

# The Road Less Traveled (1 of 5) Two Operating Systems

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Hello on this Monday morning. The series of talks I'd like to begin today is very much based on the theme of my week-long retreat that ended yesterday. I'll call the theme "The Road Less Traveled."

In Buddhist practice, there's often the emphasis on a path – the path of practice. And every time, there is a fork in the path. There's a path less traveled and a path that is commonly traveled all too easily. In Buddhism, we choose the path less traveled. Sometimes it's called going against the current. If you're swimming up against the current of a river, it's hard. Or if you put something in the river, it just floats down. It doesn't go against the current. But in the path model, we take the path that is wholesome.

There is a very simple division between the wholesome and the unwholesome. Actions like lying are in the unwholesome direction. Being honest is in the wholesome direction. Being mean is unwholesome. Being kind is wholesome. Because of this kind of pairing that can happen, it can almost seem that it's just one or the other. It's like a pairing of things that are of equal weight or coming from the same place inside. It's a choice in thinking or intentionality that's occurring at the same place.

But in fact, in the Buddhist teaching, there are two different operating systems. That's my language for the Buddha's teachings. There are two radically different sources within us for behavior. There's one whole operating system for the unwholesome. And there's a completely separate operating system for the wholesome, when the wholesome arises out of the wholesome.

If the wholesome rises out of a decision, the source of the unwholesome can be where we live with a lot of thinking and concerns and stress. And there can be a logical understanding of consequences and what's going on. A decision there can be made to do the wholesome thing. But it's not the operating system that is up in the control tower, but rather the operating system that's from a deep source within.

This week in the theme of The Road Less Traveled, I'm going to talk less about a particular choice to do the wholesome thing over the unwholesome, but the choice or capacity to be connected to a deep source inside that is the source for the wholesome. And to not take the common road – that is the source for greed, hate, delusion, stress, and clinging, and tension. We repeatedly see in the Buddha's teaching the dichotomy between these two different modes of being without it being named in such a clear way that it is highlighted. That's what he's talking about.

But the Buddha does talk a lot about wholesome and unwholesome. One of the distinctions appears when he talks about the feeling tones of experience – how experience can be either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. He talks about those feeling tones that are more on the surface, that have to do with how we are in contact with the world, or how the world is in contact with us. For example, if there is a cold wind, the body feels cold. And then based on that, we react. We think it's unpleasant and we don't want it. We want to change to do something different. In this case, it's the outer world that is affecting us.

We may be oriented towards the outer world and what it will do to us. So, for example, eating good food, getting pleasure, being nourished when feeling lonely, and thinking the world's going to provide some reassurance by just eating a lot. There can be all kinds of issues and ways in which we are counting on the world out there to be the source of our joy, pleasure, and well-being. Everything's going to be okay if the world is okay. We look at our experience out there – the pleasure or the pain of the world. This is an outer orientation.

Then there's the inner orientation. The inner is deep inside. It doesn't have to do with how our senses pick up the outer world. It involves a deeper connection to capacities within us that in Buddhism might be translated as “spiritual.” I like to call it the inner source, the place for our inner well-being.

It is important to know the difference between living a life which is oriented towards our happiness being provided by the world versus an inner life where happiness is provided by some deep source within us. This source has been set free and opened up so that it is allowed to flow. The deeper source can't flow if we are living in the control tower of reactivity to the world. And the world is not only the external world; we internalize the world in our thoughts.

Some people's inner world is completely shaped by the outer world. If we're thinking about the past and reviewing difficult things in the past, that would also be called being concerned with the outer world, even though it's the inner world of the control tower that's thinking about it. Or if we have wonderful thoughts about how to do great things in the world, it might just be more of the same. It might be the ego-driven control tower – the conceit world. We can look for a deeper way, a deeper place of connection inside. Regarding these two different modes that the Buddha often talks about, he has different metaphors for them.

I want to talk about the metaphors today before going on with this idea tomorrow. This unwholesome source inside of us might not always be seen as unwholesome. Sometimes our attachments, clinging, and greed – which are unwholesome – can bring us beneficial things. Sometimes they're successful in getting pleasure. If I'm lonely and want to go to the refrigerator to eat because the refrigerator might have some really good food, when I'm successful it feels so good. We can't necessarily see that what is going is unwholesome, because we don't see the underlying drive of the unwholesome. We don't see how taking that road creates habit and reinforces the control tower operating system.

The Buddha uses a lot of metaphors to describe this unwholesome control tower operating system. What stands out in those metaphors is that they're all things which are constructed by human beings. For example, the Buddha uses the idea of a house that has been constructed, a wooden house that has been built. There's nothing wrong with the house, except that it is built by a human being. It's constructed. With becoming awakened, the Buddha said, “House builder, you are seen. Your rafters and beams have been destroyed, never to be rebuilt again.” It's a little bit of a violent idea, but the context of it is that instead of living in the constructed world, we are now going to live in an organic world.

The wholesome source within is a source that's much more organic or maybe biological. And for that, the Buddha uses natural metaphors. One of them – a common one – is that of a plant growing, a tree growing. There's a seed. The seed inside germinates. It sprouts, grows, and becomes a large tree. It flowers and then produces fruit. And awakening sometimes is called the fruit of practice.

The language that the Buddha uses for what we call in English “spiritual practice,” in the ancient language of Pali was a word that was closer to with growing. We're growing something. The word *Bhavana* is often translated as “cultivation.” They think of it as cultivating, like a gardener cultivating a plant or a farmer doing cultivation. We don't construct the growth of the plant. We support it to nourish it. And so over and over again, the Buddha uses metaphors of constructed things made by human beings to represent how we get caught.

In another place, the Buddha uses the idea of a trap that a hunter uses to trap deer. And again, a trap is something we construct. And sometimes we build our own mental constructions. We build these thought constructions that are made of fantasy or of stories that are not accurate or are only partially accurate. And then we live in the story.

Sometimes when two people meet, they don't realize they're both living in thought constructs. Sometimes their thought constructs are similar enough that they can relate. But sometimes they completely miss each other because they're not really listening from this deep place, but they're listening through the filter of the constructed world of stories and ideas that we paint reality with.

The world of projection is a metaphor we use in the modern world. We're projecting onto other people. It's not who they are, but we're seeing them through the lens of our projection. There are thought constructs and the idea of a trap.

The other thing that humans build is if you want to tie two oxen together so they can both pull the plow, you build a yoke and then the two are tied together. So the Buddha describes how human beings in their attachment become yoked, not to each other – though sometimes to each other for sure – but yoked to what they're attached to. And so you can't really get away. The yoke pulls you along. So again, the constructed world represents this.

There can be a world that's not constructed within us, but which is biological. It grows and flows. Sometimes the Buddha uses the metaphor from the natural world of a flowing river or stream to describe how dharma practice and the dharma begins moving through us. Our job is to stay in the river – stay in the current so it can flow along.

In the beginning of practice, the natural metaphor that's used over and over again is to walk the path. Maybe sometimes you make a path by making a clearing, but that is emptying something, not constructing something. And then you walk the path. And as you walk the path, something grows. You get stronger in your walking. You become more fit, for example. Then at some point you don't walk the path anymore, but rather you're in the river and you allow yourself to flow with the river. These are metaphors that the Buddha uses for this deeper operating system – the wholesome operating system.

That will be the theme for this week: The Road Less Taken. The road taken from this deep source inside: the wholesome operating system. I hope that hearing this inspires you: that there is within you a wonderful capacity, a natural potential in a sense, that can support you and guide you through your life.

Thank you very much.