

The Fourth Noble Truth — Mental Development (samādhi)

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Bhante's Essays · 13 min read

THE FOURTH NOBLE TRUTH

Mental Development ❖❖

(samadhi)

Hopefully you have been practising meditation, so this essay should complement your practice. If you have any question concerning your practice, feel free to email me.

The Fourth Noble Truth which is the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to liberation from all suffering, is divided into morality, mental development and wisdom. ❖ However, this isn't meant to be a progressive list, but a threefold development. ❖ So while we are protecting ourselves from doing harm and keeping as best we can the moral precepts as codified in the Five Training Rules, and while we are also developing the Perfections, we need to develop our mental faculties and wisdom. And the one powerful practice to achieve this is the practice of vipassana meditation.

Meditation in the Buddha's practice holds the central place of the Middle Way. ❖ Its importance lies in two fields. ❖ The first is the purification of the mind : the last of the Three Primary Precepts. The first two, to cease from harm and to do good, are covered by the morality division. The second ❖ is the realisation of supramundane Truth, Nibbana. ❖ Both the purification of the mind and the enlightenment also include the third division of the Eightfold Path, Wisdom, but here we are concerned with how to develop the mind so that it can make the necessary insights into itself and eventually to experience Nibbana.

There are three factors of the Noble Eightfold Path that go to make up this division: Right Effort, Right Concentration and Right Awareness. And there are two areas where they are applicable: in the meditation practice itself and in ordinary life. ❖ The practice and art of meditation in daily life will be dealt with in the next essay (no 11), here we shall investigate the meditative process to see how and why it works.

The first thing we do when we begin to meditate is to take up a sitting posture and sit still. ❖ For most of us, this will be the first time we have ever sat in one position without moving for any length of time. Even when we are engrossed in a film or a TV programme, quite unconsciously we are moving and shifting about all the time. ❖ In the practice of meditation, all that has to stop and we have to make a resolution not to move for a given period of time. ❖ We start with 20minutes, but we ought to build up to close on an hour as possible. ❖ The actual posture itself is not all that important. ❖ You can meditate sitting on

a chair, but the cross-legged posture is worth developing for its future benefit. ❖ Believe it or not, when the legs have settled on the floor, it is a most comfortable position and more important gives us sense of balance, steadiness and groundedness. It's always a bit of a shock if you've fallen asleep for a moment while sitting on a chair, to suddenly find yourself sprawled on the floor! However, although comfort and good posture are important, it is the state of mind that carries more weight. ❖ The mind must be alert and this is expressed in the body through the spine. ❖ If the spine is not held with energy, the body sags and pain can result in the back. ❖ If there's too much energy, pain also arises, usually in the neck. ❖ The spine must be held erect and alert with the head balanced gently on the top. ❖ Finally the hands are placed on the lap, one on the other or apart, it doesn't matter. This is Right Effort when it comes to the sitting posture: comfortable, still and energised.

The second thing we notice when we first meditate is the silence we sit in. Some experience it as peace. ❖ All interpersonal interaction is stopped. ❖ We don't communicate with anyone. ❖ No one tries to communicate with us. ❖❖ The outer person, the one whom everybody knows, is shut down. This allows us to build up the concentration and sets up the conditions whereby we can observe and ❖ get to know the inner person.

In order to build up the concentration, we use an object which is obvious to us and so can draw the attention. ❖ Most people find it's not all that difficult to keep the body still for

some time, but when it comes to the mind, it's a very different kettle of fish! ❖ In fact, most meditators comment on how surprised they are to find that the mind is so unruly. The Buddha described it to be like a monkey, jumping from branch to branch. ❖ Now the object we choose is the breath, just that simple action of breathing in and breathing out. ❖ We don't interfere with it. ❖ We just allow the body to breathe. ❖ Some watch the breath coming in and out of the nostrils, others the rise and fall of the stomach. ❖ If you wish to develop the Mahasi Method, it is better to centre on the abdomen or if the breath is shallow at the chest. ❖ The particular merit of watching and feeling the breath at the abdomen is that it keeps in contact with the body. Whichever we choose, we should stick to it. For the purpose of watching the process of the breath is to train the mind to be still, concentrated and alert.

So now we have Right Effort and Right Concentration. ❖ Right Effort here is to put in the energy needed to keep the mind steady on the breath. If this energy is used for any other purpose, then it will begin to undermine the third factor, Right Awareness. ❖ If we concentrate on the breath to achieve something or to discover something, then we are beginning to direct the mind, putting ideas and concepts in the way of pure awareness. We need to develop a very different sort of mind to the one our education system tries to develop.

If we consider our educational system for a moment, we see it is firstly about the mind

storing information and learning skills. ❖ Secondly, when once this has been achieved, it is about teaching that trained mind to express ideas and feelings through writing, art, music and so on. But the meditation the Buddha would have us practise is about training the mind to observe itself. ❖ To see itself as it really is. That's what we mean by the word Vipassana. It means literally, really or truly seeing. We become the objective observer of our own minds.

To achieve this, we need to consider how a scientist comes to know the world in an objective way. ❖ Suppose they're an ornithologist studying the habits of the Common Dreadful Warbler. ❖ Do they ride on the back of the warbler? ❖ Of course not! ❖ Do they in any way interfere with the warbler? ❖ No! ❖ To do so would be to distort the behaviour of the bird, interfere with its natural habits. ❖❖ To do so, would not be to observe the Dreadful Warbler as it really is, but as it is interfered with. ❖❖ If we want to observe the mind as it really is, we must take up a position within ourselves that won't interfere with the workings of the mind.

The mind will offer us no end of entertainment. ❖ It is full of imaginative plots, daydreams, dialogues and emotions. ❖ Before we meditated, we used to indulge in such things. ❖ We'd sit on the bus or drive the car and allow the mind to wonder off to sunny beaches. ❖ We'd lie in bed and conjure ❖ up plans on how to get more money or win promotion. ❖ We wouldn't be able to sleep for the agitation in the mind, chewing over the day's traumas and tribulations. ❖ But since we've begun meditating, we've pulled away from these habits because we have discovered them to be unwholesome and actually harmful. ❖❖ This is not to say that there is not a place for constructive fantasy and directed thinking. ❖ What is unwholesome is when our minds indulge in escapist fantasy and thought that develop unskilful negative states of mind such as lust and grudge. There's a world of difference between using our imagination to think about how we will gather the money together and organise our trip to the Costa del Sol and using our imagination to fantasise for three or four hours wandering up and down beaches attracting the opposite sex! Allowing the depressed mind to construct a fantasy-fabricated world as a totally depressing and despairing place, is very different from trying to solve real problems in our relationships and at work which may be depressing us. ❖ But in meditation practice we don't indulge either, neither the constructive, skilful use of the mind nor the destructive, unskilful use of the mind. ❖ In meditation we are trying to observe the mind as it is. ❖ When we are indulging in any kind of fantasy or thinking we are riding on the back of the Common Dreadful Warbler. If we keep doing this we'll never come to know what the mind really is.

Many things in our mind cause us suffering. ❖ Old memories, present problems, negative emotions and moods that we'd prefer not to look at, not to acknowledge. ❖ Usually when something negative comes up, we tend to want to escape. ❖ If we feel bored, for instance,

we'll turn on the TV. If we feel lonely, we'll call a friend or get drunk. ❖❖ If we get angry with someone whom we not supposed to show anger towards, we'll swallow it. Anything but to feel the painful states of the mind within ourselves. ❖ All these strategies and tactics we employ to escape this suffering in the mind are all repressive measures. ❖ They work in a very subtle way. ❖ They push these unwanted feelings and thoughts back into the subconscious. ❖ This is like putting the Rare Dreadful Warbler into a cage. ❖ We might like to see it there. ❖ It's pretty, but it's not natural. ❖ It's not how the warbler really is. ❖ It's natural habits are not allowed free expression. ❖ It will find other ways of behaving which are unnatural to it. In time the warbler may sicken and die so unused is it to confinement. ❖ Or it's behaviour will become strange for its species, neurotic. ❖❖ Just as our ornithologist will get a distorted view of the bird by studying it in a false situation, so we will get a very distorted view of ourselves if ❖ a great part of us is unseen, unknown, buried deep in the subconscious.

Right Awareness is to be able to see the mind as it really is, as it displays itself to us. When meditators first practice Vipassana Meditation, they are often surprised to find how much suffering there is in the mind. ❖ 'I knew I had anger in me, but this anger that's coming up is frightening. I knew I was depressed, but not this depressed. I am an anxious type, but this is terrifying!' ❖ Sometimes it unfortunately happens that the meditator blames the meditation. ❖ But in reality all that's happening is that the lid is being taken off the dustbin. ❖ All our lives we've trained ourselves to bottle up, to can our feelings. ❖ As soon as we meditate, all the repressive ploys and tricks are suddenly taken away and out of the subconscious there arises a welter of unresolved guilts, angers, frustrations, sorrows, depressions, anxieties, fears. You name it, you'll find it!

A great deal of our meditation practice is to allow these painful feelings to surface into our awareness and to observe them. ❖ To feel them. To really feel them as they really are. Now we see why we must sit still. ❖ When these feelings, emotions, moods come up, our reactions have always been to escape, to run away, but now our bodies are still there's nowhere to go. ❖ There's no way in which these negative states can now be avoided. Indeed, as meditators we don't want to avoid them anymore. ❖ We've come to a point in our lives when we've decided to sort things out, to get the mind straight, to purify the heart. In order to realise how it works we need to remind ourselves how these mental states were created in the first place. ❖ The Buddha taught it is our desire and our will that play a crucial role. ❖ Desire with its corollary, aversion, creates the motivation. The will activates it, orders the mind to develop it and hence a state of mind is produced. All our lives we've indulged our likes and dislikes and felt frustrated or depressed when we've not got what we wanted. ❖ When we have what we want we're afraid to lose it. ❖ It's not so bad if it's a watch or a book, but if it's my job or a relationship, my moods, emotions, states of mind can be very painful indeed. ❖ When we meditate in the light of awareness, all these

negative states arise, but we don't indulge them and we don't push them away. ❖ So what happens to these mental states? They die away. ❖ They lose energy. ❖ They fade out. ❖ The Buddha's description of the process was of a fire. Throwing logs on a fire, will not press it out. They create a bonfire! ❖ This is repression. ❖ We can't draw the energy out of the fire by throwing sawdust on it. ❖ This only makes the fire flare up the more. ❖ If we want the fire to die out, we simply leave it alone and let it burn itself out. ❖ It's the same with our negativities. ❖ Just watching, just observing everything that comes into the mind, allows it to spend its energy and exhaust itself. ❖ It simply fades out, dies away.

But more! ❖ This watching is not just a passive activity, allowing this to burn out before our very eyes as it were, it is also active in that the attention is directed to a particular quality of all that arises into the awareness. That quality is the characteristic of transience, of change. ❖ It is at this point that Vipassana Meditation moves from being a psychotherapy, a way of healing and purifying the mind and heart, to a spiritual practice. ❖ Here by spiritual practice is meant the discovery of what lies beyond this apparent realism of our body and mind. ❖ For as we observe the arising and passing nature of our breath, our thoughts, our emotions and our sensations, we slowly begin to experience ourselves as more and more the 'objective observer'. ❖ A distance is created between the objects of our awareness and the awareness itself which grows wider and wider and more and more distinct in its separateness. ❖ As this distance grows so does our identity, our self-definition. Our egos grow dimmer and dimmer. ❖ For we realise that everything we are experiencing which we once took to be a sort of permanent and substantial personality, is but a mass of passing phenomena. There comes a time when even the observer vanishes. ❖ For instance, pain might arise in the knees. (In fact it will! Its part of the course.) We put all our effort into keeping the attention centred on the sensations so that our concentration grows narrower and narrower, until we are aware of only a very small area. ❖ There comes a time when we are aware of just sensations arising and passing away at very fast speeds and although we once perceived them as unpleasant we do not do so now. ❖ We experience them as just pure sensation, just arising and passing away. ❖

After such an experience we might also reflect, we might also realise by our own personal experience, that the consciousness of these sensations was separate from the actual sensations themselves. ❖ In fact the consciousness was not the sensations. ❖ Consciousness is one thing, sensations another. The human mind, just like the human body is made-up of parts. ❖ This is beginning to experience what is known in Buddhism as anatta. That is the teaching particular to the Buddha that no permanent soul or self or substantial ❖ entity is to be found in the body and mind. This is another of the basic characteristics of our existence. And because everything is transient and insubstantial, no everlasting happiness can be found here either. In this way we come to realise for ourselves the essential

unsatisfactoriness of the human condition. This is experiencing the third characteristic, dukkha. As these characteristics become more and more obvious and as the concentration and awareness become more and more fine, more penetrating, the intuitive faculty that 'realises' all these things, intuits Nibbana, that which is beyond all these changing, unsatisfactory and insubstantial phenomena. ❖ This the Buddha put clearly in three famous verses. ❖

All conditioned things are impermanent

When this is perceived with wisdom,

One becomes disenchanted with what cannot satisfy.

Just this is the Path of Purification.

All conditioned things are unsatisfactory.

When this is perceived with wisdom,

One becomes disenchanted with what cannot satisfy.

Just this is the Path of Purification.

All conditioned things and the Unconditioned are not-self

When this is perceived with wisdom,

One becomes disenchanted with what cannot satisfy.

Just this is the Path of Purification.

Now the whole of this meditation process rests upon Faith (saddha). Faith (saddha) here does not mean belief. ❖ The Buddha was quite clear in all his ❖ teachings that he didn't want blind belief. ❖ Belief can be understood here as the uncritical acceptance of statements about something that have not or cannot be proven. ❖ The Buddha states there is Nibbana, an end to suffering which is not annihilation, that transcends the experience of body and mind. ❖ He mostly describes it in the negative.

There is an unborn, an unbecome, an uncreated, an uncompounded, an unconditioned.

But he does also say:

There is a consciousness without object, without boundary and in all directions full of light.

He does not ask us to believe this, but he does ask us to put trust, to have confidence

in him. ❖ To give him the benefit of the doubt. ❖ Unless we can do this, all our efforts at

concentration will be undermined. All the time we'll be wondering and questioning and

doubting. All precious energy wasted, irreclaimable, lost for ever. ❖ And what's the point!

The Buddha is only asking us to try and see if it works for us, just as a doctor offers us

medicine on the understanding that we trust his medication. ❖ So with trust, effort and

interest are aroused. With these, our concentration is that much easier to achieve and

with it awareness comes easily. ❖ Within this watchful and alert awareness, the faculty

of intuition, that which makes insight, lies potential. ❖ When these spiritual faculties are

balanced and highly enough developed, vipassana insight, arises.

Whenever we sit in this way, we can presume that two things are happening. Firstly, that there is a healing process of the mind and heart, allowing all the negativities to arise and pass away. ♦ This fulfils the third Primary Precept: to purify the mind. ♦ And secondly, that the spiritual faculties of faith, effort, concentration, awareness and intuitive wisdom are being developed. ♦ Given constant practice, the meditator is bound to succeed in achieving a happier and more peaceful life and is all the time laying ♦ the foundations for the eventual experience of ♦ insight knowledge into ♦ the ultimate, ♦ that liberation from suffering, ♦ Nibbana. There's no doubt about this!

May the Teachings of the Buddha shed light into your life!

May you quickly attain the Supreme Goal!

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