Reasonable Path, The

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The Buddha often compared himself to a doctor. The Dharma is medicine. And it’s important to think about the implications of that analogy. Think about medical science. What kind of science is it? Some people say that it’s not a science. It’s an art. It’s not the sort of science that’s based on first principles and works deductively from those principles. It’s based on what’s worked in the past. Experiment and see how much of, say, a particular medicine is useful for one kind of disease, and how it can actually be harmful for other kinds of diseases. Give a dosage of medicine. It doesn’t necessarily mean that if a small dose works pretty well, that a bigger dose is going to work even better. Sometimes the bigger dose gets harmful, poisonous, and can actually kill you. So an important principle in medicine is balance. It’s like the difference between logic and reason. Logic argues from first principles. Reason, however, deals with ratios, keeping things in balance. You might say the Buddha’s teaching is reasonable. Not necessarily logical, but it’s reasonable. It works because it finds a balance. If you’re looking for logic, you can look to the way the Buddha practiced for those six years before he found the true path. If our problem is attachment to pleasure, he said, “Let’s just totally avoid all kinds of pleasure.” He tried to deny all the processes of the body. He tried to stop breathing. For a while he was going to stop eating. The devas came and said, “If you stop eating, we’re going to pour divine nutrient into your pores.” He said, “I’ll just live on as little as possible.” And so he carried the logic of self-torture all the way to its extreme and found that it didn’t work. That was when he realized that logic was not the key to the end of suffering. That’s why he ultimately came up with the Middle Way. It’s a balanced path. It’s a reasonable path. It takes virtue, concentration, and discernment and puts them in a reasonable context. Again, the Jains often complained that they were sloppier than the Buddha, that his precepts were sloppier than theirs. But again, they took the idea of harmlessness to totally useless extremes. It was logical, but it was useless. It didn’t work. It’s the same with concentration. You get the mind into a dead concentration where there’s totally no sense of the body at all. We take the mind into a state of what’s called total non-perception. It’s such a wrong state of concentration that the Buddha doesn’t even list it among the stages of right concentration. So when working with a practitioner, we realize that we’re working with a series of principles that have been worked out over time. They’re taught because they work. The Buddha’s proof of this is not so much logical as it is pragmatic. In his teachings to the Galamus, everyone focuses on the fact that he says, “Don’t go by texts, don’t go by reports, don’t go by received tradition,” or simply because your teacher says something is good. We often forget to look at the other side of the equation. He says, “Also, don’t go by things because they’re logical or because they seem reasonable to you.” Or they go in line with your notions, your ideas. You follow the Dhamma that works. If it puts an end to suffering, okay, that’s the Dhamma. In the history of Buddhism, there’s a history of a lot of people who’ve rebelled against that. They try to make the Buddhist system out into a totally logical system, or they like showing that it has its logical flaws. They basically destroy the path by saying, “Well, that’s illogical, this is illogical.” As a result, they put themselves in a position where they can’t put an end to suffering. So our training here is training in what works. It means finding a balance. Right concentration is a matter of balance. A certain amount of holding on and a certain amount of letting go. Letting go of unskillful things, holding on to things that are skillful, things that work. From a logical point of view, it may seem deficient, but it actually works. It gets the mind in a position where it can see what’s actually going on, particularly in terms of its intentions. Right concentration is a very strong example of working on your intention, keeping your intention steady. You’re balanced in a way that you not only can be still, but you can also see things moving. When the Buddha talks about five-factored right concentration, there are the four jhanas, and then there’s this other stage where he talks about the mind having its theme well in hand. The analogy he gives is a person who’s sitting down who’s watching a person who’s lying down, or a person who’s standing who’s watching a person who’s sitting. The mind is slightly stepped back from the action, watching the action. That’s the state in which the mind can really see itself. The whole point of this is seeing how the intentions of the mind shape things. To see precisely where those intentions cause stress and where they’re unnecessary. That requires a great deal of balance, a great deal of skill. It’s an art. The whole path is an art. Like any craft, any art, it has its basic principles, but it’s not something that’s hammered out from first principles to their logical conclusion. It has its consistency. It has its balance. Things are in proportion. That’s a lot more difficult than logic. Logic is something any adolescent can master. It’s that adolescent part of the mind that likes to point out the logical flaws in your parents’ program for making you an adult. What takes maturity is reason. It’s balance. It’s seeing what works and sticking with what works. It’s appreciating the value of what works. After all, the whole point of the Dhamma is not that it’s going to win out in logical debates. The Buddha actually discouraged his students from getting involved in logical debates, because it’s bad for the state of your intention. You might win the debate, but you lose the battle in trying to put an end to suffering. What he did encourage them in was getting a sense of the middle way, the times when you have to put in a great deal of effort and other times when effort gets in the way, when you simply have to watch. In the Sutta where he talks about this, he doesn’t give hard and fast rules about this. You have to watch what’s going on in your mind and the results that are gained. If you find that following your pleasure leads to defilement in the mind, you’ve got to fight your pleasure. You’ve got to deprive yourself of that particular pleasure. If you find that working with pleasure actually helps you see things, that’s a pleasure to be encouraged. Some defilements, he says, respond to strong effort. Other defilements don’t. You simply have to watch them. The way you find out which is which is by observing the results of your actions in your mind. The emphasis always keeps coming back here, back here, back here, to your intentions and their results. Having a logical system can get in the way. Insisting that everything be logical gets in the way. The honest is on you. You have to be observant. You have to be true to yourself. When you do this, what is your intention? This is an area where we tend to hide from ourselves. When you act on an intention, what kind of results do you get? Again, this is an area that we tend to hide from ourselves. This is where most of our psychological dishonesty lies. That’s precisely the ignorance that we’re trying to overcome. It’s the test of the Buddha’s teachings. It’s not so much whether it’s logically consistent as whether it actually gets the results. You follow the precepts, you follow the teachings on concentration, you follow the questioning that leads to discernment. It’s as if the Buddha challenges you. He says, “You follow this line of action, which is something fabricated, but it can take you to something unfabricated.” Logically, it may seem strange that something fabricated can lead to something unfabricated, but the Buddha said causality works that way. In modern studies and complex causality, chaos theory, chemical states that are far from equilibrium work in this way. There are these places called resonance, where the equation that describes the behavior of things in that field hits a spot where something is being divided by zero, and that takes things out of the system. You get to that spot by following the rules of the system, but it leads you out. This is what the Buddha discovered. There are certain modes of action, which he taught as the Middle Way, that would lead you to that spot where suddenly the mind is undefined. Everything gets undefined. It works because that’s the way things are. If you looked at things in logical terms, it might seem arbitrary, but it’s what actually works. It’s not a question of believing or not believing the Buddha. It’s more of a question of taking his teachings and putting them to the test, putting yourself to the test at the same time. Why? Because he says this is the end of suffering, the end of the biggest problem in our lives. We have to decide for ourselves whether we’re intrigued by that possibility, whether we’re interested in that possibility, or whether we’d rather hold to our old opinions. That’s the choice that each of us has to make.

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