

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

I've been doing 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 wish were not part of our lives—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—while seeing more and more clearly and deeply 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 two Insight Knowledges that develop during this stage. First, the Knowledge of Comprehension which involves a direct experiential recognition and reflection that everything we encounter—except for the Unconditioned or Nibbāna—is subject to arising and passing away. And second, the Tender, or Initial, Knowledge of Arising and Passing Away which involves a direct recognition that everything we encounter—except for the Unconditioned—arises and passes away because of the impermanence of causes and conditions. The understanding that everything arises when a particular set of conditions is present and it passes when those conditions pass.

As part of speaking about these insights, I also spoke about the deep level of concentration—in the range of *jhāna*, if not actual *jhāna*—that accompanies, and makes possible these direct experiences of the momentary arising and passing of everything that is conditioned. As I mentioned at the end of the talk, this level of concentration and insight is often accompanied by profound meditative experiences. Those experiences and the dangers of them are the subject of tonight's talk.

One of the experiences that may arise at this time is an intense experience of light or illumination. It may appear as a distinct bright light in the mind. It may seem to fill the mind with light. It may seem to fill the whole body. Or it may seem to fill the whole room. This light may occur whether one's eyes are closed or open. It is different from the light one can experience as part of the meditation object when developing the first *jhāna*. It is more intense. One of the dangers of the light is simply that one can get caught in being

interested in it. One can delight in it, rather than treating it as just another conditioned phenomena.

At this stage of practice, the direct experiential knowledge of arising and passing is seen with such clarity that one's faith in the teachings is verified in many ways and we may come to understand things that we had only read about previously. These experiences often lead to an increase in enthusiasm for the practice and to a deep desire to share the teachings and the practice with others. One has to be cautious that this desire doesn't divert one from continuing with the practice and the goal.

There may be intense experiences of joy, bliss or rapture in the mind or the body. As part of this there may be a sense of lightness or buoyancy as though one were floating in the air. Needless to say it is a very pleasant, happy thing to experience, and, easy to get attached to. So it can be helpful to notice that there is also a kind of agitation associated with it and that even this bliss or joy is subject to arising and passing.

A much deeper sense of tranquility than one has every experienced may arise in both body and mind. Associated with these one may be able to practice for long periods without discomfort or fatigue. A danger of the state of tranquility is that one can get attached to it. Because of that attachment, one can spend a lot of time trying to recreate the experience of tranquility rather than noticing that it is also subject to arising and passing.

There may be a deep sense of happiness present even at times when one is not engaged in formal meditation. And there may be no experiences of pain or bliss, even if one meditates for hours on end. It is easy to get attached to such pleasant states, and to also assume that they will last forever, rather than recognizing that they also are conditioned and subject to impermanence.

There may be quite intense emotions of devotion and gratitude, sometimes accompanied with thoughts about ordaining. There may be emotional outbursts, tears, or arrogant opinions about the practice and life in general. These emotions may be so intense and joyful that one becomes attached to them. And the emotions may disrupt one's practice in other ways. So one should try to use this increased faith and devotion as a support for committing to follow this path to the end.

There is often a balanced energy that arises at this stage, which makes it easy to meditate for hours at a time and to need little sleep. One may assume that this is now a permanent state, not something that also arises and passes due to causes and conditions. And in the end one may squander this hard-earned opportunity to carry one's practice forward.

At this stage mindfulness often becomes easy and almost automatic. It can be so powerful that one thinks awakening has occurred. Yet for the path to continue, one needs to recognize that this level of mindfulness is a result of having put certain conditions in place and that it is also subject to impermanence.

A strong quality of equanimity may arise at this stage. It may be experienced as a quality of deep ease and balance towards whatever arises. Concentration and mindfulness may arise easily out of this deeply balanced state of mind. If one gets attached to this state, it can derail one's practice in several ways. It can lead to a lack of urgency to continue to practice, even though one is getting closer to awakening. One can even assume that this state is actually awakening and so stop practicing.

Attachment, which may be present in any of the other states I've mentioned, is the last of these ten qualities that are often obstacles to the practice. It is important to watch out for any kind of subtle attachment or pride about what one has accomplished, what one has experienced or come to know. This also needs to be met with mindfulness both to avoid becoming entangled with it, and to see that it is also subject to arising and passing.

So at this phase of the practice, one may experience one or more of these powerful experiences. If one works through this stage of practice over a number of retreats, one may encounter the same experience or experiences again and again. It is quite common for people to get attached to and distracted by these experiences. When this happens they are regarded as obstacles or "Corruptions of Insight". When one is able to meet these phenomena with mindfulness and investigation, so that one recognizes and experiences their impermanent, unsatisfactory and conditional nature, then one directly experiences the freedom that comes with being completely present with the arising and passing of any phenomena. As a result, one directly knows that the powerful intriguing experiences are not the path and that the practice of seeing the impermanent, unsatisfactory and conditional nature of all phenomena—other than the unconditioned or Nibbāna—is the path. With this direct experiential understanding and act of letting go the stage of Purification by Knowledge and Vision of What Is the Path and What Is Not the Path is completed and one

moves on to the next stage where the arising of insights accelerates as one moves closer to the edge of Awakening.

Next week I want to step outside the model of the Path of Purification to explore some other experiences that can become obstacles to one's liberation, and then we'll continue to explore the Path of Purification through the remaining insights that lead one to the edge of Awakening.

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