

Study Guide for MN 70 The *Kīṭāgiri Sutta*

The Discourse at Kitagiri A Gradual Path

**I do not say that final knowledge is achieved all at once. On the contrary,
final knowledge is achieved by gradual training, by gradual practice, by gradual progress.**
MN 70.22

In a variety of ways the Buddha taught a path of progressive inner development culminating in Liberation and Final Knowledge. While the suttas give some examples of people attaining liberation quickly (e.g., Bahiya), it is assumed that they already had the requisite inner conditions for that attainment. For those without these requisites the Buddha described the path (*magga*) from a number of different perspectives. In this sutta (and in MN 95) he describes it from the point of view of a student relating to the teachings. In the Eight-Fold Path it is from the point of view of the qualities to be developed, sometimes summarized as the qualities of *sila*, *samadhi*, and *panna*. The 14 step program in MN 27 is from the perspective of the practices undertaken.

Some sub-sections of the gradual path are themselves described in terms of progressive development. For example, the training in *samadhi* is sometimes described through the 16 stages of Mindfulness of Breathing (*Anapanasati*) and the stages of *jhanas*.

Though practice is described in relation to a path, it is not a geographical path; one is not going some place. Rather it is a process of inner development and transformation leading to Awakening which is itself categorized into four progressively complete levels of release.

In MN 70 the Buddha admonishes two monks for not having faith. Because of this lack they seem to neglect the path of learning, understanding and practicing the teachings. In particular they did not go listen to the teachings. These two monks appear frequently in the *Vinaya* where they belong to a group of monks whose inappropriate behavior prompted the Buddha to establish many of the monastic rules.

The sutta begins with the Buddha telling his monks to abstain from eating at night (the rule prohibiting monks from eating after the noon hour had not yet been made). However the two monks refuse to go along with this. Their rationale is interesting because it resembles a “rely-on-your-own-direct-experience-stay-in-the-present-moment” logic. At MN 70.4 the monks ask,

Why should we abandon [a benefit] visible here and now to pursue [a benefit to be achieved] in a future time?”
(Bhikkhu Bodhi)

Why should we, abandoning what is immediately visible, chase after something subject to time?”
(Thanissaro Bhikkhu)

(te mayam kiṃ sandiṭṭhikaṃ hitvā kālikaṃ anudhāvissāma)

The monks stated that they were enjoying “health, strength, and a comfortable abiding.” Why then should they give up their present enjoyment for the sake of some nebulous future goal? Isn’t it enough to just stay in the moment with what is?

In response to this the Buddha analyzes the consequence of certain experiences. Some pleasant experiences are helpful in developing a person’s wholesome states while some are harmful. Some unpleasant experiences are helpful while some are not. The Buddha claims that he fully understands these things and so can instruct people in which things to abandon and which things to engage in.

This implies that the Buddha gives instruction based on things he knows but which may not be known by the people he instructs. The students are thus required to have enough faith or conviction in the Buddha so they will follow his instruction even if it entails unpleasant feelings.

MN 70 is often quoted because it differentiates seven kinds of practitioners or followers of the Buddha. Many interpretations have been made of the first two practitioners, i.e., the one “liberated-in-both-ways” and the one “liberated-by-wisdom” (MN 70.15-16). It is sometimes claimed that the former has attained liberation through the practice of *jhana* while the second does so without *jhana*. This then supports a further claim that the Buddha taught two meditation paths, one based on *jhana* and one based on *vipassana* without any reliance on *jhana*. There is no explicit mention of *jhana* in the descriptions of these two people. It is probable that the “liberations that are peaceful and immaterial, transcending forms” are referring to the formless *jhana*s. The person liberated-by-wisdom could have practiced the first four absorptions, sometimes called the ‘form *jhana*s.’

It is noteworthy that two of the seven categories of practitioners are characterized by faith: those ‘liberated-by-faith’ and those who are ‘faith-followers. The former has deeply rooted faith in the Buddha and attained a degree of liberation. The latter has no degree of liberation but has “sufficient faith in and love for the Tathagata.”

Differentiating seven types of practitioners points to the different dispositions people have and how those dispositions lead people to follow somewhat different paths. A person with strong faith may practice differently than someone whose wisdom/discernment predominates.

Reflections:

In reviewing the history of your Buddhist practice do you notice ways in which you have gradually developed and grown in the practice? What were the conditions that most supported the periods of greatest growth? Do you currently have a sense of movement along a path?

Which type of follower characterizes you the best, the Dhamma-follower or the Faith-follower? What might be the strengths of your type? What might be the weaknesses?