

Sīla Samādhi Paññā

Moral virtue, concentration, wisdom

[The three trainings in early Buddhism]

An introduction by Piya Tan ©2007

1 The gradual training

1.1 UNIVERSALITY OF THE GRADUAL TRAINING. One of the most common teaching tool the Buddha uses to provide his audience with the most conducive environment for awakening is the gradual teaching, or more technically, known as the “progressive talk” (*anupubbī,kathā*). This account of the Buddha’s teaching Pokkhara,sāti leading to his attainment of the Dharma-eye is typical:

While the brahmin Pokkhara,sāti was seated at one side, the Blessed One gave him a **pro-gressive talk**—that is to say, he spoke on giving (*dāna*), on moral virtue (*sīla*) and on the heavens (*sagga*). He explained the danger, the vanity and the disadvantages of sensual pleasures (*kām’ādī-nava*), and the advantages of renunciation (*nekkhamm’ānisamsa*).¹

When the Blessed One perceived that the brahmin Pokkhara,sāti’s mind was prepared, pliant, free from obstacles, elevated and lucid, then he explained to him the teaching peculiar to the Buddhas,² that is to say, **suffering, its arising, its cessation, and the path.**

(D 3.2.21/1:110 f) = SD 21.3

Here we have the clearest example of the application of the three trainings. The instruction begins with teachings centering around moral virtue, so that the mind in due course become free from hindrances, indicating mental concentration. Finally, the Buddha teaches him the four noble truths, constituting the wisdom aspect. In fact, a recurring stock passage in the **Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), reminds us how the training sequence leads to spiritual liberation:³

This is moral virtue, this is concentration, this is wisdom. Concentration, when well cultivated with moral virtue, brings great fruit and great profit. Wisdom, when well cultivated with concentration, brings great fruit and great profit. The mind, when well cultivated with wisdom, becomes completely free from the mental cankers,⁴ that is to say, from the canker of sensual lust, the canker of becoming, the canker of false views and the canker of ignorance.

(D 16.1.12, 1.14, 1.18, 1.21, 2.4, 2.10, 2.20, 4.4, 4.12)

¹ This passage is stock: V 1:15; D 1:148; A 3:184 etc.

² *Buddhānaṃ sāmukkamsikā dhamma,desanā*. This is an occasion when the Buddha teaches the 4 noble truths directly to the laity; for stock passage, see V 1:16 (the youth Yasa), 16 (Yasa’s father, the seth householder), 18 (to Yasa’s mother and former wife), 19 (Yasa’s five friends), 20 (Yasa’s fifty friends), 23 (to the group of 30 lucky youths, *bhadda,vagga*), 37 (to 12 “myriad” (*nahuta*) of brahmins and householders of Magadha, headed by Bimbisāra), 181 (Bimbisāra’s 80,000 village headmen), 226 (Belatṭha Kaccāna, between Rajagaha and Andhaka,vinda); D 3.2.21/1:110 (to Pokkhara,sāti), 5.29/1:148 (to Kūṭa,danta), 14.3.11/2:41 (to prince Khaṇḍa and Tissa the chaplain’s son), 14.3.15/2:43 (a crowd of 84,000), 14.3.19/2:44 (another similar crowd); M 56.18/1:379 f (to Upāli), 91.36/-2:145 (to Brahmāyu); A 8.12.9/4:186 (to general Sīha), 8.21.5-6/4:209 (to the householder Ugga of Vesālī), 8.22.5-6/4:213 (to the householder of Hatthi,gāma), U 5.3/49 (to the leper Suppa,buddha).

³ For a similar formula in Skt, see **Mahāparinirvānasūtra** 1950:160, 120. For further discussion on the progressive training, see Jayatilleke 1963:396 f.

⁴ “**Mental cankers**,” *āsava*. The term *āsava* (lit “cankers”) comes from *ā-savati* “flows towards” (ie either “into” or “out” towards the observer). It has been variously translated as taints (“deadly taints,” RD), corruptions, intoxicants, biases, depravity, misery, evil (influence), or simply left untranslated. The Abhidhamma lists 4 *āsavas*: the cankers of (1) sense-desire (*kām’āsava*), (2) (desire for eternal) existence (*bhav’āsava*), (3) wrong views (*diṭṭh’-āsava*), (4) ignorance (*avijjāsava*) (D 16.1.12/2:82, 16.2.4/2:91, Pm 1.442, 561, Dhs §§1096-1100, Vbh §937). These four are also known as “floods” (*ogha*) and “yokes” (*yoga*). The list of three cankers (omitting the canker of views) [43] is probably older and is found more frequently in the suttas (D 3:216, 33.1.10(20); M 1:55, 3:41; A 3.59, 67, 6.63). The destruction of these *āsavas* is equivalent to arhathood. See BDict: *āsava*.

1.2 RATIONALE OF THE THREE TRAININGS. As explained in discourses like **the (Ti) Sikkhā Sutta** (A 3.88), the set of three trainings of moral virtue (*sīla*), mental concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*), is a practical formula, leading us from our present state, through a cultivated state, into a liberated state. Spiritual development progresses more or less in this sequence. If we want to cultivate wisdom, clearly some level of mental focus is needed. Mental focus can only arise from a conducive environment of moral virtue.⁵

As practitioners, our training must begin with the cultivation of moral virtue, that is, a conducive external (or social) environment. However, the expression “external” here entails that we are always *a part* of our environment, never *apart* from it. The first aspect of Dharma training—that of moral virtue (*sīla*)—is practical, purposeful and intentional.

The training in moral virtue (*sīla, sikkhā*), in *practical* terms, consists of the five precepts (*pañca, sīla*) [Table 1.2]. They are not commandments: the Buddha did not invent them nor impose them on us, and no one punishes us for breaking any of them. These precepts are a practical formulation of *natural morality*, that is, they reflect universal values of life, happiness, freedom, truth and wisdom.⁶ Just as a sports or a game is defined by its rules, and as such is meaningful, fair and enjoyable, even so the five precepts are the basic rules of life that make it meaningful, just and enjoyable.

<u>Pañca, sīla</u>	<u>The Five Precepts</u>
1. <i>Pāṇātipātā</i> <i>veramaṇī sikkhā, padam samādiyāmi.</i>	I undertake the training-rule to refrain from <u>harming life [killing]</u> .
2. <i>Adinn ’ādānā</i> <i>veramaṇī sikkhā, padam samādiyāmi.</i>	I undertake the training-rule to refrain from <u>taking the not-given [stealing]</u> .
3. <i>Kāmesu micchā, cārā</i> <i>veramaṇī sikkhā, padam samādiyāmi.</i>	I undertake the training-rule to refrain from <u>sexual misconduct</u> .
4. <i>Musā, vādā</i> <i>veramaṇī sikkhā, padam samādiyāmi.</i>	I undertake the training-rule to refrain from <u>falsehood</u> .
5. <i>Surā, meraya, majja, pamāda-t, thāna</i> <i>veramaṇī sikkhā, padam samādiyāmi.</i>	I undertake the training-rule to refrain from <u>strong drinks, distilled drinks, fermented drinks and that which causes heedlessness</u> .

Table 1.2 The five precepts.

On closer examination, we can see that the five precepts entail *self-restraint*, that is, self-control over our body and speech. The first three precepts are broken through wrong or unwholesome bodily actions, and the fourth, through wrong or unwholesome communication. The fifth precept prevents heedlessness, specially drunkenness and addiction that would make it hard to keep the other four precepts. In fact, the fifth precept, as we shall soon see, in the link to the next aspect of Dharma training.

The proper keeping to the five precepts empowers us with tolerance (if not, compassion) towards others, charity and generosity, restraint and contentment, honesty and transparency, and mindfulness. These qualities are the foundations and lifeblood of a wholesome community and society. These qualities allow us, humans and all beings, to live harmoniously and productively together, without harming ourselves nor the environment.

In Dharma training, keeping the precepts is not merely good in itself. While it is true that precept-keeping is necessary and vital in inculcating true *value* into life, happiness, freedom, truth and wisdom,

⁵ A 3.88/1:235 = SD 24.10c. However, it will soon become apparent that this sequence is a matter of emphasis, rather than a mutually exclusive progression; for, all three trainings facilitate one other. See **(Ti) Sikkhā S** (A 3.88/1:235) = SD 24.10c.

⁶ For a technical analysis of the precepts, see **Sāleyyaka S** (M 41) = SD 5.7 Intro (2).

precept-keeping (because it entails restraint of the body and speech), more importantly, prepares the environment conducive for *mental cultivation*, which is the second aspect of Dharma training.⁷

How does this work? We are *habitual* beings, our lives often autopiloted by our past. If such a past is crowded and polluted by violence, greed, lust, falsehood and confusion, they only contribute to stress and foolishness. Keeping the precepts cuts down or prevents, that is, at least temporarily removes these distractions so that we can calm our mind. A progressively calm mind goes on to see its true light and strength. This is the essence of **the training in mental concentration** (*samādhi, sikkhā*).

A morally virtuous life supports a healthy mind, and together, they prepare us for **the training in wisdom** (*paññā, sikkhā*). A simile helps here. Keeping the precepts (training in moral virtue) is like preparing a workshop to make optical lenses. The training in mental concentration is like the actual grinding and polishing of the lenses. Finally, the training in wisdom is like clearing seeing through the lenses and understanding what we see there.

And what we see through the lenses of our calm and clear mind is that all existence is *impermanent*. Impermanence means that both people and things, our minds and bodies, are characterized by constant change, not turning out the way we want them to, and that they will not always be around for us. If we are unable to understand or unwilling to accept this universal nature of existence, then we *suffer* pain twice over: we suffer *physical* pain and *mental* pain.⁸ Our calm and clear mind, on the other hand, sees physical pain—bodily pains, how things decay, or even death—but the wise mind does not suffer pain on that account. On attaining nirvana, we are finally free of all pains, physical *and* mental.

2 The fruits of recluseship formula

We have been examining the three trainings in their commonly known sequence, that is, as moral virtue, concentration and wisdom (*sīla samādhi paññā*). This well known training sequence is not only reiterated in **the Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta** (M 44), but they are classified in terms of the factors of the noble eightfold path, thus:⁹

Right speech, right action, and right livelihood—these dharmas comprise the aggregate of moral virtue. Right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration—these dharmas comprise the aggregate of concentration. Right view and right thought—these dharmas comprise the aggregate of wisdom. (M 44.11/1:301)

Throughout the Nikāyas, the training is often described in a well-defined sequence of moral virtue, concentration, and wisdom. The 13 suttas of the opening chapter of the Dīgha Nikāya, “On the Aggregates of Moral Virtue” (*Sīla-k, khandha Vagga*), invariably present the three trainings as “the fruits of recluseship” (*sāmañña, phala*). Here the sequence of the training is a familiar one:

- The first stage of the path is “moral virtue” (famously known as the Sīlas or Moralities), forming probably one of the earliest parts of the Dīgha Nikāya, and originally probably existed as a separate tract on its own.¹⁰
- The second stage is “mental concentration” (*samādhi*), that is, meditative attainments, normally comprising the overcoming of the five mental hindrances, the four dhyanas, and the first five of the six direct knowledges (*abhiññā*)¹¹ which arises from the dhyanas.

⁷ It is also important to understand that moral virtue is *not* abandoned “after it is cultivated.” See (1.3) here.

⁸ See **Nakula, pitā S** (S 22.1/3:1-5) = SD 5.4.

⁹ Some Skt sources give a different arrangement: *samyag, dr̥ṣṭi, samyak, saṃkalpa* and *samyag, vyāyāma* are *prajñā, skandha* (the aggregate of wisdom); *samyag, vāk, samyak, karmānta* and *samyag, ājīva* are *sīla, skandha* (the aggregate of moral virtue), and *samyak, smṛti* and *samyak, samādhi* are *samādhi, skandha* (the aggregate of concentration): see Śrāvaka, bhūmi, in Alex Wayman, *Analysis of the Śrāvakabhūmi Manuscript*, 1961:101; *Satya, siddhi Śāstra of Harivarman* (tr A Sastri) 1978: 2.43, 448 f.

¹⁰ For a detailed analysis, see **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2) = SD 8.10 Intro (3).

¹¹ The 6 direct knowledges are: (1) Psychic powers (*iddhi, vidhā*); (2) Clairaudience or the “divine ear” (*dibba, sota*); (3) Telepathy or mind-reading (*parassa ceto, pariya, ñāṇa*); (4) Retrocognition or the knowledge recollection

- The third stage is “wisdom” (*paññā*), that is, only the sixth direct knowledge alone, namely, the “knowledge of the destruction of mental cankers” (*āsava-k, khaya, ñāṇa*), entailing arhathood. This level of training is generally defined in terms of the realization of the four noble truths and the destruction of the four cankers.

Although the training sequence is a well-defined one, in the *Sīla-k, khandha Vagga*, the terminology often varies, depending on the context and purpose of the sutta. The very first sutta of the *Dīgha*, **the Brahma, jāla Sutta** (D 1), in fact, only presents the section on moral virtue (the Moralities or *sīla*), without clearly defined sections for concentration and wisdom. However, they are almost invisibly present. The whole section on the 62 bases for wrong views (D 1.28-104) constitutes the Buddha’s “concentration,” since this knowledge has arisen from his deep meditations. The section on “Samsara and Liberation” (D 1.105-147), where the Buddha explains that all these 62 bases of wrong views arise through feeling and contact, constitutes his “wisdom.”

The Subha Sutta (D 10) gives a well-defined sequence of categories, namely, “the aggregate of moral virtue” (*sīla-k, khandha*), “the aggregate of concentration” (*samādhi-k, khandha*), and “the aggregate of wisdom” (*paññā-k, khandha*). **The Sāmañña, phala Sutta** (D 2), on the other hand, while giving the three trainings in full, does not explicitly take them as three categories—and this is also true of **the Kūṭa, danta Sutta** (D 5), **the Mahāli Sutta** (D 6), **the Jāliya Sutta** (D 7), **the Kevaḍḍha Sutta** (D 11), and **the Lohicca Sutta** (D 12).

The Ambaṭṭha Sutta (D 3), in keeping with the drift of the Buddha debate with Ambaṭṭha, mentions moral virtue in the standard manner, but highlights “conduct” (*carāṇa*) (encompassing concentration) and “knowledge” (*vijjā*) (encompassing all the knowledges). In **the Soṇa, daṇḍa Sutta** (D 4), only “moral virtue” and “wisdom” are highlighted, and in **the Kassapa (Mahā) Siha, nāda Sutta** (D 8), they are presented as “the accomplishment of moral virtue” (*sīla, sampadā*), “the accomplishment of concentration” (*samādhi, sampadā*), and “the accomplishment of wisdom” (*paññā, sampadā*).

The Poṭṭhapāda Sutta (D 9) and **the Tevijja Sutta** (D 13) depart from the standard pattern after the account of the fourth dhyana, inserting descriptions of the four formless attainments (in the former sutta), and the four divine abodes (in the latter).¹²

3 The training and the sequence of the path factors

3.1 THE PATH COMPRISES THE THREE TRAININGS. **The Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta** (M 44) contains an important dialogue on the noble eightfold path, which is here produced in full for further examination:

(9) “Sister, what is the noble eightfold path?”

“Avuso Visākha, it is just this noble eightfold path, that is, right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.”

(10) “Sister, is the noble eightfold path conditioned (*asaṅkhata*) or unconditioned (*saṅkhata*)?”

“Avuso Visākha, the noble eightfold path is conditioned.”¹³

(11a) “Sister, are the three aggregates (*khandha*) (of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*) composed of the noble eightfold path, or are the noble eightfold path composed of the three aggregates?”

“The three aggregates, avuso Visākha, are not composed of the noble eightfold path, but, avuso Visākha, the noble eightfold path is composed of the three aggregates.”¹⁴

of past lives (*pubbe, nivāsānussati, ñāṇa*); (5) Clairvoyance or the “divine eye” (*dibba, cakkhu*) or knowledge of the passing-away and re-appearance of beings, faring according to their karma (*cutūpapāta yathā, kammāpaga, ñāṇa*); (6) The knowledge of the destruction of mental cankers (*āsava-k, khaya, ñāṇa*). See **Kevaḍḍha S** (D 11) = SD 1.7 Intro (1).

¹² For further discussion, see Gethin 2001:207-212.

¹³ Comy explains *saṅkhata* as “thought out, arranged, put together, worked at, produced, to be attained by the attaining” (*ceṭito kappito pakappito āyūhito nibbattito samāpajjantena samāpajjitabbo*). (MA 2:361)

¹⁴ *Na kho āvuso Visākha ariyena aṭṭhaṅgikena maggena tayo khandhā saṅgahīta, tīhi ca kho āvuso Visākha khandhehi ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo saṅgahīto.*

(11b) Right speech, right action, and right livelihood—these dharmas comprise the aggregate of moral virtue. Right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration—these dharmas comprise the aggregate of concentration. Right view and right thought—these dharmas comprise the aggregate of wisdom.” (M 44.9-11/1:300 f)

Section 9 lists the noble eightfold path according to the well known sequence, beginning with right view. Section 10 means that the noble eightfold path is still a *path*, a means of spiritual awakening. Section 11, due to its cryptic nature, has generally been ignored by even the leading scholars of Buddhism, except for **Rupert Gethin**, and I here present his findings.¹⁵

This commentarial explanation may help us understand section 11 better:

Herein, because the *magga* is specific while the three aggregates are all inclusive, therefore, because of the specificity, it is comprised by the three all inclusive aggregates like a city by a kingdom. (MA 2:361 = Vism 16.95/514)

So why is it that the noble eightfold path comprises the three aggregates, but not vice versa? Gethin explains:

Technically, what this seems to mean is that one can instance *dhammā* such as *vicāra* and *pīti*, for example, which as *jhāna*-factors have a place in *samādhi-kkhandha*, yet are left out of the reckoning in the *ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo*. More generally this must mean that the *ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo* should be understood as having a more specific import than the all embracing gradual scheme of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*. At first sight this might seem to contradict some of what I have said above, namely, that the *ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo* does embrace and comprise spiritual practice in its entirety, that it does represent the sum of the Buddhist path as presented in the Nikāyas. However, in fact, I think this allows us to form a clearer idea of how and in what sense this is so. (2001:211 f)

Gethin then goes on to say:

The triad of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* implies a comprehensive graded description of these stages of the spiritual path. In terms of content it comprises the successive stages in full, and while reflecting the overall general nature of the actual stages of the path, it does in part represent something of an ideal scheme.

The *ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo* does something rather different. While it does not by way of content fully embrace the aggregates of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*, the eight factors do collectively touch on and comprise each of these three aspects—uniquely among the seven sets.¹⁶ This the eight factors collectively represent, as it were, an actual manifestation of all three aspects, so that the *ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo* can be seen as the essential distillation of the aggregates of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*.

The *ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo* comprises the whole of the spiritual life precisely in the sense that it is the consummation of the development of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*. It is the path or way of life that issues from that development. Its end is a reflection and crystallization of the way one has come.

In other words, the development of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* in all its various aspects culminates in right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right striving, right mindfulness, right concentration—*paññā*, *sīla* and *samādhi*, the three essential aspects of spiritual

¹⁵ Gethin 2001:210-212.

¹⁶ The seven sets are the 4 *satipaṭṭhāna*, 4 *samma-p, padhāna*, 4 *iddhi, pāda*, 5 *indriya*, 5 *bala*, 7 *bojjhaṅga*, and 8 *ariya, magga*, whose factors total 37. These are regarded as the essence of early Buddhism as found in the Nikāyas. For a monograph, see Gethin 2001. See also **Bodhi, Pakkhiya Dhamma** = SD 10 for a comprehensive introduction.

practice in perfect balance. It is only in this manner that the treatment of the *ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo* in the *Cūḷavedalla-sutta* becomes properly intelligible. (2001:212; reparagraphed)

3.2 THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF THE PATH.

3.2.1 The trainings and the eightfold path. The purpose of the noble eightfold path is to overcome wrong view and attain right view (*sammā diṭṭhi*). The Dharma-centred life as modelled on the noble eightfold path is not a sequential progression, but is a holistic living that involves all aspects of our daily activity and processes, mental, verbal and physical, directed by wholesome intentions (those, to some degree, free from greed, hate and delusion).

Such a existential pattern is consciously initiated or sustained so that it becomes a spontaneous habit. This is a spiral, self-augmenting path, each moment is reinforced by the previous ones, and in turn reinforcing the next and subsequent moments. To the extent the path is sustained by right view, to that extent, the various other factors harmoniously work, moving in the direction of self-awakening.

Again, it should be understood that **right view**—the awareness and understanding of the true nature of impermanence—is not a given, but needs to be constantly cultivated and directed to the other seven path factors: that is, envisioning impermanence at work in our thoughts, body, speech, work, drives, awareness and mental focus.

It is as if, by this process, atoms of right view are gradually being assembled in a conscious holistic pattern, or quanta of light are slowly merging together, so that the light becomes ever brighter, if the effort is properly sustained, so that the ensuing clarity reveals itself as a total vision of true reality, as supramundane right view. Such a spiritual path, with all its factors, can be diagrammed in the following manner:

Factor	(aṅga)	Training (sikkhā)	(khandha)
(7) Right view	<i>sammā diṭṭhi</i>	} <u>III. Wisdom aggregate</u> (liberation-based mind)	<i>paññā khandha</i> (straightened views)
(8) Right intention	<i>sammā saṅkappa</i>		
(1) Right action	<i>sammā kammanta</i>	} <u>I. Moral virtue aggregate</u> (the body and speech)	<i>sīla khandha</i> (wholesome conduct)
(2) Right speech	<i>sammā vācā</i>		
(3) Right livelihood	<i>sammā ājīva</i>		
(4) Right effort	<i>sammā vāyāma</i>	} <u>II. Concentration aggregate</u> (the mind)	<i>samādhi khandha</i> (mental stillness)
(5) Right mindfulness	<i>sammā sati</i>		
(6) Right concentration	<i>sammā samādhi</i>		

(D 2:312; M 1:61, 3:251; Vbh 235)

Table 8.3 The noble eightfold path

So right view is the *beginning*, as well as the *end*, of the spiritual life. How should we understand this? This is explained in the **Mahā Cattārīsaka Sutta** (M 117). The recurring theme of this sutta is the primacy of **right view** with regard to “noble right concentration along with its support and requisite”¹⁷ and that “in this regard, bhikshus, right view comes first.”¹⁸ This means that the spiritual path centres around mindfulness or meditation, the other factors support it, and the goal is right view.

This statement of the primacy of right view opens each of the first three main sections of the sutta. **The first section** of the sutta explains that right view comes first because it knows wrong view and right view as they really are [§4]. In the same way, with right view, we know the other factors (*aṅgā*) as they really are, namely, as wrong intention and as right intention [§10], as wrong speech and as right speech [§16], as wrong action and as right action [§22], as wrong livelihood and as right livelihood [§28]. The

¹⁷ *Ariyaṃ... sammā,samādhim...sa,upaniṣaṃ sa,parikkharāṃ*, M 117.2/3:71, 3/3:71.

¹⁸ *Tatra sammā,diṭṭhi pubbaṃ,gamā*, M 117.4/3:71, 10/3:72 f, 16/3:73, 22/3:75, 28/3:74, 34-35/3:76 f.

wrong factors are rooted in the unwholesome. The right factors are of two kinds: the mundane (*lokiya*): they have mental cankers, partake of merit, and result in acquisitions (for the aggregates, ie continued existence): this is the path of true Dharma practitioner. The right or “noble” factors are supramundane (*lok’uttara*): they are without mental cankers, and are truly path factors, that is, they move us on to spiritual liberation; that is, this is the path of the saints.¹⁹

3.2.2 The mundane and supramundane trainings. As we have just mentioned, there are two levels of the noble eightfold path: the mundane (*lokiya*) and the supramundane (*lokuttara*). The mundane eightfold path (*lokiya magga*) is the way of the unawakened practitioner by way of consciously keeping to the moral precepts, keeping up mindfulness, and the growing awareness of true reality. The supramundane path (*lok’uttara magga*) is often referred to as “the ninefold supramundane dharmas” (*nava, lok’uttara dhamma*), comprising the four pairs of saints (that is, the saints of the path and the saints of the fruition),²⁰ and nirvana.²¹

The supramundane path is also called the tenfold rightness (*sammatta*),²² that is, the ten qualities of the adept or arhat (*asekha, dhamma*), which is also the very last entry in **the Saṅgīti Sutta** (D 33).²³ The list is repeated in **the Das’uttara Sutta** (D 34), also the list item in the whole discourse.²⁴ These ten qualities are also listed in **the Mahā Cattārisaka Sutta** (M 117), thus

(1) In this regard, bhikshus, right view comes first. And, bhikshus, how does right view come first?

- (2) From right view comes right intention;²⁵
- (3) from right intention comes right speech;
- (4) from right speech comes right action;
- (5) from right action comes right livelihood;
- (6) from right livelihood comes effort;
- (7) from right effort comes right mindfulness;
- (8) from right mindfulness comes right concentration;
- (9) from right concentration comes right knowledge;
- (10) from right knowledge comes right liberation.

—Thus, bhikshus, the learner on the path is endowed with eight factors, but the arhat with ten factors.²⁶ (M 117.34/3:76 = SD 6.10)

This statement is very interesting as it shows how the path seems to work sequentially, from right view right up to right liberation, that is, nirvana itself. However, it should be noted that this is the “rightness” (*sammatta*) of the arhat, who is fully self-awakened. His whole life moves in this manner. For the learners (*sekha*), that is, the saints short of the arhat, there are the supramundane eightfold path, and for the good worldling (*kalyāṇa puthujjana*),²⁷ there is the mundane eightfold path.

¹⁹ M 117/3:71-78 = SD 6.10.

²⁰ On these 8 types of saints, see **Aṭṭha, puggala S 1** (A 8.59/4:292) = SD 15.10a.

²¹ Dhs 1094.

²² **Saṅgīti S** (D 33) lists only the 8 path factors as *sammatta* (D 33.3.1(2)/3:255).

²³ D 33.3.3(6)/3:271.

²⁴ D 34.2.3(10)/3:292.

²⁵ Comy: For one with right view of the path (*magga*), the right intention of the path arises. Similarly, for one with the right view of the fruit (*phala*), the right intention of the fruit arises. The other factors (except the last two) applies in the same way as the supramundane path. (MA 4:134)

²⁶ The additional two factors are those of the arhat. Right knowledge (*sammā ñāṇa*) is the review knowledge (*paccavekkhaṇa ñāṇa*) that he has destroyed all defilements, and right liberation (*sammā vimutti*) is his experience of deliverance from defilements. (MA 4:135). This tenfold set is called “the 10 rightness” (*dasa sammatta*) (D 3:271, 292; M 1:42; A 5:212).

²⁷ The good worldling is an unawakened person who is willing and able to learn the Dharma for liberation. See SD 5.4 Intro (3).

The noble eightfold path, in terms of training practice, is not a series of progressive stages of a spiritual journey; clearly not in a linear sense, anyway. Instead, it is a way of practice (*paṭipadā*), a spiritual highway with eight lanes, or better, seven lanes, with *right view* as the distance markers, place and destination names, warning signs, and the destination itself. In other words, the eightfold path is what we *are* when we become a Dharma pilgrim, namely, a person with eight wonderful qualities, initiated by right view, motivated by right viewed, heading for right view.²⁸

3.2.3 The trainings and the purifications. The three trainings form the basis for spiritual growth leading to sainthood and nirvana. We can compare the trainings to another training model, actually two training models, that is, *the seven stages of purification* (*satta visuddhi*) and *the nine factors for striving for total purification* (*nava pārisuddhi padhaniyaṅga*; mentioned in the Das’uttara Sutta, D33). The three-training model is in fact an abridged model or summary of the disciple’s training. Or, in historical terms, the seven or nine purifications are likely to be elaborations of the three trainings.

Compared to the purification models, the brevity of the three training is more expeditious: it is easier for the beginner to understand and remember these three trainings, their practice and goal, rather than a longer list, such as the seven stages of purification or the nine purifications. For the more advanced practitioners, namely, those with high moral virtue, deep mental concentration, and some level of wisdom, the third training then would be a synecdoche or short form for the rest of the purification stages.²⁹

4 The training and the fetters

The (Sekha) Uddesa Sutta (A 3.85) is a definitive discourse on how the three trainings are related to the attaining of sainthood.³⁰ The sutta is also the locus classicus on how the various kinds of saints break the ten spiritual fetters (*saniyojana*), which are as follows:³¹

- | | | |
|--|---|--------------------|
| (1) self-identity view (<i>sakkāya, diṭṭhi</i>), | } | The lower fetters |
| (2) spiritual doubt (<i>vicikicchā</i>), | | |
| (3) attachment to rules and rites (<i>sīla-b, bata, parāmāsa</i>), | | |
| (4) sensual lust (<i>kāma, rāga</i>), | | |
| (5) repulsion (<i>paṭigha</i>), | | |
| (6) greed for form existence (<i>rūpa, rāga</i>), | } | The higher fetters |
| (7) greed for formless existence (<i>arūpa, rāga</i>), | | |
| (8) conceit (<i>māna</i>), | | |
| (9) restlessness (<i>uddhacca</i>), | | |
| (10) ignorance (<i>avijjā</i>). | | |

In some places, no 5 (*paṭigha*) is replaced by ill will (*vyāpāda*). The first five are the lower fetters (*oram, -bhāgiya*), so called because they bind us to existence in the lower realms. The rest are the higher fetters (*uddham, bhāgiya*), that bind us to the higher realms. Either way, the fetters chain us to samsara.

²⁸ See Gethin 1998:83 f; 2001:211 f.

²⁹ On the 7 stages of purification, see **Ratha, vinīta S** (M 24) = SD 28.3 Intro.

³⁰ A 3.85/1:231 f = SD 3.3(2).

³¹ S 5:61, A 5:13, Vbh 377.

	Moral virtue	Concentration	Wisdom	Fetters broken
Streamwinner	Complete	Limited	Limited	The first 3 fetters
Once-returned	Complete	Limited	Limited	The first 3 fetters & diminishing of lust, hate, delusion
Non-returned	Complete	Complete	Limited	The 5 lower fetters: reborn in the Pure Abodes, ³² and there attains final nirvana
Arhat	Complete	Complete	Complete	All 10 fetters

Table 4. The 4 types of saints and the three trainings (A 3.85/1:231 f) = SD 3.3(2).³³

The Sa,upadisesa Sutta (A 9.12) mentions nine kinds of saints—three kinds of streamwinners, the once-returned, and five kinds of non-returned—“who having died with the aggregates of existence remaining are liberated” from the suffering states. These nine saints form the traditional “holy community” (*ariya,saṅgha*) of the four types of saints.³⁴

To be a streamwinner (*sotāpanna*), you need the following training:

- (1) fulfill moral virtue, that is, to at least consciously keep to the five precepts;
- (2) maintain some level of mindfulness, that is, mental calm and clarity (without the need for dhyana);
- (3) a simple level of wisdom, namely, a basic understanding of impermanence, or simply total faith in the universality of impermanence;
- (4) living our lives in this manner, we will gradually diminish and abandon
 - (a) the self-identity view (that this body is an abiding entity),
 - (b) spiritual doubt (that is, we committed to the possibility of awakening and clearing any doubt regarding the four noble truths), and
 - (c) superstition (that is, not blindly relying on rituals or vows for spiritual solace and liberation).

Streamwinning may arise immediately, or in the following life, or within three lives, but surely within seven lives. Meanwhile, you will be reborn in a family or environment conducive for spiritual cultivation. With streamwinning and all the other stages of sainthood, you will never be reborn in any of the subhuman suffering states.

To be a once-returned (*sakadāgāmi*), you must fulfill moral virtue, but need not have complete concentration, nor complete wisdom. On abandoning the first three fetters, and with the diminishing of lust, hate and delusion (that is, the three roots of unwholesome karma), you become a once-returned, returning only once to this world to make an end of suffering.

To be a non-returned (*anāgāmi*), you need to fulfill moral virtue *and* mental concentration, but need not have complete wisdom. The state may arise immediately here, and you may attain nirvana in transit to be reborn in the Pure Abode, or you are reborn there to exhaust your karma, with some exertion, or without any exertion, or you may attain arhathood as you progress successively up to the highest of the Pure Abodes.

³² The Pure Abodes (*suddh'āvāsa*) are the five highest heavens of the form world (*rūpa,loka*) inhabited only by non-returned who live their last lives there before becoming arhats and attain nirvana. These worlds are Āviha (“Non-declining”), Ātappa (“Unworried”), Sudassā (“Clearly Visible”), Sudassī (“Clear-visioned”) and Akanitṭhā (“Highest”) (D 3:237, M 3:103, Vbh 425, Pug 42-46).

³³ Cf Vism 1.14/6.

³⁴ A 9.12/4:378-382 = SD 3.3(3).

Since the sutta deals only with the “learners” (*sekha*), the arhat is not mentioned. The arhat is defined in **the (Sekha) Uddesa Sutta** (A 3.85) as one who has fulfilled all the three trainings—moral virtue, mental concentration, and wisdom—and destroyed all the ten fetters—or more commonly, he is said to have destroyed the four mental cankers (*āsava*)³⁵—as such, they are known as “those with cankers destroyed” (*khīṇāsava*), one fully liberated here and now, not to be reborn any more.³⁶

5 The training as envisioned in the Commentaries

The Commentaries—that is to say Buddhaghosa and Dhammapāla—explain the three trainings in technical detail, for which the commentarial tradition is well known. They distinguish the defilements as occurring on three levels:

- (1) the latent tendency (*anusaya*), where they remain dormant until the right conditions arise;
- (2) the obsessive level (*pariyuṭṭhāna*), where they arise and habitually seize the mind;
- (3) the transgressive level (*vītikkama*), where they motivate unwholesome bodily action and speech.

At the start of Buddhaghosa’s **Visuddhi,magga** and in the Commentaries, he notes that³⁷

- Moral virtue counters transgression (*vītikkama,paṭipakkha*) due to defilements;
- Concentration counters our obsessive nature (*pariyuṭṭhāna,paṭipakkha*) due to defilements; and
- Wisdom counters latent tendencies (*anusaya,paṭipakkha*), at the root level.

In other words, *the practice of the precepts* is effective in prevent overt violence through unwholesome actions of the body and of speech. *The practice of mental concentration* helps us deal with habitual and obsessive mental states arising through greed, hate and delusion, the three root-conditions for our breaking of the precepts.³⁸ And *wisdom* totally uproots our latent tendencies, the deeply secret storage of negative reactive habits accumulated each time we repeat an unwholesome action or do not express ourselves wholesomely when we are able to.

In the Commentaries, Buddhaghosa defines the three levels of abandoning defilements in terms of the Tipiṭaka (the Three Baskets), as follows:

Hence, the training in higher moral virtue (*adhisīla,sikkhā*) is specifically discussed in the Vinaya Piṭaka, the training in higher mind (*adhicitta,sikkhā*) in the Sutta Piṭaka, and the training in higher wisdom (*adhipaññā,sikkhā*) in the Abhidhamma Piṭaka.

In the Vinaya Piṭaka is taught the abandoning of transgression (*vītikkama-p,pahāna*), as transgression in defilements is diametrically opposed to moral virtue.

In the Suttanta Piṭaka is taught the abandoning of obsession (*pariyuṭṭhāna-p,pahāna*), as obsession is diametrically opposed to concentration.

In the Abhidhamma Piṭaka is taught the abandoning of latent tendency (*anusaya-p,pahāna*), as latent tendency is diametrically opposed to wisdom.

In the first is the abandoning by substitution (*tad-aṅga-p,pahāna*), and in the others the abandoning by suppression (*vikkhambhana pahāna*) and the abandoning by eradication (*samuccheda pahāna*).

In the first is the abandoning of the defilement of misconduct; in the others, that of the abandoning of the defilements of craving and view.

Tathā hi Vinaya,piṭake visesena adhisīla,sikkhā vuttā, Suttanta,piṭake adhicitta,sikkhā, Abhidhamma,piṭake adhipaññā,sikkhā.

Vinaya,piṭake ca vītikkama-p,pahānaṃ, kilesānaṃ vītikkama,paṭipakkhattā sīlassa.

³⁵ “Mental cankers destroyed,” *khīṇ’āsava*: see (1).

³⁶ A 3.85/1:231 f) = SD 3.3.

³⁷ Vism 1.13/5; DA 1:20; DhsA 22.

³⁸ See eg **Mūla S** (A 3.69/1:201-205) = SD 18.2.

Suttanta,piṭake ca pariyaṭṭhāna-p,pahānaṃ, kilesānaṃ pariyaṭṭhāna,paṭipakkhattā samādhissa.

Abhidhamma,piṭake anusaya-p,pahānaṃ, anusaya,paṭipakkhattā paññāya.

Paṭhame ca tad-aṅga-p,pahānaṃ, itaresu vikkhambhana,samuccheda-p,pahānāni.

Paṭhame ca duccharita,saṅkilesa-p,pahānaṃ, itaresu taṇhā,diṭṭhi,saṅkilesa-p,pahānaṃ.

(VA 1:22 = DA 1:19 = DhsA 22)³⁹

It is a well known fact that the Abhidhamma (as we know it today) did not exist in the Buddha's time, and that it was compiled by later scholastics.⁴⁰ However, if not taken in a dogmatic manner, such Abhidhamma teachings, especially where they do not conflict with the early suttas, can be helpful in a modern discourse on Buddhist psychology.⁴¹

Dhammapāla, in his Thera,gāthā Commentary, defines the three levels of abandoning defilements without mentioning the classification of the "three baskets," thus:

Hence, the avoidance of the extreme of what is regarded as the indulgence in sense-pleasures should be understood by way of the attainment of moral virtue. That of what is regarded as the devotion of self-mortification by way of the attainment of concentration, and the taking of the middle way by way of wisdom.

Thus should be understood the abandoning of transgression (*vītikkaṃ-p,pahāna*), by way of the attainment of moral virtue. The abandoning of obsession (*pariyaṭṭhāna-p,pahāna*) by way of the attainment of concentration, the abandoning of latent tendency (*anusaya-p,pahāna*) by way of the attainment of wisdom.

Or, the clearing away of the defilement of misconduct should be understood by the attainment of moral virtue; or, the clearing away of the defilement of craving by the attainment of concentration; or the clearing away of the defilements of view by the attainment of wisdom.

Or, the transcending of the lower realms (of suffering) should be understood as (being effected) by the displacement [by substituting an unwholesome thought with an opposite but wholesome one] of these (defilements). The transcending of the sense-realm is by the abandoning by suppression. The transcending of all existences should be understood as (being effected) by the abandoning by eradication. Thus it should be known.

Tathā sīla,sampadāya tesam kāma,sukhānuyoga,saṅkhatassa antassa parivajjanam dasseti. Samādhi,sampadāya atta,kilamathānuyoga,saṅkhatassa, paññā,sampadāya majjhimāya paṭipadāya sevanam dasseti.

Tathā sīla,sampadāya tesam vītikkaṃ-p,pahānaṃ kilesānaṃ dasseti. Samādhi,sampadāya pariyaṭṭhāna-p,pahānaṃ, paññā,sampadāya anusaya-p,pahānaṃ dasseti.

Sīla,sampadāya vā duccharita,saṅkilesa,visodhanam, samādhi,sampadāya taṇhā,saṅkilesa,-visodhanam, paññā,sampadāya diṭṭhi,saṅkilesa,visodhanam dasseti.

Tad-aṅga-p,pahānena vā nesam⁴² apāya,samatikkamo dassito. Vikkhambhana-p,pahānena kāma,dhātu,samatikkamo, samuccheda-p,pahānena sabba,bhava,samatikkamo dassito ti vedittabban.
(ThaA 1:14 f)

³⁹ Sentences 2-4 at MA 1:20.

⁴⁰ The first council (Rājagaha) mentions only *Dhamma,vinaya*, without mention any Abhidhamma (Cv 11 = V 2:284-293). According to Frauwallner, the Abhidhamma was probably composed between 200 BCE and 200 CE (*Abhidharma-Studien IV. Der Abhidharma der anderen Schulen*, WZKS 15, 1971b:106). Furthermore, the early Buddhist sects, each had their own Abhidharma Piṭaka, often at variance with one another. See Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pali Literature*, 1996: II.3. See also **Dhamma and Abhidhamma** = SD 26.1.

⁴¹ By "Buddhist psychology," I generally mean especially the second aspect of Buddhist training, that of mental concentration, and whatever teachings that are related to mind-training as envisaged by the Buddha.

⁴² *Nesam*, 3 pl dat-gen of *eso* (Sn 293): see Geiger, *A Pali Grammar* 2000 §107.2.

6 How the three trainings benefit us

As in any training, it is difficult to master all the stages at first. Indeed, Dharma training as a rule begins with moral virtue because it is the easiest of the trainings, and yet, deals with the most palpable aspects of life. There are “immediate” benefits even for those who remain only on the moral training level. It leads to happy rebirth in the sense-world (*kāma,loka*). The cultivation of both moral virtue and concentration leads to rebirth in the brahma realm, that is, the form world (*rūpa,loka*). But when moral virtue, concentration and wisdom are cultivated to fulfilment, all rebirth is transcended. The three trainings are the best form of birth control! **The Vimutti,magga** sums this up succinctly, thus:

After acknowledging the path of freedom, through virtue, he transcends the way to the suffering states (*apāya*). Through mental concentration, he transcends the sense-sphere. Through wisdom, he transcends all existence.

If he practises moral virtue to fulfilment, but practises little of concentration and wisdom, he will reach streamwinning,⁴³ and once-return.⁴⁴ If he practises moral virtue and concentration to fulfilment, but little wisdom, he will reach non-return.⁴⁵ If he practises moral virtue, concentration, and wisdom to fulfilment, he will reach the supreme liberation of the arhat.

(Vimutti,magga, Intro = *The Path of Freedom*, tr Ehara, Soma & Kheminda, 1961:5; rev)

Although we commonly view the three trainings as being three “stages,” all three—indeed, all the eight path factors—are actually interdependent and facilitate one another. As clearly noted by **Gethin**,

In other words, the hierarchy does not mean that when the novice at the initial stages of the path establishes *sīla*, he does not also in some way and to some degree begin to develop *samādhi* and *paññā*, or that when the adept at the advanced stages of the path develops *paññā* he does not need *sīla* or *samādhi*. (2001:209)

This vital point is clearly stated in **the Soṇa,daṇḍa Sutta** (D 4), first by the brahmin, and then endorsed by the Buddha, thus:

“...Master Gotama, just as one might wash one hand with the other, or one foot with the other, even so, wisdom is fully washed by moral virtue, moral virtue is fully washed by wisdom.

Where there is moral virtue, there is wisdom; where there is wisdom, there is moral virtue. One who has moral virtue has wisdom; one who has wisdom, has moral virtue. Moral virtue and wisdom are declared to be foremost in the world.”

“So it is, brahmin.

Where there is moral virtue, there is wisdom; where there is wisdom, there is moral virtue. One who has moral virtue has wisdom; one who has wisdom, has moral virtue. Moral virtue and wisdom are declared to be foremost in the world.” (D 4.21-22/1:124)

It is important to understand that moral virtue is *not* abandoned “after it is cultivated.” Moral virtue is not a product of a process, but the willingness and ability to respond wholesomely to others and the environment as a result of our own wholesome mind. As unawakened beings, we have to *deliberately* direct our mind towards morally virtuous deeds and states, but for the arhat, it is *spontaneous* nature. Furthermore, the unawakened *depends* on moral virtue (as good karma) for their wellbeing, but the arhat is no more “made of moral virtue,” since his mind is liberated from duality.⁴⁶

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⁴³ Cf **Sa,upadisesa S** (A 9.12.8-10/4:380 f) = SD 3.3 & Table 4 above.

⁴⁴ Cf **Sa,upadisesa S** (A 9.12.7/4:380) = SD 3.3 & Table 4 above.

⁴⁵ Cf **Sa,upadisesa S** (A 9.12.6/4:380) = SD 3.3 & Table 4 above.

⁴⁶ On how the arhat is “beyond good and evil,” see **Samāṇa,maṇḍika S** (M 78.11(3)/2:27) = SD 18.9 & **Beyond Good and Evil** = SD 18.7.

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