

Concentration

Adeesha Ekanayake

December 13, 2011

Introduction

- When it comes to the entire eightfold path, we've talked about each and every step except for the last, and today I have the honour of talking about that very step: Concentration.
- Now, before I begin, let me mention a standard disclaimer. And before I begin the disclaimers, for those of us who are thinking "What is this eightfold path thing, anyway?" let me try and give you a two minute introduction to what the eightfold path is.
- The Buddha boils down what he understood in the moment of enlightenment to what is known as the four noble truths : Suffering, the cause of suffering, escaping from suffering, the path one must walk to escape from suffering.
- The eightfold path is that fourth truth - the path one must walk to escape from suffering. Now, the path is divided into eight steps, but for ease of understanding, the eight steps are divided into 3 categories: Wisdom, Ethical Conduct, and Concentration.
- Concentration talks about right effort, right mindfulness, and confusingly, right concentration. And concentration is what I am going to talk about today.
- So, about that disclaimer -
 - Here's number one. I said that the eightfold path has eight steps but that's not really true. When I say eight steps you'd probably think of a staircase with 8 steps. You start at the first and end at the last. But the reality is that the path is more like a single thing that you look at from 8 different points of view. Or a set of 8 interrelated qualities that you have to develop together to gain enlightenment.

What it is

- So, what is right concentration, anyway?
 - Well, it is described as the ability to concentrate until you reach a full 'concentrative state'.
 - So, what did that mean? Well, there are these things called 'jhanas'. These are levels of supremely high concentrative ability.
 - * Ever heard about magic monks who fly, teleport and do other cool stuff? Well, I grew up with stories about Sariputtha and Mogallana, the amazing enlightenment-spreading duo who do all these wonderfully magical things with their concentrative power.
 - * The idea is that these abilities come not with enlightenment but with the ability to concentrate really really well.
 - * So jhanas are not unique to buddhism. Ever heard of Jains, the dudes who walk around in not much clothes? Well, Mahavir, the leader of the Jains was said to have reached all these jhanas too (he was a contemporary of the buddha). The spiritual teachers the Buddha learned with before he attained enlightenment also were said to have reached the higher jhanas as well.

- Now there are four jhanas, and here are how they feel to a practitioner, as the Buddha described them.
 - * The first is the rapture and pleasure drawn of withdrawal from lay life, as well as the ability to engage in directed thought
 - * The second is rapture and pleasure drawn of the unification of awareness
 - * The third is a sense of equanimity and mindfulness
 - * The last is a sense of pure equanimity and mindfulness; a sense of neither pleasure or pain.
 - * The neat thing to realize here is that as you progress in jhanas, you become more and more detached from the sensual pleasures and more and more mindful and satisfied.
- So, what's the point of learning to concentrate and attaining these jhanas? Well, the jhanas help you to suppress the five hindrances. When you meditate, have you ever felt a sense of your nose itching, a thought about a pretty girl (or boy) you saw in class, a sense of sleepiness or some such thought just pop into your mind and mess with your meditation? Well, such thoughts are examples of hindrances.
- And here comes my 2 minute introduction to the five hindrances:
 1. Sensual desire: The lust to gain things agreeable to your senses, the sense of craving things such as power and position (pot with paint in it)
 2. ill will: Hatred, resentment, anger directed towards self, others and even situations (a pot of boiling water)
 3. dullness and drowsiness: You feel tired and sleepy, like you don't want to get anything done. (pot choked with seaweed)
 4. restlessness and worry: You feel agitation, excitement, or crippling remorse (pot with strong wind making surface of the water choppy)
 5. doubt: NOT critical thinking and asking questions; just lack of confidence in meditation that pops up during meditation... (a pot of water with pond scum on it)

How do you develop it

- Now that we know what right concentration is and what its purpose is, how do we develop it? Well, we practice - we meditate.
- To develop concentration though, you should focus on concentration heavy forms of meditation. These can have you focus on breathing, like zazen, focus on a visual object such as a flame, or focus on a mantra.
- When it comes to mantras though, the idea is not about chanting things in a language you don't understand - when the buddha employed chanting meditation it was always incredibly simple. There is this one story I know of this monk who was asked to rub a white cloth repeatedly while saying out loud "it's getting dirty". The monk gets enlightened and lives happily ever after, but the point is that the mantra was really really really simple.

What next?

- So you attained a few jhanas, no problem. Now what? Well, Jhanas are the means to an end, and the end is enlightenment. They can help you cultivate further insight, but you need to put them to use first.
- The strange thing is that jhanas don't directly lead to enlightenment - they only make it easier to get there. According to the stories I heard and learned about as I grew up, many of the Buddha's contemporaries had attained jhanas themselves. Some, such as the guys who the Buddha learned with (famous sages like Alarakalama and Uddakaramaputtha) were said to have reached the jhanas themselves, and were able to do fantastic and magical things. But they weren't enlightened.

- According to the Buddha, enlightenment comes from insight, not concentration. Both these things can take away the five hindrances but they work in different ways. Concentration allows you to suppress the five hindrances, but insight allows you to eliminate them entirely.
- To use the boring example, it is like trying to remove grass from a lawn. You can mow the lawn, but the grass will grow back. On the other hand you can remove the grass plants, roots and all and the grass cannot grow back. Concentration is like mowing the lawn, and insight is like pulling the grass out.
- And here comes the fun example. Once one of my teachers on buddhism was talking about the difference between concentration and insight, and he told me this story. There was once a monk who was amazing with concentration meditation to the point that he could use it to fly. One day, he flies over a village and sees a few pretty girls bathing at a well. The image of one girl sticks in his mind, and he loses control.
...splat!
- Moral of the story - concentration and jhanas are important - it is very difficult to make use of an insight if you don't have the discipline to concentrate on it. At the same time, pure concentration doesn't really get you anywhere.