

The Path of Adventure

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The Buddha's name of the practice he taught, or the image for the practice he taught, is a path, something you follow. You start at one end and you go to the other end—although none of us really start at a far end. We start somewhere in the middle. We come to the practice with some virtue, some concentration, some insight already. But we also come with a lot of other things that are not part of the path. They're obstacles. Our virtue is not all around. Our concentration and insight are not all around. Sometimes there are little gaps, sometimes the gaps are enormous.

So as we come to the practice, we find ourselves someplace along the path, but there's someplace else we have to go. Now, that someplace else is not outside of the mind. It's not as if we're going to leave our mind to go someplace else. We stay right here, but the image of the path means that there are things that have to be done to achieve the goal at the end of the path. We have to keep following the path until we reach the goal. This is why the path is called a practice. You keep practicing again and again and again, until you finally get it right.

Our culture is one that doesn't really help with the practice, because it's an instant culture. People feel entitled to be at the goal already. They want really quick happiness. There are so many ways of getting quick happiness nowadays that we feel that anything that doesn't promise immediate gratification is lacking, inferior. But look at what happens to mice when they're offered instant happiness. Scientists have found the little pleasure center in the brains of mice. They've placed electrodes in that pleasure center and connected it to little metal bars on the outside of the heads of the mice. The mice can press the little bars on their heads against other little bars in their cage that gives them a mild electric shock that stimulates the pleasure center directly. They don't have to do anything else, they just get an instant zap, an instant pleasure. And what happens? They keep zapping themselves again and again and again, to the point where they don't even eat. They don't drink. They die.

So instant pleasure is deadly. It causes all your common sense and heedfulness to atrophy and die away.

This means that when we come to this path, we have to beware of our desire for instant gratification. We have to develop all the skills needed in order to defer gratification. In other words, be willing to put up with some effort right now, put up with some difficulties right now, for the sake of a pleasure and happiness that

really is true, really is lasting, and doesn't kill you—something that's actually good for you.

If you haven't already developed those skills, one of the important parts of the path is learning how to encourage yourself to keep with the path, to keep on practicing. Fortunately, this is not a path that saves all its good things for the end. There are forms of pleasure along the way: the sense of well-being that comes from being generous, the sense of well-being that comes from doing the right thing, when your actions don't harm anybody. There's a pleasure there that you have to learn how to appreciate. And with the meditation, the Buddha encourages you to develop states of concentration that have a sense of ease, a sense of rapture, so you that can tap in those forms of pleasure, those forms of rapture, when you need them, when you feel tempted to go off the path.

This is why we have to practice of meditation again and again, so that we get really skillful at tapping into the pleasure, tapping into the ease when we need it. One very simple way is to create a little space in the body where you stay focused, keeping that space in the body relaxed at all times no matter what happens. It might be in the hands, it might be in the feet, or in the area around the heart. Focus your awareness there, and just think: relax, relax, relax—so that when the breath comes in, that part of the body doesn't get pushed around. The breath goes out, that part of the body doesn't get squeezed. After a while it'll begin to develop a sense of fullness. That fullness, if you allow to grow, turns into rapture.

This takes skill. It takes time to develop the ability to do this, but once you've got it, you've got a really important source of strength, so that when other desires come along, you don't feel a strong need to give in to them. You've got a better form of pleasure from which you can look at the drawbacks of those other desires. If you were to give in to the impulse to break a precept, kill, steal, engage in illicit sex, to lie, or to take intoxicants, any person with any common sense would say that that kind of behavior is really destructive. The reason we give into these things is because we're hungry. We want a quick fix. We're impatient. And that impatience comes from a sense of lack in the present moment. So if you provide yourself with a sense of fullness, you're coming from a position of strength. You can look at the drawbacks of unskillful behavior and really honestly not want to follow through with those sorts of things.

It's not the case that by saying No to them once, you'll say No to them forever. They'll keep coming back in different guises, but if you develop this skill and have confidence in it, you can just keep at the practice with whatever comes up.

The important thing is you don't worry about how long the path is going to be. It's a good path to be on. Don't go counting the steps, because that can get you

discouraged. If there's a physical place you really want to go, suppose you're out hiking, and you know it's going to be an hour there and an hour back, an hour is something that's easy to comprehend. It's easy to get your mind around it. It's not too long either way. If you were to think about how many steps you would have to take on the hike, that might get you discouraged. Thousands and thousands: Just the thought of thousands of steps can get discouraging. What you do is that you don't focus on the thousands of steps, you focus on the one step you're doing right now. Make sure that when you place one foot in front of the other, you're placing it well and you're going in the right direction. That's all you have to do. It's not hard.

And remember that it's a lot better to be on the path than to just wander around aimlessly and not get anywhere at all. Think of how many times you've walked around in circles, how many steps were involved in walking around in circles, and you gained nothing at all. That's *samsara*, although the circles of *samsara* are immeasurably aimless and long. Here at least you're on a path that has a direction. It's going to take you someplace where you learn things within the mind that you've never learned before, to see things, to realize things you've never seen or realized before. In other words, the effort you put into it really does make a difference, really does pay off.

But you've got to learn the skills to keep yourself encouraged, to keep yourself on target, to make sure that you're willing to make that next step and the next step and the next step, and not get discouraged, not get overwhelmed that you've got thousands of steps left to make. You don't have to take thousands of steps all at once, you just take one step at a time. That gets you where you want to go.

It's not as if we're choosing between going someplace and not going someplace. We're always going someplace. This is what the word *samsara* means: wandering-on. The problem is that our wandering doesn't really accomplish anything. It's just a lot of suffering and it's aimless. Sometimes you go here, sometimes you go back, sometimes you go around and around, and you go off someplace else. But nothing really gets accomplished. There are billions and billions of steps in *samsara*, and even then, if you don't get on the path, there's no point of arrival. So just the fact we're on a path that takes thousands of steps shouldn't be in a cause for discouragement. It's a path that goes someplace and has a goal. Once you reach the goal, you don't have to keep walking anymore.

So learn to make yourself comfortable with this image of a path, that you're going someplace that will take time, take energy, but there's not a single step along the path that's going to be more than you can handle. After all, the path is something that was found by a human being and is for human beings. And as Ven.

Ananda said, one of the proper attitudes to take towards this is: “Other people can do this, why can’t I?” The only thing that really prevents you from following the path is your own attitude.

So make sure your attitude is mature. Have a mature attitude toward goals. There *is* a sense of discomfort, a sense of dis-ease, that comes from having a goal you want to accomplish, because you’re not there yet. But still that’s a lot healthier than the sense of discomfort or dis-ease that comes from having no goals at all. And it’s better than the false sense of security that comes from thinking, “I don’t need any goals. I’m perfectly okay where I am.” Well, you’re not okay. You’re in the midst of aging, illness, and death. Little things still set you off. And you’ve got bigger, nastier things you’ve got to face.

So the sense of dis-ease that comes from being on a good path is much better than the sense of satisfaction that comes from saying you don’t want to follow any path at all, because all you end up doing is just wandering around in circles and going nowhere. In a lot of cases, you make yourself worse. So if you develop a mature attitude toward being on the path, everything else becomes a lot easier, because you’re not measuring things against your own impatient standards, you’re not wanting to do all 10,000 steps at once so that you can have it over and done with and move on to something else. As the Buddha said, the path is a good one to be on. Learn how to enjoy it.

That right there is a lot of the trick in learning endurance. It’s not the case that you just put up with hardship, hardship, hardship all the time, until you wear yourself down with hardship. That’s not how endurance is developed at all. You have to learn how to find pleasure in things that are difficult. Look for it. It’s there, if you have the right attitude, if you have enough imagination. You can make an adventure of being on this path. And then it gets fun. The question of endurance doesn’t weigh on the mind.

Someone once asked me what were the hardest things in my first couple years as a monk. And I really couldn’t answer, not because there weren’t any hard things, but because I never really focused on any one thing as being the hardest. Looking back on that time, that was probably why I was able to get through the difficulties of those first years. I didn’t obsess about the difficulties. I learned how to take pleasure in the opportunities for pleasure and the challenges that were there in being on the path.

So look for the pleasure that comes from being generous, from being virtuous, from developing concentration, from developing insight and understanding. It’s there. That pleasure is what gives strength to the practice, helps develop your powers of patience and endurance, so that even though it’s a long path, you’re not

worried about the length. You're simply enjoying each step as you go along. Even the difficult steps, you learn how to enjoy those. The sense of accomplishment that comes from doing something you weren't able to do before: That's your snack food along the path that keeps your energy level up.

When you think about the path in this way, then it becomes doable. Even if you don't get to the end of the path in this lifetime, still you're happy to be on a good path. This is the path that noble ones have followed in the past, and that noble ones are going to follow in the future. As for you in the present moment, by following it, you make yourself noble as well.