To Understand the Path

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Sariputta once said that the Four Noble Truths cover all the Dhamma, encompass all the Dhamma, in the same way that the footprint of an elephant can encompass the footprints of all the other animals in the forest, all the other animals on land. So when you’re practicing, it’s good to think in terms of the Four Noble Truths, not only what they are, but the duties appropriate to each. Right now, we’re trying to practice the path, and as the chant just now said, it’s important to understand the path. If you look at the Buddha’s teachings, if you compare the Third Noble Truth with the Fourth, in other words, the cessation of suffering, with the path of that cessation, he doesn’t say much about cessation. He doesn’t describe it in any great detail. In fact, the two passages where he gives the most detail about it in the Canon are very controversial, because they happen, so those descriptions come so rarely. But the descriptions of the path are all over the place. In fact, even when the Buddha is describing the First and Second Noble Truths, that’s part of the path as well. It comes under right view. There’s lots in the path, because the path is something you can do. It’s something you can work on, something you can fashion. You can’t fashion the cessation of suffering. You can work on the causes that bring it about. This is maybe one of the reasons why the Buddha didn’t talk about it too much, because if you hear descriptions about it, what you try to do is you try to clone it. Remember, we’re not here to clone awakening. We’re here to fashion the path, which is a different kind of thing. It’s like the road to Yosemite and Yosemite itself. If you try to make the road to Yosemite look like what you’ve heard about Yosemite, you’ve got mountains in the way. You’re going all the time. So be very clear about the fact that we’re on the path. And what do you do with the path? You try to develop it. The path involves both developing and abandoning. This is important to remember, because sometimes we think that all we have to do is just let go of whatever comes up. That’s going to be the path. But some things that come up in your experience are actually part of the path that has to be developed. For instance, right concentration. That’s something you have to put together. You choose a topic to focus on, any of the four establishings of mindfulness. You think about it and then you evaluate it, like the breath. Think about the breath and then notice how the breath is going in, how it’s going out, where it’s comfortable, where it’s not. Think about what you can do to make it more comfortable, so that there’s a sense of ease, well-being, and a sense of fullness or refreshment. That’s something you work on. When these states come, you want to notice why they come. And when they go, you want to notice why they go, so that the next time they come you can deal with them with more skill. You don’t try to clone the awakened attitude that says, “Well, whatever comes is going to go, so I’m just going to let it pass, let it pass, let it pass.” You’re not there yet. You need to develop the path. And particularly with right concentration, try to give the mind a state of well-being. The work of insight, if not coming from a state of well-being, can be very disorienting, very alienating, disidentifying with all kinds of things. If you’re not coming from a solid place, it leaves you hanging. You don’t know what to do, where to stay. And the mind, as long as it still hasn’t reached the cessation of suffering, still needs something to hang on to. You’re meant to hang on to the path. The work of insight works best when you develop a sense of ease and well-being through the concentration, so you can look at your other attachments and realize that they’re not nearly as nice as this one, so that your letting go is not neurotic and it’s not alienating. It’s simply the letting go of someone who’s found something better. Concentration is something you want to be attached to. As John Ferguson once said, you want to be crazy about the concentration if you want to do it well. If you really like it, you’re really interested in it, keep coming back to it again. Again and again, trying to do it more and more skillfully to make sure that your concentration is right, because that’s the other side of the path. Sometimes you get attached to states of stillness and just wallow in the stillness and wallow in the ease, in which case your concentration has left all the other factors of the path, which means that it’s not right anymore. One of the definitions of noble right concentration is any singleness of mind that’s endowed with all the seven other factors of the path, everything from right view through right effort, right mindfulness. If you were to compare concentration with a seat, it’s like one of those ergonomic seats that they sell that makes it really easy to work from. It’s the one that supports your back so you can do work for long hours and still remain healthy. It’s not one of those big beanbag seats that you just wallow in. So when you’re focused on the breath, try to do it in such a way that you stay alert, stay mindful, and that your attitude is not that you’re going to wallow in the stillness and wallow in the comfort, but you’re going to use the comfort as a foundation. John Fong once said that there are basically two types of people who come to meditation, those who think too much and those who don’t think enough. The ones who think too much are the ones who try to analyze everything beforehand, before they have a good foundation in their concentration. So their task is to focus on getting the mind as still as possible. That’s the work they have to do. The ones who don’t think enough usually tend to find it easy to get into concentration, but then once they’re there, it’s hard for them to use that sense of well-being, that sense of stillness as a foundation for analyzing what’s going on in the mind. Those are the ones who have to be pushed into insight work. That’s their work. So focus on the work that’s appropriate for your particular imbalance. Notice where you are. Once you know where you are on this, then turn left or turn right as appropriate. There’s that famous story about Ajahn Chah where he was accused of being inconsistent in his teachings, sometimes telling people not to focus on stillness but to work totally on just watching things arising and passing away and developing equanimity and dispassion towards them. In other cases, telling people to work really hard in concentration. And Ajahn Fuen could be that way as well. I remember very early when I was first staying with him, there was another young monk who was there just for a temporary ordination. He was going to get married, and his fiancée insisted that he be ordained as a monk for a while first, before she’d be willing to marry him. So his last day at the monastery before he was going to head back and disrobe and get married, he was really regretting the fact that he was going to have to leave. He had come to enjoy his time as a monk. I remember that night Ajahn Fuen gave a Dharma talk saying, “We’re not born alone. We’re born with our responsibilities to our parents, responsibilities to those we care for.” In particular, he was talking about carrying on the family line. It was a long talk on responsibilities towards his parents. So the next morning, he left and disrobed and got married. A few days later, he was talking to me. I forgot exactly what the issue was that came up, but he reminded me, “Remember, you’re born alone. Nobody asked you to come. You came of your own free will. So you’re beholden to no one. You’re a part of no one.” When Ajahn Chah was accused of being inconsistent, he said, “Well, it’s like I see someone walking down a road. Some people are drifting off to the left side of the road, so I tell them, ‘Go right. Go right.’ Other people are drifting off to the right side. I tell them to go left. We are, after all, on a middle path. For most of us, it’s hard to stay on the middle. We tend to drift off to either side, either just wallowing in ease or working ourselves too hard.” We’re pushing the insight before we’re really ready for it. Our paths turn either into paths of self-indulgence or into paths of self-torment. So try to notice where you are on that particular spectrum. Then do the work that’s appropriate to bring yourself back into balance. Insight, when it comes, is very orienting. Someone once asked me, “When people gain awakening in this particular tradition, what do you do when they find it disorienting?” My response was, “It’s not disorienting at all. It’s very orienting. It’s very grounding. So if you find that the insights are getting you disoriented, it’s a sign that your foundation and concentration is not strong enough. You’ve got to work on that. On the other hand, if your concentration is so comfortable that you’re just kind of wallowing in it, that’s a different kind of disorientation. You lose your bearings. That means you’ve got work to do. You’re directing the thought here, directing your thoughts there, working with the breath, trying to develop an ability to evaluate the breath, using the breath to create a sense of balanced concentration that’s alert and mindful. As I say, I’m probably malleable or workable. You can actually do something with it. Once the mind is still, you give it work to do in that stillness, work to do in that sense of well-being. This way, all the factors of the path come together. It’s not a lopsided path. It’s not a path straying off to the left or straying off to the right. It’s a middle path. It’s balanced, appropriate for whatever is the situation. I’m talking about right effort. It’s not so much a middling effort. It’s the effort that’s appropriate for what your particular problem is. Whether you need to put more effort or less strain into the path, the rightness of the effort basically comes down to the type of effort that gives the right results. So this is a path we develop, that we work on. It may not look like awakening, but after all, awakening isn’t something you work on. It’s something that comes when the path has been brought to fruition. This is one of those cases where you work on the causes, focus your efforts on the causes, and the results will take care of themselves.

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