

## Seeing the Traces of the Path

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So the Buddha gave an analogy, which I would like to adapt for this talk. One day he talked about a forester, someone who worked in the forests, who roamed around the forest for their work, and one day came across the traces of an ancient road that had maybe been mostly overgrown and difficult to see. But he saw a trace of it. And he cleared the cleared little bit, and started following the road, and clearing it, and following it, and finding his way through it, until he came to an ancient capital that had long since been overgrown and been abandoned. And so then the forester went back to the monarchs of the lands and explained what had been found. And the monarchs came then to clear the road fully and to re-inhabit the great capital.

So partly what this analogy is used for in the teachings of the Buddha is to suggest that what the Buddha had to teach is ancient. He didn't invent it. He didn't, you know, dis-invent something or make something that hadn't already been there. But it was there available for everyone except it was overgrown with our preoccupations, our attachments, our contractions, our clinging, our graspings, our fears, our hatreds, our delusions, and so forth. And so he's rediscovered this ancient potential, this ancient possibility for all of us. And the task is to cut and clear the road, and to re-inhabit this beautiful place that's always been there for us, waiting for us, in a sense.

So the question is, what is the trace that we can find if we are the forester? What is the trace? What's the hint that shows us the path forward? And this idea of a road or a path is such a big metaphor in Buddhism about the journey of practice, the way that we grow and develop in the *Dhamma*. And I just love the idea of being on a journey that has an arc, has a beginning, a middle, an end, has an unfolding over time.

I think partly why I love it is that it's so organic, so part of the human condition, that there's always change. There's always a movement going on. And we see it with young children

that if you haven't been around a child for some time, you see that they've grown physically, and they've grown mentally, and capacities, and all kinds of things, and that with the right conditions, they grow beautifully, and you can't really stop them from, without a lot of effort, the natural process of their growth, the change that they unfold, maturation. And so the same way of maturation is psychological. And a maturation that we have doesn't end when we're eighteen or twenty-one, but that continues into adulthood, and right up until the time we die.

And many of you can probably recognize that in some ways you're wiser than you were ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years ago. Things that disturbed you tremendously, or things that you were afraid of, or you resisted, or that you really were grasping on to and clinging to—there might be some things you no longer do, that you've changed, and you go. You're wiser, you see clearly, and you know there are better options for you or what you used to have. No, you don't see the allure of it any more. So there is a sort of natural movement, and people who don't do any Buddhist practice at all go through a changing unfolding of it.

Sometimes there are challenges or things that interfere with the maturation of wisdom. And in that process, people get stuck. They get disappointed. They get betrayed. They have disappointments. They somehow get closed down, shut down, and so then are not available for the continued maturation process, which is a pretty natural process.

And so Buddhism is going along with that process, and then setting the conditions in place that really brings out the best in us, that brings out that freedom from being shut down, closed down, having the heart covered over with mud or with overgrown, overgrown and overgrown with all kinds of vines and shrubs and stuff that doesn't allow the heart to radiate or shine. And so this idea of a path, then a journey of that maturation process, is often talked about in Buddhism. So what are the traces we can find? And what I'd like to say is that those traces are available at the very first beginning of meditation, even before meditation, even first teachings or ideas of meditation, where there may be a recognition that all these teachings point to something. I can feel, I can sense, I can do it, that there is some freedom, some ease, some absence of stress that is possible for me. And now that is the beginning. That's the clue. That's the first traces of that road.

And what that means is that the traces and the road itself are not complicated metaphysics. They're not complicated beliefs and philosophy, but something experiential, something we can see and feel and experience for ourselves in the simplicity of—that's as simple as if you hold your hand in a tight fist. It begins being a problem, but if you release the fist, it becomes a lot easier. A fist feels freer and more comfortable. So we have all these fists of the heart, fists

in the mind with all these ways we contract. Or there might be strong resistance or strong pressure that lives inside of us that kind of obscures, gets in the way of our sense of ease or peace or freedom.

There might be a strong desire: You need to have something now. You need to have this now. And without this, I can't be happy. And the very intensity of the desire is the very thing that keeps us from being happy, rather than the thing that's going to make us happy. It's that intensity of wanting that obscures our natural capacity for the good heart to just kind of manifest, to show itself, to relax, to open. That doesn't need much but space, doesn't need much but quiet and freedom. To do so would be to express itself.

And so it's experiential, this sense of the difference between being stressed and being not stressed, being contracted and not contracted, being in bondage to something versus being freed from it, feeling under pressure, and then the release of the pressure, to feel the weight of the world, and the release of that weight, to feel a strong kind of shutting down of resistance, and then the release of that resistance. There are all kinds of things like that. Those are the traces of the path, that's what we're clearing. So when we first sit down to meditate and the shoulders relax in, that relaxing of the shoulders is maybe the first trace or hint of what Buddhism, what this Buddhist practice is all about. And so, rather than thinking that relaxing the shoulders is a preliminary practice, or a kindergarten practice of Buddhism, it itself is a little movement towards that ease, towards that freedom.

And so, rather than just relaxing the shoulders and then quickly moving on to whatever part you're going to do, take some time to appreciate, to feel, Ah, yes, it's a little bit more easy there now, more relaxed, more open, softer. Or sometimes when I relax my shoulders, it feels like I feel, Ah, that's good. But when I do so, what I feel, what's left is a little bit of the underlying tension and holding that might be there, and I feel that's good. Oh, this is good too. To know this, to be aware of it, and to be close to it, to feel it, because that's the way forward to go back to being tight. So the underlying tension is kind of masked. That's not desirable. It's really good to relax and to feel what's going on here. Ah, yes, it's like this. And then that allows for, over time, a deeper relaxation, deeper release.

And so something as simple as relaxing shoulders—I've been in social situations where I noticed my shoulders were tense, or my stomach was tight, and then I relaxed it. And it's not like something to write home about, and say, Look, what a great thing I did, you know, I've attained the fulfillment of Buddhist practice, you know? It's kind of silly to do that way. But in talking that way, I am pointing to that there's a trace there. This is the path. This is where they went forward. This is what it takes. It isn't like you relax your shoulders so that now

you can read some big tome of Buddhist philosophy. You relax your shoulders. So that's the door. That's the book we're reading. We're reading the book of softening, releasing, opening together with clarity.

And then there can be, with relaxation, a little sense, maybe a minor sense of clarity. The awareness becomes a little clearer. And these two together—release and clarity—those are the primary things that we're appreciating, valuing, opening to, remembering to do as we do this meditation, Buddhist practice. Letting that grow. These grow and develop. In doing so then allows for this maturation, allows for the greater clearing of the road until we come to this great capital. At some point it gets uncovered. So that's one kind of analogy, the analogy of a path that we go. But it's just an analogy.

And another way of saying this is that we are going from one place to another. We're going from here, our self suffering, to there, where we're not suffering at all. That's the overall kind of simple description of the Buddhist path. And so, however, it's not a geographical journey. It's not like we're travelling anywhere in the world. It's all about what happens right here, and each step along the way is not about doing something so that you can get some place in the future, but each step along the way is itself a fulfilment of the clearing, the clearing the road, or expressing or finding, even in a small degree, what the whole path is about: the freedom from suffering, from stress, from contraction, from pressure, from resistance, from fear.

And so to really appreciate this, that it is just right here and right now, what we're doing in this regard. It's sometimes said in Buddhism that the fastest way to go from a to b is to fully be at a. So not to be so involved in getting anywhere, but really take and really be here with what's happening now and now. And that's very much the same process, because if you sit down, just anybody you know, if they sit down, start paying attention to what's going on, they might find that there's a lot of physical agitation. They don't want to sit there. They have a long to-do list, and they're anxious to do it all. And there's all this restless nervous energy in the body to do. And because there's all this restless nervous energy, it actually feels better to enact it or act out the energy than to sit still and feel it, and makes us busy again, and just keeps people spinning till they're exhausted.

But so notice this energy of wanting to do, and then maybe settle back and relax the body until there's some ease and presence. Just things can unwind. And then we notice that the mind is not here and now, but in the past and the future, thinking about things. And so then there's a process of releasing and letting go of that to be here. And then we notice that we're here, OK, but we spend a lot of time analyzing and telling stories about here, and what's happen-

ing, and where we're going, and what's happening. And so we see it's all this story-making mind, and all this analysis of what and plans of what to do about—that's also keeping me from being here, really present. So then we let go of the stories. We let go of the plans. We let go of the analysis of what's happening because it keeps us removed from the experience.

And so we find this: we can't keep shedding, letting go, releasing all the things that keep us from being present in a very good, high-quality way. And it's not about getting any place as it is really arriving and being here in a fuller and fuller way. So in that sense, we're learning to be fully at a. But in doing so, we are shedding, releasing, understanding all the things that help the process of maturation unfold, the process of inner growth, the process of movement towards freedom, towards wisdom, towards compassion and love. All those things now have space and room to unfold and grow. And so there is a kind of going from a to b simultaneously. We're becoming transformed and changed in that process. And even if you don't want to be transformed in that process, you can't help human change. We're all changing psychologically. We're all changing physically, day by day, hour by hour, through this lifetime.

But what you can do is create really good conditions for that change to happen in a way that's beneficial. And if we continue to live under stress, we still continue to live not really connected to ourselves, spinning out with desire and agitation, and wanting the next thing, and making the next plans, or always hiding and closing down and not really being honest and present for what's happening. Those are powerful conditions that influence the direction of our maturation. And it can be a direction which is not so good. And if we meet ourselves, our life, with courage, with goodness, with presence, with love, with letting go, opening up, then that creates a very different set of conditions where things start feeling safe inside, where there starts feeling fearlessness inside. Where there starts feeling appreciation and love and care for what's here, and those are of a very different influence on how we change and mature over time.

And so simultaneously to the practice being fully here at nowhere but here, we are putting ourselves in a process that has us go from a to b, has us go from who we are today to what we can become as we become freer and more compassionate, more liberated in this whole process. And whether you're looking at it from going a to b, the road in the forest that's overgrown and you're clearing it, or it's simply that you are already at the palace, and that there is nowhere to go, nowhere to be. However, the palace is overgrown, the capital is overgrown with lots of shrubs and trees and vines and dirt, and so it's not a matter of getting anywhere, but a matter of clearing all the overgrowth so the capital can be inhabited. And so either way, whatever metaphor or analogy that you prefer, both of them, they're both the same process

and a process that develops.

The more we can appreciate the benefit of each moment of release, we can appreciate the value or the goodness of letting go, of opening up, of not resisting, not chasing desires and wishes, and not being agitated and swirling around in stories, not caught in the grip of resentment and anger, hostility, all these things that are kind of the overgrowth that prevent us from seeing this wonderfulness that waits for us inside. This is quite beautiful, and that we can inhabit, beauty that we can inhabit, and maybe this inner beauty, this inner freedom and peace that can be where we take up residency, and whether it's a path from a to b to get there, eventually we're there, and we're taking up residency in this wonderful beauty. Or if it's just being at a fully, nowhere to go, no road to it, no path, we also end up taking up residency to a beautified heart that has become free and compassionate.

So recognize even at the smallest initial steps of the path of release: relaxation, opening up, seeing clearly what's here, stopping to look, Oh, this is what's happening in the relaxation, in this stopping to look and see clearly. Recognize it best you can. The whole goal of the practice is found, traces of it. You're already there. You have it. You have what it takes. And now keep doing it, keep opening to it, keep practising it repeatedly, over and over again. So this can really make space and grow and develop.

And now there's a wonderful word in the teachings of the Buddha. There is a *bahulīkaroti*, which means to make it abundant. And he says, by repeated practice, we make it abundant. So make your freedom, make your peace, make your beautiful qualities of heart become abundant for you by just continuing to practice over and over again what is available for a beginner at the very start of the practice. So thank you very much for today, and a very good.