

To Nibbāna via the Noble Eightfold Path

by
The Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw
of
Burma



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Editor's Foreword

This book originally included three talks. This is just one of those, "To Nibbāna Via the Eightfold Noble Path," which was delivered in September 1971. The second and third talks were delivered over a period of several days in April 1952, so I have published them together as [Practices Evoking Friendship](#) and [The Seven Reflections](#). All three talks were translated to English by U Htin Fatt and published in Rangoon in 1980.

A key theme of this talk is the need to develop insight to arrive at the goal of nibbāna. Some teachers promise easy or instant enlightenment, but the Sayādaw makes it clear that insight must be developed in many stages. The Noble Eightfold Path can be divided into three distinct phases: the basic path (*mūla magga*), the preliminary path (*pubbabhāga magga*), and the Noble Path (*ariya magga*). The first phase means acquiring faith that there is a goal to be reached, establishing right view, basic morality, and beginning the practice of mindfulness meditation to acquire access-concentration and the lower stages of insight. The second phase requires the prolonged, diligent, and sustained practice of insight meditation to gain the higher stages of insight. Only when that preliminary path is well-developed can the Noble Path be fulfilled. If it was easy, every Buddhist would be a Stream-winner, but Noble Ones are rare.

Not to speak of Noble Ones, these days even those with the requisites factors of the basic path are the exception rather than the rule. To establish the basic path presupposes the fundamental right view regarding ownership of one's own kamma (*kammasakatā-sammā-ditṭhi*), basic morality (faithful observance of the five precepts), and the development of access-concentration to gain purity of mind (*citta-visuddhi*). These three together are not an insignificant achievement, and the third is unknown to many Buddhists, the majority of whom are not very familiar with the practice of meditation. Among those who do attend meditation classes, most are not able to overcome the wandering thoughts, aches and pains, drowsiness, restlessness, and other hindrances. If asked to sit longer than thirty minutes they are reluctant, and find it difficult to sit still for a full hour or more. This proves that they have not gained purity of mind, which is the third aspect of the basic path, since someone who has done so will readily find delight in meditation, and so will happily sit for an hour or more without complaint.

As for the further development that is required on the preliminary path, this will require much more effort than merely gaining access-concentration. Most meditators have no inkling of what is involved. If asked to meditate from 7:00 am until 7:00 pm they will complain that it is too long, that the Buddha taught the Middle Path, that they are too busy, *etc.* If we point out that twelve hours is just half a day, they think we are joking. To develop insight on the preliminary path, which means the stages of insight from knowledge of arising and passing away up to knowledge of equanimity about formations, would typically require continuous effort in meditation for at least eighteen hours a day for weeks or months. An exceptional student might develop the higher stages of insight within a fortnight. An average meditator may take months to make progress on the preliminary path just to get a clear understanding of the knowledge of arising and passing away.

Those who go on to realise the Noble Path have keen intelligence, moral integrity, and courageous energy. So, be wary of those who say that meditation is not necessary, that it is only for monks and nuns, that it is impossible for busy lay people, or that it is only for those who have emotional problems and cannot face up to "real life." The Buddha's teaching is profound, and not for the faint-hearted. Anyone and everyone who has faith in the Buddha can and should practice meditation intensively, not just superficially. The absence of any aspiration to strive for nibbāna in this very life is a sure sign of wrong views, defective morality, and a defiled mind obstructed and confused by the five mental hindrances (*pañca-nīvaraṇa*).

As with my other editions of the translated works of the late Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw, I have removed many of the Pāḷi words for the benefit of those who are not familiar with the technical terms. This publication needed heavy editing to make it easy for Western readers to follow, which is one reason why I have waited so long to attempt it. This edition may still have many defects, but I hope it is good enough to be useful. As my time permits, I will gradually improve it. If you find any errors, please let me know.

Bhikkhu Pesala
September 2021

Preface

The original discourses in this book were delivered in Burmese by the Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw of Burma. They have been painstakingly translated into English, as presented now, by a well-known and prominent writer, U Htin Fatt (Pen name Maung Htin), one of the members of the Mahāsi Translation Committee of this Sāsana Yeikthā. The book is intended particularly for the benefit of foreign meditators. It is hoped that they will find this translation — with its original style and essence preserved — enlightening.

The leading theme of the first part is an incident recorded in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta that occurred on the eve of the Buddha's final passing away when an ascetic by the name of Subhadda visited the Buddha and asked how to find out the real truth of the Dhamma. In answer to these queries, the Buddha with deep compassion elucidated the Dhamma and the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path as the only way leading to the end of suffering and the cessation of the round of rebirths. The Buddha discovered this method and called it the Middle Path (*majjhima paṭipadā*) between the two extremes of indulgence in sensual pleasures and self-torture in the form of severe asceticism, which is harmful, painful, and deplorable. The Middle Path comprises eight mental factors. They are interdependent and interrelated. They constitute three groups of spiritual development: morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*).

The Buddha pointed out that a living being is an aggregate of five groups, one material and four mental. They are the tangible matter in the physical body, sensations, perceptions, mental formations (volitions), and consciousness, and are known as Five Aggregates (*pañcakkhandhā*). In these five aggregates the Buddha summarised all mental and physical phenomena of existence.

From the first part of this book, "To Nibbāna via the Noble Eightfold Path," it is clear that all suffering arising out of craving for life can be eradicated by training the mind perfectly through insight meditation, which aims at gaining direct insight into the true nature of reality. Insight meditation entails observing all phenomena occurring at the six-sense doors. Through such meditation, the true nature of the mind and body is seen as impermanent (*anicca*), unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), and not-self (*anatta*). This is known as insight knowledge (*vipassanā-ñāṇa*). The process of gaining various stages of insight has been vividly and concisely described.

This method for the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path has been preserved and handed down to us in the form of written texts known as the Tipiṭaka by a long line of Arahants and monks in an unbroken lineage since the lifetime of the Buddha well over 2,500 years ago. In reading this book, one understands clearly that without understanding and faith, no progress can be made towards attaining true wisdom in the practice of meditation.

Being well-versed in the scriptures, and experienced in the practical side of insight meditation, the Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw, Aggamahāpaṇḍita, is qualified to give inspiring guidance on how liberation from suffering can be achieved. This is due to his great gift as a distinguished teacher of Satipaṭṭhāna meditation. In this book the process of refining the moral, mental, and spiritual perceptions has been explained lucidly. For Buddhists, the correct way to overcome all suffering, and attain the ultimate goal of nibbāna is to follow the eightfold path. This is the only way for the purification of the mind, to overcome all vices and mental defilements, and realise the cessation of suffering. According to Buddhism, realisation of nibbāna through mindfulness is the ultimate goal. In brief, nibbāna is the supreme state absolutely free from all defilements and all the various kinds of suffering that arise from rebirth.

May all beings be happy!

Min Swe, Secretary, Buddhasāsanānuggaha Organization
September 1980

To Nibbāna via the Noble Eightfold Path

My discourse today will be on the Noble Eightfold Path leading to Nibbāna. It was expounded by the Buddha, soon after his enlightenment, as the Dhammacakka Sutta to the group of five monks. He continued preaching this doctrine for the remaining 45 years of his life. Even on the eve of his Mahāparinibbāna he explained it to Subhadda, the wandering ascetic, the last to become an Arahant in his lifetime, and in whose name the Subhadda Sutta was canonised.

Background of the Sutta

Having completed 45 Rainy Seasons (*vassa*), the Buddha decided that it was time for him to shake off the sum of his life as requested earlier by Māra. So, on the full moon day of May (Kason) in the year 148 of the Great Era (Mahāsakkarā), he accepted food offered by Cunda, the goldsmith of Pāvā. Subsequently, he was attacked with diarrhoea.

Although physically weak, the Buddha walked the three *gāvuta*,¹ about six miles, from Pāvā to Kusināgara. He made this great effort bent on teaching two last suttas before his death.

It may be recalled that, earlier, Venerable Ānanda had requested the Buddha, too late, to defer his Mahāparinibbāna. This incident prompted the Buddha to keep two things in mind: to teach the Mahāsudassana Sutta, and to expound the Eightfold Path to Subhadda. In the Commentaries, no mention is made of anyone seeing the light of dhamma on hearing the Mahāsudassana Sutta, but when he delivered the discourse to Subhadda, the latter gained the first path and attained the status of an Arahant in a matter of hours. Had the Buddha attained *parinibbāna* at Pāvā, and not at Kusināgara, Subhadda would have had no opportunity to see the light of the Dhamma. It was with great compassion for the wandering ascetic that the Buddha made the supreme effort to travel to the place where he intended to pass his last moments.

It would be impossible for a sick monk to march a few miles to teach his disciples however compassionate he is, but the Buddha accomplished this feat of marching the whole distance resting 25 times at 25 stages on the journey in the hottest season with the assistance of devotees like Venerable Ānanda and Cunda.

When he reached the grove of Sal trees in the domain of the Kings of Malla, a couch was prepared for him to rest upon between

¹ A linear measure, a quarter of a *yojana*, a little less than two miles (PTS Dictionary).

two Sal saplings, with its head directed to the north, the Buddha rested on this couch reclining on his right side.

At that time, Subhadda happened to be at Kusināgara. When he heard the news that the Buddha would be attaining *parinibbāna* that very night, it occurred to him that it was only the Buddha who could dispel the doubts that troubled his mind.

Subhadda was no ordinary ascetic. He was of noble birth like the Venerable Sāriputta and Moggallāna, the chief disciples of the Buddha. He belonged to the class of millionaires known as Mahāsala. He was not just a naked fakir. He dressed himself properly and wandered about in search of truth having renounced all his worldly possessions. He should not be confused with the unruly **Subhadda**, the son of **Upaka**, the husband of **Cāpā**, the daughter of a hunter. (Cāpā has become Sāwā in Burmese legends). Upaka, the heretic, was not of noble birth.

Wishing to dispel his doubts, Subhadda had asked questions of the leaders of heretical schools flourishing at that time, such as Purāṇa Kassapa, but got no satisfactory answers from them. He had not, however, asked the Buddha for clarification, for he thought that if the elders like Purāṇa Kassapa could not explain things, the Buddha, who was younger than all the leaders of the heretical schools, would not be able to answer the questions he posed. This is according to the Commentaries. If they are to be relied upon, the Burmese laymen's conception that this Subhadda was the son of Upaka and Cāpā must be dismissed as incorrect.

By now, Subhadda had become extremely anxious lest he would lose all opportunities of enquiring for the truth if the Buddha entered nibbāna at once. Perhaps at this particular moment he felt complaisant towards the Buddha. He was, however, destined to be the last to realise the Dhamma through the Buddha's personal attention. That he was to be the last was because in one of his previous existences he made the offering of grain out of the late harvest at the last moment, unlike his elder brother (who was destined to be Koṇḍañña during the time of the the Buddha Gotama) who offered grains from the first harvest.

Request to See the Buddha

At midnight, Subhadda came hurrying to the Buddha. However, he first had to seek permission from Venerable Ānanda to interview the Teacher. "Friend Ānanda!" he entreated, "it is common knowledge

that the Buddhas arise very rarely. I have just heard that the Recluse Gotama is attaining final nibbāna in the last watch of the night. I have doubts to be resolved, and I believe that he can dispel them. Please let me see him.” Venerable Ānanda thought to himself, “Ascetics are usually opposed to the teaching of the Buddha. Any argumentation with Subhadda would just be wearisome to the Teacher.”

So, Venerable Ānanda told him not to trouble the Blessed One with questions when he was approaching death. Thrice the latter made the request, and thrice his request was turned down.

Hearing their conversation, the Buddha intervened: “Ānanda! It is not proper that you should forbid Subhadda. Let him see me. He wants to ask me a question. He has no intention to trouble me. If I answer him, he will quickly understand.”

Having got permission from Venerable Ānanda, Subhadda greeted the Blessed One with agreeable words to suit the occasion, and sat down at an appropriate place, free from six faults, which is described in the texts as neither too near nor too far away, neither windward nor leeward, neither directly opposite, nor behind the couch on which the Buddha was resting. At the head of the couch towards the north, there was one Sal sapling, and at the foot another. Since the Buddha was reclining on his right side, he was facing West. Subhadda might have been sitting not far from the feet of the Teacher, facing towards the head of the couch.

Nothing is mentioned in the Pāli text about the ascetic paying homage to the Buddha. This shows that although he had come to believe in the Buddha’s ability to resolve his doubts, his faith in the Blessed One was not as strong as that he had for his false ideologies.

Subhadda Questions the Buddha

Then Subhadda addressed the Buddha as “Friend Gotama” without paying due respects¹ and asked him what he wanted to know. “There are,” he said, “many disciples of different religious sects founded by famous ascetics such as Purāṇa Kassapa ... Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta. Their ideologies relate to crossing the ocean of *saṃsāra*, the endless cycle of birth and death. These ideologies are also revered by many. Do they know what they profess to know, or do they not?”

¹ He addressed the Buddha with the words “*Bho Gotama*,” a polite form of address, but not the respectful form of address — “*Bhante*,” Venerable Sir. (ed.)

When he was referring to the leaders of the religious sects he had *Pūraṇa Kassapa*, *Makkhali Gosāla*, *Ajita Kesakambala*, *Pakudha Kaccāyana*, *Sañjaya Belaṭṭhaputta*, and *Nigaṇṭha Nāṭaputta* in mind.¹ These six leaders of heretical school professed to know the past, present, and future of all the phenomena of existence.

Subhadda had doubts as to whether they really did or not, or whether there were some among those who knew. It was only natural for him to entertain such doubts. Most people accept religious beliefs because they are handed down from teacher to pupil. They have blind faith in them, refusing to investigate the propriety or otherwise of such beliefs with due reasoning. Subhadda had an enquiring mind. He could not accept mere hearsay. If the six leaders of the ascetics did really know the truth, the truth must be one. There should not have been different kinds of truth.

Indeed truth must be one and indivisible. This must be borne in mind. Nowadays, when the *Buddhadhamma* is being disseminated, there should be only one basis of teaching relating to the Middle Way or the Eightfold Path, the practice of morality, concentration, and acquisition of profound knowledge of the Four Noble Truths. If someone teaches that the aims of Buddhism can be achieved without recourse to actual practice of the *Dhamma*, we should at once understand that they are on the wrong track.

To Subhadda's mind the different lineages of knowledge propagated by the six ascetic leaders indicated that they were confused, because they did not know. However, he was still complaisant towards his old master and, therefore, he brought up the three questions to the Enlightened One.

The Buddha's Reply

The Buddha gave him this answer: "O Subhadda! Your question relates to whether your six old masters do really know or do not know, or whether some do, while the rest do not. Leave this question aside. Let me teach you the *Dhamma* that will prove beneficial to you. Listen to me carefully."

The Buddha did not answer Subhadda's questions directly, because if he told him the plain truth that all his six ascetic leaders did not actually know what they professed to know, it would not have done

¹ I have filled in the full names of these six teachers as given in the Pāli text of the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*. Please refer to the DPPN for details. (ed.)

him good. Moreover to those narrow minds this plain statement might be taken as mere castigation, in which case it would be unwholesome, and of no avail. Not to speak of ancient times, even nowadays, when a fault is pointed out, the wrongdoer takes offence and reacts accordingly. So we monks have to be very careful in making statements.

Sometimes we have to ignore faults as long as they do not run counter to the correct practice of the Dhamma. However, when they are harmful we have to explain the Dhamma objectively, otherwise they may think that we do not know things ourselves, and yet are trying to control them. Some might even regard us as malevolent. In the case of the Blessed One, he purposely set aside Subhadda's inquisitions and taught him only what would prove beneficial.

Now Subhadda behaved well by addressing the Buddha reverentially as "*Evam bhante* — very well then, Venerable Sir," to express his willingness to accept his proposition. Imagine someone telling the questioner that he declined to answer the latter, but proposed to teach his own doctrine. The questioner might well become antagonistic, but Subhadda said, "*Evam bhante*" in deference to the Blessed One. This shows that faith had developed in him.

Defilements Are Eradicated Only by the Noble Path

Then the Buddha delivered the following discourse to Subhadda:¹ "If, in any religion (*dhamma-vinaya*), the Noble Eightfold Path is absent, that practice can never bring about the first stage recluse (a Stream-winner, who enters the stream leading to progressive purification), nor the second stage recluse (who becomes a Once-returner), nor the third stage recluse (who never returns to this world). Lastly, there will be no fourth stage recluse (Arahants or Worthy Ones, who have finally conquered all defilements).

These are the Buddha's words, original and not edited at second-hand from Commentaries.² They should be carefully borne in mind.

¹ "*Yasmiṃ kho, Subhadda, dhammavinaye ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo na upalabbhati, samaṇopi tattha na upalabbhati. Dutiyopi tattha samaṇo na upalabbhati. Tatiyopi tattha samaṇo na upalabbhati. Catutthopi tattha samaṇo na upalabbhati.* (Mahāparinibbāna Sutta)

² In the previous passage from the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta quoted as if verbatim from the text, I have put the explanations in parenthesis because the Pāli text makes no mention of Stream-winning, Once-returning, etc. It merely states that other religions, which are devoid of the Noble Eightfold Path are devoid of these four types of recluse. The meaning of the four types of recluse must be taken as something that was well known when the Buddha spoke to Subhadda. (ed.)

In brief, they mean that any religious teaching that is not guided by the Noble Eightfold Path, can never produce the four categories of Noble Ones going through the four stages of emancipation as mentioned above, unassailed by defilements of the mind comprising the fourteen immoral mental states beginning with greed, anger, and ignorance. In this context I have rendered the term “*dhamma-vinaya*” as “religion” so that any layman can readily understand what the Buddha taught.

Any religious teaching that excludes the Noble Eightfold Path can never bring about any Stream-winner (*sotāpanna*), Once-returned (*sakadāgāmi*), Non-returned (*anāgāmi*), or Arahant. This is axiomatic in Buddhist teachings. In the world of non-Buddhists, the Noble Path is unknown. Before the Buddha’s Enlightenment and before the exposition of the Wheel of the Dhamma (Dhammacakka Sutta), even Ālāra and Udaka, who had respectively attained the seventh and eighth stages of *jhānic* bliss, did not know this Noble Path. Not knowing it, they could not disseminate knowledge about it. Without this knowledge there could have been no occasion for the realisation of even the first stage of a Stream-winner.

These days, misstatements have cropped up that run counter to what the Buddha actually taught. Knowledge, it is said, is accomplishment; and there is no need for anybody to practise the Dhamma once knowledge has been attained. Such statements amount to the rejection of the practice of the Dhamma, and to the exclusion of the Noble Eightfold Path. However, the Noble Eightfold Path should be developed constantly (*bhāvetabba*), for it is a set of disciplines that is conducive to the generation of the power to gain insight into the nature of the Noble Path. Without effort, nothing occurs naturally. Yet there is a school of thought that wrongly suggests that making an effort is itself suffering, and that, therefore, efforts should not be made. In the face of such dogma, who will take the trouble of developing the Noble Eightfold Path and practising its tenets? If there is no one who practises this Dhamma, how can its light shine within him or her? In the absence of any insight into the nature of the Path, how can one eliminate defilements and attain nibbāna?

The principles of the Noble Eightfold Path can be achieved only through contemplation in the way of insight meditation. Any proposition to negate the principles and practice of the Noble Path is to destroy Buddhist teaching. Beyond the pale of Buddhism there

is no Noble Path and where there is no Noble Path there is no annihilation of the defilements that obstruct the way to nibbāna.

In giving this discourse to Subhadda, the Buddha made no personal allusions. He did not say anything about the religious ideologies of the ascetics like Purāṇa Kassapa, Makkhali Gosāla, and others, nor the Brahmins who were then in the majority. He was only emphasising that where the Noble Path is absent there will be only obstructions in the way to peace. At this, Subhadda got enlightened at once. He realised that because the leaders of the ascetics did not know the method and practice of meditation according to the principles of the Noble Eightfold Path, they could not be all-knowing as they professed. In the teachings of the leaders of the heretical schools and of the Brahmins, the Noble Path was lacking. Under their guidance there would be none who could do away with defilements that impede the way to peace.

The Noble Eightfold Path in Practice

The practice of the Noble Path rests mainly on the observance of morality, the practice of concentration, and the acquisition of wisdom. If morality is observed with dedication, one would be cultivating the three path factors of morality: Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. If one meditates, the three path factors of concentration will be fulfilled: Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. Meditation for insight encourages Right View and Right Thought. These two are the path factors of wisdom.

Morality, concentration, and wisdom can lead one to the Noble Path. Yet some assert that it is not necessary to observe the rules of morality if they gain conviction in the Dhamma. It is often put forward by such protagonists that they have invented simplified or easy methods for their followers. How remarkable! It cannot be denied that, in the Buddha's time, there were intelligent and wise individuals who saw the light of Dhamma the moment they heard the Buddha's discourses. Of course, geniuses exist who can grasp the meaning of the Four Noble Truths after a brief exposition (*ugghaṭitaññū*), or those who can realise the Truth after a more detailed exposition (*vipaṇcitaññū*). In the Buddha's time such individuals gained the light of knowledge while listening to the Buddha's teachings without appreciable endeavour. However, when it comes to an ordinary

individual who has to be guided for the gradual realisation of truth (*neyya*), even the Buddha could not enable him or her to realise the Dhamma at once.¹ So, the following verse from the Dhammapada (v 276), taught by the Buddha, should serve as a reminder:

*“Tumhehi kiccāmātappaṃ, akkhātāro Tathāgatā.
Paṭipannā pamokkhanti, jhāyīno mārabandhanā.”*

“You should strive for the annihilation of all latent defilements. Tathāgatas can only show you the way. You yourself must develop concentration and insight. Only then will you be liberated from the bonds of Māra (defilements that destroy what is wholesome and moral).”

It is true. Even the Buddhas can only show you the way. They cannot make the command that so and so shall reach such and such a stage of the Path. Disciples should train their minds well in concentration to gain insight. Furthermore, they must meditate on the five aggregates of attachment so that they can stand firm on the foundation of insight, concentration, and wisdom.

Make Your Own Effort

When the Buddha taught the Dhammacakka Sutta to the group of five ascetics, four of the group, namely, *Vappa*, *Bhaddiya*, *Mahānāma*, and *Assaji*, did not realise the Dhamma as it was being taught. They had to make strenuous efforts under the guidance of the Buddha. They became Stream-winners only after one, two, three, and four days respectively after the diligent practice of meditation.

Liberation from Defilements

It is only in Buddhism that one can find the way to liberation from the bondage of the defilements. The following is what the Buddha taught further. to Subhadda. “O Subhadda! Under the Dhamma and Discipline laid down by me, you can attain the Noble Path with its eight factors. Only in my teaching can you find the first recluse (Stream-winner), the second recluse (Once-returned), the third recluse (Non-returned), and the fourth recluse (Arahant).”

¹ In the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, Puggalapaññatti, Catukka-uddeso, four kinds of individuals are listed. The last is unable to gain realisation of the Dhamma in the current existence (*padaparama*), but may in future lives. This limitation may be due to heavy obstructive kamma as in the case of Ajātasattu, or defective wisdom. (ed.)

Outside of my teaching there are no such recluses who actually know what they profess to know, and are able to annihilate the latent defilements.”

Let me recapitulate the points I have made. Before the Noble Eightfold Path was expounded after the Buddha’s Enlightenment, neither Ālāra, nor Udaka nor the ordinary Brahmas obtained the benefit of knowledge about the Path. When the Wheel of the Dhamma was first turned, 180 million Brahmas and myriads of deities gained the wisdom by which defilements could be eradicated. Among the human beings, *Koṇḍañña* alone attained the state of spiritual development called Stream-winning, while others of the group of five became recluses unassailed by defilements only later. So in the pre-Buddhist period, there were none who conquered defilements because there were none who taught the Noble Path. Even in these days, when Buddhism is said to be thriving, there are people who are either ignorant or sceptical of the Path. Consequently there can be no Stream-winners among them. The Buddha emphasized this point to Subhadda that there could be no recluses outside the scope of his religion.

The Commentaries give twelve kinds of such recluses, who can be subdivided into three divisions. In the first division are the four kinds of insight meditators who have already striven for the Path (*āradhāvippassaka*). In the second division are the four Noble Ones who have established themselves on the Path. The third division comprises the four Noble Ones who have come to the final stage to enjoy the fruition of the Path.

The meditator who has striven in the practice of meditation is worthy of special note. He or she will ultimately develop the knowledge of arising and passing away. From this fact, it must be noted that a meditator aspiring to the Path must practise insight meditation for the attainment of the first Path. One who meditates for the realisation of this Path will have to contemplate the three characteristics. While contemplating, he or she will be constantly directing attention to all things that are in a flux, now arising, now passing away. Since the mind is thus fixed on this phenomenon of change, there will be no opportunities for defilements to trouble the mind. In fact, they will all be eliminated. Such a one is known as a recluse. Outside of the realm of Buddhism, the practice of insight meditation is unknown, so there can be no recluses. It therefore follows that the lineage of

ordinary recluses, not to say of the eight Noble Ones, will come to an end among sectarians who claim to be Buddhists and assert that it is enough if understanding is reached with regard to corporeality and consciousness and to impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self, and that the practice of insight-meditation is superfluous.

Prolonging the Life of Buddhism

Having shown that true recluses who have annihilated defilements exist only under Buddhism, and that beyond Buddhism the lineage of recluses are usually extinct,¹ the Buddha went on to enlighten Subhadda on the best way to prolong the life of the Buddhasāsana. “Subhadda, I will tell you how to preserve this religion with its Noble Eightfold Path and the recluses practising it. If the twelve kinds of bhikkhus that I have enumerated live correctly, there will be no extinction of the lineage of true recluses including the Arahants.”²

This is what the Buddha said. I have here rendered the term “bhikkhu” as belonging to the twelve kinds of recluses following the annotations in the Commentaries. The four kinds of insight meditators and the eight Noble Ones constitute the twelve. However, what is meant by the term “to live correctly (*sammā vihareyyuṃ*)?” Does it mean to say that bhikkhus lead quiet lives immersed in the Dhamma, but doing nothing? Indeed no! If they lead a life of ease, there will be no continuity in the line of Arahants. Only when the Noble Eightfold Path is disseminated from generation to generation, will Noble Ones continue to flourish and the line of Arahants remain unbroken. Regarding this, the Commentaries have this to say: “By the term ‘*sammā vihareyyuṃ* — to live correctly,’ is meant that a Stream-winner who has attained the first Path must be able to disseminate the knowledge he has gained to others and train them to become Stream-winners.”

I think I have made myself clear. A Stream-winner should have the ability to make others interested in the Dhamma that he or she has acquired and teach them the method of developing the Noble

¹ It is said as “usually” and not “always” because there are Solitary Buddha (Pacceka Buddhas) who arise in the world at times when there are no Fully Enlightened Buddhas, and when the Buddhasāsana is extinct. They discover the path for themselves and realise Arahantship, so they are also true recluses. (ed.)

² “*Ime ca, subhadda, bhikkhū sammā vihareyyuṃ, asuñño loko arahantehi assāti.* As long as the bhikkhus practice correctly, the world will not be devoid of Arahants.” (ed.)

Eightfold Path. He or she should be able to persuade others to practise insight meditation. If, because of such efforts, a meditator attains the Path and becomes a Stream-winner who will also develop to reach the higher levels of Once-returned, Non-returned, and Arahant, then there will be a succession of Arahants for posterity.

As this meaning of the term “to live correctly” applies also to Once-returneds, *etc.*, it needs no further elaboration. Suffice to say that as long as new Arahants continue to come into being, their lineage will never become extinct. In the Commentaries, the way that more and more recluses can be developed on the basis of the first four Noble Paths has been fully explained, but it must be remembered that new Noble Ones do not just come into being automatically the instant that Path consciousness is attained. They can arise anew only after the fruition of the Path.

Insight Meditation for the Attainment of Stream-winning

Continuing, the Commentaries have this to say: “The insight meditator, who has already striven for Stream-winning and attained that knowledge of arising and passing away (*udayabbaya-ñāṇa*), will also be able to convert others to his own way of striving for Stream-winning, demonstrating to them the exercises in meditation, in which he or she has excelled. In this case, he or she may be said to have lived correctly.”

The insight meditator, who has, as said before, striven for the Path and acquired the knowledge of arising and passing away, is one who has striven for the Path (*āradhāvīpassaka*). A meditator who has acquired analytical knowledge of body and mind (*nāmarūpa-pariccheda-ñāṇa*), knowledge by discerning conditionality, or knowledge by comprehension (*sammasana-ñāṇa*), which is the knowledge that recognises the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self as a result of constantly observing the behaviour of mind and matter, cannot be regarded as one striving for the Path until he or she gains the knowledge of arising and passing away. Only on getting this knowledge will the meditator, now enriched with personal experience, be able to serve as an impetus to others to develop the Path.

Special attention is drawn to this Path striver in the face of wild assertions that it is not imperative to meditate since knowing the method is quite sufficient. This view is entirely wrong. The four

categories of the Noble Ones become established in the Path only after practising meditation on the Noble Eightfold Path. If, by constant practice, one reaches the knowledge of dissolution (*bhaṅga-ñāṇa*), which is knowledge about the dissolution of the knowing mind and the known object, nothing further needs to be said because he has achieved the desired aim.

The insight meditator who reaches the knowledge of arising and passing away attains proficiency in meditation. However, when he or she reaches the stage of the **knowledge of equanimity about formations** (*saṅkhārupekkhā-ñāṇa*) he or she can be regarded as the most proficient. It is therefore urged that a meditator share his or her knowledge with close friends and relatives. If, as a result of such persuasion, his friends and relatives reach the stage of arising and passing away, they will become intent on striving for the Path. Gaining inspiration, they will make successive attempts until they attain Arahantship. Then a new generation of Arahants will arise.

We bhikkhus take upon ourselves the task of meditation to preserve the Buddha's teaching with its Arahants. I appeal to those who genuinely wish for the long life for the Buddha's dispensation to help us in our venture. Unfortunately, there still exist some among us who oppose our efforts with unfavourable criticism launched behind our back. This is a sorry state of affairs.

In the times of the preceding Buddhas, similar efforts were made for the long life of the dispensation; but there were also times when the Dhamma could no longer be taught and propagated, and consequently it could not be practised. Under such circumstances, the Noble Eightfold Path became entirely forgotten. It was only when a new Buddha arose that the world came to know of the Path together with the method of developing it. For as long as the meditators strive for the renewal of the Path, true recluses will continue to flourish.

Development of the Noble Eightfold Path

I shall now deal with the Noble Eightfold Path concisely. The constituents of the Path are:

1. Right View (*sammā-dīṭṭhi*),
2. Right Thought (*sammā-saṅkappa*),
3. Right Speech (*sammā-vācā*),
4. Right Action (*sammā-kammantā*),

5. Right Livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*),
6. Right Effort (*sammā-vāyama*),
7. Right Mindfulness (*sammā-sati*),
8. Right Concentration (*sammā-samādhi*).

Among the eight path factors, Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood are in the morality group. If one abstains from lying, slander, harsh speech, and frivolous talk, one may be regarded as practising Right Speech. If one abstains from killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct, one would be regarded as practising Right Action. If one abstains from the seven kinds of misdeeds so far described, one would also be regarded as practising Right Livelihood. These path factors of morality are the basic steps to be observed before practising the Dhamma.

Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration are in the concentration group. It is achieved only after developing concentration. When the noting mind notes each object of tranquillity and insight, he is said to have made the Right Effort which can accomplish four tasks: 1) the task of preventing unwholesome states that have not yet arisen from arising, 2) the task of eliminating unwholesome states that have already arisen, 3) the task of developing wholesome states that have not yet been developed and 4) the task of establishing wholesome states that have been developed.

Concentration on the sense-object to be observed is Right Mindfulness. It has two aspects, tranquillity and insight. The Pāḷi Canon defines Right Mindfulness as follows:

There are four foundations of mindfulness: mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of feelings or sensations, mindfulness of thoughts, and mindfulness of phenomena. These four are achieved after due reflection on body, feelings, thoughts, and phenomena.

It has been clearly shown that these four foundations of mindfulness are grouped in the path factor of Right Mindfulness. Therefore, noting the process of respiration of breathing in and breathing out, as well as noting the parts of human anatomy such as hair of the head, hair of the body, *etc.*, is the tranquillity aspect of Right Mindfulness. So too, the observation of meditation devices (*kasina*) or corpses for the purpose of developing concentration are the tranquillity aspect of Right Mindfulness. However, noting and being aware of physical behaviour, mental and physical feelings,

sights, sounds, attachment, anger, *etc.*, is the insight aspect of Right Mindfulness. When Right Mindfulness is established, one can be regarded as possessing Right View, having gained insight into the arising and passing away of mind and matter, and the three characteristics: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self.

Mindfulness and Meditation

When mindfulness is established, knowledge of concentration (*samādhi-ñāṇa*), is gained. To enable the layman to remember how to practice meditation so that Right Mindfulness and Right View can be achieved, I have laid down the following instructions. To develop mindfulness and gain insight-knowledge, the following points must be borne in mind:

1. Recognise correctly all physical behaviour as it arises.
2. Recognise correctly all mental behaviour as it arises.
3. Recognise all kinds of sensations — pleasant, unpleasant, and indifferent — as they arise.
4. Know all phenomena with an analytical mind.

I have explained these points extensively in my other discourse on the [Dhammacakka Sutta](#), which may be consulted.

In the course of concentrating on a sense-object with due awareness, Right Mindfulness will be established together with Right Concentration, which the Buddha elaborated as the four *jhānas*, the highest stage of concentration. At the lowest level of concentration, is access-concentration (*upacāra-samādhi*), or proximate concentration, so called because it is in the neighbourhood of *jhāna* or attainment concentration (*upacāra-samādhi*), all denoting ecstasy. At the stage of proximate concentration, purity of mind (*citta-visuddhi*) is achieved. There is also momentary-concentration for insight (*vipassanā-khaṇika-samādhi*), which may be described as momentary-concentration by which one gains insight. It may be equated with the true proximate concentration in its ability to repel the hindrances such as sloth and torpor, restlessness, *etc.*, that prevent the arising of wholesome thoughts and obstruct the bliss of nibbāna. In the Commentaries this momentary-concentration is described as access-concentration.

When a meditator's insight becomes strengthened, Right Thoughts would direct the mind to realities of the sense-objects on which it concentrates: and eventually one will gain Right View.

This happens in the following way. As one begins to establish mindfulness and, consequently, purity of mind, one will be able to distinguish the knowing mind from the object known. For instance, when one is meditating on the rising and falling of the abdomen, one may be able to distinguish the phenomena of rising and falling from the knowing mind. In much the same way, in the process of walking, one may notice that the act of raising the foot, extending it forward, and putting it down can be distinguished from the mind motivating the movement. In this way, mind (*nāma*) can be distinguished from matter (*rūpa*). This happens without any preconceptions. One recognises the phenomena without giving any thought to them. In other words, recognition is spontaneous.

As the meditator's concentration gains strength, and wisdom thereby gets sharpened, he or she will realise that the knees bend because of the wish to do so. Walking occurs because of the desire to walk. Seeing occurs because there are eyes to see and objects to be seen. Hearing occurs because there are ears to hear and sounds to be heard. He or she enjoys life because kamma is favourable. In this way, he or she is able to distinguish between cause and effect with reference to every phenomenon that takes place.

As concentration and wisdom get stronger, the meditator will also realise that the knowing subject and the known object arise in one moment to pass away in the next. They arise anew to pass away again. As this continual process is perceived, the meditator will realise that all is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self. These insights arise from direct experience. They are not just imagined or the products of auto-suggestion.

The meditator knows these facts without having to direct his mind purposefully. By noting things as they occur, he or she realises their true nature. As mind and matter are truly different, he or she realises that they are not one and the same. Subsequently, he or she realises the cause as well as the effect of all that occurs. The real nature of things observed urges the meditator on to the knowledge that all mind and matter are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self. Now the meditator is on the path to Right View.

A meditator has to note and observe every object that appears via the six sense-doors. This requires effort; and that is Right Effort. Then he or she has to keep the mind on what is noted to be aware

of it, which is Right Mindfulness. Since he or she is mindful, the mind will be fixed on the object, which is Right Concentration. These three factors of the Path — Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration — are the group of concentration.

Then there is the process of thinking out the reality of nature, which is classified as Right Thought. As a result of this right thinking we have Right View. These two are the group of wisdom. These five factors of the concentration and wisdom groups are together classified as the five workers (*karaka-maggaṅga*), which combine in their efforts in the process of simultaneously noting and knowing.

Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood, as mentioned earlier, constitute the group of morality, which may generally be deemed as fulfilled when the meditator takes up the practice of insight meditation. During the period of meditation, these three path factors of morality remain unpolluted; in fact, they get progressively purified as time goes on. With these three in this group added to the five in the previous groups, we have the eight path factors with which we meditate.

Again, in the development of insight meditation, the qualities of the basic path (*mūla-magga*) must be fulfilled. Of them the first is right view of the ownership of kamma (*kammassakatā=sammā-diṭṭhi*). Only when a meditator has firm faith in this law of action and its consequences, can he or she practise insight meditation. One must be confident that practising meditation exercises can lead to the path, its fruition, and nibbāna. Only with this confidence will the meditator be able to exert right effort. Second in importance on this basic path is morality, which must always remain pure. Third in importance is momentary-concentration, which is akin to access-concentration, as explained above. Accomplished in this basic path, a meditator is deemed to be on the right path to attain insight. The path of insight that I mentioned before is the preliminary path (*pubbabhāga-magga*), which is the precursor to the fulfilment of the Noble Path.¹

The Three Stages of the Path

It may be reiterated here that the right view in accepting the law of kamma, the three path factors of morality — right speech, right action, and right livelihood — and the three kinds of concentration,

¹ There is only one eightfold path, but it has a beginning, middle, and end. See also the Sayādaw's [Discourse on the Sallekha Sutta](#). Before anyone will set a foot on the path, they must have faith, only then will they work to reach the goal. (ed.)

namely, *jhāna*, access-concentration, and momentary-concentration, are grouped in the basic path (*mūla-magga*). While meditating, momentary-concentration may become established, but if insight remains weak, even the lower stage of analytical knowledge of body and mind may not arise. Only when the hindrances are dispelled can a meditator arrive at this stage. However, it is obvious that he or she must first be accomplished in momentary-concentration. Some direct the meditator to concentrate on the three characteristics before any concentration has been established, but this does not augur well for the development of insight.

The three basic path factors of morality should have been accomplished before a meditator starts practising meditation, but a beginner may skip the practice to attain *jhāna*, and start meditating at once on the five aggregates of attachment in accordance with the example cited in the [Dhammadāyāda Sutta](#) as follows:

Within the scope of Buddhism, some would prefer to practise access-concentration or attainment concentration before practising insight meditation. Such practice is tranquillity (*samatha*). If a meditator, accomplished in tranquillity, practises meditation further, observing the three characteristics, that will be insight meditation. This illustrates the way a meditator using tranquillity as a vehicle (*samathayānika*) practises insight meditation, but meditation involving the three characteristics can be stated here only briefly. The Visuddhimagga has elaborated on the subject of acquiring analytical knowledge of body and mind through the exercise of *jhāna*, and also the attainment of that knowledge coupled with knowledge of conditionality (*paccaya-pariggaha-ñāna*) through the exercise of access-concentration.

The way that a meditator using insight as a vehicle (*vipassanāyānika*) develops insight knowledge is as follows. Within the scope of Buddhism, some meditators prefer to meditate on the five aggregates of attachment while noting and observing the three characteristics, without developing tranquillity first.

Although the texts thus say that one gains insight into the three characteristics by contemplating the five aggregates of attachment, without resorting to the practice of access-concentration and *jhāna*, it must not be assumed that the three characteristics are perceived from the very beginning of meditation. If the hindrances cannot be removed, the characteristics of mind and matter may not be fully

appreciated. Here the strength of momentary-concentration must be called to assist. This concentration is attentiveness that lasts only for a while, but when it becomes established, tranquility and purity of mind occur at the moment of meditation. Only when the mind is thus purified, analytical knowledge of body and mind will become established. Thereafter, knowledge of conditionality will occur spontaneously. These stages have been shown in detail in the Visuddhimagga. Here, it can only be said in brief that the three characteristics are observed and noted in relation to the aggregates of attachment. This observation, however, does not ensure gaining insight into the three characteristics from the very beginning of meditation. If one holds that it does so, it goes against what is said in the Visuddhimagga, and will be far away from the truth.

The stage when knowledge of arising and passing away is gained through the contemplation of the five aggregates, keeping the mind pure by means of the three types of concentration, the meditator is said to be on the preliminary path. The ability to distinguish between mind and matter leads to the path of insight. Ability to know the cause and effect relationship between mind and matter, and perceiving the three characteristics also leads to insight, which is the precursor to the realisation of the noble path. This preliminary path can be realised in ten stages ranging from **knowledge by comprehension** (*sammasana-ñāṇa*), to **knowledge of adaptation** (*anuloma-ñāṇa*). After the attainment of this final stage of wisdom there arises consciousness known as **maturity knowledge** (*gotrabhū-ñāṇa*), a thought-moment that overcomes the sense-sphere lineage and develops the sublime or noble lineage. That means arriving at the stage of the Noble Ones from that of worldlings.

Developing the Preliminary Path

The preliminary path is the precursor to the noble path. It is one step before reaching the noble stage. To get to it one must contemplate the aggregates of attachment so that one gains conviction regarding the Truth of Suffering (*dukkha-saccā*). When this is properly understood one will know the Truth of the Cause of Suffering (*samudaya-saccā*). Constant concentration on this Truth will lead to the discovery of the method to eliminate the cause of suffering. This is accomplished the task of insight meditation. Once the meditator is convinced regarding

the truth of impermanence, the mind will be detached from the perception of permanence, and when the meditator reaches that stage, ignorance will be dispelled. Then the meditator will be able to get free from mental formations (*sañkhāra*), which constitute kamma that produces rebirth. Now he or she sees a flash of nibbāna.

The five aggregates of attachment must be thoroughly understood. They do not need to be just learnt by rote — they need to be known by actual experience and practice. One must try to realise the phenomena of arising and passing away of mind and matter. Insight means the self-knowledge gained by inquiry and effort. Only self-discovery through meditation will dispel all doubts about the existence of any self or soul. Only then can it be said with certainty that there is nothing that can be called a self, and that what appears to be a self is just an aggregate of mind and matter. As one gains this realisation, one will come to understand the law of cause and effect. As one continues to meditate on causality one will encounter the constant arising and passing away of mind and matter, which are not permanent.

To Know the True Nature of Things

Only when one observes and notes phenomena as they arise can one know the true nature of mind and matter, as well as the causes and effects relating to their arising and passing away. Consider this: suppose your body becomes hot. When you notice this “hotness,” and constantly contemplate on it, you will come to realise its nature, which is just one attribute of the element of temperature (*tejo-dhātu*), that governs hot and cold. When you are concentrating on the nature of heat, you do not identify it with yourself, nor with others, be they men or women. You recognise “hotness” correctly. Likewise, if you concentrate on the stiffness of your body, you will notice only “stiffness” without reference to yourself or others. Apply such investigation to every movement that you make. Invariably you will cognise the movement and not the individual who moves. The movement, you will realise, is the element of motion (*vāyo-dhātu*).

The Buddha enjoined us to know the fact of going when going. We must understand standing as “standing,” sitting as “sitting,” resting as “resting,” lying down as “lying down,” and so forth, just as we stand, sit, rest, or lie down. Any physical action that is made must be noted at once. We simply arrest that moment when a thing

happens and note the happening. All actions arise because of the desire to act, which stimulates the element of motion. You might possess second-hand knowledge of all that is now being described through reading books; but one should not rely on book knowledge. One should know things by actual observation and meditation.

If you watch a flash of lightning at the moment it strikes, you will see it for yourself and know all about it. If you are simply imagining how lightning strikes before or after the event, you may have not seen and known the flash of lightning. So try to know things for yourself by actual observation of things as they occur.

In the beginning of meditation, one may not notice anything extraordinary, but after regular practice, all hindrances, such as sensual desire, hatred, and cruelty, will be absent, and the distinction between the bodily movement and the mind that notes it will become apparent. Again, reverting to the example given with reference to going, the meditator will realise that one goes, because the mind desires to go and because the body brings about movement that constitute going.

The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta Commentary says: “When intention to go arises in the mind, it impels the element of motion to propel (the body).” On the stimulus given by the mind, the pressure of the element of motion is brought into play; and so the body moves. Then we say “It goes.”

As the meditator focuses constantly on the rising of the abdomen, the power of concentration will gradually get stronger. Then the successive movements that constitute the rising abdomen will be distinctly noticed as they occur. To observe and note all that happens at the six sense-doors might prove impossible for beginners. So we direct the meditator to begin with observing the rising and falling of the abdomen. While doing this basic exercise, he or she may think of something else. We urge him or her to note this too and then revert to observing “rising,” and “falling.” If he or she feels tired, painful, or hot while meditating, we urge him or her to note all of these sensations and then revert to the original task of noting the movements of the abdomen. As one goes on meditating, one will come to realise that all these discomforts are suffering or unsatisfactory sensations (*dukkha-vedanā*). We repeatedly urge meditators to observe such phenomena. We have good reasons for doing so. A

beginner does not usually understand things at first. When noting one thing as instructed, he or she may wonder what to note next. The meditator is therefore asked to concentrate on one thing at a time so that time is not wasted by the mind wandering. When concentration and effort gain strength, we instruct the meditator further to concentrate on all that occurs at the six sense doors. Among us now there are many meditators who are able to note all that occurs in relation to the arising and passing away of mind and matter, that is the origination and cessation of all phenomena.

When Realities Are Known

As the meditator keeps watching the arising and passing away of mind and matter, knowledge of their true nature will mature. Then he or she will realise that all arising phenomena immediately cease. Whatever arises, passes into dissolution. The process of origination is called “*udaya*” and that of cessation is called “*vaya*.” Hence the term “knowledge of arising and passing away (*udayabbaya-ñāṇa*).” The reality of these two phases of phenomena cannot be perceived unless the significance of mind and matter are fully appreciated. In the metaphor of a flash of lightning, unless one actually sees the flash one can never know it. Without actually seeing a thing happening, one can never know what happens. Therefore, the mere recital of “arising and passing away” cannot lead one to knowledge about all mental and physical phenomena. One who cannot appreciate these realities cannot be said to have attained insight knowledge.

Conviction Regarding Impermanence

When the realities of mind and matter are known, the meditator will realise that things come into being only to pass away. The Commentaries say: “Having become, things cease to exist; and that is impermanence (*hutvā abhāvato aniccā*).” Only when one can appreciate this nature of origination and cessation, will one gain conviction regarding impermanence. So that Commentary adds: “Know impermanence; know the sign of impermanence; know how to contemplate impermanence.”

The five aggregates are impermanent. In the Dhammacakka Sutta they are explained as the five aggregates of attachment. All compound things that come into being and pass away are impermanent.

When the meditator is watching the six sense-doors, he or she will notice the process of seeing, hearing, *etc.*, and will eventually attain knowledge by comprehension and knowledge of arising and passing away, by which the truth of impermanence is realised. If one builds a house in a field, that house was not there before. Now that is built, it has come into existence. In time, it will become dilapidated, and finally it will disappear altogether. What was not there before comes into being and totally disappears the next moment. That is the way of impermanence. You see a flash of lightning. Is the flash eternal?

So the Commentaries say:¹ “That which arises to be subjected to dissolution is the characteristic of impermanence (*Tassa yo hutvā abhāvākāro, taṃ aniccalakkhaṇaṃ nāma*).”

Contemplation on Impermanence

Our bodies have identifiable characteristics by which we can recognise one another. In the same way we can recognise the nature of existence by its identifiable characteristics. Before we notice the identifiable characteristics in others we do not know who is who. In the same way, before we see the characteristic of impermanence we do not gain real knowledge about impermanence. In that way we say that the meditator has not reached the stage of knowledge of impermanence. Merely by reciting “Impermanence! Impermanence!” from book-knowledge, one cannot arrive at that stage. When one observes what one sees or hears, and is able to take note that what one sees or hears gets dissolved, then only knowledge of impermanence is accomplished. In other words, it is only when one has constantly contemplated impermanence and realised the truth of the Impermanent nature of existence that one becomes truly apprehensive of the law of impermanence.

From Impermanence to Unsatisfactoriness and Not-self

When the meditator appreciates that impermanence is real, he or she will also appreciate the realities of unsatisfactoriness and not-self. However, here too, superficial knowledge is not meant. When a pot is broken, we say that it does not last long and is, therefore, impermanent. When a thorn gets into the flesh, we say that it is painful, and that, therefore, it is unsatisfactory. This is merely

¹ Itivuttaka Commentary, ii.88 (ed.)

knowledge of concepts (*paññatti*). Here we are referring to knowledge of absolute realities (*paramattha*). When one has only a conceptual knowledge of impermanence and unsatisfactoriness, one may not be able to grasp the real import of not-self. The Commentaries say:

“When the characteristic of impermanence is recognised, the characteristic of not-self will also be recognised. To know one of the three characteristics is to know all of them, and when a meditator sees the truth of not-self in all conditioned things he or she is ready to enter the gateway to nibbāna.”

Ten Kinds of Insight

There are ten kinds of insight. The foregoing mainly relates to the first kind — **knowledge by comprehension** — by which a meditator is able to investigate the aggregates as a composite. When this knowledge arises, he or she becomes fully convinced of the truth of the Dhamma relating to the three characteristics, on the contemplation of which he or she can develop knowledge about the arising and passing away of mind and matter. This is the stage when the meditator attains the **knowledge of arising and passing away**. At this stage one will see radiance. One will feel highly exulted. Awareness will be extraordinarily clear: There will be nothing that one fails to notice. The mind is sharp and the memory clear. Strong faith will be established. One will be joyous both physically and spiritually. This state of mind defies description. However, at this stage, if one becomes attached to such delightful sensations, which in the negative sense, are precursors to mental defilements, there will be no further progress. Joy is no doubt a support to the meditator in his or her efforts to gain more courage and determination to strive for higher goals until reaching the destination of insight knowledge. So the meditators are warned to just note the joy as it occurs and discard it altogether to gain further insight.

If the meditator discards the radiance, accompanied by all manner of delightful sensations, he or she will clearly see the arising and dissolution of mind and matter. After that he or she will notice that both the knowing mind (*nāma*), and the sense-object known (*rūpa*), disappear as quickly as they appear. In other words, the meditator knows immediately the rapid dissolution, in pairs, of both the

inclination of the mind towards the object and the knowing mind simultaneously. This realisation is called **knowledge of dissolution** (*bhaṅga-ñāṇa*). On attaining this insight, one will become convinced that whatever sensations arise from outside stimuli, are impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self. This also applies to sensations formed in the mind in relation to sense-objects. At this stage, one will be able to discard all ideas about permanence, satisfactoriness, and self.

As the meditator finds that all conditioned things dissolve quickly, he or she becomes apprehensive; and at this stage is said to have attained knowledge of fearfulness (*bhaya-ñāṇa*), which leads to a higher stage called **knowledge of misery** (*ādīnava-ñāṇa*) when he or she realises all apprehensive things as baneful. From this stage he or she progresses to **knowledge of disgust** (*nibbidā-ñāṇa*) when he or she becomes very weary and regards all baneful things as disgusting. When this knowledge is developed he or she desires to escape from such things, and by further striving reaches the stage of **knowledge of desire for deliverance** (*muñcitu-kamyatā-ñāṇa*). As the will to liberate himself or herself from such ills develops further, the meditator attains the **knowledge of re-observation** (*paṭisaṅkhā-ñāṇa*). At this stage he or she makes extraordinary efforts to gain tranquility. As tranquillity strengthens, he or she gains the **knowledge of equanimity about formations** (*saṅkhārupekkhā-ñāṇa*).

In the Visuddhimagga the development of the knowledge of fearfulness and its successive stages are metaphorically described as the plight of a fisherman who has caught a fish in his trap. He put his hand into the trap and was delighted to find he had caught something. Then he took it out only to discover that what he had caught was not a fish, but a poisonous snake with three characteristics distinguishing it as a poisonous snake. Fear gripped him. He now realised that it was a mistake to have seized the snake, wished he had not, and would very much like to get rid of it. However, if he released it carelessly, it would bite him. So he held it high overhead, whirled it three times, and threw it away so that it landed elsewhere. Then he ran for his life. After some time he looked back.

Before the three characteristics are noticed, we are very attached to our body and mind. Perhaps we are delighted with our 'self' like that fisherman who thought he had caught a fish. Only when we saw the three characteristics we took fright, realised our error and

became disgusted with what we saw. Then we could no longer be pleased with our mind and body. In fact we would like to escape from what we call our mind and body. A meditator practises insight meditation to perceive mind and matter as repugnant, and therefore, to develop a desire to gain liberation from their grip in much the same way as the fisherman did to get rid of the poisonous snake.

Some might argue that as long as one knows about the three characteristics, the task is done. If one contemplates on unsatisfactoriness, they say, one finds only unsatisfactoriness. This kind of argument does not accord with the Pāli texts. What these people know of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self is superficial. This superficial or conceptual knowledge fails to instil fear in the mind of the meditator. What is there to be afraid of with seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and knowing things? They think it is pleasurable to see things that they like to see, and to hear things that they like to hear. It tastes delicious, they would say. It smells fragrant, it is soft to the touch, it is delightful to think about. When one is free to think about a variety of things and is able to let one's imagination run free, one feels that the experience is mostly enjoyable. Naturally, therefore, one feels it irksome to restrain one's mind and meditate. Perhaps that is why some invent easy methods to gain insight. However, if one gives free rein to the imagination, taking delight in it, one would be reluctant to relinquish pleasant thoughts. In that case, how could one fling away this body and mind in the way that the fisherman did with the poisonous snake? Superficial knowledge is not enough for one seeking liberation. It is difficult even for those rich in wisdom to develop the weariness of existence instilled by the knowledge of desire for deliverance.

When a meditator strives to escape from mental formations, he or she may be likened to the fisherman trying to fling the poisonous snake away. Having made an extraordinary effort to get free from those formations using the knowledge of re-observation, he or she arrives at the stage of knowledge of equanimity about formations, which is unique among the ten kinds of insight.

Six Characteristics of Knowledge of Equanimity

This knowledge of equanimity about formations has six characteristics. The first relates to neutrality where the mind is unmoved by fear

or pleasure induced by sense objects. Before reaching this stage, a meditator is apprehensive of the dangers and obstructions caused by conditioned things. As knowledge of fearfulness develops, anxiety and fear arises that things have gone wrong. Weariness then develops, and the meditator longs to be free from these undesirable phenomena. Making a great effort in meditation, he or she develops equanimity that is unaffected by fear or anxiety. Tranquility is thus established.

The second characteristic is mental equilibrium whereby the meditator neither feels glad about pleasant things nor sad about things that cause pain and distress. He or she can note joy as joy, pain as pain, and sorrow as sorrow, viewing things impartially, with neither attachment nor aversion towards sense-objects.

The third characteristic relates to the meditator's balance of mind. When meditating on volitional activities the meditator establishes a perfect balance of mind that "remains right in the middle." That is to say he or she remains neutral to all objects of volitional activities. However, it may be asked if equanimity is concerned only with neutrality towards the objects of volitional activities and not to the practice of meditation. Regarding this point the Commentaries say that just as the mind views the sense-objects with equanimity so too it accepts the act of insight with equanimity. Previously, in the earlier stages, the meditator had to exert effort to concentrate on the sense-objects as well as on the noting mind. This stage of equanimity is effortless in focusing the mind on the sense-objects as well as on the very act of focusing. It may be that initially one will have to exert to note the rising and falling of the abdomen or the activities of sitting, touching, *etc.*, for a few times. These are just preliminaries. After that no such efforts are necessary. The two processes of noting and knowing the object will become spontaneous, running together in their own sequence. Concentration is rendered easy.

To these three characteristics may be added the other three mentioned in the Path of Discrimination (*Paṭisambhidāmagga*). So, now we have the fourth characteristic, namely, the firm establishment of knowledge. It means the knowledge achieved is retained for a long time in all its sequences. Formerly the knowledge attained through meditation lasted only four or five minutes, getting dissipated thereafter for various reasons. In that case one had to begin meditation afresh. However, once the knowledge of equanimity gets established,

the stream of knowledge flows without losing momentum, after the meditator has initially repeated his or her efforts to note four, five, or at most ten times. When this momentum is achieved, the meditator will be noting and knowing conditioned things for two or three hours at a stretch. This is how knowledge is established for any length of time.

The fifth characteristic of knowledge of equanimity is refinement. When grounded or powdered rice is sifted again and again in a sieve, all the chaff will be discarded and only the finest grain will remain. In much the same way, refinement is achieved when this knowledge is exercised time and again.

The last characteristic of this insight is the ability of the observing mind to remain fixed only on the object it has set itself to work on without wavering. The texts say that at this stage the mind withdraws from the many enjoyable sensations it encounters and refuses to flicker. It might direct its attention to those pleasurable sensations for a fleeting moment, but it does not dwell on them for long. It reverts to its task of noting and knowing conditioned things impassively as it has done before. The meditator may be noting and knowing various sense-objects, but the mind will not be flitting about and getting dispersed. It will recoil from them and get fixed on only a few selected objects prominent among them.

Those three latter characteristics may be described succinctly as firm establishment of knowledge, achievement of refinement, and developing an unwavering mind. With the three former characteristics we have six characteristics of the knowledge of equanimity about formations. Meditators should examine themselves to see whether they are qualified for this insight with its six properties. If found wanting in any of them they may not be considered as proficient and therefore, they may regard themselves as not having attained that stage of the noble path.

Realisation of Nibbāna by the Noble Path

As the knowledge of equanimity ripens, the process of knowing gains pace as the mind takes note of the sense-objects effortlessly. As speed is gathered in the process, consciousness quickens until it arrives at the stage when it ceases along with the object it is concentrating upon. This indicates going beyond the volitional activities of mind and matter to gain entry into the portals of bliss called nibbāna.

In the Milinda Pañha, it is said:

“As the meditator notes the object by systematic observation, it overrides the phenomena of incessant arising and passing away of mind and matter, and reaches the stage when the constant flux of mind and matter ceases.”

Initially, the meditator has been systematically noting the process relating to the phenomena of touching, thinking, knowing, hearing, and seeing that arise in the body and mind, thereby discovering the nature of the various volitional activities, which are too numerous to be taken into account, and realises that they are all impermanent. Finally all sense-objects and consciousness of these sense-objects get dissolved. At this stage one can look forward to nibbāna.

So the Milinda Pañha again has the following:

“When the preliminary path is well-developed, the meditator reaches the stage where the stream of forces relating to mind and matter ceases, then he or she may be said to be heading for nibbāna.”

As I have said, concentrating on the arising and passing away of mind and matter, observing the three characteristics, is the preliminary path, the precursor to the Noble Path. Having reached that stage, progressing from there in stages from the knowledge of equanimity, the meditator gets to [knowledge of adaptation](#), so called because it is through this knowledge that an aspirant for enlightenment adapts to the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment (*bodhipakkhiya dhamma*). When this knowledge is achieved, the meditator is on the path of the Noble Ones and ready to find shelter in the peaceful and cool shade of nibbāna. Once he or she looks forward to nibbāna like this, he or she becomes a Stream-winner who finally escapes from the four lower realms. Gaining insight into not-self, the meditator realises nibbāna, and once nibbāna is seen, escapes from the lower realms.

All that I have discussed relates to how Noble Ones arise, having liberated themselves from defilements by attaining nibbāna through the practice of insight meditation. Now I shall go back to the story of Subhadda. On the eve of his *parinibbāna*, the Buddha taught his last discourse with compassion for the ascetic who had by now listened to the discourse reverentially and with rapt attention.

The Buddha's Last Words to Subhadda

These are the last words of the Buddha addressed to Subhadda:

“Ekūnatimso vayasā Subhadda, Yaṃ pabbajim̐ kiṃkusalānu esī.

Vassāni paññāsa samādhikāni, Yato ahaṃ pabbajito Subhadda.

Ñāyassa dhammassa padesavattī, Ito bahiddhā samaṇopi natthi.

“Dutiyopi samaṇo natthi. Tātiyopi samaṇo natthi. Catutthopi samaṇo natthi. Suññā parappavādā samaṇebhi aññehi. Ime ca, Subhadda, bhikkhū sammā vihareyyuṃ, asuñño loko arahantehi assā”ti.

“O Subhadda! At the age of twenty-nine, I went forth to seek Enlightenment. Since then, more than fifty years have gone by. Beyond the scope of this Dhamma that I have been teaching during those years, there has been none who practised insight meditation as part of the doctrine of Noble Path. Neither has there appeared any first recluse (*sotāpanna*), second recluse (*sakadāgāmi*), third recluse (*anāgāmi*), nor fourth recluse (*Arahant*). Outside of my teaching, there are none of the twelve recluses in the four categories, who are free from mental defilements, and who really know what they profess to know. Subhadda! Know that for as long as the Noble Eightfold Path remains extant, the lineage of the true recluses will remain unbroken. If the bhikkhus live correctly, the world will not be devoid of Arahants.”

One thing that stands out prominently in this valediction is the revelation that there are none in any other religious teachings who practise insight meditation. So beware of those who assert that insight meditation is unnecessary. Such statements are not conducive to the practice of insight meditation, without which Buddhism would be like any other ordinary teaching.

Then Subhadda reflected: “In the doctrine that my teachers, and their teachers taught, no instruction is given regarding the practice of insight meditation. Therefore, among them there are none who are liberated from mental defilements. There are none among them who observe conditioned phenomena such as seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking, knowing the three

characteristics. There are none who follow the basic path, let alone the preliminary path of insight. Then, how can there be true recluses who have eliminated mental defilements by attaining the Noble Path? I will renounce asceticism and embrace the teachings of the Buddha.” Having thought to himself thus, he told the Buddha:

“Excellent, Venerable sir! You have revealed what was hidden. You have shown the way to one who was lost. You have shed light where there was darkness. You have let me see the light of the Dhamma after explaining it in many ways. I take refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha. May I obtain the going forth in your presence.”

Subhadda Obtains the Going Forth

Then the Buddha said: “Subhadda! Anyone belonging to another religious order usually undergoes probation. If anyone wishes to accept my Dhamma and Discipline, he takes refuge in the Triple Gem and observes the training for four months, after which, if the elders are satisfied, they may be ordained. However, I accept herein that there are differences between individuals.”

At this Subhadda said that he would willingly undergo probation for four years if necessary, even though others do so only for four months. The Buddha knew that it was not necessary for him and asked Venerable Ānanda to ordain him as a bhikkhu at once.

Venerable Ānanda took Subhadda aside, and had his head washed and shaved. Then he was taught the reflection on the first five of the thirty-two parts of the body, dressed in the yellow robes, and asked to take the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha as his refuge. In this way he obtained the going forth.

That was at midnight on the full-moon day of May. Venerable Ānanda brought the novice to the Buddha who then ordained him. This is mentioned in the Commentaries; so it seems that Subhadda did not become a monk by the words, “Come, Bhikkhu! (*Ehi Bhikkhu*). Monks who were thus admitted into the Order did not need to shave their head and don the yellow robes; nor were they required to take refuge in the three Gems. As soon as the Buddha had bidden the candidate with the words, “Come, Bhikkhu!” he became a monk, complete with shaven head and yellow robes and all the requisites that a monk should have. In this case, Subhadda was formally ordained.

Subhadda Practises Meditation

The Buddha then prescribed meditation exercises for the newly ordained monk. The Commentaries make no mention of the kind of meditation that he was asked to practise, but later in the text insight meditation was referred to which shows that he took up insight meditation. It may be noted that he had never before heard the words of the Buddha. It was only now, just before the *parinibbāna*, that he had the opportunity to hear the Buddha's discourse. Despite all these drawbacks, the Enlightened One instructed him to meditate the moment he became a bhikkhu.

Certain assertions have been circulating that before one is well versed in Dependent Origination, one should not practise meditation. Such a proposition could demoralise anyone intent on practising the Dhamma. It has been argued that Subhadda needed no learning in the [Doctrine of Dependent Origination](#) because he was an extraordinary man. If this argument holds water, what then of Chanda, who was equally extraordinary? He was taught this Law, but he could not get illumined in the Dhamma in spite of being extraordinary, because he was highly egoistic. To an individual whose attachment to life in this world is not strong, it would not have been too difficult to see the laws of cause and effect. Once he becomes convinced about these laws and tries to take note of conditioned things arising as they arise, he will see for himself the working of the law of cause and effect. These have been dealt with elsewhere when I gave the discourse about the Dhammacakka Sutta.

Having got instructions from the Buddha, Subhadda noted them and went to a suitable place. In those days the Buddha had so many disciples with him that it would not be easy to find solitude where monks were absent. By a suitable place is meant a place which was not overcrowded with monks. Finding such a place, he walked to and fro there and meditated. Since he walked during his meditation, his exercise could have had no relation to tranquillity. In that practice, whether he meditated on respiration, or on the thirty-two repulsive parts of the body, he would have to be at rest. In meditation on devices (*kasiṇa*), one has to concentrate on the conceptualised image of a circle. In the cemetery meditations, one has to concentrate on corpses. In practising the Brahmavihāra Dhamma, one has to concentrate on loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic-joy, and

equanimity. All these exercises in meditation require the meditator to remain at rest. So it may safely be taken that the Buddha instructed Subhadda to practice insight meditation. As the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta enjoins the meditator to note going while one is going, it may safely be assumed that Subhadda practised mindfulness and insight meditation.

While walking, Subhadda noted the antecedents and precedents of the phenomenon of moving and developed insight after repeated concentration and finally became an Arahant possessed with the four analytical knowledges (*paṭisambhidā-ñāṇa*). Then he came to where the Buddha was and, having made his obeisance, sat there.

At the first Buddhist Council, all of these incidents were related and duly noted. It must be noted from all that I have taught that merely thinking over the Dhamma does not lead one to the path, its fruition, or nibbāna. It is common knowledge that if you let your mind go wherever it wishes to go, exerting no effort to train it, you cannot be on the Noble Eightfold Path. Without the realisation of this Path, one cannot become a true Noble One who is liberated from defilements. At the first Buddhist Council it was noted that Subhadda was the last disciple to attain the Arahantship during the lifetime of the Buddha.

May all who have listened to this discourse on the Subhadda Sutta attain nibbāna from the basic stage of the path through the preliminary stage to the final stage of the Noble Path trodden by the Worthy Ones.

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