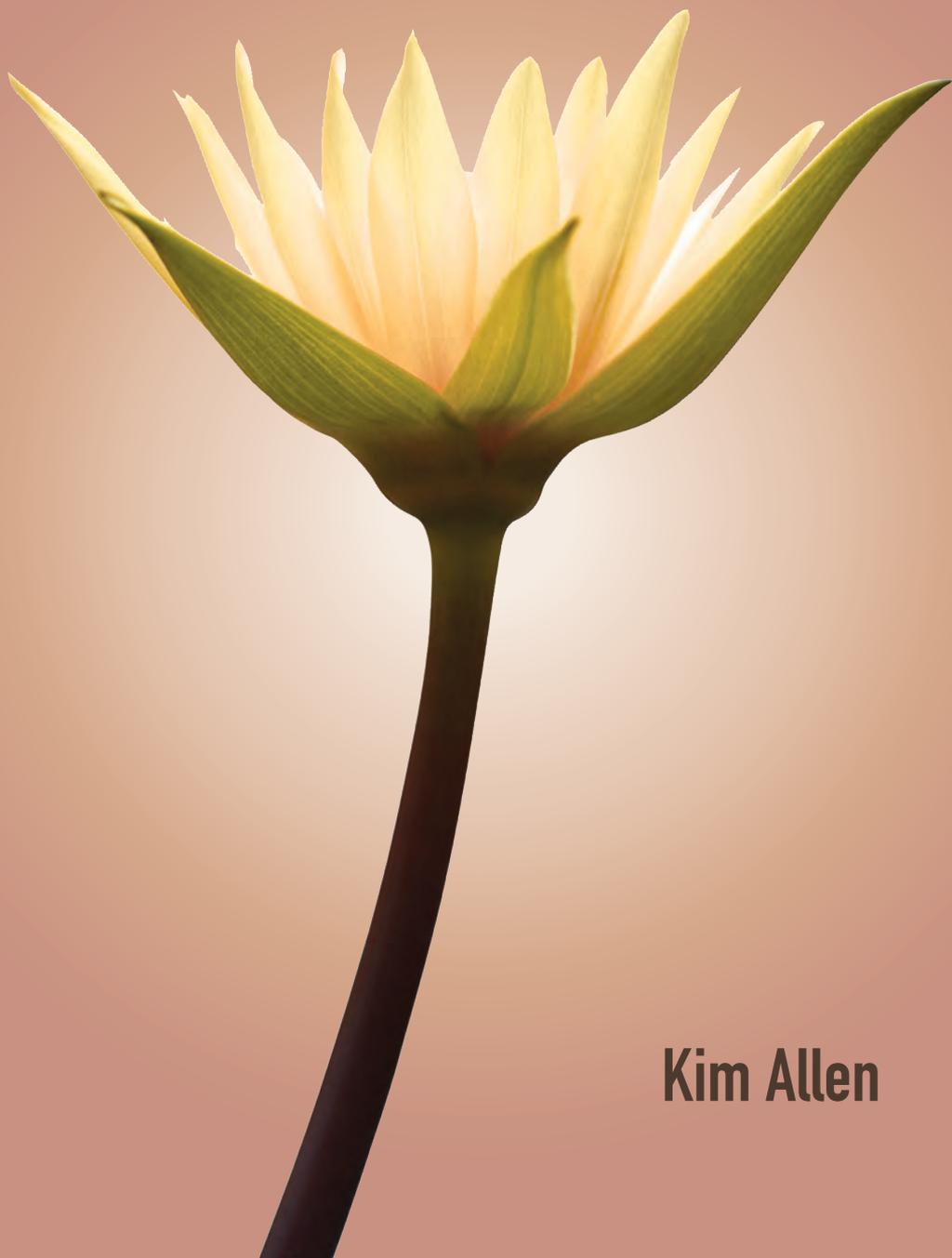


Practice After Stream Entry



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1 Introduction

The most important transformation described in the suttas is becoming an arahant – fully awakening by completely abandoning greed, hatred, and delusion and realizing the cessation of *dukkha*. However, along the path toward Nibbāna, there is a distinct transition that is nearly as important – that of “stream entry” (*sotāpatti*). This is the point at which the practitioner is said to be assured of reaching full Awakening because of gaining sufficient experiential understanding of the teachings. It is a genuine and irreversible transformation.

The Buddha speaks powerfully of the importance of stream entry in a series of metaphors.¹ He says, for example, that the suffering that remains in the mind of a stream-enterer (*sotāpanna*) in relation to the suffering that has been eliminated is like the difference between the dirt under one’s fingernail in relation to the soil on the Earth, or like three drops of water in relation to the water at the confluence of five major rivers. The Buddha urges his followers to aim for stream entry as an initial goal.²

Stream entry is described as a change of view – of understanding. A stream-enterer has gained certain qualities of mind and abandoned certain incorrect ways of seeing (described below). Such a person is said to be “independent in the Dhamma,”

1 SN 13, The *Abhisamayamyutta* (Connected Discourses on the Breakthrough). More than ten such images are used.

2 The Buddha often uses powerful terms here too. For instance, in SN 56.35, he likens the suffering of ordinary existence to being struck by weapons, whereas stream entry “is accompanied only by happiness and joy” – and hence, a wise practitioner would accept a certain number of blows by weapons if it would guarantee stream entry.

meaning that they have enough internal understanding of the path and goal to navigate further practice on their own. Another term in the suttas for such a person is a “trainee” (*sekha*), one training for arahantship.

Both these terms have a clear relationship to the path that is named in the fourth noble truth. In SN 55.5, Sāriputta states that “the stream” (*sotā*) is the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariyo attangiko maggo*). The term *sotā* could also be considered to be a “current” – a flow within a larger stream that is distinct and clearly heading downstream. In this image, a stream-enterer or trainee has found a path, or tapped into a current, that will surely lead to full Awakening, the ocean of Nibbāna. Another implication is that, in a sense, the path is just beginning; all practice before stream entry is a process of finding the Noble Path.³ Of course, one can and must develop the qualities of the path (view, intention, etc.) before stream entry, but only with this transformation does it become an assured passage to freedom.

Thus, the question arises: What does practice look like after stream entry or when one is a trainee? How does it differ from practice before this transition? This book considers what is the change that the suttas call “entering the stream” and how one practices the Noble Path to reach its end.

Models of the transition

The term stream entry is used in a four-stage model in the suttas, in which a person progresses from stream-enterer (at most seven more lifetimes in only the human or higher realms) to once-returned (one more rebirth in the human realm) to non-returned (reborn only once in a higher realm) to arahant. It is also described in terms of losing “fetters” (described further below): The

³ The commentaries call the phase of practice before stream entry the “preparatory path.”

stream-enterer has abandoned three of ten fetters, the once-returner weakens the fourth and fifth fetters, the non-returner cuts these two, and the arahant eliminates the final five fetters. Within this framework, it is the transition to stream entry that gets the most attention along the path. Almost nothing is said about once-returning. Non-returning is usually discussed only in relation to arahantship, in which the distinction is that, for a certain practitioner, “one of two fruits is to be expected for him: either final knowledge in this very life or, if there is a residue remaining, the state of non-returning.”⁴ Only very rarely do people declare that they are non-returners.⁵

Another model has only two stages: *Sekha* (trainee) and *asekha* (one beyond training – i.e. the arahant). In this model, the stage of trainee encompasses the three stages of stream-enterer, once-returner, and non-returner. Although this framework gets less attention in modern Theravāda teachings than the four-stage model above, it is discussed frequently in the early Buddhist teachings, in line with its representing the two most important transformations: arahantship and the entry into the assurance of full awakening.

In this book, the general framework is the two-stage model: It is assumed that “practice after stream entry” is one phenomenon. Terminology from both models will be used: The stream-enterer and the trainee will both refer to one who has undergone the transformation that accompanies finding the Noble Eightfold Path. The main focus is on practice in this lifetime, not in conceiving of this transition in terms of lifetimes remaining.

4 This is a stock phrase found throughout the suttas, including the *Satipatthana Sutta* (MN 10). The commentary adds that the “residue remaining” is some delight or attachment to the Dhamma or to the deep equanimity of the *jhāna* states.

5 In SN 47.29 and 47.30, a householder makes this declaration, in both cases to Ānanda.



2 Stream Entry

What is this transformation of understanding that removes so much suffering from one's mind? Often it is described as a distinct occurrence, as evidenced by the title "The Breakthrough" for one section in the *Samyutta Nikāya*.⁶ In the early suttas, stream entry does not only occur while sitting in deep meditation. The brahmin Upāli⁷ and the prince Abhaya⁸ gain stream entry while listening to discourses spoken by the Buddha, a phenomenon that also occurs numerous times for monastics.⁹ The Buddha's two chief disciples, Sāriputta and Moggallāna, became stream-enterers upon hearing a verse spoken by one of the Buddha's arahant followers, even before they themselves had met the Buddha.¹⁰

When people declare stream entry after a distinct experience, they most often speak in terms of understanding arising and ceasing: "All that is of a nature to arise is also of a nature to cease."¹¹ Perhaps it could be interpreted that the person has experienced something ceasing at a deep enough level to make an impression on their understanding. This is also called the arising of the "Dhamma eye," and is accompanied by the stock description (such as for Upāli), "Upāli saw the Dhamma, attained the

6 Chapter 13

7 MN 56

8 SN 46.56

9 Beginning with Kondañña, one of the Buddha's five ascetic former companions. He reached stream-entry upon hearing the Buddha's first discourse, the *Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta* (SN 56.11).

10 Mv 1.23.1-10. The verse was spoken by the bhikkhu Assaji, who was also one of the Buddha's five former ascetic companions.

11 *Yaṃ kiñci samudayadhammaṃ sabbaṃ taṃ nirodhadhamman.*

Dhamma, fathomed the Dhamma; he crossed beyond doubt, did away with perplexity, gained intrepidity, and became independent of others in the Teacher’s Dispensation.”

In some modern Theravāda schools, stream entry has been given a more technical definition specifically as a meditative attainment, and the language used is that the mind has a “glimpse” of Nibbāna or the mind briefly enters Nibbāna. Schools differ on whether it is a complete cessation of experience (i.e., a “gap”) or a purified form of awareness with no taints present. Although the suttas allow a broader range of stream entry experiences than these, there is evidence that what is seen at stream entry is only seen in the mind but not fully entered with the body.¹² This is consistent with the notion that the transformation is in one’s understanding – essentially a cognitive attainment, which may not (yet) penetrate one’s entire being.

In other cases in the early suttas, stream entry is not a totally distinct, black-and-white occurrence. There is the case of the “faith follower” and the “Dhamma follower,”¹³ who have not had a distinct, powerful experience like those above, but nonetheless will gain the “fruit of stream entry” in this lifetime. They have begun a more extended process, founded on either faith or wisdom, that will certainly lead to the key transition assuring full awakening.

Stream entry is described in several different ways in the Pāli Canon:¹⁴

- Qualities gained (four factors, three of which are the same and the last of which varies)
- Fetters abandoned (three out of ten are destroyed)

¹² E.g., SN 12.68, SN 48.53, and MN 70 (section on “one attained to view”). Note, however, that in contrast, MN 95 states that a practitioner at stream entry “realizes with the body the supreme truth, and sees it by penetrating it with wisdom.” This is mentioned again further below.

¹³ MN 70, SN 55.24, SN 55.25

¹⁴ Many are described in the *Sotāpattisamyutta* (SN 55).

- Attaining Right View (and specifically, seeing the Four Noble Truths)
- Becoming “independent in the Dhamma”

Qualities Gained

Stream-enterers are always described as having the three qualities of “confirmed confidence” (*aveccappasāda*) in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. The word means “confidence based on knowledge,” and is also translated as “experiential confidence.” They have had a direct experience of what the Buddha is pointing to in his teachings.

In addition, there is a fourth quality that varies. Most often, it is possessing “the virtues dear to the noble ones—unbroken, untorn, unblemished, unmottled, freeing, praised by the wise, ungrasped, leading to concentration.”¹⁵ It can also be excellent generosity¹⁶ or “the wisdom directed to arising and passing away, which is noble and penetrative.”¹⁷

Finally, stream-enterers are said to no longer fear death.¹⁸

Fetters Abandoned

The Buddha taught that there are ten fetters (*samyojana*) that bind the mind to conditioned existence – five lower fetters and five higher fetters.

15 E.g., SN 55.1

16 SN 55.32

17 SN 55.33

18 SN 55.27, AN 4.184

They are:¹⁹

1. Self-identity view²⁰
2. Doubt
3. Attachment to precepts and religious practices²¹
4. Sensual desire
5. Ill will
6. Desire for rebirth in the form realm
7. Desire for rebirth in the formless realm
8. Conceit
9. Restlessness
10. Ignorance

The first three are abandoned, or cut, at stream entry. The first refers to belief in an enduring personal entity or identity. In the context of ancient India, it was likely meant to counter views of an underlying cosmic “Self,” the *attā* (or *atman*, Skt.). It does not deny the Western psychological view of individual experience, but does challenge any sense of a person having inherent or inalterable qualities, or some underlying “essence.” To cut this fetter means to have an experiential understanding that no element of experience – in body or mind – can constitute an unchanging

¹⁹ AN 10.13

²⁰ *Sakkāyaditthi*. Bhikkhu Bodhi translates this as “personal existence view.” It literally means “existing-body view.” In Buddhaghosa’s commentaries, he translates *sakkāya* as “embodiment” – it is interesting to consider that before stream entry, a person has a fundamental misunderstanding about embodiment.

²¹ *Sīlabbataparāmāso*. The first term, *sīla*, is recognizable as the precepts. The person does not abandon the precepts (as evidenced above by the presence of excellent ethical conduct), but no longer believes that following them is sufficient for Awakening. The same is true for *vata*, which could be translated as religious practices. The person will certainly still practice, and will likely continue with rituals or devotional practices, but knows that these alone do not bring about liberation.

“self.” (Recall: All that is subject to arising is subject to cessation). Practically, it means that a stream-enterer no longer takes things personally. With no need to define or defend a self, there can be tremendous relief.

This first fetter is only part of the mind’s deep attachment to existence. Even after there is no sense of a personal “self,” the mind still has conceit (*māno*), the sense of existence or “I am.” Conceit allows for comparative thought, which is a form of *dukkha*, and it is not uprooted until arahantship. In SN 22.89, Venerable Khemaka, who is a non-returner (i.e., a late-stage trainee), distinguishes the two with an analogy to a flower. Just as the scent of a flower does not belong to the petals, stalk, or pistil, but instead to the flower as a whole, Khemaka knows that no element of body or mind is himself, and yet, there remains a “scent” of “I am.” He explains that meditating on the arising and passing of the five aggregates will eradicate the last of this “scent.”²²

The second fetter of doubt refers to doubt in the Buddha’s teachings and the path to liberation, whether outright disbelief, lack of confidence in one’s ability, or more subtle uncertainty about what exactly they refer to. Abandoning this fetter is the counterpart to gaining confirmed confidence in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, and in understanding Right View as the four noble truths.

Abandoning the second fetter leads directly to abandoning the third: When one understands the path and has had some glimpse of the goal, it is no longer possible to believe that following precepts or religious practices alone constitutes Awakening.

All of these fetters are related to one’s *understanding*. The stream-enterer releases many key misunderstandings that inhibit

22 The five aggregates are form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness, the elements of experience from which we construct a sense of self or existence. It is noted in the sutta that Ven. Khemaka attained arahantship through giving this teaching!

walking the path. It is not mere intellectual understanding – reaching stream entry requires direct experience – but nonetheless, there are aspects of the mind that remain untouched, or only slightly altered. The next two fetters, sensual desire and ill will, are *affective* and are thus rooted more deeply in the emotional aspect of the mind. This hints at one way that practice changes after stream entry, as further described below. The five higher fetters reach even deeper into the mind and include processes fundamental to life – a sense of existence (conceit) and the urge to move or create (restlessness).

Right View

The understanding that arises with stream entry is what the Buddha called Right View as the first step of the Noble Path. There is some subtlety here. It is not a specific view that can be stated like a campaign platform, but more of an orientation toward experience. Nonetheless, it is specific enough that the Buddha put language to it, in order to clarify it for further walking of the path.

The most common formulation of Right View is as an experiential understanding of the Four Noble Truths.²³ The mind orients toward seeing *dukkha*, the clinging/craving that accompanies it, its release, and the path to releasing it. The exposition by Sāriputta in MN 9 (*Sammāditthi*, Right View) gives a number of variations on this theme, explaining that a noble disciple could know other qualities along with their arising, cessation, and path to cessation (such as nutriment, the taints, and the links of dependent arising).

Importantly, the Noble Truths are not carried as abstract ideas, but as qualities to notice about *this* – this particular

²³ See the *Saccasamyutta*, SN 56.

experience happening now. Having experienced the cessation of *dukkha*, there is an inclination toward continuing that process, and the stream-enterer knows that only this moment has any reality.

Hence, the transition to orienting by Right View is a shift in what aspects of experience are seen. When the mind begins orienting in terms of suffering and its end, it also gains other, more penetrative ways of seeing phenomena. Before stream entry, the mind is most interested in phenomena themselves (believing them to be permanent and controllable, and the means to happiness). After stream entry, it sees not only the phenomena, but also their universal qualities of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and impersonality, as well as their conditional relatedness.²⁴ This enhanced aspect of seeing can be unfolded much further, as noted below. A trainee also senses that this way of seeing provides greater satisfaction, and even a form of joy, compared to simply perceiving experience as objects. This provides a kind of support for walking the rest of the path to freedom.

More generally, “right views” are ways of seeing that further the path, and hence, even “worldlings” can have right view.²⁵ It is simply not stabilized as an internal experience until one reaches stream entry. Right View is what allows the trainee to be independent in the Dhamma.

24 These are practiced intentionally before stream entry, but become much more strongly rooted once one is a trainee.

25 Also translated as “untaught ordinary person” – in Pāli, *asutava putthujano*. Literally, this is a common person (*putthu* implies “many”) who has not heard (*asutava*) the teachings. In the Buddha’s time, teachings were oral, and it was very important to get to hear a teacher. Also implied is the deeper “hearing” of really taking in the teachings and reflecting on them or practicing them – something that depends on a person’s temperament and karma. No pejorative is implied by the term “worldling.”

Independent in the Dhamma

Independence in the Dhamma is related to both Right View and the confidence that comes with stream entry. A trainee can no longer be shaken by debates or verbal challenges to the Dhamma²⁶ and no longer looks to other practitioners as those who “really know and see.”²⁷

And yet, there can still be a role for a teacher. MN 141 differentiates Sāriputta and Moggallāna this way: “Sāriputta trains others for the fruit of stream-entry, Moggallāna for the supreme goal.” If there were no need for a teacher after stream entry and no difference in the training before and after stream entry, such a distinction would not be necessary. There is even a prominent example: Moggallāna, already a stream-enterer when he ordained with the Buddha, benefited from the direct intervention of the Buddha in his mind to attain the *jhānas* and progress to arahantship.²⁸

The next section develops some further points about independence in the Dhamma.

Knowing that One is a Stream-Enterer or Trainee

It is considered important to know that one has made this transition. It is an aspect of being independent in the Dhamma, and it is part of the job of a Dhamma teacher to give teachings that help people understand the path that is unfolding through their practice. All of the above characteristics of stream-entry are framed such that people could know for themselves. For example, practitioners can check if they indeed have unwavering confidence in Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha and an absence of doubt: This is a clear internal experience. People can know for themselves if they

26 SN 56.40

27 SN 56.39

28 SN 40.1-9

understand the cessation of *dukkha* through having a clear experience of this. They can also observe if they have certainty that precepts and religious practices are not what liberation is about, while still having utter respect for and clear enactment of ethics in their life.

Some suttas address this issue. In SN 48.53, the Buddha asks and then answers the question, “What is the method by which a [practitioner] who is a trainee, standing upon the plane of a trainee, understands: ‘I am a trainee?’” One way is to know that one understands experientially the Four Noble Truths. Another is to understand the five faculties (faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom) as such,²⁹ perhaps meaning that one discerns them clearly, knows that their strength is the key to advancing on the path,³⁰ and knows (most importantly) that liberation lies beyond any conditioned quality.

In MN 48, the Buddha first gives six “principles of cordiality” that conduce to harmonious communal living, the sixth of which is Right View – i.e., being at least a stream-enterer. He then offers seven additional qualities with the comment, “When a noble disciple is thus possessed of seven factors, he possesses the fruit of stream-entry.” Each factor involves a consideration of one’s mind, and hence these seven have been called “the great reviewing knowledges” in the Majjhima commentary.³¹ These are summarized as follows:

1. Knowing that one’s mind cannot be obsessed to so great a degree that one could not see things as they are

29 And SN 48.2 and 48.3 state explicitly that a trainee understands the “arising, cessation, gratification, danger, and escape” in the case of the five faculties.

30 E.g., SN 48.14

31 *Mahāpaccavekkhanañāna*. A later commentarial text, the Visuddhimagga, elaborates further on “reviewing knowledges” (Vism XXII, 19-21).

2. Knowing that when one cultivates right view, one obtains serenity and “quenching” [of suffering]
3. Knowing that one’s view is unique to the teachings of the Buddha and is not found in other teachings³²
4. Instinctively drawing back from committing ethical violations, and immediately reporting any that one has committed
5. Considering further practice to be of primary importance in one’s life
6. Paying close attention to Dhamma teachings, listening eagerly
7. Feeling inspired, confident, and joyful when the Dhamma is being taught

The fourth and fifth qualities are said to refer to the “character” of one with Right View, while the sixth and seventh refer to the “strength” of one with Right View. Practitioners can check if these factors are present in their own minds. Note the overall similarity to the qualities discussed in the previous section (confirmed confidence, right view, ethics).

Not all stream-enterers know that they have attained this, however. A person may not have heard or understood the teachings sufficiently to consciously comprehend the level of their mind, even though they would still possess unshakeable confidence in Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. The householder Mahānāma, who was a trainee, still expressed concern to the Buddha about

32 Although this sounds on the surface like it encourages dogmatism, it is actually the opposite. For one who has experienced the cessation of *dukkha*, it becomes clear that this is possible only through the release of *all* clinging – including dogmatic clinging to religious views. Teachings that do not say this would not lead to the end of suffering. This third reviewing knowledge is equivalent to the understanding that there is no conditioned “solution” to *dukkha*; only liberation ends suffering.

his rebirth if he were to die in a confused state of mind.³³ He did not have the first reviewing knowledge listed above.

If one knows one is a stream-enterer, should one say so? In the Pāli Canon, the Buddha does not encourage it, but neither does he discourage it. The Buddha says that people who are certain they are stream-enterers could choose to state their attainment: “Such a noble disciple may, if he so wishes, declare of himself: ‘Destroyed for me is (rebirth in) hell, destroyed is animal rebirth, destroyed the realm of ghosts; destroyed for me are the lower worlds, the unhappy destinies, the abysmal realms; I have entered the stream, no more subject to fall into the states of woe, affirmed, assured of final enlightenment.’”³⁴ The Buddha also expresses approval when householders declare to him that they have attained the fruit of stream entry. Monastics in the texts more often declare arahantship than stream entry to the Buddha, perhaps highlighting that full Awakening is the goal of the monastic life.

In the modern Insight culture in the West, acknowledging stream entry is not encouraged. There is a view that people will develop conceit or become fixated on their spiritual experiences. In addition, monastics are keenly aware that the penalty for incorrectly declaring an attainment is expulsion from the monastic order, so monks and nuns almost never speak of attainments, including the *jhānas* and the paths and fruits.

In any event, a trainee knows that the path lies in letting go of clinging, including identification with being a stream-enterer. They are more likely to demonstrate their attainment through wholesome actions and continuance of practice than to state it in words, unless it would be skillful at that moment to do so.

33 SN 55.21. The Buddha assures Mahānāma that his attainment prevents such an occurrence.

34 E.g., SN 55.7-10 and AN 5.179. In these suttas, certainty comes from having the four key qualities of confirmed confidence in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, and excellent ethics.



3 Practice as a Stream-Enterer or Trainee

It is necessary to keep practicing after stream entry. Most people will do so naturally, although apparently, it is possible for a stream-enterer to, at least for a while, rest content with this attainment. In such a case, the person does not experience the profound joy offered by the path.³⁵ However, to be a “trainee” implies that one is continuing to train. What happens in practice when one is a trainee?

Practice is now shaped by the understanding that there is no abiding self. It is no longer possible to believe that one is “doing” one’s practice as a willful self that directs the process. Nonetheless, there is still the need for effort, purification, and refinement in order to deepen wisdom and insight, and some of this must be done intentionally.

It is supportive to realize that the suttas are both prescriptive and descriptive. Rather than seeing them only as instructions to be followed, they can in addition be seen as highlighting what to watch for and how to channel one’s energies so the process of the path unfolds. Buddhist texts also serve as mirrors for the trainee’s deepening engagement with life, meeting the practitioner at each deeper level with new revelations as to the meaning of what the Buddha was talking about.

Practice also becomes much more individualized. People are following an internal sensibility as their primary guidestar – each

³⁵ SN 55.40

practitioner must learn to address their unique combination of remaining defilements. Nonetheless, the functioning of the mind is impersonal, and for a trainee, there is no sense of a “personal” path. Hence, it can be very helpful to study the paths of masters who came earlier, as well as to work with a living master, but this is done without imitation or subversion of one’s own intuition. It is an interesting balance that is explored more in the final section.

The next section gathers some of the suttas that speak explicitly, or fairly explicitly, about practice as a trainee. The subsequent sections expand into the diversity of paths that are available within early Buddhist teachings for the trainee to cultivate. Finally, a more general and experiential interpretation is given for what it means to be “in the stream” or “in the current.”

Practice as a Trainee in the Suttas

There are suttas that address how practice unfolds after stream entry, often in juxtaposition to the “preparatory path” of the worldling. Some state that there is effectively no difference in practice; others find a similarity in the general structure with differences in the details; and yet others focus on the changes that have come about with stream entry (abandoning certain fetters, having Right View, etc.) and how they alter the purpose, flavor, or focus of practice. These are not contradictory, but represent different lenses one can place on the process of awakening.

No Fundamental Difference

In some sense, there is no real difference in practice after stream entry. There is still the need to abandon the hindrances, cultivate the factors of awakening, practice the four establishments of mindfulness, observe arising and passing in the five aggregates and six sense bases, etc.

In SN 22.122, Sāriputta teaches MahāKotthita that at every stage of practice, from before stream entry through arahantship, a monk should wisely attend to the five aggregates with regard to the three characteristics. At each stage, this contemplation leads to the next stage, and for the arahant it provides “a pleasant abiding here and now.”

Another sutta with a very different context also states that there is effectively no difference in practice after stream entry. In MN 95, the Buddha describes a distinct transition in which the practitioner “awakens to truth,” while also acknowledging that there is not as yet the “final attainment” of truth. It is reasonable to assume that this initial transition is stream entry because this does involve realizing the four noble truths as Right View. The conversation with the interlocutor, a brahmin from the Bharadvāja clan, continues like this:

“Yes, Master Gotama, to this extent there is an awakening to the truth. To this extent one awakens to the truth. We regard this as an awakening to the truth. But to what extent is there the final attainment of the truth? To what extent does one finally attain the truth? We ask Master Gotama about the final attainment of the truth.”

“The cultivation, development, & pursuit of those very same qualities: to this extent, Bharadvāja, there is the final attainment of the truth. To this extent one finally attains the truth. I describe this as the final attainment of the truth.”

“Those very same qualities” refers to a set of twelve steps by which the practitioner learns the Dhamma, reflects on it, becomes inspired to practice [or practice further], and attains understanding. Here, the path is portrayed as a repeating process that is not essentially different for a worldling and a trainee.

This teaching was given to a brahmin, that is, to someone who was not a follower of the Buddha, but was instead fully trained in the Vedic tradition, which relied on memorization of teachings and exact repetition of rituals. Perhaps such a listener would be more receptive to an awakening process that is essentially the same from start to finish, requiring only ongoing repetition.

Similar, But Deeper

Other suttas suggest that *sekhas* train in a similar way as worldlings, but are doing so with deeper qualities of mind. There is some noticeable “shift” in the trainee’s mind, but the underlying path is very similar. One such example is MN 53 (the *Sekha Sutta*).

This sutta is spoken by Ānanda, who was understood to be a stream-enterer at that time. The Buddha was present for the talk and approved of his words, but it is interesting that the teaching was put in Ānanda’s mouth. Perhaps we can understand this to mean that even when one is a stream-enterer (and hence the lowest level of *sekha*), one can discern and describe the path adequately to enable one to reach full enlightenment – indeed, this distinguishes the *sekha* as one “independent in the Dhamma.”

The sutta describes the *sekha*’s training in ethics, concentration, and wisdom, noted to be the “higher” forms of these. This three-fold division of the training is characteristic of an oft-repeated scheme called the “gradual training,” which has some variations in its specifics. Here we see that there are no “secret,” advanced teachings for *sekhas*; one does not “outgrow” the need for sense restraint, moderation in eating, wakefulness, and ongoing cultivation of wholesome states, including the *jhānas*.

Nonetheless, we can infer that some depth has been attained beyond what an initial practitioner would have. In particular, Ānanda names “seven good qualities” possessed by a noble disciple that are not typically mentioned in other texts on the gradual training, and they include some features that are available only after some degree of practice. The seven are faith, *hiri*,³⁶ *ottappa*,³⁷ learning, energetic effort, mindfulness, and wisdom. In particular:

- The section on learning concludes with the statement that the trainee has “penetrated [the teachings] well by view,” a reference to the Right View of the noble disciple.
- The wisdom of arising and passing is said to be “noble and penetrative, and leads to the complete destruction of suffering,” which is the phrase used for the wisdom of a trainee, assured of Awakening.
- In addition, it can be noted that concentration – described just after the seven qualities in the sutta – completes a listing of the five faculties (faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom) among the trainee’s assets. As noted earlier, the five faculties are framed in the suttas as the main differentiators of people’s level of attainment.

Thus, the *sekha* has qualities that are deeper versions of the same qualities found at the beginning of training. The higher training has the same structure as the initial training, but is proceeding from a deeper place. Put into modern language, it might be said that practice after stream entry proceeds from a more reliable reference point, that is, a glimpse of the actual goal.

36 Concern about possible ethical deviations of one’s past actions. This quality is what drives the trainee to immediately admit and remedy ethical breaches (the fourth “reviewing knowledge” named above from MN 48)

37 Concern that one might commit an ethical breach in the future. It serves to enhance mindfulness and sensitivity. Neither *hiri* nor *ottappa* bring about unskillful qualities like shame and anxiety.

The sutta concludes by subsuming the three divisions of training (*sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*) into “conduct” – the areas of work for both the worldling and the trainee. The difference is that one in higher training has the certainty of being “capable of attaining the supreme security from bondage.” The consummation of training in this “conduct” is “true knowledge” (the three knowledges),³⁸ which distinguishes the arahant from the trainee. An arahant is *asekha* (one beyond training).

Other suttas support the idea that a trainee has a distinctive level of development in certain key areas, and only needs further practice to complete this development. Here are just two examples:

- SN 47.26 states that the trainee has partial development of the four *satipatthānas*.
- SN 48.2 states that the trainee “*understands* as they really are” the five faculties, while SN 48.3 says that the arahant, “*having understood* as they really are... the five faculties” with the additional quality of being “liberated by non-clinging.” The trainee is doing a process that the arahant has completed. Being “liberated by non-clinging” suggests that there could be a path that consists of practicing non-clinging – this is discussed further below.

Differences in Purpose and Understanding: The Importance of “Directly Seeing”

Having the clear reference point of non-suffering that comes with stream entry enables a certain kind of seeing that is not possessed by the worldling. Several suttas distinguish the trainee by

³⁸ *Tevijja*. These are knowledge of one’s past lives, knowledge of how beings pass away and are reborn according to their karma, and knowledge of the destruction of the taints. They are the knowledges said to accompany the transition to arahantship (e.g., MN 4).

his/her attainment of an initial level of *direct knowledge*, which must then be fully developed.

SN 47.4 in the *Satipatthānasamyutta* states that novices (worldlings), trainees, and arahants have different purposes in undertaking *satipatthāna* practice. All three “dwell” the same way (“contemplating the body in the body,” etc.), but the novice is doing so “in order to know phenomena as they really are,” whereas the trainee is doing so “in order to fully understand phenomena as they really are” (i.e., there is some genuine knowledge, but it is not complete). The arahant dwells “detached from phenomena,” having completed the training.

The *Mūlapariyāya Sutta* (MN 1) also contrasts the worldling, trainee, and arahant (and also a Buddha) on the basis of how they see. The “untaught ordinary person” perceives phenomena as “things” (“he perceives earth as earth”), and then goes on to imagine himself in relationship to these things, including relationships of identity, inclusion, exclusion, possession, and delight. These are standpoints rooted in identity, conceit, and craving.³⁹ The Buddha points out that this person has simply “not fully understood.”

In contrast, the “disciple in higher training” (the *sekha*) is said to “directly know” [earth as earth, for example]. They have seen through the “thingness” of phenomena, knowing that all experiences are impermanent, inherently ungraspable, and not indicative of a self. However, the Buddha still gives an instruction for the *sekha*: The trainee *should not* adopt a relationship of identity, conceit, or craving in regard to experience. In other words, there is the possibility of slipping into these habitual ways of experiencing, and the trainee is training to remain in

³⁹ These three qualities (craving, conceit, and views) are said to be the basis for “mental proliferation” (*papañca*) in MN 18. They are the roots from which conceptual thought takes over the mind and obscures clear seeing.

direct knowledge. The Buddha says the trainee “must fully understand,” and hence trains.

For the arahant, “he too directly knows” [earth as earth, for example]. But having directly known, he *does not* adopt those unskillful relationships to experience, because “he has fully understood.” No further training is needed.

Progression of the Fetters

When the first three fetters are gone, the next two are sensual desire and ill will. These are affective qualities. Because two stages of the four-stage model (once-returning and non-returning) are needed to eliminate these fetters, it is clear that they are strong and deeply rooted in the mind. There is some evidence in the suttas that working with affective qualities comes to prominence in the trainee stage.

In the *Vatthūpama Sutta* (MN 7), the practitioner is noted to have “unwavering confidence” in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, and to have released 16 unwholesome qualities of mind “in part,” both of which are characteristics of a trainee. This person is gladdened and inspired by the Dhamma (in line with the reviewing knowledge for the stream-enterer in MN 48), and gains concentration easily (in line with the seven qualities stated in MN 53, and with having the support of excellent ethics).

For the purposes here, the key sections of MN 7 are 13-16, in which the person practices the four Brahma-viharas. In other words, an appropriate practice for someone in the trainee stage is that which undermines covetousness, hostility, ill will, and other unwholesome emotional or affective qualities. And although this sutta is primarily about cultivation, the spark for the trainee’s development is *appreciation of the absence* of various unwholesome

factors – a point that will be discussed further below. The joy of this appreciation is intuited to reveal a path.

The practice in MN 7 occurs within a clear understanding of the four noble truths as immediate experience: “There is this, there is the inferior, there is the superior, and beyond there is an escape from this whole field of perception.” Following the commentary and adding some further interpretation, the first phrase represents the understanding of conditioned experience as *dukkha* (first noble truth). But more subtly, it says so in regard to *this*, that is, this particular experience. Stream-enterers are less inclined to resort to abstract principles than to find truth in this very moment.

The second statement, “there is the inferior,” refers to an unskillful relationship to this very experience (second noble truth), the third to a skillful relationship to experience (fourth noble truth), and the last to the cessation of *dukkha* (third noble truth). Note that the practitioner sees two possible relationships to experience: Falling into craving or clinging (inferior), or taking a step on the path (superior). This is reminiscent of the trainee’s choice in MN 1: grasping and personalizing experience, or letting it remain direct and impersonal. In the case of MN 7, the Brahma-viharas are offered as appropriate “superior states” for cultivation.

The first line of the *Mettā Sutta* (Sn 1.8) may also suggest that *mettā* practice is a method for stream-enterers to progress farther on the path. One fairly literal translation is, “This is what should be done by one who has realized the peaceful state.” The term for “peaceful state” (*santaṃ padam*) is used elsewhere to refer to Nibbāna, so the instruction seems to be directed at a trainee. However, although the verb is certainly “having realized,”⁴⁰

40 *Abhisamecca*

the commentary states that the person actually “knows Nibbāna through mundane wisdom,”⁴¹ leaving some uncertainty about the interpretation that this text is aimed at trainees. Nonetheless, it is clear that the *Mettā Sutta* offers powerful methods that lead toward liberation.

Another way to work with the Brahma-viharas in more advanced training is to use them as objects of *vipassana* practice. In the *Atthakanāgara Sutta* (MN 52), the practitioner abides in any of the Brahma-viharas to the level of attaining “deliverance of mind” (i.e., a boundless experience of that heart quality) and then considers that the state is “conditioned and volitionally produced” and hence “impermanent and subject to cessation.” It takes a notable amount of wisdom to observe a thoroughly wholesome state as subject to impermanence and conditionality.

The heart practices are important at any stage of the path because of their powerful purifying action on the mind. They directly remove ill will, cruelty, and other aversive mindstates, and also weaken states based in greed by offering a more refined form of pleasure. They become especially important when the mind is working on the fourth and fifth fetters.

Strong Avenues of Cultivation (Classical)

The discussion so far has focused on how the path after stream entry relates to that before stream entry. It is broadly the same, but conducted at a deeper level, or with a different focus, or with a different purpose or understanding. This section moves away from direct comparison and selects out some classical avenues of practice that are especially fruitful in progressing from stream entry to full liberation (and they are also seen to be highly

⁴¹ *Lokiyapaññā*. Presumably, this means that the person has heard of Nibbāna and is inspired to practice toward that goal.

intertwined, not truly separate). They can be practiced all along the path, from the very first day, and share the quality of being powerful enough to take a practitioner all the way to the goal.

The presentation here does not exhaust the possibilities; we are not attempting a comprehensive summation of Dhamma practice. And the descriptions are briefer because they are not the main focus of this book. Also, it should be acknowledged that for any of these cases, one must develop the twin skills of *samatha* and *vipassana* in order for it to be fruitful. How far one takes the *samatha* aspect is not discussed here.

Different Dhamma teachers tend to delve into one of these avenues deeply, making it the basis of their teachings (because it is the basis of their own practice). Other teachers have found other avenues that are not covered here. Later texts, such as the *Visuddhimagga* and modern Theravāda meditation manuals, also give detailed instructions on how to undertake the practices that lead to full release.

Understanding Conditionality

It is stated that “one who sees dependent arising sees the Dhamma; one who sees the Dhamma sees dependent arising.”⁴² Unfolding this understanding can become a whole path, the fruit of which is the Unconditioned.

Working with conditionality is introduced in the fourth *sati-patthāna* practice, through which the practitioner begins to understand how both unskillful and skillful qualities of mind arise and cease – what conditions bring them about and accompany their presence, and what conditions lead to their fading away and prevent their presence.

42 MN 28, with Sāriputta quoting the Buddha

The Four Noble Truths are about the conditionality of *dukkha*. Once the practitioner understands the domain of what is called “*dukkha*” and the process of conditionality, the path becomes a matter of completing the process by removing all the conditions for *dukkha*.

A stream-enterer has some genuine understanding of conditionality – both dependent arising and dependent cessation. This is suggested by the Vinaya story, noted above, of the stream entry of Sāriputta, who made the breakthrough upon hearing these verses from the Venerable Assaji:

Whatever phenomena arise from cause:
their cause
& their cessation.
Such is the teaching of the Tathagata,
the Great Contemplative.

This is also stated directly in SN 12.27:

When, bhikkhus, a noble disciple thus understands the condition; thus understands the origin [or arising] of the condition; thus understands the cessation of the condition; thus understands the way leading to the cessation of the condition, he is then called a noble disciple who is accomplished in view, accomplished in vision, who has arrived at this true Dhamma, who sees this true Dhamma, who possesses a trainee’s knowledge, a trainee’s true knowledge, who has entered the stream of the Dhamma, a noble one with penetrative wisdom, one who stands squarely before the door to the Deathless.

Bringing this into more common language, there is a need to understand “how things work” – one aspect of the Dhamma is that

it is simply “nature.” The general principle behind more specific expressions of conditionality is often stated as, “This being, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises; this not being, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases.”⁴³

The task of practice is to take the very stuff of one’s life, the specific experiences, and completely discern this general operational principle – the cognitive understanding of which comes with stream entry. It is not a simple task,⁴⁴ but it is one that completely fulfills the training.

Perception of Impermanence / Inconstancy

Conditionality is intimately related to the universal quality of *anicca*, most often translated as “impermanent.” The word *nicca* more closely means “constant” than “permanent,” and observing that conditioned experience is continually changing has a profound effect on the mind over extended periods of practice. The principles of conditionality and inconstancy are so deep that they do not require “Buddhism”: AN 3.134 states that, “Whether there is an arising of Tathāgatas or no arising of Tathāgatas, there persists that law, that stableness of the Dhamma, that fixed course of the Dhamma: ‘All conditioned phenomena are impermanent.’”⁴⁵

The task of contemplating impermanence is related in numerous suttas to all aspects of the structure of the Buddha’s teachings: The five aggregates, the six sense bases, the five faculties, the steps of dependent arising, the brahma-viharas, the states of *jhāna*, etc. The effect of such contemplation is that the mind becomes “disenchanted” (*nibbida*) with any conditioned

43 Ud 1.1-1.3

44 In DN 15, Ānanda (who is a stream-enterer) tells the Buddha that dependent arising appears “clear” to him, and the Buddha quickly corrects him, saying that it is “deep, and it appears deep.”

45 This sutta contains some layers of subtlety in that it not only offers the encapsulated truth of *anicca*, but it does so by noting that the very law of inconstancy is “stable” and a “fixed course.” This is worth contemplating deeply.

phenomenon as a basis for true happiness or peace and is hence willing to let go of grasping experience. Stream entry convinces one of this completely, but there is still the task of finishing the work, for not all aspects of the mind have been transformed.

Perception of Not-Self

The elimination of the first fetter of an abiding self-view is a major shift of understanding. Nonetheless, as noted above, this initial insight does not entail full understanding because the conceit “I am” remains in the mind. Also, it is normal for the mind to habitually continue to generate an idea of self even after stream entry due to longtime conditioning, ongoing support from the outside culture, and even from language. The self-idea is just no longer believed by a trainee.

Hence, continuing to develop the perception of not-self (*anattā*)⁴⁶ is important in order to progress toward full Awakening. One way this can be accomplished is through the perception of *anicca*, as noted in the *Meghiya Sutta* (AN 9.3): “The perception of impermanence should be developed to eradicate the conceit ‘I am.’ When one perceives impermanence, the perception of non-self is stabilized. One who perceives non-self eradicates the conceit ‘I am,’ [which is] Nibbāna in this very life.”⁴⁷ Note the

46 The perceptions of *anicca* and *anattā* are often placed side-by-side as simply two of the universal characteristics of phenomena in which one can train perception. But the sutta referenced above, AN 3.134, notes that by the law of Dhamma, all conditioned phenomena (*sankhāra*) are *anicca*, whereas all phenomena (*dhamma*) are *anattā*. The distinction is usually understood to mean that Nibbāna, as the one unconditioned phenomenon, is not inconstant but is not-self. Nibbāna is certainly neither a self nor a Self. However, it is worth noting that the suttas are inconsistent about whether Nibbāna is in fact a *dhamma*, a phenomenon. This issue is perhaps addressed by the section below on “absence,” in which Nibbāna is noted to be not something, but also not nothing. Possibly Nibbāna is neither self nor not-self. This is an area for further contemplation by the reader.

47 Meghiya was a very new practitioner who had little experiential understanding of how to work with his own mind. Nonetheless, the Buddha gave him this discourse that includes deep practices aimed ultimately at eliminating conceit. This demonstrates that it can be appropriate to teach even beginners the full length of the path.

use of the term “stabilized,”⁴⁸ indicating that it is an appropriate practice for one who already has an initial, possibly unstable, perception of not-self. And continuing to abide in this perception moves the mind along the path toward uprooting conceit, one of the last fetters.

Another way to deepen the perception of not-self is to prevent the mind from proliferating thoughts and views beyond the simple registering of an experience. This allows the mind to see that the self is something extra imputed onto experience, and is associated with suffering. The Buddha’s instructions to Bāhiya demonstrate this method:⁴⁹

Bāhiya, you should train yourself thus: In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself.

When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen ... only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then, Bāhiya, you will not be with that. And since you will not be with that, therefore, you will not be in that. And since, you will not be in that, therefore, you will not be here or hereafter or in between the two—just this is the end of suffering.

In addition, there are practices that work directly with the perception of *anattā*. On many occasions, the noble disciple is distinguished from the worldling by this very perception: The uninstructed worldling “regards form as self, or self as possessing

48 *Sanṭhāti*

49 Ud 1.10, with some repetitions of Bāhiya’s name removed. (These instructions appear in other places in the suttas too).

form, or form as in self, or self as in form” (and the same for the other aggregates), whereas the instructed noble disciple “does not regard form as self, or self as possessing form, or form as in self, or self as in form.”⁵⁰ This distinction sounds descriptive, but it can be prescriptive; it is possible to volitionally incline the mind toward seeing any experience as empty of self, even in normal daily life.

Understanding Emptiness

This term, empty (*suñña*), merits further discussion. The suttas most often refer to experience as “empty of self and what belongs to a self.”⁵¹ But other suttas refer to an inherent emptiness of phenomena, such as the *Phena Sutta* (SN 22.95), which says each of the five aggregates is “void, hollow, insubstantial.” The general term emptiness (*suññatā*) points toward the lack of any essential core or inherent quality. Investigating this deeply in experience can lead to full Awakening.

The *Cūlasuññata Sutta* (MN 121) describes this development as a systematic shift in perception brought about during meditation. It begins by noting that the Buddha himself “often abides in emptiness.” The Buddha then describes a progressive simplification of perception to more subtle levels. On each step, the practitioner notices both what is absent (what the experience is “empty of”) and what is still present, which eventually guides the practitioner toward letting go into Nibbāna through the door of emptiness. The *Mahāsuññata Sutta* (MN 122) states further that this practice can be done off the cushion also, by maintaining that same perception in daily life after it has been established through meditation.

⁵⁰ E.g., SN 22.43

⁵¹ SN 35.85

It may be noted that later schools of Buddhism place much greater emphasis on emptiness than do early Buddhist teachings, but practices on emptiness do appear in the Pāli Canon, and some lay Insight teachers and Theravadan monastic teachers explicitly discuss emptiness.

Awareness, Abiding, and Absence

Three additional topics round out this discussion of modes of practice after stream entry. These are not as clearly delineated in the Pāli Canon as the above-mentioned strong avenues of cultivation, but they represent a strand within the early texts that is especially relevant for more experienced practitioners (and also beneficial for newer practitioners).

Consider that a moment of experience includes an object (from the realm of body or mind) and the knowing of that object.⁵² We can imagine a spectrum of practices spread between a focus on the “object” side and on the “knowing” side, with some partaking of both.

Methods that orient toward objects are more common. Many are “directed” practices such as focusing on the breath or cultivating the Brahma-viharas. There are also object-oriented practices that do not involve directing the attention, such as the open and choiceless attention in the instructions to Bāhiya quoted above. Sometimes the practitioner is simply cultivating certain mindstates, and other times observing qualities such as *anicca*, *dukkha*, or *anattā*.

Including the “knowing” side – becoming “aware of awareness” – becomes possible when there is sufficient continuity of

52 There can be much detail (and energy expended) in precisely defining different kinds of knowing, such as mindfulness, consciousness, and attention. [A related issue is distinguishing *citta* from *manas* (and *viññāna*)]. However, this will not be attempted here. There is no Pāli term for the general word “awareness,” which will be used to stand for any of these and defined in context as needed. The later Buddhist traditions delve into this realm more deeply than the early tradition.

mindfulness and nonreactivity in the mind. Many instructions in this area point the practitioner toward becoming aware of awareness through the object being known. Both the object and the knowing are included.

Focusing *exclusively* on the knowing end of the spectrum is not emphasized in the suttas, although it could follow from the instructions. It is the later Buddhist traditions that highlight pure awareness practices. Much could be said about the development of such practices in the Buddhist tradition, but that is outside the present scope.

Recognition of knowing is discussed in several contexts in the suttas. The most prominent is in the fourth *satipatthāna* practice (concerning *dhammas*), which instructs the meditator to contemplate consciousness (among the five aggregates) and to contemplate mindfulness (among the seven factors of awakening). One is also instructed to notice consciousness in discerning the components that make up contact, and in dependent arising. And in the third *satipatthāna* practice (concerning the *citta*), an awareness of the state of mind could include its knowing aspect.

There are number of benefits of becoming aware of awareness. One is that so much of the progress on the path is linked to such terms as seeing, knowledge, vision, and insight. It is understood that proper or appropriate attention (*yoniso manasikāra*) is what nourishes wholesome states⁵³ and is indeed necessary for the arising of right view.⁵⁴ Directly knowing how the mind is seeing is a crucial aspect of practice. Also, awareness, being formless, is inherently more peaceful than being with objects;⁵⁵ this is touched on further below. And for the stream-enterer, becoming aware of awareness has the effect of gradually releasing

53 MN 2

54 AN 2.126. The other factor is “the voice of another.”

55 Iti 73

the sense of “doing” the practice. Stream-enterers have already discarded the belief in an enduring self that could be directing one’s practice, and bringing in the knowing side of experience deepens the wisdom that the path unfolds through non-willful means.

Intimately connected to this perspective is the instruction to “abide” (*viharati*), which is spread throughout the suttas and becomes both more accessible and more prominent for the trainee. Abiding becomes natural when the mind is less attached to and identified with mental and material phenomena. The Buddha encourages practitioners to abide in the four *jhānas* and formless bases,⁵⁶ the liberation of mind by the Brahma-viharas,⁵⁷ and emptiness.⁵⁸ And in MN 10, he does not say to “be mindful” of phenomena, but rather to “abide contemplating” phenomena, “ardent, fully aware, and mindful.”⁵⁹ Thus, mindfulness is a method of abiding. It becomes clear to the trainee what this term means experientially.

Abiding (or resting, or dwelling) in the direct knowing of wholesome states or in awareness slowly starves the tendencies toward unwholesome states and particularly those activities that involve agitation, restlessness, or willful effort. A practice of non-doing moves the mind closer to the goal of non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion, for greed, hatred, and delusion involve doing.

Abiding can go even farther: It is possible to notice and even dwell in the quality of absence – the sense that something is not there. The Buddha offers this instruction quite accessibly in

56 For these, the phrase is “enters upon and abides in.” E.g., MN 52, but the phrase is used throughout the suttas.

57 MN 52

58 MN 121.13

59 This could be taken as another instance of instructing the meditator to become aware of awareness, through the act of checking if they are “fully aware” (*sampajañña*).

the third *satipatthāna* practice. The meditator is asked to notice whether the mind is affected by lust, hatred, or delusion – or not. It is perhaps novel for a new meditator to observe a mind characterized by not containing, for instance, hatred. Absence is something humans do not normally pay attention to.

Once one is attuned to this type of instruction, it is seen to run throughout the teachings in various forms. In SN 36.11, “the successive cessation of formations” is taught: Speech has ceased for one who has entered the first *jhāna*; thought and examination have ceased for one who has entered the second *jhāna*; and so on through the cessation of greed, hatred, and delusion for one with taints destroyed. Noticing what has ceased is also the practice taught in MN 121 (noted above), as the mind progresses in perceiving emptiness. In practicing with the immaterial bases, space can be regarded as the absence of materiality. In practicing with dependent arising, one can use the “cessation mode” of noticing what is not present – for example, when birth is absent (has ceased), there is no aging and death.

The underlying motivation for this type of noticing is to attune the mind to peace, and ultimately to Nibbāna, the supreme peace. As stated in Iti 73: “The formless is more peaceful than the form realm, and cessation is more peaceful than the formless.” At first the mind seeks more and more peaceful *objects*, but eventually it attunes to absence as more peaceful than any object. This can be quite a revelation because absence can accompany any experience. There can always be the absence of clinging, regardless of what objects are manifesting to the senses and in awareness. This gives a sense of one way to intuit Nibbāna in everyday life – as the subtle quality of non-clinging.

The Buddha even encourages abiding in absence as a type of *samādhi*. SN 48.9 in the *Indriyasamyutta* uses the phrase “having

made release the object” under the definition of concentration as a spiritual faculty.⁶⁰ By inclining the mind this way, the practitioner gains successively deeper understanding of what “release” means. Eventually, the mind can find and rest in the release of Nibbāna.

Another expression of abiding in absence is found in SN 35.117:

That sphere should be understood, where the eye ceases and perception of forms fades away. That sphere should be understood, where the ear ceases and perception of sounds fades away.... That sphere should be understood, where the mind ceases and perception of mental phenomena fades away...

In general (both on and off the cushion), it is valuable to train the mind to rest in peaceful states, noticing the absence of greed, hatred, and delusion. This can lead to the deep contemplation suggested in the suttas: “This is peaceful, this is excellent, namely the stilling of all preparations, the relinquishing of all assets, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, Nibbāna.”⁶¹

The early Buddhist teachings do not give a single definition or image for Nibbāna, the goal. Although it is clear that the aim of practice is the destruction of greed, hatred, and delusion⁶² and hence the elimination of *dukkha*, this is described by many different terms, including the unmanifest, the unailing, the unaging, the uninclined, the unconditioned, the sublime, the destruction of craving, the unadhesive, the shelter, the unafflicted, the foremost ease, and the wonderful.⁶³ Many of these are images of

60 *Vossagga*. There is much commentarial discussion as to what this refers to, which will not be engaged here, as it does not impact the present thread of thought.

61 AN 3.32, translations by Bhikkhus Katukurunde Ñānananda and Bodhi combined.

62 A few of the numerous references are AN 3.55, SN 45.7, SN 43.44, SN 22.23, SN 45.36.

63 Many are listed in SN 43.1-44 but other images are scattered throughout the Pāli Canon.

absence, for Nibbāna is not a thing. Perhaps so many images are given so that people of different temperaments and proclivities can each find a guidestar that resonates for them. Or perhaps the variety is intended to prevent fixation on a particular way of understanding liberation, for it is not something that can be held by the cognitive mind.⁶⁴

The First Joyful Birth

The Noble Path can perhaps be encapsulated in the factors of “transcendent dependent arising” in the *Upanisa Sutta* (SN 12.23): Suffering, faith, delight, joy, tranquility, happiness, concentration, seeing things as they are, disenchantment, fading away, liberation, and knowledge of the destruction of the taints. After beginningless births into repeated suffering, there is at last the arising of the deepest faith: Confirmed confidence in Awakening. This is the birth of the Noble Path in the heart.⁶⁵ It is the first genuinely joyful birth because, although like all births it will end in some kind of death, the path exhausts itself in the deliverance of full Awakening. And among all the qualities that accompany the process, not one partakes of the lower realms of deep suffering.⁶⁶ A few bodies may come and go along the way, but the heart cannot fall away from the path. In this sense, it is also the final birth.

64 One quality of an awakened person is that they cannot be defined by any conventional measures. They are defined only by the absence of greed, hatred, and delusion (e.g., SN 22.36).

65 AN 4.170 (the *Yuganaddha Sutta*): “In him, the path is born.”

66 “Not partaking of the lower realms” does not mean that the path is always *pleasant*. Only the worldling equates happiness with pleasure. Trainees discover the natural joy of the Dhamma in each experience, thus touching a happiness beyond preference and a liberation that does not require particular conditions.

4 **Becoming the Dhamma**

As noted, stream entry is a shift in perspective. Looking from the near shore, the worldling sees a path to traverse from here to the far shore. Even the trainee sees that more work is to be done, and envisions the Noble Path, which consists of a special kind of action (*kamma*) – “the *kamma* that is neither dark nor bright, which leads to the destruction of *kamma*.”⁶⁷ This phrase points toward the view being quite different from the far shore. From there, nothing needs to be done. Indeed, the very concepts of near and far shore are nonsensical, as Nibbāna does not have such distinctions. Because trainees see from either perspective at various times, sometimes they undertake practices and trainings, and sometimes they abide in the purifying release of freedom.

There comes also a fluidity in modes of practice, which is a fruit of releasing the third fetter of “precepts and religious practices.” Trainees have greater ability to stand back and see *how* a given practice is functioning – what it is doing in the mind. This allows them to understand when a certain practice has done its work and to stop at that point (which is one aspect of the well-known “simile of the raft”).⁶⁸

Consider again the idea of being “independent in the Dhamma.” The Buddha exhorts his disciples: “Dwell with yourselves as an island, with yourselves as a refuge, with no other refuge; with the Dhamma as an island, with the Dhamma as a refuge, with

67 AN 4.232

68 MN 22.13

no other refuge.”⁶⁹ No enduring self is being proposed; here, *attā* is used in a reflexive sense of one’s own person or experience. It seems that the self and the Dhamma are being linked.

What might this mean practically? Two suttas offer a bold and intriguing practical statement about this connection. In the *Mahāsalāyatanika Sutta* (MN 149), it is stated that for a person who is able to abide in nonreactivity, “The view of such a person is right view, their intention is right intention, their effort is right effort, their mindfulness is right mindfulness, their concentration is right concentration. But their bodily action, verbal action, and livelihood have already been well purified earlier.” This denotes the excellent ethics of the stream-enterer, and states that the other path qualities of such a person are automatically “right” (*sammā*), which should be understood to mean “appropriate,” i.e., leading to Awakening. It goes on, “Thus the Noble Eightfold Path comes to fulfilment in them by development.”

The *Mahācattārīsika Sutta* (MN 117) contains similar statements. It differentiates path factors that are meritorious and lead to (good) rebirth from those that are “noble, a factor of the path” (i.e., lead to Awakening). The difference is that the Noble Path factors are certain views, intentions, speech, actions, etc., that are undertaken by “one whose mind is taintless, who possesses the noble path and is developing the noble path.” For example, in the cases of view and speech:

“And what is right view that is noble, taintless, supramundane, a factor of the path? The wisdom, the faculty of wisdom, the power of wisdom, the investigation-of-states enlightenment factor, the path factor of right view in one whose mind is noble...”

69 SN 22.43 and DN 16

“And what is right speech that is noble...? The desisting from the four kinds of verbal misconduct, the abstaining, refraining, abstinence from them in one whose mind is noble..”

Certain specific qualities are defined as right view and right speech, but in addition, there is the idea that *their arising in the mind of a stream-enterer* is what makes them path factors that will lead to Awakening.

This gives tremendous confidence and relief to the stream-enterer when first taken in deeply. This is what it means to be “bound for deliverance” – having entered the stream, the heart cannot fail to fully awaken. It also harks back to the prior comment that practice becomes highly individualized after stream entry. The mind-body system is functioning differently: It now generates the views, intentions, effort, etc., that will carry it to full Awakening, whatever those are for that system (i.e., person).

There are two other implications to be taken in deeply. First is the need for vigilance. As noted in MN 1 and many other suttas (and direct experience), the mind of a stream-enterer is not always in a wholesome state. It is still capable of falling into habitual patterns of reactivity; it has not released all the fetters; and it still contains ignorance, places where it does not know it is clinging or does not know to what it is clinging. The path is now one of watching carefully for these places of remaining clinging and ignorance and working to reduce their strength and breadth (a process also called “effacement”).⁷⁰ One should not assume, for example, that *any* arisen intention is appropriate, but only those coming from the current of freedom running within the

70 MN 8

totality of life experience. On the other hand, those intentions that are noble can definitely be trusted as steps on the path.

A second implication is that we must each find our own path. There is no formula. This book has endeavored to offer some specifics and guidelines gathered from the wisdom of the long line of practitioners who have walked the path before us. But nonetheless, finding it our turn to walk, we find the field quite open. We see that the practices in which we have been training have prepared us to rest calmly in openness, sensitive to what arises. And this abiding is exactly what is required to walk the Noble Path.

The path is becoming internalized. The suttas include a number of images that support this understanding. The most common one, used throughout this book, is that of the stream or current. The task is to sense this special flow within the full breadth of experience, for the water in the current is the part that will flow to the ocean – the rest gets caught in eddies that go nowhere. Another image is that of a growing plant – in one sutta, a “medicinal plant” that benefits others.⁷¹ In terms of experience, perhaps the practitioner is invited to explore how practice feels like being inside a growing plant, expanding forth, responsive to and moving toward the light.

A more intriguing classical image is that of a nāga. Nāgas are powerful mythical beings used as symbols of Awakening.⁷² In SN 46.1, the cultivation of the seven factors of awakening – leading to “greatness and expansiveness of wholesome states” – is likened to a nāga growing larger in a succession of bodies of water until it enters the ocean, where it “achieves greatness and expansiveness

71 AN 4.44. The plant image is complicated a bit by the use of the same category of image (seed, plant, fruit) to refer to the ongoing process of ripening karma or the establishment of consciousness, which are not images for freedom.

72 See, for example, MN 23.

of body.” Far from disappearing when “not-self” is discovered, this image suggests tremendous growth. Liberated from a small sense of a separate self, practice can unfold through the expansion of non-separation, the dissolving of inner and outer.

Modern teachers also have given many images. Here are just a few:

- Climbing the ladder of a slide, then sliding down: Some effort is made, and when it culminates, we let go into a natural, effortless flow. Perhaps at that point, a new ladder appears until there is a final slide into the ocean.
- Sea turtle: Turtles can navigate by detecting a magnetic field. Common turtles just follow the magnetic field of the Earth, which is analogized to people just following the flow of *kamma*. With stream entry, we discover a magnetic field in our own heart, and following it will lead out of dependence on magnetic fields. This image encompasses the need for vigilance, as we must know whether the “pull” we feel is from karma or from the path.
- Shooting an arrow: Seeing an open vista before us, we shoot an arrow (representing aspiration) and then follow it. We find it stuck into a wall. We make some effort to pull out the arrow and climb the wall, upon which a whole new vista opens. We again shoot our arrow. At some point, one imagines that the arrow does not land, or perhaps that it dissolves and there is nothing to shoot.

A few notes about these images. Many are nature-based. The Dhamma expresses nature, and Dhamma practice aligns the practitioner with natural law. Not merely the laws of science

(although these are included in Dhamma), but the laws that include the mind.

Many of these images have a step-like quality of flow alternating with effort. Sometimes the mind can flow along unimpeded, effectively abiding in freedom, but sometimes there is still work to do in the remaining places of clinging and ignorance. There will still be obstacles that require effort and practice, and then these will be overcome, opening a new degree of freedom. The trainee has the confidence that this will always occur, and no hesitation (no doubt) about stepping into any practice that might be required by a situation.

Also, these are quite visceral images that can be felt in the body. They are not abstract or philosophical declarations of “truth” or “peace” dissociated from the living of life. Stream-enterers have some personal, intimate experience of freedom from which they live,⁷³ and are learning to let it pervade all aspects of life.

Different people will find different ways to engage a teacher (recall MN 141, with Moggallāna as the teacher for those who are trainees). At times, one’s Dhamma intuition may take the form of seeking outer guidance or instruction. Precisely because the process of awakening is impersonal, it is possible to benefit from practicing in ways that others have practiced before us, and a living master can assist greatly. Nonetheless, the teacher will never be someone whose views override one’s own intuition. For some stretches of the path, no human teacher is needed. Resources appear, doors open, and when they do not, there is patience, trust, and the willingness to just sit and listen. The effort made is just the right effort to stay within the current or complete the task that has appeared. Through this process, the path becomes ever clearer.

⁷³ One quality of the Dhamma is that it is *paccataṃ veditabbo viññūhi* – “to be experienced individually by the wise.”

Modern practitioners have access to many strands of Buddhism, many teachers, many ways to practice. There is room for creativity in finding ways to uproot the remaining fetters, develop and strengthen the required qualities, or otherwise continue to progress along the path until the final letting-go into Nibbāna. Of course, it is not the creativity of the person practicing, but the creativity of the Dhamma in finding ways to flow all the way to ocean. We slowly release our preference for how the path “should” look, choosing to follow this flow. There is *dukkha* and the cessation of *dukkha*; that is all. We no longer think in terms of “my path” or even “the path,” but simply “a path” – the one being unfolded here.

For stream-enterers who are laypeople, a wide range of lifestyles is seen. Some have a family, while others do not. Some are drawn to enter society, serving others through healing, social action, or leadership. Some model skillful detachment from the world, living as contemplatives or scholars. Some express the Dhamma through art. Some are asked to teach.

However, despite this overall variety, for a given trainee, it does not feel like a plethora of options. The path goes in certain directions and not others. This kind of freedom is not about preference. As lifestyle, path, practice, and person gradually merge, a unique expression of the Dhamma comes forth, “like the moon set free from a cloud.”⁷⁴

Buddhism in the West is still young. But it is surely interesting that a significant number of practitioners here have reached the stage of trainee and are steadily deepening the presence of Buddhist teachings in this culture. It is hoped that this book provides some useful inspiration for those engaged in Dhamma practice, and that it brings benefit to many beings.

74 Dhp 172-173



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