

## *The Path of Action*

*December 4, 2004*

The Buddha's first teaching was a path of action. He taught the noble eightfold path before he taught the four noble truths. And his last teaching was a path of action. The teaching he gave to his very last student was, again, the noble eightfold path. And his very last words were an imperative: "Bring about completion," he said, "through heedfulness." All these are things that we *do*. And although it's a commonplace that the practice is not just technique, if you look at it from another point of view, it *is* technique—"technique" including your beliefs, your views, your motivations. As the Buddha pointed out, all these things are actions as well.

So the focus is on the doing. One of the things we're told to reflect on is, "Days and nights fly past, fly past. What are you doing right now?" Because it's the doing that makes all the difference. Again, this includes not only bodily acts but also verbal acts and mental acts, the things you're thinking. All this comes down to method: This is what holds everything together—seeing what you're doing that's causing suffering and then seeing what you can do to stop that.

Just as science is held together by the scientific method, the Buddha's teachings are held together by his method. In other words, when we think of science it's not so much an issue of believing in relativity or in evolution—those things are still theories that have yet to be totally tested; there's always the possibility that something might come along, some new discoveries—but the trust there is in the method. If these theories are going to be proven or disproven, it has to be done by the scientific method. That's the trust, that's what holds it all together.

And the same with the Buddha's teachings. You look at the suttas and they seem to be all over the place: Sometimes they talk about the aggregates, sometimes he talks about sense-media; sometimes they stress equanimity, other times they stress effort. Attempts to map out the whole teaching and make it into a consistent system have always been problematic. There's no final word on what Buddhist philosophy should be. People keep coming up with new ideas, new interpretations, new frameworks. But the Buddha's basic method is always the same, or the proof is always the same: Does it put an end to suffering?

And this is the question we should always ask ourselves as we're practicing to make sure that we're on the right track: "When I do this, what are the results?" This is the teaching the Buddha gave to Rahula and it holds all the way through from the most basic levels of the practice to the most refined. You've got to learn how to be sensitive to what you're doing and the results of what you're doing.

And if you find yourself caught in a box, you've got to learn how to think outside the box. This is especially a problem for those of us brought up in the West, because we've been brought up in a culture that has a lot of unskillful patterns of behavior—that we've picked up

from our families, we've picked up from the media, we've picked up from school—unskillful ways of thinking, speaking, acting. And society's designed in such a way that it rewards a lot of unskillful patterns of behavior. So it takes a real effort to step outside of that box, because we're boxed in by it on all sides. This is why we need monasteries, societies where the values are different, where the priorities are different, where the patterns of behavior are different, where the box has an open side.

Which is why the technique of the practice is not just the technique of what we're doing as we're sitting here meditating. That's basic, it's essential, but it's not the whole thing. In Thailand, a lot of my training in the Dhamma was not just sitting there with my eyes closed but it was also sitting there with my eyes open, watching what was going on, how people behaved. Particularly seeing Ajaan Fuang interact with other people: what he would say, what he wouldn't say; what he would do, what he wouldn't do. And, as a result, learning his values as well. The need to win out over other people was not high on his agenda. The need to straighten everything out on an external level and be very efficient or very businesslike: That was not high on his agenda. The basic value was the training of the mind. And what needed to be done in any particular situation depended a lot on his sensitivity to the situation.

So these are the kind of skills we should try to develop among ourselves. Because they all form part of the path—in particular, right effort. We discussed this point today. There's a teaching you very rarely hear in the West but it's very common over there in Thailand: *Viriyena dukkhamacceti*, a person overcomes suffering or stress through effort, through persistence. And not just brute effort. Look at right effort, it's an element in the path. You arouse your desire, your energy, your persistence, your intent, to prevent unskillful mental states from arising or to get rid of the ones that have arisen; to give rise to skillful mental states that haven't yet arisen and to maintain and develop those that have.

So to begin with, you've got to have the desire to do this, realizing the importance of why you're doing it. This is where right view becomes part of right effort. And then you have to be alert to what's actually happening in your mind. The states that are running through your mind: Are they skillful or are they unskillful? Should you give them credence or should you try to undercut them? So it's a combination of right view and right mindfulness that informs the effort and makes it right.

This means you have to look very carefully at your behavior. So often we go through life and we're really not aware of what we're doing. We just see the bad results coming and we have very little sense of what it is we're doing that's causing those bad results. It's because we haven't been very attentive or because we've picked up strange ideas from other people about what causes difficult situations or how to approach them.

So all of this requires learning how to step back and question some of your assumptions and to be very, very alert about what you're doing. When you see that what you're doing is leading to something undesirable, okay, try to think of other ways to say things, other ways to

act. This requires that you not be too set in your idea of what *your* way of doing things is. This is one of the forms of clinging: the formal term is clinging to practices and precepts, but it basically means clinging to certain ways of doing things. “It’s got to be done *this* way. I can’t think of any other way to speak, any other way to act in this situation. This is *my way*.” It makes you think of that old Frank Sinatra song, “I screwed up my life but I did it my way.” Well, big deal. Everybody screws up and does it their way. The world is such a mess because of that, because everybody does it *their* way.

The great thing about the Buddha was that he learned that he could change his ways. And he realized that if there was going to be an end to suffering, he *would* have to change them. So he said, if the end of suffering is possible, then the possibility of changing the way you act is possible, the possibility of looking at what you do and thinking of different ways of doing it has to be possible. And so, acting on that assumption, he found that it worked. Our destiny is not written in stone. Things are not totally determined.

You look at most people’s behavior and it may seem that things are determined by biology or sociology or whatever, but that’s simply because most people don’t take the time to stop and look at what they’re doing and think of other ways of doing it when they find that they’re causing suffering.

This is the method: Look at what you’re doing, look at the results. If things aren’t going well, consult someone else who’s also on the path. This is part of the method, too. Give importance to your intentions. Reflect on what you’re doing. Use your imagination. These are all part of the method. When you understand the method, then you apply it to everything. Make it your sport to see: What’s the most skillful thing to do in this situation? What’s the most skillful thing to think? What’s the most skillful thing to say? And instead of getting upset with yourself or depressed or upset at the situation when things don’t turn out the way you expected them to, just learn from it, chalk it up to experience. Next time it comes around, try again.

This is what concentration is for: to give you a well of energy, a well of strength from which you can draw to keep at this experiment, to keep at this challenge. And in this way, talk of making your practice your whole life or making life your practice is not just a vague generality. It’s very specific: Right now, here in this situation, what’s the most skillful thing you can think of doing? And then do it. And then see what happens.

As the Buddha said, this is the technique by which everyone has purified themselves. All those who *have* purified themselves did it this way; all those who *will* purify themselves will do it this way; all those who *are* purifying themselves right now do it this way. This is how they do it; this is the method. And part of the method includes having the desire for your own happiness; the trust that true happiness is possible; and trust in your own ability to find it, to create the causes, to master the necessary skills. Just because you’ve been unskillful in the past

doesn't mean that you can't develop skill in the future. It's simply a matter of applying the proper method.

So this is the kind of effort that the Buddha's talking about when he talks about right effort. This is the effort that brings about an end to suffering. As he pointed out, this is the first thing you want to focus on. This should be your top priority. And you find that, in the process of giving this particular approach top priority, all the other real problems in your life get sorted out as well, while the unreal problems get put aside.

The reason the Buddha ended his teachings with the teaching on heedfulness is because if you don't do it now, when are you going to do it? He was reminding his students, he was reminding *all* of us not to be complacent, because otherwise the suffering we create for ourselves just goes on and on and on. And although the path to the end of suffering takes effort, the path of continual endless suffering takes a *lot* more effort.

So don't be complacent. Every moment, you're making choices. So make it your sport, make it your game to keep making skillful choices as consistently as you can.