

Chapter 1 The Way to the End of Suffering

When we come to recognize the need for a spiritual path, we discover that spiritual teachings are by no means homogeneous and mutually compatible.

One approach to resolving the problem of finding the best solution to our quest for the Ultimate is the eclectic one. But, there are two interrelated flaws in eclecticism that account for its ultimate inadequacy: one is that eclecticism compromises the very traditions it draws upon; the other is that perspectives and practices in different spiritual traditions are actually incompatible.

When we have outgrown eclecticism and feel that we are ready to make a serious commitment to a genuinely liberative path, we will find that the only thing we need is to put our suffering to an end finally and completely.

The choice of a spiritual path is closer to a marriage: one wants a partner for life, one whose companionship will prove as trustworthy and durable as the pole star in the night sky.

Since spiritual paths are generally presented in the framework of a total teaching, we can evaluate the effectiveness of any particular path by investigating the teaching which expounds it. In making this investigation we can look to three criteria as standards for evaluation: (1) the teaching has to give a full and accurate picture of the range of suffering. (2) the teaching has to offer a correct analysis of the causes giving rise to suffering. (3) the teaching has to state clearly that the path which the teaching offers has to remove suffering at its source.

Dhamma, the teaching of the Buddha, meets all the three requirements. It offers a message of deliverance from suffering claiming to be verifiable in our own experience and along with that message there comes a method of practice, a way leading to the end of suffering – the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path stands at the very heart of the Buddha's teaching. It was the discovery of the path that gave the Buddha's own enlightenment a universal significance and elevated him from the status of a wise and benevolent sage to that of a world teacher.

To see the Noble Eightfold Path as a viable vehicle to liberation, we have to check it out against our three criteria: to look at the Buddha's account of the range of suffering, his analysis of its causes, and program he offers as a remedy:

<The Range of Suffering> : dukkha

The Pali word dukkha is often translated as suffering, but it means something deeper than pain and misery. It refers to a basic unsatisfactoriness running through our lives of the ordinary people. This fact of dukkha is the only real spiritual problem.

Dukkha takes different forms, both evident and subtle. It shows up in the suffering

inherent in the physical process of life itself, and even pleasures are not immune from dukkha. We pass our days running after pleasures and running away from suffering. Then in the end we have to die, but even death does not bring us to the end of dukkha for the life process does not stop with death. The “mental continuum,” the individual stream of consciousness, springs up again elsewhere with a new body, and the cycle goes on and on. This round of rebirths – called samsara, “the wandering” – has been turning through beginningless time. Life is impermanent and thus marked with that insecurity which is the deepest meaning of dukkha.

<The Cause of Suffering> : Ignorance

The origin of dukkha is located within ourselves, in a fundamental malady that permeates our being and can be seen in our tendency to certain unwholesome mental states called defilements (kilesas). The most basic defilements are the triad of greed, aversion, and delusion. From these three roots emerge the various other defilements and from all these defilements together, the roots and the branches, comes dukkha in its diverse forms: as pain and sorrow, as fear and discontent, as the aimless drifting through the round of birth and death. To gain freedom from suffering, we have to eliminate the defilements. So, we have to find out what the defilements depend upon and then see how it lies within our power to remove their support. The Buddha teaches that there is one defilement which gives rise to all the others, one root which holds them all in place. This root is ignorance (avijja).

Ignorance begets erroneous perceptions and ideas, and thus nurtures the defilements. In a word, Ignorance issues in the defilements, and the defilements issue in suffering.

<Cutting Off the Causes of Suffering> : Wisdom/ the Noble Eightfold Path

To free ourselves from suffering fully and finally we have to eliminate it by the root, and that means to eliminate ignorance. But, how?

Since ignorance is a state of not knowing things as they really are, what is needed is knowledge of things as they really are. Not merely conceptual knowledge, knowledge as idea, but perceptual knowledge, a knowing which is also a seeing. This kind of knowing is called wisdom (panna). How do we acquire wisdom?

Wisdom cannot be gained by mere learning, but it can be cultivated. It can be cultivated through practicing the Noble Eightfold Path with its eight factors: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

The Noble Eightfold Path “gives rise to vision, gives rise to knowledge, and leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbana.”