**Realizing the Noble Eightfold Path**

These notes refer to the final stanzas of the Satipatthana Sutta through a translation by Thanissaro:

"Furthermore, the monk remains focused on mental qualities in & of themselves with reference to the *four noble truths.* And how does he remain focused on mental qualities in & of themselves with reference to the four noble truths? There is the case where he discerns, as it has come to be, that 'This is stress.' He discerns, as it has come to be, that 'This is the origination of stress.' He discerns, as it has come to be, that 'This is the cessation of stress.' He discerns, as it has come to be, that 'This is the way leading to the cessation of stress.'

"In this way he remains focused internally on mental qualities in & of themselves, or externally on mental qualities in & of themselves, or both internally & externally on mental qualities in & of themselves. Or he remains focused on the phenomenon of origination with regard to mental qualities, on the phenomenon of passing away with regard to mental qualities, or on the phenomenon of origination & passing away with regard to mental qualities. Or his mindfulness that 'There are mental qualities' is maintained to the extent of knowledge & remembrance. And he remains independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on mental qualities in & of themselves with reference to the four noble truths...

"Now, if anyone would develop these four frames of reference in this way for seven years, one of two fruits can be expected for him: either gnosis right here & now, or — if there be any remnant of clinging/sustenance — non-return.

"Let alone seven years. If anyone would develop these four frames of reference in this way for six years... five... four... three... two years... one year... seven months... six months... five... four... three... two months... one month... half a month, one of two fruits can be expected for him: either gnosis right here & now, or — if there be any remnant of clinging/sustenance — non-return.

"Let alone half a month. If anyone would develop these four frames of reference in this way for seven days, one of two fruits can be expected for him: either gnosis right here & now, or — if there be any remnant of clinging/sustenance — non-return.

"'This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow & lamentation, for the disappearance of pain & distress, for the attainment of the right method, & for the realization of Unbinding — in other words, the four frames of reference.' Thus was it said, and in reference to this was it said."

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, the monks delighted in the Blessed One's words.

It is important to consider the context of this section in order to realize what the title of Analayo’s book suggests: “Satipatthana—The Direct Path to Realization”. This passage describes the fulfillment of this quest—*realization*, manifested in a radically different understanding of the Four Noble Truths. This direct knowledge comes about through the utmost co-operation of the Seven Awakening Factors, Mindfulness, Investigation of Mental Phenomena, Energy/Persistent Wholesome Effort, Joy/Engaged Interest, Tranquility, Concentration/Unification of the Awakening Factors, and Equanimity/Balanced Interactions of the Awakening Factors. Mindfulness, Investigation and Energy/Effort provide clarity and the wholesome channeling of attention, Joy and Tranquility are unified in their functioning by Concentration, and the entire operation is balanced by Equanimity.

The Four Foundations are not just understood conceptually but are “known” through direct experiential insights. The first foundation, *Mindfulness of the Body*, is organized around a penetrating and persistently *mindful investigation* of breath sensations. This training also involves clear awareness of any other experiential phenomena and a skillful redirecting of the *energy* of attention back to the breath sensations to create a *stable*, non-reactive quality of awareness. This non-reactive attention cultivates a detached, *Mindfulness of Feelings* (the second foundation), recognizing them as impersonal organic responses to stimuli. The third foundation, *Mindfulness of the Mind*, is fully known as an *equanimous* and *tranquilly* balanced quality of consciousness.

The resulting flow of attention reaches its ultimate potential for directly knowledge regarding the three characteristics of subjective experience—the transient nature of consciousness, the impersonal processes which constitute the experience of self-organization (the ego), and the distress and confusion which manifests as Dukkha (doo-kah), the instability and inherent dissatisfaction of life. This realization revisits the Four Noble Truths and fulfills the potential effect described by the concept of the Noble Eightfold Path, which, through diligent practice, matures into the Noble Tenfold Path--this direct knowledge is “ennobling”, a manifestation of the spiritual aspirations embedded in the human species. Here is this reformation as the Noble Tenfold Path:

1. The First Noble Truth: The fundamental experiential awareness of dukkha is investigated and understood, revealing the inherently unstable, uncertain, and ultimately uncontrollable emotional distress all humans know through the lens of a dispassionate and balanced awareness. The transient subjective and conditioned nature of the mind is revealed to be an impersonal phenomenon. All thoughts or concepts have been deconstructed, confirming the inherent instability and unreliability of the ego.
2. The Second Noble Truth: The dynamic process of becoming is clearly known as the manifestation of a fabricated self, emerging into awareness through the impersonal processes of craving and clinging, having been investigated with dispassionate and balanced awareness—this is observed without impulsive emotional reactivity—there’s an awareness that the potential for the emergent grasping process to get traction is present, but there is no urgency regarding reacting to or identifying with that phenomenon as a self.
3. As a result of this direct and nonreactive investigative attention, the Third Noble Truth is recognized at an extremely subtle and fundamental level, through the relinquishment of any dualistic delusional view that there is an enduring/autonomous self. This realization sets the conditions supportive of the experience of the non-dual nature of reality—any subject-object perspective is relinquished, and the unconditioned nature of reality becomes apparent, and Nirvana is realized.
4. This is accomplished the revelatory views and powerfully insightful skills described by the Noble Eightfold Path are realized. The Path has, of course, eight elements, divided into three categories: Wisdom, Virtue, and Mental Training. When these categorical investigations and developments are sufficiently mature, the category of Wisdom is “revisited”, that is, what was originally understood conceptually is directly realized. What is conceptually called *Right Understanding* is now termed *Right Knowledge*, an undeniable conviction that karma is real, and, as a result of mature insight, karmic conditioning operates only in a purified form—direct awareness that there is no separate, enduring self. What is conceptually called *Right Intention* is now called *Right Release*—total relinquishment of any need to defend or gratify any subjective experience previously misperceived as a self—within this realization there is no experiential bias towards greed or aversion, and this makes the characteristics of Virtue automatic, as all unvirtuous thoughts and actions become irrelevant.

The characteristics of *Virtue*--*Right Speech, Right Action*, and *Right Livelihood*--become a fundamental characteristic of personality as the ethical potential of the Path is realized. The temptation to act on any urge to manifest unwholesome speech drops away as the felt need to defend or gratify a belief in an enduring/autonomous self dissolves with entry into the Unconditioned experience. Any impulse towards actions that are harmful to oneself, others and the environment are also diminished as there is a direct realization of the interdependent nature of the world. These two realizations automatically manifest as a lifestyle that is socially and environmentally harmonious, guided by the total realization of how choices can either promote harm or well-being; the direct experience of the Unconditioned brings a quality of consciousness that fosters wholesomeness that wells up from deep within rather than being informed by societal norms guided by greed, aversion, or ignorance.

Regarding the concepts of *Right Effort, Right Mindfulness*, and *Right Concentration*, consciousness operates at a very high level of mental clarity and coherence, as described by the Seven Awakening Factors. The wholesome attributes of personality are unified and coordinated in their functioning—mindfulness becomes effortless.

Here’s what Gil Fronsdal has written 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*

The direct experience of Right Knowledge and Right Release provides an opening that has always been difficult to describe with words. A term often used is *sunnata* (soon-yah-tah), interpreted as *emptiness* or *voidness*. This translation seems to compare this state of mind to interstellar space, which is not useful. I find this quote from Shaila Catherine’s “Focused and Fearless”, p. 221, to be helpful, while still acknowledging the inadequacy of any terminology:

…“What is this meditation that is not dependent upon a meditation object and that is not defined by a posture, a perception, or a technique? What is meditation that is not limited by perception of physical or mental objects, not defined by the cultivation of spiritual factors, and not bound by space and time?

To understand it, we must consider meditation beyond the confines of disciplined practices that cultivate certain factors of mind. The Buddha’s teachings lead to an experience of emptiness and the realization of liberation from fixation, not bound to concepts and conventional perceptions. It is unborn, unchanging, unfabricated, and dimensionless. It cannot be characterized as a thing, a place, or a function. The experience of emptiness is revealed when grasping has ceased and when consciousness is not reaching toward perceptions to construct a sense of “I” in relationship to mental, physical, or environmental contacts. The cessation of these formations awakens such an unwavering state of pure rest, beyond all extremes and fabrications, that it may be referred to as abiding beyond all extremes and fabrications, that it may be referred to as abiding in voidness, resting in emptiness, or the realization of the deathless.”

It is possible that Shaila Catherine has experienced this, which Buddhism calls Nirvana (Nibbana in Pali). My assumption is based on a chapter in “Realizing Awakened Consciousness” by Richard Boyle. The book involves interviews with a number of experienced meditation practitioners who have experienced Nirvana, and she is one of those people. When I first began meditating, I believed that Nirvana had been experienced by a very few people in history, but now I believe that there are probably tens of thousands of individuals around the world who have experienced this remarkable phenomenon, whether identified as Buddhists or not.

Experiencing Nirvana has different connotations in different Buddhist traditions. The term itself is translated in various ways: as *the blowing out the flames of craving and clinging*, or as *a total unbinding of karmic actions*. My preference is *an experience that occurs when the fuel for craving and clinging has been extinguished.* A term that has historical relevance is Enlightenment, which began to be used when Europeans began to explore Southeast Asia during the Age of Enlightenment, which was related to the beginnings of rational and scientific inquiry in the 17th and 18th centuries. A more accurate terminology has emerged in this era—the word *bodhi* (bow-dee) represents the fulfillment of the Eightfold Path, that a Buddha has experienced Awakening; this is my preferred terminology, as the word describes the process of emerging from being asleep.

In the Theravadin view, there are four different experiences of the Unconditioned that occur sequentially:

1: Stream Entry, Sotapanna (so-tah-pah-nah) in Pali, is the direct realization that 1) There is no enduring autonomous self; 2) The validity of the Four Noble Truths is confirmed; 3) There is no need for rites and rituals, either former religious ones, or idiosyncratic personal and cultural customs and habits. This experience does not totally eradicate other impediments to full Awakening.

2: Once-Returner, Sakadagamin (sah-kah-dah-gah-mee) in Pali, involves the weakening of the three fetters experienced during Stream Entry, the first experience of Nirvana.

3: Non-Returner, Anagamin (ah-nah-gah-min) in Pali, is the eradication of any doubt regarding the potential for becoming an Arahant (ahr-hahnt), the fulfilment of Awakening. A Non-Returner is no longer affected by desire or aversion.

4: Fully Awakened, Arahant (ahr-hahnt) in Pali, represents the ultimate liberation from Samsara (sahm-sah-rah), the cycle of birth-death-rebirth. An Arahant has overcome any desire for rebirth in the material or heavenly realms, any conceit (a sense of privilege, entitlement, or dualism), restlessness of any sort in the mind, and ignorance regarding ultimate reality.

This sort of categorization regarding levels of Awakening are not explicitly described in the Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist traditions, although the goal of Awakening is primary to any Buddhist tradition. The dominant theme found in them is the Bodhisattva Vow (boh-dee-saht-vah), which is organized around the intention to realize Awakening, but not full Buddhahood, until all sentient beings have also experienced Awakening.

One of the ways I understand the practical difference between the Theravadin and Mahayana traditions is that Theravadin practices emphasize liberation through realization of anicca (ah-nee-chah), the impermanent nature of subjective experience, while the Mahayana practices emphasize realization of anatta (ah-nah-tah), the absence of an autonomous self. All Buddhist traditions acknowledge the three characteristics at their cores—anicca, dukkha and anatta.