

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 04-14-2015.

This is another of the series of talks on what I'm calling the Twining Vines of Awakening¹. Last week I began talking about the sixth stage of the Path of Purification: Purification by Knowledge and Vision of the Way. It begins with a very stable ability to see the arising and ceasing of each moment of experience, called the Mature Knowledge of Arising and Passing Away.

From that foundation four further insights unfold:

- the Knowledge of Dissolution (Seeing only ceasing in each moment.);
- the Knowledge of Appearance as Terror (Experiencing some fear or grief at recognizing that everything one had relied on for one's sense of self is constantly ceasing and therefore unreliable.);
- the Knowledge of Danger (Recognizing that our experiences of *dukkha* {unsatisfactoriness and suffering} come from trying to hold onto clusters of experiences {the *khandas* or Five Aggregates Subject to Clinging} that are constantly ceasing. Then realizing that each moment of conditioned experience has the potential to lead us into more *dukkha*.); and
- the Knowledge of Disenchantment and Dispassion (No longer being enchanted by or attracted to any form of conditioned experience, in other words not being attracted to the Five Aggregates Subject to Clinging.).

As a result of the knowledges of Dissolution, Terror, Danger, and Dispassion, the Insight Knowledge of Desire for Deliverance arises. It is simply the strong desire for complete liberation from entanglement with all conditioned phenomena—not simply the sense world, but also the refined states of mind that one can experience in deep states of concentration or *jhāna*.

Out of this strong desire for deliverance, there is a re-commitment to seeing and knowing the reality of the three characteristics — *anicca* or impermanence, the arising-and-ceasing of each moment; *dukkha* or the unsatisfactoriness of each moment, even if it has a pleasant feeling-tone; and *anattā* or the not-self or conditional nature of each moment, that what is encountered in each moment arises and ceases dependent on causes and the changing of causes. This re-focusing on the three characteristics is called the Insight Knowledge of Reviewing the Three Characteristics.

As one continues to quite consistently know momentary experience at the level of the three characteristics, a quality of equanimity arises towards all conditioned phenomena. This is the Insight Knowledge of Equanimity Towards Formations. As part of this, the attitudes of both terror and delight fade away, and there is no longer any identification with phenomena as "I, me, or mine."

Two obstacles may arise at this point in practice. If one stops observing the arising and ceasing, unsatisfactory and conditional nature of each moment, there may be a temptation to identify with the equanimity and to think "I'm doing really well now". This identification keeps one out of the stream of seeing and knowing the three characteristics. The second obstacle occurs if one assumes that the calmness and ease of equanimity is the experience of nibbāna. It is not.

The path ahead is to continue knowing the three characteristics in each moment. As one continues with the practice, giving attention to all of the mental and material forms that arise and cease along with the moment of consciousness that knows it, the forms may begin to fade from awareness and may eventually disappear.

Shaila Catherine has written that "When fascination with impermanent things ends, a great spaciousness opens where the unconditioned may reveal itself."² My sense is that this ceasing of interest happens without any intentional effort of any kind, without any attempt to manipulate or change the way things are at this moment. Even the actions involved in meditation may cease.³ Then, there may be a turning, an opening to the peacefulness of the unconditioned, the unfabricated, the unborn, the Deathless, nibbāna.

You may have noticed the "mays" in Shaila's comment and mine. The conditions are ripe for a turning towards the peacefulness of the unconditioned. But even at this point it may not happen. Matt Flickstein used to describe the turning towards the unconditioned as requiring a "synaptic leap." The idea was that there was a gap there between the world of conditioned experience and the unconditioned. The gap is like the synapse between nerves in our bodies. Matt's sense at that time was that somehow a leap of consciousness occurs over that gap so that we know this other reality that is indescribable, yet called, in Theravāda Buddhism, by names such as the unconditioned, the unfabricated, the unborn, the Deathless, and nibbāna.

All of the "mays" also brings to mind the quote attributed to the Zen teacher Richard Baker Roshi: "Enlightenment is an accident; practice makes you accident-prone."⁴

One of the things that prevents Awakening from being a sure thing even at this refined stage of practice is that if there is still the subtlest of holding on at this moment, any kind of identification whatsoever, the mind will stay caught in equanimity. Or, if for whatever reason the unconditioned is not perceived as peaceful then attention will turn back towards equanimity. But if there is a complete letting go of conditionality, even for a moment, the unconditioned may be contacted.

As this turning towards nibbāna is happening, another insight knowledge, Knowledge of Conformity with Truth, is said to arise for 3 very, very quick mind moments. So the mature phase of the Knowledge of Equanimity Towards Formations and the Knowledge of Conformity with Truth co-exist in time.

This knowledge is said to be a transitional process as consciousness is re-oriented from the habit of focusing on the five aggregates to focusing on the unconditioned. Matt Flickstein uses a simile of relay runners to help understand what happens in these three mind moments. He has written:

"In a relay race, the person to receive the baton begins running even before the present runner reaches his or her position on the track. In effect the subsequent racer tries to conform to the pace of the current runner, so that the transition will be smooth. Similarly, the knowledge of conformity with truth assists the mind in making a smooth transition from taking the five aggregates as its objects of awareness, to taking unconditioned reality as its object. It does so by helping the mind conform to the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment, which will arise when the supramundane realizations occur."⁵

The word "supramundane" refers to the experiences or realizations associated with contacting the unconditioned.

Immediately after the Knowledge of Conformation with Truth, there is another very, very quick and brief mind moment called The Knowledge of Change of Lineage. This is the moment when consciousness actually takes the unconditioned as its object. I want to quote from Shaila Catherine because she succinctly describes nibbāna, the unconditioned.

"Ultimate reality is not a concept. Nibbāna is not a place or a thing. Nibbāna contains no materiality and includes no mentality. It includes no space or properties.

There is a total absence of characteristics of diversity or changing factors that would create instability. It is void of all conditioned formations. It is described [in DN 11.85] as:

Consciousness without feature, without end,
Luminous all around:
Here water, earth, fire, and wind have no footing;
Here long and short, course and fine,
Fair and foul, mentality and materiality
Are all brought to an end.
With the stopping of consciousness,
Each is here brought to an end."⁶

My sense is that for some nibbāna may be seen with this clarity. Perhaps the arahants, the fully awakened ones see it this way. But my sense is that the first encounters with the unconditioned are more often like a blink. There's a moment when things shift, one knows with certainty that something new and very profound has occurred, but it is really beyond words. One's understanding probably doesn't include all of the detail I've shared from the commentaries.

This moment of contact isn't magic. It doesn't happen because of some kind of grace from an external power. It simply happens because step-by-step the conditions have been put in place to lead to this possibility. Those conditions are choosing again and again to live ethically, which purifies one's behavior, to develop concentration, which purifies the mind, and to practice insight meditation both on the cushion and in daily life, which allows one to truly see things as they are moment by moment.

Next week we'll explore the changes that occur following this blink, following this moment of contact.

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Notes

1. Sources:

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2. Catherine, op cit., p. 453.

3. ibid.

4. Baker, Richard, Roshi, quoted in Halifax, Joan. *Being with dying*, Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2008, p.49.

5. Flickstein, op cit., p. 151

6. Catherine, op cit., p. 455.