

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 03-31-2015.

This is another of the 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, especially those things we turn to for comfort. I've been exploring the second vine through the model found in the 5th century CE commentary, the *Visuddhimagga*, or The Path of Purification.

Over the last four weeks, I've been talking about how meditative experiences can become obstacles to practice until we realize that having experiences is not the path of practice. Before I get back to the final two stages of the Path of Purification, I'd like to talk about one more set of experiences, ones that the Buddha called the Eight Worldly Conditions. They can also become obstacles to our progress. Or they can become part of what opens our hearts and minds.

In the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, the Numerical Discourse collection, the Buddha is recorded as saying:

"Bhikkhus, these eight worldly conditions revolve around the world, and the world revolves around these eight worldly conditions. What eight? Gain and loss, disrepute and fame, blame and praise, and pleasure and pain."¹

At some point in our lives, I think all of us probably have some kind of experience with each of these. We may not feel we have experienced fame, but if we think of it as "being thought well of" then I think almost all of us will have had some experience of this one too.

How do we deal with these when they impact our lives? The Buddha describes it like this:

"Bhikkhus, when an uninstructed worldling [that is, someone who isn't committed to this path of practice] meets with gain, he [or she] does not reflect thus: 'This gain that I have met is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change.' [She or] He does not understand it as it really is."²

The same thing is said with regard to loss, disrepute, fame, blame, praise, pleasure and pain. Then the Buddha continues:

"Gain obsesses ~~his~~ [one's] mind, and loss obsesses ~~his~~ [one's] mind. Fame obsesses ~~his~~ [one's] mind, and disrepute obsesses ~~his~~ [one's] mind. Blame obsesses ~~his~~ [one's] mind, and praise obsesses ~~his~~ [one's] mind. Pleasure obsesses ~~his~~ [one's] mind, and pain obsesses ~~his~~ [one's] mind. ~~He~~ [One] is attracted to gain and repelled by loss. ~~He~~ [One] is attracted to fame and repelled by disrepute. ~~He~~ [One] is attracted to praise and repelled by blame. ~~He~~ [One] is attracted to pleasure and repelled by pain. Thus involved with attraction and repulsion, ~~he~~ [one] is not freed from birth, from old age and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, dejection, and anguish; ~~he~~ [one] is not freed from suffering, I say."³

Actually, what the Buddha describes may be putting it mildly. Sometimes one or more of these eight worldly conditions hits our lives with such force, it changes our circumstances so much, that we struggle to survive, let alone to practice. Sometimes the force and impact of these conditions is not disastrous, but we still get so caught up in these eight conditions that our lives are wrecked, maybe even destroyed. We can see that in the lives of some celebrities and politicians, even if not in our own lives or those of our family or friends.

But even if they don't have a catastrophic impact on our lives, getting entangled with any of these eight conditions can still derail our practice and our movement along the twining vines of awakening. When we're entangled and we sit down to meditate we aren't able to settle and focus our attention because we're so obsessed and agitated about one of these conditions.

This is most likely to happen when we encounter one of these conditions in a very powerful way. But even when we have less forceful experiences of any of these conditions, we can become obsessed, attracted or repelled.

This can happen at any point on the path as we are practicing. Even when we are on intensive retreat and are practicing without speaking to others. Someone may act in a way that feels like a slight, or we may become enchanted with them, or get caught in judging them. Then the mind can become obsessed and our meditation comes to a halt. The mind is off in some fantasy, rather than right here, recognizing what is happening.

The Buddha doesn't just warn us of the dangers, though, he points to how we can move through our encounters with these eight worldly conditions. In another sutta on the eight worldly conditions, he is recorded as saying:

"A wise and mindful person knows them
and sees that they are subject to change.
Desirable conditions don't excite his [the] mind
nor is he [one] repelled by undesirable conditions."⁴

To follow the Buddha's advice, first we have to recognize what we've encountered. Quite often this doesn't happen until we're already entangled with the worldly condition. Quite often we don't begin by recognizing the worldly condition with this kind of mindful objectivity. Rather we often begin by recognizing that we're suffering, that we're struggling, or that we're creating havoc in our lives or the lives of our loved ones.

Going hand-in-hand with this quality of recognition is acceptance. Acceptance that this suffering, or that this worldly condition is part of our lives at this time. It is one of the paradoxes of our practice that to even begin to recognize that we're struggling with something, there must be at least a little bit of acceptance of that reality. Without that tiny bit of acceptance, there is just denial, just a failure or refusal to even see and know it.

Once there is some recognition and acceptance, then we can begin to investigate this experience of one, or more, of the worldly conditions. This is where we can rely on some of our training in bringing mindfulness to the body, feeling-tones and to our mind-states. We can investigate these different fields of experience to see how the suffering or the worldly condition is being experienced and expressed in different ways. We can investigate in which of these fields we're most entangled with attraction or repulsion.

As we investigate we are also bringing *sati sampajañña*, mindfulness and clear knowing, to our experiences. There is a quality of objectivity to this knowing. It is free of excitement, attraction and repulsion. This means that we're fully experiencing what is occurring in this moment, but we're not getting entangled with it. We're not grasping it. We're not trying to push it away. We're not pretending that it is other than what and how it is. But it is not simply seeing or "knowing." There is a quality of curiosity about it, which is why I spoke of investigation.

As we are present for this moment of experience, it allows us to see that just as it arose into our experience, it passes as well. If we pay attention, we can see that even during periods of intense joy or intense grief, the experience isn't one of solid joy or grief. There are moments of joy interrupted by moments of other thoughts, feelings and sensations. And the same thing occurs with grief.

If we pay attention, we can begin to see that it depends on conditions, and that as conditions change what is arising will change as well. And recognizing the impermanent and conditional nature of whatever worldly condition we're experiencing, helps us to know that it doesn't always have to be there.

Out of this practice of mindfulness, the quality of equanimity becomes stronger in our minds and hearts. We become more at peace with things as they are, even if we are also making an effort to change our circumstances.

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Notes

1. AN VIII.6. Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2012, p. 1116.
2. AN VIII.6, p. 1117 (adapted for gender neutrality)
3. *ibid.* (adapted for gender neutrality)
4. AN VIII.5, p. 1116 (adapted for gender neutrality)