

Stages of the Path: Stream Entry and Beyond

by
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For many years I have thought that the traditional Nikāya scheme of Stream Entrant, Once-Returner, Non-Returner and Arahant was unclear. The category of Once-Returner seems particularly strange, even bizarre. What does it mean to have a 'stage' in which the fourth and fifth fetters (that is, craving and hatred) are merely weakened? How 'weak' is enough to qualify? How could that be measured or attained? This appeared to be nothing other than an example of scholastic foolishness, but the scheme was not easy to dismiss because it is asserted as a very real category in the Pali Canon and commentaries. Moreover, there is an apparent contradiction within the Pali Canon itself about the ethical criteria that are indicative of Stream Entry. I have for some time thought that these ethical criteria were often set too high, both within the Western Buddhist Order and within the contemporary Theravāda, within parts of which it seems that Stream Entry has even come to be regarded as beyond the reach of practitioners in this current age.

Why does any of this matter? Ultimately, I believe, it makes a great difference to the confidence that we have in our traditions – our institutions, practices and practitioners. In addition, it seems to me that being clear about the doctrine is of critical practical importance. Sangharakshita, the founder of the Western Buddhist Order, is often quoted as saying that Stream Entry is well within the reach of members of the Western Buddhist Order who have practised wholeheartedly for 20-30 years. Here is one of many examples of Sangharakshita expressing this view:

In fact, it would be surprising if, after 20 or 30 years of life in the Order, you were not a Stream Entrant. It would seem to be very surprising, if you have done all the other things - maybe you have founded Centres and written books and given so many lectures and gone on so many retreats, that you were not a Stream Entrant: why not? ¹

This statement was intended to be encouraging in 1985, but perhaps could have the opposite effect in 2010. The Western Buddhist Order has been going long enough now for there to be many of us who have practised sincerely and effectively for twenty, thirty and even forty years. So are there Stream Entrants in the Order? If there are none, one could be forgiven for harbouring doubts. Has Sangharakshita overestimated our capacity? Have we failed to live up to our potential? Are the teachings and practices that we have adequate? Or is it that there are Stream Entrants in the Order, but we don't recognise them?

In this article I shall be aiming to examine the behaviour one could expect of a Stream Entrant and those at more advanced stages, and be proposing that the Nikāya categories can be seen to describe very real Stages of the Path.

Stream Entry and the Traditional Criteria

Three conditions are forsaken by him at the instant of acquisition of Insight [i.e. Stream Entry], namely, (1) self-delusion, (2) doubt, and (3) the indulgence in rights and ceremonies should there be any. He is also absolutely freed from the four states of misery and is incapable of committing the six crimes. This precious jewel is in the Sangha. By this truth may there be peace.

*Whatever evil deed he commits, either by his body, speech or thought, he is incapable of concealing it. For it has been said that such an act is impossible for one who has seen the Path. This precious jewel is in the Sangha. By this truth may there be peace!*²

Much of this will already be very familiar to readers of this article. Sangharakshita has given a clear and detailed account of the breaking of the three fetters in, for example, his talk 'The Taste of Freedom'³. However I want particularly to explore the level of ethical purity one might expect from a Stream Entrant beyond these three fetters.

A Stream Entrant is incapable of gross actions of craving and hatred that will definitively lead to rebirth in the four states of misery (Hell, Asura, Hungry Ghost and Animal realms) and of committing the six crimes (referred to above in the Ratana Sutta) which are killing one's mother, killing one's father, killing an Arahant, causing a schism in the Sangha, wounding a Buddha, and holding Wrong Views. Explained in this way, it seems that the ethical standards don't seem too high and I expect that most of us could manage to avoid at least five out of these six without too much trouble.

Elsewhere in the Pali Canon, however, a Stream Entrant is described as having unshakeable confidence in the Three Jewels together with ethical impeccability:

*... he is possessed of morality dear to the Noble Ones, unbroken, without defect, unspotted, without inconsistency, liberating, uncorrupted and conducive to concentration.*⁴

There is a very real difference here. The level of ethical attainment outlined in the Ratana Sutta is of someone who still commits unskilful acts of body, speech and mind, maybe even quite serious ones. They will not be able to conceal it, however, but will always confess (to the appropriate person) and then make amends. The image of the Stream Entrant offered in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta is one very close to ethical perfection. Other places within the Canon and the commentaries support one or the other of these positions, but it seems clear that since they contradict each other they cannot both be correct.

The weight of both evidence and reason, however, supports the former account, that is to say, the Stream Entrant as portrayed in the Sutta Nipāta. There are many examples of Stream Entrants within the Suttas whose morality is not yet perfect including a number of householder Stream Entrants portrayed in the Canon who 'still enjoy sensual pleasures', which I take to mean that they remain sexually active. The Kosambiya Sutta⁵ is one of many which supports the Ratana Sutta's account of the Stream Entrant as an individual capable of unskilful acts but incapable of concealing them. Furthermore in several suttas⁶ the Stream Entrant is presented within the scheme of the ten fetters as having broken the first three fetters, but not yet having significantly weakened the fourth and fifth fetters of craving and hatred.

The first three fetters are traditionally outlined as in the Ratana Sutta quoted above: (1) self-delusion (or the view of an unchanging self), (2) doubt (about the value of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha such that it leads to indecision and an inability to commit to spiritual practice) and (3) indulgence in rites and ceremonies as ends in themselves. The positive counterparts of these three fetters could be broadly expressed like this: (1) knowing what needs to be done (in the sense that while one realises that there is no unchanging self, one also sees that one remains under the influence of craving and hatred that continually try to shore up this view), (2) possessing the unshakeable determination to carry it out, and (3) knowing how to do it. On the basis of this, ahead lie the two great mountains of craving and

hatred and one simply starts working away at them. In this way Stream Entry begins to appear as the real beginning of the Path.

While it is important not to minimise the significance of Stream Entry, or the efforts required to reach it, it seems to me to be crucial to understand that Stream Entry is more concerned with vision and understanding in the sense of seeing through false views and false approaches rather than with actual ethical purity, which is what one aspires to develop as one weakens and then eradicates craving and hatred and, in this way, finally establishes freedom (from attachment) and compassion.

The Scale of the Task

As I have noted, according to Sangharakshita, it would be very surprising if after 20-30 years of serious practice one has not become a Stream Entrant. This view appears to be supported by the plentiful accounts in the Pali Canon in which many people, under the Buddha's guidance, attained this stage with relative ease. According to the tradition it then takes a Stream Entrant no more than seven lifetimes to gain full Enlightenment. So from becoming a Stream Entrant to becoming a Once-Returner takes up to six lifetimes – or about 420 years of sincere practice. Then it takes another 70 years or so, that is to say, one more human lifetime, to become a Non-Returner and Arahant.

I realise that in presenting the facts in this way I may appear to be adopting an extreme form of literalism and, of course, one shouldn't take these numbers literally. However laying out the figures in this way can give a useful indication of the relative scale of the task involved at each stage. It plainly indicates that by far the greatest section of the path is that part which lies between Stream Entry and the stage of Once-Returner.

So why does the path from Stream Entry to Once-Returner represent such a colossal task?

The reason for this is, I believe, that what follows after Stream Entry isn't merely the tidying up of a few loose ends, but rather undertaking the complete and radical overhaul of our ethical lives, of body, speech and mind, to the point of perfection. When viewed in this way, the attainment of Stream Entry begins to look like *the beginning of the principal task of the spiritual life*.

In the *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhaghosa broadly correlates the Threefold Path (Sīla, Samādhi, Paññā) with the four stages of the individual (Stream Entry, Once-Returner, Non-Returner, Arahant)⁷. He correlates the Stream Entrant and Once-Returner with Sīla, the Non-Returner with Samādhi, and the Arahant with Paññā. This is interesting and supports the current line of argument that the primary task of the Stream Entrant, in particular, is of ethical purification. It is not that the stages of Stream Entry and Once-Returner are devoid of Samādhi or the development of Insight; both are necessary, but I think this correlation does help to highlight the primary nature of the task at each stage.

This may alter our view of what Stream Entrants are like. They may not, for example, necessarily be particularly happy or contented. Nor may they be so accomplished at meditation that they can do without particular conditions (of the sort one has on retreat, for example) to bring about Samādhi, or absorption. They will certainly be engaged with meditation, but the experience may feel something like an irresistible force meeting an (almost) immovable object, the force being the individual's determination to practice (founded upon the undeniable knowledge and vision of things as they are) coming up against

the great fetters of craving and hatred. Yet one may feel that one is in the grip of a force or energy bigger than oneself that in some way 'drives one on'.

Sangharakshita has said that Stream Entry represents the point at which the gravitational pull of the 'Unconditioned' exerts a greater force than that of the 'Conditioned'⁸. I believe that this is true provided that one takes into account the fact that Sangharakshita was speaking metaphorically to at least some degree. Perhaps it is clearer to say simply that a Stream Entrant's practice is likely to be less affected by the conditions around them; this would depend upon an individual's propensities so, for example, someone who had a tendency to overindulgence in food may become less bound by that desire even when delicious food is around, or someone who always became angry when contradicted may find it easier to hold their temper in check under that condition. Nevertheless, Stream Entrants also remain vulnerable to greed and hatred and so are still affected by whatever stimulates these mental states. Certainly they will quickly confess unskillfulness under all conditions, but it seems likely that part of the Insight involved in Stream Entry will include an awareness that they are best served by seeking certain conditions in preference to others. Among such conditions might be a simpler life, a more structured practice environment, living more intimately with spiritual friends, and living in a situation where they can express generosity more effectively; there are many possibilities, and each individual will need to find the conditions that work best for them.

In any case, while there will be progress, this spiritual struggle could go on for a long time – six lifetimes if you take the traditional account literally.

Who is the Once-Returner?

As mentioned in the introduction, the Once-Returner is a figure that prompts many questions. Why have a specific stage in which something is merely weakened? Why not eradicate it from the system and just speak about Stream Entry and Non-Returning, the stage in which the fetters of craving and hatred are eradicated?

Clarity in this area is often further obscured by the Suttas in which Once-Returners appear. For example, there is the encounter between the Buddha and Mahānāma⁹, a Once-Returner and the householder cousin of Anuruddha, in which Mahānāma asks the Buddha why he can't bring himself to go forth. The Buddha tells Mahānāma that it's because he hasn't sufficiently experienced the pleasures of meditation. One can only assume from this that Mahānāma is somewhat stuck in the hindrances (nīvaranas).

I think, however, there are some clear reasons for regarding the Once-Returner as a distinct category.

Firstly to do so emphasises the scale of the task facing the Stream Entrant, but beyond this I believe that real, almost measurable, criteria can be outlined for the Once-Returner.

The Atthasalini (called 'The Expositor' in the Pali Text Society translation), a commentary by Buddhagosa on the first book of the Abhidhamma, gives a revealing account of the level of ethical activity one might expect of a Once-Returner:

Here the diminution should be understood to take place in two ways: by occasional production and by febleness in breaking out. For the Once-Returner the lower nature does not arise frequently as in the majority who follow the round of rebirths. It arises occasionally

like the sparse blades of grass in an imperfectly mown field. And when it does arise it does not arise crushing, spreading, covering, making darkness, as in the case of people who follow the round of rebirths. But being put away by the two paths, it becomes very weak and is attenuated in form like a film of cloud and a fly's wing.¹⁰

So one could say that the Once-Returner is no longer dominated by hatred or craving, that there are no longer any times in their lives when they are overwhelmed by such unskilful emotions. These emotions may arise occasionally in a weakened form, and only in the midst of awareness – they don't dominate. Guenther supports this view in 'Philosophy and Psychology of the Abhidharma' in which he describes the gradual process that follows upon Stream Entry:

But the effectiveness of paying closest attention to the Truths perceived, is evident from the fact that covetousness and ill-will make themselves felt only occasionally and that they rise slowly.¹¹

In the Visuddhimagga¹² there is a considerable amount of material which elaborates upon the actions, speech and mental states that an individual at each of the four stages is and isn't capable of. For example, a Stream Entrant is incapable of actions of craving and hatred that will definitively lead to rebirth in the four states of misery (Hell, Asura, Hungry Ghost and Animal realms), but the remaining gross craving and hatred is only eradicated when one becomes a Once-Returner; subtle craving and hatred are eliminated for the Non-Returner. The Visuddhimagga also offers more specific details. The Stream Entrant is incapable of False Speech, but is capable of both Malicious and Harsh Speech, which are only eradicated when one becomes a Non-Returner. The sections devoted to this in the Visuddhimagga can seem a bit technical and perhaps overly rigid, but they do help to give the practitioner a clearer idea of how ethical purification is developed along the path.

In this way, we are able to see the emergence of reasonable criteria for the Once-Returner: the emotions would be gentler, more skilful, and one would no longer be subject to any outbursts or compulsions associated with craving or hatred. The Once-Returner has basically 'broken the back' of these fetters, so that they are rendered weak and feeble. This is no small achievement.

This perspective makes more sense of the way the Pali Canon explains the appearance of Once-Returners, but it also has another important consequence. Bearing in mind that this stage is the result of serious and sustained practice by a Stream Entrant, the implication is that the Stream Entrant could be prone to such outbursts, perhaps even to the extent of being overwhelmed by craving and ill-will. These outbursts would certainly pass and the individual would always make amends, confess appropriately (being unable to do otherwise), and reaffirm their determination to work on those emotions.

I realise that this is an image of the Stream Entrant which is a bit more 'down to earth' and subject to one's lower nature than many of us are familiar with. Nevertheless, I believe that this way of seeing Stream Entry fits canonical and commentarial evidence more naturally than any other, and gives real significance to the stage of Once-Returner which would otherwise be meaningless.

The Non-Returner

In the figure of the Non-Returner we encounter a being who truly seems to come from another world. In addition to having broken the first three fetters and possessing an unshakeable faith in the Three Jewels, the Non-Returner has attained complete ethical purity. It's not that they don't conceal their unskilfulness, they just don't have any, whether of body, speech or mind. They are almost flawlessly motivated by generosity, love and wisdom.

The last five fetters remain of course, but these are exceptionally subtle in comparison to what has been broken in the fourth and fifth fetters. Also, because Non-Returners are not subject to any hindrances, the Eight Jhānas are readily accessible to them (not that ready access to Jhāna necessarily indicates any particular attainment, I should add – it doesn't work the other way round).

There are examples of both monastic and lay Non-Returners in the Canon. There is the figure of Gatikāra the Potter¹², for example, who remains in the household life in order to care for his ageing parents, but he is an extraordinarily holy man.

Within contemporary biography it has struck me that Dīpa-mā¹³ may fit here. I say 'may' because, well, who am I to know for sure? Certainly she claimed to no longer experience unskilful mental states and she could access the Jhānas at will; she also actually claimed certain levels of attainment.

Are there Non-Returners in the Western Buddhist Order? I don't know. I'm sure it would be a wonderful and humbling experience to meet one.

The Arahant

There are two points that I would like to draw out concerning the Arahant.

The first is that it's important, while referring to this scheme of the path, not to apply to the Arahant the degraded meaning that was established during the later phases and schools of Buddhism. The Arahant is a towering figure of spiritual attainment on a par with the great Bodhisattvas and Mahāsiddhas.

Secondly, while there are examples of lay Stream Entrants, Once-Returners and even Non-Returners in the Canon I don't believe that there are examples of lay Arahants. There is speculation about this possibility in other texts¹⁴, but overall the system indicates that as one progresses through the stages of the path, and especially at the stage of the Non-Returner, one's life becomes increasingly simple and free from attachments to the world. The Arahant represents the full expression of this freedom and, while they may not technically be bhikkhus, one would expect them to be living a life free from attachment. This is not to deny that they could be involved in the world in a Bodhisattva-like way, since they would also be the perfect embodiment of Compassion.

Confidence in our tradition

This clarification is important primarily because it relates to issues of confidence both in ourselves as effective practitioners and in our practices.

An excessive tendency towards self-criticism and low confidence are very common in the culture of the West (and are also, consequently, present to some degree within the Western Buddhist Order). If the ethical criteria of Stream Entry are understood in such a way that

Stream Entry becomes a state close to perfection, it is very easy to adopt the position that almost no one in the Sangha is close enough to perfection to be a Stream Entrant. And when those few for whom we held out some hope (and on whom we projected our hopes) of them being Stream Entrants also finally reveal themselves to us as capable of craving, hatred or delusion, then we may write them off too.

This can lead to a damaging loss of confidence in ourselves and our practices, and perhaps it can also lead us to search around for that greatly accomplished and perfect teacher.

If one reads the Pali Canon closely, however, one can catch glimpses of the real individuals within and can get a sense of what they were up to. For example, as I have already mentioned, there is Mahānāma the householder Once-Returner who seems to be stuck in the hindrances and can't really meditate. Does this match our image of the Once-Returner? Then there is the example in the householder Ugga of Vesālī¹⁶ who had four young wives before he attained the state of Non-Returner, at which point he told them he could no longer remain their husband. So he asked them to choose between remaining in his house and “doing good deeds”, returning to their former families, or marrying another man of their choice. When his first wife said she wished to take another husband he gave her to the man she indicated, reporting that on doing so he felt no change of composure in his heart. This seems to imply that, although he had attained ethical perfection and equanimity on becoming a Non-Returner, prior to that, as a Once-Returner, he had still experienced craving and thus fell short of the highest ethical standards.

One can find many more examples if one reads the Canon closely.

It is not my intention to depreciate the attainment of Stream Entry; it is certainly an extremely significant stage on the path, and can only be reached by a consistent and determined practitioner. But it is important not to over idealise it. We have the doctrine, but the reality is usually stranger and messier than we think.

Making claims and the danger of self-inflation

While it can't be denied that there are issues and dangers involved in making claims about attainments, I believe it can be useful to explore these categories provided that one is motivated by clarity and inspiration, rather than acquisitiveness and a tendency to self-inflation.

There are several reasons why individuals with attainments may prefer to be circumspect and not reveal themselves publicly. I remember reading about one nun who wrote that if one decided to make public claims of Insight, whatever the motive involved or truth of the matter, then one should be prepared to be perpetually scrutinised and to defend one's position for the rest of one's life.

Furthermore the nature of Insight is such that the deeper one's Insight becomes, the less inclined one becomes to make such claims. If insight is genuine then one becomes less egotistical, less concerned with status, and more concerned about whether such declarations would be helpful within the Sangha.

There is an interesting Sutta relating to the recognition of Insight¹⁷ in which a wanderer called Sandaka asks the Buddha if an Arahant is always aware of his Insight. The Buddha says that he is not aware at the time of arising of Insight, but only when he reviews it. This demonstrates that the nature of Insight is such that it leads one to be more fully engaged in

what one does and less likely to ask oneself if one has it. One is less likely to be aware of Insight as an object or category than, perhaps, as a vision which we are living out, or even as a vision living through us!

It is also notoriously difficult to evaluate the depth and degree of Insight in either ourselves or others. Traditionally the Buddha claimed that only he was able to determine with certainty the level of an individual's attainment. This alone should give us pause for thought.

A further common danger is mistaking charisma for Insight. There are many impressive men and women in the world, in all walks of life, and some of them are Buddhists. I hope that I won't be thought mischievous if I say that it has often occurred to me that one is more likely to discover the 'Noble Ones' quietly making the tea, sweeping the yard or cleaning the toilets at the Buddhist Centre than up there in the limelight giving the big teaching. What I'm suggesting here is that deep, natural humility, and the absence of pride, is a quality that develops alongside the arising of Insight.

In any case, when one considers all these points it is hardly surprising that Stream Entrants (and those who have attained stages beyond that) may be reluctant to declare themselves publicly. However, I do think that within certain situations, perhaps with long-standing spiritual friends, one may appropriately explore the issue if one undertakes it with care for the sake of deeper mutual understanding and delight in the Dhamma. But one should always bear in mind that it is possible to delude oneself.

Conclusion

I think that my presentation of the stages in this article fits more accurately the evidence to be found in the Canon and the commentaries. This way of understanding the scheme of the path is also likely to be much more useful than one which renders the first stage virtually unattainable. I have little doubt that within the Western Buddhist Order (as well as significant parts of the modern Theravāda), the levels of ethical purity within the fourfold scheme have been elevated to such an extent that practitioners can become discouraged and less confident in themselves and their practices. It is important to be clear about the scale of the task and the primary grounds of practice that each stage involves, and I hope this article serves that end.

I firmly believe that ethical perfection (which consists in total freedom from greed, hatred and delusion and embodies generosity, love and wisdom), is an aspect of Full Enlightenment. However, within the stages of the path as outlined in the Pali tradition, the process of ethical purification is gradual. It is *the* major task that many of us are involved in.

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