

The Gradual Training, pt. 3: Clear Understanding

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 07/29/2014

Tonight I'd like to continue with a series of talks about the Gradual Training. My primary source for this talk is "The Shorter Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant's Footprint", the Cūḷahatthipadopama Sutta, MN 27.¹

The steps in this Gradual Training that have been covered so far are:

- Having the good fortune to hear the Buddha's teachings, and then the faith or confidence to begin to test them out in one's own life.
- As a first expression of that faith, training oneself to live a more ethical life, which is focused on our behavior towards others, but which really involves training the mind, to notice and restrain unwholesome behaviors and to support and cultivate wholesome ones. This training leads to inner and outer harmony, safety and ease.
- Ethical Training is followed by training oneself in simplifying one's life, or being more content with what one has and being patient with the way things are.

Two weeks ago I also spoke about the training of sense restraint or "guarding the sense doors." I'd like to share one further aspect of this training which I've learned from Bhikkhu Bodhi since then. I think helps us to further integrate guarding the sense doors as a practice of mindfulness and a support for our mind training.

Bhikkhu Bodhi suggests that this practice of sense restraint is normally done during one's daily activities along with mindfulness of a meditation object. This object could be mindfulness of breathing or mindfulness of the rising and falling of bodily sensations, for example. So as you go through your day, the training in guarding the sense doors involves having a general stance of mindfulness towards all the sense doors and specifically noticing when there is reactivity at one of the doors. In other words, noticing when there is greed or grasping after pleasant sense experiences; aversion or pushing away unpleasant sense experiences; or a tendency to fall asleep with, or not notice, neutral sense experiences. After meeting this reactivity towards the feeling-tone of the sense object with mindfulness, and letting go of that reactivity, one pauses one's daily activity for a moment or two, or longer if needed, and gives attention to one's meditation object. This is a process of replacing an unwholesome state of mind with a wholesome one. And by staying with the meditation object for some moments, it allows the mind to stabilize these wholesome qualities of mindfulness and letting go. And then one returns to one's current daily life activity, whatever it happens to be at that moment.²

So training in guarding the sense doors isn't simply a form of restraint, it is also a way of beginning to train the mind to bring mindfulness to the sense doors and to let go of our entanglement with greed, hatred and delusion at these doors. All of these are skills we will need to live with some peacefulness, and to be able to meditate successfully.

The next training that the Buddha describes is:

"~~He~~ [One] becomes one who acts with clear comprehension when going forward and returning; who acts with clear comprehension when looking ahead and looking away; who acts with clear comprehension when flexing and extending ~~his~~ [one's] limbs; who acts with clear comprehension when wearing ~~his~~ [one's] robes and carrying ~~his~~ [one's] outer robe and bowl; who acts with clear comprehension when eating, drinking, chewing, and tasting; who acts with clear comprehension when defecating and urinating; who acts with clear comprehension when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking and keeping silent."³

The Pāli word *sampajañña* that Bhikkhu Bodhi translates as "clear comprehension" is also translated as "full awareness" [by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli], "alertness" [by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu] and Bhikkhu Bodhi has also commented that it can be translated as "clear understanding," though he prefers "clear comprehension".⁴ My personal preference is "clear understanding" because its meaning doesn't seem any different from "clear comprehension", but it is a simpler and easier to understand word.

The Commentaries helpfully describe four types of *sampajañña*, although the four types aren't found in the suttas. The first is: Clear understanding of the purpose of an action. So before performing an action, one pauses for a moment to clarify in one's mind the purpose of the action, to avoid acting in an unwholesome way impulsively or simply out of habit. An example of this would be when an impulse arises to grab a snack. If one were practicing with clear understanding, one would pause to notice whether one was actually hungry and in need of food, or, perhaps, bored and seeking stimulation, or anxious and seeking comfort. As one trains in this clear understanding of purpose, over time one applies it to increasingly subtle actions, so that more and more of one's actions are made with a clarity of purpose.

The second type is: Clear Understanding of the Suitability of one's means for achieving the purpose. An example of this would be having a clear understanding of whether throwing a fit or having a calm discussion, would be the best way to deal with one's spouse or partner about an irritation, and whether bringing it up as soon as they came home from work, or after they've had some time to relax, would be more timely and effective.

The next form of Clear Understanding is generally translated as "Clear Understanding of Domain." The Pāli is *gocara sampajañña*, with *gocara* literally referring to a pasture or field. So, Clear Understanding of "the domain where the practitioner grazes". Bhikkhu Bodhi's understanding of this is that the domain where the practitioner grazes is the object of meditation. So when the practitioner's attention is not needed for external activities, it will be drawn back inward to the meditation object and the practitioner will keep this object as the focus of attention. This practice will help keep the mind from just drifting into stories, obsessive thoughts or into unskillful habits.

One of my other teachers, Matt Flickstein, described that this domain had to do with clearly understanding that everything was part of one's mindfulness practice, that the whole of life is the domain of practice.⁵ To me both seem to be true, while pointing to slightly different ways of working with one's experience throughout the day. Everything is the domain of our practice in the broadest sense, yet sometimes it may be more skillful to temporarily return to our primary meditation object, such as the breath, to help stabilize the mind in a wholesome state of mindfulness, while at other times mindfulness and concentration are strong enough that one can take whatever arises next as one's meditation object.

The fourth form is Clear Understanding of Non-Delusion. I've heard it said that in the *suttas* *sati* (mindfulness) and *sampajañña* (clear understanding) are often linked together. Bhikkhu Bodhi differentiates them by saying that Mindfulness is "a basic awareness of what one is doing", while Clear Understanding is "knowing the purpose", suitability or domain of what one is doing.⁶ So these three forms of Clear Understanding are not quite wisdom, but are like a seeds that can develop into wisdom⁷ But having a Clear Understanding of Non-Delusion "is the point where clear comprehension evolves into *pañña* or wisdom." "This is the clear comprehension that one is practicing when one is doing insight meditation, when one is developing the four foundations of mindfulness." So one gradually comes to see through the delusion or misperceptions of the nature of the body, feeling, mind-states and phenomena and comes to see the ever-changing, unsatisfactory, and conditional nature of all phenomena.⁸

Within the context of the Gradual Training, we're still in the early stages of practice. So we're more likely to be working with the first three forms of Clear Understanding, beginning to settle into our experience, beginning to settle and open our minds and hearts, training minds and hearts in preparation for the more subtle and difficult work of meditation while giving us a tool that we can use during daily life no matter how far along we are on the Gradual Path.

NOTES

1. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *In the Buddha's Words*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2005, pp. 241-250.

2. Bhikkhu Bodhi, Commentary on MN 27, part 3, 30:17-31:37, "Exploring the Word of the Buddha: A Systematic Study of the Majjhima Nikāya", Buddhist Association of the United States, 2008.
3. MN 27.16, Bhikkhu Bodhi, *In the Buddha's Words*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2005, p. 246. [Gender neutral "one" substituted for masculine by PLJ.]
4. Bhikkhu Bodhi, Commentary on MN 27, part 3
5. Matthew Flickstein, *Swallowing the River Ganges*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2001, pp. 84-85; reissued as *A Meditators Atlas*.
6. Bhikkhu Bodhi, Commentary on MN 27, part 3, 38:50-41:45.
7. Bhikkhu Bodhi, Commentary on MN 27, part 3, 34:35-35:00.
8. Bhikkhu Bodhi, Commentary on MN 27, part 3, 35:41-47:45.