

A Path Under the Trees

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Think about the life of the Buddha: He was born under a tree, he gained awakening under a tree, and then he passed away under two trees. So here we are, out sitting among the trees. It's good to remember that the Buddha found the Dhamma in the wilderness, but he was able to bring it into civilization.

In other words, he found it in seclusion. Of course, even when you're in the wilderness, you're not totally alone. There are all the other animals out there, the spirits of the trees, spirits of the place, but they generally leave you alone enough so you can look into your mind. When you're with other people, you're getting their thoughts, their ideas, their opinions poured into your mind, and it's hard to sort out what you really believe, and what you simply pick up from others. But when you're out alone, that's when you have time to sort things out.

When the Buddha was alone, he was able to reflect: What was the big problem in his life? The reason he'd gone into the wilderness to begin with was because he was bothered by the problem of aging, illness, and death. He wondered: Is there something that doesn't age, doesn't grow ill, doesn't die? And if there is, how can you find it? He had tried various ways. None of them had worked.

He had tried six years of austerities, with five monks looking after him, and that didn't work. He finally realized that the austerities were not working, so he began eating again. The five monks got disgusted and left. Now he was really alone.

So he looked to see: What angle can you take on that problem of aging, illness, and death that would actually get you to something that doesn't age, doesn't grow ill, doesn't die?

He finally realized that by focusing on the problem of suffering—what is suffering, what causes suffering: That was the way out.

The teachings of other teachers of that time all talk about other topics: Some of them talk about the world. Some of them talk about how there's nothing really good or evil: that good and evil are just social constructs, they're just made-up by people. There were people who taught that after you die that's it, there's nothing left, so you might as well enjoy yourself while you can.

But no one really looked into the problem, "What is this suffering?" That was where the

Buddha began to strike out on his own. And he found that suffering was something you might not have expected. He said that it was the five clinging- aggregates, and the important part was the clinging. If there's no clinging to the aggregates, then there's no suffering. And why do you cling? Because of craving.

So the question is: Can you get rid of that craving: the craving for sensuality, the craving for becoming, the craving for non-becoming?

The first factor of the path that he found was right concentration. There's another way he tells the story in which he actually got started with right resolve, but the two are very closely related.

Right resolve is to resolve not to focus on sensuality, but to resolve on renunciation instead—in other words, ways of finding happiness that have nothing to do with sensory pleasures. It also means to resolve on non-ill-will. In other words, you have goodwill or equanimity for others; you don't wish for anybody to suffer. And then there's resolve on non-harm, that you're not going to harm anybody. The way those resolves get carried out is that the mind turns inward to find a sense of well-being inside. That's what right concentration for.

When the Buddha was able to follow the path of right concentration, he discovered the other path factors as well: everything from right view to right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. He followed that path, developed it, and that was what led to awakening.

In his awakening, he solved two problems at once. One was the problem of suffering in general and the second was the problem of aging, illness, and death in particular, because he actually found something that didn't age, didn't grow ill, didn't die. That deathless experience was what certified the truth of all of his other insights.

So, here we are, out sitting under the trees. Unlike the Buddha, we actually have some guidance. We have the memory of what he taught, and it'll help us get focused a lot faster. The big problem is our craving and our clinging, and the way to solve the problem is to work on the path. As the Buddha pointed out, right concentration is the heart of the path. So let's work on that.

The Buddha's instructions for how you get the mind into concentration are under the factor of right mindfulness. You stay focused on, say, the breath in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That's the formula.

What it means is that you focus on the breath simply as it is, as you experience it right here,

right now. You're not concerned about whose breath it is, or anything else. Just: What is it like to breathe right now? What kind of breathing would be comfortable? The Buddha does encourage you to breathe in ways that feel good.

So you try long breathing, short breathing, faster, slower, heavier, lighter, deeper, more shallow, to see what feels refreshing for the body right now. After all, if you're going to engage in renunciation, you can't just give up on pleasures entirely. The Buddha had discovered that already with his six years of austerities. If you gave up on pleasures of all kinds, you die.

But the pleasure of right concentration, he realized, was a pleasure that's blameless. It doesn't take anything away from anyone else and doesn't encourage the mind to be heedless. And it doesn't obscure things. In fact, the more you can find a sense of well-being by being quiet here in the present moment, the clearer things become in the mind.

So you try to stay established on the breath coming in, going out. Then, as the Buddha says, you're ardent alert, and mindful. Let's take those in backward order. Mindful means you keep in mind the fact that you want to stay here. Sometimes you may want to use a meditation word to help: Think *bud-* with the in-breath, *dho* with the out-. *Buddho* is the title of the Buddha, which means that he's awakened. It's interesting: His title is a past participle in Pali. You use that to help keep the breath in mind.

Then you're alert. In other words, you watch what you're doing. When you're with the breath, you watch the breath. When you're not with the breath, you know that you're not with the breath. Then you bring in ardency: You really want to do this well. So, if you find that you're not with the breath, you bring the mind right back.

It's not as if you have to pull the mind back. All you have to do is let go of whatever disturbance, whatever distraction there was, and your awareness will gravitate naturally back to the breath. While you're with the breath, you try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels. Ask yourself: Where do you feel the breathing in the body right now? As you breathe in, where are the sensations that let you know you're breathing in? They may not be where you expect them to be, so make a survey all around the body.

Watch your hands for a while. When you breathe in, can you tell it in the hands that you're breathing in? When you breathe out, can you tell in your hands that you're breathing out? The same with the feet, the arms, the legs, the torso, the head. Can you sense any distinction between the way the body feels as you breathe in, and the way it feels as you breathe out? Wherever it's clearest, focus your attention there. But try to keep this full body awareness

going at the same time.

So you focus simply on the breath right here, right now. Any thoughts of the world, you just let them go. As your focus gets more solidly established, it turns into right concentration. There'll be a sense of ease, a sense of pleasure. Then there's *pīti*, which we translate either as rapture or refreshment. These sensations come simply from the fact that your mind has withdrawn from unskillful thoughts, and it's happy to be here.

Now, you're still talking to yourself about the breath as you try to adjust things, and try to catch the mind as its old habits begin to show and it starts wandering off again. That talking to yourself is called *directed thought and evaluation*. It's the way you've been talking to yourself all along, just that you didn't realize that there were those terms for it. Like the woman who discovered, after she became an adult, that she had been speaking prose all of her life: She didn't know there was a word for such a thing.

But you talk to yourself about the breath in a way that gets the mind more and more inclined to want to stay here. Then, when it's here, just keep watch over what you've got. If you notice that you're doing anything that's adding unnecessary stress to your concentration, just let it go. Or if you find that if you let certain activities go you lose your concentration, it means that it's not time to let them go yet. But wherever you discover any unnecessary stress, look for what you're doing that's causing that stress and let that go.

When you think in these ways, you bring some discernment to your concentration. It's not the case that you have to wait until your concentration is perfected and then you develop discernment. You develop discernment in the process of getting the mind to settle down, because you come to see the mind a lot more clearly and understand what it's doing.

This is how you put the path together.

You bring right view, right resolve... The factors having to do with the precepts, you don't have to worry about them right now. As you're sitting here, you're not harming anybody. The factors you have to work on are right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. You find that as you get more and more skilled at these things, the activity of the effort gets more and more calm. But you will still want to be alert, because there's still the potential for more craving and more clinging in the mind. It's simply that they're very quiet right now. But when everything is quiet like this, then when these things do begin to show their faces, you can recognize them for what they are. And you see that, yes, the Buddha was right. They really do add more stress onto the mind.

So as you protect your concentration, it becomes a way to develop more and more discernment in line with the four noble truths. In that way, you're getting closer and closer to the state of the mind that the Buddha had on that night of his awakening. You're sitting alone out under the trees, focused on your body as a whole, alert to whatever you're doing that might be causing stress. Just keep on doing that.

Wherever you see any stress coming up, you let it go, let it go. That'll bring the mind to an even greater stillness, and you start seeing even more subtle levels of stress that you didn't see before. That's the path you follow.

It's not as if, when you're following the path, you're going to be here at the beginning of the path and someplace else at the end of the path; you're going to be here all the way. It's just that what you see here as you develop greater and greater sensitivity, greater and greater concentration, gets more and more refined until it reaches a level where something opens up inside.

A question came up earlier: How do you let go of the three fetters so that you can become a stream enterer? The answer is that it's the other way around. It's through the experience of the deathless that comes as you follow the path: That experience is what cuts through the fetters.

When you've seen that this path really does lead to the deathless, that's when your doubts in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha are ended. The Buddha really did know what he was talking about—the path is the path to the deathless. And the deathless really is deathless because it's outside of space and time, so there's no way it can change.

As for your self-identity views—*sakkāya-ditthi*: You have this experience of the deathless, but there's no experience of the aggregates *in* this experience, so there's no reason why you would identify yourself with the aggregates.

And because you realize that it was an act of discernment that allowed this experience to happen, you stop grasping at precepts and practices. In other words, you don't believe that simply by following a certain practice very obediently it's going to take care of the whole path. It's *part* of the path: You follow the precepts, you follow the practice of right concentration, but you realize that they, on their own, can't do the work. The work is done by your act of active discernment. So, as the Buddha said, you are virtuous, but you no longer identify yourself around the virtues.

When the mind is released from these fetters, things are a lot lighter inside. You've gained

an inkling of what the Buddha was talking about. You don't have a full experience of awakening yet, but you know that the deathless is true, and that that's where you're headed.

So what we're doing right here under the trees, trying to get the mind into right concentration, is to follow the Buddha's example. He, of course, didn't have any examples to follow. We're fortunate that we have his story to inspire us and to give us direction. So try to take advantage of that fact while his story is still around.