



Ajahn Sucitto

# THE GRADUATED PATH

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AMARAVATI  
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If you had to specify the central feature of the Buddha's teaching, what would you say? Some might say 'liberation' or 'nibbāna'; others might come up with 'The Four Noble Truths'; some might consider wisdom and compassion and to be the essential feature of the Buddha's teaching; others might reckon that it all centres on mindfulness. All of these points are important, but what covers everything that the Buddha taught is a Path. The Buddha didn't always teach mindfulness, the Four Noble Truths or nibbāna: not everyone wants nibbāna, or is even clear what that means; we can all be interested in wisdom and compassion but not know what encourages them to manifest; and mindfulness is just a tool that can be used in a number of ways, not all of which take you to where the Buddha was aiming. But a Path, a way of consciously getting from where you feel you are to somewhere better, whether that means just being able to give up smoking or drinking, or being more at ease or less anxious – that's always relevant to everyone. It's inspiring to even think that there is a Path, and that life isn't a series of circumstances over which one has no control. And that we can do more than just wish or hope that things will get better. The Buddha's teachings on his Path – which varied dependent on the interests and understanding of whoever he was addressing – always have that direct and practical slant that means you can put them into practice. They're not just inspired revelations, or beliefs that you have to adopt. Instead they take you from where you are right now through a developmental process to a consistent result. This '*opanāyiko*' (meaning 'pertinent' 'furthering' or 'leading onwards') quality is a feature of the teachings; and the Buddha specified that they should be taught as a graduated Path: '*Teach others Dhamma thinking: I will give a talk on the graduated path*' (A.5.159) That is, teach in a step-by-step way so that people can follow and experience the results for themselves.

Many Buddhists will be familiar with the Eightfold Noble Path, but this is just one example of the Path, one that was given to those whose minds were already prepared through training. For those who had no previous training and weren't committed to his teaching, the Buddha presented something of more general relevance: a way of turning the heart towards its values and strengths. Through taking up this, a person would gain the view and the assurance that there is a way of progress, to be practised in oneself, and that it leads to the well-being of liberation – even if this is the relative liberation of not feeling so helpless. This initial presentation is called the 'graduated path': it begins with generosity and sharing (*dāna*), and goes on to morality or integrity (*sīla*) and then, through pointing out the unsatisfying and stressful nature of materialism, encourages simplicity, restraint and renunciation (*nekkhamma*). As these values become

firmly established, the mind comes out of wrong views and fantasies and is ready for the teachings on the Four Noble Truths.

Although this graduated path may seem to be of a basic nature that we could easily get, or even skip over for more esoteric teachings, I don't think the Buddha wasted his time in presenting soft options. Instead I consider this graduated path to be essential, to be constantly cultivated, and of far-reaching significance for the world in general. Even after forty years of practice, I still seek and enjoy development in terms of this graduated path, looking for how I can give and share to people and other creatures, to how I can broaden my field of ethical concern, and how I can live in a way that uses material resources with wise restraint. And as anyone who sees the effect of unbridled materialism will agree, there is a need for all of us to live in accord with these values. To practise sharing and cooperation and harmlessness and respect to all forms of life, as well as aligning our use of planetary resources to what is sustainable for the biosphere is an increasingly obvious responsibility. Either we put a check our desires or the planet deteriorates and we're in very deep trouble. It's good to see that many people now get it: there are international movements and gatherings that indicate a shift of attitude that echoes what the Buddha meant by *dāna*, *sīla* and *nekkhamma*.

On the other end of the spectrum, with regard to personal liberation and the realization of nibbāna, the sensitivity and strengths that the graduated path develop in the mind are a necessity to counteract the push of self-obsession and bias. Liberation means that in any degree, in any circumstance, that push is lessened – even if it's just to the extent that we're less self-critical, or less compulsively busy. Taken as a whole then, there is never a time when the teachings on giving, on non-abuse and on developing a life beyond material self-interest aren't relevant.

Generosity is where this Path begins, because everyone enjoys a chance to be generous. Whether this is through offering things, service, voluntary work, teaching or just attention, generosity makes us feel rich, creative and an essential part of other people's lives. It also implies sharing, because for *dāna* to manifest, you have to connect to other people and thereby establish a basis of cooperation. For instance in the monastery we live as a community: acting in accord with communal needs, interacting with respect, following communal routines, sharing time and living space – this is a big step for individuals to undertake. And we try to contain that community with reference to something sacred. Giving is the easiest and most accessible sense for that reference: our daily group meditations begin with an act of offering candles, incense and flowers to the Triple Gem. It's a ritual whereby one person physically makes the offering on behalf of the

group, but everyone puts their heart into an expression of lifting up and honouring the sacred through that ritual. It symbolises what the training is about: you are offered space, facilities, and daily requisites; and in return you share what you can with others.

Generosity is an easy value to attune to: it is the standard expression across all cultures by which people greet, celebrate and take leave. And the development of humanity is in line with the development of generosity to include a wider field of concern. Currently there has never been a time in human history when there were so many philanthropic institutions and organisations offering voluntary service to those in need (including non-human species). Why do people do this? I believe it's a natural part of being human: when we are generous and sharing we experience some of the fullness of heart that is our true potential. But it's a potential that we lose touch with; this is why the Buddha taught it: *'If people only knew, as I do, the results of giving and sharing, they wouldn't eat without having given'* (Iti. 1.26) Check it out for yourself: whenever you feel depressed or lost in your problems, any act of dāna is a real tonic. It makes you feel happy in a quiet and satisfying way.

It's much the same with *sīla* – which is based on the recognition that others count, that they are of a value equal to myself. This value is the partner and support to the cultivation of kindness, compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity; it is the basis of empathy, of 'to others as to myself', rather than of moralizing righteousness. We may take five, eight, ten or a hundred or more training precepts, but it all comes down to this same principle. We establish full awareness of our actions, recognizing that every action has effects. Ajahn Chah once summed up the entire Vinaya, the samana's *sīla*, as one thing: to live with conscience and concern (*hiri-ottappa*). His guide and inspiration, Ajahn Mun, said he himself only kept one precept: to maintain watchfulness over the mind. And you can note, in terms of actions, when and how the mind slides into blurring full awareness, with the mood, 'this doesn't matter', or 'I don't have time to consider', or 'well, everybody does this' or whatever fudge comes with that blurring. So your hand reaches out for a drink ... or it cuts corners, or shrugs off responsibility. Even when there are few effects for others, fudging and shrugging off weakens full awareness and becomes habitual. So *sīla* is not a legal matter, it's based on recognizing our potential to develop or lose clarity, self-respect, and a firm foundation for one's own welfare and that of others.

True human development is also synonymous with the growth of this ethical responsibility. How long ago was it that human beings were enslaved, or treated as apparatus for labour? Or when it was possible to

get a licence to hunt Bushmen in South Africa? (1936) Or that native families of Australia and America were systematically broken up with the children being sent to institutions where they were repeatedly abused? Horrific although these facts are, what has to be celebrated is that now we see them as horrific, along with torture of humans and the maltreatment of animals. In the nineteenth century, the tiger-hunt, 'bagging' tigers by the score, was a favoured pastime of dignitaries of the Raj; in 2015, the hunting and killing of one African lion evoked protest and condemnation throughout the world.

*Hiri-ottappa*, conscience and concern, is said to be the guardian of the world. It offers us the window to see others as we see ourselves, and widen and strengthens into the spiritual heroism of the volunteers who work for the welfare of those in need. As with the heroes in Buddhist fables and imagery: in the *Jātaka* anthology, even animals commit to moral precepts, and human beings conquer their passions, or their thirst for revenge and manifest generosity or kindness to others. So when it comes to values that support your own heart, *sīla* makes you feel strong. You're reliable, a source of confidence for others, and you know it.

'Renunciation' as *nekkhamma* is generally translated, is the consequence of noting that, although generosity and ethical integrity both gain ready acceptance in the sphere of human values, there's a lot of hoarding and non-distribution of wealth, and a lot of killing, stealing, lying, sexual abuse, and intoxicating going on. The Buddha attributed this to the instinctive pull of the senses, the glow and glitter that craving paints on goods, on bodies, on status and on power. Just to see how liberally and fantastically the world of stuff and prestige is painted – this itself is an eye-opener. The very need for a barrage of advertising in order to keep us consuming more indicates that if we were more attuned to things as they really are we wouldn't buy half the cosmetics, trinkets and clothes that we do. So I admire women who don't die their hair or starve themselves skinny, or wear make-up: when are we going to accept that human bodies look like they really do? Bodies are bone, skin, meat, fat and hair. They're OK, but do they need to be held as fantasies that you have to spend an hour each day weaving and pondering over? And even then walk around concerned about how you look? Isn't it more respectful and peaceful to accept bodies as they are? The truth of the matter is that no material thing, however expensive, is gratifying; none of it will take us past old age, sickness, loneliness, anxiety and all the rest of it. That's actually a great spur to spiritual development! Because in our heart, soul or spirit, there is the possibility of a steady development of ease, richness and beauty. And we can relate to others through that and share some good heart.

But counteracting the pull of the senses takes both the development of that alternative source of well-being, and an understanding how the pull works. Because there's no doubt about it, sensory happiness is real and available. When we get the hit of a luscious taste, or the pull of an alluring sight, bells go off in our nervous systems. We get a lifting effect ... for a while ... and then a come-down. It's rather like the lift you might get from holding a hot air balloon. You grab the string of the balloon, and up you go ... and then, crash! back to earth again, a little stirred-up. So you grab the string of another balloon. Same thing happens. But a pattern is established, and the mind gets used to that pattern, to the extent that the purpose of life becomes one of grabbing balloons. Some have cars or bikes painted on them, some have clothes, some have human bodies, some play tunes ... there's a huge range. But they all pull, lift ... and deflate. And yet the pattern of 'be attracted, grab hold, get lifted, do it again', becomes so established that a life without it sounds unbearably barren and meaningless. This is the process otherwise known as addiction. When you begin to see how compulsive, expensive, and from time to time downright degrading it is, you know you want to kick the habit. But how?

The skill of letting go of the string is renunciation. It's not that you don't feel pleasure, but you know how to let the string run through your hand and not to clench it. Then you don't get pulled away. This skill is developed through stepping back (*viveka*) from sense contact and enriching the inner life. Much of Buddhist meditation practice, in fact the Buddhist way of life, is about this; about generating happiness from an inner 'heart-base', or *citta*, to counter the attraction of the senses. This happiness is born from *viveka*, whereby the mind feels clear, and is amplified by turning attention to a bright theme – such as kindness, or the calm of breathing in and about. This ease ripens into deep composure or *samādhi*, whereby the mind is steered out of its habitual patterns, as with focusing on breathing in and out. As the mind settles, it starts to feel relaxed and buoyant. You feel good. Then you don't want the rougher ups and downs of the sensory pulls. From that basis you can review the objects of desire more dispassionately.

For instance, human bodies: they're useful, and they don't have to be attractive – in fact life is a lot more peaceful when that's the case. Less competition, jealousy, sexual frenzy and fighting – less expensive too. So the glitter and glow of sexual desire is an addition that you don't need. And to help change the pattern, putting in time reflecting on what's under the make-up, or under the skin – and how unbalanced the mesmerising effect of such superficial appearances can be – that is a worthwhile cultivation. Then as you're dealing with truth, your mind gets stronger in terms of focus and clarity, and your heart firms up.

Meditation on themes like this presents ways to release the string of sense-pleasure, and as you do so, even for a few seconds, you get a glimpse of freedom. That's the blessing of renunciation: it shows you what freedom is.

Seeing things as they are also helps us to be clear what we're up against. The ongoing cultivation of meditative attention or puts us in touch with the pull of craving and the compulsive tendencies of the mind. You get to feel and know their spin, their voices and their feverish energy. And you notice that if you shift your attention from the 'feel-good' glow of the image or impression that pulls you to the feeling of being pulled, you know that : 'this is stressful'. Once you know that getting pulled around is unpleasant, undignified and pointless, you practise shifting focus and noticing this truth time and time again. You don't waste time or focus in disapproval or feeling ashamed of yourself; you keep the mind clear of such excesses. Instead you note what it's like when your mind/ heart comes out of the grip. It feels light and clean. This then is the first taste of the Four Noble Truths: you see the unsatisfying for what it is, you understand what the unsatisfying is based on, you relinquish that basis and you know how that relinquishment comes about.

There are a couple of misperceptions about renunciation. One is that it is akin to asceticism, or entails a perverse attitude to the senses. This was a mistake that the Buddha made before his awakening, and he repudiated it many times in his teachings, saying that he taught a refined and stable source of pleasure and ease. This is because renunciation in the Buddhist sense of the word entails both wisdom and *samādhi*. It's not an ideological position, but a putting aside of a lesser happiness in favour of a greater one. This process requires a clear recognition of the limitations of sensory data in guiding your life: how much contentment can arise when the heart is looking for that in transient sensations and their resultant perception and feelings? Necessary as they are for functioning, if the feelings that arise from sensations get clung to, they establish patterns of behaviour that end up ruling your life, both in terms of providing a source for craving, and also by defining you as a being framed by the six senses. And the world of the senses is bound up with separation, decline and death. So for a meditator, the point is that although we're in touch with the sensory world, we don't have to take it in.

Another misperception is that renunciation doesn't really matter, or that renunciation is for samanas (monks and nuns) and that people 'in the world' can't do it. This is lazy thinking. Renunciation is no more a matter of lifestyle than craving is. Whoever you are, if you can't meet and let go of craving, you're not tapping into the essential power and clarity of the

human mind. Less on the surface can mean greater depth. Whereas samanas have renunciation set up for them by the Vinaya (although unscrupulous ones still find ways to amass wealth) lay people have to take initiative: to put limit on how much TV they watch, and instead spend that extra time with real people or with *citta*. You can practise 'no shopping' days; or when you go to the store, to not buy anything other than what you had predetermined to buy. We can do this; when circumstances require it, when there's a disaster or an emergency, we can drop stuff and let go – but most of the time we don't think we're in an emergency. But we are. Broadly speaking, any of us can die at any moment: only a strong and uncluttered mind will get past the gates of death unscathed; now is the time to learn letting go. And even before that great test, every day we're threatened with anxiety, liable to experience grief or malice at the loss of what we're holding onto, and often confused as to what life is about. So we need to have less on the surface of our lives in order to give fuller attention to the depths.

So a wise person is then one who learns to review and separate what they want from what they need; and as they do so, certain truths come home. Wants spin and rush through the mind and multiply, but needs get simpler and steadier. We need food and shelter, friendship, clarity (and whatever other values you may favour). And in this list, you'll notice that a big part of those needs can be met by one's own mind.

Consumerism on the other hand weakens our inner potential. Its message is that through buying the latest stuff we can feel happy and also fit in with the more vibrant section of society. You can see this through the models and examples that are presented in advertisements. Even the act of making a phone call is presented through images of (generally young, good-looking) people laughing in a state of collective euphoria. In real life, how many phone calls send you into ecstasy? But the subliminal message gets implanted through the 'feel-good' glow. It's a deft distortion: the focus of consumerism encourages to ignore each other as we really are in favour of images, often on a screen. Yet the hunger to be part of something, and in the presence of friends is so innate that the fake signal of the advertisement is very effective. Well, if you want to be in good company, and with people who are friends in human reality, cultivate *dāna*, *sīla*, *nekkhamma*. Taken together they are the basis of spiritual companionship (*kalyānamitta*), of accessing and offering reliable friendship. Rightly referred to by the Buddha as 'the whole of the spiritual life', spiritual friendship amounts to more than euphoric phone calls, it is an indispensable foundation for awakening.

In this way, these three elements of the graduated Path are both accessible, liveable and profound. They stimulate cooperation; they allow us to return to the dignity of human nature rather than its defilement; and they create something that can be passed on to future generations: 'This is how true humans behave, here is our source of happiness, strength and freedom.' Accordingly it is through *dāna*, *sīla* and *nekkhamma* that the 'great assembly' of samana and householder disciples has functioned and sustained Dhamma for over two millennia. If we don't pass on this legacy, what do we pass on? If we don't consciously help to create the future, we do so in blindness, fumbling along following a flickering feel-good glow.

But if we want to live and pass on the way to a good and awake life, we establish this Path. Generosity, morality and renunciation bring happiness, strength and freedom; they are for our welfare and lead to nibbāna. This is why the Buddha taught them as a Path: because real life is in the goodness, truth and beauty of heart.

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**Amaravati Publications**

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Amaravati Publications is a part of The English Sangha Trust Ltd, UK  
registered charity no. 231310

First published by Amaravati Publications 2016

This electronic edition published 2016

Digital Edition 1.1

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