Reviewing the Third Noble Truth

Continuing a thorough review of the of the Four Noble Truths, the focus of these notes is Nirodha (nih-row-dah), the Third Noble Truth, liberating the mind from dukkha, the distress and confusion that characterize our human experience. This liberation is completed through the experience of Nirvana, Nibbana (nih-bah-nah) in Pali, a quality of awareness that is unconditioned, characterized by the total absence of any sense of duality, that is, realizing the absence of a subjective self, interacting with an objective other. This direct experience is termed *bodhi* (boh-dee) in Pali and is translated as *Awakened*. A person who has directed her or his life to the ultimate experience of Awakening is called a Bodhisattva (boh-dee-saht-vah) prior to the direct experience of nirvana. Here is a quote about the Third Noble Truth:

What is the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering? It is the remainderless fading and cessation of that same craving; the rejecting, relinquishing, leaving and renouncing of it. But whereon is this craving abandoned and made to cease? Wherever there is what seems lovable and gratifying, thereon it is abandoned and made to cease.

There is this Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering: such was the vision, insight, wisdom, knowing and light that arose in me about things not heard before.

This Noble Truth must be penetrated to by realizing the Cessation of Suffering....

This Noble Truth has been penetrated to by realizing the Cessation of Suffering: such was the vision, insight, wisdom, knowing and light that arose in me about things not heard before.

[Samyutta Nikaya LVI, 11]

A core concept that is relative to Nibbana is *sunnata* (soon-yah-tah), usually translated as *emptiness* or *voidness*, which I believe is misleading. I believe sunnata can be more usefully understood as *the fundamental absence of singularity or autonomy*. Singularity is the belief that the self is autonomous, without reference to environmental conditioning. This is related to the concept of interdependence or interbeing and can be related to the contemporary concept expressed as *complexity theory*, found in the areas of physics, biology and psychology. These notes are not intended to expand on complexity theory, but simply put, humans operate in complex systems, both externally (Social interactions, changes in weather, economic dynamics, etc.) and internally (changes in metabolism, thought processes, etc.), and as this complex interactive dynamic process operates, there can be no enduring, autonomous self in control. In this way, sunnata can describe the “emptiness” of substance in the selfing process. Here is an observation attributed to the Buddha that describes the emptiness of the Five Aggregates of Clinging, from the Phena Sutta, translated by Bhikkhu Sujato:

“Form is like a lump of foam; feeling is like a bubble; perception seems like a mirage; choices like a banana tree; and consciousness like a magic trick: so taught the Kinsman of the Sun… However you contemplate them, examining them carefully, they’re void and hollow when you look at them closely.

The principle that integrates these similes is the Second Noble Truth, that is, the cause of dukkha is craving and clinging to the belief that there is an enduring and autonomous self. Mindful investigation of the aggregates reveals the transitory, ephemeral, and ultimately insubstantial nature of the self, an illusion, as described in the above quote. The goal of the Noble Eightfold Path, which is the Fourth Noble Truth, is to reveal the hollowness of the self through the realization of Nibbana.

Here is the relevant passage in the Four Noble Truths Discourse regarding the Third Noble Truth, as translated by Thanissaro:

“And this, monks, is the noble truth of the cessation of stress: the remainderless fading & cessation, renunciation, relinquishment, release, & letting go of that very craving.”

The process of Awakening is gradual; we often read about the experience of nirvana as a sudden process, a dramatic event. I’ve not experienced it and probably won’t—however, I believe that Awakening involves a series of insightful experiences over the course of a lifetime, characterized by a diminishing of interest or engagement in normal cognitive processes—the stream of internal commentary and imagery fades away because the mind becomes increasingly peaceful as the demands of sensual or mental phenomena are “renounced” and “relinquished”; *renunciation* is a process of *turning away* from craving and clinging, while *relinquishment* represents the total *letting go* of the subject/object duality in consciousness. This realization doesn’t drain a person of effective functioning socially—the Buddha lived for another 40 years or so after full Awakening and created a spiritual system that has survived for millennia.

This experience of Awakening is termed *Satori* (sah-toe-ree) in the Zen tradition, and *Ultimate Bodhicitta* (boh-dee-chee-tah) in the Tibetan tradition. *Bodhi* is the Awakened and *Citta* (chee-tah) is Mind; scholars may dispute these determinations, but for the purpose of these notes, these terms are sufficient.

There is another Tibetan Buddhist term, *Relative Bodhicitta*, that has relevance in this review. Relative Bodhicitta is the mind dedicated to the process of Awakening and applying the merits of this practice to the alleviation of dukkha for all beings. This dedication is organized around the principles and practices described in the Fourth Noble Truth, the Noble Eightfold Path, which will be reviewed in future talks. Even without considering the likelihood of experiencing Nibbana, the cultivation of the eight factors of the path fosters the emergence of a more wholesome way of living through an ongoing series of “mini-Awakening” experiences, which could be described as improvements in personal and interpersonal well-being. Every time a person notices and renounces the arising and enacting of unwholesomeness, dukkha is set aside. In contemporary psychology, a singular moment of experience is described as a *state*; when a state is reenacted over time, becoming habitual, it then is described as a *trait*, in the process of Awakening, a beneficial development of character.

The Theravada tradition places great emphasis on the cultivation of jhana (jah-nah) states of consciousness, which are listed as the four jhanas of form and the four formless jhanas, as preparations of the mind prior to the experience of Nibbana. The assumption is that the highly refined consciousness experienced during the various levels of jhana prepare the mind to see more clearly any subtle manifestations of self-identity that arise and basically drain energy and attention from the processes of craving and clinging, eventually producing a profoundly detached level of consciousness called *viraga* (vih-rah-gah), translated as *dispassion*. This sort of investigation is called *sammathavipassana* (sah-mah-tah-vih-pah-sah-nah), which combines *tranquility and stability of attention* with *insight* in order to thoroughly investigate the three characteristics, *anicca* (The inherently unstable and transitory nature of experience), *dukkha* (The distress and confusion resulting from the process of craving and clinging) and *anatta* (The absence of an enduring/autonomous self, realized when craving and clinging are relinquished). This level of highly sophisticated insight is how renunciation matures into relinquishment. The term *Nibbana* literally means *that which occurs when the fuel of craving and clinging is used up*.

Over one hundred years ago, highly respected monks in Burma, now called Myanmar, developed a system that does not require mastery of the jhanas, called *sukkhavipassana* (soo-kah-vih-pah-sah-nah), translated as *dry vipassana*, insight that does not require samatha. This practice was introduced to provide opportunities for Awakening for those who are called householders, and places emphasis on first setting aside the Five Hindrances, which is a quality of attention that has significantly set aside distractions, and then very persistently investigating the transitory and impersonal arising and passing away of self-states.

The practice of dry vipassana has been a predominant form for Awakening in the West, beginning in the 1970’s, but recently some teachers such as Shaila Catherine and Leigh Brasington are helping householders in Western cultures learn how to cultivate jhana states. The most important practice in either case is using vipassana skills to foster the experience of Nibbana.

The Theravada tradition describes a series of subjective experiences called *The Progressions of Insight* that allow a practitioner of vipassana to recognize her or his progress towards Awakening. Briefly summarized, an appropriately skillful practice of mindful investigation provides a person with the ability to clearly discern that what the mind creates is a fabrication which provides conditional understanding of sensory stimulation. This realization allows the development of insight regarding how quickly these fabrications arise and pass away, multiple times per second. This awareness is shocking—subjective experience seems groundless and “slippery”, like trying to walk on ice, and this instigates an existential and impulsively reactive fear. When the mind is stable and equanimous enough to not react to the fear, there is a direct realization of impermanence and the absence of an enduring and autonomous self. It then becomes possible for a profound indifference to the fabricating process to be identified with as a self, because the distress and confusion that comes with that identification is realized as fruitless and empty of any inherent validity. At this point in the process, it becomes possible to completely relinquish any belief in “selfing”, and the opportunity to realize Nibbana is realized.

In the Theravada tradition, the experience of Nibbana must be revisited, systematically eliminating what are called the fetters. Classical Theravada Buddhism describes the fetters to be overcome:

* Belief in a self
* Doubt or uncertainty about the reality of Awakening
* Attachment to rites and rituals
* Sensual desire
* Aversion/Ill-will
* Attachment to life experience
* Attachment to after-life experience
* Conceit/ Attachment to views
* Restlessness/Mental Agitation
* Ignorance/Absence of Wise Attention

Within traditional Buddhism, beliefs are organized around the concept of rebirth, which means that an individual on the Eightfold Path will have to transit through many lifetimes to become a fully Awakened being; there are some commentaries that report individuals who were able to dissolve and relinquish all the fetters in a single lifetime. The traditional system involved cultivating the jhanas, while contemporary dry vipassana practices don’t require that level of highly focused attention. Here are brief descriptions of this progression:

***Stream Entry*** This experience provides a profound and direct realization that there is no enduring/autonomous self, through the experience of non-duality—the absence of a subject/object, a “suchness” event. After his Awakening, the person we call the Buddha used the term *tathagata* (tuh-tah-gah tah) as a personal descriptive, and a useful way to translate this word is *mastery of suchness.* This realization also eliminates the fetter regarding doubts about the validity of the Four Noble Truths. There is a realization that any rites or rituals, either as part of religious practice or as the ways that we behave in order to have a “normal” life, interfere with realizing the full potential of Nibbana.

***Once-Returner*** represents the further diminishment of the fetters, as the drives of sensual desire and aversion/ill-will are significantly diminished. A person with such a highly functioning level of consciousness will nearly always be peaceful, no matter what circumstances, either pleasant or unpleasant, may occur. This person will be able to quickly and reliably renounce sensual desire and aversion/ill-will.

***Non-Returner*** represents the quality of presence that has completely relinquished sensual desire and aversion/ill-will, no matter what the circumstances of her or his life might be.

***Arahant*** (ahr-hahnt) represents the fulfillment of the process of Awakening. An Arahant directly knows the experience of Nibbana at will,. Additionally, the Arahant relinquishes any slight residual conceit, relinquishing the need to defend or gratify the ego and is totally free from mental restlessness. Finally, this level of awareness totally conforms to nondual consciousness.

The Third Noble Truth is realized through the cultivation of the principles and practices of the Fourth Noble Truth, the Noble Eightfold Path: Right Understanding, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. These will be reviewed one by one over the next several talks.