

in someone, I truly believe it is just another form of hyper-sophisticated spiritually-induced blindness and rationalization, common things being common as they are, and there is no reason this couldn't be blended with genuine insights, as most of the people I know who claim this sort of thing have spent a lot of time practicing.

THE THERAVADA FOUR-PATH MODEL

The root of the complexity in standard Buddhism comes to us from the Theravada four-path model. This is the original model presented in the Pali canon and the oldest Buddhist model we have to work with. All the subsequent schools (i.e. the many and varied strains of the Mahayana and Vajrayana), react to it in their own way but are still influenced by it even if they say they are not, so you need to know it to understand the debate.

The problems began long before the Buddha in the various ancient traditions that would eventually and collectively be referred to as "Hinduism" (which had a huge impact on Buddhism, despite what some naive Buddhists will tell you) and probably long before that, but this is as good a place to start as any. I shouldn't blame ancient India and Nepal for what is really a perennial human wish. Let's face it: we all want emotional perfection, as a large chunk of the pain felt in our lives relates to our emotions causing trouble. I propose that not perceiving our emotions clearly is a far greater problem than the emotions themselves, but I seem to be in the minority in this regard. As I stated in the chapter "Harnessing the Energy of the Defilements", there is a lot to be said for the skillful aspects of what we usually consider negative emotions. It is important to realize that empty compassion drives all our emotions, whether filtered through the illusion of duality or otherwise.

"Really?" you might reasonably reply, "Even the heinous acts of 'terrorists' and telemarketers?³ Really, these are in some twisted way resulting from empty compassion?"

To which I reply, "Yes."

Does that make their actions ethical? Often not, obviously, though ethics is sometimes in the eye of the beholder, and there is the rub that makes a bare bodkin of us all, to bastardize Mark Twain's bastardization of *Hamlet*, and of course meaning no offense to those whose parents weren't married at the time of their conception.⁴

The Theravada four-path model has four stages of awakening, namely first path: "stream enterer" or in Pali, *sotapanna*; second path: "once-returner" or *sakadagami*; third path: "non-returner" or *anagami*; and, finally, fourth path, which gets translated in various ways in various sources, with some including "perfected person", "holy one", "saint", or "conqueror" (one who has conquered the defilements that prevented the realization of *nibbana*), or *arhat*, *arahant*, or *arhant*, pick your favorite spelling, but I will use *arahant*, realizing that I used *arahat* in the previous version. The terms once-returner and non-returner have to do with issues relating to the dogma that those who have attained to second path cannot be reborn more than once

³If you have no option but to be a telemarketer to feed yourself and your loved ones, accept my deepest apologies and sympathies. Otherwise, stop calling my phone! Thanks.

⁴"But get thee to a nunnery—go!"—from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, by Mark Twain.

before attaining arahantship, and certainly not in the lower realms (i.e. hell realms, hungry ghost realms, or animal realms, see the “Samsara” Wikipedia article section on realms of rebirth, and/or Chögyam Trungpa’s *Transcending Madness* for a discussion of the six realms), and that those who have attained to third path, if they do not attain to arahantship in this lifetime, will at worst be reborn in a heavenly realm where the conditions are optimal for achieving awakening.

However, the core of the Theravada four-path model is the dogma that enlightenment involves progressively eliminating the ten defilements (also often called the ten fetters, and so this is sometimes called the “Ten Fetter Model”). In this model, stream entry eliminates the first three defilements: 1) skeptical doubt; 2) attachment to rites and rituals; and 3) “personality belief”, meaning belief in a separate, independently existing self. Second path attenuates the fourth and fifth defilements, usually translated as: 4) greed; and 5) hatred (or, more technically, attraction and aversion to everything that is not a jhanic state). Third path is said to eliminate those same fourth and fifth defilements, however translated. Fourth path, that of arahantship, eliminates the remaining five defilements: 6) attachment to formed jhanas (the first four jhanas); 7) attachment to the formless realms (the second four jhanas); 8) restlessness and worry; 9) “conceit” (in quotes because the Pali word *māna* is a bit hard to translate); and something called 10) “the last veil of unknowing”.

It is important to note that arahants who are said to have eliminated “conceit” (in limited emotional range terms) can *appear* to us as arrogant and conceited, as well as restless or worried, etc. That there is no fundamental suffering in them while this is occurring is an utterly separate issue. That said, conceit in the conventional sense and the rest of life can cause all sorts of conventional suffering for arahants, just as it can for everyone else. While discussing conceit, perhaps I should take on the subject of the word “ego” in a more comprehensive way than I have done so far.

The pop psychology meaning of the word “ego” is something like arrogance, self-absorption, pride, narcissism, conceit (in the conventional sense), and a failure to consider the feelings, rights, needs, and/or existence of others. This is also the definition that is most commonly behind such mainstream Buddhist statements as, “That action or statement [that I really didn’t like] had a lot of ‘ego’ in it.” I think that this definition of ego can sometimes be slightly useful for training in morality if we are very kind to ourselves and those around us, but often it seems to me to be pop spirituality turned into a weapon and a form of denial of someone else’s difficulties, feelings, and suffering.

Worse, people often take this definition, mix it in with their own insecurities and unfortunate fear of existing or asserting themselves in the conventional sense, and then take this neurotic *mélange* and use it to continue to flog themselves and those around them. Please don’t do this. It is misguided and will not help you or anyone. This pop psychology definition of ego also has nothing to do with the “self” that is being seen through in the quest for awakening in the formal sense, so don’t bring it to mind when you read this chapter except to dismiss it.

Another definition of ego is the formal psychological one put forward by Freud. In this definition, ego is the moderator between the internalized parents or police of the super-ego and the id’s primal drives, those largely involving survival and reproduction. In this sense, ego is extremely important and should be cultivated consciously. This definition has to do with the more formal psychological concept of “ego strength”, a strength that is very positive and necessary for the deep and often difficult personal growth that we all want for ourselves.

One of the explicit requirements for entering intensive psychoanalysis (and intensive meditation for that matter) is highly developed ego strength, the ability to face our reality and dark stuff without completely freaking out. Thus, eliminating this form of “ego” would be a disaster.

For reasons completely beyond me, the word “ego” is also used in a high mystical sense to describe the elimination of the experiential illusion of there being a special reference point as described in the section on no-self in the chapter “The Three Characteristics”. One who had eliminated this form of ego, which is in this case a useless illusion, might describe their experience in this way: “In this full field of experience or manifestation, there seems to be no special or permanent spot that is observing, controlling, separated from, or subject to any other point or aspect of the rest of this causal field of experience or manifestation.”

This is the experience and realization of the arahant. Notice that this use of the term “ego” seems to have nothing whatsoever to do with the other usages of the term. This is exactly the point, and so I strongly advocate never using the word “ego” to substitute for “self” as understood in the context of describing realization of “no-self”. Those who do otherwise continue to cause an astounding amount of unrealistic, disempowering, and life-denying thinking in mainstream Buddhists. It is my sincere wish that the misuse of the word ego and the associated negative side effects stop immediately and forever.

Since the Theravada four-path model explicitly states that realization is mostly about eliminating greed, hatred, restlessness, worry, etc., this suggests a limited emotional range model, and deserves some serious skepticism. In fact, this is a good time to go into what I love and despise about the Theravada.⁵ I absolutely love its emphasis on the three characteristics, love the astounding power of its techniques, and am grateful beyond words for the maps it provided me with for the territory before second path, however incomplete and idealized. I am profoundly grateful, at times to the point of tears, and I mean that, for the monasteries I got to sit in, for its preservation of what has been true and useful in Buddhism for over 2,500 years, and for the chance to have sat with real, awakened teachers.

And yet, its maps of enlightenment still contain a hefty helping of scary market-driven propaganda and so much garbage that is life-denying, dangerously out of touch with what happens, and an impediment to practice for millions of people. That the enlightened lineage holders of the modern Theravada and their ex-monk and ex-nun Western counterparts don’t have the guts to stand up and say, “We are deeply sorry that for 2,500 years, many of our predecessors perpetuated this craziness to put food in their bowls and fool ignorant peasants so that they might be supported in their other useful work, and we vow to do better!” is a crying shame. The huge question is, how many of the monastics are really practicing deeply, really giving attainment of actual realization everything they have, rather than being monastics for worldly reasons, that, while potentially of benefit to them and their supporters, lack the key focus for which the Buddha founded the order?

Due to this lack of realization found in so many monastics, they are chained to the texts, myths, and the ancient exaggerations, as well as the culture, seemingly doomed to indoctrinate

⁵For the societal growth process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis to take place, some poor fool has to be willing to state the antithesis part and trust the synthesis to the organic process that follows and, in this case, that poor fool is me, and the person in whom I am putting my trust to synthesize well is you.

and brainwash generation after generation of monks and nuns, practitioners, and devoted followers with their delicious poison, however benevolently intended. What a freakish paradox that the meditative techniques and technologies that I consider among the most powerful and direct ever developed should come from a tradition whose models of awakening contain some of the worst myths of them all. I have sat with numerous arahants who were monks or former monks who just couldn't seem to overcome their indoctrination and so when giving dharma talks would occasionally mix in the junk with the gold when it was obvious they knew better from their own direct experience.

Here's an example from one of my favorite, realized, arahant teachers who taught me a ton and to whom I am extremely grateful. Someone asked him, "Are you suffering?"

He answered, referring to himself, "This [name withheld] is not suffering!"

Except that I was aware of the details of this teacher's life, and this teacher's life involved all sorts of real, ordinary, straightforward misery and problems, the sort of suffering that is listed by the Buddha as being an integral part of the suffering of having been born into this life.

I have at times dreamed that all the great, realized teachers from all the Buddhist practice lineages would get together, come up with a plan to jointly get themselves out of the trap, and in a big formal ceremony present the truth as a new beginning, like a mass intervention, like a family gathering around an alcoholic to try to force them to reform their ways. None of them on their own seems to be fully able to take the heat, as each one that steps out of line in a direct fashion tends to get blasted, squashed, silenced, shunned, etc., though there are a few gentle and subtle exceptions, such as Jack Kornfield's *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*. Thus, I think they should all try to do it together, with Zen Masters, Roshis, Lamas, Rinpoches, Tulkus, Sayadaws, Ajahns, and their Western counterparts all sitting side by side around a large table saying, "Enough is enough! We are declaring a new era of honest, open, realistic, relevant dharma teaching, free from finely honed sectarian fighting, free from mythic and archaic models of awakening, and free from denial of humanity!" Enough of my ranting, back to the models ...

I have no significant problems with most of the traditional descriptions of stream entry. It does make people realize somewhat that rites and rituals are not the primary reason that they got enlightened, though I know practitioners who awakened with the significant help of techniques involving various rituals in their practice, and why not? It should also be noted that there are rituals and there are rituals. Some rituals involve high degrees of concentration, altered states of consciousness, and profound investigation, elements that can be conducive to deep insights.

Stream entry does counter in some semi-intellectual way the sense that there is a permanent, separate self, though exactly how meditators know this is much more mysterious than at the higher stages of awakening, and the degree to which this is noticed varies depending on the practitioner. Regardless of the degree to which they notice it, it beats any understanding of this that is pre-stream entry. However, beware the pernicious descriptive fallacy that states that all stream enterers will describe their reality and realizations exactly as we imagine they should and thus automatically state that they are totally free of "personality belief".

Further, they know that awakening is possible and can be done in this lifetime, assuming they know they are awakened in the first place, which strangely not all awakened beings do. Those persons that encounter this understanding outside of established traditions may fail to recognize that what they have understood is called awakening, among other names. Regardless,

stream entry is metaphorically understood as “the opening of the dharma eye”, as contrasted with the “wisdom eye” of arahantship. These are simply poetic metaphors for some aspects of clearly perceiving things and don’t refer to anything beyond those attainments themselves. I hesitate even to mention those terms, as I get all sorts of totally strange questions about them, as if they are some bizarre psychic or anatomic phenomena. They are poetic metaphors, not some extra eye on your forehead *à la* Lobsang Rampa.⁶

My real problem with the Theravada four-path model comes as soon as it starts talking about second path, that is, the attenuation of greed and hatred or attraction and aversion, and by the time it promises eliminating these in their ordinary forms, as they say occurs in third path, I think that a serious critique of their language and dogma is called for. Those in more explicitly dogmatic, traditional Theravada circles may notice the third path glass ceiling they find after second path, meaning that they can find lots of examples of people who are second path by their definitions, but then suddenly there is a total disconnect in which people continue to progress and practice, go through cycles, and gain all sorts of additional insights into the basics of reality, but still have the emotions that the dogma said should be eliminated by third path. It is a problem. They still might get angry. They still might get sexually aroused. They still might feel and do all sorts of things that those who are anagamis are not supposed to be able to feel and do.

Then, if you try to find living examples of those who are out past second path by the standard models, people suddenly get vague and the talk either quiets down or becomes full of zealous bluster and pontification. Hints are put out there that so-and-so might be third or fourth path, but then everyone is watching them to see if they do things that might imply they still have emotions related in any way to greed and hatred. In this way, the whole topic gets covered in this neurotic mass of complexity, shadow stuff, and reality-theory conflict.

What the models at their best are attempting to say is that the sense of the observer, center-point, continuous and separate subject, watcher, or however you want to describe the sense that there is some self at the center of all this stuff that so compellingly seems to be divided into over here and over there is, in fact, just a bunch of sensations. When these begin to be perceived as they are, the sense of how special the center point is begins to lose its grip on perception, which begins to become broader, more inclusive, and more even in its basic treatment of and interaction with phenomena.

Accomplishing this is fundamentally a matter of direct sensate clarity about those processes as they occur, hence the simple beauty of insight practice. When this is better understood and becomes part of our baseline way of experiencing, there doesn’t seem to be so much of a “this” side and “that” side. This perceptual improvement reduces the imagined mental dance involving attempts to get *away* from that side when it is bad, get to that side when it is good, or just tune out the whole thing when it is boring. Thus, the system functions better as it gets better at realistically perceiving the information coming into it. As these perceptual insights encounter old, outdated emotional patterns based on the previously poor way of perceiving reality, there can be transformation of those patterns.

⁶Twentieth-century author of some occult books, the most notable one called *The Third Eye*, the cover of which features an eye in the middle of his forehead.

This is a very tough topic to talk about and even harder to map. It certainly doesn't sell as well as saying, "Do these things, and you will be free from all negative emotions," or, worse, "We did these things and so are free from all negative emotions, and so you should worship us, give us donations, support our center, buy our books, give over power to us, think of us as very special, divine, or extraordinary, stand in awe of us, sleep with us, allow us to act like raving lunatics, etc." I think you get the picture. Thus, what really happens is that aspects of the misperception that seems to make specific categories and patterns of the causal, sensate field into a separate "self" are reduced and then stop. However, many of the traditions advertise eliminating negative emotions and the sensations of all forms of craving or aversion, even things like hunger and thirst. The two couldn't be more different, and yet they are described as the same.

A REVISED FOUR-PATH MODEL

Here is my revised version of the four-path model. It is the primary model I use when describing awakening, talking about my practice, and helping others practice. I think that using the original terminology and revising its definitions allows a lot of the most universally applicable and least culturally conditioned information from the Pali canon to be used today, thus maintaining a link to that previous great work. However, I realize that using terminology that already has such deep cultural and dogmatic resonance may be a problem. For those who want something new, I will shortly present a rephrasing of this model that I call "the simple model".

In the revised four-path model, stream enterers have discovered the complete discontinuity that is called Fruition and sometimes called *nirvana* (Sanskrit) or *nibbana* (Pali), as in texts such as the *Abhidhamma*. This is the first of two meanings of nirvana (with the other being the waking, walking-around, day-to-day experience of fourth path). Stream enterers cycle through the *ñānas*, know that awakening or some different understanding from the norm is possible, and yet they do not have such a different experience of most sensations from those who are not yet stream enterers. They may correctly extrapolate a lot of good dharma insights from momentary experiences, particularly far along in High Equanimity and the three moments before Fruition, but this is not the same as living there all the time. In fact, most stream enterers have a very hard time describing how their minds have changed in terms of their everyday perception except that they cycle and can understand the dharma in ways they never could before.

Those of second path have now completed a new insight cycle. If they attained this within a tradition that maps this process in something like this way, they will understand the process by which awakened beings make further progress and equate progress with further cycles of insight, which is partially true. Strangely, psychological issues tend to be a bigger deal during this particular path, and psychological development often more becomes interesting and important to those of second path in some way. More model-obsessed, intellectual, or analytical practitioners at second path may get very into fractal models, consciousness models, enlightenment models, various integrative theories, etc.

By this point, many people—though certainly not all—have at least some understanding of the basics of the shamatha jhanas (assuming they are training in a tradition that can point those out), and these can be very fascinating. What they may be most bothered by is that, despite cycle after cycle of practice, duality remains the predominant experience most of the time.

Their capacity to appreciate finer points of dharma phenomenology, such as sub-cycles, subjhanas, sub-ñanas, and the like, will be generally superior to stream enterers, but there is a range and wide individual variation in phenomenological and analytical ability, both of which can be significantly improved by training.

Third path individuals have shifted their understanding of progress beyond those of second path, and begin to see that they can perceive the emptiness, selflessness, impermanence, luminosity, etc. of many sensations in daily life. Perception tends to get broader, more spacious, more expansive, more through and through, with awakening being now more of a waking, walking-around experience. This can be a long, developmental process from the first time they notice it to when it becomes a nearly complete experience. Thus, third path tends to be a long path, though it doesn't have to be, with individual variation being significant and affected both by natural ability and formal training.

At the beginning of third path, most practitioners think: "I'll just complete more cycles of insight, as I did before, and this will do the trick." They don't understand yet what it is they have attained, or its deeper implications. By the mature stage of third path, which for most can take months or years to show up, the practitioner is more and more able to see the selfless, centerlessness, luminosity, etc. of phenomena in real-time, so much so that it can be very difficult to notice what artificial perceptual dualities remain.

"Rigpa" is a nuanced and subtle term from Dzogchen meaning something along the lines of the "clear light" of the natural, awakened mind, the ultimate nature of reality, and is meant to help point to something essential about the nature of consciousness. I don't want to go into an in-depth discussion of rigpa, but I do wish to point out the oft-noticed phenomenon that fascination with terms like rigpa, and feeling that they now seem very important to one's practice and what one is experiencing, is common in this territory. Fascination with the concept of "rigpa" as well as related concepts such as "luminosity", "ground of being", and the like, is not diagnostic of this territory, as unawakened scholars may have similar fascinations, but, if you are up into the path of awakening and are noticing that those terms seem to have a lot more experiential relevance, then the advice in this section may be helpful.

I get a moderate number of questions from people in the general territory of the first two paths about how to attain the next two paths, as they can begin to recognize rightly that they are missing something more fundamental that must apply to everything. Thus, I include here some advice that people have said was helpful to them for attaining third path.

- 1) Continue to practice directly perceiving sensations arise and vanish on their own everywhere in experience, however you can do that. Direct observation of all the complexity is better, though using noting to ease into unpleasant or disconcerting patterns of sensations can sometimes still be useful. Try to notice that all experiences occur in this moving space of experience. This may sound so simple that its profundity may be missed, but it is a key to awakening.
- 2) Going broad and through: what you are looking for is more spaciousness, more about dissolving a significant chunk of what seems to be observing, doing, controlling, analyzing, and the like. Take on more of the sensations that seem to make up "you" and those core processes. "Who am I?" practices may be of value here: pay attention to both

who is asking the question, the answers that result, and *where in space they occur*. Mindfully explore with natural curiosity how to dissolve the artificial boundaries that seem to delineate whatever seems to be “you” from everything else, meaning the rest of what happens in what seems to be space. Play around with investigating that moving line: how do you know what the edge is between what seems to be you and not you, viscerally, perceptually, vibrationally, texturally, geographically, volumetrically? Identify and become familiar with any qualities of experience or pattern of sensations that seem to really feel like “you”, then notice the three characteristics of those patterns again and again, more times than you think you should have to.

- 3) Regard your cherished ideals and the patterns of sensations that make up those ideals about what you think meditation practice will get you as more sensations to observe. If you can do this at the level of fluxing, shifting patterns of suchness, it is easier. Whatever level you find yourself at is the level that you can work with, as it is all the same from that point of view that includes whatever is going on as both practice and the foundation of realization, and knowing that simple fact can help a lot. This is a good time to check out Dōgen and his practice-enlightenment emphasis. Traditions that emphasize dangerous concepts such as “ground of being” might be more helpful now than they might have been earlier, if you can take them with an appropriately huge grain of salt and eventually see beyond them.⁷
- 4) Really allow experience to show itself. Really allow luminosity to show itself. Really allow things just to happen as they do. Less control, more direct understanding of that natural unfolding, more noticing of how the sense of control occurs at all, what it feels like, how that set of textures and intentions sets up a sense that there is a “you” that is doing anything and how obviously wrong that is. Feel into what seems to be looking, asking, wanting, and expecting, and investigate all of that. Do not do this forcefully. Instead, skillfully and subtly coax those patterns into the light of awareness that sees through their clever tricks. There are only so many trick patterns: learn them and see them for what they are. The right feel for this is the same as the way you must look just slightly to one side of the Pleiades to see them clearly. It is almost as if you must sneak up on core processes so gently that they don’t notice and can be caught unawares, except that the sneaking up process is what you are also trying to sneak up on. Thus, the slower you move attention, the more likely you will be able to catch up with yourself. Skillful rapid vibration junkies will shift to become flow-fluxing, panoramic, gentle synchro junkies instead. Remember “The Exercise of the Spinning Swords”.
- 5) Notice that you can’t do anything other than what happens. Try. See how those patterns occur. Try to do something other than what happens. It is preposterous, but when you try it, there are patterns that arise, patterns of illusion, patterns of pretending, patterns that if you start to look at them you will see are ludicrous, laughable, like a kid’s fantasies. Yet, that is how you believe you are controlling things, so try again and again to do something other than what occurs and watch those patterns of confusion and of pretending to be in control which arise, and you will learn something. This is an unusually profound point.

⁷Pepper!

I spent many hours exploring exactly what happens during attempts to do something other than what happens and found it high-yield.

- 6) Keep the six sense doors and the three characteristics in all their profundity as the gold standards for whether you are perceiving things clearly. In each moment that you aren't clear about these, notice why and debunk it right there, and then do it again and again and again. It always takes more repetitions of this process than people think it should, and so many get psyched out, when it might have been but a few more iterations of the process to have succeeded in locking in that way of perceiving things.
- 7) Feel the going out into new territory with its confusion, tedium, frustration, and creepiness as the prize itself. That which wants it to be known, mapped, predictable, certain, safe, and familiar, is part of what you need to see as it is. Perceive those patterns in the head, chest, stomach, throat, etc., as more shifting, fresh patterns. That freshness keeps you honest, keeps you really paying attention in that slightly violating, slightly personally taboo way that really helps in the end.
- 8) If you are familiar with the vipassana jhanas as living, familiar, felt perceptual modes, then realize that third path, due to the fractal strangeness of the mind, has elements of the third vipassana jhana to it. Third path is broad but there is something creepy about it, as it violates the center in a more intimate way than do the earlier paths. The more you have a tolerance for something in that letting go through-to-the-bone creepiness and can see the good side in that, the breadth, the spaciousness, the naturalness, the directness, the completeness, the fullness, the now-ness of it, the better you will do. It is a more sophisticated way of perceiving things, more beyond control, more decentralized, more spacious, braver, more free, requiring more trust, more openness, more acceptance, being more down-to-earth, and at the same time also more diffuse, which is an odd juxtaposition of feelings to get used to, but it is worth it. Said another way: third path is an acquired taste.
- 9) If you have Boundless Space, or even j4.j5, meaning the spacious aspect of the fourth jhana that is not truly formless but still quite open and wide, this is a really good pointer, just also allow it to go through anything you think is you, working on that seeming boundary line, as above, but allowing it to breathe, to flux, volumetrically, like moving blobs of space with texture all together, all of them just the natural world doing its rich and empty thing.
- 10) In that same way, if you have access to Boundless Consciousness, or even j4.j6, meaning the Boundless Consciousness aspect of the fourth formed jhana, the aspect where you see the luminosity of consciousness pervading the space of the jhana and its formed elements, cultivate that. There is also some element of this that is useful to realizing what third path is all about. It is not that the jhana is third path, or that third path is perfectly like these jhanas. It is that these jhanas do fill in some piece of the puzzle, which, when combined with insight, helps third path arise.
- 11) If you have the last two formless realms, Nothingness and Neither Perception Nor Non-Perception, enter them and leave them again and again and again. What remains of you when you are in these rarified states? What falls away when you enter them? What seems the same? What perceives them? You can't answer these questions for the eighth jhana, but it is very instructive to try. Further, that glorious post-eighth jhana junction point

(P8JP) has some interesting power to it, and, after leaving the eighth jhana, asking deep, direct, perceptual questions about perception itself can be quite powerful. What rearises when you leave them? What do they tell you about your typical impression that you must be a body, a mind, or even something perceived? Set intentions to answer these questions before you get into that territory and watch what happens!

- 12) There is something very immediate about third path. Thus, look for how a sense of time is formed in your experience. What does your mind do when you think a thought of past or future? How do those feel different? What is the difference in the qualities of sensations, in the way the head and eyes hold themselves, in where thoughts occur, in how they feel? Formally experiment with how a sense of time is created here and now, consciously, clearly, in this space, in this immediacy. This begins to create some of the frameworks of insight that will be very useful later. Read that sentence again and see how you immediately perceive the concept of “later”!

As those on third path cycle, they will enter new territory, possibly causing some uncertainty or instability, and with each Review phase they tend to feel that they truly have done it until they notice the limits of their practice. There can be this nagging sense in the background that things aren’t finished, and yet figuring out exactly what the problem is can be very slippery. It is a bit like being in the stages just before stream entry, trying to figure out what exactly needs to be done. They need to notice something that has nothing to do with the cycles to untangle the knot of perception at its core, but doing this can be a real trick. It is a very strange place, as we seem to know the insight practice-related aspects of the dharma all the way to the end and yet somehow it still isn’t quite enough. In that vein, it is interesting to note that I wrote most of this book while I was an anagami and, years later, I still appreciate much of what I wrote then. My emphases are slightly different now, but the basics are the same.

As practice deepens, anagamis begin to tire of the cycles to a small or large degree and begin to look to something outside of or unrelated to them for the answer to the final question. Golden dreams, meaning golden chains, such as a luminous transcendent superspace or ground of being, can at once become more compellingly attractive and more repulsive. Finally, the cycles of insight and, if meditators have them, the shamatha jhanas, the powers, and all the other perks and prerogatives of their stages of awakening, as well as any concentration abilities (again, if they developed them), hold no appeal and only lead to more unsatisfying cycles. In fact, these cycles may strangely begin to become a source of deep, existential disgust, and this can come as quite a surprise to those who previously felt enraptured by them.

I completed around twenty-seven full, complete insight cycles with powerful A&P Events, challenging Dark Nights, equanimity phases, and what seemed to be brand new, fresh Fruitions and Review phases between third and fourth paths. There is nothing special about that number, both because it is just a rough guess and because of the reasons I stated when describing the phenomena of what Bill Hamilton referred to as “Twelfth Path”. The later cycles got faster and faster, so that by the end it seemed I was whipping one out every few weeks or even every few days, but they still seemed to be leading nowhere.

It was only when I had gotten so sick of the cycles and realized that they were leading nowhere that I was able to see what has nothing to do with the cycles, which also wasn’t

anything except a strange untangling of the knot of perceiving them. The cycles, for better or worse, have continued just the same. Thus, there is not much point in counting cycles or paths, as they don't necessarily correlate well with anything beyond the first two or three, and issues of backsliding can really make things complex, as I explained earlier.

Finishing up my revised four-path model, arahants have finally untangled the knot of perception, dissolved the sense of the centerpoint as being "The Center Point", and no longer experientially make a separate self out of the patterns of sensations that used to produce that sense, even though those same patterns of sensations continue. This is a different understanding from those of third path, and makes this path about something that is beyond the paths. This is also poetically called "the opening of the wisdom eye" (which, as mentioned, is not talking about any sort of additional eye or psychic eye or whatever, as some people seemed to extrapolate from my mentioning it without this qualifier in *MCTB1*). What is interesting is that I could write about this stage reasonably well when I was an anagami, but that is a whole different world from knowing it as an arahant. As an anagami, it seemed like about ninety-five to ninety-nine percent of the field of experience knew itself where and as it was. The last little remaining ignorant percentage was maddeningly difficult to track down, with the tracking down paradigm obviously being part of the problem. That subtle few percent of the field of perception that was still poorly perceived caused a surprising amount of discomfort that got worse rather than better as practice progressed.

To use strictly metaphorical language, the wisdom eye may seem to blink initially, which is a way of saying that this untangling of the final knot of perception may re-tangle itself, though having ever seen perception truly untangled, that insight, even if transient, really points to the essence of realization, and even remembering what it was like can call the mind back to that far-superior way of perceiving. We may go through cycles of suddenly untangling just after Fruition and then having that insight slowly fade over a few hours (at least on retreat) as each round of physical sensations, then mental sensations, then complex emotional formations, then lastly fundamental formations such as inquiry itself, move through and become integrated into this new, correct, and direct perception of reality as it is.

Review cycles may recur many times during each period when perception is untangled, and during those periods, the cycles may seem rather irrelevant in comparison to keeping the level of clarity and acceptance high enough to keep the "eye" open. When the direct and untangled perceptual mode fades and the knot of perception seems to retie itself, the familiar insight cycles may seem like pure drudgery, as the focus drifts back to getting lost in the cycles and then gradually shifting again to getting clear enough to get the "eye" to "open" again. The themes that occupy center stage go through a cycle that is very much like a progress cycle.

Finally, the various cycles all converge, and the wisdom eye stays open from then on, the knot remains untied. Said another way, we cease to be able to perceive reality in a tangled state, and even everything that seemed tangled is now clearly perceived as intrinsically untangled without any other perceptual option. That being seen, nothing can erode or disturb the centerlessness of perspective. Done is what had to be done, and life goes on. That there are arahants who have flipped reality around to the centerless mode of perception but had it re-tangle, and that there are those who have opened it and had it stay open is rarely mentioned but worth knowing.

For the arahant who has kept the knot untangled, there is nothing more to be gained on the ultimate front from insight practices, as that axis of development has been taken as far as it goes. That said, insight practices can continue to be of great benefit to them for a whole host of reasons. There is much they can learn just like everyone else about everything there is to learn. They can grow, develop, change, evolve, mature, and participate in this strange, beautiful, comic, tragic human drama just like everyone else. They can integrate these understandings and their unfolding implications into their general way of being. Practicing being mindful and the rest still helps, since the mind is an organic thing like a muscle, and how we condition it affects it profoundly. These practitioners also cycle through the stages of insight, as with everyone beyond stream entry, so doing insight practices can move those cycles along.

I commonly get questions about the fact that arahants still cycle, and thus must go through the Dark Night stages. The Dark Night stages are not the problem that they were before, as they relied on the knot at the center of perception for much of their disturbing power. With the knot of perception gone, the stages' unfortunate aspects vanish, and the skillful aspects that engender growth, keep us real, and promote fascinating spiritual adventures, remain. It is amazing to call up the stages of insight and go deeply into them while in this untangled perceptual mode and watch how they just don't stick as they did, don't catch us in the same way, and yet still take us on a rich tour of ourselves in so many different, human facets. This sort of formal Review practice can yield rich treasures of development and amusement. Enjoy!

On less fun topics, in the circles I run in, *MCTB1* inspired some folks to create a spin-off term, "technical fourth path", which continues to be loosely defined in a strangely large number of ways by various definers, but generally was pointing to this disconnect between the standard Theravada models that implied eliminating all negative emotions and the perceptual models that involved seeing all things as naturally empty, centerless phenomena. Please note that various schools of thought on exactly what the criteria are for "technical fourth path" do not agree on those criteria, and claiming that someone has "technical fourth path" has become relatively common, for better or for worse. If you run into someone claiming this attainment, it might be worth asking exactly what they mean and what their criteria are, to avoid confusion and needless projection.

One criterion that gets thrown around as primary for this "technical fourth path" is the sense that a person is simply "done". Over the years, I have had that feeling myself many times and I have come to the measured conclusion that we have to be very careful with what we do with that feeling of being "done", as it can very easily become a subtle (or gross) and intractable delusion, something we cling to that prevents us from carefully seeing what is happening now—like a refusal not to progress, grow, and improve—and it can keep us from knowing what the limits of our practice might be and how much more progress could occur if we had more of what Carol Dweck calls a growth-versus-fixed mindset.

Thus, should you find yourself feeling "done", just watch how that unfolds over time and varies by the moment, as well as how that feeling responds to the challenges that life can bring. Keep an open mind, as I think that this attitude will likely help you more than being certain that the feeling of doneness will last forever or be something you can ride on. I also advocate that whenever that feeling of being "done" arises, you recognize it and make a conscious resolution to open to anything beyond it, just in case, as such resolutions have real power in this territory.

I was blessed enough to be sitting at a lunch table with some of the grandmothers and grandfathers of the modern Western meditation teacher world one day, a truly accomplished and seasoned group of wisdom beings, and they all agreed that, whatever you think you have achieved, you should always keep practicing. There are so many axes of development that further practice can benefit. Further, if you are really “done” in the insight sense, no amount of inquiry can violate that, so inquire your ass off, just to be on the safe side, as it can do no harm and can do much good.

Since the term “technical fourth path” is out there, were I to define “technical fourth path”, I would define it as having all the following attributes:

- 1) the total and final elimination of any sense that there is anything called “attention” or “awareness” that is different from, separate from, or unrelated to bare phenomena;
- 2) the perfect direct comprehension of all sensations in the entire field where and as they are by themselves, as perception and the sensations are the same thing, so the parity between perception and reality is perfectly one to one at all times, meaning that the question of parity is actually completely eliminated perceptually, as there are just sensations;
- 3) the total naturalness of the field, such that everything is obviously happening completely on its own in a perfectly causal way;
- 4) the total integration of all sense doors into one unified and all-pervading “sense door” as mentioned in the Time and Space models section (meaning that all sensations appear to be just qualities of this perfectly integrated, boundaryless, fluxing, created-on-the-fly volume), which also specifically means that all thoughts are perceived naturally as part of this same integrated, fluxing volume;
- 5) the direct and immediate perception that time and space are created out of sensations that arise and vanish now, such that the sense of time and space as existing real entities is entirely seen through;
- 6) all sensate phenomena without exception self-liberate automatically, meaning that the experience of such questions as, “Is this field awake?” yields a wonderfully direct and satisfying experience of centerlessness and directness of the whole interdependent moment of that same question;
- 7) any sense of a this-and-that is fundamentally completely uprooted at the perceptual level (not that ordinary discrimination doesn’t function as before), and that this holds up over the long-haul, meaning off-retreat and for years in the face of the strongest vicissitudes of life, across insight cycles, across jhanas and other shifts, and is the only and default perceptual mode at all times when there are any sensations of any kind occurring.

By having this sort of take on what awakening is about (which I think is a pretty high standard), I have been accused of having very low standards. I think this standard is a very reasonable one, and if you think it is a low bar, then I would recommend attaining it and seeing how you find it, and wish you well on your journey beyond it to whatever else calls to you at that point. If you have already attained it, and it has held up for a while, drop me a line if you feel inclined, as it would be fun to talk about it.