Safe Path, Safe Goal

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We all know that the Buddha called the goal of the path Nirvana or Nibbana. But what we may not know is that he added the names for the goal as well. And some of them indicate that it’s a place of safety. In fact, safety is one of the names. A harbor, refuge, the secure, security. It’s a place outside of space and time. Nothing can touch the happiness of that state. Nothing can harm it. Total safety. Totally secure. But the path doesn’t save all the safety to the end. It’s a safe path that we’re on. By following the practices of virtue, concentration, discernment, we give safety to ourselves and we give a gift of safety to others. It’s a basic principle. We’re not going to find true safety until we’ve given safety to other beings as well. Sometimes it’s said that those who go for Nibbana are selfish. They leave samsara. And go to Nibbana and leave everybody else behind. That’s a misunderstanding on two counts. One, it’s not that samsara is a place and Nibbana is another place. Samsara is an activity. The activity of taking on states of becoming. And then when they fall apart you take on more. In doing so you keep on creating suffering for yourself and for people around you. Nibbana is when you stop the activity. So to say that someone is selfish to go to Nibbana, it’s like saying someone who’s been addicted to hard drugs would be selfish not to continue the addiction. The best way to help other people get over their addiction is to show that it is possible to end the addiction and to find happiness that way. That’s precisely what the Buddha does. Of course the other count is that the idea that by running away from Nibbana you’re just leaving other people without help. Think about the Buddha. He provided a lot of help for others. And looking for safety, he provided a lot of safety too. There are two stories that illustrate this point. Toward the end of his life Devadatta tried to take over the Sangha. And at one point he hired some assassins to kill the Buddha. One assassin was told to go and kill the Buddha and then to follow a certain road. And then two other assassins were placed on that road to kill the first assassin. And then they were told to follow another road. Four assassins were placed on that road to kill the two. And then there were eight assassins that were hired to kill the four. So all together there’d be a lot of bloodshed. Well the Buddha prevented that. When the first assassin came toward him, the Buddha spread so much metta that the assassin was frozen with fear and realized that he should not be doing this. And the Buddha said, “Have no fear. Put down your weapons and come and see me.” So the assassin does. The Buddha teaches him the graduated discourse, starting with generosity, virtue, the rewards of virtue in heaven, the drawbacks of sensuality, seeing safety and relanciation. And then taught him the Four Noble Truths. And the assassin gained the Dharma. He really wanted to know how the Buddha expressed those teachings. To convert the guy so totally. But what he did was he protected that assassin from the karma that would come simply from having thought that he was going to kill the Buddha. Now that he was a stream-enterer, he was not going to fall below the human realm. That’s quite a gift. Then the other two assassins, not seeing the first one come, followed the road and found the Buddha. And he taught them. They became stream-enters too. The same with the four and the eight. So out of his compassion, the Buddha made sure that all these people were safe, that they were not going to fall below the human realm. That’s quite a gift. Then on the night of his passing away in Dhanubana, he told the monks, “There may be people who will criticize Junda, the silver smith, who provided the Buddha with his last meal, which caused his dysentery. There are people who tell him that he made a lot of demerit in doing so.” And so the Buddha wanted to make sure that that didn’t happen. So referring to Junda as “Venerable Junda,” a term that’s usually used for senior monks, he said that there are two meals that give the greatest rewards. The meal the Buddha receives right before his awakening and the meal he receives right before his total Nirvana. So even though he was dying, he was concerned about the silver. He was concerned about the safety and well-being of the person who provided the last meal. So it’s not the case that the Buddha just turned and ran away. He provided safety for those he left behind. And he provides safety for us in the path that we follow. We follow the precepts. We harm nobody. We protect ourselves from the bad karma that would come from breaking the precepts. At the same time, we provide safety for others. One, we don’t try to get them to break the precepts. And two, they’re not the victim of our acts of stealing or killing, illicit sex, lying, taking intoxicants. So we provide safety for ourselves and for others. The same with concentration. We feed off the pleasure of concentration, which means we don’t have to feed off of other people. We don’t have to find our emotional satisfaction out of our relationships. We find emotional satisfaction inside. And that places a much lighter burden on others. And when we’re inclined to help them, we’re not doing it out of a neurotic desire to look good in our own eyes. Because we have this inner source of well-being, we can help them in ways that really are for their genuine help. The same with discernment. As we see what leads to suffering, what doesn’t, doesn’t lead to suffering. We get more and more skillful in how we think, how we act, how we talk. And this provides a good example for other people too. So it’s safety all around. So you can be secure that this is a safe path you’re on. And you’re giving a gift of safety to others as you follow it. Even though this may not be the total safety of nibbana, it’s heading you in the right direction and it’s preparing you so that when you do achieve that ultimate safety, it’s not going to be a selfish act. You leave gifts of safety behind for other people to enjoy. So the goal of the path that we’re pursuing here is good all around. And it is good to remember that the path and the goal are separate things. Sometimes you hear it said that the goal and the path are the same thing. But that would be an endless path. And the Buddha’s not teaching that kind of fruitless path. The path has fruit. It leads to a place where you don’t have to follow a path anymore. As he says, “Once our hunts are free from feeding on things, their paths can’t be traced.” It’s like the path of birds through the sky. They don’t leave any tracks behind. And then when they enter total nibbana, they’re totally beyond any kind of restriction, any kind of limitation. So this is a good path we’re on because it leads to a good place. As the Buddha once said, if you see that there would be any regret in a person who’s entered nibbana, that’s a wrong view. It’s a happiness that’s totally satisfactory. It’s said to be the end of hunger, not because you try to stifle your hunger or tell yourself not to have preferences. It’s the end of hunger because it provides you with a happiness that’s totally satisfactory, totally satisfying. So have confidence as you follow this path that it’s good all around, safe all around. We’re fortunate that we have this opportunity to follow it. After all, it’s not the case that the path is clear all the time. The Buddha has an image of a old city that has been swallowed up by the jungle. And there’s a road there, but the road has been swallowed up by the jungle as well. There’s a man who comes and discovers traces of the old road. Follows it, cuts away the vines, cuts away the trees that have gotten in the way, finds the city, and then goes to find a king and say, “If you could open up the way to that city, many people would benefit.” So there are times when the path is overgrown and it’s hard to find. But now the path is still here. There was a period in the last century when people believed that the path to Nibbana was closed. And in Thailand at least, it took the forest of Jhanas to discover that no, the path was still open. After all, it is agaliko, timeless, the Dharma the Buddha taught. And they cleared the path and made it available to everyone who’s interested. So take advantage of this opportunity. It’s not here all the time.

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