

Householder Series:

The Eightfold Noble Path

-- Right Attitude

So one has decided that spiritual practice is worthwhile for some reason. That doesn't mean that we have to go off in a monastery, but our household life, our driving, our interpersonal relations, they are our practice, and they require some working with. The next level or the next step in this is Right Attitude or Right Thought. One sees the value in inner life and sees that frankly our happiness is based on our heart considerably more than it is on external circumstances. When there are difficulties around, if the heart is open or clear or understanding, we can be happy. We can be in the midst of beautiful circumstances and be miserable, be lonely or depressed, and know that our happiness which we seek is really a function of our heart, our interior life.

The Dhammapada begins with:

Mind is the forerunner of all things." If you act based on kindness and wisdom in the mind, happiness will follow you like the wheel of a chariot follows the ox which draws it. And if you act based on unkindness or you act from an unwise state of mind, then unhappiness follows just as the wheel of the cart follows the ox which draws it.

There are three aspects to Right Attitude. The first is openness or receptivity. In undertaking our practice, try not to make it a certain way: "I want it to always be peaceful, I want it to be calm, I want not to be angry" or "I want my body not to hurt" or "my knees" or "I don't want to be restless" or "I don't want to be afraid" or "I want to come to a lot of light or joy." Good luck! You get that sometimes. But if you just look for that, what will happen in your daily practice? A really simple thing happens if you're looking for that. What happens? You're disappointed. And then what do you do? You stop sitting. If you hold in mind how your personality should be or how your body should behave or how your mind should be, does it listen to you very much? Tell the truth! You sit here and say, "Thoughts, don't come." Does it help much? A little bit with some training, but just a little. It's like the radio. The advertisements come, and you can't say, "I want radio without advertisements." It doesn't work.

You might have begun some investigation or awareness of what your personality is like. Most people when they start to look at their personality, after a little while say "yuk" because personalities have that kind of quality to them. You say "God, maybe if I practice hard, my thoughts will quiet down and I can kind of change my personality." I have news for you! Your personality is kind of like your body; you come in and you get issued one for this ride. And you can get wiser or kinder, but you kind of have it, and you'll be a wise character of the same personality that you are as an unwise one, but you'll be pretty much the same. Or you'll be a loving person, whatever you are

now, however you define yourself.

Openness means not getting caught on, "I want it to be quiet or peaceful, the body or the mind to be this way," but more a quality of discovery, of experimenting, of seeing what you are. "I'm going to sit and listen to my heart and see what I really care about or where I'm afraid or what I hold back on. I'm going to look at my mind and see what the patterns are, what the desires are, and see what makes me happy and what makes unhappiness, and how that works in the world."

There are enormously rich and deep things to discover in our practice. It requires this attitude of, "I'm going to look and learn," rather than, "I'm going to make it a certain way."

There's a beautiful poem I'll read from the German poet Rilke. He says:

Sometimes a man stands up during supper
and walks outdoors and keeps on walking
because of a church that stands somewhere
in the East. And his children say blessings
on him as if he were dead.

And another man who remains inside his
own house, stays there inside the dishes
and in the glasses, so that his children
have to go far out into the world
toward that same church which he forgot.

Such a wonderful poem. There's something in us, in our nature, which compels us to discover. I remember a very powerful moment with the old guru who I studied with, Nisargadatta Maharaj, who taught the way of Nisarga Yoga. "Nisarga" means natural. The basic translation of his name was "Mr. Natural". He was this 80-year old cigarette-smoking man. He had a little cigarette stand. He was kind of a combination like Krishnamurti and Fritz Perls. He would put you on the hot seat when you came in and ask you about your spiritual life.

One day we were in a room about this big. People were coming in and asking questions. Somebody came in and asked a question and was a little bit dissatisfied and left. And another person raised their hand and said, "Maharaj, what will happen to that person who came and asked that question and left? Is it all over for them in this life? They didn't stay here. You are a great guru, and they weren't interested, and they went home." And he twinkled at that moment, he really lit up, and he said, "It's too late. Even the fact that they put their foot in this room, even if they hadn't asked the question, means that somewhere in there there's a seed of really knowing who we are and what this life is about. Not what you were taught in elementary school or what's on TV or the newspapers, but a deep seed of knowing our true nature, that wants to discover; it's like coming home. The fact that he just walked in the room means that that seed has started to sprout. And no matter if he tries to forget it and goes back and gets lost, sooner or later that will manifest in awakening."

We can't not do it once we start. Trungpa Rinpoche in speaking with his students at a big public talk one night said, "Frankly, I recommend that you don't start the spiritual path because it's painful and

it's difficult; it's really hard. So my recommendation to all of you is not to do it. You can leave now." Then he said, "But I have a second recommendation, and that is: If you start, you better finish. If you begin, then really do it."

It's something in us. I think it's the part that loves truth, or maybe it's the part that loves connection with another being. Even if we're terrified of intimacy - some of you may know that one - or we're terrified of getting close and then losing things, or we're afraid of dying, or it's hard to look at parts of ourself, there's something in our heart that really wants union, that wants to connect with people, with life, with the world around us in a deep way.

And openness then, the first part of Right Attitude, is this process of discovery, of seeing what's here and opening to it, not trying to change it but seeing clearly with mindfulness, without judging our fear, loneliness, aggression, joy, happiness, love, sorrow; our body, how we use it, how we exercise with it; what we eat, when we're full, when we overeat. The beginning is just this quality of discovery, because it's fantastic then. That makes spiritual practice alive; it's not some rote imitation. Then we can begin to learn, and we learn about the forces of desire, of fear, of wanting, of love, that makes the whole world go round, and really runs our lives. Whether we're conscious or we're on automatic pilot, they still operate. We start to discover who we are and how it works.

This leads to the second part of Right Attitude, which is renunciation. There is a saying in India, "When a pickpocket meets a saint, he only sees the saint's pockets." What we want determines what we see.

If you walk down the street and you're hungry, what do you see? Restaurants. "There's a Greek restaurant. I could have feta cheese or a nice salad. Oh, there's a nice natural food restaurant. No, I think I'll have a burger. That's a good place for burgers." You don't see shoe stores. Or if you come to the sitting and you look around, there's break time, time for tea, you see what you're interested in. If you like to talk to women, you'll see the women. If you're interested in sex, you see people who are attractive to you or your competition for those people. If you're interested in astrology you kind of check out and see whether there are lots of water signs or fire signs that come sit. If you're interested in young people or old people, that's what you scope out. If you're a barber, you come in here and see who needs a haircut.

What you're interested in determines and limits what you see. What renunciation means is putting what we want aside for a little bit. At Achaan Chah's, where I studied in the forest monastery for awhile, we did a lot of work with a practice of the monks' rules as discipline, and there are hundreds of them. At first they seemed like a real pain in the ass. As I learned to work with them, work with the discipline of not eating after noon, or sitting in a certain kind of posture when you were with senior monks -- there's a whole lot of ritual around it -- it required a lot of surrender. And as I did it I said, "I want to do it my way. This is 2,000 years old and it's dumb, and it's modern times," and all kinds of resistance came up. Of course, I didn't have much choice. I was a monk and I was supposed to do it. I mean, if I had stopped, I suppose I could have left or something. "Alright, I'll do this trip." But I had all the resistance, and all the things of not wanting to follow rules or not wanting to go against my habit. We're spoiled in this country. You can drink whatever kind of beer you want, eat whatever kind of food, travel where you like, and we have a capacity to change our

lives in ways that most people in the world don't come close to.

So here it was, renunciation. What came from it was a discovery that there's a strength of heart that comes when we don't just follow our habit; and it brings a sense of well-being or purity or something, because we begin to train ourselves. We don't have to follow all of our habits and all of our desires.

Achaan Chah was great because he would psych you out when you came there to begin practice, and if you were someone who loved to meditate and loved it peaceful and quiet, he would assign you to the monastery in the middle of Bangkok, in the traffic. And if you loved to socialize and talk and be with people, he would send you off to where everyone was in separate caves, and you had to deal with your loneliness or your aloneness. The style of practice which really is relevant to our lives, is to look into that which we're afraid of, which we run away from, or which keeps us moving all the time.

It requires a little fire. Practice has fire. If it doesn't have fire, it's not interesting. Yeah, you sit and you hold hands at dinner and you do a little "Om" and it's kind of peaceful, and you eat. It's not very interesting. If there's fire, it transforms your body, it transforms your heart, it makes you feel your loneliness and your desire, and you look at places where you hold tension in your body, and what it means to be unhappy or to be happy, to look at your suffering, to look at your expectations -- that's juicy, that's interesting, and that's where liberation comes.

The second step is renunciation. It means beginning to work with areas of our life where we've been unconscious and which we can identify.. I mean, I could go around the room and just ask you, and you could all name off the things that could use a little work, not that they're bad or anything, but because you can empower yourself through it.

Let's take a moment now and think of an area to work on this next week, maybe a very small one. It might be a simple a thing such as biting your nails. Think of one thing for yourself that you really want to look at and discover more about, that you're caught in -- it's a habit, it's a compulsion, or a fear, or whatever. Do you have one? I'm sure you must be able to think of one. Okay, fine. Here I want to give an assignment which you're welcome to do. If you're the kind that resists assignments, please don't do it. The assignment of working with openness is to just look at it for one week. Make the resolve in your mind, whether it's nail biting, or being afraid of this, or compulsive about that, whatever it happens to be that you choose, that for one week you're going to be a botanist, and you're going to study it, when it comes out, is it a night creature or a day creature, what it's mating habits are, and what it eats, and how long it's there. So you're really going to study it. First you'll see the superficial nature of how often it comes. Count it for a day, whatever it is. It might be a mental state or an activity. See how often it comes. Then start to look deeper. See what's there when it comes. When you bite your nails, when you pay attention to your heart and your mind, you see, "Oh, I start biting them when I'm afraid. Alright now, what happens? I'm afraid. What's there with the fear? Oh, I get lonely. Maybe that's what it is." So you see it's loneliness, and then fear, and then chomping away, or whatever it is that you're examining.

So let yourself take a week and go from the activity itself, really seeing how often it comes, and

what it's like, and also look at the heart and the mind under it, and see if you can discover the mental states that come, and see how they come and go. Let it be a practice of a deeper insight than that. You see the content, you see the sources of it in your feelings, and then you also see how the action and the mind states come like clouds for a little bit and then they pass away.

That's your assignment, to study it for one week. Then the second week's assignment, which I'll give you tonight in case you don't come next week, is to stop it for just one week, whatever that particular thing is, either the outer activity or the inner one if it's there. Try to stop it and watch what happens when you stop it, not that it's bad or you're going to get rid of it completely, but then make your observation and your experiment to see what mental states and what experiences come when you don't do that. Does this give you some sense of what I mean by "fire" or being willing to work with yourself? It's discovery; it's not that bad. You may do it for the rest of your life, but you can begin to sense this capacity of inner strength, of directing your attention, concentrating your mind, and seeing with more clarity. We start with little things and we see how we're bound. It's really the question of bondage and liberation, from biting your nails to the deepest inner things. We can start to see what it is that creates bondage, and that to discover this resource we have to be freer inside.

We become, as Ram Dass put it, connoisseurs of our neurosis. It's not that the neurosis goes away necessarily, but you have, "Wow, look at that example. Isn't that fantastic! I really did it that time." And there's a sense of humor that you can bring to it. When you observe, after awhile either there comes despair or humor, depending on which you want to pick. After awhile you get tired of despair, and you see, "My God, there it goes again."

The first thing in Right Attitude is openness; that it's not a thing of "I'm going to perfect myself and make a perfect personality and a perfect body and a perfect mind." I don't know anybody like that. But it's a quality of really discovering and opening. And the second is a willingness to work, not to just follow our habits, but to put ourselves into it a little bit, to put some effort out, renunciation. And the third is the quality of non-harming, or loving thoughts, and how to evoke that, how can we bring this quality of loving thoughts, how can we evoke that quality in our spiritual life, which means becoming more conscious of what we do in what we do.

One way is to see the events that come to us as gifts, especially the difficult ones; not necessarily as good gifts, but gifts. Don Juan calls them "challenges."

One way to really discover this quality of love is to see that we've got a big playpen. I'm getting into baby metaphors these days. You have to understand it's my new conditioning. We have a big playpen and a lot of toys, some of which are hot and they burn, some of which are cold, some are pleasant, and some aren't. Our life is limited; we're born, we're going to die. Nothing will stop that. No matter how fast we run, or how much we jog, we're going to die anyway. Because it's limited, it makes it interesting to experiment with. Let's learn in this time that we're here; let's really look at it.

It's hard, because it's easy to love kittens and puppies, babies when they're not crying, and pleasant experiences. That actually doesn't have much to do with love. That's kind of an ease of mind or sentimentality or something. I think, really, love manifests when things get difficult. That's when

you really know it. That's when the fire melts whatever barriers we have in our heart. Our hearts want to be melted. The pain isn't so bad. It's much better to have that all happen than have it all still, solid and barricaded.

What love requires in practice, this quality, is "constancy" -- Suzuki-roshi's word.

St. Francis de Sales says:

A cup of knowledge, a barrel of love and an ocean of patience.

In a way this quality of love and patience are so related. Our practice will go through cycles. Sometimes you sit at home and it will really nourish you, and you'll feel rested afterwards; other times you'll sit down after a busy day and the body will be tight and the mind will be spinning, and you'll be hating this person, and worried about that, and you don't want to feel it, and you don't want to look at it. Feel it, look at it; work to nourish that quality of constancy, of what's called, "a long-enduring mind." It's not a short game. You know, we're used to instant food, drive-through, tell the lady through the speaker, "Yes, I'd like a Big Mac, fries and a coke," or whatever it is. You drive around and you get it and you can eat it while you're driving; you don't even have to stop. Instant gratification. This is not an instant gratification thing. It is the longest thing you'll ever do because it's your whole life. It's really to discover how to transform your life from being on automatic pilot to being conscious, to discovery, to play. And it's wonderful. So it means that you don't complete it, you actually learn how to play the game and make your life into that.

It has many cycles. There will be many times when it's hard to sit, maybe more than when it's easy. And even in the good moments they'll come. You know what happens when something is really sweet and good, a wonderful taste, a great sexual experience, a good concert, a piece of music, or some wonderful sitting? What happens? There's this little voice that comes in the middle. What does it say? "It won't last. Can I get it to stay? How much longer?" There's that worry even in the middle. We can't kind of enjoy it because there's that thing inside that tries to grasp it.

Wisdom is also this development of patience or love or constancy, that you go through so many cycles.

I'll read you a poem from Gary Snyder called "The Avocado".

The Dharma is like an avocado.
Some parts of it so ripe
you can't believe it it's so good,
and other parts hard and green
without much flavor,
pleasing those who like their eggs
well cooked.
And the skin is thin,
the great big skin around the middle
is your own original true nature,

pure and smooth.
Almost nobody splits it open
or ever tries to see if it will grow.
Hard and slippery it looks like you should plant it,
But then it shoots through the fingers and gets away.

We grasp it sometimes, or we touch it, we touch something really deep, and it's beautiful and it's tremendously important. Then what happens? Bleep. Slippery seed. That's fine. You pick up the avocado seed again, or you plant it, or maybe make a garden of avocado seeds, avocado trees.

As I speak I'm trying to translate the talks and concepts that I've used so often in intensive retreats to try and find ways to really make them applicable in our situation of jobs and families and driving, and all the rest of it. I did a radio show today on KCBS which will be on in a couple of weeks. And at the end of it I taught a driving meditation, knowing that people listen to the radio when driving. "Don't close your eyes. Hold the steering wheel. Now relax. That's right." It was great fun. But that's the quality of beginning to make what we do our practice, through this openness or discovery rather than some ideal that's spiritual; through some willingness to renounce or a little fire, and finally through a tremendous amount of patience or constancy.

Here's another exercise I want to give you. Pick one day next week, and maybe next time we'll have a little pairing at the end and see who did it and just share with one another in a pair what you discovered. Pick one day next week and see how many moments of impatience you can count. Even if you get to 500, don't judge them, don't try and make them go away, but in one day of your life see how many times you can count impatience, 50, 200, 500. We'll have a contest. The person who comes with the most moments of impatience they saw in a day will get a prize.

Patience can even be used to understand impatience, because if you look at it, you start to see what's there when you feel impatience. We discover love by looking in places where it's not. Actually, we discover deeper or truer love. Don't look at what's romantic. Forget that part. Look at where it's hard, and you can really learn about love.

Do the exercise. I'll give you a little bit of a hint. You get impatient when the kind of experience is happening that's unpleasant, when it's painful, when there's some experience of body or mind that hurts a little bit. For the heart to open you have to be willing to feel pain, joy, pleasure, hot, cold, the whole thing. When you open the door, what do you get coming in? You get what's there. And if you open the heart, you get the experience of what our humanity is, what's rich. You can't open the heart for pleasure and not feel the pain. The world is dual; it's up/down, light/dark, hot/cold, and when we open, we discover a kind of capacity for joy and for understanding which allows for the fact that life has pleasure and pain. It's got them both. If you don't want pain, go to another planet, because this one has light and dark, sweet and sour, hot and cold, and pleasure and pain. That's the game.

If you want your heart to open, study your impatience. It's a fantastic place to look. Count it through a day, and just see what the things are that evoke it as you look. Don't try and change it. There are wonderful things you can learn from it.

This is from the Sufis again:

Overcome any bitterness that may have come
because you were not up to the magnitude
of the pain that was entrusted to you.

Like the mother of the world
who carries the pain of the world
in her heart, each one of us is
part of her heart and therefore
each is endowed with a certain measure
of cosmic pain.

You are sharing in the totality
of that pain and are called upon
to meet it in joy instead of
self-pity.

It's not a judgment but rather realizing we have this capacity, we have a beautiful capacity to suffer, and we have a beautiful capacity to love, and we have a beautiful capacity to open to the richness of our experience which has all that in it -- what's joyful, what's unpleasant -- so that the attitude of practice is like a flower blossoming. You started, so it's happening anyway, but you can help it. You can give it a little plant food or you can water it. By sitting every day you water it, and the plant food and the nourishment comes from the sangha, from coming together, from listening to the Dharma and discussing it, and getting those extra kinds of nutriments that help you when you work in your daily life.

If we do that, then we can find the dharma that's true. We can work with it in traffic on Highway 101, in our kitchen, with our children, in our office, and in the times of our inner solitude, and then things really do become rich and wonderful.

I hope I wasn't too preachy tonight. I speak in a way to remind myself of these things that just make it a lot better to live. It's not that you should do it, but these are just laws of what makes life richer or happier in some way.

I want to close by telling one more story. The story, which to me is a wonderful illustration of openness, is of a physician, Larry Brilliant, who was involved in a campaign to put an end to smallpox in the world. He was working in the villages in Nepal and India. Almost everyone had been inoculated. There were a few small areas where it still existed. They had to go in because if they didn't, then it would spread, and the whole thing would start all over again around the world. There's blindness that comes from smallpox and in some cases terrible disfiguration and brain damage. So it was really a very important thing.

They went to this village and the villagers refused to be inoculated. They said that smallpox came from God, and God brought both disease and life, and that that had to be honored as it came. Here's

this guy, Larry Brilliant, who's a very devoted spiritual person, and here are these people saying it's from God, and he has to make some choice. He and the people with him say, "God or not, we don't want another 100,000 children in the world next year to be blinded by smallpox." So they went into the village at night with their jeeps. They first went to the house of the chief, and the doors were barricaded. They broke the doors down, and they went in with nurses and doctors, and they wrestled the chief and his wife to the floor -- she was apparently tougher than the chief -- and they gave them their shots. They were screaming and saying, "No, no," and whatever, and for him it was terribly traumatic because his values had been that you respect the religion of all people, and so forth. Working in spiritual practice, it's not so black and white, it's not so easy. I'm sure you have seen that, haven't you? Making choices.

Then what happened after that? Already that was difficult. So they're sitting there, and after inoculating the chief and his wife and the family, then the village was easy to inoculate. The chief goes out to his garden -- very small garden, it's a really poor village -- and picks a couple of squash, some of the few vegetables that are in the garden, and brings them in and hands them to the doctors, and says, "I would like to give these as a gift," and then starts to prepare a meal with the very little they have, and they're astonished. They say through the translator, "Why is he doing this?" And the chief explains. He said, "You came to my house. It is my religious belief that smallpox is a gift from God, among the many things in this world, and following my religious belief in my heart, I had to resist you. It is your belief that it is the best thing in the world that everyone be inoculated. Following your belief, and given the fact that there were more of you than there were of us, you inoculated us. Defeat is no shame! Now you are a guest in my house and I would like to treat you as such."

As he tells the story it was one of the most wonderful awakenings in his life. It was the kind of awakening to see that you are in a difficult situation. To live is difficult, and we're always in these binds Can you stay open, can you discover what's new? Can you allow the people around you to do surprising things? Can you yourself do surprising things?