

# The Unified Path to Freedom

Ajahn Sucitto, 11 February, 2011, Cittaviveka

## ***Everything we do has an effect***

It is important to remember that the Buddhist path unifies in ethics, meditation and discerning wisdom: *sīla*, *samādhī*, and *pañña*. *Sīla*, or ethics, includes virtue, integrity, intentions, attitudes and inclinations of the mind that are skilful – and it excludes ones that are unskilful. *Samādhī* is the deepening stillness that we experience in meditation; it is a focus that is steady and firm. *Pañña* is wisdom, or discernment: the action of clearly understanding things in line with suffering and the cessation of suffering.

So Buddhist wisdom is something you *do*. It's about applying the mind to find out how stress or suffering is caused, how the roots of it are laid down, and how suffering continues if these roots are not looked into. Even if the stress is not agonizing, and the suffering is just manageable discontent, we can either lay down the foundation to continue in the future suffering, refrain from doing that, or clear the premises and habits that trigger unskilful mental action. Sometimes clearing takes work: it isn't always comfortable working with dullness or resistance, or holding back the craving mind. So we have to recognize that the intention to clear is for our welfare; then we acknowledge and bear with unpleasant feelings – if that's what it takes to release ourselves from unskilful reactions. What becomes clear with discernment is that filling up, holding on, or trying to be something in the future is stressful. Bear this in mind as it helps us establish a template for how to live and what to do in our hearts and minds.

What we do, how we act, and what intentions we carry out: this has results on our lives and the lives of others. Whatever we incline towards, whatever we think or do and how we act has effects. This is the principle of cause and effect, or kamma. It includes obvious external ethics, such as the

way we physically act in the world, the way we speak to other people; and also it concerns attitudes we have towards our own bodies and minds. Doing something with a joyful intention has a joyful effect, doing something with a negative or restless intention has a negative or agitated effect. This principle of kamma extends to the most refined levels and subtle forms of activity that occur in meditation, in which we experience the results of inclinations – say of kindness, spaciousness or firmness. We can shift our attention to these subtle forms of activity, or to refraining from their opposites: ill-will, rigidity and pressure, and dithering. In general then, this principle of cause and effect, of inclining one's intentions and inclinations, is a foundation you can always rely on. It is a thread of practice that links ethics, meditation and wise discernment.

### ***What am I doing?***

We start by looking at whether what we are doing is skilful or unskilful – trying not to overlook *anything*. How do we get up in the morning? How do we attend to our duties and requisites?

Basically, this is what monastic life is about. It brings forth a lot of attention to things like robes, food and shelter, and to how we relate with monks, nuns, and lay people. All this is included as practice. Full attention is expected. It's not just about looking nice or being polite. We train in this way because the way we act and incline our minds affects ourselves and others. Commitment to this understanding helps us to gradually work our way out of greed, hatred and delusion.

Delusion is most difficult because we can't really see it. That is why one of our main trainings is to continually deepen and strengthen the power and quality of attention and intention. In this way we can penetrate into the places in the mind that are often misted over, and where blind habits, casualness, impulsiveness, or recklessness take over. We start becoming more attentive to what is happening. Nothing is inconsequential. It's all worth attending to. We can do this, it's really good to know that we can do it, and it has good effects on the mind.

Seeing the stress and suffering from a mind that is craving or restless can be uncomfortable. Still, pausing, widening attention and being with what is happening is a simpler process than getting into a panic, analysing yourself, or trying to manipulate it. It's even more straightforward just to be with what is arising when we use this monastic way of life, as it emphasizes that refinement of attention and it cuts off some of the alternatives. When we can't act on the distracting mind, we have to observe craving or restlessness, and really see the stress and suffering they cause. Then you don't want to follow them. And to bear with this process, not adding more complexities or emotional reactions to it – just that much has good results. Moods and energies change, the mind comes out clearer, and we see that things can move along in a good way.

We get a clear sense of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* when we get what we are doing in our lives down to the very specific, finite, here-and-now perspective. We know what we are doing; we can contemplate it and check the results out for ourselves. From this we start to see the bigger picture of how what we do affects our lives. So we incline towards actions that are skilful, virtuous, and generous; good kamma that gives us a sense of satisfaction, or leaves no regret, and that leads the mind to stillness and reflection. It doesn't mean life is going to be all pure and trouble-free, but we are beginning to notice more clearly the grudges, worries, anxieties, impatience, etc. for what they are. We are developing the Path. At the end of the day we feel clearer and stronger in ourselves because of developing skilful kamma. The mind isn't in doubt or speculation or drifting. We know what we are doing and how we are being. This begins to form us; it becomes who we are.

### ***What do I want to become?***

*Sīla*, *samādhi*, *paññā*, and *kamma* pertain to the most intimate and refined details of our minds as well as through the larger perspectives of what we are doing in our lives. We can ask ourselves, 'What do I want to become? More restless, frantic, uptight, judgemental, worried, confused,

conceited or more generous, steady, mellow, gentle, kind and clear?’ When we consider what to do it’s pretty up-close and immediate: What do we want to think about? How do we want to be with other people? This is the way we practise; and as we do, the close-up picture of moment-to-moment attention starts to blend with the bigger picture of our lives.

The Buddhist path is thoroughly and fundamentally relational. The Buddha taught to do things that are for our welfare, the welfare of others, and that lead to *nibbāna*. If we can say ‘yes’ to all three of those, then it’s the right thing to do. The process refers to a relational intelligence: How does this action work in relationship with me? How does this mind-set work in relationship with other people? What are my attitudes and perceptions of other people and what do I do with those? The fundamental relational axis for being with other people is one of kindness, respect, compassion, appreciation of their goodness, and equanimity.

Equanimity, or *upekkhā*, means we trust people to go through their ups and downs; not getting excited when they have a good day and not getting depressed when they lose it. Equanimity offers the trust that they can work through whatever is arising. We can also have appreciation, *mudita*, for being in the presence of people who are skilful. We start to appreciate how good it is to be with good-hearted and fine people. These are aspects of our fundamental relational axis. If we’re not experiencing others in this way, we have to question how we are relating: ‘Am I comparing: You’re greater or lesser than me? Am I intimidated? Is there attraction or aversion?’ Or more specifically: ‘How does it feel when I complain that “he’s slow, she’s lazy, he’s this, she’s that, she’s always in the way, he’s always telling me what to do, he’s taking over the kitchen, she’s always late, she’s doing her own thing!”’ Eventually you think, ‘Wait a minute...What’s this doing to my mind? This isn’t skilful.’

By contemplating perceptions and the effect they have on the mind, we see which ones need to be investigated and released, and which ones need to be developed and strengthened. We start to put it together, realizing that it is better to be blamed than to be blaming other people. If I have to have one or the other, it is better to be criticized than to be criticizing someone else. It's better to be forgiving rather than expect people to forgive me. It's better to appreciate others than expect to be appreciated. Just look at the results: when other people appreciate me, that's fine. But if I'm wanting that, or continuously asking for it, or needing it – it leads to suffering. I don't like being blamed, but there is not much I can do about that. I can however avoid blaming, criticizing, or being negative to other people. So we start to piece it together. First *sīla*, then *samādhi*: stay focused on ethics and see how that gives us a firm ground; then with that kind of *samādhi*, see how that supports *pañña*, discernment: knowing the different ways the mind can go, and which are the skilful paths that lead to *nibbāna*. This is the way we train ourselves.

### ***What is my relationship?***

Meditation is the place where we can investigate the whole topic of perceptions, feelings, forms, bodies. We can start by first exploring: 'How am I in a body?' When meditating, sometimes the body can feel unbalanced or twisted, or a smooth flow with knots in it or tensions, or it can feel like there are holes in it where there is no feeling at all. It can feel fiery and jangly. We begin to practise how to be with that; how to calm it, steady it, soothe it, and bring balance to the body. Basic *samādhi* practice is knowing how to bring ourselves into our bodies, how to sit and walk, how to feel comfortable and settled in a body. You begin to recognize on a subtle level that the way you attend to your body begins to form it. You experience a sense of the body becoming something quite light and amorphous.

My personal experience is that when the mind is steady, the body has a different form. It feels something like a sphere; like a soft, radiant ball. Visually it doesn't look like that! But then, do I want to take my cues from visual perceptions or from direct bodily experience? If we focus on what bodies look like and the perceptions that arise from that, nothing much good comes from it. There is comparing, contrasting, attraction, aversion, self-consciousness, vanity, etc. When we start to relate to the direct bodily experience, we see that this is where we can develop *sīla* – because we are developing pure attitudes toward the body. *Samādhi* – we are stilling the body; making it more comfortable and steady. And *paññā* – we are beginning to recognize the tensions in the body and how to release them through breathing. Also, we begin to see how our attitudes affect us. If we are either too tense and pressured, or too lax, it doesn't feel right. If we are either not persistent enough or too dogged – it doesn't feel right. We know we are on the right track when our minds, or our mental approach, becomes malleable, pliable, workable, upright, and skilful. Through working on the body and mind at the same time, we can develop these skills and qualities.

*Paññā* begins to recognize the relational aspect of our experience. Consciousness is normally conscious of some kind of form: visual, tactile, auditory, olfactory – any of the senses. There is a particular formed object that arises that we are conscious of. The relationship between consciousness and form gives us a sense of being 'with' that form. From that, there arises a particular quality of feeling and a perception that interprets the experience. Then 'activities', *sankhāra*, arise: interest, disinterest, attraction, aversion, worry, speculation, restlessness; or skilful activities like steadiness, investigation, calming, entering and handling the perceptions, forms, and feelings that arise. These five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, activities and consciousness are the basis of our experience.

As awareness arises with a form, some kind of feeling and perception occurs, like, 'Oh, this feels

rough, or warm, or smooth, or interesting, or open, fearful, blurred.’ Then come the activities: you can zone-out, attend, try to hold on to it, try to work with it, etc. The most useful activities are the ones that handle experience such as investigation: ‘What’s this about? Where is this happening? Is there a way of holding this experience that would make it feel more still and comfortable, more agreeable? How do I sit comfortably with the perception of this person or this experience? What kind of activity is required to make this more calm and steady? Maybe I need to be a little more spacious, or patient – or why don’t I be a bit more generous, or firm, still, calm, steady?’ In this way, we are developing skilful activities around the perceptions, feelings, and forms that arise. This process is intensely relational because, as we are always working with the five aggregates, we are always *with* something. Furthermore, the process is causative because how we are in this relationship gives rise to results that we then experience. If we are relating in the right way, the results are in line with freedom, release, and clarity.

There is an energetic movement that underlies an experience. It could be a dull, heavy, congested sense, or a flaring-up, busy sense; an agitated sense or one of flowing or calm. There is an energy to any of this. First there’s a perception which gives an impression or felt meaning – like feeling under pressure or feeling agitated. Then some kind of reaction occurs; and around this responsive energy a sense of self, a subtle form, emerges. This sense of self is constructed out of these five aggregates. From feeling, perception, activities and the form that they take: we get formed into being something. We become a busy person, an important tall person, a defensive contracted person, a stupid, squashed person, a lazy withheld person, a wonderful expansive person, a person that needs to save the world, or a person that can’t save himself. One self is bad enough, but within a day we have multiple ones! There’s a kaleidoscope of them that we can witness: committed, convinced, doubting, uncertain ... Look at that. At any given moment it can change!

So we develop mindfulness by holding the mind, and we keep a sense of inquiry. With mindfulness, investigation, and energy we start to get the specific quality of the experience, and this specific and unwavering clarity is conducive to rapture. From rapture, *samādhi* arises.

In this process, the emphasis has to be on the specific quality of experience – being with things specifically rather than spinning out into generalizations and personal definitions. Slogans can be useful at a certain place and time: ‘be with the knowing’, ‘trust awareness’, ‘let go.’ But however good they are, you have to always have to translate any Dhamma-encouragement directly into the felt contextual experience; into what is happening now in this relationship.

Relationship is the art of opening to the unknown. We don't know what something is because it's actually always the first time this experience is occurring. If we knew what it was, there wouldn't be a living relationship; we'd just be pre-judging and acting on assumptions. To be accurate is like handling something rather than labelling it. It's this kind of inquiry – the getting a feel for what's happening – that gives you the specific quality.

Actually nothing is ever the same from one moment to the next, but our minds blur it into that: ‘Just another day, another *puja*... “*Namo Tassa*” for the nine-hundred and eighty-eighth time!’ You get this ‘another *puja*’ despair! ‘I’ve been chanting this thing for the last thirty-five years! Chanting this same old thing! Couldn't we do something different for once?’ Nope. Eventually, as the mind clears its reactions and opinions, there is only ‘*Namo Tassa*’ left. All the overlays of assumptions, the resistance, and the impatience have been squeezed out of you. There is nothing left but ‘*Namo Tassa*’ – directly experienced as the clarity of energy, perception, generosity, and the sense of offering to the Buddha. Why not let it happen? It's that specific: in this arising, the mind is

rapturous. This doesn't come through trying to be rapturous, but just because rapture is natural to the clear mind. Rapture is the quality of a poem rather than just another old statement. It's keen not because the thing is so great, but because your mind isn't preoccupied with agendas and assumptions; with things you've got to do, or how you should or shouldn't feel. But you have to go through different levels of feelings until they are washed out and all you are left in is that brightness.

When the mind has cleared a lot of its preoccupations then we can feel subtle and skilful inclinations more clearly and directly. There is a sense of lifting ourselves, steadying, and holding ourselves firmly and gently. We become much more effective, because overlays aren't clogging the mind. Practice is a purification, a stripping away that allows us to have a lot more immediate say on how we are going to feel. So in learning the skill of relating to our perceptions, feelings, our bodies, we are deepening our understanding of cause and effect: how certain activities are conducive to welfare and the absence of stress, and how certain things and assumptions and compulsions increase stress. With deepening wisdom, we recognize this, keep it in mind, and know that everything counts.

### ***This is what we can do in our lives!***

The Buddha's offering of Dhamma gives each of us the opportunity to develop true responsibility in our lives. We are honoured by picking that up. We pick it up and practise, not expecting applause – but the results are an inner sense of freedom and clarity. This is what we can do in our lives. The beauty of it is that we can do it on a microcosmic level: working with the body, mind, sitting, and walking. We can work with it a level up, in terms of how we structure our day, what we do in a day. We can go a step further to the kind of life we want to live: as a monk or nun, or whatever the occupation we want to have. We go all the way down from the macrocosm to the microcosm. What

is essential is that we get in touch with the details of how consciousness is building our sensed self. When we begin to get fully clear about how consciousness builds us, we can see how it is possible to let consciousness rest, let the awareness rest. Then it is just aware.

So this is what the Buddha offered us and we can do it. We can get hold of and deepen our understanding of cause and effect, virtue, stillness, concentration, wisdom, relationships. But it's up to us. Here and now is the setting – but to investigate and apply these skilful qualities continually in our lives takes our own initiative.