Growing From Self-State Integration to Self-Liberation

We all hope for a fuller development of our humanity. For most humans, this is realized as financial, professional and social success. It is measured by whatever standards are prevalent in a particular culture during a particular historical period. Our culture sets an idealized standard that we strive for, and we become distressed and confused when the standard isn’t realized. There is the ideal male—strong, in charge, sexually potent, socially and professionally powerful and admired. The ideal female is attractive, capable, socially popular, nurturing, a good parent, cooperative and suitably mated to a successful male. We live in times that challenge these ideals, perhaps because we don’t live up to the ideals or the ideals have changed during our lifetimes. Contemporary American culture, as diverse as it is, is changing at perhaps the most rapid pace in human history. We are better informed as to what these standards are due to the wide extent of media exposure, and some of that exposure plays on the stresses of these changes produce to their commercial or political advantage.

I have been a psychotherapist for over 35 years, but I have been a practicing Buddhist for a little over 40 years. My orientation as a mental health professional is strongly influenced by the benefits suggested by the Four Noble Truths, as a way to more effectively cope with these stresses as well as a way to cultivate a more spiritual approach to life. I see a person’s encounter with dukkha (dew-kah), suffering, as the distress and confusion we encounter during contemporary life—a motivation towards Awakening.

The process of Awakening is ongoing, during which the transitions from one self-organization to another evolves from recurring internal conflicts through a phase of self-state integration and on to self-state liberation. What I want to accomplish with these notes is to explore what happens as the process of awakening unfolds, using the development of the Four Noble Truths as the supportive practice for cultivating awakening.

First, here is my current thinking about what it means to awaken. In our current culture, the term “enlightenment” is typically used to describe the liberative process that the historical Buddha realized and taught. It is meant to be the translation for *nibbana, (*Sanskrit *nirvana).* The term nibbana literally means that which remains when the flame of clinging and the heat of craving are extinguished. The Pali word for Awakening is bodhi (bow-dee), and I believe this is a more appropriate term. An excerpt from Wikipedia on the term “Buddhist Awakening” says:

“Robert S. Cohen notes that the majority of English books on Buddhism use the term "enlightenment" to translate the term *bodhi*. The root *budh*, from which both *bodhi* and *Buddha*, are derived, means "to wake up" or "to recover consciousness". Cohen notes that *bodhi* is not the result of an [*illumination*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illuminationism), but of a path of realization, or coming to understanding. The term "enlightenment" is event-oriented, whereas the term "awakening" is process-oriented. The western use of the term "enlighten" has Christian roots, as in Calvin's "It is God alone who enlightens our minds to perceive his truths". [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enlightenment\_in\_Buddhism downloaded 10/13/14](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enlightenment_in_Buddhism%20downloaded%2010/13/14)

The Four Noble Truths include:

 1) The direct awareness of dukkha, subjective distress, experienced as desire, fear, frustration, etc.

 2) The direct awareness of what’s emerging in consciousness, particularly the felt sense of like or dislike (called *affect approach* or *affect avoidance* in psychological jargon), and the degree to which the mind becomes “enchanted“ by clinging to the accompanying self-talk, through craving and clinging to the ideal self-state.

 3) The experience of becoming “disenchanted” with the affect and self-talk, which is the process of Awakening in its first manifestations.

 4) The ways and means that foster the process of Awakening, that is, Right Understanding, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

Direct awareness of dukkha means not avoiding honestly investigating the experience of distress and confusion. This is difficult to do in a culture that reinforces busyness and distraction. We are bombarded with thoroughly researched commercials and carefully constructed algorithms to excite the mind and body, either pleasantly or unpleasantly. It is so easy to be enticed and manipulated by such strategies that are developed to provide commercial, social, and political gains.

Direct awareness of what is emerging in consciousness is the goal of mindfulness meditation. My psychology background provides some mental conditions that clarify the unwholesome mental characteristics that can be confronted effectively. Psychotherapists encourage their clients to focus on their self-talk, using what are called schemas to clarify what is to be confronted and challenged with mindfulness, investigation of mental phenomena and the application of Right Effort.

Reviewing the seven awakening factors provides a way to understand how to intervene mindfully to reduce self-state conflict and increase self-state integration:

1) *Mindfulness*--Of the body, feelings/affect, conscious awareness, and mental phenomena/self-talk.

2) *Investigation of Mental Phenomena*--At this stage, aiming attention at what emerges into awareness and sustaining that awareness long enough for Right Effort to act.

3) *Energy--*Right Effort, that is, to notice and interrupt emerging unwholesome self-states--the five hindrances, or disabling beliefs about oneself or the world--at the verbal and behavioral karma levels, and to notice and foster emerging wholesome self-states at the verbal and behavioral karma levels.

4) *Joy*--At this level, a willingness to continue the practice diligently; as the process of awakening develops, this feeling becomes a heightened interest in investigating what emerges in awareness, whether pleasant or unpleasant.

5) *Tranquility*--At this level, tranquility is relatively weak and inconsistent and is likely to not be clearly in awareness or misperceived, resulting in sloth and torpor. Increasing the ability to investigate the sensation of breathing for longer periods without distraction increases tranquility as well as the next factor, concentration.

6) *Concentration*--The first goal of this level of the development of awakening is to interrupt the emergence of the influence of the hindrances and cultivate a stable flow of attention, that is, ongoing breath awareness.

7) *Equanimity--*At this level, the cultivation of patient persistence in practicing mindfulness of breathing *no matter how often attention is distracted away from mindfulness of breathing*.

What fosters this realization is the increasing investigation and renunciation of unwholesome conflicted self-states and development of wholesome self-states. There are different manifestations of self-states. There’s an idealized version, that is, *how things should be*, and this is normally contrasted with *what actually happens.* For example, an ideal self-state might be: “When I do the right thing, others will appreciate this and honor me for my accomplishment.” This view has several possible alternatives:

1. I don’t actually do the right thing, either because of lack of skill or misperceiving what the right thing is.
2. I do the right thing, but unexpected conditions prevent the right thing from achieving the intended outcome.
3. I do the right thing, but no one notices.
4. I do the right thing, but I’m criticized for doing the right thing (a problem that “whistle blower” employees encounter).

There are probably other outcomes that are also less than ideal. The point is the discrepancy between what the expected outcome is and what actually occurs and the resulting dissatisfaction with the discrepancy. This is what I call “self-state conflict”.

The application of the seven awakening factors plays a key role in reducing self-state conflict and the result is the flow of experience that I call “self-state integration”. *Self-state integration is the absence of any “friction” between self-states.* There’s still a preferred outcome, but it’s not idealized, and there’s no aggravation or despair when the outcome isn’t realized. Using the example above, the initial self-state might be “I will do the right thing because it is harmonious with wisdom and virtue.” This view also has several alternatives, but the stress of conflict between what is wise and virtuous is absent. This view also has several alternatives, but none of them produce stress:

1. I don’t actually do the right thing, due to lack of skill, but there’s a realization that the right thing is based on virtue rather than intended outcome. This is followed by research and practice to improve the requisite skills.
2. I do the right thing, and even though unexpected conditions prevent the intended outcome, I’m at peace through the virtuous intention.
3. I do the right thing, and it doesn’t matter whether anyone notices, because the peace and clarity that comes from benevolent intention is already satisfying.
4. I do the right thing, even if I’m criticized for it, but there’s enough equanimity that I don’t take the criticism personally.

Self-state integration involves the development from wholesome states of mind to wholesome traits within the process of selfing. 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.

Contemporary psychological research investigates the development from *state mindfulness* to *trait mindfulness* as an indicator of psychological and spiritual maturity. A book was recently written entitled “Altered Traits” that reviews the development of this research. It is authored by Richard Davidson and Daniel Goleman, two psychologists who met at Harvard in the 1960’s, which is when they began practicing Buddhist meditation; they represent the first generation of contemporary Buddhist scholars and have a strong influence on the synthesis of traditional Buddhist concepts and practices with contemporary neuroscience.

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 cultivation of self-state liberation involves the integration of trait mindfulness into one’s daily life routines.*

The first stage of liberation from dukkha requires a clear awareness that any sequence of self-states arising and disintegrating represents a series of circumstantial phenomena. This awareness is characterized as *namarupa* (nah-mah-roo-pah), 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 referencing to prior experience is renounced by focusing instead on the physical experience and denying the repetition of the anxiety-related narrative. Alternatively, a wholesome narrative is 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 in the body, 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!”

**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*