

## Growing in Wisdom: Introduction to Entering the Stream

By Gil Fronsdal

The path leading to Nibbāna—  
That is where my mind delights.<sup>1</sup>

The Buddhist path can be divided into two parts: the path of preparation and the path of seeing. The first leads to a clear view of what it is like to be free of attachments and suffering. It provides a personal, experiential vision of what further freedom is possible. Practicing with this vision, sometimes called “right view,” is the path of seeing. While the basic Buddhist practices are the same in both halves of the path, the direct vision of freedom available in the second half changes how one does these practices.

The primary representative of the first phase is “walking the Eightfold Path.” The second phase is characterized by the idea of “entering the stream.” “Path” is a land-based metaphor where personal initiative and effort—sometimes considerable—are needed to move forward. By contrast, “entering the stream” is a water-based metaphor referring to being carried along by the stream’s current. When in the current, one does not need to initiate an effort to move; one is already being carried downriver. When walking, the walker supplies the force to move; when floating downstream, the current supplies the momentum.

When walking the Dharma path, one is developing in oneself the eight factors of the Eightfold Path. When one has vision, i.e., a clear, direct experience of the Dharma, one recognizes the Eightfold Path as part of oneself or, ultimately, as oneself. The Pali term for entering the stream is *sotāpatti*, where *sota* means the stream itself and its current. One doesn’t simply step into a river; one enters thoroughly enough to be carried onward by the Dharma current.

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<sup>1</sup> *Connected Discourses* 8.1 (verse 711)

When one has entered the stream, the naturalness of this liberative process is analogized by water flowing downhill. If nothing obstructs the water, it will naturally move downward without anyone making it do so:

"Bhikkhus, just as when the rain pours down in thick droplets on a mountain top, the water flows down along the slope and fills the cleft, gullies, and creeks; being filled, these fill up the pools, being filled, these fill up the lakes; being filled, these fill up the streams; being filled, these fill up the rivers; being filled, these fill up the great ocean; so too, for a noble disciple, these things—confirmed confidence in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, and the virtues dear to the noble ones—flow onwards and, having gone beyond, they lead to the destruction of the taints."<sup>2</sup>

This analogy contrasts with any conception of the path as a walk where every step requires personal effort, volition, and agency. In the metaphor of flowing water, an effort may still be needed to remove whatever thwarts the flow; this is why restraining and abandoning unwholesome impulses is emphasized in Buddhist practice. But when these obstructions have been removed, and the appropriate conditions are in place, the unfolding path naturally flows toward liberation.

Wisdom is essential for both the path of preparation and the path of seeing. The tradition lists three sources of wisdom: from thinking (*cintāmayā*), learning (*sutamayā*), and practice (*bhāvanāmayā*).<sup>3</sup> All three support the path of liberation. Contemplating the Dharma, learning the Dharma, and practicing the Dharma are all needed to mature along this path. Significantly, the wisdom derived from thinking is listed first. This is Dharmic thinking, which, when done well, provides inspiration, joy, and understanding connected to the profound inner spring feeding the stream carrying us onward. Because of its importance, during this Entering the Stream program, please allow yourself time to contemplate the Dharma in a way that nourishes the Dharma flow in you.

We are beginning this program with the next essay emphasizing the role of a profound, gestational form of contemplation in the Buddha's teachings and our involvement with these teachings. This will provide a foundation for our study of wisdom, the third of the three trainings

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<sup>2</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation of SN 55:38, p. 1825.

<sup>33</sup> *Long Discourses* 33.6 (III 219)

emphasized in Buddhism. Over the last two years, the two previous eight-month programs focused on the first two trainings, training in virtue (*sīla*) and meditation (*samādhi*). The first began with highlighting the role of "care" (*anukampa*) in our ethical life. The second started with a focus on "beauty" (*kalyāṇa*) as a guide for meditation practice and our care for our inner life.

Just as virtue, meditation, and wisdom work together along the path of liberation, so care, beauty, and generative contemplation are mutually supportive in contributing to finding the inner Dharma path within ourselves and in how we live our lives.

Virtue, meditation, and wisdom are the three legs that provide a firm foundation for maturing in the Dharma. These three give each other invaluable support; relying on only one or two of these is like trying to have a tripod remain upright with only one or two legs. To grow in virtue (*sīla*) is to grow in the care and compassion that supports wholeness (a description of the experience of *samādhi*) and opens our eyes to wisdom. The unification process of *samādhi* provides the sensitivity that inspires virtue and highlights liberative wisdom. With the maturation of wisdom, we increasingly know that virtue and wholeness are infinitely better than their opposites.

The mutually supportive development of virtue, meditation, and wisdom is at the heart of the path of liberation. Together, they are the essence of a life in the Dharma. As these mature, a person's Dharma life goes through the two major phases discussed above. First, one walks the Dharma path through one's own efforts and then one is carried along by the Dharma stream. As we bring all of ourselves along when we physically walk, with the first phase, we learn to include all of ourselves in our practice. The more we practice with our whole self, the easier it is to float on the current.

May this Entering the Stream program support you in deep and inspiring contemplation of the Dharma.

It is up to you to make strong effort;  
Buddhas merely tell you how.

Dhammapada verse 276

Though the path is impassable and uneven,  
The noble ones walk it.  
The ignorant fall down headfirst,

Right there on the uneven path.  
But the path of the noble ones is even,  
For the noble are even amidst what is uneven.  
*Connected Discourses 2.5 (verse 268)*