

Onward Leading Journey

Gil Fronsdal

2024-02-04

So, one of the ways that Dharma practice is described is that it's onward leading. And that implies movement. And there's two kinds of movement that most characteristically kind of represent the Dharma. One is that usually in English you say a path that we walk. And the other is a current of the river that we float in, that carries us along.

The path metaphor suggests that we have to engage, we have to do something, we have to bring ourselves along, we have to walk, walk the path. The current, the river current metaphor, suggests that not so much we have to do, except stay in the current and be carried by something.

And it's a significant point in the practice when it shifts from one to the other. For people who are beginning, it can take a lot of effort, a lot of walking, a lot of engaging in it. At some point, the onward leading feels like it's almost innate, and something has been carrying us.

There's something onward moving, and what is that onward moving that we feel or sense? Or what is it? And I find it kind of inspiring to think that it's, maybe it's somewhat related or similar to the onward moving nature of a little child growing. What is it that propels the growth of a baby, a child?

Like, I used to try to stop my son from growing. I put my hand on his head and said, "Stop!" He would laugh, you know, because, you know, it's, you know, he fit so well in my arms at one point, the little baby, and I remember those days. But nope, there's something propelling him to grow.

And this movement, the on upward movement of, like, you know, by the time we had the second child, I wasn't so eager for the milestones to happen, you know, walking and talking, because they just meant more problems. The first kid, I didn't know that. Like, I was like, cheering him on. Couldn't make way to, you know, even worry, like, why isn't he there yet? Second one, take your time.

But you know, what is it that propels them to learn and develop and grow? What is that natural process? And what is a natural process that propels us, in a sense, onward in this Dharma practice? Maybe it's as natural as a child growing, a tree growing, something.

So, there's onward leading nature of the path. And there's a very classic description of the Dharma, which I find still very inspiring, very evocative, that the Dharma is something that's immediately visible, here and now. It's immediate. So, it's visible, here and now. It's immediate, meaning it's not really part of the past and the future. That's not the orientation. It's something that really we connect to here.

It is, it's a very colloquial expression for this. It literally in Pāli, it's a very simple, ordinary term, "Ehe Pasiko." It means, "Hey, hey." It doesn't say, "Hey," but I add that to make it even more kind of colloquial. "Hey, come see." And so, some people translate it as, "It invites inspection. It invites us to come and

look.” But really, just saying, “Come, come along, come see.” And see for yourself. And then, onward leading, and to be experienced personally by the wise.

So, something that each person, you’re, this description, you’re the wise one. That you’re supposed to experience for yourself. So, that’s what the Dharma is. Whatever, you know, it’s something that’s immediate, visible, experience for yourself, inviting to you to come and take a look.

And so, one of the most classic metaphors for the practicing the Dharma is the notion of a path. And I’m inspired by this notion of a path. And probably because I, under the influence of kind of European English culture, where a path is kind of idyllic, it’s kind of pastoral, it’s kind of like, you know, it’s wonderful little, I love, you know, hiking in the mountains on little paths, and then the forest, and it’ll pass and finding my way.

And, you know, it’s kind of like wonderful thing. And for some of us in the American speaking world, at least, you know, like, each person has to, you know, find their own path. Great individualistic thing, find your own path, you know. And so, it turns out that the word in Pāli, the ancient language, Buddhist language, that doesn’t really mean path. It’s the word for road. But road is not so inspiring. We associate with roads with asphalt, and cars drive on roads.

And so, you know, the eightfold road, let’s get, it doesn’t quite evoke something as heartfelt as it, for many of us, as the eightfold path. At least we’re so, you know. But there’s a difference between a path and a road. A path is usually, I associate, usually something narrow. And it’s something that’s in the woods, something in the wilderness or something. And it’s usually a narrow thing. And it’s easier to kind of feel like you’re walking it alone, when you walk on a path.

And even if you go with a group of people, they, let’s say you walk a path, the distance between people stretches out. And maybe you don’t see the people in front of you, because they’re like around the curve, and are behind you or something. A road is wide. And for the Buddha, who spent most of his adult life on the flat plains of northeastern India, you know, the roads were flat, a lot, solid and wide.

And a road is something you can, a lot of people can accompany you on. They can walk side by side, you walk together. There’s room for, if you have, if you found your road, the road, you can invite all your friends to join you. You can do it together, in a way that, a path that feels more like you’re on your own. But the road, you can, it’s wide enough to hold all your friends, all your family, your whole community. It’s a wide thing.

And in fact, it’s very valuable, this idea of walking the path, walking the road, together, and being accompanied. And I like to think of it as that we’re walking the road with the Buddha, that he accompanies us. And the same road he walked.

And at some point, as we get along with this, you have to appreciate that there’s all these paradoxes, you know, that two things, you have to hold both in the Dharma. So there’s a path, it’s path, the road that you walk, and there’s also the river you get into that carries you. Something, at some point, you

walk this road enough, something begins freeing up, opening up, begins to grow and develop.

And you feel like there's an onward leading momentum in the practice. And I have a little bit sometimes, when I go for long hikes, especially over like, you know, for many days in a row, after a while, there is a feeling of like, I'm not walking. There's this force, this momentum inside of me, that energy inside of me, like, I'm just like, you know, sometimes I end up walking faster and faster as I get into it. I get in shape, I get stronger.

And it's like, whoa, just, you know, cruising along, kind of. It's onward leading movement, onward leading movement of the walking. Something, I'm in the stream now of walking, I'm being carried by it, somehow. And so, the onward leading, the road, implies a destination.

That we're going someplace. At the same time, in some ways, we understand the destination is right here, now. It's not somewhere else. So how do you hold both of those? We have the idea that, and again, maybe has something to do with some of this Western culture that some of us have grown up in, where there's a very strong, among many Westerners, to prioritize or emphasize how great it is just to be and not to do.

And some, like, like, sometimes that's been really nice for me and helpful for me. Because sometimes in my life I've been too much in, like, actively, anxiously doing, doing, doing. And then, oh, you don't have to do, you can just be. Ah. So that's nice.

But actually, they both need it for the Dharma practice. There's what we have to do. And there's what we be. And they eventually don't have to be two different things. The doing is the, is being. Being is the doing. They two don't have to be separated. In fact, to have them as two different things shortchanges us.

So all these things, there's a destination, but the destination is here. Destination is here. There's what you have to walk, but then there's how you get carried along. There's how you just be, but there's also the doing you have to do. So all these go together, not to confuse you and get you all tied up in knots, but rather to, to appreciate the richness of it. And, but also to not shortchange yourself.

To

, to, to choose any one of these sides actually limits you, eventually. Sooner or later, all these sides come together and are working together. And one of the one I want to emphasize today, this idea of the, of the Buddhist practice being a journey. It's onward leading, it involves going someplace.

And in that journey, it's the point of it, a big part of it, is the journey itself. And maybe not the destination. There's a destination, freedom, liberation, awakening. But the journey itself is what we have to settle into and just trust the journey, or just trust the next step, be the next step of the journey.

We'll be changed by that journey. We'll keep, grow like a child grows, we'll grow in the Dharma, just giving ourselves some next journey. I still remember my son taking his first steps. Guess what? Amazingly, as a proud parent, his first steps were seven. But then he fell. Oh, my son fell. He failed.

I didn't think that. But I could have. Like, the point is to walk. And by golly, he stopped walking. He fell. And I could have gotten angry and gave him a talking to explain, like, this is not how it's done. When you walk, you walk. That's what they say in Zen. When you walk, you walk. No, no. You know, it's the point is a journey for a kid, little kid like that.

The point is the process. And of course, they're gonna fall. And then they get up and they walk some more and they fall. And eventually they don't fall so much, until they're old enough to start that again. And so the, so just part of the life process.

So, we're on this journey. And the point of the lot of journey is just being on the journey. What come, what come, what may. And we just keep practicing and working. But one of the things that can support this journey, in this momentum, this both what we do, the walking we do, and the stream that carries us, is to have a feeling, an understanding cognitively, but also a feeling for what is, where's the onward leading nature of this?

Where's the inner sensations, the inner sense that, oh, this now is onward leading. This is where we go forward here. There's the next step. And that can be not just a cognitive like idea, but you can actually feel it in your body. It's not somewhat different.

Maybe when you do walk, I have a friend who loves to walk off trail, off the paths. And she explained to me last week why she likes it so much. She says because all her senses are involved if she walks in the mountains off the trail. And every step is consequential. Every step she's, she's, she says, I'm being shaped by the terrain as I walk.

That's very different than I walk on the road. And there, every step, there's something inside of me that knows to step a certain way, to shift my weight a certain way, to turn my foot a certain way, to bend a certain way, to turn here and there and go. And it's not like she's planning it all out.

But she feels like all her senses are involved. And something inside of her knows and feels, you know, how to make all the little adjustments that have to be made to walk off trail in the mountains. And she feels very alive and connected to the earth, connected to the natural world when she does this. And so she, she finds great delight in it.

But so there, she has an on, there's something inside of her knows the weight of how to find her way. That's more than just, you know, following a map that she knows. She has to discover it as she goes. So the onward, onward leading nature of it.

So I want to take you on this journey, or take you on a journey. So many of the teachings in Buddhism are organized, like, especially like a lot of lists that some people are irritated by. But part of the lists are, they're actually depicting or representing the onward leading nature. You can kind of almost, if you can feel your way into these lists, sense them, not just kind of think of them as, you know, abstract lists.

But think of them as, or feel them as something that is embodied. Something that represents you and

your inner growth, your inner capacity to develop. That wants to come forth, just as much as a child wants to grow in a sense.

And that this represents this onward leading nature of the Dharma as we grow in it. So there's a list of this, this journey called the paramis, the ten perfections, the ten wonderful qualities that are developed, can be developed on the path.

You don't want to take this too seriously. You don't want to take the linear way in which is talked too seriously. And that you have to fit into all this. But, but what I want, what I want to do today is to convey these ten as a journey, as, as kind of a linear progression. One, building and setting the conditions for the next to arise.

And my dream is that, as I speak this, that I can kind of evoke some inner sensibility in you for each quality. That you'll, you'll maybe think about a reference point for each of these qualities. That maybe once upon a time in your life, this, you had, you felt this, you experienced this for yourself.

Maybe in some way that's more than just, you know, just an idea. But some way that shaped you or affected how you engage in the world, how you were and acted in the world, or how you felt and how you experienced yourself in the moment.

And then as you feel this, maybe, maybe you can kind of feel into how something inside of you maybe is oriented towards these qualities. Something inside of you feels, yes, this can be good. This can be, this is a place that, this is something that's worth making room for in your life.

That yes, this is something that you're capable of having, your system, maybe not in your ordinary thinking mind, but something deep inside, it's a source inside. Yes, yes, you're capable. Yes, in the right circumstances, yes, this wants to come out. Maybe not in all circumstances, but in enough circumstances.

So, so the Onward Leading Nature. So last time I taught here on Sunday, I talked about the Four Noble Truths. At the heart of the Four Noble Truths is our capacity to distinguish between the things that we do that bring suffering, and the possibility of being free of that suffering.

The things that make it simpler, because suffering is a big word, some people don't relate to, or just, but be able to distinguish experientially between what elicits in you, "ouch." That's a, that's not a sophisticated word. Just "ouch, oh, you know, that doesn't feel good. Oh, you know, that's stressful."

And what goes, "ah, ah, that's good." On a cold, windy day, you know, it's kind of like you tense up, and that's a little bit of an ouch, maybe. But then you stand in the sun, and something softens and warms up, and that's an "ah."

We can have the ability to distinguish between this very simple movement from "ouch" to "ah." And there are times where the "ah" direction just is a completely natural thing to do. I've been tense in my life, maybe my shoulders were up in my ears, and I've had friends come over and say, "Gil," maybe they even put their hands, you know, kindly on my arm and said, "Gil, you seem kind of tense."

And I didn't know it until they said it. And just because they said it, and reminded me I could feel it, and now I knew it, there was an onward leading movement. I didn't have to do it. I didn't have to think about it, or plan it out, or how I was going to do that. Something inside of me gives, gave away, and relaxed. "Oh, yes, I'm tense. Oh, that's true." That's the onward leading nature.

That was on. Something knows, something knows how to go forward in time to create health, to create a movement of goodness. So, the Four Noble Truths are partly teaching us, pay attention to this. Notice this. And for that, you have to be in the present moment. It's visible, it's experiential here and now to feel a "ouch" and "ah."

It's not really about the past and the future, it's about now. It's immediate. And there's something about this that invites us to come and look, to inspect. There's something about if you really notice your "ouches" and "ahs." It kind of like, calls you, pay more attention here.

And it's something which is onward leading, just as, just as dramatically as I relax when my friend tells me I'm tense. So, one example of something onward leading for me, when I was a relatively new Zen student, I worked with other Zen students at Zen Center.

Had a bakery back then on Cole and Parnassus in San Francisco, called the Tassajara Bakery. And I worked there. And so, one of the Zen priests ran the bakery. And one day I was upstairs in the office. I don't know what I was doing up there, but I was sitting next to him.

And he was opening, opening mail. And he read the letter that came. And he turned to me and asked me how he should respond to the letter. I was just a little kid. You know, I didn't know, I didn't know much. And I was certainly surprised that he would consult with me around the letter.

But what it was, was a local neighborhood association that was fundraising for something. And he said, "How much do you think we should give? The bakery should donate." And like, what? Donate? What's that? I didn't grow up with any kind of real understanding of donating and giving and why you would.

And I'm rather embarrassed to say this, especially what we are now here at IMC. But it was true. And so I was like a little confused what to say. I don't think I said anything. And it didn't compute for me. And then he said, "Oh, I think we'll do \$50." Which in 1979 was, you know, more than it is now.

And I said, "Wow. Like, wow. That's something. That really made an impression on me. It touched something in me. Something was awakened in me. It was a birth of some onward leading movement, some growth, something that was beginning to open in me around generosity.

It was a small little thing, and maybe it's not worth even a story to tell anyone, except it made a big, big impact on me. It was the beginning of something being, something was being, was born in that, witnessing that little experience and what he was doing.

And as I went along, there were other experiences like this. And then there were experiences where I

was able to be generous to others. And I felt something inside of me kept opening, something I could feel this momentum, how good, that was an “ah.” This is good. It’s not a “should.”

It’s, it’s a good. It’s not a “should.” It’s a, of course, this is what wants to come out. This onward leading nature. I learned that when it’s a “should,” and it doesn’t come from this onward leading kind of “ah, yes.” It’s not so healthy for me.

So the first of these ten paramis, this beginning of this journey, many times in the Buddha gives a kind of description of kind of the path of practice or the teachings. He begins with evoking generosity. And some people say that the path begins with generosity. It doesn’t have to.

But it’s an inspiring idea. Because generosity puts you in community. You can be generous to yourself, but I think, you know, it’s probably good sometimes to do that. But generally, generosity is something you do with others and to the world.

And so, to that the Buddha’s path begins with generosity, means it begins with our relationship to the world around us. It begins by rectifying or, or adjusting those relationships in a way that happens when you start practicing generosity.

When you practice generosity from this place of “ah,” rather than “should,” if you practice generosity, not out of, you know, you know, it’s a transaction and I’ll get something back. But you just, this wonderful openness and giving, that you have to, if you do it wisely, you have to pay attention to the relationships.

It clarifies relationships, it heals relationships. I’ve known people, people come to me and talked about, you know, some very difficult relationship they have with some family member or someone. Especially family members you can’t get away from.

And it seems like the other person is kind of unreasonable in their difficulty. And I say, just start practicing small acts of generosity. When you go visit that person, bring something you bake or cook. They’re just little things.

And sometimes people come back and say, “Gil, that made a huge difference. The person began to relax and began to treat me a little more kindly.” And, you know, so, so the act of generosity to change and develop and rectify and establish kind of a healthy relationship to the world around us that I think generosity can do.

It puts us, our practice, our life, in context of that what we do has an effect on the world around us. And the world around us has an effect on us. This is a, this is where the Dharma practice is not about going sitting in meditation alone or finding, taking your path, narrow, isolated path up in the mountains by yourself, getting away from all those difficult people.

I mean, for many, some of us occasionally, it’s like, life would be easy if it wasn’t for the people. And, but in fact, the Dharma practice is to be inclusive of that. And so, that it starts there. So, what is this

onward movement of generosity, of giving, to relate to people, to the world, from that place where there's an inner growth, inner call, to get, to offer a smile, to open the door for someone, to not grab the shopping cart at the grocery store, because, you know, because you're, it's closest one to you.

And as someone else is getting it, you just, I know, I don't, that's easier for me, just take this one. But rather, this person is a whole person themselves, who knows what difficulty their life has been, and what they've been up to in the moment. Maybe just like, here, there's a confusion about who was here at this grocery cart first. Here, please.

And the person relaxes. Oh, thank you. It's been a hard day. And to have someone just offer such a small thing, who knows what it does for them. And what does it do for you, if after you do it, they say, thank you, it's been a hard day. Oh, that felt good. That was an ah, that I didn't, wasn't selfishly grabbed it for myself. I kind of offered it to the person.

So as we practice generosity in this way, it provides more evidence, more connection to what feels like ouch, and what feels like ah. We get more sensitive to that. As we get more sensitive to that movement, we start seeing it in other areas of our life.

And it turns out that what is usually in English speaking world is called ethics. There's actually no word in Pāli for ethics. Isn't that something? That's a whole other story. But from our English point of view, Buddhism is very ethical. They just don't have a word for ethical. Isn't that great? Yeah, it's hard to believe.

But as, but they have a word for virtuous conduct. So as we go along, we start, the sensitivity leads us to understand that certain behaviors in relationship to other people are a big ouch. You know, if you kill people, that's an ouch. If you hit people aggressively, it's an ouch for you.

But to, not everyone realizes that. Not everyone is paying attention to what's going on in the side of themselves. Some people even say it feels good to hit someone. But actually it doesn't if you're really attentive. And if you're, you're sourcing your life in this deeper place where children grow, where you grow, you would feel the difference between behavior which is an ouch and an ah.

In English language, ethical behavior which is an ouch and an ah. So this is called sila. So often in Pāli, in English, it's translated as ethics. But the word is really has to do with conduct. Ethics is kind of a broader, maybe more deeper kind of thing. But it's, so the common translation these days is virtuous conduct.

So we start practicing virtuous conduct, which is the walking, is the doing. We do things. And so where's that onward leading? As we live more ethically and feel more these ouch and ah, this movement, then what do we feel next? So the next parami, so it's first generosity, and then we call it ethics for now.

The next one is a frightening word for some people. Off-putting renunciation. Oh, these Buddhists. Here we go. Letting go. But this letting go, in relationship to the ouch and the ah, is learning that I don't have to do the ouch thing. I don't have to do the greed, the hatred.

I don't have to be so afraid. I don't have to tense up so much. I don't have to be so caught in things, my preoccupations. That's an ouch, this way of living. It's actually I'm better off if I don't do these things. There's an ah on the other direction.

So renunciation, the English word, doesn't provide the richness of the word in Pāli, which has the meaning of much more, what, much more has meaning of what you gain, what you gain by letting go. We benefit. This onward leading movement towards growth and freedom is found in renunciation.

As we renounce, as we let go, this world of ouches and ahs becomes more sensitive, more richer. The sense of ah becomes more stronger and stronger reference point. The ability to be calm, to be relaxed, to be at peace becomes more and more of a reference point.

So we get more and more sensitive to the slightest little movements of ouch. The slightest movement of tension, of feeling uneasy. And that distinction is the classic distinction for wisdom. The fourth of these perfections. We become wise.

And isn't that because you read all the books about Buddhism and you know all about all the lists and you know, it's something really simple, this wisdom we're looking for. It's this onward leading feeling that we can have when you recognize this is healthy for me and this is not. This is beneficial for me and this is not.

And over time, that wisdom becomes more and more immediate, more subtle, more in all the little details of our life. And things that normally we wouldn't think of as being ethical even. It could be as simple as how you sit in a chair. You can feel, well, you know, this way I'm sitting, it's not so good for me.

I've sat in a couch in a way that totally expressed my depression. I couldn't slump anymore and still be in a couch. And by doing that, I learned I was actually reinforcing my depression. It wasn't healthy for me to collapse into the depression physically on the couch that way.

And I found that if I changed my posture and sat upright in a more, you know, dignified way, it didn't make the depression go away. But boy, was it a world of difference. There's, oh, there is some here now, there's some other thing happening here. There's a kind of an ah, there's kind of a movement towards health.

There's something here more than just collapsing into the depression. So sitting in a chair, you know, that meant, I use that as an example, that, you know, even subtle things that we don't pay attention to, start becoming more and more part of the, under the scope of Buddhist wisdom.

As we become wise, like this way, then the onward leading nature of the path comes along is that we're more motivated and inspired to act differently, to live differently, to engage in our life differently. And this is now the parami of viriya, vitality or effort.

That we become more interested in living a different way. And sometimes then because of that, we make huge behavioral choices. Some people actually will change something radical in their life, because

they realize this, what I'm doing, doesn't really work anymore. I think I have to change something big.

And so this viriya, this change, this effort, this engagement, becomes more important. That's what, that's what wants to grow. That's what has come out. As we engage more, making more effort, chances are, like most people, you'll have to be more patient.

Seven steps and you fall. Luckily, there was, that had no meaning for my little son. He was nine months old. The fact that he fell, it was a non-event for him, I think. It's just like, you know, that's what happens. That's what life is. Or I don't know. He probably didn't think about it.

But he, you know, the drive to stand again and walk was there. Yeah, so, but as we get older and we know more, some of us have to be more patient, more accepting, more tolerant, more spacious, more, you know, patient with ourselves, and patient with the path, patient with our life.

So effort is good, but we don't want to have the effort get in the way of that inner growth and opening. So we need a lot of patience to stand up again and try again. As we are patient, then the next parami is a connection to what is really true, truth.

And it's still just this ouch and this ah. It's really seeing how this applies and works in all kinds of areas in our life. And the truth that this, making this distinction and living by this distinction, and paying attention to this kind of movement, this path, this flow, this thing that wants to grow or move through us, this is true.

And not being, living close to it, is really a way of not being true to ourselves. So at some point, truth becomes really important. With a stronger connection to what feels true and truthful, the next of these ten is resolve.

And so something inside of us decides to become resolved, decides to become intentional, decides that this is what I'm going to put myself into. I'm going to give myself to this. This is important. And that can make a huge difference.

Some people come to a point in their life like this is really something I want to do. But resolve can make you a bit stern and strict and tight. So luckily, the ninth perfection, for me, is loving-kindness, is goodwill. And this also is part of the natural growth.

I was blown away by metta, by goodwill. When I first encountered it in this Insight Tradition that we did, that teachers were teaching it, and at some point I experienced it, and I said, "Wow, this is something." I mean, certainly the idea of being kind is a nice one.

But to experience a kind of onward flow or momentum of goodwill that's deeper than any idea that we have about it's a good idea to be kind. This was powerful. And this softens the resolve, reminds the resolve that the resolve that we have to practice should be relaxed, should not have any tension as part of it.

But it's still a dedication. And then the final part of me is equanimity. And equanimity can seem kind of cold and neutral to people. But here it's building on all this other growth and development over time, all the previous nine. And now equanimity is something that perfects all the others.

It's like, "Wow, now I understand the ouches and the ah of life and how it works. And now I can see that it's much better to not get be reactive. I can be at peace. I can be still. I can be in this world completely without being tripped up by it. Wow, this is possible."

And what that allows in Buddhist practice is when you're really practicing with a lot of equanimity, it puts you in the stream. Remember the stream that's part of the onward moving? That you just have to trust the stream and float in the stream. Then the stream can take you to the, in the classic analogy, the stream, the current of the river, will take you to the ocean.

The Ganges ends up in the Indian Ocean, or somewhere. And so, so a journey, a path, an unfolding, an onward leading, something like that is in you, part of you. Just like it was, you were a baby once, a toddler. Something in you to grow and to walk. Something in you new to learn to speak.

Something in you new to keep growing and developing. And something is here still for you that's doing the same thing that's available. Can you feel it? Can you sense it? Can you allow for it? Can you take time for it? That's what Dharma practice is.

And the Dharma is in you in this way. You have to walk it. It's a road that you walk with many people. It's a current in the river that you can trust. And it's visible here and now. But you have to pay attention. You have to take time to look for it. It's immediate. There's something about it that's right here, the next step you take.

It's something about it that invites inspection. Come look. It's onward leading. And it's something to be experienced by the wise. So, please be wise.

So I hope this, you could follow this journey. I hope it was interesting to do that. And maybe that's not the journey you have to take. I was just, if you could at all kind of follow. I was hoping that it would inspire you to pay attention to what your way, your journey is. It is very personal.

So this idea that it's your path is not off completely. But your path is a road with a lot of people walking next to you. Everyone's making their own path on the wide road. So, thank you for sharing it with us all today.