

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 02-03-2015.

In the discourses of Early Buddhism and the commentaries on them the path to awakening emphasizes gaining insight into the impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self nature of experience. It emphasizes becoming increasingly free from greed, hatred and delusion, especially the misperception that one has an independent and enduring self. But for those of us who do the practice, it seems to me that there is a more personal process of awakening to our own lives and to life in general.

During the early years of my own practice, I often felt that the descriptions of the path offered by Early Buddhism had little in common with my own experience. But in more recent years I've come to think of these two forms of the path of practice as being like twining vines of awakening. In this view, neither path fully accounts for the process of awakening. But together they come more closely to it.

My view is that both the personal process of awakening and the more formal Buddhist models begin with two things. There needs to be some degree of distress, of a sense of something lacking from one's life, for one to have the motivation to begin. Sometimes the distress may be acute and intense. Maybe the sudden loss of a loved one. Or suddenly finding one's life upended in some other way. At other times it may just be the gradual recognition that there is something missing from one's life and that the more common attempts to soothe oneself by getting more of something—sensual pleasures, relationships, money, power, recognition, and so forth—just leave one feeling more and more empty and dissatisfied.

To begin this process of awakening, there also seems to be a need for a basic ability to live an ethical and compassionate life. There needs to be an ability to be kind and respectful of oneself and of others, so that there is a degree of stability in one's life and one's relationships.

Sometimes people have to begin practice with finding some degree of stability. This seems to be one of the things that all religions offer, and it may be part of the appeal of the more fundamentalist versions of the different religions. People may need to start with a more black-or-white approach to ethical living, before they are able to integrate the shades of gray. Of course sometimes people don't move beyond the black-and-white. And that will be an obstacle to their own awakening, having their hearts blocked in that way. For other

people, there is already a "good-enough" level of ethics integrated into their lives, so that they may not have to begin by emphasizing ethical living, though it probably will need more attention later down the path.

Our personal paths of awakening are different. They depend on the challenges that life brings to us, and the resources that we have to meet them. But invariably they involve coming to see more clearly the *dukkha* (the unsatisfactoriness, stress and suffering) in our own lives and an acceptance or surrender to that reality, which contributes to our compassion and our equanimity with all the ups and downs of this human life. Our personal paths invariably require an opening of our hearts and minds to the views and realities of others along with not clinging so tightly to our own views and opinions.

A simile for this aspect of awakening is that we are like a light that gradually grows stronger, and illuminates a greater and greater area in the dark space of life. On the other hand, from a psychological perspective, we can think of this as the ability to integrate more and more of life into our own tiny life, so that we don't feel so threatened, or so bowled over, when we encounter Life. Some might call this having more of a mastery with life, but I think that implies a bit too much of a sense of ego, of a sense of "I", and may also emphasize the will to be in control too much.

One can follow this path of personal awakening quite a ways without relying on meditation. But the meditative path certainly helps us to develop qualities and skills that accelerate our ability to live with wisdom, compassion and equanimity.

Developing the ability to settle and focus our minds (in other words concentration or *samādhi*), along with the qualities of seeing more clearly what we're experiencing in any moment (mindfulness or *sati*), can be very helpful in seeing, accepting and opening to life as it is. But the Theravāda Buddhist tradition describes the development of deeper and deeper insights that develop as we strengthen these qualities of concentration and mindfulness through meditative practice.

This model is referred to as *The Path of Purification*. It involves seven stages, each one unfolding from the previous as concentration and insight deepen. As one directly experiences the practices and processes associated with these seven stages sixteen insights occur that lead one to the edge of awakening. But because of time constraints, I want to begin exploring those insights next week.