

The Fourth Noble Truth - Mental Development - Samādhi

Bhante Bodhidhamma · A Foundation Course in Buddhism · 20:29

The Fourth Noble Truth, which is the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to the 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 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, being covered by the morality division. The second is the realisation of the supramundane truth, *Nibbāna*. Both of 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 insight into itself and into Nirvana.

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 of life where they are applicable, in meditation practice and in daily life. The practice and art of meditation in daily life is dealt with elsewhere. 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 ever sat still in one position without moving for any length of time. Even when we are engrossed in a film or a TV program, 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 twenty minutes 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-leg 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 a 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 then 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 everyone 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 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 rising and falling of the stomach. We should choose the one that seems most obvious to us and stick to it. There's no special merit attached to either, for the purpose of watching the process of 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 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, science and so on. But the meditation the Buddha would have us practice is about training the mind to observe itself, to see itself as it really is. That's what we mean by the word *vipassanā*. 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 she's an ornithologist studying the habits of the common dreadful warbler. Does she ride on the back of the warbler? Of course not. Does she 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 wander 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've discovered them to be unwholesome and actually harmful. This is not to say that there's not a place for constructive fantasy and directed thinking. What is unwholesome is when our minds indulge in escapist fantasy and thought that develop unskillful 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 fantasising 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 a very different thing from trying to solve real problems in our relationships and at work which may be depressing us.

But in meditation practice we do not indulge in either, neither the constructive skillful use of the mind nor the destructive unskillful use of the mind. In meditation we are trying to observe the mind as it is. When we are indulging in any 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.

There are many things in our minds that cause us suffering. Old memories, present problems, negative emotions and moods that we 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 the TV on. If we feel lonely, we'll call a friend or get drunk. If we get angry with someone we're not supposed to, we'll swallow it, anything but to feel the painful states of mind in us.

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. Its 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 its 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 Vipassanā meditation, they're 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 I didn't think I was this depressed. I know I'm 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 awareness and to observe them, to feel them, to really feel them as they really are. Now we can 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 is 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 mind.

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 put 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. 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 transiency, of change.

It is at this point that Vipassanā meditation moves from being a psychotherapy, a way of healing and purifying the mind and heart, to a spiritual practice. Hereby 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 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 some 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. We put all our effort into keeping the attention centered 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 *anattā*, that teaching particular to the Buddha that no permanent soul or self or substantial entity is to be found in the body and mind.

This insubstantiality is another of the basic characteristics of our existence. And because everything is transient and insubstantial, no everlasting happiness can be found there either. In this way, we come to realise for ourselves the essential unsatisfactoriness of the human condition, the third characteristic, *dukkha*.

So it is that by observing the phenomena of the mind from the point of view of the characteristic of transiency of change that the nirvanic experience can be had. For upon the observation of this characteristic of transiency, the other two characteristics become more obvious, unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality. 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 intuitively *Nibbāna*, that which is beyond all these changing, unsatisfactory and insubstantial phenomena.

This the Buddha put clearly in three famous verses. "All that is conditioned is transient. When one sees this with wisdom, one tires of suffering. This is the path of purification. All that is conditioned is unsatisfying. When one sees this with wisdom, then one tires of suffering. This is the path of purification. Everything is insubstantial. When one sees this with wisdom, then one tires of suffering. This is the path of purification."

Now the whole of this meditation process rests upon faith. Faith 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 uncritically accepting statements about something that have not or cannot be proven. The Buddha states there is *Nibbāna*, an end to suffering, which is not annihilation, that transcends the experience of body and mind. But he never describes it, save in the negative. It is the unborn, the unbecoming, the uncreated, and the uncompounded.

He doesn't ask us to believe this, but he does ask us to put trust, to have faith 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, unreclaimable, lost forever. 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 we trust the 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, *vipassanā* insight actualizes.

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 fulfills 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, *Nibbāna*. There's no doubt about this.

Well, I hope you found this talk interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain the nirvanic peace within.

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