**SELF-STATE LIBERATION**

When I let go of “This is who I am”

There is the opportunity to become

“Who I might be”—Lao-Tsu

During previous talks, I have used the term *self-state integration*. To understand the term more fully, let me describe what Western psychology differentiates regarding a *state* and a *trait*. Generally speaking, a *state* represents a transient, circumstantial state of mind, which can involve particular thoughts and moods. A *trait* represents a consistently operating series of states which often are describing a person’s character or personality. Another way to describe this difference would be that a *state* can be somewhat unique to a situation; to the extent that a state might recur in a more or less similar series of situations could be considered the manifestation of a *trait*. A person might experience a *state* of situational anxiety when confronted with a specific stressful experience; when this sort of anxiety occurs frequently or predictably in a variety of experiences that might not be particularly stressful, this could be termed *trait* anxiety.

Buddhist concepts address this differentiation with some useful clarity. A moment of *selfing* is equivalent to a *state*, while the misperception of a sequence of states as a *trait* represents one of the characteristic causes of dukkha, i.e., clinging to the *trait* phenomena as an enduring, substantial self.

The first stage of liberation from dukkha requires a clear awareness that the sequence of self-states represents a series of circumstantial phenomena. This awareness is characterized as *namarupa*, with *nama* representing the mind’s momentary, fabricated interpretation of the stimulus that *rupa* presents—a *state*. Rupa is sensory stimulation, that is, light and seeing, sound and hearing, etc. The fulfillment of the realization of the process of namarupa is called *the insight into arising and passing away* and involves the immediate awareness of the moment-by-moment formation and dissolution of the self-states. *This realization diminishes the tendency to misperceive that which is impermanent as permanent, and it is the doorway to liberation.*

An important quality of mind to be cultivated to liberate the namarupa process is the elimination of internal self-state conflicts or contradictions. For example, the ability to experience directly the body-mind process of anxiety as simple the manifestation of a natural phenomenon, without attributing it to “my anxiety”. Additionally, there is a clear awareness that the internal narrative associated with the feeling of anxiety is fabricated from prior, somewhat similar experiences. This narrative may be beneficial when it is organized around the intention to be kind, which might include compassion, generosity, tolerance and patience. The cultivation of clear awareness and benevolent intention fosters this insightful process.

There’s a story that Jack Kornfield relates in one of his books about a trip he made with his teacher, Achaan Chah, through the mountains of Thailand. The road was narrow, with steep drops and blind corners. The driver was apparently quite reckless, and Jack became very frightened. Jack felt ashamed that his fear would prove that he wasn’t as spiritual as he could be, and he wondered what was going on for Achaan Chah, who also looked quite frightened. At the end of the journey, as they watched the driver leave, Achaan Chah commented “That was quite interesting, wasn’t it!?” Achaan Chah was mindful of the fear the circumstance generated, but regarded it as something to investigate, to *not make into a self*. It was a situationally appropriate *state* rather than a *trait*.

Another story involved Achaan Chah, this time with another Western monk, Achaan Sumedho, when Sumedho was quite young. A group of nursing students visited their monastery, and some of them were attractive. After they left, Achaan Chah asked Sumedho what his reaction was, and his reply was “Like, but don’t want!”

Self-state conflict occurs when there is a disconnect between the “ideal self”, that is, the way we should be, and what actually happens. In the first case, the ideal self wouldn’t experience fear, and in the second, the ideal self wouldn’t be attracted. In both cases, the practice is to notice what the mind is making of what the eye sees and not feed the emerging self-state that would be identified with not being fearful or experiencing lust.

How does the practice of mindfulness of breathing support this realization? There is a core concept of Buddhism that shows how this works. The term referred to is *paticca samuppada*, typically translated as *dependent origination*. I prefer the term *contingent provisional emergence* as a more accurate and useful understanding of the process (Googling *contingent provisional emergence* will take you to the notes I prepared for that talk, presented some time ago.) The Buddha said that anyone who truly understands paticca samuppada will experience liberation.

The process describes 12 links in a chain, which suggests one link leads to another, which is a misrepresentation of how it operates. The process is nonlinear, that is, all the links are interactive with each other, and their mutual, highly complex operations produce an ongoing series of “selfing moments” that blend imperceptibly with one another, producing the experience of an ongoing, “solid” self. Here is an excerpt from the notes I prepared on this topic:

The word *contingent* means that two events are mutually dependent and mutually influential upon each other. In the sense I intend here, a moment of experience is mutually interdependent with other co-occurring factors. The logic of contingency is as follows: if A occurs, B occurs; if A doesn’t occur, B doesn’t occur. In the incredible complexity of life, the number of contingent variables far exceeds the number of letters in the alphabet! This variability in this case is related to the 12 different “links” of paticcasamuppada, in that they are all mutually interactive with each other.

The term *provisional* in this context means that because one condition exists in a certain way, the accompanying condition is influenced in its emergence, that is, the emerging nature of A provides an influence on the co-occurring B, and vice-versa. For example, a man, A, would respond to a woman, B, differently than if B was a man. The response of A to B, whether B was male or female, would also be influenced by the context of the encounter, for example, in a workplace setting rather than a social context.

The word *contingent* describes the existence or non-existence of conditions A or B, while *provisional* describes the nature of conditions regarding A or B. In the paticcasamuppada concept, the conditions of A and B are constantly changing, in a process that constantly fluctuates, more or less rapidly. Sometimes it is termed as codependent or interdependent origination. I have substituted the word *provisional* to emphasize the conditionality of the process, as well as the transformational possibilities implied by the term. The co-occurring, mutually influential 12 links of provisional emergence *provide* a karmic outcome, which could be the emergence of a wholesome, unwholesome, or neutral moment of experience. Contingency implies the Buddhist view of non-self, that is, that a moment of self-awareness can’t be truly independent; rather, that moment is inherently contextual rather than created by an ongoing self.

The term *emergence* is used to avoid the potential for misunderstanding that occurs with the word *origination*, which implies an origin or beginning. Buddhism doesn’t consider first causes, because the emphasis is on modifying the constantly changing states of mind that constitute a self, rather than the origins of life. Also, the word origination implies a singular cause in the sequence of events, which isn’t really possible, considering the inconceivably complex nature of life!

Another consideration related to *emergence* relates to 20th century physics—complexity theory. Very simply stated, it is the incredible complexity of the physical environment, interacting with the incredible complexity of human psychological functions. Emergence is the term used to describe the dynamic, ever-changing interactional process as a moment of “structural coherence” emerges into awareness. I recall an article I read in a magazine back in the 1980’s *Omni* magazine on complexity theory. One phrase stayed with me: *Bounded chaotic mixing produces strange stability.* *Bounded chaotic mixing* is the interaction between the natural world and the mind. *Strange stability* is the moment of “selfing”. The word “*produces*” is the function of emergence.

How is this concept related to “The Selfing Story”? Buddhist psychology conceives of self state organization as the Five Aggregates, that is, *form, feeling, perception, fabrication and the mind that reflects them*. Here is another excerpt from the notes on contingent provisional emergence I prepared some time ago:

"The form of what has thus come into being is gathered under the form clinging-aggregate. The feeling of what has thus come into being is gathered under the feeling clinging-aggregate. The perception of what has thus come into being is gathered under the perception clinging-aggregate. The fabrications of what has thus come into being are gathered under the fabrication clinging-aggregate. The consciousness of what has thus come into being is gathered under the consciousness clinging-aggregate. One discerns, 'This, it seems, is how there is the gathering, meeting, & convergence of these five clinging-aggregates. Now, the Blessed One has said, "Whoever sees dependent co-arising sees the Dhamma; whoever sees the Dhamma sees dependent co-arising." And these things — the five clinging-aggregates — are dependently co-arisen. Any desire, embracing, grasping, & holding-on to these five clinging-aggregates is the origination of stress. Any subduing of desire & passion, any abandoning of desire & passion for these five clinging-aggregates is the cessation of stress.' And even to this extent, friends, the monk has accomplished a great deal." Majjhima Nikaya # 28, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi

The key to understanding experientially how this works is to focus on the transition from feelings and perceptions into the fabrication process. Fabrication occurs when sensory input is associated with prior experience, creating a meaningful, ongoing rendering, out of which a sense of self emerges. With enough training in mindfulness of breathing meditation, it becomes possible to be immediately, clearly aware of the momentary transitions as this meaning-making process transforms the data input into a self-state. It can be experienced as a flickering effect on inner awareness, sort of like being in a dark room with a rapidly flashing strobe light. Another experience could be the sense that all the fabrications that emerge into awareness are dreamlike, transparent, with a diminished attachment to perceiving the resulting sequence of self-states as convincing manifestations of reality. Instead, the awareness recognizes the provisional and transient quality of what is experienced.

**THE PROGRESSIONS OF INSIGHT AWARENESS**

In the Theravada Buddhist tradition, there are various stages representing progress towards liberation from craving and clinging. There are many commentaries on this process; these notes represent a summary. Some of the insights I’ve personally experienced; I’ve heard about or read accounts describing those I haven’t experienced. The preliminary insights focus on the ability to establish and maintain steadfast mindfulness. These comments pick up at the stage of differentiating the difference between physical experience (rupa) and what the mind makes of the experience (nama).

**NAMARUPA:** This insight involves direct realization that mind and the senses are separate processes operating in conjunction but not necessarily reliably adaptive to current circumstances. The eyes are stimulated by a certain visual pattern; it’s just light in a variety of shades and configurations—the mind conjures up the assumption “It’s a snake!”, while further processing reveals that it’s just a piece of rope.

**UNDERSTANDING THE LAW OF CAUSE AND EFFECT:** This insight reveals through direct awareness the power of intention. An intention organizes the various conditioning functions of the mind towards a conclusion. When the organizing function is distorted by craving and clinging, distress and confusion (dukkha) manifests. When the organizing function of intention is generated by clear awareness and benevolent intention, liberation from dukkha is manifested.

**CLARIFICATION OF THE TRUE PATH TO LIBERATION:** This insight follows on the insight regarding cause and effect. As the energy of intention is freed up, extraordinary awareness emerges—these momentary, often pleasurable experiences are called the *corruptions of insight*. There may be too much exhilaration, or too much detachment. The mind can become enchanted by vivid inner processes that produce luminous mindsets, beautiful sounds, strongly pleasant body sensations. At this point, breath awareness and ongoing investigation are necessary to further the process towards liberation.

**INSIGHTS INTO THE DISSOLUTION OF SELF STATE ORGANIZATIONS:** At this stage, a series of insights reveal the reality of impermanence and the absence of an enduring, controlling self. There can be clear awareness of the rapidly arising and passing away of thoughts and images, much like what happens when watching something move in a dark room with a strobe light.

There are flashes of momentary sensations and thoughts that are fragmented and somewhat chaotic. The ability to make sense of what happens is significantly disintegrated, that is, *the integrative capacity of the self-organizing functions can’t get traction, as if slipping and sliding on ice*.

This realization is accompanied by a sense of revulsion, even panic, with direct awareness that craving and clinging as a process is unreliable and completely untrustworthy—there is no inner guide or organizer in charge of reality! Confidence in the benefits of the Path can dissolve, as it can seem that life is meaningless. At this point, faith, and the support of a well-informed guide can be of crucial importance.

When mindfulness of breathing and investigation of mental phenomena is still practiced diligently, the futility of craving and clinging to the belief that there is a permanent, controlling self becomes very evident, and there is a total release from craving and clinging. This awareness is called stream entry and is direct insight into impermanence and the absence of a separate, autonomous self. The totality of interdependence is realized with insight into the immense complexity and mutuality of existence—in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, this might be rendered as God-consciousness—“Love your neighbor as yourself”, “I and my father are one”, and “Inshallah, as God wills it to be”.

After this extraordinary release from normal human reality, the Four Noble Truths are confirmed, and there is utter conviction that the Eightfold Path is valid, particularly as regards the value of Right Understanding, Right Intention and the manifestation of virtue: Right Speech, Action and Livelihood.

**REVISITING THE EIGHTFOLD PATH**

The eightfold path has, of course, eight elements, divided into three categories: wisdom, virtue, and mental training. When the practices presented in the eightfold path are sufficiently mature, the category of wisdom is “revisited”, that is, what was originally understood conceptually is actually realized. What is conceptually called Right Understanding is now termed “Right Knowledge” (I prefer the term “Clear Awareness”). What is conceptually called Right Intention (I prefer the term “Benevolent Intention”) is now called “Right Release”. Here’s what Gil Fronsdal has to say about these realizations:

“…As a continuation of the Eightfold Path, Right Knowledge is knowing firsthand the benefits experienced through living the path and the suffering experienced when we don’t live the path. The benefits include greater peace, compassion, well-being, integrity, and spiritual freedom. The suffering includes agitation, fear, conceit, greed, and hostility. The more strongly we experience the benefits, the more clearly we see the differences between being attached and being free, having ill will and having goodwill, having ethical integrity and not having integrity. As we begin to make different choices, the contracted and agitated states of clinging begin to lose their appeal and power over us and we learn that they are neither hardwired nor necessary. As we see and experience healthy alternatives, these painful states begin to diminish in strength and frequency.

“…Right Knowledge also includes recognizing that letting go of clinging is reliable and trustworthy. It is not something we need to fear, even if what we are releasing is our most precious and tenacious attachments to self. Freedom from clinging doesn’t diminish us. Rather, it leads to some of the healthiest and most beneficial states of mind humans can experience.

Through the mindfulness and concentration factors of the Eightfold Path, Right Knowledge shows us how all our perceptions and conceptions are constantly in flux. With their fleeting appearance and disappearance, they are not stable and thus cannot provide the fullest experience of peace. They cannot be the basis for a liberated mind. Instead, the basis for liberation is release.

“…Right Knowledge sets the stage for Right Release by helping the mind relax and appreciate the process of letting go. Knowing the tangible suffering of clinging brings a disinclination to cling. Knowing the peace and well-being of non-clinging teaches that letting go of clinging is letting go into peace.

Right Release differs from ordinary letting go by being more impactful and lasting. It is a ceasing of clinging so clear that Right Knowledge then becomes a knowing that is always available to us. Just as one is no longer fooled by a magic trick after being shown how it is performed, so we begin to see through the tricks of the mind as we release ourselves from clinging.

For most people Right Release includes a gradual process of becoming free in more and more areas of their life. The Buddha described these areas in terms of beliefs, biological drives, and subtle mental tendencies.

Because freedom does not come from beliefs, Buddhism is particularly sensitive to the problems of holding on to beliefs, interpretations, and stories. An important part of living the Eightfold Path is loosening the grip on our views, including views about ourselves. A significant experience of release shows us that we don’t need to be defined by any self-concept or identity.

More tenacious than clinging to beliefs is the clinging that stems from the biological drives of sensual desire and hostility. Even when we know that such clinging causes suffering, it can be difficult to let go. Even the wisest people can easily succumb to it. This is where practicing the Eightfold Path is especially important. It provides a satisfying sense of well-being that is an effective alternative to desire or anger. Our strong biological drives can relax and fade away when we are experiencing something better…” Downloaded from: [*http://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/books-articles/articles/from-the-eightfold-path-to-the-tenfold-path/*](http://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/books-articles/articles/from-the-eightfold-path-to-the-tenfold-path/) *10/15/14*