

Path & Practice of Purification

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 05/20/2014.

This practice that the Buddha taught, the path that leads to freedom from stress, unsatisfactoriness and suffering, is sometimes called the Path of Purification. That's also the name of the most influential commentary in the Theravāda Buddhist tradition.

But what is purification? The short answer is that it is the process of freeing ourselves from all the forms of action that lead to unsatisfactoriness with life. There are three forms of actions that we work with as part of this training: behaviors in the world, spoken words, and thoughts and our other inner processes. So tonight I want to just spend a little time talking about this process of purification.

We purify ourselves of unwholesome behaviors and speech by working with the Five Ethical Precepts:

1. Not taking the life of other living beings and acting with goodwill towards all beings.
2. Not taking what hasn't been given and acting with generosity.
3. Not engaging in sexual misconduct and respecting the boundaries and commitments that others have made.
4. Not engaging in false and harmful speech and speaking in ways that are true, spoken in a skillful way and at an appropriate time.
5. Not using intoxicating substances that lead to heedless behaviors and using prescribed medications appropriately for illnesses.

The more we are able to live from these guidelines, the less our minds and hearts will be troubled by the fear of retaliation by others who we have harmed, and by our own guilt, shame and remorse. The less we are troubled in these ways, the more the mind and heart are able to settle, and be peaceful, open and see things as they are.

Purifying our mental actions can be thought of as a process of letting go of the things that distract us or that keep our mind and heart from being balanced and easeful. When we first sit down to meditate, the mind is quite distracted and it's focus is pretty fragmented. Attention jumps from this sensory experience to that one, from this thought to that. It is sometimes aptly described as "monkey mind" because at this point our mind is like a monkey in a jungle, jumping and swinging from this branch to that one to another, never resting anyplace for very long. But as we keep bringing attention back to the present moment, we start letting go of our reactivity, our grasping and pushing away, of sensory experiences. And because of this letting go, this purification, the mind and the body begin

to settle. They slowly become calmer. And the mind becomes less distracted, less fragmented. When this happens, it is typically a pleasant experience.

As we develop more ability to be with our present experience — bodily sensations, sounds, smells, sometimes sights and thoughts, as we develop more of an ability to be present with them without getting pulled into any kind of reactivity towards them — wanting more, wanting less, or getting lost in some kind of story about them, then in time memories may begin to come into awareness. This is another form of purification that occurs in meditation. This is the part of meditation where the distinction between meditation and psychotherapy can get blurred.

Sometimes the memories are of pleasant experiences we've had. But often what comes up are memories — including emotions, images, and even physical sensations — from past experiences that were troublesome, that were difficult. Often when these experiences occurred, we didn't have the capacity to just be totally present for them. Maybe we were too young. Maybe the experiences were too intense, or too overwhelming. Because we haven't been able to be present with these experiences, there are parts of our lives, parts of life, that we tend to block out, parts of life that we're afraid of or feel threatened by.

When we do mindfulness practice in a consistent way, sooner or later some of these memories begin to arise. Our practice, then, is to be present for them with the same kind of openness and acceptance that we've learned to bring to our more immediate sensory experiences. Through our practice of compassion for ourselves and others, and through our commitment to mindfulness and to seeing as clearly as we can what is true in our experience, we have the capacity to be with these experiences. This is part of what is called "purification." We're freeing our minds and our hearts, we're "purifying" our minds and hearts of these things that prevent us from being at ease with whatever life presents to us.

The stronger our mindfulness is, the more able we are to meet these experiences. And the more we are able to simply meet these experiences with mindfulness, the stronger our mindfulness and concentration becomes. As a result of this stronger mindfulness and concentration, insights arise. We see more clearly the true nature of how our minds operate. We see more clearly the causes of our sense of unsatisfactoriness, stress, struggle and suffering. We're able to let go more and more. We're able to live with ease, balance and

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an open heart. And eventually, if we practice diligently and are a bit lucky, we get a deep taste of freedom and understand for ourselves what the Buddha discovered for himself.

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