The Tree of Enlightenment

Dr Peter Della Santina

E-mail: bdea@buddhanet.net
Web site: www.buddhanet.net

Buddha Dharma Education Association Inc.

Chapter Six

Mental Development

In this chapter we will look at the steps of the Noble Eightfold Path that fall into the group known as mental development. We have already noted the interdependent nature of the steps of the path, and in this context it is particularly important to understand the position of mental development. Placed as it is between good conduct and wisdom, mental development is relevant and important to both. You may ask why this should be so. Indeed, people sometimes think simply following the precepts of morality is sufficient for leading a good life.

There are several answers to this question. First of all, in Buddhism there is more than just one goal of the religious life. Besides the goal of happiness and good fortune, there is also the goal of freedom. If you want to attain freedom, the only way is through wisdom, and wisdom can only be gained by means of mental purification, which is achieved through meditation. But even for the sound practice of good conduct, mental development is helpful if not necessary. Why? Because it is relatively easy to follow the rules of morality when things are going well. If you have a good job, live in a stable society, and earn enough to support yourself and your family, it is relatively easy to observe the moral precepts. But when you find yourself in situations of stress, instability, and uncertainty—when, for instance, you lose your job, find yourself in circumstances where lawlessness prevails, and so forth—then observance of the rules of good conduct comes under attack.

In such circumstances, only mental development can safeguard your practice of good conduct. By strengthening the capacity of the mind and by attaining control over it, mental development serves as a guarantor of the observance of the precepts, and at the same time it assists in the real objective of seeing things as they really are. Mental development prepares the mind to achieve wisdom, which opens the door to freedom and enlightenment. Mental development therefore has a distinctly important role in the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Buddhism's emphasis on the importance of mental development is not surprising when we remember the importance of mind in the Buddhist conception of experience. Mind is the single most important factor in the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path. The Buddha himself put this very clearly when he said that the mind is the source of all things and that all things are created by the mind. Similarly, it has been said that the mind is the source of all virtues and other beneficial qualities. To obtain these virtues and qualities, you must discipline the mind. The mind is the key to changing the nature of experience. It is said that, if we had to cover the whole surface of the earth with some soft yet resilient substance to protect our feet from being hurt by sticks and stones, it would be a very difficult undertaking indeed. But merely by covering the soles of our feet with shoes, it is as if the whole surface of the earth were thus covered. In the same way, if we had to purify the whole universe of attachment, aversion, and ignorance, it would be very difficult indeed, but simply by purifying our own minds of these three afflictions, it is – for us – as if we had purified the whole world of them. That is why, in Buddhism, we focus on the mind as the key to chang-

ing the way we experience things and the way we relate to other people.

The importance of the mind has also been recognized by scientists, psychologists, and even physicians. You may be aware of a number of visualization techniques now being used by therapists in the West. Psychiatrists and physicians are successfully employing methods very similar to well-known techniques of meditation to help patients overcome mental disorders, chronic pain, and diseases. This approach is now an accepted practice within the therapeutic community.

We can all appreciate the influence the mind has on our own state of being by looking at our experience. We have all experienced happiness and know how it has a beneficial influence on our activities. When in such a state of mind, we are efficient, we respond appropriately, and we are able to function in the best possible way. On other occasions, when our minds are disturbed, depressed, or otherwise pervaded by harmful emotions, we find that we cannot even discharge simple tasks with care. In this way, we can all see how important the mind is in whatever sphere of our lives we care to consider.

Three steps of the Noble Eightfold Path are included in mental development: (a) right effort, (b) right mindfulness, and (c) right concentration. Together, these three encourage and enable us to be self-reliant, attentive, and calm.

In its most general sense, right effort means cultivating a confident attitude toward our undertakings. We can call right effort "enthusiasm," also. Right effort means taking up and pursuing our tasks with energy and a will to carry them through to the end. It is said that we ought to embark on our tasks in the

same way an elephant enters a cool lake when afflicted by the heat of the midday sun. With this kind of effort, we can be successful in whatever we plan to do, whether in our studies, careers, or practice of the Dharma.

In this sense, we might even say that right effort is the practical application of confidence. If we fail to put effort into our various projects, we cannot hope to succeed. But effort must be controlled, it must be balanced, and here we can recall the fundamental nature of the Middle Way and the example of the strings of a lute. Therefore, effort should never become too tense, too forced, and, conversely, it should not be allowed to become lax. This is what we mean by right effort: a controlled, sustained, and buoyant determination.

Right effort is traditionally defined as fourfold: (1) the effort to prevent unwholesome thoughts from arising, (2) the effort to reject unwholesome thoughts once they have arisen, (3) the effort to cultivate wholesome thoughts, and (4) the effort to maintain wholesome thoughts that have arisen. This last is particularly important, because it often happens that, even when we have successfully cultivated some wholesome thought, it is short-lived. Between them, these four aspects of right effort focus the energy of the mind on our mental states. Their object is to reduce and eventually eliminate the unwholesome thoughts that occupy our minds, and to increase and establish firmly wholesome thoughts as a natural, integral characteristic of our mental state of being.

Right mindfulness is the second step of the Noble Eightfold Path included in mental development, and is essential even in our ordinary, daily lives. Like the other teachings of the Buddha, this can best be illustrated with examples from everyday life

itself. Indeed, if you look at the discourses of the Buddha, you will find that he consistently used examples that were familiar to his audience. Thus we might do well to look at the importance of mindfulness in our ordinary, mundane activities.

Mindfulness is awareness, or attention, and as such it means avoiding a distracted or cloudy state of mind. There would be many fewer accidents at home and on the road if people were mindful. Whether you are driving a car or crossing a busy street, cooking dinner or doing your accounts, it is done more safely and effectively when you are attentive and mindful. The practice of mindfulness increases our efficiency and productivity; at the same time, it reduces the number of accidents that occur due to inattention and general lack of awareness.

In the practice of the Dharma, mindfulness acts as a kind of rein upon our minds. If we consider for a moment how our minds normally behave, we will clearly understand the need for some kind of rein, or control, in this context. Suppose that, as you are reading this book, a gust of wind suddenly causes a window to slam shut somewhere in the house. I am sure most of you would immediately turn your attention to the sound and, at least for an instant, focus your mind on it. At least for that instant, your mind would be distracted from the page. Similarly, at almost every moment of our conscious lives, our minds are running after objects of the senses. Our minds are almost never concentrated or still. The objects of the senses that so captivate our attention may be sights, sounds, or even thoughts. As you drive down the street, your eyes and mind may be captured by an attractive advertisement; while walking along the street, catching the scent of a woman's perfume, your attention may be

momentarily drawn to it, and perhaps to the wearer. All these objects of the senses are causes of distraction.

Therefore, to manage the effects of such distractions on our minds, we need a guard that can keep our minds from becoming too entangled with such sense objects and with the unwholesome mental states they can sometimes arouse. This guard is mindfulness. The Buddha once told a story about two acrobats, master and apprentice. On one occasion, the master said to the apprentice, "You protect me, and I will protect you. In that way we will perform our tricks, come down safely, and earn money." But the apprentice said, "No, master, that will not do. I will protect myself, and you protect yourself." In the same way, each one of us has to guard his or her own mind.

Some people may say this sounds rather selfish. What about teamwork? But I think such doubts result from a fundamental misunderstanding. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link. A team is only as effective as its individual members. A team of distracted people, incapable of discharging their own responsibilities efficiently, will be an ineffective team. Similarly, to play an effective role in relation to our fellow beings, we must first guard our own minds. Suppose you have a fine car. You will be careful to park it in a place where it will not be damaged by another motorist. Even at work or at home, you will occasionally look out the window to make sure the car is all right. You will wash it often, and you will be certain to take it into the shop for servicing at regular intervals. You will probably insure it for a great deal of money. In the same way, each of us possesses one thing far more valuable than anything else he or she may have: a mind.

Recognizing the value and importance of our minds, we ought to guard them. This is mindfulness. This aspect of mental development can be practiced anywhere and at any time. Some people think meditation is too difficult to practice. They may even be afraid to try it. Usually, such people are thinking of formal meditation, that is, concentrating the mind while sitting in meditation. But even if you are not ready to practice the techniques of mental concentration, certainly right effort and right mindfulness can and should be practiced by everyone. The first two steps of mental development are simply (1) cultivating a confident attitude of mind, being attentive and aware; and (2) watching your body and mind and knowing what you are doing at all times.

As I write, at this very moment, with one corner of my mind I can keep an eye on my mind. What am I thinking of? Is my mind focused on the message I am trying to convey, or am I thinking about what happened this morning, or last week, or about what I will do tonight? I once heard a teacher remark that if you are making a cup of tea, then at that moment, Buddhism means making it well.

The heart of mental development is focusing the mind precisely on what you are doing at this very moment, whether it be going to school, cleaning the house, or conversing with a friend. No matter what you are doing, you can practice mindfulness. The practice of mindfulness can be universally applied.

Traditionally, the practice of mindfulness has played an important role in Buddhism. The Buddha called mindfulness the one way to achieve the end of suffering. The practice of mindfulness has also been elaborated with regard to four spe-

cific applications: (i) mindfulness of the body, (ii) mindfulness of feelings, (iii) mindfulness of consciousness, and (iv) mindfulness of objects of the mind. The four applications of mindfulness continue to play an important role in the practice of Buddhist meditation to this very day.

But let us go on to consider the third step of mental development, namely, concentration, which is also sometimes called "tranquillity," or simply meditation. You will recall that we traced the origins of meditation all the way back to the Indus Valley civilization. Meditation, or concentration, has nothing to do with frenzy or torpor, much less with a semiconscious or comatose state. Concentration is merely the practice of focusing the mind single-pointedly on an object. This object can be either physical or mental. When complete, single-pointed concentration on an object is achieved, the mind becomes totally absorbed in the object to the exclusion of all mental activity—distraction, torpor, agitation, and vacillation. This is the objective of the practice of right concentration: to concentrate the mind single-pointedly on an object. Most of us have had intimations of this kind of state of mind in our everyday lives. Occasionally, something approaching single-pointedness of mind occurs spontaneously, when listening to a piece of music or watching the sea or sky. At such times you may experience a moment when the mind remains single-pointedly absorbed in an object, sound, or form.

Concentration can be practiced in a number of ways. The object of concentration may be visual (like a flame, an image, or a flower) or it may be an idea (such as love and compassion). When you practice concentration, you focus the mind repeatedly on the selected object. Gradually, this leads to the ability to rest

the mind on the object without distraction. When this can be maintained for a protracted period of time, you have achieved single-pointedness of the mind.

It is important to note that this aspect of mental development is best practiced with the guidance of an experienced teacher, because a number of technical factors can condition your success or failure. These include attitude, posture, and duration and occasion of practice. It is difficult to get all these factors right just by reading a book. Nonetheless, you need not become a monk to practice this kind of meditation. You need not live in a forest or abandon your daily activities. You can begin with relatively short periods of meditation, as short as ten or fifteen minutes a day.

Proficiency in this kind of meditation has two principal benefits. First, it leads to mental and physical well-being, comfort, joy, calm, and tranquillity. Second, it turns the mind into an instrument capable of seeing things as they really are. Thus it prepares the mind to attain wisdom.

The gradual development of the ability to see things as they really are through the practice of meditation has been likened to the development of special instruments by means of which we can now see subatomic reality and the like. In the same way, if we do not develop the potential of our minds through the cultivation of right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration, our understanding of the real state of things will remain at best intellectual knowledge. To turn our understanding of the Four Noble Truths from mere book knowledge into direct experience, we have to achieve single-pointedness of the mind.

It is at this point that mental development is ready to turn

its attention to wisdom. Now we can clearly see the particular role of meditation in Buddhism. I touched on this briefly when I spoke about the Buddha's decision to leave the two teachers of meditation, Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta, and of his combination of concentration and wisdom on the night of his enlightenment. Here, too, single-pointedness of mind by itself is not enough. It is like sharpening a pencil before proceeding to write, or sharpening an ax that we will use to cut off the trunk of attachment, aversion, and ignorance. When we have achieved single-pointedness of the mind, we are then ready to join concentration with wisdom in order to gain enlightenment.