

Faith: The Adz Handle Sutta

(Edited and abridged)

Happy old year. This is the last Dhamma talk of 2024. So we'll offer a reflection to mark the occasion, to keep the Uposatha, to take time to practice, renew our precepts, contemplate the dhamma. Such a good formula. The subject we've been on the last couple of sessions is faith. And as it as it happened this morning, Jim and I read a sutta picked from random... on the topic of faith. It deals with the subject of faith in a not so specific way. And it deals with the fact that when we have faith, we're able to proceed and to develop and to practice without really being able to know exactly the results at any given time. We know that we're on the right course, even though sometimes it's not obvious what the effects of each particular choice we make is. We just have this sense of going in the right direction.

Recently I was asked a question, and it's a question actually that the Buddha had been asked. So I knew the Buddha's answer and I answered in the same way. I didn't have to think too hard about it. The question is interesting because it's something that has been an ongoing theme for the last few thousand years.

“Is everyone on the path?” And you may be aware or may not be aware that this is a pervasive view out in the world, that 'everybody will get enlightened eventually.' The Buddha would say “This is a wrong view.” It's seemingly very innocent. It's brimming with naivete and a sincere belief in the human spirit, that people are intrinsically good. It is sincere belief that while we sometimes muddle our way through things, we'll eventually figure it out. It is belief that we grow over time and given enough time, we'll all eventually get to enlightenment.

Unfortunately, the dark side of this view is that it defeats wholesome action. It defeats wholesome purpose. This is common in the philosophies that existed at the time of the Buddha. A teacher was surrounded by disciples and they were practicing in a specific way and they had a philosophy that was the basis of their form of practice. And basically the philosophy boiled down to 'It doesn't matter what you do, you will get enlightened.' But then somebody could come along and say, “Well then, why are you guys practicing this way? Why are you renouncing the world? Why should I listen to you as a teacher? Why do you abstain from wholesome acts and practice wholesome ones if we're all getting there anyway? Why go through all that effort? You can just do whatever you want and you'll still get enlightened.”

The dark side of this view is that it undercuts all of your efforts to develop the wholesome and to abandon the unwholesome... the view itself says 'it doesn't really matter.' But this 'nicer' side, the naive side, has existed for thousands of years and will

exist long after my bones have crinkled away to dust. It is based on the idea that we are becoming old souls who will eventually just get tired of worldly existence... and we will transcend. It's an idea of the growth and development seen in a human lifetime; that as you get older, as you get more experiences, you will gradually wean yourself off of the silly things you were doing in your youth. Maybe we're accumulating knowledge and wisdom and understanding and skill even if we're not aware of it, and that it will happen anyway.

The concept of “path” has existed for a long time. It was ancient when the Buddha used it. It existed before law existed, before alphabets existed, before the wheel. It denotes a specific route of travel and it denotes a specific destination. And when these two things are present, we call it a path. If somebody doesn't have a destination, when they leave from where they're going and come to a fork in the road, it doesn't matter whether they go left right or keep going straight. Because they have no destination, they can't go the wrong way. With that as a possibility, they could loop back around to where they were.

So if somebody doesn't have a destination, you wouldn't say they're on the path to something. But even if they have a destination, if they are not taking a particular route to that destination, you would not say that they are on the path. If they start here in the town of Princeton and they want to go to Boston, but they go to the north, then somebody else who is familiar with Boston and knows the nature of Boston and the direction of Boston would not say that they are on the path to Boston. In fact, they will never arrive at Boston by traveling in that way. If somebody said, is everybody on the path to Boston, you would rightly respond in the same way that the Buddha did when he was asked the question, is everybody on the path? He would say, well some people are on the path to Boston and some people are not on the path to Boston. You need to have a particular route, the designated route. It is not necessarily exact, but it has to be a route.

When we apply this to a mundane goal, say, 'I want to be rich' or 'I want to be a rock star,' those would be mundane goals. You have a destination. As long as I had some sort of process by which I might move towards that goal, I could say 'I'm on the path to being rich' or 'I'm on the path to being a rock star' And eventually I could attain that goal, reach that destination. The path would be complete. When we apply the idea path to a spiritual goal, something outside of the mundane, it's the same sort of connotation. There needs to be a destination and there needs to be a route to that destination.

If we have some concept, even if the route and destination are not fully defined, not exact, not specific, then it is fair to say that we are on a path. But not all paths are created equal. Some might be 'on a spiritual path to be more loving.' And this is not not-a-path. It is 'a' path. Some might be 'on a path to eradicate all hatred from their life.' Some might be 'on a path to completely overcome all suffering' to attain what the Buddha first saw, before he had even reached enlightenment. They called that goal 'the

deathless.' The Buddha could see (as could all of the seers and rishi's and practitioners who had come before him) that those things which are mundane goals still terminate in death. Whether or not you reach your goal, you will still die. And so whatever you have reached will die with you.

So when these philosophers and practitioners and rishi sat down, they realized that, in terms of what is spiritual, what they wanted most deeply was to find that which is deathless, that would not fall away at the time of death. That which they would not have to relinquish, give up and lose. So they saw the deathless, they had a goal. But there was a lot of uncertainty about the path, the route, the lane of travel they would take to get there. And when you sat them all side by side, they were all doing different things. There was an idea of the goal but not how to get there.

And this is the amazing thing that the Buddha provided, the missing piece. He was able to reach the goal and then having reached the goal, he was able to describe the route to that goal.

And based on this, we have what we refer to as magga or path in Buddhism. And it's not to say it is the only spiritual path, but it is a spiritual path which has a clearly defined route and a clearly defined destination. And like mundane goals, it's also a destination that can be reached within our lifetime, which is quite special in spiritual terms. If we were to set out to become more loving, well, that's a kind of open-ended goal, isn't it? You can attain it many times in your lifetime and you can keep getting better at it. But in terms of attaining the deathless, attaining the cessation of suffering, freedom from all the causes of suffering, well once you've done that, you no longer have to do it again. It is an attainment which will not fall away at the time of death.

And so this is what we would call fruit or pala in the Buddhist teachings. And so when we study enlightenment, we are studying these two things, magga or path and pala or fruit. We are looking at this process of attaining a fixed destination and a route to get there. At the attainment of that destination, no more travel needs to be undertaken. The Buddha reached the end destination and was able to look back and describe the route. He was able to describe several stopping points along that route. And so as he described enlightenment, he described it as eight stages. There are four paths and four fruits which constitute four pairs. Each path reaches a fruit. And these follow on to the final one, which is the path of arhanship and the fruit of arhanship, which is full enlightenment, at which time there is no more need for any of the other paths and fruits. That is the complete attainment of the spiritual goal of reaching the deathless, of attaining nibbana.

But it occurred to me also while reading this morning, that when the Buddha talks about a stream enterer, this means somebody who has attained the first stage of enlightenment.

That is, they are on the path to the attainment of what we call stream entry. But the Buddha was willing to designate anybody who had a sight of the goal, who had faith in the triple gem, as the bare minimum entry level. He called them a stream enter, he called them one who had entered the stream. Because he acknowledged that even to just (and it's not 'just'; look at all the things I've described! it takes a fair bit of wisdom and understanding and trust even to 'just' have faith in the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha) overcome doubt to that degree and to get a sight of the goal of the deathless, of nibbana, of enlightenment; to be able to say, “well, to do that I would have to abandon a course which is without a route, I would have to give up just doing whatever I wanted. I would have to do what leads to that goal,” even to just undertake that with nothing more than faith... one would enter onto the path to full enlightenment. And the Buddha said this is not something you fall away from. When you really see the goal and you really understand the route to get there, it has a purifying effect on the mind. To undertake that to any degree requires the letting-go of doubt. And the letting-go of doubt is the letting-go of a certain level of ignorance. And the letting-go of ignorance means you let go of not-knowing in favor of knowing. And once you know, you can never not-know again.

And it's an amazing thing when you think about it... that once ignorance is taken away to that small degree and faith is established and doubt ceases, it will not come back to that degree. Ignorance will not come back to that degree, which means you are now on the fixed course to the deathless. But though it is a clear route and it is a clear destination, it's not to say we know exactly what to do. It's not to say it's obvious at every stage what we're supposed to be doing. Rather we've got a sight of the destination and we've let go of the doubt that it is unattainable. And now we're experimenting. We're practicing. And in modern English, Buddhist speak, we use the word 'practice' a lot. “My practice.” “I take on practice”. “I am practicing.” “We are practitioners.” It's a good word to describe what we're doing because we're trying to get good at it. And we recognize that we are not masters yet, we are learning, we are experimenting. And so to be one of the practitioners, we have to be willing to try things. As we try things, we'll gradually figure out what works and what doesn't. The route, the path will gradually become narrower and narrower and narrower and more focused. And this is when we start to have a good idea of the path. We start to really get a sight of the fruit. Until you reach the destination, you don't fully understand 100% the route there. Only one who has come to the destination knows exactly what the route could look like. And so one who is on the path can make some speculations based on that little glimpse that they've gotten of what it's like to attain the fruit. But they cannot say exactly what it's like because they've never been there. But one who has reached the fruit of a particular stage of enlightenment can look back and say, “okay, yeah, you're going the right way,” or “a little to the left,” or “a little to the right,” “You keep coming, you've got more ahead of you.” They have a vision of the route they can start to evaluate for others who are coming after them, what to expect, what to look for.

Once we've got some sense of the goal, once we've begun to establish faith that this is possible, we see the Buddha and it inspires in us the confidence that enlightenment is possible. We hear the Dhamma and the mind gets brighter. It's like, "ah, that makes sense." We see our fellow practitioners and we realize we're not alone, we realize that this is something that others see value in and are putting effort towards. The willingness, the confidence is instilled in us to also give it a try, not for others' sake, but because we see the value of the goal and we realize that we can do it.

So this is something you find in a stream enterer, in a faith follower, a dhamma follower, in anybody on the path, this faculty of faith has been established to that degree that the person is not merely wishing, "Oh, may I be free from suffering. Oh, may today be a day without suffering. Oh, may suffering not befall me may no bad things happen to me." It's not merely that they have this wish, though they might have the wish or they might not. But irrespective of that wish, if they are developing, then they can know deep down, "I am moving towards that goal. I might not know on any given day I'm going to experience this amount or this amount or this amount of that goal. I might have successful experiments in the letting go of suffering. There are things I know will work, that I may have the wisdom and the willpower to employ at any point." We don't know for sure, but the faith has been established that there is a destination and there's a way to get there. And so when we are faced with opportunities to put the Buddhist teaching into practice, to do it, it is not somebody else who does it. And it is not a mere wish arising. We ourselves put forth that effort. We ourselves do this development for our own sake.

And so this is something I find very inspiring about the quality of faith and faith followers. The Buddha talks about the stream enterer; they are somebody who is independent of all others in the dispensation. And that's something really special. We were talking last Wednesday, about the nature of confidence and the nature of the acquisition of a skill. When you are just reading from a book or when you've memorized something and you're repeating what you have heard, there is a certain ability you get from that. You can follow a recipe in a book and bake some bread or build a ship or do whatever by following directions and going step by step. And even if you've memorized directions, even if you've done that a dozen times, if you're still kind of going through the directions one by one by one, that level of skill is there.

But there is another level of skill yet beyond that. If I just gave Jim a bucket of flour and some water and some yeast and I said make some bread, he might not make the same loaf he would make if he had all of his recipes and formulas on hand, but he would be able to make a loaf of bread certainly way better than I would do. I'm pretty sure I would create a very ugly pancake. And that is a level of mastery and a level of confidence that can only be acquired by one who has developed something to the point that they can create it themselves. They've developed it to the point that they truly understand it and they have made it their own. It takes something so mundane like that, like the ability to

bake some bread or the ability to build a cabinet or the ability to write a book. And once you have done that, once you have mastered that, you have the skill to apply that to something like spiritual practice.

This is the nature of faith in the triple gem. True rooted faith in the triple gem is the point of breaking away from a nondescript path, a nondescript route and a nondescript destination, the point where you say, "I get it. This is something that I myself will do, can do, and I'm willing to do it. I'm going to do it." And that this shatters all of the doubt. At that point, whether conditions are easy or conditions are hard... still this knowledge exists within. And when presented with a situation, you are not just going step by step by step.

This is something quite invisible to somebody looking from outside. They look at somebody who's sitting and meditating and looking at the clock. And when it dings they get up and dust themselves off. And it seems like they're just following a formula like everybody else in the world. They're just doing the program so that they can get to whatever mundane goal that they've got. And yet if you were to pick up that faith follower, transport them across the world and plop them down, they would begin to orient themselves based on this goal that has now taken root within that towards enlightenment. Their practice might look different, but it would still be a practice. It still has a route and destination that has not changed, because this route and destination is outside of mundane circumstances, is outside of the world. And because it is outside of the world, it is outside of death. And this is why you say of the stream enter that they have just enlightenment as their destination, even if it will take several lifetimes. That is the nature of the skill that they have acquired, the mastery that they have acquired. It supersedes all of their mundane skills which will fall away at death. They have figured out how to orient themselves in relation to something which is not moving. Which is not changing. Something which is stable, namely nibbana, the deathless, the unconditioned, enlightened. And so they will never fall away from moving towards that destination.

And so on the eve of the new year, I wish you all more success in your practice and I delight that we've all survived to this point, and we might get more time to develop and it's been enjoy practicing together and I look forward to more such opportunities.

This is the Buddha talking on the question of 'is everyone on the path', but he's also talking to the faith followers. He's talking to the people who are on the path who are not sure if they're really doing it right. The question in their minds and those who are not yet established as faith followers who are looking and wondering, is "Well, what if I just

really want it? What if I bow down to the Buddha, I bow down to the Buddha statues, I bow down to the Bodhi tree? What if I recite the Dhamma every day? What if I set the wish in my heart, 'oh, may I attain full enlightenment' and maybe I won't have to, you know... renounce anything?"

Sn 22.101. The Adze Handle or The Ship

At Savatthi. "Bhikkhus, I say that the destruction of the taints is for one who knows and sees, not for one who does not know and does not see. For one who knows what, who sees what, does the destruction of the taints come about? 'Such is form, such its origin, such its passing away; such is feeling ... such is perception ... such are volitional formations ... such is consciousness, such its origin, such its passing away': it is for one who knows thus, for one who sees thus, that the destruction of the taints comes about.

"Bhikkhus, when a bhikkhu does not dwell devoted to development, even though such a wish as this might arise in him: 'Oh, that my mind might be liberated from the taints by nonclinging!' yet his mind is not liberated from the taints by nonclinging. For what reason? It should be said: because of nondevelopment. Because of not developing what? Because of not developing the four establishments of mindfulness ... the four right strivings ... the four bases for spiritual power ... the five spiritual faculties ... the five powers ... the seven factors of enlightenment ... the Noble Eightfold Path.

"Suppose, bhikkhus there was a hen with eight, ten, or twelve eggs that she had not covered, incubated, and nurtured properly. Even though such a wish as this might arise in her: 'Oh, that my chicks might pierce their shells with the points of their claws and beaks and hatch safely!' yet the chicks are incapable of piercing their shells with the points of their claws and beaks and hatching safely. For what reason? Because that hen with eight, ten, or twelve eggs had not covered, incubated, and nurtured them properly.

"So too, bhikkhus, when a bhikkhu does not dwell devoted to development, even though such a wish as this might arise in him: 'Oh, that my mind might be liberated from the taints by nonclinging!' yet his mind is not liberated from the taints by nonclinging. For what reason? It should be said: because of nondevelopment. Because of not developing what? Because of not developing ... the Noble Eightfold Path.

"Bhikkhus, when a bhikkhu dwells devoted to development, even though no such wish as this might arise in him: 'Oh, that my mind might be liberated from the taints by nonclinging!' yet his mind is liberated from the taints by nonclinging. For what reason? It should be said: because of development. Because of developing what? Because of developing the four establishments of mindfulness ... the four right strivings ... the four bases for spiritual power ... the five spiritual faculties ... the five powers ... the seven factors of enlightenment ... the Noble Eightfold Path.

"Suppose, bhikkhus, there was a hen with eight, ten, or twelve eggs that she had covered, incubated, and nurtured properly. Even though no such wish as this might arise in her: 'Oh, that my chicks might pierce their shells with the points of their claws and

beaks and hatch safely!’ yet the chicks are capable of piercing their shells with the points of their claws and beaks and of hatching safely. For what reason? Because that hen with eight, ten, or twelve eggs had covered, incubated, and nurtured them properly.

“So too, bhikkhus, when a bhikkhu dwells devoted to development, even though no such wish as this might arise in him: ‘Oh, that my mind might be liberated from the taints by nonclinging!’ yet his mind is liberated from the taints by nonclinging. For what reason? It should be said: because of development. Because of developing what? Because of developing ... the Noble Eightfold Path.

“When, bhikkhus, a carpenter or a carpenter’s apprentice looks at the handle of his adze, he sees the impressions of his fingers and his thumb, but he does not know: ‘So much of the adze handle has been worn away today, so much yesterday, so much earlier.’ But when it has worn away, the knowledge occurs to him that it has worn away.

“So too, bhikkhus, when a bhikkhu dwells devoted to development, even though no such knowledge occurs to him: ‘So much of my taints has been worn away today, so much yesterday, so much earlier,’ yet when they are worn away, the knowledge occurs to him that they have been worn away.

“Suppose, bhikkhus, there was a seafaring ship bound with rigging that had been worn away in the water for six months. It would be hauled up on dry land during the cold season and its rigging would be further attacked by wind and sun. Inundated by rain from a rain cloud, the rigging would easily collapse and rot away. So too, bhikkhus, when a bhikkhu dwells devoted to development, his fetters easily collapse and rot away.”