

The 12-step discipleship

Source: **The Gradual Way**, Spiritual discourse, training and freedom in early Buddhism (SD 56.1).¹ by Piya Tan © 2014.

2.3 THE KĪṬĀ,GIRI SUTTA (M 70), SD 11.1

2.3.1 The teaching. One of the key teachings of the **Kīṭā,giri Sutta** (M 70) is the very practical and immediate steps of training that anyone serious about spiritual growth should take up to reach the path: “And how, bhikkhus, is final knowledge achieved by gradual training, by gradual practice, by gradual progress?” For our immediate practice, this gradual practice leads to the path of **streamwinning**.

2.3.2 The 12-step discipleship

The **Kīṭā,giri Sutta** (M 70) records the Buddha as declaring:

“Bhikkhus, I do not say that final knowledge (full awakening) is achieved all at once. On the contrary, **final knowledge is achieved by gradual training, by gradual practice, by gradual progress.**² And how, bhikkhus, is final knowledge achieved by gradual training, by gradual practice, by gradual progress?” The Buddha instructs us that, to attain that path, we must take up these **12 steps of discipleship** “with diligence”:³

(1) We have faith (in a teacher) and approach him.

We should approach a teacher not because he is famous, popular or learned, certainly not because we find him attractive, but because he teaches the Dhamma or the suttas clearly, so that we can easily verify his teachings in the suttas themselves, and they help us in our practice.⁴

(2) Approaching him, we respectfully draw near to him.

A true follower is one who sits up close (*upāsaka*) to the teacher while he is teaching, so that we can hear him clearly without distraction, and feel the Dharma as he teaches it.

(3) Respectfully drawing near [attending] to him, we lend our ear [listen attentively] to him.

Even when we may not be able to sit up close to the teacher, we should make every effort in fully attending to him as he teaches. In our times, electronic gadgets (phones, etc) should be switched off so that we are not distracted while learning.

(4) Lending our ear, we listen to the Dharma.

As we listen, we should discern what is “explicit in sense” (*nīt’attha*), what is implicit (*neyy’attha*). The explicit should be understood so; the implicit should be further investigated or questioned.⁵

¹ SD 56.1: <https://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/56.1-Gradual-way-piya.pdf>

² *Nāhaṃ bhikkhave ādiken’eva aññ’ārādhanaṃ vadāmi, api na bhikkhave anupubba,sikkhā anupubba,kiriyā anupubba,paṭipadā aññ’ārādhanā hoti.* (M 70,22 f), SD 11.1.

³ M 70,21.5 (SD 11.1). This 12-stage learning progress is listed in M 70,23 (SD 11.1). It recurs in **Caṅkī S** (M 95), first in normal sequence (M 95,20/2:173) and then in reverse (M 95,21b/2:174), SD 21.15. Cf A 4:336, 5:154.

⁴ On how famous teachers can have wrong views, see (**Pañcaka**) **Thera S** (A 5.88), SD 40a.16.

⁵ For details, see *Neyy’attha Nīt’attha Sutta* (A 2.3.5+6), SD 2.6b.

(5) Having listened to the Dharma, we remember [memorize] it.⁶

The best way to remember the teaching is by paying full and wise attention. Recording the talk may help—when we listen to it again as necessary. Another way is to summarize the talk as soon as we can while our memory is still fresh.

(6) Having remembered the teachings, we investigate their meaning.

After the talk or lesson, we should survey what we have noted or remembered for any aspects that we are uncertain about or do not understand. We should note down points to raise and questions to ask the teacher or someone who can help as soon as we can.

(7) Having investigated their meaning, we reflectively accept the teachings.

To reflectively accept a teaching is to fully understand it in relation to other teachings so that we have a clearer, bigger perspective of things. Often it helps to ask oneself how this teaching relates to impermanence. We also remind oneself that whatever we understand now is only provisional and our views will change as our understanding grows.

(8) Having reflectively accepted the teachings, desire [will-power] arises in us.

As our understanding grows, we feel a sense of confidence: now that we understand this, we are ready for more. We feel a great wholesome desire to learn and understand more teachings.

(9) When desire [will-power] has arisen in us, we exert oneself [we assert our will].

When we feel this wish to know the Dharma further, we face the Dharma by oneself, alone in our solitude in searching the suttas or reflecting on them. We may not at once feel how the Dharma guides us, but we will surely know this in retrospect as we reflect over our experiences.

(10) Having exerted oneself [Having asserted our will], we weigh [harmonize⁷ our practice].

As our strength in the Dharma deepens and widens, we will notice one of the spiritual faculties—faith, effort, mindfulness, concentration or wisdom—manifesting itself. Recognize this faculty; notice how it feels, grows and connects with other faculties. Notice how they should harmonize; rejoice in this.

(11) Having weighed [harmonized our practice], we are resolute [strive on].

As our faculties harmonize and develop, we feel a clearer sense of direction in our life: what gives meaning to it, and what our real purpose is. We begin to understand what “the path” means and how we relate to it.

(12) Being resolute, we realize through our own body the supreme truth and see it by penetrating it with wisdom.

We begin to clearly feel a need to attain the path of awakening. We now know that we get closer to the path through our understanding of the Dharma. We have a peaceful but powerful sense of directing oneself to the path of awakening without a thought of falling back.

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⁶ In the first line, *dhammam* refers to the Teaching as a whole; in the second line, individual aspects or topics are meant. For details, see *Kiṭṭāgiri S* (M 70,23(6) n), SD 11.1.

⁷ Or, “balances” (the 5 spiritual faculties).