

## 2. The Direct Path

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*“Monks, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of dukkha and discontent, for acquiring the true method, for the realization of Nibbāna, namely, the four Satipatthānas.”*

Depending on which translation you read, the phrase “direct path” may mean different things. In one translation, it means that this is a path that leads *directly* to the goal. Another one claims that this is the *one and only* path. Others say that this is the path that *one must travel alone*, or the path taught by *the One* (that is, the Buddha), or that it is a path that *is found only in Buddhism*, or that this path *leads to one goal* (namely *Nirvana* or *Nibbāna*).

Clearly the translation a reader chooses will have an impact on their attitude toward the practices. I choose to take the translation preferred by Anālayo, who is generally considered one of the foremost experts on this text in particular and in comparative studies of early Buddhist texts in general.

The term in question is the Pali expression *ekāyano maggo*. This is a compound word made up of the parts *ekā* (meaning “one”), *ayana* (meaning “going”), and *magga*, (meaning “path”). You can see how the parts taken without further reference could be interpreted in the variety of ways described above. Anālayo compares this use of the phrase with other contexts in which it is found in the early texts, and concludes that the most likely correct translation is “direct path.” An example of the use of this phrase elsewhere clarifies the meaning here. A person is described as walking along a path that ends in a pit. If the man does not leave the path, one can confidently predict that he will fall into the pit. In the same way, if we follow the path described in the *Satipatthāna*, we can expect to reach the end of the path, that is, *Nibbāna*. Notice that the man could choose to leave the path, make his own way in the woods, come at the pit from another angle, and still fall in. Saying that this path is a direct path does

not imply that there are not other ways to reach the goal. It is saying simply that this is a path that, if you stay on it, will lead you to the goal.

Let's take a look at where this path claims to lead. “*this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of dukkha and discontent, for acquiring the true method, for the realization of Nibbāna.*” This looks like a long list, but it's actually just a repetitious list. These are all phrases for saying pretty much the same thing, but coming from different angles so that what it is saying can be perfectly clear. “Surmounting sorrow and lamentation” and “the disappearance of discontent” are pretty straight forward. What about some of these less obvious phrases?

For example, what is meant by “the purification of all beings”? Or the words *dukkha*, and *Nibbāna* (or *Nirvana*. *Nirvana* is the Sanskrit pronunciation of the Pali word *Nibbāna*.) These are all different ways of saying the same thing, and these three are intertwined.

*Dukkha* is a word often translated as “suffering” but is more akin to “unpleasantness” or “discomfort.” It is described as being like traveling in a wagon on which one of the wheels' hubs is so worn that the wheel bumps and lurches as it rolls. It is this constant presence of things that are not as you want them throughout your life that comprises *dukkha*. We know from other texts that *dukkha* is the result of a person's mental state of grasping, resistance, and ignorance about how things really are. (Often called “greed, hatred, and delusion” is traditional translations, and I will use these words interchangeably just for ease of talking.) So *dukkha* is the discontented state of being that results from a person's mental states of greed, hatred, and delusion.

“Purification” is the mental cleansing of greed, hatred, and delusion. To purify your mind is to scrub out all the grasping, resistance and delusion – about internal experience – from your mental process. And if *dukkha* is the consequence of having greed, hatred, and delusion in your mind, then purifying your mind will also stop your *dukkha*.

*Nibbāna* literally means “blowing out” or “quenching” the suffering (or unpleasantness) we live with. *Nibbāna* at the end of the list sums up all the rest. This passage is saying “this is the direct path to

the end of suffering.” And everything in that list describes in different ways what that means and how to achieve it.

In short: This is a Path to Freedom.

But if this is a single path, how can there be four different paths within it? And more within that? How can 53 different meditation techniques be called a single path?

The commentaries explain it this way. Having referred to other texts in which the Buddha was teaching different types of people, the commentators conclude that there are so many different kinds of meditation technique because they are suitable for different kinds of people:

“For a dull-witted man of the craving type the Arousing of Mindfulness through the contemplation of the gross physical body is the Path to Purity; for the keen-witted craving type, the subtle subject of meditation on the feeling. And for the dull-witted man of the theorizing type the Path to Purity is the Arousing of Mindfulness through a subject not too full of distinctions, namely, consciousness; for the keen-witted theorizing type, the subject which teems with distinctions, namely the contemplation on things of the mind — mental objects...”

And on it goes. Each of the different methods, according to the commentators, was to suit a particular type of person.

From this we can gather any one of the 53 techniques described in this text is sufficient for the relinquishment of suffering. This approach encourages us to choose whatever technique is best suited to our abilities and interests.

While I think this is true, I also think this complicated single path goes deeper than this. The four areas of mindfulness, Body, Feeling, Mind, and *Dhammas* build on one another, starting at the coarser and easier to observe sensations of the body, through the more subtle feeling tones and mental states and finishing up with the less tangible, sublime *dhammas* such as the hindrances, the aggregates, and other such things that are difficult to pin down initially. Thus these could be seen to be stages along a path of developing the clarity to see the subtlest causes of suffering.

On the other hand, we are not expected to ignore experiences from the other three categories while we are studying one in particular. And we do not ever finish with any type of meditation. Even the most enlightened teachers today still practice the most basic breathing meditation. So as well as building on each other, they also complement each other, support each other, and reveal each other.

You do not have to practice all 53 techniques in this text, nor do you have to practice in the order in which they are laid out in order to attain freedom from suffering. But taken as a whole, the myriad parts of the *Satipatthāna* blend together into a powerful path that can be integrated into a single meditation practice.