

The Gradual Training, pt. 6: Samādhi

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 09/09/2014.

Tonight I'm continuing the series of talks on the Gradual Training. The Gradual Training is a progressive series of practices that help to train the mind to let go of increasingly subtle unwholesome states and actions, which lead to dissatisfaction, stress, struggle and suffering, in other words dukkha, and to cultivate increasingly subtle wholesome states and actions, which lead to our long-term happiness and peace. My primary source for this series is "The Shorter Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant's Footprint", the Cūḷahatthipadopama Sutta, MN 27.¹

The last two talks I offered were on working with the Five Hindrances. Before I proceed to the next section of the sutta, I want to say a bit more about working with the hindrances. From reading the short description in the sutta, and perhaps from listening to my talks, one can get the idea that it is possible to quickly recognize and abandon the hindrances. But the reality is that this part of the practice is, in some ways, like peeling an onion. It requires some effort to remove each layer of the onion, and often some tears go with it. And then when one is finished, there is yet another layer to remove. This is often how it is with the hindrances as well. The difference being that usually there is a bit more of a break between tackling the hindrances when they arise again in a new form. In between, one may find that the mind easily settles and focuses on the meditation object or the issue at hand.

If one is primarily cultivating mindfulness and momentary concentration or samādhi—brief moments when the mind is free of the hindrances and fairly settled and focused, then one's practice may involve a fairly steady effort to confront the hindrances. But if one is attempting to develop enough moments of concentration so that they become more of a steady mind-state, then we begin to move into the territory that comes up next in the sutta.

So next the Buddha said:

"Having thus abandoned these five hindrances, imperfections of the mind that weaken wisdom, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, he [one] enters upon and abides in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. ..."²

First, when the Buddha says "Having thus abandoned these five hindrances, ... quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states" he is describing the preconditions for developing more consistent moments and states of samādhi. We live a simple, ethical life and re-orient ourselves to seek happiness and pleasure somewhere other than through our senses. And, along with that, we abandon the five hindrances, these difficult mind and body states that interfere with our ability to settle and focus the mind so that we can

see things as they truly are. These preconditions are the steps of the Gradual Training that we have practiced and trained in up to this point.

Then when we're meditating, we rely on mindfulness to recognize when attention is focused on our meditation object, such as the experience of breathing at the tip of the nose or upper lip, and to recognize when attention has wandered or been drawn to some other object, perhaps a sound, a bodily sensation or a thought or story about ourselves.

Each time we direct attention to our meditation object, we're using a mental factor that in Pāli is called *vitakka*. We can find this translated in a number of ways. In this sutta we find it translated as "applied thought." But I think the clearest translation, in terms of the actual experience, is "directed attention."

Once we direct attention to our meditation object, we try to maintain attention on it. This is an application of the mental factor that in Pāli is called *vicāra*. This term is also translated in a number of different ways. Here we find it as "sustained thought." But I find the clearest reference to our own experience is "sustained attention." We are attempting to sustain our attention on the meditation object. When *vicāra* is weak, attention tends to wander and wobble pretty frequently. Then it is quite hard to settle attention and to feel calm and peaceful. But when we keep bringing attention back again and again and again with a strong intention and a balanced effort—neither too strenuous nor too lazy, then we strengthen *vicāra* to a point where our attention is held more and more continuously on our meditation object.

Although I don't believe that it is mentioned in the suttas, the Commentaries tell us that *vitakka* and *vicāra* act as antidotes to two of the hindrances. *Vitakka*, directed attention, is said to counteract the hindrance of dullness or drowsiness. When dullness is strong, it is hard to keep directing our attention to our meditation object. We actually tend to forget to do so and instead just kind of drift along, or drift into sleepiness. But when we're able to direct our attention again and again, we are summoning energy, which of course is the opposite of the experience of dullness and helps us to stay alert.

Vicāra, sustained attention, is said to counteract the hindrance of doubt. When doubt is strong, it is hard to sustain attention on our object. We keep turning in an obsessive way back to doubting this and that. But when we sustain attention on our meditation object, we're not giving doubt any openings and the mind begins to settle down.

As the mind is increasingly calmed and focused as a result of directing and sustaining attention on the meditation object, the mind becomes further secluded from the influence of sensual experiences. In other words, the mind becomes less and less distracted by sensual experiences — sights, sounds, thoughts and so forth. As a result of this increased calm and

seclusion two other factors of mind become more prominent. The sutta points to this with the phrase "with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion".

The quality mentioned as "rapture" is called *pīti* in Pāli. It is a mental form of happiness that seems to arise in response to freedom from distractions. Some other words that are used to describe it are bliss, elation, joy and delight. There is a certain energetic quality to this kind of happiness.

The term "pleasure" in the quote seems to be a reference to the other form of happiness that arises in response to the freedom from distractions. In Pāli it is called "sukha" and the most frequent English translation is simply "happiness." It may have been translated as "pleasure" in this sutta because in the *Abhidhamma* *sukha* is regarded as a feeling rather than a *saṅkhāra*, a mental formation. So as a feeling it will have to do with the quality of pleasantness.

The commentaries tell us that *pīti* counteracts the hindrance of aversion, which makes sense because it is probably impossible to be happy, in a wholesome way, and hateful at the same time. The commentaries also say that *sukha* counteracts the hindrance of restlessness. This may not be quite so obvious. But since restlessness arises or persists when we give careless attention to and react to the unpleasant feeling-tone associated with it, it makes sense that when we're giving attention to the pleasant feeling that is *sukha*, then we wouldn't be reacting and getting caught in restlessness or worry.

The arising of these pleasant states of *pīti* and *sukha* encourage one to be even more devoted to the meditation object, directing and sustaining more and more attention on it. And this is true whether one is cultivating momentary concentration or a more stable state of concentration. Whichever form of concentration, it leads to a very stable focus on the meditation object. This stability of focus is called *ekaggatā* in Pāli and is often translated as "one-pointedness" but can also be translated as "unification of mind". The commentaries tell us that this unification of mind leads to the suppression of the last of the five hindrances: sense desire, greed or lust. At this point the happiness of a concentrated mind is simply more attractive than any of the pleasures of the sense world.

When directed and sustained attention are strong enough to lead to enough delight, happiness and one-pointedness so that one is truly secluded from the senses and hindrances in a stable way, then this is regarded as the establishment of a deep level of concentration called *jhāna* in the Pāli or absorption concentration in English.

Bhikkhu Bodhi has described this shift to *jhāna* as a "quantum leap" to a different level of consciousness and away from the world of sense objects to a "world of pure form" .³ The term "pure form" means that our objects of attention are now not related to the senses but to

mental objects, ideas or events. The first of these "pure forms" is actually the mental sign, or nimitta in Pāli, that one focuses on in making the transition from the sensory experience of our meditation object. For example, moving from the felt sensation of breathing, to a mental image of a light in the vicinity of the tip of the nose.

In the teachings of Early Buddhism and in the Theravāda School of Buddhism, there are said to be four levels of jhāna, each one deeper and more subtle. Then there are four additional states, the formless realms, that can take one even deeper into the nature of consciousness.

Just as one has to let go of the sense world to move into the first jhāna, one has to let go of some of the five qualities that led one into first jhāna in order to go deeper. To move to the second jhāna one lets go of vitakka and vicāra (directed & sustained attention). Then one let's go of pīti (rapture, bliss or delight), to move into the third jhāna. One lets go of sukha (happiness) to move to the deep equanimity of the fourth jhāna. And on the basis of this equanimity, one explores the four aspects of consciousness that are called the formless realms.

One of the characteristics of the Gradual Training has been that one learns to let go of progressively more subtle unwholesome forms of experience while cultivating progressively more subtle wholesome ones. This is the lesson again and again as one moves from one level of jhāna to another. Speaking of another one of the benefits of experiencing jhāna, Shaila Catherine tells us that "In jhāna the strength comes not through rubbing up against obstacles, but through familiarity with a way of being that is unhindered by them."⁴

So jhāna gives us glimpses of what it is like to live with a mind free of unwholesome states. This insight can support our faith that complete freedom from greed, hatred and delusion may indeed be possible in this life, and it may motivate us to be even more committed to developing the clarity and wisdom that will make that freedom a reality.

© Philip L. Jones, 2014

NOTES

1. Bhikkhu Bodhi. *In the Buddha's Words*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2005, pp. 241-250.
2. MN 27.19, Bhikkhus Nāṇamoli & Bodhi trans. *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995, p. 275. Adapted for gender neutrality.
3. Bhikkhu Bodhi. *Exploring the Word of the Buddha: A Systematic Study of the Majjhima Nikāya*, M0032 - MN -027 *Cūlahatthipadopama Sutta* - The gradual training (part 6), 31.47-32.44 minutes.
4. Shaila Catherine. *Focused and Fearless*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2008, p. 97.