The Path in Brief

February 24, 2023

Wisdom starts with the question, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” The wisdom there lies in seeing, one, that long-term happiness is possible, and it’s better than short-term. It’s going to depend on your actions. We had that reflection just now, how we’re subject to aging, illness, death, separation. And if the reflection stopped there, it would be pretty depressing. Buddhism does have a reputation for being pessimistic, talking about suffering so much. But then there’s that fifth reflection. We have our actions, and our actions have power. They will give consequences and will benefit from the consequences of our good actions. And we’ll suffer from the consequences of our bad actions, our unskillful actions. So we have to be careful. But we do have power. With power comes responsibility. And that power can be used for long-term welfare and happiness. There’s nothing pessimistic about that message at all. In fact, the Buddha says, “Ultimately, you can find a happiness that is not subject to conditions at all, in any way.” So it’s hard to think of a teaching that’s more hopeful. But it does place responsibility on us. Nobody else is going to come down and take us to nirvana unless we’re developing skill in our own actions. Nobody else can do that for us either. But we have to see the importance of our actions and then act responsibly in line with that importance. In the Buddhist description of the Eightfold Path, this covers right view and right resolve. Right view is seeing that our actions will make all the difference between happiness and pain. And, of course, our intentions come with the mind. So you have to look and see what kind of intentions will give rise to suffering and which ones will lead us away. We realize our desire for sensuality and simply our desire to take on an identity on a very subtle level. These things cause stress. But before you get to that level, just take a moment to start with a level where you don’t want to harm anybody. You don’t want to harm yourself. You don’t want to harm other people. For several reasons. One, the consequences of that harm are going to come back to you. And two, if your happiness depends on harming others, that happiness is not going to last. They’re going to do what they can to destroy it. So this is not something you just listen to and say, “Oh, that’s an interesting thought.” You go to heart and you look at your actions. What kind of actions are you going to resolve on? Actions that are free from sensuality, free from ill will, free from harmfulness. And then as part of the path, you act on that resolve. That’s why we have the precepts against lying, malicious speech, idle chatter, harsh speech, the precepts against killing, stealing, illicit sex. We’re noticing that if you narrow your actions down to areas where you’re not harming anybody, you feel more confident in yourself. And this goes also for right livelihood. You want to earn your livelihood in ways that doesn’t harm anybody and doesn’t foster unskillful qualities in your mind. So you live your life in a way that makes it conducive to looking at your own mind. Because you’re acting on skillful intentions, avoiding unskillful ones, it’s a lot easier to look at what’s going on in your mind. If you’re giving in to unskillful things, often you don’t want to look at what’s going on. You start putting up walls, and there’s a lot of denial inside. And in observing the precepts, you begin to see the importance of your intentions, because the precepts are designed to focus on intentional actions. In other words, if you happen to kill an ant without intending to, that doesn’t count as a breach of the precept. Or if you say something that you think is true but it’s not, that doesn’t count as a lie. So simply observing the precepts focuses you on your intentions and develops qualities of mindfulness, alertness, and urgency. Mindfulness and keeping the precept in mind. Alertness and watching what you’re actually doing to make sure it is in line with the precept. And then urgency. If you see ways in which you could act that would be against the precepts and you feel tempted to break the precepts, you figure out how to talk yourself out of wanting to do those things. Or if you see that there’s an instance where, if you divulge some information, the precept person who’s hearing the information is actually going to abuse it and harm other people, how do you not give the information without at the same time lying? That exercises your discernment. You have to think on your feet. So the precepts develop a lot of good qualities in mind, precisely the qualities you’re going to need for the meditation. You get used to what’s called right effort. In other words, when you see an unskillful intention come up, you learn how to say no to it. You learn how to cultivate skillful intentions. And then you settle down and learn how to observe your mind directly. This is what the establishment of mindfulness is all about. Giving yourself a topic to focus on so you can get into right concentration, like the breath right now. This is called the body in and of itself. It’s the body as it’s sitting here, not the body in the world. The body in the world is when you think about whether it’s good-looking to other people, or strong enough to do the work of the world, and what role it plays in society at large. You put all those thoughts aside and say, “What is it to have a body just sitting right here? What’s going on?” Well, the first thing that’s going on is that you’re breathing. So you’re focused there. And you learn how to breathe in ways that are pleasant, refreshing. You’re aware of the whole body as you breathe in and the whole body as you breathe out. And you watch not only the breath, but also how the mind relates to the breath. What perception of breath helps you settle in? If you think of the breath simply as air coming in and out through the nose, it’s hard to get a whole body sense of refreshment out of that. But if you think of the breath as the energy moving throughout the body, and the nerves in the blood vessels, that allows the air to come in and allows the air to go out. And it’s all around you. It’s easier to think of the breath as permeating the whole body, permeating your whole awareness, with a sense of well-being, which is precisely what gets you into right concentration. You’re not thinking thoughts of sensual pleasures at all. You’re thinking about how pleasant it is just to be here, right now. And you let the breath fill your awareness. You let the awareness fill the body. And as it gets more and more easeful, more and more expansive, you don’t see any need to go anywhere else. And this is the state of mind with which you can see more subtle things inside. The subtle clingings, the subtle cravings that constitute the cause of suffering. All that becomes clear because things are a lot more quiet and settled. And the mind finds it easier to reason with itself. Because when you’re feeling tired, lacking, irritable, you don’t hear about what you’re doing to create suffering. You tend to focus more on what other people are doing to create your suffering. But when the mind is in a better mood, you can more easily see, “Oh yeah, this is what I do that weighs the mind down, creates burdens, and I don’t have to do it.” That’s when you can start letting go of the causes of suffering. So this is how the path spirals around again, back to right view, and brings it to a more subtle level. Right view informs your actions and reminds you that what you do is important. But then you engage with the other factors of the path and you actually do things and you watch yourself. You watch the mind in action, you watch your breath in action, and that refines your knowledge. So all the parts of the path work together. It’s one path with eight factors, and they begin to connect. They converge. This is where it gets really good. But to get it to converge, you need all eight factors. There’s nothing excessive in the path. There’s nothing lacking in the path. It’s all there. What you need to do to see your cravings and clingings, see how the cravings cause suffering and how you can let them go. Those things are just simply not worth it. They have their appeal, they have their allure. The Buddha doesn’t deny that. The things we clung to and the things we craved didn’t have any allure. We wouldn’t cling to them, we wouldn’t crave them. The Buddha never denies their good side, but he basically says that when you balance the good side with the pain and suffering they cause, you begin to realize that the pain far outweighs the pleasure. You might say, “Well, that’s just a negative world, denying life, denying attitude.” But it’s because when you let go of these things, there’s a greater happiness that comes. That’s why the Buddha is pointing out these things. It’s as if you were addicted to a particular food that’s really bad for you. The Buddha comes along and says, “There’s another food that’s really good for you.” And he points out the drawbacks of the food that’s bad for you. If you don’t believe that there’s a better food, you’re just going to say, “Well, he’s just bad-mouthing my favorite food.” But if you’d like something better, if you can see that there are drawbacks to your attachments, drawbacks to the things to which you’re addicted, you’re willing to give the Buddha’s teachings a try. This is why he focuses on the problem of suffering to begin with. When you see there is stress in the way you live your life, you’ll be interested in the possibility that there will be a life that is totally free of stress and suffering and pain, pain for the mind. That’s when his path begins to make sense and seems to open the way to something better. Because that’s what it’s all designed for, is to open the way to something better. The Four Noble Truths don’t just have suffering and the cause of suffering. They also talk about the cessation of suffering. And as the Buddha said, if you thought that there would be pain and a sense of restriction when you attained the cessation of suffering, you really don’t understand. So what he’s asking you to do is open your mind to new possibilities. He shows you a path that you can follow. We live our lives following different paths, often having no idea where they’re leading. It looks attractive, it looks appealing, and you follow along. And some people will tell you, “All paths lead up to the top of the mountain.” But there are a lot of paths that lead you over a precipice, a lot of paths that lead you down into a swamp. At the very least, the Eightfold Path is a good path to be on. It doesn’t ask you to do anything that’s embarrassing, anything that’s beneath you. It’s all noble. It’s all harmless. As he said, it’s good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end. Just the thought of doing the path, following the path, is inspiring. As you’re on the path, you realize it’s a good place to be. And when you get to the end, you say, “Well, that was the best path that could have been followed at all.” You get to a place that lies beyond your imagination. So all the factors of the path work together to get you to be really observant of what you’re doing. As the Buddha said, there are two qualities that nurture the path. One is that you commit yourself to it, you really do it. And then two is that you reflect, you observe yourself in action. And that ability to reflect on yourself, that’s what enables you to see things that are not in the texts, that are not in the words, but you see the realities appearing in your mind. Because the mind does have this quality where the Buddha said it’s luminous. And what he means is that it can watch itself. It’s not darkness to itself. We tend to put up walls, as I said. There are a lot of things we disguise. That’s because there are aspects of the mind, things we’ve done, said, or thought that we don’t like. But you put yourself on the path. It’s a path that can tear those walls down, because it teaches you to behave, to act, speak, think, in ways that you can look at and not try to shield your eyes. You’re content to look at how you’ve been doing things. And then you come to learn from what you’re doing. That’s what the concentration is for, so you can see subtle things moving in the mind. And what Right View is for is to get you to ask the right questions. Questions about where’s the stress here? What’s causing it? What’s the allure of what’s causing it? And what are the drawbacks? And how can I find an escape from those drawbacks? The Buddha puts you in a good place to see and understand your own mind and gives you the right questions to open things up. There’s nothing pessimistic about this at all. It’s all about your power in action and how you can take that power and put it to the best use for a happiness you can’t find anywhere else. Thank you.

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