

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 02-24-2015.

This is the fourth in a series of talks on what I'm calling the Twining Vines of Awakening. The Vines refer to the interdependent processes of opening to our own individual lives—the joys and sorrows, the acceptable things and those we prefer to not acknowledge—and the deepening processes of letting go of our usual sources of comfort—sense pleasures and the various ways that we buttress the sense of self—and seeing more and more clearly the impermanent, unsatisfactory and empty or conditional nature of what we encounter in life. This second vine is summarized in the commentary *The Path of Purification* as the development and unfolding of 7 stages and 16 insight knowledges.

In the last talk I spoke about the fifth stage of the Path of Purification, which is Purification by Knowledge and Vision of What Is the Path and What Is Not the Path. And I spoke about the first of the two Insight Knowledges that develop during this stage, Knowledge of Comprehension. This knowledge or insight has to do with a significantly deeper and broader, direct experience and understanding of the impermanent, unsatisfactory and conditional nature of almost all of our experiences.

One of the things that I find interesting about this point in the practice is the crucial role played by a strengthening and deepening of concentration. An ongoing debate in our practice has to do with concentration. "How much concentration is enough?" "What form of concentration is needed?"

There are some people who emphasize that before starting to do insight meditation, one should develop a deeper state of concentration such as the *jhānas*, the states of attention being quite stably focused on one's meditation object. But I think there is a pretty broad consensus, at least here in the West, that we can develop enough concentration to begin the practice just by bringing mindful attention back to our meditation object again and again.

In this way of practicing, we turn attention to the experience of the breath in some location of the body. And when we notice that attention has wandered somewhere else, we bring it back to that location. In this way we begin to experience what is known as momentary concentration. There are some moments when the mind has established some concentration, some focus, on the meditation object. But those moments are usually interspersed between moments when the attention is somewhere else. Then, gradually, the moments of concentration become more frequent, closer together.

This stronger concentration allows us to begin to investigate aspects of our experience, particularly our bodies, the feeling-tone of our experiences, our mind-states and then certain categories of experience that are especially crucial for practice, especially meditation practice. This is working with the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, or as I prefer to call them the Four Fields for Establishing Mindfulness. These are the fields, the objects, that we're exploring as the practice unfolds in this Path of Purification, this path of seeing and knowing things as they are.

One of the approaches for bringing mindfulness to the world, to these fields is what is known as the Mahasi Sayadaw method of Insight Meditation or vipassanā, after the 20th century Burmese master who both perfected it and did so much to popularize it. I think two of the hallmarks of this approach are that it doesn't put much overt emphasis on the role of concentration, while trusting that any concentration needed will develop from the simple practice of mindfully observing or experiencing, and then labeling or "noting" increasingly refined moments of direct experience, experience below the conceptual level.

In the book *In this Very Life*, the Burmese master Sayadaw U Pandita, perhaps Mahasi Sayadaw's most well-known and most highly respected student here in the West, speaks of deep forms of concentration, what he calls "vipassanā jhānas"¹, arising during this stage of Purification By Knowledge and Vision of What Is the Path and What Is Not the Path. My understanding is that the phrase "vipassanā jhāna" cannot be found in the Buddha's discourses, the suttas. So I take U Pandita's use of the phrase to be an indication of just how crucial deeper states of concentration are for this stage of the practice.

Sayadaw U Pandita said:

"As vipassanāñāṇa [in other words, direct experiential insight into the impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self or conditional nature of phenomena] recurs in one's practice, the mind is led into a natural and spontaneous reflection that impermanence, suffering and nonselfness are not only manifest in the present situation. One realizes by deduction that these three qualities have also manifested throughout the past and will continue to prevail in the future. Other beings and objects are constituted of the same elements as oneself, all impermanent, unsatisfactory and empty of self-nature."²

What Sayadaw U Pandita is speaking of is the Insight Knowledge of Comprehension. He describes it arising with what he calls the First Vipassanā Jhāna, when the factors of vitakka (directed attention) and vicāra (sustained attention) are the most prominent.

These factors are the ones that we begin using at the very beginning of practice. We direct attention to the experience of breathing in our specified location, such as the tip of the nose, and then we sustain attention there which allows us to investigate or to see more clearly what this experience is actually like. At this point in practice though, directed and sustained attention are quite strong, quite able to keep attention focused on the meditation object. So they are functioning in exactly the same way that one finds in the more traditional descriptions of absorption concentration at the level of the First Jhāna.

The stage of Purification by Knowledge and Vision of What Is the Path and What Is Not the Path continues with a further deepening of our concentration into what U Pandita calls the 2nd vipassanā jhāna. It is characterized by a dropping away of the need to intentionally direct and sustain attention on the object of meditation. At this point there is enough stability in the focus of attention that we don't have to intentionally make it happen. The second vipassanā jhāna is also characterized by the coming into prominence of the qualities of joy, bliss or rapture and happiness. Along with this there is a further deepening of our direct experience of and insight into impermanence. This Insight Knowledge is called the Initial or Tender Knowledge of Arising and Passing Away.

This knowledge continues to develop during the next stage of the Path of Purification, where it is known as the Mature Knowledge of Arising and Passing Away. The fact that this Insight is regarded as a process and that it is split between two stages points to the fact that the Path of Purification is a model, a conceptualization of the unfolding of the path, and that the divisions are somewhat artificial. As these distinctions become increasingly subtle, one may experience the knowledge without having a clear, distinct recognition of each insight. But the distinctions do allow us to talk about how deep insight does unfold.

The Tender Knowledge of Arising and Passing Away involves directly seeing in our own experience with much greater clarity than we've experienced previously that mental and material processes arise and pass away simply because of the arising of conditions and the ceasing of conditions. It is a much deeper and clearer knowing of the cause and effect nature that underlies all the phenomena we experience. This level of insight and concentration is often accompanied by profound meditative experiences. If we get attached

to them, which often happens, they become obstacles or "corruptions of insight." And that will be the topic of next week's talk.

© Philip L. Jones, 2015

Notes

1. Sayadaw U Pandita. *In This Very Life: The Liberation Teachings of the Buddha*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2nd edition, 1992, pp. 171-211.
2. op cit, p. 196, text in brackets is my own.

Other Sources:

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

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*.)