



Vision and Transformation: The Buddha's Eightfold Path

Week 6 – Perfect Awareness and Perfect Samādhi



So far on this course we have looked at 6 out of the 8 'limbs' of the Noble Eightfold Path. By way of conclusion, we now consider the remaining two limbs that we've regarded as lying within the 'meditation' portion of the simpler Threefold Path. **Perfect Awareness** concerns developing **mindfulness**, not just during meditation, but in our everyday lives – we can be much more aware of mundane things, of ourselves, other people and Reality itself. **Perfect Samādhi** (a word that is difficult to translate directly into English) is the culmination of the Noble Eightfold Path – it entails nothing less than our very being moving increasingly in harmony toward the true nature of things – that same true nature which we glimpsed through Perfect Vision at the beginning of our 'tour'.

Perfect Awareness

The Higher Evolution (as introduced last week in looking at 'Perfect Effort') takes place not through the process of selection with a species, but through the development in an individual of increasing levels of awareness.

The name of the equivalent stage in the mundane eightfold path is 'Right Mindfulness'. Mindfulness is defined, in the Buddhist tradition, in terms of the three complementary areas:

- **Attentiveness:** the practice of *paying attention* to some object – in meditation this may be the breath, or the people we bring to mind in the Metta Bhavana. In everyday life it will be whatever object we need to focus upon in order to 'get the job done'.
- **Awareness:** this has a broader scope than attentiveness; we are able to hold the object of our focused awareness within the appropriate context. For example, we may pay attention to making a phone call, but retain enough awareness not to walk carelessly into the road, and to finish the call in time to meet an appointment on time.
- **Continuity of purpose:** this involves the memory (or recollection) of what we have set out to do, whether staying with our breath, completing the washing up or whatever. Continuity of purpose strengthens our concentration, which (in turn) means that we are less easily distracted.

There is an important aspect of individuality in these three factors – when they are present, we are more likely to be creative individuals, rather than reactive members of a social group.

Sangharakshita chooses to classify Perfect Awareness in four main areas:

1. **Awareness of things:** this refers simply to our awareness of the material things that make up our everyday environment.

Of the six senses traditionally defined in Buddhism (of which the sixth is the mind), we generally give extremely little deliberate attention to the things that we see or hear. The reason that we normally give for this is that we're far too busy; we have far too little time to "stand and stare" (to quote part of the poem 'Leisure' by William Henry Davies).

When we do see or hear something, we don't usually do so purely in its own right, in the sense that we instead perceive it through the powerful filters of our own conditioning. We interpret and label the raw image or sound; we judge it, analyse and categorise it according to whether we perceive either value or a threat. This means that our relationship to the seen or heard object can't actually be described as being 'aware' of it in the true sense of the word. Far from directly seeing or hearing the real thing, we instead tend to see or hear a heavily-loaded projection of ourselves.

What we need to cultivate to overcome this powerful tendency can be described as **receptivity**. We try to open up to our experience, whatever it may contain – pleasure, irritation or whatever - with an attitude of openness, interest and curiosity.

2. **Awareness of oneself:** in this area of awareness we can conveniently define three 'sub-levels'. What they all share is that the application of awareness to each area has the gradual effect of 'refining and sublimating' an aspect of ourselves.

Firstly, in the canonical texts of Buddhism, the Buddha frequently encourages his followers to practise **awareness of the body and its movements**. This practice of awareness has the potential to bring about a whole 'culture change' in our behaviour, *so that, for example, we might do things more slowly and methodically*, but without any loss of productiveness.

Then, in practising **awareness of feelings**, we begin to address our emotional issues, for example anger or anxiety, simply by being aware of them as they arise. Through this awareness, unskilful (i.e. unhelpful) emotional states will slowly begin to be resolved, and positive, helpful ones to be refined.

Lastly, **Awareness of thought** involves 'the mind watching the mind' – we learn to see our chaotically-arising thoughts simply for what they are. A particularly interesting outcome of this sort of awareness is that, when we 'watch' for arising thoughts for a little while, they may seem less likely to arise at all, and the normal level of mental 'chatter' can subside.

3. **Awareness of people:** we need to actually 'look at' the people with whom we interact – both literally and metaphorically. In other words, we need to learn to relate to them as fellow human beings, rather than just objects that have some (or no) use to us. In this way, our relationships with other people can gradually move from a utilitarian to a more genuinely human basis.
4. **Awareness of reality:** as we are not yet Awakened, it is difficult for us to practise this sort of awareness in a direct sense. Instead, we have traditional approaches that, whilst indirect, are seen as helpful in our development of insight.

The first of these is awareness (or recollection) of the Buddha, in the sense that he can be seen as the human manifestation of reality. In this practice we bring to mind not only the appearance and legendary actions of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, but also his qualities of wisdom, compassion, energy and others – in other words, the various aspects of an individual who has direct experience of reality.

On a more mythic level, we can practice the regular recitation of a mantra, which can be seen as a representation in sound of one of the traditional qualities of the Awakened mind.

Perfect *Samādhi*

The word *samādhi* can be approximately translated as 'concentration', and this final stage is sometimes offered, in terms of the mundane Eightfold Path, as 'Right Concentration'. However, Perfect *Samādhi* has a much more profound meaning, which is nothing less than wisdom itself. This makes sense if we see this stage as the culmination of the Path of Transformation, and therefore of the entire Noble Eightfold Path. We might therefore say that, in terms of the Threefold Path, Perfect *Samādhi* relates to both meditation and wisdom. The interpretation of *samādhi* as transcendental wisdom is particularly familiar within the tradition of Zen Buddhism.

To quote Sangharakshita, Perfect *Samādhi* "...represents the state of being fully and perfectly transformed, on all levels and in every aspect of one's being. In other words it represents the culmination of the process of transformation from an unenlightened to an Enlightened state, and the complete and perfect permeation of all aspects of one's being by that Perfect Vision with which one started".

The relationship between the more modest rendering of Right Concentration and the much higher one of Perfect *Samādhi* can perhaps be explained in terms of the question, 'Why do Buddhists meditate?'. Buddhist meditation is sometimes seen as having two components – the first is the progressive calming and quieting of the mind, which is sometimes known as *samatha*. This is an essential prerequisite for the second component, known as *vipassanā* – the arising of wisdom through direct experience. It's very

important to stress two things at this point – firstly, that *samatha* is indispensable as a preparation for *vipassanā*. Secondly, the arising of wisdom is **not** a matter of understanding, but rather of **experience**. Like the Buddha's Awakening, this cannot be fully described by the use of concepts, only through experience!

A very valuable teaching in this regard is that of the **Three Grounds of Faith**. We can apply this 3-part model to any dharma teaching, to help us examine our relationship to it – a good example might be that of impermanence (although, obviously, there are any number of other examples).

The first - **faith grounded in intuition** - is the initial glimmering that there may be a deeper level of reality. When you have this intuition you don't *know* that there is such a thing, but you have a feeling, an intuition, that there is. However, many people today, influenced by a scientific approach to life, and perhaps also disillusioned by conventional religion, distrust faith and intuition to some extent. This is understandable, because the kinds of things that some people have faith in are often not verifiable by reason or experience – to put it bluntly, they are sometimes quite irrational.

The second ground of faith – **faith grounded in reason** – is where that intuitive feeling is tested by reason. It feels right, but is it? Does it make sense – is it reasonable? We sometimes hear of religious faith being opposed to reason, but in Buddhism these things are not opposed. Buddhism is not irrational, and every claim that Buddhism makes to the truth *can and should* be tested for its reasonableness.

The third ground of faith is **faith grounded in experience**, and this is where faith and wisdom come together. In the second ground of faith your intuition was tested by reason – you had to see whether what you had faith in stood up to reason. Reason though, for Buddhism, is not the last word on the subject. It's possible to think something through and get it wrong. In the third ground of faith your intuition and reason are tested by experience. The 'experience' that is meant here is the seeing of the way things really are – it is *the experience of wisdom*. This crucial third ground is what we hope to encourage by practising *vipassanā* meditation.

To conclude, we have now reached the end of our very rapid survey of the Noble Eightfold Path. Hopefully, it has given you a reasonably good understanding of one of the key formulations of 'basic Buddhism'. More importantly, you might feel that it has helped to inspire you to make the Three Jewels closer to the centre of your own life, and given you a set of practical techniques to enable you to do so.

We hope to meet you again before too long. Make sure you have a copy of the handout 'What's next after Going Deeper' to see how you could further develop your connections with the Manchester Buddhist Centre and with the Three Jewels.