

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 03-10-2015.

I've been doing a series of talks on what I'm calling the Twining Vines of Awakening. The Vines refer to two interdependent processes. One vine involves opening to our own individual lives—the joys and sorrows, the acceptable things and those we wish were not part of our lives—and finding a way to meet it all with some equanimity and kindness. The other vine is 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. One way this second vine is summarized is found in the *Visuddhimagga* or 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. There are ten powerful meditative experiences that can arise during that phase of practice. If one gets attached to them, they can be obstacles to one's progress. But coming to see for oneself how attachment to experiences can be obstacles leads to the understanding that attachment—even to beautiful experiences such as these—is not the path. It can also lead to a deep experiential understanding that seeing and knowing the arising and ceasing of all conditioned phenomena is the path.

Before I proceed further along the Path of Purification, I want to step outside that model to talk about some other meditative experiences that can also become sidetracks or obstacles to deeply experiencing for oneself the freedom that comes with true Awakening.

In our normal everyday life, we generally give attention to whatever is in the foreground. If we're chopping vegetables, we want to give attention to the veggies, to the position of the knife at any particular point and to our fingers. It's a practical matter of getting the job done without drawing blood.

In the systems of meditation in Theravāda Buddhism we build on this naturally conditioned tendency to be drawn to what is in the foreground. When we are meditating we usually give attention to whatever object is in the foreground of awareness, usually the breath, a word, phrase or a mental sign, or to something that has pulled attention from the primary object such as a sensory experience, a feeling or a thought.

But in the "Greater Discourse of Advice to Rāhula", the Buddha says,

"Rāhula, develop meditation that is like space; for when you develop meditation that is like space, arisen agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain."¹

One way to develop meditation like space is that as we bring mindfulness to what is in the foreground of more and more of our lives, we increasingly discover that there is a quality of spaciousness that develops around these moments of encounter. Rather than holding onto moments tightly, we are able to have a relaxed and spacious relationship with them.

Another way that we can develop meditation like space, is through the practice of mettā or goodwill meditation. With mettā practice we expand our field of attention step-by-step from ourselves to all beings everywhere.

And yet another way of developing the quality of spaciousness occurs in working with our own pain and suffering when, without denying or repressing the reality of our own pain, we are able to recognize that what we are experiencing is no different from what billions of other people are also experiencing. Recognizing that what we are experiencing is part of what it is to be a human being.

In working with our pain and in mettā meditation, we continue to focus on what is in the foreground, but we expand that foreground so that, just as with bringing more and more mindfulness to our lives, what is in the foreground has a more relaxed and spacious quality to it.

In one of the very advanced states of absorption concentration we can explore the state of infinite space. This is another kind of spaciousness that we can experience in our meditations that still relies on holding an object in the foreground.

Occasionally, though, we may find our attention resting more with the background, noticing the space around an object and giving less attention to the object. We can develop this into a skill by learning to de-focus the foreground and just relaxing or resting attention into the background. Sometimes when we do this there's a sense that we are resting in spacious awareness or spacious knowing and we can think that it is a place or a permanent state of consciousness that we've found a way to access.

While the Theravāda Buddhist approaches to meditation mostly keep the focus on the foreground, the systems of meditation in the Tibetan Buddhist traditions of Dzöḡchen and Mahāmudra², at least as I understand them, are built more around awareness of the spacious background. So there's a tendency in these Tibetan approaches to talk about Awakening in terms of spaciousness, of having a spacious mind.

As those of us who don't practice within the Tibetan systems have come to learn some of the Tibetan techniques for touching spacious awareness, and as we've learned of these Tibetan descriptions of Awakening, I think we sometimes confuse the spaciousness of an Awakened mind, as emphasized in these Tibetan systems, with the quality of spaciousness that we experience when practicing Theravāda approaches. And so there is sometimes a tendency to think that anytime one tunes into the spacious quality of mind that one is resting in being Awake, perhaps even that one is resting in a luminous, spacious kind of awareness that is equated with the Unconditioned or nibbāna.

But Anālayo Bhikkhu reminds us

"The experience of a constant form of awareness in the background of experience, independent of the actual content or affective mode of what is taking place in the mind, can easily be mistaken for a subtle form of awareness or mental luminosity that does not change. Close inspection, however, shows that even the most subtle form of awareness or of being conscious is definitely subject to the law of impermanence."³

To see the subtle forms of awareness with the close inspection he describes, requires quite a bit of concentration, mindfulness and investigation. Yet the tendency to rest in the relaxed spacious quality of mind, can actually lead to a dissipation of concentration, contributing not only to our failure to see spacious awareness more clearly, but also preventing us from having the concentration needed to see that knowing the impermanence of even these subtle experiences is actually the path to freedom. If one believes that their experience of spaciousness is the Awakened Mind, then one may simply fail to maintain the concentration needed to carry one to the actual edge of Awakening.

I think we can say that An awakened mind may be spacious, but a spacious mind is not necessarily awakened. So, while there may be a quality of freedom to this kind of spaciousness, it is important to notice how the spaciousness is conditional and impermanent and so is not the completion of the path.

Notes

1. MN 62.17, Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, trans. *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, First Edition, 1995, p. 530.
2. See: Dowman, Keith, trans. *The Flight of the Garuda: The Dzogchen Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2nd edition, 2003.
 Thrangu Rinpoche, Khenchen. *Essentials of Mahamudra: Looking Directly at the Mind*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2004.
3. Anālayo Bhikkhu, Barre Center for Buddhist Studies FaceBook page, 1/17/2015: 1:00 p.m.