

Walking a Path

By Rev. Master Phoebe

Some time ago a young woman who I shall call Rose visited the temple and went for a walk in the back field. As she approached the hills, she thought it would be nice to climb one, not knowing there is a trail that goes there, with a bench on the top. It looked a steep climb, so at first she decided against it and sat down to enjoy the view from where she was. After a while however, she felt a longing to see more, and, without thinking any further about it, started to climb straight up. Our hills are made of decomposed granite, a very loose and crumbly material that is eroded steeply. Going straight up is difficult – you keep on slipping back and your feet sink deep into the dirt. Not for nothing have they been called the “cat litter hills”. Rose did not give up even though, in her words, from time to time “she thought she would die”.

What a surprise and relief when suddenly she came across the path that we who live and practice here built almost ten years ago with the help of many friends. Every year erosion and new growth make the path disappear at least partly, and most years that effect is undone simply by people walking the path. From time to time something more is needed in the way of maintenance, and this winter Amber did a wonderful job of rebuilding the erosion barriers and repairing and adding steps. But the main work is to walk the path regularly, using the soles of our shoes to smooth it out, preventing grasses and weeds from growing there.

When Rose found the path her first thought was one of relief that now the going would be much easier – no more slipping and sliding, less of an incline. Then, too, there was the reassurance that there must actually be a “there” to get to; people have done this before for a reason! When she arrived at the top of the hill and the bench where the statue of Maitreya Buddha raises his hands up to heaven, she did the same and let out a victory yell (unfortunately she did not send us the picture of herself she took that day). What she did not realize is that once she walked along the path, she herself contributed to it for the next person or persons who come this way. That is a subtle concept but very true. Contrary to roads, a path will disappear quite quickly if not used, and its existence speaks

directly of the users. A coyote path for instance is very different from a people path, or a cow path, and once you know the differences, you can choose which one to follow.

The Buddha called His Way of Practice a path, and in times and places where it is still possible or necessary to walk in nature that concept is very observable. When we walk through the jungle of life and come across the Noble Eightfold Path, we can see that, yes, this is easier going; yes, someone has come before me; yes, there is a purpose to living this way. And in turn, by walking this Path, simply by example we keep it open for others and, importantly, for ourselves.

Changing metaphors here for a minute, one might say that the shoes we wear while walking our path of training are words and forms. The words we use to express our dedication, our understanding. The thoughts we cultivate to inspire ourselves and each other. The forms of bowing, chanting, ceremonial and altars. Like shoes, they connect us to the path, and help us along it. Familiar words and form can be very comfortable, and extremely useful. But when our words become cliché's, our ceremonial mindless motion, our "shoes" lose their profile and we lose traction. By listening and looking with renewed attention we redefine our original intention, or the beginners mind, and our shoes remain as new.

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