

Introduction to “The Path of Practice”

by Gil Fronsdal

Introduction to Readings for Week 4

Reading:

- review the “Introduction” to the *Middle Length Discourses*, pp. 32-38
- MN 70, 107, 141, 117, 125
- (optional: MN 24)

The Buddha of the *Middle Length Discourses* repeatedly provides systematic and well-developed instructions on the path of practice. Rather than laying out a comprehensive religious philosophy, he taught a comprehensive course of practice. In the terminology of modern religious studies, this path has been described as soteriological in that it is concerned with liberation.¹ In the languages of India, the Buddha was teaching a “Path” or *magga* (Sanskrit: *marga*). Interestingly, the Pāli language has no obvious word that we would translate as ‘religion.’ However, the *magga* functions in much the same way as a concept that places Buddhism in the context of other Indian religion that also offers a ‘path.’

The centrality of the metaphor of a path appears in the first teachings attributed to the Buddha preserved in the discourse *Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma*.² This text begins with the Buddha explaining he has “awakened to the middle way (*majjhima patipāda*), which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna” (SN 56:11). He then equates the middle way with the Eightfold Path comprised of eight factors or practices: Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. MN 141, assigned for this week, provides an analysis of part of this discourse by the Buddha’s disciple Sāriputta.

The metaphor of a path suggests a course of action that a person undertakes to reach a particular destination. The Eightfold Path is a general overview of the major areas of life a

¹ Soteriology comes from the Greek *soteria* meaning ‘salvation.’

² This is found at *The Connected Discourses* 56.11 and the *Vinaya* I. 10-12.

practitioner addresses in walking the path. In the *Middle Length Discourses* the Buddha provides other descriptions of progressive courses of practice. As we have seen, the *Cankī Sutta* contains the 12-step sequence for discovering the truth. MN 27, the first reading for this section, has a 10-part progression from first becoming a monastic to eventually practicing meditation to the point of enlightenment. MN 107 has a similar 8-part sequence that ends with attaining the four meditation states of *jhāna*, and MN 125 has a 12-step progression from moral restraint to the destruction of the taints.

The idea of progress along a path of inner cultivation is also seen in the various lists of mental qualities and states developed along the path. These lists are commonly presented in a sequential order from preliminary to more developed mental states, each state a support for the development of the subsequent ones. So, for example, the Eightfold Path begins with Right View and ends with Right Concentration. The list of the five faculties begins with faith and ends in wisdom, the seven factors of enlightenment begin with mindfulness and ends in equanimity. When these and other lists are compared it becomes clear the early discourses have a clear sense of progressive spiritual development. The handout included in this week's reading has a table with six lists from the suttas. By comparing the six we can see they all contain a similar pattern to spiritual growth. By selecting the most common factors from these lists we can posit that for the early Buddhist tradition, spiritual growth follows the progressive sequence of faith, effort, joy, tranquility, happiness, concentration, equanimity, and wisdom.

In the reading for this week, MN 70 and 95 describe the path it from the point of view of a student relating to the teachings. In MN 141 and 117 the teachings of the Eightfold Path are presented from the perspective of the qualities to be developed; and the 14 step program in MN 27 is presented from the perspective of practices undertaken. In addition to describing a path, some sub-sections of the gradual path are themselves described in terms of progressive development. For example, the training in meditation is sometimes described through the 16 stages of mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*). At other times meditation is described as going through four levels of progressively refined states of absorption (*jhāna*).

The importance of faith at the beginning of the path is suggested by the six lists that have faith (*saddhā*) at or near the beginning of the sequence. Repeatedly faith is described as integral to becoming a monastic; in this week's reading it is described with the phrase "clansmen who have gone forth out of faith" (MN 107.15). As an element of the Buddha's path of practice, faith is a step along the path. Its role is to motivate a person to practice; in his teachings to Prince Bodhi, the Buddha listed faith as one of the factors of striving that lead a person to learn a skill (MN 85.58). Progress on the path of liberation is dependent on acquiring particular skills that culminate in enlightenment.

The Tathāgata is the one who shows the path.

-the Buddha (MN 107.14)

Questions to consider

- Sometimes the path is divided into three categories: Ethics, Meditation, and Wisdom. How do the elements of the path models described in this week's reading fit into these three categories?
- Do you think the path descriptions are more prescriptive or descriptive or perhaps a combination of both? What gives you this impression?
- These paths are depicted as straight lines going in a single direction. Why do you think the paths are described in this way?
- Any difficulty in accomplishing the path elements is not included in the discussion of the paths. Why do you think this is? Do you think it would be relevant? If it were to be included, how might that be accomplished?
- Examining the different elements of the different paths, which elements are depicted as arising as a natural consequence of the preceding step and which elements are depicted as requiring distinct effort by the practitioner?