

1.3.1

The Place of Meditation in the Path



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Introduction

To begin this section on meditation we will be looking at an excerpt from one of the Buddha's discourses from the Pāli Canon, called 'The Fruits of the Homeless Life.' This has been chosen because it puts meditation in its context, showing how it fits into the Buddhist path. It describes the attitudes and mental states we need to develop to make meditation effective, and it also describes the effects of meditation, which go far beyond our experience on the meditation cushion.

Meditation is what first attracts many people to the Dharma, and we can sometimes see it as the most important part of Buddhism, and even as a stand-alone practice we can pursue in its own right. But traditionally meditation was not seen in this way. It is seen as just one part of an overall process of transformation, which is often summarised as the Threefold Path of ethics, meditation, and wisdom. The text we are going to look at brings the Threefold Path alive. It describes a total process of inner transformation, caused by a combination of meditation and changes in the way we live and act. It shows how combining these practices can progressively transform our attitudes, our emotions, and the way we see the world. And it describes how this process of transformation ultimately culminates in complete liberation.

The text does this in the context of the Buddha's recommended style of practice for those who were able and willing to become homeless renunciants, at a time when there was still a lot of forest wilderness for homeless wanderers to live in, when ordinary householders seem to have been generally happy to support spiritual practitioners by giving them food, and in a climate where living and sleeping outdoors was possible for most of the year. We probably won't be willing or able to practice in exactly this way, even if it were possible in our very different social, economic, and climatic conditions. But this doesn't mean we can't put the same principles into practice in our own spiritual lives, and it is the principles behind the lifestyle that we need to be looking for in this text.

Setting the scene

There are no questions for discussion with this text; instead you will be reading it through in the group, and discussing it as you do so. To set the scene:

The Buddha and 1250 of his followers are staying in a mango grove belonging to the physician of King Ajātasattu of Maghada. The King is infamous for having gained his throne by killing his father. He has a troubled mind because of his crime, and has been looking for spiritual advice, but his practical, no-nonsense turn of mind makes it difficult for him to accept that purely spiritual benefits are worth pursuing for their own sake. So he has been asking different spiritual teachers what benefits, visible here and now in this life, we could expect from living

the spiritual life, but nobody has been able to convince him that there are any. It is a beautiful moonlit night, and the King recognises that this should be enjoyable, but he is restless. He says “Can we not visit some ascetic ... to visit whom would bring peace to our heart?”

Different ministers suggest a number of spiritual teachers, but the royal physician’s description of the Buddha, who he says “may well bring peace to Your Majesty’s heart”, obviously carries much more conviction than anyone else’s suggestion. So the King orders his riding elephants to be made ready, and sets off for the doctor’s mango grove with a ridiculous procession of hundreds of riding elephants bearing, among others, his hundreds of wives. When he gets into the countryside and has to get off his elephant and walk he is terrified by the darkness and silence, and has to be coaxed along by the doctor. Then he is astounded and very impressed to come across the Buddha’s followers sitting ‘in silence like a clear lake’. He wishes that his son – who will eventually kill him to get his throne – could have the same calm.

The King introduces himself, and then asks the Buddha, as he had asked others, what benefits visible in this life he could expect from following the spiritual path. The excerpt we are studying is part of the Buddha’s reply, which deeply impresses the King, so that he declares himself a lay follower, and confesses his father’s murder with regret.

The Place of Meditation in the Spiritual Life

Text from The Sāmaññaphala Sutta: The Discourse on the Fruits of the Homeless Life, adapted from the translation of Maurice Walsh, in The Long Discourses of the Buddha.

1. ‘This Dhamma is heard by a householder or a householder’s son. Having heard this Dhamma, he gains faith in the Tathāgata. Having gained this faith, he reflects: “The household life is close and dusty, the homeless life is free as air. It is not easy, living the household life, to live the fully-perfected noble life. Suppose I were to shave off my hair and beard, don yellow robes and go forth from the household life into homelessness!” And after some time, he abandons his property, leaves his circle of relatives, shaves off his hair and beard, dons yellow robes, and goes forth into the homeless life.

2. And having gone forth, he dwells restrained by the restraint of the rules, persisting in right behaviour, seeing danger in the slightest faults, observing the commitments he has taken on, devoted to the skilled and purified life, perfected in morality, with the sense-doors guarded, skilled in mindful awareness, and content.

3. And how, Sire, is a monk perfected in morality? Abandoning the taking of life, he dwells refraining from taking life, compassionate, trembling for the welfare of all living beings. Abandoning the taking of what is not given, he lives accepting what is given, without stealing. Abandoning unchastity, he lives aloof from the village-practice of sex. Abandoning false speech, he is a truth-speaker, one to be relied on. Abandoning malicious speech, he does not repeat here what he has heard there. He is a reconciler, rejoicing in peace, and speaking up for it. Abandoning harsh speech, he speaks what is pleasing to the ear, reaching the heart, urbane. Abandoning idle chatter, he speaks at the right time, what is correct and to the point. Thus he is perfected in morality.

4. And then Sire, that monk who is perfected in morality sees no danger from any side. Just as a duly-anointed king, having conquered his enemies, sees no danger from any side, so the monk, on account of his morality, sees no danger anywhere. He experiences in himself the blameless

bliss that comes from maintaining this noble morality. In this way Sire, he is perfected in morality.

5. And how, Sire, is he a guardian of the sense-doors? Here a monk, on seeing an object with the eye, does not grasp at it. Because unskilled states would overwhelm him if he dwelt leaving this eye-faculty unguarded, so he develops restraint of the eye-faculty. On hearing a sound with the ear, on smelling an odour with the nose, on tasting a flavour with the tongue, on feeling an object with the body, on thinking a thought with the mind, he does not grasp at it. He develops restraint of the mind-faculty. He experiences within himself the blameless bliss that comes from maintaining this noble guarding of the faculties. In this way, Sire, a monk is a guardian of the sense-doors.

6. And how, Sire, is a monk accomplished in mindfulness and clear awareness? Here a monk acts with clear awareness in going forth and back, in looking ahead or behind him, in bending and stretching, in wearing his robe and carrying his bowl, in eating and drinking, in evacuating and urinating, in walking, standing, sitting, lying down, in speaking and in keeping silent. In this way, a monk is accomplished in mindfulness and clear awareness.

7. And how is a monk contented? Here, a monk is satisfied with a robe to protect his body, with alms to satisfy his stomach, taking only what he needs. Just as a bird flies hither and thither, burdened by nothing but its wings, so he is satisfied. In this way, Sire, a monk is contented.

8. Then he, equipped with this noble morality, with this noble restraint of the senses, with this noble contentment, finds a solitary lodging, at the root of a forest tree, in a mountain cave, a charnel-ground, or in a jungle-thicket. Then he sits down cross-legged, holding his body erect, and concentrates on keeping mindfulness established before him.

9. Abandoning worldly desires, he dwells with a mind freed from worldly desires, and his mind is purified of them. Abandoning ill-will, by compassionate love for the welfare of all living beings his mind is purified of ill-will. Abandoning sloth-and-torpor, perceiving light, clearly aware, his mind is purified of sloth-and-torpor. Abandoning worry-and-flurry, with a calmed mind his heart is purified of worry-and-flurry. Abandoning doubt, he dwells with doubt left behind.

10. Just as a man who had taken a loan to develop his business might pay off his debts, and might think: "Before this I developed my business by borrowing, but now it has prospered", and he would rejoice and be glad about that.

11. Just as a man who was ill, with no appetite and weak in body, might after a time recover, and regain his appetite and bodily strength. And he would rejoice and be glad about that.

12. Just as a man might be in prison, and after a time he might be freed from his bonds. And he would rejoice and be glad about that.

13. Just as a man might be a slave, unable to go where he liked, and after some time he might be freed from slavery, able to go where he liked. And he would rejoice and be glad about that.

14. Just as a man might go on a journey through the desert, and after a time arrive safely at a village, and think: "Before this I was in danger, now I am safe at a village", and he would rejoice and be glad about that.

15. As long, Sire, as a monk does not perceive the disappearance of the five hindrances in himself, he feels as if in debt, in sickness, in bonds, in slavery, on a desert journey. But when he perceives the disappearance of the five hindrances in himself, it is as if he were freed from debt, from sickness, from bonds, from slavery, from the perils of the desert.

16. And when these five hindrances have left him, gladness arises in him, from gladness comes delight, from the delight in his mind his body is tranquillised, with a tranquil body he feels joy, and with joy his mind is concentrated. Being thus detached from unwholesome states, he enters and remains in the first jhāna, which is with thinking and pondering, born of detachment, filled with joy and [physical] delight. And with this delight and joy born of detachment, he so suffuses, drenches, fills and irradiates his body that there is no spot in his body that is untouched by this delight and joy born of detachment.

17. Just as a skilled bath-man, kneading the soap-powder with water, forms a soft lump, so that it becomes one oleaginous mass, so this monk suffuses, drenches, fills and irradiates his body, so that no spot remains untouched. This, Sire, is a fruit of the homeless life, visible here and now.

18. Again, a monk, with the subsiding of thinking and pondering, by gaining inner tranquillity and oneness of mind, enters and remains in the second jhāna, which is without thinking and pondering, born of concentration, filled with joy and [physical] delight. And with this delight and joy born of concentration he so suffuses his body that no spot remains untouched.

19. Just as a spring feeding a lake, the water welling up from below, would suffuse, fill and irradiate that cool water, so that no part of the pool was untouched by it, so, with this delight and joy born of concentration he so suffuses his body that no spot remains untouched. This, Sire, is a fruit more excellent and perfect than the former ones.

20. Again, a monk with the fading away of [physical] delight remains imperturbable, mindful and clearly aware, and experiences in himself that joy of which the Noble Ones say: "Happy is he who dwells with equanimity and mindfulness", and he enters and remains in the third jhāna. And with this joy devoid of [physical] delight he so suffuses his body that no spot remains untouched.

21. Just as if, in a pond of lotuses, in which the flowers are fed from the water's depths, those lotuses would be suffused with the cool water, so with this joy devoid of delight the monk so suffuses his body that no spot remains untouched. This is a fruit of the homeless life, more excellent and perfect than the former ones.

22. Again, a monk, having gone beyond pleasure and pain, and with the disappearance of former gladness and sadness, enters and remains in the fourth jhāna, which is beyond pleasure and pain, and purified by equanimity and mindfulness. And he sits suffusing his body with mental purity and clarification, so that no part of his body is untouched by it.

23. Just as if a man were to sit wrapped from head to foot in a white garment, so that no part of him was untouched by that garment, so his body is suffused, with mental purity and clarification. This is a fruit of the homeless life, more excellent and perfect than the former ones.

24. And so, with mind concentrated and cleansed, spotless, malleable, workable, and having gained imperturbability, he directs his mind towards knowing and seeing. It is just as if there

were a gem, clear, bright, unflawed, and a man might take it in his hand and describe it clearly. In the same way a monk with mind concentrated and cleansed directs his mind towards knowing and seeing. This is a fruit of the homeless life, more excellent than the former ones.

25. And he, with mind concentrated, applies his mind to the production of a mind-made body. And out of this body he produces another body, having a form mind-made. It is just as if a man were to draw a snake from its [old] skin. In the same way a monk, with mind concentrated, directs his mind to the production of a mind-made body. He draws that body out of this body, mind-made. This is a fruit of the homeless life more excellent and perfect than the former ones.

26. And with mind concentrated, purified and cleansed, malleable, and having gained imperturbability, he applies and directs his mind to the knowledge of the destruction of the corruptions. And through his knowing and seeing his mind is delivered from the corruption of sense-desire, from the corruption of becoming, from the corruption of ignorance, and the knowledge arises in him: "This is deliverance!" And he knows: "Birth is finished, the noble life has been led, done is what had to be done, there is nothing further here."

27. Just as if, Sire, in the midst of the mountains there were a pond, clear as a mirror, where a man standing on the bank could see oyster-shells, gravel-banks, and shoals of fish. And he might think: "This pond is clear, there are oyster-shells..." and so on, just so, with mind concentrated, he knows: "Birth is finished, the noble life has been led, done is what had to be done, there is nothing further here." This, Sire, is a fruit of the homeless life, visible here and now, which is more excellent and perfect than the previous fruits. And, Sire, there is no fruit of the homeless life that is more excellent than this.'



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. In verse one, the "going forth" is a spiritual death, the death of the old person, who leaves his old identity and role completely behind, and even changes his appearance and perhaps name to mark this death. Why is this important?
2. We probably are not up for the radical "going forth" the Buddha describes, but how can we get some of this?
3. Verse three brings out the importance of positive emotion. It also brings out that ethics is about cultivating positive emotion, not about sticking to the letter of a set of rules, and that concern for the wellbeing of others is ideally part of our motivation for practicing.

Why is positive emotion, and concern for others in particular, needed to meditate effectively and develop wisdom?

4. In verse four, "...that monk who is perfected in morality sees no danger from any side... He experiences in himself the blameless bliss that comes from maintaining this noble morality". Why does being ethical free us from anxiety and a sense of danger?
5. In verse five, the monk is encouraged to guard the gates of the senses. Why might guarding the gates of the senses help us in our meditation practice?

6. In verse eight, the monk, “equipped ... with this noble restraint of the senses, with this noble contentment” goes to his solitary lodging to meditate. Would the monk be able to meditate effectively there while still subject to distraction and discontent? What would he probably experience if he tried to?
7. How might the ethical practice the monk has already undertaken help him get beyond the hindrances?
8. If the monk is already in such a good state, e.g. trembling for the welfare of all beings and completely contented, how could he still be subject to the hindrances of sense desire and ill-will?
9. What are your responses to the descriptions of the dhyānas, and the traditional images? Do they sound like a fruit of spiritual practice that is worth striving for? Have people had any experiences resembling these, and if so what were the circumstances that gave rise to this?