STREAM ENTRY

Part 2: Stream-Entry and After

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Stream-Entry Part 1 | The Way to Stream-entry

Contents *

- Introduction
- The Texture of the Dhamma-Eye
- The Arising of the Dhamma-Eye
- The Dhamma-eye in the Texture Sutta
- Rewards
- Admin

Introduction *

Stream-entry is the first major level of awakening, the first of which there is a clear-cut path. The practice leading to stream-entry is also the most demanding: the part of the path that requires the most sustained effort. It requires the abandonment of the first five fetters, which underlie the entire cycle of rebirth. It requires the development of discernment powerfully compelling to the Unbinding of the Unbinded. Stream-entry about sounds like a minor detail compared to the Unbinding, but it's not. It's the point where you can't deny that there is a path to the Unbinding that is real, consistent, and even simple enough for ordinary people. Stream-entry is the point where you can be sure that there is a way out.

The material in this part of the guide is based on the Buddha's teachings on the texture, or pattern, of the stream-entry. The texture is described in the Texture Sutta, and in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, where it is called the "dhamma-eye" or the "vision of the dhamma." The vision of the dhamma is the vision of the texture. The texture of the dhamma is the texture of the path. The texture of the path is the texture of the stream-entry. The texture of the stream-entry is the texture of the Unbinding. The texture of the Unbinding is the texture of the Deathless. Unlike nonsensical and pretending-to-be-profound descriptions of the Deathless, the texture of the Deathless is not a matter of mysterious or paradoxical statements. It's a matter of simple, down-to-earth, practical, and even commonsense principles. The Buddha has stated in his discipline-before-nirvana and without-remainder-after-nirvana mode of speech that he has found a way to describe the Deathless in terms that are clear, consistent, and practical for people who want to know how to find the Deathless for themselves. The texture of the Deathless is the texture of the path, which is the texture of the stream-entry. The texture of the stream-entry is the texture of the Unbinding. Unlike many different mediums whose skills for attainment of stream-entry in each different tradition, using the texture of the stream-entry as a measure of attainment, the Buddha's teachings on the texture of the stream-entry are universally applicable to all people who want to know how to find the Deathless for themselves.

The term "stream" in "stream-entry" refers to the point where all eight factors of the noble eightfold path converge.

"Stream. The stream, the stream-entry, what is a stream? And what, bhikkhus, is the stream?

"It is this noble eightfold path, namely, right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

"Any good, bhikkhus? Very good! Well-done, bhikkhus! Well-done, bhikkhus! Well-done, bhikkhus! Right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

— SN 55.5

"And what, bhikkhus, is right view? Knowledge with regard to dukkha, knowledge with regard to the origination of dukkha, knowledge with regard to the cessation of dukkha, knowledge with regard to the path of practice leading to the cessation of dukkha. This, bhikkhus, is called right view.

"And what is right resolve? Resolve with renunciation, on freedom from ill will, on harmlessness. This is called right resolve.

"And what is right speech? Abstaining from false speech, abstaining from divisive speech, abstaining from harsh speech, abstaining from idle chatter. This, bhikkhus, is called right speech.

"And what is right action? Abstaining from killing living beings, abstaining from stealing, abstaining from sensuality. This, bhikkhus, is called right action.

"And what, bhikkhus, is right livelihood? There, bhikkhus, a noble disciple, having abandoned wrong livelihood, gets his livelihood by a right livelihood. This, bhikkhus, is called right livelihood.

"And what, bhikkhus, is right effort? There, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu generates desire for the non-arising of evil, unwholesome states that have not arisen; he makes an effort, stirs up his energy, exerts his mind and strives. He generates desire for the abandoning of evil, unwholesome states that have arisen; he makes an effort, stirs up his energy, exerts his mind and strives. He generates desire for the arising of wholesome states that have not arisen; he makes an effort, stirs up his energy, exerts his mind and strives. He generates desire for the persistence of wholesome states that have arisen, for their non-decline, their increase, their fullness, their development, their culmination; he makes an effort, stirs up his energy, exerts his mind and strives. This, bhikkhus, is called right effort.

"And what is right mindfulness? There, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu dwells contemplating the body as a body, ardent, clear-comprehending, mindful, having put aside covetousness and grief for the world; he dwells contemplating feelings as feelings, ardent, clear-comprehending, mindful, having put aside covetousness and grief for the world; he dwells contemplating mind as mind, ardent, clear-comprehending, mindful, having put aside covetousness and grief for the world; he dwells contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects, ardent, clear-comprehending, mindful, having put aside covetousness and grief for the world. This, bhikkhus, is called right mindfulness.

"And what is right concentration? There, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu, secluded from sensuous objects, secluded from unwholesome states, enters upon and abides in the first jhana, which is accompanied by initial application of the mind and sustained application of the mind, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. He enters upon and abides in the second jhana, which is accompanied by rapture and pleasure born of concentration, with unification of the mind. He enters upon and abides in the third jhana, which is accompanied by pleasure and equanimity. He enters upon and abides in the fourth jhana, which is accompanied by neither-pleasure-nor-pain and by the purification of mindfulness through equanimity. This, bhikkhus, is called right concentration.

— SN 45.8

The texture of the path is described in the Texture Sutta as the texture of the noble eightfold path, which is the texture of the stream-entry, which is the texture of the Unbinding. The texture of the Unbinding is the texture of the Deathless. The texture of the Deathless is the texture of the

"Furthermore, a disciple of the noble ones endowed with these four qualities is linked with long life, human or divine; is linked with beauty, human or divine; is linked with happiness, human or divine; is linked with status, human or divine; is linked with influence, human or divine.

"I tell you this, Nandaka, not having heard it from any other brahman or contemplative. Instead, I tell you this having known, seen, and realized it for myself."

When this was said, a certain man said to Nandaka, the chief minister of the Licchavis, "It is now time for your bath, sir."

[Nandaka responded,] "Enough, I say, with this external bath. I am satisfied with this internal bath: confidence in the Blessed One."

— SN 55.30

The Canon often places great importance on the power of the last mental state before death in determining one's future plane of existence. However, the power of stream-entry is so great that it can overcome even a muddled state of mind at death, ensuring that the next rebirth will be a good one.

As he was sitting there, Mahanama the Sakyan said to the Blessed One, "Lord, this Kapilavatthu is rich & prosperous, populous & crowded, its alleys congested. Sometimes, when I enter Kapilavatthu in the evening after visiting with the Blessed One or with the monks who inspire the mind, I meet up with a runaway elephant, a runaway horse, a runaway chariot, a runaway cart, or a runaway person. At times like that, my mindfulness with regard to the Blessed One gets muddled, my mindfulness with regard to the Dhamma... the Sangha gets muddled. The thought occurs to me, 'If I were to die at this moment, what would be my destination? What would be my future course?'"

"Have no fear, Mahanama. Have no fear. Your death will not be a bad one, your demise will not be bad. If one's mind has long been nurtured with conviction, nurtured with virtue, nurtured with learning, nurtured with relinquishment, nurtured with discernment, then when the body — endowed with form, composed of the four primary elements, born from mother & father, nourished with rice & porridge, subject to inconstancy, rubbing, pressing, dissolution, & dispersion — is eaten by crows, vultures, hawks, dogs, hyenas, or all sorts of creatures, nevertheless the mind — long nurtured with conviction, nurtured with virtue, learning, relinquishment, & discernment — rises upward and separates out.

"Suppose a man were to throw a jar of ghee or a jar of oil into a deep lake of water, where it would break. There the shards & jar fragments would go down, while the ghee or oil would rise upward and separate out. In the same way, if one's mind has long been nurtured with conviction, nurtured with virtue, nurtured with learning, nurtured with relinquishment, nurtured with discernment, then when the body... is eaten by crows, vultures, hawks, dogs, hyenas, or all sorts of creatures, nevertheless the mind... rises upward and separates out."

— SN 55.21

[Ven. Ananda is speaking to Anathapindika:] "A well-instructed disciple of the noble ones, when endowed with these four qualities [the factors of stream-entry], has no terror, no trepidation, no fear at death with regard to the next life."

— SN 55.27

"Then there is the case of the person who has no doubt or perplexity, who has arrived at certainty with regard to the True Dhamma. Then he comes down with a serious disease. As he comes down with a serious disease, the thought occurs to him, 'I have no doubt or perplexity. I have arrived at certainty with regard to the True Dhamma.' He doesn't grieve, isn't tormented; doesn't weep, beat his breast, or grow delirious. This, too, is a person who, subject to death, is not afraid or in terror of death."

— AN 4.184

"Just as it's not easy to take the measure of the water in the great ocean as 'just this many pails of water or hundreds of pails of water or thousands of pails of water or hundreds of thousands of pails of water.' It's reckoned simply as a great mass of water that is unreckonable, immeasurable. In the same way, when a disciple of the noble ones is endowed with these four bonanzas of merit, bonanzas of skillfulness [the factors of stream-entry], it's not easy to take the measure of the merit as 'just this much bonanza of merit, bonanza of skillfulness, nourishment of bliss, heavenly, ripening in bliss leading to heaven, leading to what is agreeable, pleasing, charming, happy, & beneficial.' It's reckoned simply as a great mass of merit that is unreckonable, immeasurable."

— SN 55.41

"Monks, even though a wheel-turning emperor, having exercised sovereign lordship over the four continents, on the break-up of the body, after death, reappears in the good destination, the heavenly world, in the company of the devas of the Thirty-three, and enjoys himself there in the Nandana grove, surrounded by a consort of nymphs, supplied and endowed with the five strings of heavenly sensual pleasure, still — because he is not endowed with four qualities — he is not freed from [the possibility of going to] hell, not freed from the animal womb, not freed from the realm of hungry shades, not freed from the plane of deprivation, the bad destinations, the lower realms.

"And even though a disciple of the noble ones lives off lumps of almsfood and wears rag-robes, still — because he is endowed with four qualities — he is freed from hell, freed from the animal womb, freed from the realm of hungry shades, freed from the plane of deprivation, the bad destinations, the lower realms.

"And what are the four? There is the case where the disciple of the noble ones is endowed with verified confidence in the Awakened One... verified confidence in the Dhamma... verified confidence in the Sangha... He/she is endowed with virtues that are appealing to the noble ones... He/she is endowed with these four qualities.

"And between the gaining of the four continents and the gaining of these four qualities, the gaining of the four continents is not equal to one sixteenth of the gaining of these four qualities."

— SN 55.1

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Sole dominion over the earth,
going to heaven,
lordship over all worlds:
        the fruit of stream-entry
        excels them.
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— Dhp 178

Then the Blessed One, picking up a little bit of dust with the tip of his fingernail, said to the monks, "What do you think, monks? Which is greater: the little bit of dust I have picked up with the tip of my fingernail, or the great earth?"

"The great earth is far greater, lord. The little bit of dust the Blessed One has picked up with the tip of his fingernail is next to nothing. It's not a hundredth, a thousandth, a one hundred-thousandth — this little bit of dust the Blessed One has picked up with the tip of his fingernail — when compared with the great earth."

"In the same way, monks, for a disciple of the noble ones who is consummate in view, an individual who has broken through [to stream-entry], the suffering & stress totally ended & extinguished is far greater. That which remains in the state of having at most seven remaining lifetimes is next to nothing: it's not a hundredth, a thousandth, a one hundred-thousandth, when compared with the previous mass of suffering. That's how great the benefit is of breaking through to the Dhamma, monks. That's how great the benefit is of obtaining the Dhamma eye."

— SN 13.1

"Suppose, monks, that there were a pond fifty leagues wide, fifty leagues long, & fifty leagues deep, filled to overflowing with water so that a crow could drink from it, and a man would draw some water out of it with the tip of a blade of grass. What do you think? Which would be greater: the water drawn out with the tip of the blade of grass or the water in the pond?"

"The water in the pond would be far greater, lord. The water drawn out with the tip of the blade of grass would be next to nothing. It wouldn't be a hundredth, a thousandth, a one hundred-thousandth — the water drawn out with the tip of the blade of grass — when compared with the water in the pond"...

— SN 13.2

"Suppose, monks, that the great ocean were to go to extinction, to its total end, except for two or three drops of water. What do you think? Which would be greater: the water in the great ocean that had gone to extinction, to its total end, or the two or three remaining drops of water?"

"Lord, the water in the great ocean that had gone to extinction, to its total end, would be far greater. The two or three remaining drops of water would be next to nothing. They wouldn't be a hundredth, a thousandth, a one hundred-thousandth — the two or three remaining drops of water — when compared with the water in the great ocean that had gone to extinction, to its total end."

"In the same way, monks, for a disciple of the noble ones who is consummate in view, an individual who has broken through [to stream-entry], the suffering & stress totally ended & extinguished is far greater. That which remains in the state of having at most seven remaining lifetimes is next to nothing: it's not a hundredth, a thousandth, a one hundred-thousandth, when compared with the previous mass of suffering. That's how great the benefit is of breaking through to the Dhamma, monks. That's how great the benefit is of obtaining the Dhamma eye."

— SN 13.8

Not all of the rewards of stream-entry concern one's fate at death. Many of them pertain also to the here-and-now.

Then Anathapindika the householder went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to the Blessed One, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, the Blessed One said to him, "When, for a disciple of the noble ones, five forms of fear & animosity are stilled; when he is endowed with the four factors of stream-entry; and when, through discernment, he has rightly seen & rightly ferreted out the noble method, then if he wants he may state about himself: 'Hell is ended; animal wombs are ended; the state of the hungry shades is ended; states of deprivation, destitution, the bad bourns are ended! I am a stream-winner, steadfast, never again destined for states of woe, headed for self-awakening!'

"Now, which five forms of danger & animosity are stilled?

"When a person takes life, then with the taking of life as a requisite condition, he produces fear & animosity in the here & now, produces fear & animosity in future lives, experiences mental concomitants of pain & despair; but when he refrains from taking life, he neither produces fear & animosity in the here & now nor does he produce fear & animosity in future lives, nor does he experience mental concomitants of pain & despair: for one who refrains from taking life, that fear & animosity is thus stilled.

"When a person steals... engages in illicit sex... tells lies...

"When a person drinks distilled & fermented drinks that cause heedlessness, then with the drinking of distilled & fermented drinks that cause heedlessness as a requisite condition, he produces fear & animosity in the here & now, produces fear & animosity in future lives, experiences mental concomitants of pain & despair; but when he refrains from drinking distilled & fermented drinks that cause heedlessness, he neither produces fear & animosity in the here & now nor does he produce fear & animosity in future lives, nor does he experience mental concomitants of pain & despair: for one who refrains from drinking distilled & fermented drinks that cause heedlessness, that fear & animosity is thus stilled.

"These are the five forms of fear & animosity that are stilled."

— AN 10.92

"These are the five rewards of conviction in a lay person. Which five?

"When the truly good people in the world show compassion, they will first show compassion to people of conviction, and not to people without conviction. When visiting, they first visit people of conviction, and not people without conviction. When accepting gifts, they will first accept those from people with conviction, and not from people without conviction. When teaching the Dhamma, they will first teach those with conviction, and not those without conviction. A person of conviction, on the break-up of the body, after death, will arise in a good destination, the heavenly world. These are the five rewards of conviction in a lay person.

"Just as a large banyan tree, on level ground where four roads meet, is a haven for the birds all around, even so a lay person of conviction is a haven for many people: monks, nuns, male lay followers, & female lay followers."

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A massive tree
whose branches carry fruits & leaves,
with trunks & roots
& an abundance of fruits:
        There the birds find rest.

In that delightful sphere
they make their home.
Those seeking shade
        come to the shade,
those seeking fruit
        find fruit to eat.

So with the person consummate
in virtue & conviction,
humble, sensitive, gentle,
        delightful, & mild;
To him come those without effluent --
        free from passion,
        free from aversion,
        free from delusion —
the field of merit for the world.

They teach him the Dhamma
that dispels all stress.
And when he understands,
he is freed from effluents,
Whatever phenomena arise from a cause:
        totally unbound.
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— AN 5.38

Advice

Although it would be pleasant to conclude this study guide with the above passages of encouragement, we would probably do better to follow the example of the Buddha, who directed his last words to his stream-winner disciples, encouraging them not to rest content with the rewards awaiting them, but to maintain instead an attitude of heedfulness.

"And what is heedfulness? There is the case where a monk guards his mind with regard to [mental] fermentations and mental qualities accompanied by fermentations. When his mind is guarded with regard to fermentations and mental qualities accompanied by fermentations, the faculty of conviction goes to the culmination of its development. The faculty of persistence... mindfulness... concentration... discernment goes to the culmination of its development."

— SN 48.56

"And how, Nandiya, does a disciple of the noble ones live heedlessly? There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones is endowed with verified confidence in the Awakened One... Content with that verified confidence in the Awakened One, he does not exert himself further in solitude by day or seclusion by night. For him, living thus heedlessly, there is no joy. There being no joy, there is no rapture. There being no rapture, there is no serenity. There being no serenity, he dwells in pain. When pained, the mind does not become centered. When the mind is uncentered, phenomena do not become manifest. When phenomena are not manifest, he is reckoned simply as one who dwells heedlessly.

"Furthermore, the disciple of the noble ones is endowed with verified confidence in the Dhamma... verified confidence in the Sangha... virtues that are appealing to the noble ones: untorn, unbroken, unspotted, unsplattered, liberating, praised by the wise, untarnished, leading to concentration. Content with those virtues pleasing to the noble ones, he does not exert himself further in solitude by day or seclusion by night. For him, living thus heedlessly, there is no joy. There being no joy, there is no rapture. There being no rapture, there is no serenity. There being no serenity, he dwells in pain. When pained, the mind does not become centered. When the mind is uncentered, phenomena do not become manifest. When phenomena are not manifest, he is reckoned simply as one who dwells heedlessly...

"And how, Nandiya, does a disciple of the noble ones live heedfully? There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones is endowed with verified confidence in the Awakened One... Not content with that verified confidence in the Awakened One, he exerts himself further in solitude by day or seclusion by night. For him, living thus heedfully, joy arises. In one who has joy, rapture arises. In one who has rapture, the body becomes serene. When the body is serene, one feels pleasure. Feeling pleasure, the mind becomes centered. When the mind is centered, phenomena become manifest. When phenomena are manifest, he is reckoned as one who dwells heedfully.

"Furthermore, the disciple of the noble ones is endowed with verified confidence in the Dhamma... verified confidence in the Sangha... virtues that are appealing to the noble ones: untorn, unbroken, unspotted, unsplattered, liberating, praised by the wise, untarnished, leading to concentration. Not content with those virtues pleasing to the noble ones, he exerts himself further in solitude by day or seclusion by night. For him, living thus heedfully, joy arises. In one who has joy, rapture arises. In one who has rapture, the body becomes serene. When the body is serene, one feels pleasure. Feeling pleasure, the mind becomes centered. When the mind is centered, phenomena become manifest. When phenomena are manifest, he is reckoned as one who dwells heedfully."

— SN 55.40

"Therefore, Dighavu, when you are established in these four factors of stream-entry, you should further develop six qualities conducive to clear knowing. Remain focussed on inconstancy in all fabrications, percipient of stress in what is inconstant, percipient of not-self in what is stressful, percipient of abandoning, percipient of dispassion, percipient of cessation. That's how you should train yourself."

— SN 55.3

SABBADANAM DHAMMADANAM JINATI

THE GIFT OF TRUTH EXCELS ALL OTHER GIFTS

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