

Introduction to Buddhism Part 3: The Path

Gil Fronsdal

February 03, 2020

Keywords: magga, mārga, Ānanda Mārga, nibbāna, precepts, generosity, mindfulness, impermanence, conditionality, Eightfold Path

In the beginning of the year, I started a ten-part series called Introduction to Buddhism. I do that here on Monday nights when I'm here, and today I'm here. So this will be the third talk in the series. Just as a background introduction for those of you who might be new to this, to call it an introduction to Buddhism is actually a strange thing to say, because there are many forms of Buddhism, and no one really should be in the position of representing all of Buddhism. But a lot of people who are Dharma teachers have a little bit of religious license to say something like a shorthand introduction to Buddhism. What we mean is it's an introduction to the Buddhism of my tradition, or the tradition locally.

So we're getting a particular take on Buddhism from me, not supposed to be the pristine, perfect Buddhism that has been taught down through the ages, because there is no such thing. There's only that which people have found useful, and they try to teach and try to pass on. As we pass it on, it's with the spirit and the attitude that you'll try it on and find out what works for you, and the whole spirit of trial and error. It's a hugely important part of discovering what Buddhism is for oneself: to learn some teachings and learn some practices, and then try it on, experiment with it, and find out in what way it applies in your life, or how useful it is in your life, or how it supports you in your life. Now, however, at the same time, Buddhism is called a path, and in the ancient Buddhist language it's *magga*. Some of you familiar with modern Indian languages know it as *mārga*.

There is a religion called Ānanda Mārga, which is a great name because it means a path of joy—the joy path. So Buddhism is a *magga*, a path, and it's a path that goes to some place, and that place is the guide for how we experiment, the trial and error we do. If you want this as the goal of your practice, then Buddhist practice is used for that purpose. Actually, there can be many goals of Buddhist practice. Sometimes it's good to be clear why you are practicing

Buddhism, why you're interested in it, so you can explore, experiment, do the trial and error, and find out how the teachings and practices work for you given the goal, the purpose that you have.

There's plenty of people who come to Buddhism these days because they want stress reduction, which is a great thing, and that's a particular goal. So then, how do these teachings work for that? Some people are coming to live a happier life, a better life, and a life of greater integrity. How does that work out? What are the teachings and practices? Some people are looking to calm their minds in some very deep way. How do the teachings support that, bring some kind of peace?

Some people are looking for enlightenment, because Buddhism is famous for enlightenment. Some people are looking for it and don't have a clue what it is, but they know they want it. It's the ultimate, the greatest. It'll make you, you know, certainly the most popular person on your block. So it'll be great, lots of friends, and all kinds of success in life if you could just get enlightened. It doesn't really matter what it is—it's just a great thing. But it also helps to know what it is.

There are, again, different ideas of what enlightenment is in Buddhism. So you go around and see what speaks to you, what inspires you, or what fits you. Sometimes people come to Buddhism and they're very inspired by the goal, like the idea of *nibbāna* or enlightenment, awakening, and they hear a particular expression of what that means, and that inspires them. That's what they want. Sometimes people encounter the practice and just love the practice, the way it's presented, and they don't really care that much or think so much about where it goes, but they're just inspired by the practice.

For example, some people find the mindfulness dedication is to be honest. Some people have a tremendous kind of inspiration in their lives to be honest and live an honest life. Mindfulness is a practice of honesty, of self-honesty. Every moment that we're mindful is a moment of recognizing actually what's happening and being honest about it to oneself. Where that goes, people may not be so clear, but that's what they want: to live a life of integrity, with that kind of honesty, and have that available. Some people are inspired by the notion of compassion.

Buddhism offers a practice to try to live that, or supposed to meet compassion and be of service to the world. Awakening doesn't really have that much inspiration for them, but the idea of a life of compassionate care, with a kind of ethos of what Buddhism is, a kind of values of Buddhism that maybe are less supernatural than some of the religions they grew up with and don't care for so much anymore. So, in a sense, you can personalize it, and how far you

can go and still call it Buddhism is an open question. But it's okay because there's no one who has the authority to tell you what it is. Though there are lots of people who will judge you if you say, "This is what Buddhism is," or you teach it this way. People will say, "No, that's not it. You're too much that, too much this. You're not doing the right thing. There's the right one."

You know, you teach too much about rebirth. You don't teach enough about rebirth. You teach about, you know, your teaching is way too secular. You're just secular humanistic values. And really, there are great spiritual values we have to include, and without that, it can't be. Or yes, you're teaching meditation, but you're not teaching enough ethics. Yes, you're teaching ethics, but you're not teaching enough meditation. And it goes on and on and on. One reason is because, I guess, it's a religion. I don't know if you've noticed, but religions bicker a lot, at least some of the ones that are more public, and Buddhists are not free from that either.

If you go back to the ancient teachings of the Buddha, he has some teachings that are quite radical, and I find quite inspiring. One of them is: Don't bicker about all the different views. It's not about having views. It's not about having opinions. In the most ancient teaching, it's not about having opinions. It's not about holding on to ethics, making ethics ultimate. It's not about having religious practices and making their practices ultimate. It's not about some great cosmic experience of consciousness, some wonderful opening and special state of consciousness, and all the things that many times people associate Buddhism with. That's not what it's about, really. They're part of it, maybe, and they have their place—some of these things, like ethics—but it's a very simple goal, kind of what I talked about two weeks ago: it's not to cling. Don't cling to anything.

Then you might ask, "Well, why shouldn't I cling? Isn't that useful?" The reason not to cling is that clinging is suffering. Clinging is painful. Sometimes it's painful immediately. Sometimes people cling unconsciously, unknowingly to things for decades, and then something happens—it's torn away from them, the thing they cling to, and it's devastating. Then they start to see that they are really holding on to this, they're depending on it, and it didn't serve them in the end. So one of the ways of seeing the goal of Buddhism, and this is what inspires me a lot, is the end of suffering, the end of clinging that brings suffering.

So then the question is, if that's the goal, what's the means to that? How do you live? What are the teachings? What are the practices that lead to that? So there's the experiment: we learn them and we apply them for ourselves. It's not my job to tell you what you should do or what Buddhism exactly really is. I just have to get in the ballpark well enough to inspire

you—just well enough that you try to try some of these things out and then find what works for you and what's best. That way, it's not exhausting being a teacher, because if a teacher is supposed to get everyone the pristine and perfect practice and pristine, perfect Buddhism, exactly the right view and philosophy, this is what it is and get everyone to agree on that—that's exhausting. But if you allow me just to be close enough that it's something that works for you, that's meaningful for you, gives you a new perspective, supports you in some way, and that you can apply and use in your life, then I think hopefully we've done the job.

So Buddhism is called a path. What a path means is that it's practices that lead you somewhere, that take you somewhere. It's something you walk. The metaphor of a path is something that you bring your whole body into—you walk on a path. So it's something you engage in with all of yourself. It's not meant to be, traditional Buddhism, not meant to be a hobby. It's not meant to be something you do just on Sunday or something, but it's something that you engage your whole life with, all of you. That's what the offering is, an idea.

For some people, the idea of the end of suffering, and the idea of understanding what that potential is about, can evoke a tremendous amount of compassion as we encounter the suffering in the world around us. Then we understand something about suffering, the cause of it, how to address it, how to meet it, how to respond to it in ways that hopefully not only help us not suffer more, but help us to suffer less, and do the same for other people, support other people not to suffer. So it's called a path. Classically in Buddhism, there are two distinct paths that are taught by much of the tradition. One is a path for people who just want to live a happier life, either in this lifetime or in future lifetimes. So it's advice for living a good life for the purposes of going to the good place. Then there's the other path, which is the path of awakening.

The path of awakening, or the path of liberation or freedom from suffering, calls for a higher level of commitment. It's meant to be for people who really want to put all themselves in here and somehow be transformed in the process. For people who want the path of liberation, there are three major trainings in that path. One of the ways Buddhism is referred to is as a path; it's also called a training. Buddhism is a training because we're training ourselves in some way. There are three major categories of trainings: there is ethics, there is mental development, and there is wisdom. These are a whole set of things that we engage in. If you want to be involved in the path of liberation, you do all three. If you want to do the path of worldly happiness, then the primary emphasis is on ethics.

What's happened here in the West, and not just in the West but in modern Asia in the last hundred years as well, is that a lot of lay people have also started to learn meditation. Many

people who do meditation are not really so interested in awakening, the insight or the wisdom, but they are using meditation to live a healthier, happier life. The great example of this is what's nowadays called secular Buddhism here in the West, where people can go to a local hospital, clinics, spas, libraries, and even corporations, and they have classes in mindfulness. We have someone here at IMC who currently is teaching a class in mindfulness. We're invited to go teach students at a local college. I asked, "Why do you want someone from a college to come and teach your college students?" I was told, because there's an epidemic of suicides on national colleges, and we have to bring knowledge to the students and mindfulness. Students are coming to college already being introduced to mindfulness meditation; they want more of it, or they want to be taught more. So it's not there for awakening; they're there for a happier, healthier kind of life. That's kind of exciting to bring these together.

But classically, the people who want a happier life are living an ethical life. What's nice is these two paths, the path of awakening and the path of a healthy, happy life, share the same first training: a training in ethics. For lay people, the path for awakening, as is classically taught in Buddhism, is to be ethical, primarily through adhering to five sets of precepts: not killing, not stealing, not engaging in sexual misconduct, not lying, and not making yourself crazy with drugs and alcohol—don't get intoxicated. Those five are considered fundamental trainings for lay people. The interesting word is they're called trainings. They're not called commandments. It's not all or nothing, and if you break them, you go to hell or something. These are trainings that you are training to grow into, to really learn how to live that way. It's a process of trial and error, of reflection, thinking deeply about your life, trying to do your best, and trying not to do those things.

An example would be, it is not uncommon for someone to come to me and they're trying to live an ethical life. In this kind of environment, there are people living, in some ways, a pretty ethical life. So they come to me, and they are asking about the first precept not to kill. They're not in danger of killing people, but they feel like they need to fumigate or put poison on their homes because of the ants or the cockroaches or the termites or something. What do I think about that? What I think about that is, I'm so happy that they're asking. I'm so delighted that someone is concerned about the welfare of these little critters, that they're reluctant to kill them, and they feel some kind of moral concern that they come to me and ask me, "What do you think of this?" So that's one of the things I say, and it doesn't answer their question. But I generally don't want to answer their question. I don't want to be in the position of arbitrating what they should or shouldn't do, what's right and what's wrong. But I will encourage them to go look for all the alternatives to killing.

I say that a lot of times people are quite quick to go for the violent way, the supposed easy way, and to be done with it. But to really live an ethical life is, at minimum, to really reflect deeply about what we're doing and look for alternatives and how to accomplish what we feel we need to do without causing harm. Many years ago, when a person came to me and said she was thinking of getting a gun to protect herself, and what did I think, I didn't say then I was happy that she was thinking that way, but I did say I didn't want to answer her question yes or no. But I did want to encourage her to consider the alternatives. There are a lot of alternatives. It might actually make you safer. But it takes time and effort to get trained and to get wise. The idea of a gun is quick; you don't have to get trained the same way.

So these five precepts are the core ethical guidelines for lay people interested in just living a healthy or happier life. They tend to put together the conditions that, over time, the better circumstances come our way; they tend to create a good life that way. The other primary practice for lay people, for living a happy life, is generosity. There's something about the chemistry, the alchemy of generosity, and how we relate to other people and how we relate to ourselves, that really begins to change dramatically our relationships. To be generous to the people we live with in our communities, in our families, and our places of work, to make generosity a primary vehicle, a bridge to the world around us, changes that world we have around us. People relate to us differently. We relate to other people differently. Generosity gives us a deeper connection to people. We see them in different ways. We don't see them just on the surface. We don't see them just as instruments for our own welfare.

It really creates a healthy relationship to the world around us that will come back and support us and support the kind of happiness that is reliable and good, that is much more helpful than winning the California lottery for the sake of happiness. They've done studies of people who enter big jackpots and lottery, and they study them a year after they win, and they're less happy than they were before they won. You still want to win? Many people will say yes, and be, "We win the lottery and be unhappy—where do I pay for that?" So generosity is a path. Ethics is a path. The other path, the path of freedom from suffering, is traditionally in Buddhism the path for monastics, because back in the old days, especially in the time of the Buddha, there were not any centers down the road. You couldn't just drive down to IMC, to a local community center, and get teachings and meditate.

Even just a few decades ago, people would travel a long way to get Buddhist teachings. Not my direct teachers, but the grand-teachers, grandparents of mine in Dhamma, would travel through jungles for weeks because back in northern Tibet, back in the forests of northern Burma, there was this great meditation master, a great meditation teacher that people heard

about. There was no audiodharma, there was no bookstore to get the books, there was no radio. In order to get that Dharma teacher, you had to walk there, and people would spend weeks sometimes to find a teacher to sit there and learn from and teach, and so on. There was no support for that, and people's professions, people's work—most people didn't have vacation time to go on a meditation retreat. There were no meditation centers where you could just go and do a retreat. So the idea of having spiritual practice for really deep spiritual engagement available was, for the most part, unavailable for centuries and centuries unless you became a monastic.

Some people's drive for freedom from liberation was so strong that they had to do that. They would renounce the world and engage full time, wholeheartedly, in the practice. Some people suffer a tremendous amount; there are horrific challenges some people have been through. Sometimes ordinary life doesn't make any sense anymore. But to do something really serious and deep, like engaging in deep, full-time spiritual life, is what's healing, or what's liberating, or what's really the only thing that makes sense. There are other people whose personalities are contemplative in some deep way, and I've known people who are struggling to, if I may use this analogy, this metaphor, struggling to come out of the closet as contemplatives. Nobody wants, no other family members want them to be contemplative—meaning, they don't want them to live a quiet, meditative life of contemplation, of study, and the parents want them to go off to college. I've had people tell me later, "I'm supposed to be a doctor. All my family, all my siblings, are doctors. They want me to do that." Or, "I'm supposed to follow in my family's footsteps, take over the family business, but I just want to go off and study and practice and meditate."

Some people just are contemplative by personality, who they are. I've seen people finally step into that role, and you see that they kind of blossom. It's like that's who they are, and they just kind of inhabit that in such a beautiful way. So the people who want to go much further than just having a happy life, then there's those three trainings: a training in ethics, a training in mental cultivation, and a training in wisdom. The background for this kind of training is one of the fundamental orientations or understandings, perspectives the Buddha had on human life. It begins with the idea of change, that our life is characterized by impermanence. Most Indian religions at the time of the Buddha, like the Buddha, really emphasized how impermanent this world is. In Greece, it was Heraclitus who said, "You can't step in the same river twice," because everything's changing all the time. A lot of people understand that, and for many people, that's an important insight to have.

The Buddha's contribution to seeing the changing nature of this human life of ours is that the

change, the impermanent way things change and change over time, is not random. Change occurs based on the conditions that influence, that come to bear on the situation. So if it gets cold and there's a lot of humidity, those are the conditions for rain. If it's hot and not so humid, probably one can't have rain. As the climate changes because of climate change, those are conditions that we are having now—different kinds of weather all over the world. What are the conditions that contributed to that? There's some argument these days about what's the underlying human role in creating those conditions. But we certainly see that humans have created lots of conditions in recent decades and centuries that influence all kinds of things in the world. Human health is phenomenally affected by the conditions of how humans live their lives. The smog in cities around the world that people are getting asthma and worse is phenomenal, and it's clear that it's humanly caused smog. The conditions that we create shape how things change in the future, and that happens in our hearts as well, for our minds.

If you kill, steal, engage in sexual misconduct, lie, and maybe drink alcohol as you do it, all that creates a very different set of conditions influencing how your life can unfold than if you do the opposite. Chances are, if you break all the five precepts, you can end up being miserable, probably end up in jail or worse. If you do the opposite, that's a very different set of conditions that's going to create a very different direction in what your life's going to go. So the Buddhist teaching about impermanence is that we have a role in influencing how impermanence changes, how things change over time, by the conditions we put into the system. If what we want is to become free of suffering, we have to create the conditions that will allow that to happen. If you want to become free of suffering, and you just spend all your time, I don't know, reading romance novels, or watching pornography, or spending your time at the casinos, or just all kinds of things, that's not going to be the conditions that allow you to look deeply into your heart, deeply into your mind, and begin putting the conditions in place that begin to shape, change your mind in such a way that your mind can be transformed in a useful way.

This is called the second training. This is called mental cultivation. We're developing our mind. We're developing our mind to be mindful, to be able to be in the present moment, so we're not always being pulled away, being distracted by our thoughts, our preoccupations, our concerns. That's something we can train our mind to do. It takes practice, but practice and practice over and over again, and the mind will change. Mind is plastic. You can cultivate your mind to develop greater concentration. Concentration really helps a lot to stay calm, balanced, and to be able to see more clearly. Concentration practice is kind of like clearing

the windshield from dirt, so you can really see well, and so the mindfulness can be strong. But if the windshield is dirty, you can't see so well. So we cultivate concentration.

It's possible to cultivate equanimity, to cultivate a capacity to be non-reactive. A non-reactive mind puts in place very different conditions than a reactive one, and so different things happen, different things can unfold because of that non-reactive mind. We cultivate loving-kindness and compassion. We cultivate healthy feelings of goodwill, of generosity for the people around us, and that creates a very different inner landscape than one that is motivated by greed, or "I would acquire more for myself," or "I don't care about other people." So we cultivate these things. Initially, people might think, "That's too much. I can't do that," or "It just seems like too high up a mountain to climb, to change myself, and it's too hard." But actually, it's not that hard. It's remarkable how much the mind, the heart can grow, develop, and get stronger through regular practice. You have to do it regularly, ongoingly, again and again.

I'll give you my favorite analogy for how just doing small changes can be really big over time. I learned it from a yoga teacher. A long time ago, there's something called a triangle pose where you lean over to one side and try to get one hand flat on the ground, but if you can't lean over and you can't get your hand on the ground, the instructions I was told back then is to get some telephone books. Now, those of you who don't remember telephone books, the paper, the individual sheets of paper in a telephone book probably was not possible to have them thinner—they're about the thinnest paper you could see in ordinary life. So you get a stack of these telephone books, as many as you need, so you can get your hand flat against the surface, lean over. Every day you tear out one page, one page. That's so thin, it's inconsequential, seemingly. But you do it every day, and eventually all the pages will be gone and you'll have your hand down on the floor. That's training.

Some of the teachings about concentration make it seem so lofty and distant from my mind. The idea to be mindful and be in the present seems so distant and far away, given how distracted my mind is. But in fact, we can be trained if we do it slow enough. Can we do it slowly? Maybe if you meditate every day, you won't see the distance you've traveled because it's so thin, just like those thin pages of the telephone books. But over time you will change. So to cultivate it. What's very important by this teaching, a good teaching of conditionality, is we're not the cause of our spiritual change. We're not the cause for how we really change. We are just putting the conditions in place and allowing this natural process of growth and development to happen.

It's kind of like, I used to tell my kids—one of the ways I've bothered my kids is I would tell

them, "Please stop growing. I like you just the way you are. Stop." They were tiny kids, right? "Stop." Usually they'd laugh at me because they knew it was impossible, and they took it as a kind of an expression of love. If these kids are eating, they're going to keep growing, right? You can't stop. Turns out we don't stop developing and growing when we turn seventeen, eighteen, twenty, whenever, whatever it is. When you're an adult, the natural movement towards growth, towards maturation, can continue until you're a hundred if we create the conditions for that natural growth to happen. Most people get so preoccupied and caught up with lay life and adult life that they actually will put a stop to that natural maturation that's there. The practice of mindfulness, of concentration, of kindness are, in some ways, helping us get out of the way, taking the distractions—the greed, hate, and delusion, the fears we live under—and getting them out of the way to allow this natural growth to continue happening. It really feels that way.

So it's a beautiful thing because it takes it out of me, myself, and mine. It's almost like not you who's growing—it's just nature. It's the natural nature of the mind, the heart, to grow in these beautiful ways. One day, I think, one of the really beautiful adventures of human life is to do these kinds of mental cultivation practices that help us to encounter and experience this natural wonder of the inner growth, the maturation, the movement that can be there. It doesn't have to be dramatic, but in small ways we get changed and develop over time if we put the conditions in. One of the conditions is to put in the effort. One of the conditions is to be willing to be changed. Without that willingness, we won't change, probably.

Then the third training is the training in wisdom. Wisdom is to have insight, deep understanding of our minds, how it works, of our clinging, the nature of attachment, and the nature of freedom. The best kind of insight you can have in Buddhism is to really understand the nature of freedom. That's to really feel and know firsthand something about the nature of how the mind becomes free, and then have that as a reference point for how you live your life. To have that like your North Star, a guide. That's how you can be free. Then you go through your life, and you see all the ways you have a choice, or all the ways you get caught, and you know there's another way. Because you have already had a kind of embodied experience of freedom, you really can see the difference now between being caught and not being caught. Then you can navigate with that, and maybe lean in the direction of freedom, of how not to be caught. If you lean in that direction, that's a condition for the growth of freedom. If instead you lean in the direction of your clinging—it's too much work to be free, it's easier to cling—that's a condition for reinforcing the habit of clinging.

Beginning to have these insights, very practical insights, gives us much greater choice and

gives us a clear sense of what the purpose is we're doing this for, because now we really know it for ourselves. It becomes more and more of a personal experience, this path. It remains a path, the path we walk and engage in and move and develop in. But more and more, as we do it, it becomes our own path. They say in Buddhism that as you keep doing it, at some point you become the path. Isn't that nice? One teacher said that then, when you really understand Buddhism, Buddhism becomes you somehow—the joining of the two.

In terms of this Introduction to Buddhism series, I wanted to convey to you a few points today. One is that this is a very personal path that we explore and develop for ourselves, and we use ourselves as the canvas. We use ourselves as the material that we're experimenting with. We have to have some sense of what the goal is that we have, and then we're trying to make it match, experiment or practice in the way that supports our goal. If you mostly want to have a happy life, then by all means be ethical and be generous. If you want to do a bit more, be kind. If you want to do a little bit more, meditate. But if you want a path of liberation, if you're interested in the full potential of this path, then you need to do more than ethics and generosity. Then it's really the work of mental cultivation.

It's a path, meaning that it's an unfolding, it's a journey, it's a growth. It's not a sudden, all-or-nothing kind of thing—hit the enlightenment button and you'll be happy ever after. Why should I do all this hard work when I can just take LSD or psilocybin? Or maybe there's an app and we can, you know, much more efficient than meditation. The idea is to walk a path that includes all of who we are, not a quick fix, and become transformed in the process. Classically, that's to be transformed, to become a totally free person who knows firsthand what it means to be liberated or free, which is synonymous in the classic Buddhist language with experiencing a profound level of peace—a peace where we feel completely at home in our hearts, quietly at home and alive, without any suffering, without any feeling of oppression or limitation. We just feel and know, feel free. So a path of practice—we walk a path. Next week when I come, I'll talk about one version of this path, a very famous version of it called the Eightfold Path that's at the foundation of the classic Buddhist teachings. So thank you.