Reviewing Wisdom on the Noble Eightfold Path

The Noble Eightfold Path is often considered to be the core teaching in all of the varieties of Buddhist traditions. It is the Fourth Noble Truth, the first three of which describe first, the universal human experience of dukkha, second, the process of craving and clinging, which is the cause of dukkha, and third, the conditions which manifest as liberation from dukkha. The Noble Eightfold Path, in Pali written as *ariya atthangika magga* (ahr-yah ah-than-gee-kah mah-gah), provides the conceptual and practical means for realizing the Third Noble Truth.

First, here is a different rendering of the Pali word *ariya*, which is traditionally translated as *noble*: Stephen Batchelor translates it as *ennobling*, which is more helpful for me. The Pali word is related to the Brahmin tribal term *Aryan*, which describes a particular nomadic tribal culture which immigrated into Northern India a few centuries before the time of the Buddha. When the Buddha was alive, the Aryans were considered to be noble by birth; his repurposing of the term ariya could have been intended to indicate that one who had realized the Third Noble Truth was ennobled by his or her effort, regardless of which their clan of birth might be, and this ennobling realization emerges from the principles and practices of the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Path is divided into three subsets, the first of which is the Wisdom aggregate, *panna* (pahn-yah) in Pali, which has two characteristics that are mutually dependent, like the two sides of a coin—*Samma Ditthi* (sah-mah dee-tee), translated as *Right Understanding* or *Right View*, and *Samma Sankappa* (sah-mah sahn-kah-pah), *Right Intention* or *Right Resolve*. The term panna can more practically be understood as *direct insight* or *undistorted comprehension* regarding how the selfing process operates when the principles and practices of the Path are realized—conscious awareness of the transitory nature of subjective experience. This insightful awareness is termed *anicca* (ah-nee-chah) in Pali. The ongoing “selfing” experience is created in an ongoing way from the residual impressions accumulated over the course of a lifetime, meaning there is no already existing, autonomous self—insight regarding this reality is termed *anatta* (ah-nah-tah), in Pali, usually translated as non-self. When these insights are not activated, the resulting experience manifests as dukkha, the First Noble Truth. Anicca, dukkha and anatta are considered to be an innate process that creates basic experience for all sentient beings.

The other two subsets of the Path are *Sila* (see-lah), the Virtue Aggregate, which has three elements, and *Bhavana* (bah-vah-nah), the Mental Discipline Aggregate, which also has three elements. These topics will be reviewed during future talks.

The following comments provide a more in-depth analysis of the Wisdom Aggregates:

*Samma Ditthi*: This function of Wisdom is traditionally translated as *Right Understanding*, meaning there is direct, clear and detached awareness of the three characteristics described above, anicca, dukkha and anatta. The term *Right* can also be understood as *Appropriate, Wholesome* or *Skillful*, while *Understanding* can alternatively be described as *View* or *Perspective*. Implicit in this concept is the law of Karma, that is, each succeeding moment of created self-state organization has consequences, either nurturing dukkha or liberation from dukkha. This understanding is revealed through mindful investigation of how self-experience is a “flow” state; the more deeply sensitive the investigative process is, the more ephemeral and “transparent” self-identity becomes. There are times during meditation when the internal commentary of “selfing” loses “solidity”, so that the narrative is incidental, that is, no more impactful or meaningful than other environmental phenomena, such as bird songs or other stimuli. The process we call ego is creating a sense of a self that seems to be observing and acting; if this is so, then the self that is being created is benefitted by the quality of ethics involved in that creative process. This leads to the considerations described by the “other side of the coin”, described next, which is:

*Samma Sankappa*: This function of Wisdom is traditionally translated as *Intention, Aspiration* or *Resolve*. The meaning of Sankappa is similar to the function of the Pali word *cetana* (chey-tah-nah), translated as *volition*, which organizes the various mental conditioning factors toward unified action in an ongoing way. In Buddhist psychology, cetana is a Universal mind conditioning factor, which means that it can be affected by either wholesome or unwholesome accompanying mind conditioning factors, while sankappa is always wholesome. The concept of Samma Sankappa was originally developed within a monastic community as the resolve to cultivate the Path to Awakening wholeheartedly, unaffected by the distractions of a householder’s responsibilities. In contemporary secular Buddhism, the concept is understood as a way as to put more emphasis on the Virtue Aggregate—Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood, supported by the integration of the Mental Discipline Aggregate functions, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration, within the constraints of the householder lifestyle.

The function of the Noble Eightfold Path in early monastic Buddhism was to provide the conditions that supported cultivation of extraordinary levels of concentration called *jhana* (jah-nah), as this was the Path through which Siddhattha (sih-dah-tah), who aspired to experience full Awakening to become the Buddha, realized the fulfillment of Wisdom. Over the centuries after the Buddha, the Path to Awakening became reorganized, putting more emphasis on vipassana (vih-pah-sah-nah), insight into the three characteristics, rather than on the cultivation of jhana states of consciousness, prior to the practice of vipassana.

The accumulated and coordinated insights provided by vipassana are called *panna* (pahn-yah). The insights revealed by vipassana are developed through the functions of Mindfulness, Investigation of Mental Phenomena and Right Effort. Right Mindfulness and Right Effort are functions of the Bhavana Aggregate of the Path and also involve careful investigation of the selfing process. These topics will be considered more thoroughly in future talks.

There are different levels of panna described in the commentaries:

* Learned *panna,* knowledge or wisdom that is acquired from books or listening to others.
* Reflective *panna*, knowledge or wisdom that is acquired from thought or logic and reasoning.
* *Panna* from spiritual development, knowledge or wisdom that is acquired from direct spiritual experience.

This progression parallels the development of *saddha* (sah-dah), *faith* or *confidence*, traditionally aligned with wholesome mind conditioning functions. First there is the confidence that originates with an inspiring book or dhamma talk—this level is shaky, as the person who wrote the book or gave the talk could be deceptive or mistaken; regardless, that kind of conceptual knowledge doesn’t effectively increase one’s ability to realize Awakening. The second level is more secure through internal cognitive research regarding the inspiring information, but it is still shaky, due to the levels of emotional distress and cognitive confusion that will distort any conceptual understanding. The third level is the most important, as the validity and effectiveness direct experiencing of the Wisdom is integrated into a person’s way of living, that is, Right Livelihood.

Shaila Catherine, in her book “Wisdom Wide and Deep”, on page 380, reviewing the commentary found in the Theravada Buddhist treatise, the “Visuddhimagga” (vih-soo-dih-mah-gah), translated as the “Path of Purification”, describes the conceptual understanding of panna:

Cause: penetrating things according to their intrinsic and ultimate nature

Function: to illuminate the object like a lamp makes objects visible; to abolish the darkness of delusion which conceals the individual essence of states

Manifestation: as clarity of perspective, lucid discernment, nonbewilderment, like a good guide in the forest

Proximal Cause: wise attention; concentration, because the Buddha said ”One who is concentrated understands things as they really are”

Expanding on the above quote, what panna *causes* is insight and *functions* to illuminate the manifestation of anicca, dukkha and anatta. Its *manifestation* has the characteristic of clarity, and its proximal cause occurs through intentionally bringing attention to how the self-creating processes originate, followed by careful investigation which either supports furthering that process or redirects attention to a more wholesome process.

In closing, it is important to address a frequent concern regarding the Wisdom aggregate—if there is no enduring/autonomous self, does life have any meaning? If there is no ongoing self in charge, why take any action in the world? My answer is this: Since we are inextricably interacting with our environment, being affected by events and affecting our environment in our spheres of influence, isn’t it wiser to train the mind to be more aware of the consequences of our thoughts and actions, based on the principle of benevolence? Contemporary research strongly suggests that prosocial attitudes and behaviors provide greater happiness for those who cultivate them. Contemporary environmental research suggests that a more benevolent attitude and lifestyle organized around more thought and self-discipline regarding the karma of consumerism has great benefit for all life on the planet. The principles and practices described in the Noble Eightfold Path promote these attitudes and behaviors. The reviews that will be reviewed over the next several Dharma talks regarding the Virtue and Mental Discipline aggregates provide more insights and training suggestions to manifest Wisdom.

Commentaries on the Noble Eightfold Path describe a maturing towards what is called the Noble *Tenfold* Path, wherein the Wisdom aggregate is actually realized, as mentioned in the above progression, so that Right Understanding is realized as Right Knowledge and Right Intention is realized as Right Release. These realizations represent entry into Nirvana, the Third Noble Truth.