The Path of Adventure

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The Buddha’s name for the practice he taught, or the image for the practice he taught, is a path, something you follow. You start at one end and you go to the other end. Although none of us really start at a far end, we start someplace in the middle. We come to the practice with some virtue, with some concentration, with some insight already. But we also come with a lot of other things that are not part of the path, obstacles. Our virtue is not all around. Our concentration, our insight, are not all around. Sometimes there are little gaps, sometimes there are huge gaps. So we come to the practice, we find ourselves someplace along the path, but there’s someplace else we have to go. It’s not like we’re going to leave our mind and go someplace else. We stay right here. But the image of the path means that there are things that have to be done. There’s a goal at the end of the path. We have to keep on following the path until we reach that goal. This is why the path is called a practice. You keep practicing. Again and again and again, until you finally get it right. In our culture, our culture is one that doesn’t really help with the practice, because it’s an instant culture. People feel entitled to be at the goal already. They want really quick happiness. There are so many ways of gaining quick happiness nowadays that we feel that it’s not worth it. Anything that doesn’t promise anything immediate is really lacking, is inferior. But look what happens to mice when they’re offered instant happiness. They’ve found that there’s a little pleasure center buried in the brain, and they’ve connected electrodes to that pleasure center, the little metal bars on the heads of the mice. They compress that little bar against another little bar that gives them a little electric shock that stimulates the pleasure center directly. They don’t have to do anything else. They just get an instant zap, instant pleasure. What happens? They just keep zapping themselves again and again and again. They don’t even eat, they don’t drink, they die. So instant pleasure is deadly. It causes all your other common sense, everything else, to atrophy. So when we come to this path, we have to be aware of that desire for instant gratification. We have to develop all the skills needed in order to defer gratification. In other words, be willing to put up with some effort right now, put up with some difficulty right now, for the sake of a pleasure or happiness that really is true, really is lasting and doesn’t kill you, something that is actually good for you. So if you haven’t already developed these skills, that’s one of the important parts of the path, is to learn how to encourage yourself to keep with the path, to keep on practicing. Fortunately, this is not a path that saves all of its good things to the end. There are forms of pleasure along the way. The sense of well-being that comes from being generous, the sense of well-being that comes from doing the right thing, knowing that your actions don’t harm anybody, there’s a pleasure there that you have to learn how to appreciate. And with the meditation, the Buddha encourages you to develop states of concentration that have a sense of ease, a sense of rapture. So you can tap into those forms of pleasure, those forms of rapture, when you need them. You don’t have to feel tempted to go off the path. This is why we have to practice the meditation again and again, so we get really skillful at tapping into the pleasure, tapping into the ease when we need it. One very simple way is just to create a little space in the body where you stay focused on keeping that space in the body relaxed at all times, no matter what happens. It might be in the hands, it might be in the feet, or in the area around the heart. Focus your awareness there and then just think, “Relax, relax, relax.” So that when the breath comes in, that part of the body doesn’t get pushed around. When the breath goes out, that part of the body doesn’t get squeezed. After a while, it’ll begin to develop a sense of fullness. That fullness, if you allow it to grow, turns into rapture. This takes skill, it takes time to develop the ability to do this, but once you’ve got it, then you’ve got a really important source of strength so that when other desires come along, you don’t feel the need to give in to them. You’ve got a better form of pleasure from which you can look at the drawbacks of those other desires. You give in to the impulse to break a precept, kill, steal, engage in illicit sex. You give in to the impulse to lie or take intoxicants. A person with any common sense would see that this kind of behavior is really destructive. The reason we give in to it is because we’re hungry. We want our quick fix. We’re impatient. That comes from a sense of lack in the present moment. So if you give yourself a sense of fullness, then you’re coming from a position of strength. You can look at the drawbacks of unskillful behavior and really, honestly, not want to follow through with them. But it’s not the case that by saying no to them once means you’ve said no to them forever. They’ll keep coming back in different guises. But if you develop the skill and have confidence in it, you can just keep at the practice, keep at the issues, whatever comes up to you. You can keep following along with the path. The important thing is you don’t worry about how long the path is going to be. It’s a good path to be on. Don’t go counting the steps, because that can get you discouraged. If there’s a place you really want to go, suppose you were out hiking and you knew it was going to be an hour there and an hour back. An hour is something that’s easy to comprehend. It’s easy to get your mind around it. It’s not too long either way. If you were to think about how many steps you had to take on the hike, that might get you discouraged. You know, thousands and thousands. Just the thought of thousands of steps can get discouraging. But what you do is you don’t focus on the thousands of steps. You focus on the one step you’re doing right now. Make sure that when you place one foot in front of the other, you’re going in the right direction. That’s all you have to do. It’s not hard. And remember, it’s a lot better to be on the path than to just wander around aimlessly and not get anywhere at all. Think of how many times you’ve walked around in circles, how many steps were involved in walking around in circles, and you gain nothing at all. Here, at least, you’re on a path that has a direction. It’s going to take you someplace. You’re going to have to realize that you’ve never seen or realized before. In other words, the effort you put into it really does make a difference. It really does pay off. But you’ve got to learn the skills to keep yourself encouraged, to keep yourself on target, to make sure that you’re always on target. You’ve got to make sure that you’re willing to make that next step and the next step and the next step and not get discouraged, not get overwhelmed with the idea that you’ve got thousands of steps left to make. You don’t have to make thousands all at once. You just take one step at a time. That gets you where you want to go. It’s not like we’re choosing between going someplace and not going someplace. We’re always going someplace. This is what the word samsara means. It’s a wandering. The problem is our wandering doesn’t really accomplish anything. It’s just suffering. It’s aimless. Sometimes you go here, sometimes you go back, sometimes you go around and around, and then you go off someplace else. But nothing really gets accomplished. There are thousands, millions of steps in samsara, so just the fact that we’re on a path that takes thousands of steps shouldn’t be any cause for discouragement. It’s a path that goes someplace. It has a goal. Once you’ve reached the goal, you don’t have to keep walking anymore. So learn to make yourself comfortable with this image of a path. You’re going someplace. It’s going to take time. It’s going to take energy. But there’s not one step along the path that’s going to be more than you can handle. After all, the path was something that was found by a human being, and it’s for human beings. As the Buddha said, one of the proper attitudes to take towards this is that other people can do this, why can’t I? The only thing that really prevents you from following the path is your own attitude. So make sure your attitude is mature. Have a mature attitude towards goals. There is a sense of discomfort, a sense of dis-ease that comes from having a goal that you want to accomplish, but you’re not there yet. But still, that’s a lot healthier than the sense of discomfort and dis-ease that comes from having no goals at all. It’s better than this false sense of security that comes from saying, “Well, I don’t need any goals. I’m perfectly okay where I am.” Or you’re not okay. You’re in the midst of aging, illness, and death. Little things still set you off, and you’ve got big things facing you. So the sense of dis-ease and discomfort that comes from being on a good path is much better than the sense of satisfaction that comes from saying you don’t want to follow any path at all, because what you end up doing is just wandering around in circles and going nowhere. In a lot of cases, you make yourself worse. So if you develop a mature attitude towards being on a path, everything else follows. Everything else becomes a lot easier. Because you’re not measuring things against your own impatient standards. You’re not wanting to do all 10,000 steps at once so you can have it done with. As I said, the path is a good one to be on. Learn how to enjoy it. That right there is a lot of the trick in learning endurance. It’s not the case that you just put up with hardship, hardship, hardship all the time. That’s not how endurance is developed at all. You learn how to find pleasure in things that are difficult. Look for it. It’s there. If you have the right attitude, if you have enough imagination, you can make an adventure out of being on this path. Then it gets fun. The question of endurance is a little bit more complicated. Endurance doesn’t weigh on the mind. Someone once asked me what were the hardest things in my first couple of years as a monk, and I really couldn’t answer. Not because there weren’t any hard things, but I never really focused on any one thing as being the hardest. Looking back on it, that’s probably why I was able to get through the difficulties of those first years. I didn’t obsess about the difficulties. I learned how to take pleasure in the opportunities for pleasure that were there in being on the path. So look for the pleasure that comes from being generous, from being virtuous, from developing concentration, from developing insight and understanding. It’s there. And that pleasure is what gives strength to your practice, helps develop your powers of patience and endurance. So that even though it’s a long path, you’re not worried about the length. You’re just enjoying each step as you go along. Even the difficult steps, learn how to enjoy those. The sense of accomplishment that comes from doing something you weren’t able to do before. That’s your snack food along the path that keeps your energy level going. When you think about the path in this way, then it becomes doable. Even if you don’t get to the end of the path in this lifetime, still you’re happy to be on a good path. This is a path that noble ones have followed in the past, noble ones are going to follow in the future. And in following it, you make yourself noble as well.

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