

The Reasonable Path

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The Buddha often compared himself to a doctor, and the Dhamma to medicine. It's important to think about the implications of that analogy. Think about medical science: What kind of science is it? Some people say it's not a science, it's as an art. It's not the sort of science that's based on first principles and works deductively from those principles. Instead, it's based on what's worked in the past, experimenting, seeing how much of, say, a particular medicine is useful for one kind of disease and can actually be harmful for other kinds of diseases. When you give a dosage of medicine, it doesn't necessary mean that if a small dose works pretty well, then a bigger dose is going to work even better. Sometimes the bigger dose can actually kill you.

So an important principle in medicine is balance. It's like the difference between logic and reason. Logic argues from first principles. Reason however, deals with ratios, keeping things in balance. You might say that the Buddha's teaching is not necessarily logical, but it's reasonable. It works because it finds a balance. That's why the Buddha called in the middle way.

If you're looking for logic, you can look at the way the Buddha practiced for those six years before he found the true path. If our problem is attachment for pleasures, he had told himself, then let's just totally avoid all kinds of pleasure, even to the extent of denying all the processes of the body. He suppressed his breathing. For a while he was even going to stop eating altogether, but the devas came and said, "If you stop eating, we're going to pour divine nutrient into your pores." So he said, "In that case, I'll just live on as little as possible." So he carried the logic of self-torture all the way to its extreme, and found that it didn't work. He almost died.

That was when he realized that logic was not the key to end of suffering. Ultimately he found the middle way, a balanced path, a reasonable path. It takes virtue, concentration, and discernment, and puts them in a reasonable context. The Jains often complained to the Buddha that his precepts were sloppier than theirs. But again they took the idea of harmlessness to totally useless extremes. It was logical but it was useless. It didn't work. The same with concentration. You can get the mind into a dead concentration where you totally have no sense in the body at all, where you enter a state called non-perception. But it's such a wrong state of concentration that the Buddha doesn't even list it among the stages of right concentration.

So when we're working in the practice, we have to realize that we're following a series of principles that have been worked out over time. They're taught because they work. The Buddha's proof for his teachings is not so much logical as it is pragmatic.

In his teachings to the Kalamas, everyone focuses on the passage where he says, "Don't go by texts. Don't go by reports. Don't go by received tradition, or simply because your teacher says something is good." We often forget to look at what else he said not to go by. In particular, he said not to go by things because they're logical, because they seem reasonable to you, or because they fall in line with your notions, your ideas. Instead, you follow the Dhamma that works. If it puts an end to suffering, okay, that's the Dhamma.

The history of Buddhism is a history a lot of people who've rebelled against that. Either they tried to make the Buddha's system into a totally logical system or they liked showing that it has its logical flaws—basically destroying the path, saying, that this or that doesn't fit with this or that first principle. As a result, they put themselves in position where they couldn't put an end to suffering.

So our training here is training in what works. It means finding a balance. Right concentration is a matter of balance: a certain amount of holding on, a certain amount of letting go—letting go of unskillful things, holding on to things that are skillful, things that work. From a logical point of view, it may seem deficient, but it actually works. It gets the mind into a position where it can see what's actually going on, particularly in terms of its intentions. Right concentration is a very strong example of working on your intentions, keeping your intentions steady, but balanced in a way that you can not only be still, but can also see things moving.

When the Buddha talks about five-factored right concentration, it includes the four jhanas, and then a stage where he says the mind has its theme "well in hand." The analogy he gives is of a person sitting down who's watching a person lying down, or a person standing who's watching a person sitting—slightly stepped back from the action, watching the action. That's a state in which the mind can really see itself in action. The whole point is seeing how intentions of the mind shape things, and to see precisely where those intentions cause stress, and where that stress is unnecessary.

That requires a great deal of balance, a great deal of skill. It's an art. The whole path is an art. And as with any craft, any art, it has its basic principles but it's not something that's hammered out from first principles to their logical conclusion. It has its consistency in that it's all aimed at one goal. It has its balance. It takes a lot of things into consideration, and finds the right proportions among them. That's a

lot more difficult than logic. Logic is something any adolescent can master. It's the analyst in the mind who likes to point out the logical flaws in your parent's program for making you an adult. What requires maturity is reason, balance among many factors, seeing what works and sticking with what works, appreciating the value of what works.

After all, the whole point of the Dhamma is not that it's going to win out in logical debates. The Buddha actually discouraged students from getting involved in logical debates because it's bad for the state of your intentions. You might win the debate, but you lose the battle in trying to put an end to suffering.

What he *did* encourage them in was getting a sense of the middle way, being sensitive to the times when you have to put in a great deal of effort and other times when effort gets in the way and you simply have to watch. In the sutta where he talks about this, he doesn't give hard and fast rules about when to follow one approach and when to follow the other. You have to watch what's going on in your mind and the results you gain. If you find that following your pleasure leads to defilements in the mind, you've got to fight your pleasure. You've got to deprive yourself of that particular pleasure. If you find that working with pleasure actually helps you see things, that's a pleasure to be encouraged. Some defilements, as he said, respond to strong effort. Other defilements don't. You simply have to watch them and they go away. And the way you find out which is which is by observing the results of the actions in your mind.

The emphasis seems always coming back here, back here, back here to your intentions and their results. Having a logical system can get in the way. Insisting that everything be logical gets in the way. When you're logical, you don't have to be observant. You can blindly follow your first principle to wherever it takes you. But here the onus is on you. You have to be observant. You have to be true to yourself. When you do an action, what's your intention? This is an area we tend to hide from ourselves. The next question is, when you act on an intention, what kind of results do you get? Again, this is an area we tend to hide from ourselves. This is where most of our psychological dishonesty lies. It's precisely this ignorance that we have to overcome.

So the test of the Buddha's teachings is not so much whether it's logically consistent, it's whether you actually get results. You follow the precepts. You follow the teachings on concentration. You follow that the questioning that leads to discernment. It's as if the Buddha is challenging you. He tells you to follow this line of action, which is something fabricated, but it can take you to something unfabricated. Logically, it may seem strange, that something fabricated can lead to something unfabricated, but the Buddha said causality works that way. And it

turns out that modern studies in complex causality, chaos theory, chemical states that are far from equilibrium, work in this way, too. There are these places called resonance, where the equation that describes the behavior of things in that field hits a spot where something is being divided by zero. That takes things out of the system. You get to that spot by following the rules of the system, but the spot lets you out.

This is what the Buddha discovered. There are a certain modes of action, which he taught as the middle way, that will lead you to the spot where suddenly the mind is undefined. Everything gets undefined. It works because that's the way things are. If you look at things in logical terms, it might seem arbitrary. But it's what actually works. It's not a question of believing or not believing the Buddha, it's more of a question of taking his teachings and putting them to the test—and putting yourself to the test at the same time. And why would you do that? Because he says this leads to the end of suffering: the end of the biggest problem in our lives. We have to decide for ourselves whether we're intrigued by the possibility, whether we're attracted to that possibility, or would we rather hold to our old opinions. That's the choice each of us has to make.