

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 02-17-2015.

This is the third in a series of talks on what I'm calling the Twining Vines of Awakening. One of the vines is the largely personal, individual process of awakening to one's own life and to life in general. Some might call it the process of becoming an authentic human being. The other vine is the process of increasing renunciation, or letting go, combined with deepening insight into the impermanent, unsatisfactory and conditioned, dependent nature of this individual life and of all life.

A model for this second process is found in the *Visuddhimagga*, or *Path of Purification*, a Theravāda Buddhist commentary from the 5th century CE. In the previous two talks I've tried to elaborate on the personal process of opening to one's own life, while also beginning to present the 7 stages and 16 Insight Knowledges described in the *Path of Purification*. Those first two talks, and many others, are available on the Silent Mind-Open Heart website on the Talks page.

Before I go further with this, I want to admit to some ambivalence about talking about these stages and insights. On the one hand, I think it is quite important for practitioners to understand that there is a lot more to the ability to be present for all of life's ups and downs than simply being mindful or developing the ability to be concentrated. Mindfulness and concentration are essential skills on the path, in large part because they lead to the wisdom, the insights, that bring us to a greater sense of freedom, of ease, balance and relaxation, with life as it is. I also think it can be helpful for people to have an intellectual understanding of some of the realizations that develop out of a deep commitment to the practice. And in my own practice I've also found the idea inspiring that the practice unfolds in a lawful manner, step by step.

But like most things in life, the unfolding of the practice is actually less straightforward, less linear, than the *Path of Purification* model suggests. This is part of the reason why I like the simile of twining vines. For our lives to be fully integrated, there must be an interplay between these forms of practice.

There's also a danger in getting caught in striving for the insight knowledges. Sometimes getting caught in intellectually trying to figure them out, rather than just trusting that the insights will come from the practice. Sometimes practicing with fierce effort and determination to *get* an insight, which mostly interferes with the development of the direct

experience that is the insight. And perhaps worst of all, sometimes getting caught in comparing mind. One common form is judging ourselves — "Am I there yet?" or "You mean I'm only this far!" or "I'm no good because I haven't had that insight yet." And probably worst of all "I'm really doing well now because *I've* understood this, and those other people haven't." Another form of comparing mind is a tendency to idealize another person, often a teacher, wanting to believe that at least they have realized the end of the path, or at least significant progress on the path. They may have, but watch out for that tendency to idealize another.

So I just want to emphasize that while it is useful to know of these twining vines of awakening, what is really important is to just keep doing the practice, wherever we are on the path, and to simply trust that the path will unfold and greater ease and wisdom will develop.

This brings me to the ending of last week's talk. I had commented that as a result of our practices, especially bringing mindfulness, concentration and investigation to our experiences of the body, the feeling tone of experience, and the impact of intentions and perceptions on actions and feelings,

"the Insight develops that the body and mind are able to function without there being an "I" in charge. We overcome the doubt that the conditioned nature of the body and mind is enough to allow us to function in this world. This is called the insight into conditionality."

I just want to say that for some people this insight arises suddenly and with great clarity, while for others, perhaps most of us, it is just a gradual understanding that shifts into place as we keep observing body and mind functioning on their own. And I also want to say that this insight knowledge of conditionality is not the same as seeing through the view of there being an "I", a personality or identity, that is the center of this life and in control of it. Knowledge of conditionality is a preliminary step in developing that insight. It is a beginning to see how life can function just from cause and effect, from conditions affecting each other.

The Insight Knowledge of Conditionality is the culmination of the fourth stage of the Path of Purification, the stage of Purification by Overcoming of Doubt. You may recall that doubt is one of the Five Hindrances, the obstacles to an increasingly settled and focused mind. The antidote to doubt is Faith. And so as we overcome doubt about cause-and-effect

and conditionality, our faith, confidence and trust in the practice grows. This helps to carry us into the next stage of practice, which is called Purification by Knowledge and Vision of What Is the Path and What Is Not the Path.

With this stage of practice, concentration becomes stronger, two Insight Knowledges arise, or become stronger and clearer, and a number of other spiritual experiences may arise as well. With the strengthening of concentration we become more able to see or directly know the impermanence, the actual arising and passing of both moments of contact with a sensory object and the knowing of that object.

Prior to this time we may have been able to see the arising and passing at a more gross level. For example, we might notice that "pain" arises and passes in the leg or the foot, but we may not see below the concept "pain" to the actual components that make up that experience, things like tightness, burning, twisting and so forth.

But with the increased strength of concentration and mindfulness, we begin to move below the conceptual level down into the more basic aspects of each moment of experience, seeing how even those basic parts of the experience are arising and passing, and how the knowing of that basic experience is also arising and passing. This can actually be a long phase of practice. Often our ability to dip down into that deep level is inconsistent. At some moments we will see it very clearly. At other moments maybe we will know it more at a conceptual level of experience. And at other moments we may not know it at all. Over time our investigation will include all of the forms of matter that we encounter and all mental aspects that we can observe. Shaila Catherine tells us that

"It is important that the examination of phenomena be comprehensive—internal, external, near, far, gross, subtle, past, present, and future..."¹

As our ability grows to look increasingly closer at the basic phenomena, and to do so with more and more consistency, our deep, direct understanding of the impermanent, unsatisfactory and conditional, empty or not-self nature of all of life matures. As we investigate more and more experiences, we come to directly know for ourselves, we comprehend, the truth that all conditioned things are arising and passing, that they are not satisfactory sources of comfort or refuge because they are constantly changing, and that they arise simply because of causes and conditions. This is the Insight Knowledge of Comprehension. It is the first of the two Insight Knowledges of this stage, and this is where I want to stop for tonight.

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References

Flickstein, Matthew. *Swallowing the River Ganges: A Practice Guide to the Path of Purification*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2001. (This book has been slightly revised and reissued by Wisdom under the title *The Meditator's Atlas*.)

Catherine, Shaila. *Wisdom Wide and Deep: A Practical Handbook for Mastering Jhāna and Vipassanā*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2011.

Notes

1. Catherine, Shaila, p. 435.