

Three Stages of Development

All the teachings of the Buddha can be summed up in one verse which embodies the three stages on the grand path that leads to NibbĀna:

To refrain from all evil,
To do what is good,
To purify the mind,
This is the teaching of the Buddhas.

There are three stages of development for a Buddhist – morality is the first stage, concentration the second, and wisdom the third. The eight steps of the Eightfold Path are classified under these three stages. Morality includes right speech, right action, and right livelihood; concentration includes right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration; and wisdom includes right understanding, and right thought (which are the first two steps in the Eightfold Path). Although wisdom is in one sense the beginning of the Eightfold Path, in a more important sense it is the outcome.

There are three stages of development because there are three stages of defilement which must be overcome. In the first stage, defilements are not manifest in words or deeds, but lie latent in each being. In the second stage they come up from the latent state to the level of thoughts, emotions, and feelings when they are awakened by an object, pleasant or unpleasant. In the third stage they become fierce and ungovernable and produce evil actions.

The three stages of development dispel the three stages of defilement. Morality can dispel only the defilements of evil actions, but leaves untouched the defilements of the two lower levels, so they could rise again. Therefore, morality is called the temporary putting away of defilements. Concentration can dispel only the second defilements of thoughts, emotions, and feelings. It can be effective for a considerable time, for it is more powerful than morality; but since the defilements which are latent are not dispelled, the defilements of the second level could arise again. Therefore the putting away by concentration is called the putting away to a distance.

The defilements of the first level, the latent defilements, are dispelled by wisdom, by insight. They are untouched by morality or concentration, but when dispelled through insight will never arise again. Getting rid of them by wisdom is like cutting a tree by the root; therefore, the putting away by insight is called the cutting away.

Since the three stages of development are interdependent and interrelated, they should be practiced at the same time. For example, when living a moral life, it is easier to have right concentration and right understanding. The practice of right concentration helps one to live rightly and to understand things rightly; and in the same way, the practice of right understand-

ing helps one to live rightly and to concentrate rightly. On the other hand, they cannot be practiced separately, for it is impossible to live a moral life without concentration — which mind control — and without right understanding; in the same way, concentration and wisdom always require the other two stages.

The first of the rules of discipline (morality) prescribed for the lay disciples are the Five Precepts: not to kill, not steal, not to commit any sexual misconduct, not to lie, and not to take any intoxicating liquor or drugs. These are not the Buddha's commandments, which it would be considered a sin to break. They represent the preliminary ideals of a virtuous life which a man will accept wholeheartedly if he is to call himself a Buddhist. He does not make a promise to the Buddha to obey the precepts; he gives the promise to himself. The pledge is phrased, "I accept the precept to refrain from taking life."

Each man who repeats the precepts puts himself on his honor to do his best not to break them. And if he breaks them the only repentance which is constructive is to make the pledge to himself again as many times as is necessary, day after day, month after month, year after year, until he wins the struggle against his lower nature. A man must win the goal of purity and nobility by himself. Neither the Buddha, nor angels, nor any god can bring a man to deliverance. The practice of the moral life is the very core and essence of Buddhism. A person of right understanding who realizes the law of cause and effect may accept the precepts and then go on a step further and cultivate sense restraint, since he realizes that overindulgence in sensual pleasures is a hindrance to moral and spiritual progress.

The spiritual man who has learned to practice morality and master his senses is inclined to move to the second stage on the path to Nibbāna, the stage of control and culture of the mind which brings a higher and more lasting happiness through concentration. This higher happiness can be attained through Jhānas (*dhyānas* in Sanskrit). The word Jhāna comes from a root which may mean "to think closely of an object," or "to burn adverse things which hinder spiritual progress." It has been translated as trance, absorption, or ecstasy, but it is best thought of as a special, extramundane experience.

The spiritual man who seeks the second stage of development selects one of the recommended objects of concentration which appeals to his temperament and concentrates on it for days, weeks, months, or years until he is able to visualize it without difficulty. When he can visualize it without looking at it, he continues concentration on it until he develops it into a conceptualized object, at which stage he has attained proximate concentration. At that point, he can overcome temporarily the five hindrances of sensual desires, hatred, sloth, restlessness and worry, and doubts. By continuing in the discipline of concentration he eventually attains the five stages of jhāna and easily develops the five supernormal powers: celestial eye, celestial ear, remembrance of past births, reading thoughts of others, and various psychic powers.

The mind of the spiritual man who has reached such high levels of experience through the jhĒnas is highly refined; yet that man is not entirely free from evil tendencies because concentration can only overcome temporarily the evil tendencies of the second stage of defilements. Since the evil tendencies of the first stage — the latent defilements — still remain untouched, the defilements of the second stage — the thoughts, emotions, and feelings aroused by sense objects — would arise again.

Morality makes a man gentle in his words and deeds; concentration controls the mind and makes him calm, serene, and steady; and wisdom enables him to overcome all the defilements completely.

The spiritual man who has reached the third stage on the path to NibbĒna, the stage of wisdom or insight, tries to understand the real nature of his self and of the things of the world in general. With his highly purified mind he begins to realize that there is no ego-principle or persistent identity of a self or substratum in either internal or external phenomena. He perceives that both mind and matter, which make up his personality, are in a state of constant flux; he sees that all conditioned things are impermanent (*anicca*), subject to suffering (*dukkha*), and void of self-existence (*anatta*). To him then comes the knowledge that every form of worldly pleasure is only a prelude to pain and that everything is in a state of flux and cannot be the source of real, permanent happiness.

The aspirant then concentrates on the three characteristics of existence — impermanence, suffering, and non-ego. Having neither attachment nor aversion for worldly things, he intently keeps on developing insight into both internal and external phenomena until he eliminates the three fetters of self-illusion, doubts, and clinging to vain rites and rituals. It is only when he destroys these three fetters completely that he realizes NibbĒna, for the first time in his existence. At this stage he is called one who has entered the stream that leads to NibbĒna, for just as a stream flows inevitably toward the ocean, so the aspirant will with certainty attain his final enlightenment. But because he has not eradicated the remaining seven fetters, he may be reborn as many as seven times.

When the aspirant has developed deeper insight and weakened the next two fetters — sensual craving and ill will — he becomes a Once-returner because if he does not obtain final release in this present life he will be reborn in the world of desires only once. When those two fetters are completely discarded, the aspirant becomes a Non-returner, one who will not be reborn in this world or any of the realms of sense pleasures, but if he does not attain this final Enlightenment in this life he will be reborn in one of the higher, suitable planes and pass from there to NibbĒna.

The fourth stage is that of Arahant, the perfected saint who completely annihilates the remaining five fetters of craving for existence in the world of form, craving for existence in the immaterial world, pride or conceit, restlessness and ignorance. He then realizes that rebirth is exhausted, the Holy Life is fulfilled and what was to be done has been done. This is the highest, holiest peace and end of greed, hatred, and delusion. The Arahant stands on heights more than celestial, realizing the unutterable bliss of NibbĒna. There is nothing in him to cause

him to be born again, or grow old again, or die again. There is nothing more for him to do, for he has shown that man can follow the Path of the Buddha to NibbĒna.

NibbĒna

NibbĒna is the result of the cessation of craving, of selfish desires. It may also be defined as the extinction of lust, hatred, and innocence. The PĒĀi word NibbĒna is formed of *ni* and *vana*. *Ni* is a negative particle and *vana* means craving or selfish desire. NibbĒna therefore literally means the absence of craving. The Sanskrit word Nirvana comes from the root *va* which means to blow, and the prefix *nir* which means off or out. Hence, Nirvana in its Sanskrit form means "the blowing out." It is understood to mean the blowing out of the flame of personal desire.

The predominance of the negative explanation of NibbĒna resulted in the mistaken notion that it is "nothingness" or "annihilation." However, in the Pitakas we find many positive definitions of NibbĒna, such as Highest Refuge, Safety, Unique, absolute Purity, Supramundane, Security, Emancipation, Peace and the like. NibbĒna is therefore not a negative concept because it is the cessation of craving, a "blowing out of desires leaves a man free. NibbĒna is freedom, but not freedom from circumstances; it is freedom from the bonds with which we have bound ourselves to circumstances. That man is free who is strong enough to say, "Whatever comes I accept as best."

Freedom does not mean that one can do everything that can be imagined, that one can defeat a lion with a slap of the hand. Freedom to do anything we wish is not freedom, for that means a return to the bondage of our wishes, our desires. Freedom means that one cannot be made a slave to anyone or anything, because one is free from personal desire, free from resentment, anger, pride, fear, impatience— free from all craving. Such a man's binding emotions have been blown out like so many candles. That man is free here on earth. He has reached NibbĒna in this world.

How to dispel ill will

In the commentary there are six ways meditators can practice to abandon ill will.

1. The first to learn is "taking up loving kindness meditation," sending out thoughts of love, thoughts of good will, toward all beings.
2. The second is to "practice loving kindness meditation" until you reach the Jhāna stage. When meditators reach the state of Jhāna, they will be able to abandon ill will.
3. The third is to reflect on "kamma as your own property." To reflect on your kamma as your own property is important for many reasons. When you are angry, you can say to yourself, "Who am I angry with?" You are reborn on this earth as result of the kamma you have accumulated in the past. You will also be reborn hereafter, according to the kamma you accumulate in this life. So beings are born and die according to their kamma and since it is according to their kamma that beings are reborn and die, there is no reason for you to be angry with anybody. A person who is angry is like a person who wants to strike somebody else. Such persons want to take up a red-hot iron to strike or pick up filth to throw at somebody else. But they hurt themselves first, before they can harm somebody else. So meditators should reflect on their own kamma as being their responsibility. We all shape our own life according to our own kamma.
4. The fourth way is "extensive contemplation on good things about mettā and bad things about ill will." This means trying to see the advantages of loving kindness and the disadvantages of anger, ill will, and hatred. By recognizing what is good and seeing the advantages of loving kindness as well as the disadvantages of ill will, meditators will be able to abandon hatred, ill will, and anger.
5. The fifth way is "having a good friend," a *kalyāṇa mitra*. A good friend is always a condition or cause for abandoning *akusala* thoughts which, in this case, are ill will. People who are full of love can influence other people to be full of love, too. So when you associate with a friend, with a person that has abundant loving kindness, then you will be able to abandon ill will and anger, taking the friend as example.
6. The sixth way is "suitable talk," talk about loving kindness meditation, talk about the advantages of loving kindness and the disadvantages of ill will. This will help to abandon ill will.