

## The Gradual Training, pt. 2: Faith & Ethical Living

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 07/08/2014

Tonight I'd like to continue with a series of talks about the Gradual Training, the interwoven phases of practice that gradually lead one to a greater and greater ability to live with contentment, to live with an open heart, to live with more and more freedom from greed, hatred, and delusion.

My primary source for this talk is "The Shorter Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant's Footprint", the *Cūlahatthipadopama Sutta*, MN 27.<sup>1</sup> Last week I explored the first steps in this Gradual Training: Having the good fortune to hear the Buddha's teachings, and then the faith to begin to test them out in one's own life. And, as the first expression of that faith, training oneself to live a more ethical life, which leads to inner and outer harmony, safety and ease.

In the sutta, the Buddha is speaking of the gradual training that a person would go through moving from being a lay person, like you and me, to being a monastic, a bhikkhu or bhikkhuni. But there's really a lot to learn for we lay people too.

After beginning the training in living ethically, the next thing the Buddha mentions is

"He becomes content with robes to protect his body and with almsfood to maintain his stomach, and wherever he goes, he sets out taking only these with him. Just as a bird, wherever it goes, flies with its wings as its only burden, so too the monk becomes content...Possessing this aggregate of noble moral discipline, he experiences within himself the bliss of blamelessness."<sup>2</sup>

This is clearly a training for the monastics, so what relevance does it have for lay people?

As I reflected on this, it seemed to be pointing to the value of living more simply. Yet the arc of a lay life seems to be towards the accumulation of more and more stuff.

What I've seen in my own life, I've started seeing in my daughters' lives too. One starts out with a few possessions. Maybe there's a time when one can fit all of one's worldly possessions in a car. But even if one is living in an apartment, one slowly begins getting more stuff. For instance, different types of clothes to wear in different situations, different kinds of cooking utensils for different kinds of dishes, appliances and various substances to help with cleaning, and depending on one's interests, things to help entertain oneself.

If one moves to a house, then the accumulation accelerates. There is more space to be filled with furniture. One needs a variety of additional tools to care for the house and the land. And the larger the house, the more space to be filled with things. Initially the accumulation of this stuff may feel like one is making progress in one's life. But in time one also may begin to feel it as a burden.

There's a responsibility to care for and manage all of this stuff. It takes time and often involves worry. So then at some point in life one may begin to think about getting rid of some of the possessions, simplifying may begin to feel like a virtue, and one may find contentment in having less stuff, just as the Buddha is suggesting.

The next part of the training begins this way:

"On seeing a form with the eye, he does not grasp at its sign and features. Since, if he left the eye faculty unguarded, evil unwholesome states of longing and dejection might invade him, he practices the way of its restraint, he guards the eye faculty, he undertakes the restraint of the eye faculty."

And similarly for each of the other senses: hearing with the ear, smelling with the nose, tasting with the tongue, feeling a sensation with the body, and cognizing or knowing and thinking with the mind.

"Possessing this noble restraint of the sense faculties, he experiences within himself an unsullied bliss."<sup>3</sup>

This is the training known as "guarding the sense doors."

One way of understanding this practice is that it "puts the brakes on habitual yearning" for pleasurable sensory experiences.<sup>4</sup> But as the sutta quote makes clear, it is really a training in protecting ourselves from getting caught reacting with longing or greed, or reacting with dejection or aversion, to any sensory experience.

A sutta in the Saṃyutta Nikāya, the Connected Discourses, makes it more clear why this is important.

"If one dwells with restraint over the eye faculty, the mind is not soiled among forms cognizable by the eye. If the mind is not soiled, gladness is born. When one is gladdened, rapture [or bliss]<sup>5</sup> is born. When the mind is uplifted by rapture, the body becomes tranquil. One tranquil in body experiences happiness. The mind of one who is happy becomes concentrated. When the mind is concentrated, phenomena become manifest."<sup>6</sup>

We may not like that term "soiled". Another, more neutral way of saying it, might be "the mind is not led into the unwholesome states of greed, hatred and delusion."

If we look at the actual experience in more detail, it will give a sense of how we both get caught in greed, hatred and delusion towards our sensory experiences and how we can free ourselves by practicing restraint at these sense doors. In each moment of experience, we're being bombarded by lots and lots of sensory stimuli at each of our sense doors. We develop some consciousness or knowing of the sensory contact, depending on the strength of a particular stimuli or sensory object, the sensitivity of a particular sensory organ, and our past conditioning, which affects what we give attention to.

When this connection, or contact, of sense stimuli, sense organ and sense consciousness occurs, a feeling —pleasant, unpleasant or neutral— automatically arises in association with this contact. And depending on the quality of attention we are giving to that sense door at the time, and of course our past conditioning, we may react in unwholesome or unskillful ways by grasping at the pleasant feeling, by trying to avoid or push away the unpleasant feeling, or by being bored or not even noticing the neutral feeling. Or, if mindfulness is present at that moment, we will simply notice and experience the feeling and the sense experience as it comes into awareness and then passes away. Noticing with mindfulness, a wholesome mind-state itself, then contributes to the arising of the wholesome states of bliss, tranquility and greater concentration, leading to the arising of insight or wisdom. So what it means to act with restraint at the sense doors, is to bring careful attention and mindfulness to them, to notice when greed, hatred and delusion are arising in relation to them, and to let those unwholesome states go, watching those unwholesome states pass away, as well as watching and experiencing the sensory contact and the associated feeling arising and passing away.

Guarding the sense doors is a transition between training our behavior through work with the ethical precepts and training our minds through meditation. It is a practice we can do throughout the day, not just something to do when we're sitting, doing formal meditation.

So as you go through your day, notice what sensory experiences entice you. Perhaps something catches your eye and draws you into searching for other pleasant sights? Perhaps there are sounds that you're drawn to? At that moment, are you aware and mindful that hearing is occurring, or are you simply caught in the enjoyment of hearing? Can you bring this same kind of attention and curiosity to the sense of smelling, tasting and touching? And perhaps most difficult for many of us, can you bring attention and curiosity to the mind door, noticing when the mind is getting lost in thoughts and emotions, in stories about "I, me or mine".

Notice what sensory experiences you react to with repulsion, with a desire to avoid or perhaps with anger or fear over encountering them. And, notice what happens when the sensory experiences are neutral, when nothing seems to be happening, nothing seems

interesting, how are you reacting then? Are you searching for some other stimulus? Are you simply falling asleep? Or are you noticing the neutrality and what that is actually like in this moment?

As we train in Guarding the Sense Doors, it's important to remember that having sensory experiences isn't the problem. As long as we have functioning sensory organs, a capacity for consciousness, for knowing, and we're in any sort of situation where we're exposed to stimuli, there will be sensory experiences. The training is a matter of learning to notice *how we're relating to* our sensory experiences. Are we relating in unwholesome ways, out of greed, hatred and delusion, which leads to our own dissatisfaction and sometimes suffering, as well as dissatisfaction and suffering for others? Or, are we relating in wholesome ways, with careful attention and mindfulness, which leads to gladness, bliss, tranquility, concentration and the subtle and deep happiness of knowing things as they truly are?

So we hear the Dhamma and develop some Faith or Confidence in it. As a result, we begin training ourselves in giving attention to our behavior, living ethically and developing the happiness that comes with a sense of outer and inner safety. We also begin to notice how grasping after more and more stuff becomes burdensome, and begin living more simply, developing more skill in letting go and in being content with things as they are. All of which leads naturally to paying more attention to how we are relating to experience at our sense doors and whether the way we are relating leads to unsatisfactoriness or to harmony, contentment and joy. And all of these trainings create confidence in ourselves and in our practice, confidence which carries over as a support into daily life, and which helps to prepare us for exploring more deeply the truth of our own lives.

© Philip L. Jones, 2014

#### NOTES

1. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *In the Buddha's Words*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2005, pp. 241-250.
2. MN 27.14, BB, p. 246.
3. MN 27.15, BB, p. 246.
4. Shaila Catherine, *Wisdom Wide and Deep*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2011, p. 102.
5. My alternative translation.
6. SN 35.97, Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000, pp. 1179-1180.