

The Gradual Training, pt. 7: Samādhi

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 09/16/2014.

Tonight I'd like to offer the final talk in the series on the Gradual Training. The Gradual Training is a progressive series of practices that help to train the mind to let go of the increasingly subtle unwholesome states and actions which lead to dissatisfaction, stress, struggle and suffering — in other words dukkha, and to cultivate the increasingly subtle wholesome states and actions, which lead to our long-term happiness, peace, and freedom from greed, hatred and delusion.

My primary source for this series is "The Shorter Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant's Footprint", the Cūlahatthipadopama Sutta, MN 27.¹ The simile is about following an elephant's footprints until we see for ourselves that they are truly the footprints of a great elephant. The key metaphor, of course, is that the Buddha is that great elephant. And as we follow the path that the elephant, the Buddha, took, we are moving to deeper levels of happiness, peace and freedom until we attain for ourselves the same freedom that the Buddha came to know for himself.

In the last talk I spoke about the jhānas, the deep states of concentration where attention has turned away from the sense world and is absorbed in pure wholesome perceptions. This path through the four jhānas is being presented in this sutta because this is the path that the Buddha himself followed. But Bhikkhu Bodhi, and many other teachers, have noted that the suttas reveal that this is only one of the possible paths to awakening.

Bhikkhu Bodhi states that it is his understanding of the suttas that it is possible to attain the first two stages of awakening, stream-entry and once-returning, just by direct insight without deep concentration — from our usual form of insight meditation that relies on momentary concentration. Or it is possible to realize the first two stages with concentration at the level of access or near-jhāna (in which the hindrances are temporarily suppressed but in an unstable way) and then through direct insight based on that. Or one can attain the first two stages of awakening through concentration at the level of any of the jhānas and insight based on that.² To reach the third stage of awakening, non-returning, and the fourth stage, arahant-ship, Bhikkhu Bodhi has indicated that one would need to attain at least the first jhāna and then build insight on the basis of that.³ But Bhikkhu Bodhi also notes that the Commentaries and the Northern Buddhist tradition (the many schools of Mahāyana Buddhism) assert that one can reach arahantship through "dry insight" without the jhānas.⁴

So this brings us to the final aspect of the training, the development of liberating insight or knowledge associated with awakening. In the sutta we find the Buddha saying:

"When his mind is thus concentrated, purified, bright, unblemished, rid of defilement, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, he directs it to knowledge of the recollection of past lives. ... 'There I was so named, of such a clan, with such an appearance, such was my nutriment, such my experience of pleasure and pain, such my life-term; and passing away from there, I was reborn elsewhere...'"⁵

All of the qualities of mind mentioned in the first sentence are said to be characteristic of a mind that has been mastered through training in the four jhānas. This is a mind that is quite powerful, clear and precise in its ability to examine extremely minute moments of experience. A mind like this is said to have extraordinary powers. While I can't speak about this from personal experience, there certainly are contemporary teachers who can. One of these teaches was Dipa Ma, who was a teacher of Joseph Goldstein & Sharon Salzberg, among others. You can read about her extraordinary powers of concentration in the book *Dipa Ma*.⁶

So although the ability to look back at past lives of oneself or others may seem bizarre or a fantasy to us, over the years I've come to take a kind of agnostic attitude about this. I just don't know. If I ever master the four jhānas, then I might be able to find out for myself.

The sutta continues:

"When his mind is thus concentrated, purified, bright, unblemished, rid of defilement, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, he directs it to knowledge of the passing away and rebirth of beings. With the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, he sees beings passing away and being reborn ... He understands how beings pass on according to their actions..."⁷

These first two knowledges — the knowledge of rebirth and passing away, lifetime after lifetime, and the knowledge that one's actions, whether deeds, words or thought, impact how and where one is reborn — point to the deep nature of dukkha (unsatisfactoriness, stress and suffering) in our lives.⁸ And this is true whether we understand rebirth and past lives in terms of many physical rebirths, or if we understand it as a metaphor for the psychological rebirths we experience moment after moment in our lives when we get caught in grasping, aversion, identification or some other form of ignorance.

The Buddha then continues to the third of the liberating knowledges:

"When his mind is thus concentrated, purified, bright, unblemished, rid of defilement, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, he directs it to knowledge of the destruction of the taints. He understands as it really is: 'This is suffering. This is the origin of suffering. This is the cessation of suffering. This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.' He understands as it really is: 'These are the taints. This is the

origin of the taints. This is the cessation of the taints. This is the way leading to the cessation of the taints.'...

"When he knows and sees thus, his mind is liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of existence, and from the taint of ignorance. When it is liberated there comes the knowledge: 'It is liberated.' He understands: 'Birth is destroyed, the spiritual life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming back to any state of being.'⁹

So it is with these final three knowledges arising from the gradual training that the remaining defilements of the mind are finally eradicated or permanently overcome.¹⁰ These defilements are said to be latent or dormant, so they are like deeply conditioned tendencies to act or react in ways that lead to continuing unsatisfactoriness.

The first stage of awakening, stream-entry, is said to involve becoming free of: a belief or view that there are enduring personalities or selves, independent of causes and conditions; the belief in the effectiveness of ritualistic actions to purify or free one; and becoming free of doubt about the truth of the Buddha's awakening, about the possibility of awakening, and about the teachings.

The second and third stages of awakening, once-returning and non-returning, are said to involve becoming free of reactivity to the sense world, in other words, to become free of desire for sensual pleasures and to become free of aversion to what is painful at the senses.

The final stage of awakening, arahant-ship, is said involve becoming free of: the desire for existing, or for experiences, in the fine-material realm — the pleasant wholesome states of the first through fourth jhānas; the desire for existing, or for experiences, in the immaterial spheres — the deep states of equanimity associated with the formless states of consciousness; conceit — the tendency to compare oneself to others - better than, worse than, or the same as, which is based on a sense that there is a self that can be compared; restlessness — agitation, even very subtle forms of mental agitation, that disturb the peacefulness of one's mind; and the last remnants of ignorance — of not clearly seeing the three characteristics of conditioned experience and therefore getting caught in confusion including a sense, as opposed to a belief, that there is a distinct being having experiences.¹¹

Bhikkhu Bodhi suggests that after mastering the fourth jhāna, the meditator will exit it and then turn attention first to the mind. Actually it is described as a process of coming out of jhāna, investigating the mind for a while, then as attention begins to be less powerful, going back into jhāna to strengthen it, then coming back out and continuing with one's investigation.

Using this power, precision and clarity of mental unification, one investigates the jhānic experience and comes to see for oneself how the apparent unification of the mind is dependent on the physical body, that even this jhānic level of consciousness is still dependent on the sign or perception of the meditation object. So one comes to see that even this extremely pure kind of mind is actually made up of components: the five aggregates of subject to clinging — form or materiality, the body; feeling - the pleasant, unpleasant or neutral tone of a moment of experience; perception - recognizing the specific characteristics associated with an object of attention; mental formations - especially volition or intentions; and consciousness - the bare knowing of each moment of contact with an object.

As one moves in and out of jhāna, one comes to see that these components are constantly arising and passing away. Then one broadens the field of attention to the rest of one's experience and comes to see, to directly and clearly know, that one's body and one's mind are just a stream of events arising and passing hundreds or thousands of times in "each snap of one's fingers."

This clear seeing of impermanence, anicca, leads to the realization that "whatever is impermanent cannot be relied upon for security, that it is not a basis for any lasting, stable kind of happiness." In other words seeing that craving or hunger for this conditioned world of experience is dukkha, unsatisfactory, stressful, and suffering. And seeing that "whatever is arising and passing away, whatever is made up of constituents and can be taken apart is not a solid, stable self," that it is anattā, not-self.

One continues to examine more and more subtle aspects of experience, until at some point the mind turns away from conditioned experience, and momentarily touches the unconditioned, which is said to be not impermanent, not suffering, the ultimate bliss. Bhikkhu Bodhi says "When that happens one makes the true breakthrough to the true understanding of the four noble truths, which is called the 'knowledge of the destruction of the taints'."¹²

The word āsavas is translated as "taints" here, but more literally it means very deep, latent defilements that either influence, flow into or are influxes into consciousness, or flow out from, effluents from, "the mind through the senses into the world."¹³ There are three forms of taints: kamāsava - the taint of sensuality or sensual desire, desire for sense pleasures; bhavāsava - the taint or craving for renewed existence; and the taint of ignorance. The first two are different types of craving. Although the text makes it sound like liberating insight (the knowledge of the four noble truths/freedom from the taints) occurs all at once. But it actually occurs over the four stages of awakening.¹⁴

Having experienced and realized for oneself this final freedom from greed, hatred and delusion, the sutta tells us that:

"It is at this point that a noble disciple has come to the conclusion: 'The Blessed One is perfectly enlightened, the Dhamma is well expounded by the Blessed One, the Saṅgha is practicing the good way.' And it is at this point ... that the simile of the elephant's footprint has been completed in detail."¹⁵

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NOTES

1. Bhikkhu Bodhi. *In the Buddha's Words*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2005, pp. 241-250.
2. Bhikkhu Bodhi. *Exploring the Word of the Buddha: A Systematic Study of the Majjhima Nikāya*, M0034 MN-27 - Culahatthipadopama Sutta - The gradual training (part 8), 4:50-6:08.
3. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *ibid.*, 6:08-7:58.
4. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *ibid.*, 7:58-9:23.
5. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *In the...*, op cit., MN 27.23, p. 248.
6. Schmidt, Amy. *Dipa Ma: The life and legacy of a Buddhist Master*. BlueBridge Publications, 2005. Previously published as *Knee Deep in Grace: The Extraordinary Life and Teaching of Dipa Ma*.
7. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *In the...*, op cit., MN 27.24, p. 248.
8. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Exploring...*, op cit., 13:38-14:08.
9. Bhikkhu Bodhi, MN 27.25, p. 249.
10. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Exploring ...*, op cit., 37:17-37:30.
11. Shaila Catherine. *Wisdom Wide and Deep*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2011, p. 456.
12. Bhikkhu Bodhi. *Exploring...*, op cit., 46:08-53:58.
13. Bhikkhu Bodhi. *Exploring...*, op cit., 53:58-56:15.
14. Bhikkhu Bodhi. *Exploring...*, op cit., 57:16-57:31.
15. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *In the...*, op cit., MN 27.26, p. 249.