

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 04-21-2015.

This is another of the series of talks on what I'm calling the Twining Vines of Awakening.<sup>1</sup> Last week I talked about the later part of the sixth stage of the Path of Purification which is called Purification by Knowledge and Vision of the Way. This stage is completed when the mind or consciousness has turned away from all conditioned phenomena and has turned towards the unconditioned or nibbāna. (As a reminder, nibbāna is a reality that is free of conditions, free of diversity, free of changing conditions, so it is quite, quite peaceful.)

Immediately following that moment of contact when nibbāna is known, the next Insight Knowledge occurs. It is called the Path Knowledge. There are actually four Path Knowledges, representing increasingly refined abilities to live from wisdom and compassion and free from greed, hatred and delusion. It is also at this point that the last stage of the Path of Purification, Purification by Knowledge and Vision, is reached.

This moment of contact with nibbāna makes one a Noble One, or to use the Pāli term, an Ariya. As the Buddha uses the word, it is a reference to a nobility of character, to a purity of mind, heart and behavior. It is not a reference to any kind of power, status or genetic superiority. This moment of contact with nibbāna is the moment that the Eightfold Path becomes the Noble Eightfold Path. Part of what makes this a transition into a kind of nobility is that although a Path knowledge is quite brief each Path Knowledge results in the weakening or destruction of some of the ten fetters that bind one to a life of *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness and suffering).

The first Path Knowledge is known as *sotāpanna* in Pāli. It is usually translated as "stream-enterer", the knowledge of entering the stream of the noble ones. In the discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing the Buddha said:

"In this community of monks there are monks who, with the wasting away of [the first] three fetters, are stream-winners, steadfast, never again destined for states of woe, headed for self-awakening."<sup>2</sup>

One of the fetters that is broken with this first direct experience of nibbāna is skeptical doubt (*vicikicchā* in Pāli) about the truth and effectiveness of the Buddha, the Dhamma (his teachings), the Saṅgha (the community of noble ones) and the path of practice. Having directly experienced nibbāna for oneself following the guidance of the Buddha's teachings,

one simply no longer doubts that this is the way to freedom from the rest of the fetters. But it isn't just freedom from skeptical doubt about the path. Having tasted this first contact with nibbāna one has great confidence in the path from this point on.

A second fetter that is broken with this Awakening is the belief in the effectiveness of rites and rituals (*sīlabbataparāmāsa*). It has also been translated as grasping at precepts and practices.

The context for regarding belief in rites and rituals as a fetter, is that the Brahmanical culture of the Buddha's time basically had a spirituality of rites and rituals along with a caste system of social organization that relied on and reinforced this belief. The idea was that if one did a ritual perfectly it would bring harmony to the world and to one's life. A failure to do it perfectly would bring harm. The only people who could possibly do the rites and rituals perfectly was the top caste, the Brahmins. In calling the belief in the effectiveness of rites and rituals a fetter, and also using the term Ariya to describe those who have Awakened to some degree, the Buddha is challenging the world view of the dominant culture of his time.

We may not believe in the rites and rituals that the Brahmins did, but we may treat our own spiritual practices in a ritualistic way. We may treat them in a way that reinforces grasping rather than as a means to cultivating what is wholesome, rather than as a means to seeing and knowing what is true. For example, we may sit in meditation posture each day for some period of time just because it is the right thing to do, without actually working at being mindfully present for what we are experiencing. We may meditate in the hope that it will make us more effective workers. We may meditate simply to get ourselves calmer. (Getting calmer can be a skillful practice, but when it is the only end we're pursuing, then we're really using meditation in the service of grasping.) We may make expressions of *mettā* or goodwill out of a belief that the mere expressions will somehow transform reality, which is a ritualistic, or even magical, attitude. (*Mettā* practice transforms our intentions which lead to actions based in goodwill.) We may engage in chanting, bowing and other devotional practices believing that such actions are an essential part of the day, rather than simply effective supports for the faculty of faith and other wholesome states.

With this first taste of the freedom of nibbāna, though, one directly and deeply knows that performing rituals or grasping at practices has nothing to do with liberation from greed, hatred and delusion. One has a clear direct experience that the path is one of making

skillful choices — choosing what is wholesome, what leads to inner and outer peace and harmony rather than choosing any of the forms of greed, hatred or delusion. One has come to know from one's own experience that the path is one of engaging in skillful activities both out in the world and in working with one's own bodily sensations, thoughts and emotions. Another way of saying this is that one has learned for oneself that the path to freedom is one of meeting the ups and downs of this human life — the eight worldly conditions — with generosity, kindness, goodwill, gratitude, and the deep desire to see and know all that is encountered just as it is.

Next week I'll explore the third of the fetters that are broken at this first stage of Awakening. Then, I think, I'll bring this exploration of the Twining Vines of Awakening to a close.

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#### 1. Sources:

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2. MN 118.12, Ānāpānāsati Sutta: Mindfulness of Breathing, Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, trans., <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.118.than.html>, accessed on 2015-04-20, 9:29 a.m. CDT.