



A PATH OF DIVERSE PRACTICES

The buddhadharma, the path of awakening, includes an endless diversity of practices for cultivating awareness and compassion. What follows is an attempt to provide an overview of the central practices to see how they fit together to create a path of practice and a way of living.

TURNING THE MIND FROM SUFFERING TO FREEDOM

Struggle and suffering leads to disgust and determination to be free.

The possibility of freedom from suffering leads to turning the mind from confusion and reactivity, to take refuge in clarity and kindness.

CALM ABIDING ~ STABILITY

The gentle persistent practice of returning, resting, and opening leads to stable attention and the capacity to abide (shamatha) in all experience (sensations, feelings, emotions, thoughts, activity).

Calm abiding leads to stable but vividly clear experience.

LOOKING DEEPLY ~ INSIGHT

When attention is stable and vividly clear, we can look listen feel taste smell deeply; again and again we look and listen, and we begin to know how things are; we see the nature of experience as it arises (vipashyana, clear seeing).

IMPERMANENCE ~ 3 MARKS

looking again and again at every internal experience and external phenomena as it arises, we see that no thing is permanent, separate from its causes and conditions, or ultimately satisfying.

KARMA

Seeing the pervasiveness of struggling against experience, and the unsatisfactory results of the three poisons (grasping, rejecting, and ignoring what arises), we stop denying or avoiding the consequences of how we see, feel, speak, and act.

KINDNESS AND COMPASSION

In all traditions, some version of the six perfections (paramitas) are cultivated: generosity, ethical behavior, patience, joyful enthusiasm, unified attention (samadhi), and meditation (dhyana).

In all traditions, some version of the four immeasurables (brahmaviharas) are cultivated:

- Equanimity is the capacity to not be thrown off balance by pleasant or unpleasant experience.
- Lovingkindness is the radiant wish that all beings be happy.
- Compassion is the ability to be present with suffering and pain.
- Joy is the ability to be present with happiness.

The four can be combined in practices such as sending and taking (tonglen).

As these qualities are uncovered, one sees that the apparent differences between self and others are often not what they appear, and are always temporary and contextual.

ENERGY TRANSFORMATION

In all practices, the energy of reactivity is transformed into presence.

We can also cultivate and balance various levels of energy as fuel for stability and clarity, and / or as practices for health or enhancing our abilities in the world.

In most buddhist traditions, energy is transformed through stability (shamatha) and clarity (vipashyana).

In the theravada tradition, energy is often raised with concentration and lovingkindness (metta).

In the mahayana tradition, energy is often transformed with devotion to the three jewels and compassion for all beings.

In the vajrayana tradition, energy is often raised with devotion to the teacher / buddha or through practices of visualization and internal yogas.

In the pure land tradition, energy is transformed through humility, faith and letting go, and service to others.

Energy can also be raised and balanced through walking practice, yoga, qigong, mindful physical labor, and other body-based practices.

The habitual reactive patterns that create suffering are physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral, so all these aspects must be included in practice if the patterns are to be completely released.

RESPECT AND APPRECIATION

It is important to enter a path of practice deeply, to let the practice work on you, to let yourself be transformed. Each situation is unique, but in general it may be helpful to do a practice for at least 100 days before expecting significant change. Slow change is good.

Each practice is an effective medicine for a specific dis-ease; seek advice when you are confused about which practice to cultivate.

Each of the paths (theravada, mahayana, vajrayana, pure land, etc) evolved within a culture and a time in order to free people from struggle and suffering. Each path is complete and valid. It is useful to know and respect the differences between the paths, to keep the integrity of each path. Now that the practices and paths are all available to us, it is also useful to see that different paths are useful to different people, and the different practices are useful to each of us at different times.

Some version of many or most buddhist practices are common across the traditions and schools. The boundaries between the traditions, like all boundaries, are temporary and provisional.

The central purpose of all buddhist traditions is freedom from struggle and suffering; the central practice is to stop and look deeply into the nature of experience, to know the causes of suffering and the end of suffering.

May all be healthy, happy, at ease in their body, at home in the world.