Success

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One of the strangest things we notice in some Western Buddhist circles is that people are ashamed to talk about wanting to succeed in a meditation. Somehow it sullies the purity of their practice or takes them out of the present moment, as if the present moment were not totally sufficient in and of itself. But look at your present moment. Is it sufficient? Is there anything wrong with it? If there is, there’s work to be done, i.e., if there’s suffering, if there’s stress, if there’s any burden on the mind. The Buddha offers practices, he offers a path, and the path has a goal. That’s what the whole purpose of using the word “path” is. These are practices that you follow. They take you to a place where there are no problems, where there is no suffering. Well, that’s not really a place, but it still takes you to a dimension where suffering has been totally transcended. So the path is not the goal, it’s the way to the goal. This is a lesson that the Buddha learned very clearly in his own lifetime. Different teachers taught him very advanced stages of concentration, as if they were the goal. He stayed with them, and he realized that there was still unfinished business in the mind. So he went off and tried to find other possible ways to put an end to suffering. He ultimately came back to concentration, but this time, instead of using concentration as the goal, he tried it as a path. He used it as a basis for analyzing what’s going on in the mind, particularly in terms of the intentions that lead to stress, the intentions that lead to pleasure, and what intentions might possibly lead beyond. And so he learned from experience that the path is one thing, but the goal is something else. The path is something to be done. It’s a kind of karma. You have intentions, you fabricate. You have states of mind, like we’re doing right now, focusing on the breath. You’re keeping the breath in mind. You’re being alert to what’s going on with the breath, when it’s coming in, when it’s going out. And then you try to evaluate it to see whether it’s pleasant or not, whether it feels nourishing or not. And if it doesn’t, you can change. When you do find that the breath is comfortable, you can think of those comfortable breath sensations spreading throughout the body. As if it were honey going through the veins of your body, something very nourishing, something very enjoyable. All of this is a fabrication. That doesn’t mean that it’s illusory, but it does mean that it requires effort, it requires intention. It’s something you work at. One of the big problems in Buddhist history was when the question came out, “How can something fabricated take you to the unfabricated?” The question goes back a long ways. There’s one answer in the Malayana Banha, the questions of King Malinda, where Malinda asks the monk, Nagasena, “If Nirvana is unfabricated, how can anything fabricated get you there? How come it doesn’t get in the way?” And Nagasena gave him an image. It’s like going to a mountain. The road to the mountain gets you there. It doesn’t cause the mountain. And your walking on the road doesn’t cause the mountain. But walking on the road does get you to the mountain. And it’s the same with Nirvana. It’s a path. The Buddha doesn’t say the cause of Nirvana. He calls it the path to the end of suffering, something you do that leads you there. It leads you to where you want to go. So we work on fabricating the path. We’re not here to clone Nirvana or to try to create our mental image of Nirvana and impose it on the present moment. We’re working on the path. And in the course of working on the path, developing the factors of the path, Nirvana becomes evident. You witness it. So as you do the duty appropriate to the path, which is to develop it, you’re also doing the duty with regard to the cessation of suffering, which is to realize it. Because the duty there in realizing it is one, actually seeing craving, and two, letting it go. We don’t usually see it. And when it comes, we tend to hold on to it. It’s our friend. As the Buddha said, wherever we go, we tend to go with craving as our companion. It’s as if we’re constantly having a conversation. You want this. You want that. You don’t want this. You don’t want that. How about this? How about that? It’s this constant conversation. It goes on. This is why the mind never finds any peace. It’s got this companion that it’s constantly talking with. So when craving comes, instead of letting it go, we’re constantly getting more and more involved with it. We enjoy it. In fact, we sometimes enjoy the process of craving a lot more than we do the actual things we crave. So you notice the factors of the path are two kinds, ones that foster clear knowing, and the others that tell you to abstain. In other words, you abstain from sensual thinking. You abstain from wishing harm, feeling ill will for others. You abstain from thoughts of cruelty. You abstain from unskillful speech, unskillful action. You try to drop qualities of mind that get in the way of your knowing. And then there are the factors that lead to more knowing. There’s right view, the part of right effort that we try to develop, the desire to give rise to the qualities of mind that make things clear. Mindfulness, alertness, all the factors of right mindfulness and right concentration. So the three noble truths, the cessation of suffering, have a double function. On the one hand, you’re letting go of the craving, and at the same time, you know what’s happening. And the path is a process of getting good at that, learning how to let go and know at the same time. There are times when we do let go of craving, but that’s usually when we let go of one craving because we’re interested in chatting up another one. Sometimes we don’t really notice what it’s like when we drop craving. So the path gets us more and more skilled at this. As we let go of the blatant forms of craving that we can tell for sure are obviously unskillful, then we begin to see others that are not quite so obvious. We have to watch them more carefully. This is why developing mindfulness and concentration in your discernment are important, because you’re going to look into things that, at first glance, seem perfectly okay, perfectly normal, perfectly natural. But as you turn fresh eyes on them, you begin to see that these things really do carry stress with them. So we’re doing both the knowing, developing the knowing, and whenever we find anything unskillful, we let it go. The two go together. And even though we’re looking at something that’s going to be found in the present moment, it’s not apparent in every present moment. Why? Because our powers of discernment are not yet sharp enough. So they get developed gradually. And so, finally, there is a breakthrough. This is why the path is a process of discovery. The path is both gradual and sudden. Buddha’s image is of the continental shelf off the coast of India. It goes out gradually, sloping away, sloping away, and then there’s a sudden drop. It’s like the continental shelf off the east coast of North America, gradually getting deeper, deeper, deeper, and then there’s a sudden drop-off. The path develops gradually. Your powers of concentration get gradually more subtle, more refined. So that you’re more and more able to see what’s already here. And when the seeing comes, the images are usually very sudden. And John Sawat talks about turning on a light switch. Darkness that has been there for aeons. In one instant, you can obliterate it. Darkness can’t come back and say, “Hey, we’ve been around here for aeons. You can’t get rid of us in one instant.” The darkness doesn’t have any power against the light. Once the light is there, it’s sudden, clear, bright. And the same when there’s final awakening. You’re not even just final awakening. It’s the different stages of awakening. Each is sudden. It takes a while to get there. Once the realization comes, the effect is sudden. That’s the third noble truth. Realizing the abandoning of craving, and what comes along with the abandoning of craving. And what lies beyond that is something that’s beyond action, beyond fabrication. In one of the talks attributed to Ajahn Mun, he says the four noble truths are like steps. Each one of them has an activity. Even the cessation of suffering has an activity. You’re associated with it. Realizing, realizing the abandoning of craving. But then what lies beyond that? Nibbana is something that lies beyond the four noble truths, something unconditioned, outside of space and time, where there is no activity. It’s there as a dimension, but there’s no thing there. But to really understand this, you focus on the path. You don’t sit there waiting for Nibbana to come, wondering what it might look like, or trying to conjure it up in your mind, thinking, “Well, maybe if I think in a certain way, and short-circuit my language, and do all these other things to get beyond language, maybe that’ll get me there to the end of it.” But it doesn’t work that way. You follow the path. The steps are all laid out, and it’s a gradual development of the mind. Another common image is of ripening fruit. The fruit gradually ripens, gradually ripens, and then there comes a point where it just falls from the tree. If you’re trying to say, “Well, if it falls from the tree, that’s awakening. Let’s just pick it.” It doesn’t work that way, because it’s not going to be ripe. So you focus on the path, and in focusing on the activity of developing the path, you are at the same time comprehending stress, abandoning the cause, realizing what happens as you abandon the craving that is the cause. And when all these activities get perfected, then you find out what’s going on. You find out what lies beyond. That’s what it means to succeed. So try to bring what they call the “faces of success” to the practice of the path. You develop the desire to do this. You’re persistent in doing it. You stick with it. You give it your full attention. You don’t keep one eye on the path and one eye on what you think might be coming down the road. You give your full attention to the development of the path. And then you bring the quality of circumspection. Use your ingenuity. Look at things from many different sides. Try to develop your sense of judging what’s working and what’s not. These bases of success are planted there in the path, those qualities that you bring to right effort. So the Buddha talked very openly about succeeding and not succeeding in the path. It’s good for us to be open about the fact that this is what we really want. It’s a question of learning to be skillful, though, in how you approach your goals, learning not to get frustrated by the fact that this may take a long time because there’s a lot of developing to be done, realizing that at least you have a goal. There’s a purpose. There’s a direction in your life, which is much better than wandering around without a direction. And that someday you really do hope to succeed. In Thai, when they talk about attaining Nibbana, they call it “succeeding at Nibbana.” So when you think about wanting to attain Nibbana, don’t be ashamed of having that desire. To get there is part of the path. It’s one of the bases for success. And whether it’s going to come quickly or slowly, that’s not the issue. The issue is that you’re focusing on the path right now, and you’re trying to keep with the path as much as possible, bringing in these qualities of desire, persistence, your full attention, your full intentness, and all the powers of your discernment. Don’t be embarrassed to give yourself to the path. Don’t think that it’s not cool to make an effort like this. We’re not here to impress anyone else. We’re here to solve a problem that’s weighing down the mind. And that’s what’s important. That’s what counts.

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