

Progress

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 3 min read

'If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there'. Lewis Carroll In his inimitable quirky way, Lewis Carroll points to a profound truth about our lives. If we don't know where we are going, there is not only no central focus to our lives, there is also no meaning. When there is no focus, no aim, no meaning, our lives drift. But not in any old haphazard way. We are already in any given moment conditioned beings. We have our habitual ways of understanding and acting upon those understandings. And understandings can be true and they can be false. Our history is littered with 'ideologies', secular and religious, that have taken us down dark roads. The Buddha's own avowed aim when he took up his mission to teach others to liberate themselves was to elucidate a path: a development and an aim. And most important an understanding, not based on philosophical abstraction, but based upon his own personal direct experience of his own progress and attainment. Our idea of time as a linear progression, an arrow that moves from past to present to future, lends itself to a view of progress that presumes from worse, we get better and from better we get even better (for the pessimist the opposite). We may consider this true when we think of science which investigates the physical and psychological world with a view to understand and then, as is our nature, to control. This has led to a technology that astonishes. Yet, it is common observation that when it comes to ethics, the way we as humans relate to each other, to other living beings and nature, there does not seem to have been a comparable progress and one might argue that it has all got worse. However, we can point to individuals both in the religious and secular life that are paragons of human goodness, but they remain a rarity and always arise as a response to general unethical behaviour, such as apartheid, regime oppression and careless destruction of our environment. And there are legions, yes legions, of people involved in putting the world aright whether climate crisis, slavery or political oppression to mention some of the worse. How then would progress manifest in a world truly devoted to Dhamma? Because our aim is to achieve liberation from suffering, we look into the causes of that suffering. We find the root cause to be selfishness. It's really all about me! When we realise this 'me' is a mistaken understanding of how we really are, we begin to change. Before we thought 'me' was independent, a self-willed integer, complete and entire unto 'myself'. On careful observation and reflection, we begin to realise this 'me' is entirely dependent on my relationship with other beings and the surrounding world. I am inextricably bound up in the total environs that envelope me. I cannot exist outside this milieu. This beckons us to develop those attitudes that will lead the whole environment towards harmony since in harmony we also find our peace and joy. In that harmony people are more than willing to support each other in their spiritual quest. How easy it is to practice when surrounded by like minded others on retreat. Or indeed, how joyful is the practice of affectionate mindfulness when doing something with others who have a similar goal. So it does

help to know where we are going, no matter how nebulous the goal. The Buddha says our ultimate goal is Nibbana. But what can that be? Rather than fretting over something that is by definition beyond description, we can ground ourselves in the ethics manifested in the way an Arahant, one who has attained Nibbana, lives. Then that path becomes clear. In short, the second step of the Eightfold Noble Path, Right Attitude, shows us where we are going - moving from selfishness to generosity, hatred to love and cruelty to compassion. These are all social virtues. They cannot be practiced on 'me'. They demand the 'other'. And in that relationship, the 'other' is encouraged to reciprocate as we are encouraged when the 'other' behaves towards us with generosity, love and compassion. It would be delusive to believe that we would end up in Shangri-La for this is after all Samsara. But we may move from a disharmonious social order based on competition to one based on harmonious co-operation.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.