

The Four Paths and the Four Fruits

Bhante Bodhidhamma · A Foundation Course in Buddhism · 23:58

Foundation Course 2, Talk 10 The Four Paths and the Four Fruits

Another way of looking at the whole process of mental purification is to see it as a release from chains or fetters that tie us to this form of existence. The Buddha enumerated ten such fetters. The interesting thing is that in this categorization they are linked with the Progressive Insight. This progress itself is enumerated as the four paths, each having a particular insight or fruit.

When Buddhism talks of the middle path, this is what he meant at the highest level. Generally, the middle path is understood as the path of moderation in all things, but it can also mean the apex of a triangle which rises above and beyond the two lower paths of sensual indulgence and self-mortification. Here we shall see how this middle path develops into final liberation.

The first three of these fetters are dissolved, rooted out, with the first insight into *Nibbāna*. They are wrong view of self, skeptical doubt, and adherence to wrong rites and rituals. Wrong view of self is believing that the ego, the personality and the body constitute an integral person or substantial soul or self. It is when we believe the five *khandha* to be what we really are. That is why in the meditation practice we try to become more and more aware of the transient, changing, insubstantial nature of this being I call me, this being I call myself.

Therefore, it is not surprising that when a meditator intuits *Nibbāna*, the one thing she comes to know is that whatever the five *khandha* are—the body, the sensations, the perception, the volitional conditionings and consciousness itself—it isn't her. The *Nibbānic* experience can then be said to be a moment when we discover our true identities, what we really are.

Discovering and realizing that the third noble truth, the end of suffering, is true, obviously also brings to an end all the skeptical doubt. Until that moment, we have put confidence in the Buddha's teachings, and we've practiced the meditation and tried to shape our lives around the Noble Eightfold Path. But until this moment of insight, we cannot know for sure whether it's all true or not. This not knowing causes fear to arise, and it expresses itself within us as skeptical doubt. Is it just a trick? Perhaps the Buddha thought he was enlightened, but maybe he wasn't. Did the Buddha really know? This Eightfold Path makes sense, but I don't think it's the whole story. And so on. Some people are wracked by these sorts of doubts. Up until the moment of breakthrough, such people can overcome doubt by raising confidence, by putting trust in the path, at least until the real experiential proof to the opposite arises.

With insight, this sort of confidence, this faith becomes unshakable, for now the person knows. With this

insight, not only is skeptical doubt in the Buddha's path rooted out, but the path leading to total liberation is opened up. Such a person who enters the Noble Path is called a *Sotāpanna*, which means one who has entered the stream, the stream that will carry them inevitably to total liberation.

Up until this moment also, a meditator may believe that there are other ways of overcoming suffering, such as appealing to a god or performing some magic ceremony or ritual. It's nice to think that the slate can be wiped clean by special pleading or an act of sacrifice. So it is, people will make offerings or undergo self-inflicted punishment, believing that this will wipe out the karmic debt. In Buddha's time, for instance, some ascetics believed that by standing in the river for hours on end, the passing water cleansed the body and the mind.

Insight dispels such wrong views. The stream-entrant, the *Sotāpanna*, knows it is only through personal self-endeavor that the mind will be purified and the noble paths won. Only by accepting the law of *kamma*, only by cleaning up one's own karmic stream, can further insights be made. It's a bit like a hiker who is lost in a forest, and suddenly in the clearing perceives the mountaintop he's aiming for. Now he knows the direction.

Because the stream entrant knows the direction, there is no chance such a person will find themselves in circumstances where training cannot continue. In terms of being born again after death—not something, by the way, that is necessary to believe to benefit from the meditation—such a person need only go through the process of birth and death at the most seven times, and the worst place he can be born into is here, as a human. Being a human, by the way, was recommended by the Buddha. He said it was the best place to train, for here a being can confront suffering more easily and discover the way out.

The importance of such people who attain this insight cannot be stressed too much. They form the backbone of the Buddhist community. Their firm, unwavering faith helps others to keep going when the going gets rough. Their own efforts are an inspiration. Without this continual renewal within the Buddhist community, there is a great danger of a loss of faith and the growth of superstitious beliefs, such as turning the Buddha into a god who can save us. In the East, it is generally believed that in these so-called corrupt times, people cannot achieve insight. But one of the greatest scholars in Burma, Ledi Sayadaw, said that such views were a danger to the Dharma and urged people to make great effort to attain at least the first path.

When the next noble path and fruit are attained, the next two fetters are only attenuated. Their grip is loosened, but the person is not free of them. These two are ill-will and sensual desire. Such a person is called a *sakadāgāmi*, or one who needs to be born only once again. So we see that attaining the paths not only brings us closer to liberation, but also manifests as a change in personality. At this level, the grip, the obsession with sensual pleasure is greatly diminished. However, it is not until the third path, the *anāgāmi*, the one who will not return, the non-returner, that the shackles, the fetters of sensual desire and ill-will are finally rooted out.

Finally, there is the last stage, the *arahat*, one who has killed all enemies, meaning, of course, the roots of unwholesomeness—greed, hatred and delusion. In that absolute liberation, all the fetters that chain us to the wheel of dependent origination, the wheel of becoming, are finally rooted out for good. The final five fetters are the craving for the realm of forms and the formless realms, conceit, restlessness and ignorance. The realms refer to states of mind achievable through concentration meditation and also to realms of existence, where a being proficient in these skills can be born. But like all places in this phenomenal universe, they suffer from the wrath of transiency and don't last.

Losing desire for such blissful states of mind means that the arahat has no wish at all to stay in this world of change, *saṃsāra*, this ever going on and on. All desire for sense pleasure is gone. Although an arahat may be reborn in a high plane upon death until all kamma is finally run out, once this has passed, he passes into *parinibbāna*, total Nibbāna, as have all the Buddhas. This state is never described. The Buddha said it was indescribable.

It is interesting to note that conceit and restlessness stay up to the bitter end. Conceit, of course, arises out of wrong view of self. So all the other path-winners do not do away with ego. Even though they may know who they truly are, there is still delusion. There is still attachment to the five khandha, this body and mind. So long as there is even an iota of attachment, so long will there be wrong view of self. This, of course, is ignorance, the last fetter. Not until the heart is totally purified will we ever stop creating unwholesome kamma, no matter how insignificant it may be. This unwholesome kamma always causes mental disturbance. This is the restlessness that final liberation does away with.

So that's why those on the first three paths are called *sekha*, meaning trainees. Work still has to be done. But the arahat is called *asekha*—no more training is necessary. That final liberation also brings with it the consummate knowledge of the *sāvaka* Buddha, the enlightened being who was a follower of the Buddha. He becomes one who knows. All ignorance as to the true nature of *saṃsāra*, this phenomenal universe, this universe of becoming, is dispelled.

It's important here to note that the Buddha didn't call himself a master, but a guide, one who leads people to the higher understandings and attainments. He didn't want disciples to remain disciples. He wanted them to become masters, to master the path, and become equal to him in the knowledge of the Enlightenment. That is why followers who achieve the total Enlightenment, the highest path of the arahat, are known as *sāvaka* Buddhas, Buddhas who are disciples of a Buddha.

The joy of such attainment, of such liberation, is beautifully recorded in the words of Kisāgotamī. She was a woman who had turned up at the Buddha's monastery with her dead child and had asked him to bring the child back to life. She had gone from door to door looking for a mustard seed from a house where there had been no death, believing that if she found one, the Buddha would be able to perform a magic ritual and resurrect her child. Of course, she never found one and came back much enlightened by her experience, for it had taught her that death is inescapable and part and parcel of this universe. She joined

the order and later achieved arahatship.

These are her victory verses: "Hear me. I have travelled upon the noble eightfold path that leads to that state of sheer happiness. It is Nibbāna itself I have realised, and I have gazed into the mirror of the holy norm. Yes, I, even I, am healed of my suffering. My burden is laid down. My task is done. My heart is set totally free. This is I, Sister Gotamī, who have said this."

The Buddha himself, of course, stands as the greatest of all in this dispensation. What gives him that special stature is that he is the *sammāsambuddho*, the fully self-enlightened one, and that he is the one who is the teacher of humankind. Whatever field we look at, be it religious or scientific, artistic, historical or social, the ones remembered are the ones who started things, accomplished something for the first time, discovered something.

The spiritual quest is often compared to mountain climbing, and here it works very well. So many attempts were made to climb Everest, but not until Sherpa Tenzing and Edmund Hillary actually made it did people know it was really possible. After their conquest, everything became that much easier because now climbers knew it could be done, and from that knowledge took confidence and courage. So with the Buddha. His life itself and the teachings are a monument and a description of that most difficult of peaks to be conquered. And just as Tenzing and Hillary are regarded with special honour and affection in mountaineering circles, so the Buddha is venerated by his followers.

The special qualities of a Buddha are chanted most times that Buddhists come together. It starts with a salutation: *Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa*—Hail to the Blessed One, the arahat, the fully self-enlightened one. Then, in the Theravāda tradition, the qualities are chanted.

They are, first of all, that he is an arahat, one who has destroyed all the enemies of the spiritual path and uprooted greed, hatred and delusion. Because of this, he has broken the spokes of the wheel of dependent origination, the wheel of becoming, and gone beyond. Therefore, he is worthy of homage.

The second is the fact that he is fully self-enlightened, fully in that he knows what suffering is, what the cause is, what the end of all suffering is, and the path leading to that end. This is what a Buddha knows. What is more, he achieved this by his own endeavour and without a guide.

Having achieved the enlightenment, the third characteristic is that he became endowed with clear knowledge, clear vision and virtuous conduct, perfect moral behaviour. There was no separation in him between what he said and how he behaved, what he said he did. His behaviour came out of wisdom and its special sign was a devotion to wakefulness, bright awareness. Indeed, there is a discourse when Ānanda, his attendant, enumerates the wonderful and marvellous qualities of the Buddha. But there is one thing he leaves out, and this, the Buddha says, is what is also remarkable about a Buddha: his continuous unbroken awareness. "All you have said is true, but remember this also, Ānanda, that this is also a wondrous and marvellous quality of the Perfected One. The Accomplished One is aware of feelings,

be they pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. He is aware of them as they arise and as they pass away." And so he says that he is equally aware of all the other five khandhas—the perceptions, the volitional conditionings and consciousness.

Having achieved the Buddhahood, the journeying itself was accomplished. He had made a commitment to the Buddha of the last dispensation, Dīpaṅkara, at whose feet he determined to become a Buddha. Life after life he trained to achieve the necessary perfections, so that eventually he could discover the path without a guide. So he is called *sugato*, often translated unhappily as well-gone, but it means to have completed the journey to enlightenment with distinction.

The Buddha actually refers to himself in the scriptures as the *Tathāgata*, one who has gone or travelled thus, meaning this journey to enlightenment. This journey revealed to him the nature of the world we live in and of all the realms. So it is that his fourth quality is that of a knower of the worlds.

Having achieved his Buddhahood, he decided to teach, and so he is called incomparable trainer or leader of human beings who need to be tamed or trained. He is the teacher of gods and humankind, and this he did out of compassion to alleviate their suffering. In other scriptures he is called the *Mahākaruṇiko*, the great compassionate one. And so it is that he is enlightened, the awakener of humankind, and blessed, and deserving respect and veneration on account of these consummate qualities.

So in the Theravāda tradition, these are the nine qualities enumerated which belong to a Buddha. Thus is the Blessed One: he is an arahat, fully self-enlightened, endowed with clear knowledge and virtuous conduct, his journey well accomplished, knower of the world, incomparable charioteer of people to be trained, teacher of *devas*—those who dwell in the higher realms, here often translated as gods—and humankind, enlightened and blessed.

This brings us to devotion in Buddhism. Anyone entering a Buddhist shrine would immediately think that people are praying to a god and so on. The external trappings are the same as in many another religion: the statue of the founder, the special veneration he is held in, the candles, the incense, the flowers, the bells and smells, and so on. However, in Buddhism, devotion takes on a different meaning. Rather than an outpouring of emotions, it is a conscious, determined effort to bring to mind the qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha—the three refuges, the triple gem—and to ponder their meanings, for it is to these qualities that one devotes oneself.

That's devotion—to take on, to train oneself, to devote oneself to achieving the qualities of an arahat, the sāvaka Buddha. No doubt, when a Buddhist or a meditator considers the life and work of the Buddha and what they have gained from the teaching and the practice, great feelings of thankfulness and praise arise. This is the heart's natural response to the generosity of the Buddhas and the saints. One can feel such gratitude for many another person—mother and father, friends who have helped us in need, public servants and so on. Although when these feelings arise there is great warmth and lightness in the heart, they would be of little use if they were not also seen as motivators to take up the path more seriously.

What's the point of going around telling everyone what a lovely and wonderful doctor you've got when you never take the prescribed medicine? Such emotions that arise of praise and gratitude can all be used by devotees to urge themselves along the path. If this is not so, if the Buddhist believes that performing a few ceremonies such as lighting candles and bowings and feeling good about it is all that is required for liberation, they are simply strengthening the fetter of adherence to wrong rites and rituals. It becomes right ritual and ceremony when it helps to further our training, to further a person along the path.

So when a Buddhist bows to a Buddha statue called the Buddha *rūpa*, he is saying something like, "Thank you for your teaching. I shall devote myself to the path. I submit myself to your wisdom. I have faith that it will lead me to my liberation." When a Buddhist lights the candles, she may call to mind the enlightenment and determine to achieve insight into one of the paths. When she lights incense, she may call to mind the law of kamma, that good deeds pervade the universe just as the scent of incense pervades the air.

When she sets out the flowers, she may remind herself of the essential characteristic of the universe: transience, change. Even the most beautiful bloom must fade. Whatever a devotee does in the shrine room has this symbolic quality about it. They are all aids to reflection. Even the chanting is simply recalling to mind the teachings of the Buddha, constantly developing right understanding of the Noble Eightfold Path.

This same devotion is also developed towards the Dhamma, the second refuge. The Dhamma is said to be thoroughly explained by the Buddha. When one realizes the Dhamma within oneself, this is the same as gaining the four paths of insight and their fruit. The results of such insights are immediate. This is why Buddhism talks of the eightfold kinds of noble persons. Each individual can achieve the four paths of insight and so gain the four fruits of these achievements.

The Dhamma is said to invite investigation. It's not just to be believed. It leads to *nibbāna*. Nibbāna is the end of training. It's the goal, the highest good. And finally, the Dhamma has to be understood by each person individually. No one else can understand or experience this for us. We have to do the work. Again, this is all part of Buddhist devotion: to devote oneself to realizing the Dhamma.

Devotion to the Sangha, which here means the eight kinds of persons—those who have entered the paths—is to recognize their unique position in the Buddhist community. Their conduct is said to be good, upright, wise and dutiful. For this reason, they are worthy of offerings, of hospitality, of gifts and reverential salutation, for they constitute an incomparable field of merit for the world. In other words, if you praise someone's way of life and livelihood, you want to support them.

Remember, such people can be both monastics and lay people. However, monks and nuns are more visibly trying to lead the holy life, and so are obviously treated with greater respect. And to some, many show great devotion.

The manner of showing devotion differs according to the culture. In Japan, monks and lay people will hold

their hands together as if in a form of prayer and bow. They will bow this way to statues of the Buddha, the Buddha Rupa. In our tradition, there is a full body bow which is done towards the Buddha Rupa or to monks on occasion. Five parts of the body are to touch the ground: the two knees, the two hands and the forehead.

To us in the West, it seems a little over the top, but a great deal of study has been done in the West on the meaning of body postures. It is through our body and facial expressions that we also communicate what we mean. We stand in a different way when we're with a friend from when we're with the boss. With the boss, we tend to stand a little more alertly—some say respectfully—and if we are taller, we tend to bend just a little to show deference.

Bowing can teach us a lot about ourselves. I recommend you try, and just notice how the mind reacts with all its opinions. I certainly butted against it when I first came to Buddhism, but now I find it a very meaningful practice.

So we've covered here the four different paths of sainthood, the meaning of the refuges, and of devotion. This is also the last talk, and therefore I think it right and proper to end with the victory verse of the Buddha himself, which he is said to have uttered upon enlightenment. They are recorded in the Dhammapada.

"I, who have been seeking the house-builder of this body, failing to achieve enlightenment by which I could discover him, have wandered through innumerable births in Samsara. To be born again and again is indeed suffering. But now, O house-builder, you have been caught. You shall build no more houses for me. All your rafters have been broken asunder, your gable-top destroyed. My mind has attained the unconditioned. The end of suffering has been achieved."

Well, I hope this talk has been interesting and helpful.

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