the suffering comes from a cause—something you're doing,

but you can change what you're doing. Now, changing in the way he recommended is going to go against the grain because, as he said, it's from our craving that we suffer, and we like our cravings. But he's asking you to step back and look at those cravings and see what they really do. If you can develop some dispassion for them, that's how you can put an end to them.

And there's a path of practice that he explains. He sets it out like a doctor's diagnosis of an illness: These are the symptoms. These are the causes. It's possible to put an end to the disease by attacking the causes, and here's how you do it. In this case, the cure is the noble eightfold path, which can be summarized in three sections: There's *virtue*, there's *concentration*, and there's *discernment*, all of which are good things to develop.

That's the beginning, just learning about the theory. Then there's the actual practice, and that's admirable too. As you put these principles into practice, you learn a lot about yourself. You change your environment and you find that you have potentials within yourself that you didn't suspect before.

Here again, it's not just a matter of accepting what's there. You try to figure out: What are the potentials here? What is your potential for mindfulness, say, what is your potential for concentration? How do you go about developing those potentials?

As the Buddha said, you commit yourself to what the practice tells you to do, and then you reflect on the results of what you're doing, because knowledge is not going to come simply from listening to what he had to say or just obeying what he had to say. It comes from putting his instructions into practice and then watching yourself to judge: Is this really working? In other words, what's good about this path is that it develops *your* powers of observation.

The Buddha wanted a student, he said, who was honest and observant to begin with, and he would take those two qualities and develop them in the path. So you're doing this path not simply to please other people or to obey them. You're doing this so that you can learn how to pass judgment on it yourself. And you're going to be trained to be really reliable at passing judgment.

After all, you're asked to develop what qualities? Mindfulness, alertness, ardency, all under right mindfulness. Those are all good qualities to have in your mind. You develop them by staying with the breath, keeping the breath in mind, continually watching the breath coming in and going out, and then trying to do it well.

Doing it well means learning how to breathe with a sense of ease, with a sense of fullness. Learning how to breathe with a sense of being aware of the whole body. Calming the effect

that the breath has on the body. Breathing in a way that allows you to see how your perceptions and your feelings are having an impact on the mind, and learning how to calm that impact. Energizing the mind when it needs to be energized, steadying it when it needs to be steadied, releasing it from its burdens when it needs to be released. You do all this by developing that quality of committing to the practice and then reflecting on what you're doing.

The Buddha's meditation instructions answer a lot of questions, but they also raise a lot of questions. They give you ideas of where you should look, what you should try to do, but you have to see the details for yourself. A lot of what you see is going to depend on you to develop your own powers of observation, and your own honesty about what's working and what's not working. This also includes your powers of ingenuity to figure things out.

So, that's the path in the middle. It's admirable in the middle because it trains you to be an observant, reliable person.

And then it's admirable in the end. As the Buddha promises, it leads to a happiness totally independent of conditions.

Now, you might say, "Well, aren't we doing the path? Isn't the path creating the conditions that give rise to that goal?" The path doesn't give rise to the goal. It's like a road to a mountain. The road doesn't cause the mountain, but you follow the road and you get there.

Or to look at it another way: If you've ever been to the Grand Canyon, you know there are two ways to approach it from the south: straight from the south, and then in from the southeast. Sometimes the path is like the road straight from the south. It goes along a very flat area, and you have no notion that there's any canyon anywhere nearby at all. Then all of a sudden you hit the edge of the canyon and it's huge.

The road from the southeast follows what's called the Little Colorado River, and it does follow a canyon. The canyon is interesting, and you can see that it's getting deeper and deeper. Then finally it, too, reaches the Grand Canyon, which is immensely larger than the Little Colorado River canyon. But at least on that side you're getting a sense of, "Yeah, there is a canyon around here."

In other words, sometimes as you're practicing you don't see anything that would indicate there's anything deathless at the end of this; it's just a lot of work. But you read the guidebooks and they say, "Keep on going north, going north," and so you keep at it.

Other times, you can see that the mind is getting more stable, it's getting more reliable, its sense of well-being gets stronger. Whether you're meditating or not, there's a sense that your

mind has lowered its center of gravity so that it's not pushed over so easily. So there are ways that you can begin to see, yes, this path is going in a good direction, but when you get to the goal it's something totally other. The path is fabricated; the goal is unfabricated. In other words, you didn't put it together. It's there.

Ajaan Lee's analogy is of trying to get fresh water out of salt water. There is water in the salt water, but you have to apply some heat to distill it, and then you've got fresh water. Where was the fresh water to begin with? It was there in the salt water, but you aren't going to get the fresh water simply by taking the salt water and letting it sit, because the salt is not going to separate out on its own.

In the same way, the goal is already there, it's already there, simply that it takes some effort to find it. You work at cleaning away the impurities of the mind, and then you reach something totally other. And everyone who's experienced it says with one voice, "It's the ultimate happiness, the ultimate security."

The Buddha had forty-some names for it that indicate, one: It is a type of consciousness. You're not blanking out. He calls it consciousness without surface. The image is of a sunbeam: If it lands on something, you can see the light. We look out at outer space, and a lot of it looks black. But every spot that looks black to us actually has light going through it. It's simply that the light's not reflecting off of anything, so you don't see it. The same with the consciousness of *nibbāna*: It's not reflected by anything, but it is a kind of consciousness.

Secondly, it's true. In other words, it doesn't change. It's not something fabricated into being that's going to fall apart when the fabrications fall apart.

It's blissful.

And it's free. In fact, the word *nibbāna* comes from an image that they used to describe how fire went out. Their view of fire was that there was a fire element latent in everything, and when you provoked it, fire would appear. As it was burning it was clinging, and it was stuck in its fuel because it was clinging. But when it goes out, it lets go.

The point of the image is that it's free *because* it lets go. It's not the case that the fuel is clinging to the fire. The fire was clinging to the fuel. In the same way, it's not the case that the five aggregates are holding on to us, keeping us down. *We're* the ones clinging to them, and *that's* what's keeping us down. So the freedom's going to come from leaning how to let go.

And then finally, excellence: Nibbāna really is amazing. It really is something totally other and above, beyond anything else you've ever experienced.

That's the admirable goal.

So this is the path that the Buddha offers: admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end—and it's open to everyone. It's not a toll road where you have to pay to get on, but it does require a lot of effort and a lot of dedication. Still, it's effort and dedication more than repaid.

So look at the path that you're following in your own life, and then ask yourself, "Is this the path I want? Is this the best path I can manage? Is there something better?"

The Buddha says, "Here is the better path." So you might want to give it a try.