

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 04-28-2015.

This is the final talk in the series I've been calling the Twining Vines of Awakening. As a reminder, 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— as we see more and more clearly and deeply the impermanent, unsatisfactory and empty or conditional nature of what we encounter in life. I've been exploring the second vine through the model found in the 5th century CE commentary, the *Visuddhimagga*, or The Path of Purification¹.

Last week I began to talk about the last stage of the Path of Purification, Purification by Knowledge and Vision. At this point the Insight Knowledge called the Path Knowledge arises. There are four Path Knowledges, each is associated with one of the four stages of Awakening. And in each stage of awakening one or more of the fetters is either loosened or completely broken. The fetters are unwholesome mind-states that keep one bound to greed, hatred and delusion. Last week I spoke of the first two fetters broken during the initial stage of awakening, stream-entry: the fetter of skeptical doubt about the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha and path of practice; and the fetter of a belief that rites and rituals are an effective way to bring about peace and harmony in one's own life and in the world.

The third fetter that is broken with the first contact with nibbāna is called *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*. It has been translated as personality view and as identity view, among other things. It is also talked about as realizing the not-self nature of experience, though identity view is a more specific form of the belief in self.

The usual explanation for identity view is that it involves an identification with one of the five aggregates. There could be a belief that one is one of the aggregates, in other words that one is identical with the aggregate. For example, a belief that I am this body. There could be a belief that one possesses an aggregate. An example of this is, "These are *my* feelings about this." There could be a belief that one contains an aggregate. Maybe thinking that "Consciousness, or the ability to know, is part of me." Or there could be a belief that one is contained by an aggregate.² Maybe thinking "I'm part of the Universal Consciousness that is all things."

While this explanation about identity view is correct, I don't think it quite gets at the subjective experience that contributes to identity view, which is a form of wrong view, of delusion.

Most people, in the Early Buddhist discourses you might find the expression "an uninstructed worldling" used, most people have an experience of "I" or of "my self" as an unchanging constant either in the forefront or in the background of all experiences. In other words there is a sense of continuity from moment to moment. We believe that sense of continuity occurs because "I" have or am all of those moments of experience.

This sense of "I am" as an unchanging constant to which experiences are happening is reinforced by the structure of our language. There's a subject "I" that acts on or is identical with an object. Or there's an object "me" that is acted upon by other things that are subjects in terms of the grammar. So the structure of our language also reinforces the sense that there are other things that exist in the same way that this "I" does, things like "trees," "cars," and "pianos," for instance.

Now one way that this sense of an unchanging "I" is understood is, in Western terms, as a soul. This is, perhaps, similar to the Brahmanical idea of an *ātman* or *ātma*, an unchanging and constant self, which you may come across if you read Buddhist explanations of self and not-self.

Whether you believe in a soul or not, most people operate in the world on the basis of a belief in an unchanging "I". It is the way most of us understand our lives and our experiences in the world. "I" am having this experience. Or, this experience is happening to "me." And this "I" or "me" is my "self."

This is problematic for us because it reinforces the belief that we and other things are permanent. That reinforces the belief that "I" can get "that" and keep "it," and that it will permanently satisfy my desires, my cravings. But our deep experience is of everything constantly changing, even when we don't consciously acknowledge it. The biggest change in our lives is the reality of death. People and other creatures who we know and love die. Of course we also have some awareness that we are going to die. So there is also a constant background anxiety or uneasiness associated with this seemingly unchanging "I."

The tension between this belief in a permanent "I" or "me" and the reality of change reinforces our cravings for more and more of whatever it is that we think will give us satisfaction and control. And of course this leads to a lot of destruction and harm.

When we pay close attention to our experience — and that is what this whole path of purification involves, paying close attention in a kind and objective way without clinging, what we see is that our experience is, indeed, constantly changing. But at least initially, and usually for a long time, we continue to regard all of this changing experience as happening to me or as being me in some way. When we get to the latter phases of the process that is called the Path of Purification, one of the things that we see is that everything that I've associated with "I" or "me" is ceasing. And it is not just that it is changing, it is that change is all there seems to be. There is just this flow of arising and ceasing.

Then in that moment of contact with the Unconditioned, with nibbāna, even the finest filaments of that sense of a background "I" cease. Yet in the next moment life continues. But one no longer has any doubt that the sense of "I" is something that is constructed in each moment through an identification with different aspects of experience identification with one's physical form or body; identification with one's experiences of pleasant, painful and neither-painful-nor-pleasant, as well as with one's emotions; identification with one's thoughts and memories that allow one to recognize different aspects of experience again and again; identification with one's intentions and actions; identification with one's consciousness, with the ability to know and be aware of whatever is encountered moment by moment. In other words, an understanding that the sense of "I" is a result of identifying with one or more of the five aggregates of clinging, moment after moment.

This breaking of the fetter of identity view is perhaps the most significant of the three changes resulting from this first contact with nibbāna. One of the things it leads to is a greater sense of ease in the world, and a greater sense of ease, perhaps even a bit of amusement, with one's own mind and body. So with the breaking of these three fetters of skeptical doubt, belief in rites and rituals, and identity view, the path knowledge of stream-entry is complete.

According to the traditional four stage model of awakening, there are seven fetters left to be broken before one is fully awakened, fully liberated. The next two stages of awakening — called Once-Returning and Non-Returning — are involved with weakening and then

freeing oneself, respectively, from the control of greed and hatred of the sense world. The final stage of Awakening, becoming an Arahant or Fully Awakened One, involves becoming free from craving or desire for existence in the subtle, pleasant states that can be experienced in jhāna and are said to also be other spheres of existence: the fine material sphere, and the immaterial sphere. It involves becoming free from conceit — the tendency to reference one's self, "I am," in relation to other beings or things, for instance, as "I am better than," "I am the same as," or "I am worse than." It is only at this point, with freedom from this self-referencing and comparing, that one fully sees through and breaks the fetter of the sense of there still being an "I" or "me", even though the *belief* was abandoned with the first stage of awakening. Becoming fully awakened involves becoming free from even the most subtle forms of restlessness. It also involves becoming free from any remaining forms of ignorance or delusion regarding the nature of all phenomena and regarding the Four Noble Truths.

Awakening happens as a result of the choices we make as we live our daily lives and follow the path of practice, in other words through the twining vines of awakening. Choosing to live ethically, we become increasingly grounded in kindness, in restraining our reactions to sense experiences and in generosity. Choosing to settle the body and the mind, to develop concentration, we learn to let go of all that distracts us. As a result, we touch increasingly peaceful, happy and balanced states of mind. Choosing to meet what we encounter without grasping, aversion, or identification, whether meditating or in daily life, we come to see things as they are. This inevitably involves opening our hearts and allowing ourselves to be touched by the suffering in the world and in our own lives. But as we move along these twining vines they also inevitably lead us to a deepening capacity to live with gratitude and kindness, to act in ways that create less pain and suffering, and to a mind and heart that can be at peace with whatever life brings.

The progression of this path of practice may have sounded inspiring or it may have sounded impossible. However it struck you at any particular time, the important thing is to remember that you only have to work with this very moment. You don't have to do it all at once. This is how past generations have found their way to freedom. That possibility is yours as well.

Notes

1. Sources:

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2. Bodhi, Bhikkhu. *In the Buddha's Words*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2005, p. 308.