Reviewing the Third Noble Truth

Continuing a thorough review of the of the Four Noble Truths, the focus of these notes involves the liberation of 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, a subjective self interacting with an objective other. This direct experience is termed *bodhi* (bow-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 (bow-dee-saht-vah) prior to the direct experience of nirvana.

A core concept that is relative to Nibbana is *sunnata* (syoon-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*. 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 (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. The goal of the Noble Eightfold Path, 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 (See the notes from the talk entitled “Reviewing the Second Noble Truth” found in the orlandoinsightmeditation.org archives for more comments on this topic), 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 millenia.

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, this experience is described as a *state*; when a state is reenacted over time, becoming habitual, it then is described as a *trait*, which represents a beneficial development of character.

In the Theravada tradition, the experience of Nibbana must be revisited, systematically eliminating what are called the fetters. 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. Here are brief descriptions of this progression:

*Stream Entry* involves a profound realization that there is no enduring/autonomous self, a direct experience of non-duality. This realization also eliminates any doubts about the validity of the Four Noble Truths. There is a realization than 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 sense desire and ill-will are significantly diminished. A person with such a cognitive function will nearly always be peaceful, no matter what temptations, either pleasant or unpleasant, may occur. This person will be able to quickly and reliably be able to renounce sense desire and ill-will.

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

*Arahant* (ah-rah-hant) represents the fulfillment of the process of Awakening. 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, in order to experience Nibbana. An Arahant directly knows the experience at will, not requiring the disciplined efforts for cultivating jhana states. Additionally, the Arahant relinquishes any slight residual 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 reviews.