

Factors of Stream-Entry

So far the discussion has focused on those who have reached the highest stage, of complete realization of Nibbāna. It is worthy, however, to recognize the many individuals, especially householders, who have ‘entered the stream’ to Nibbāna or have caught a glimpse of Nibbāna. These individuals often have spouses and children, conducting their lives virtuously in the wider world.

In modern times, people’s understanding of and feeling for Nibbāna and enlightened beings has changed considerably. The view held by many people in the past of Nibbāna as a heavenly city of eternal bliss has changed into a view of extinction. Having less contact with Buddhist teachings and being influenced more by materialism has led people to see Nibbāna in a negative light, as something to be avoided. At the very least they see Nibbāna as something distant and without relevance to their lives. To address this problem, apart from instilling a correct understanding of Nibbāna, people should be encouraged to take special interest in the first stage of enlightenment—of stream-entry. The importance of stream-entry goes beyond an academic interest in Nibbāna and enlightened beings, but it often gets overlooked. The Buddha repeatedly taught:

Bhikkhus, those for whom you have compassion and those who are receptive—whether friends or colleagues, relatives or kinsmen—these you should exhort, settle and establish in the four factors of stream-entry.¹

The life of a stream-enterer does not appear alien or frightening to contemporary people; rather, it appears admirable. Many of the stream-enterers at the time of the Buddha were lay disciples and were exemplary people. They were virtuous, led contented family lives, and were engaged in society, helping their community and the Buddhist religion. Although stream-enterers have reached a level of realization, they still possess a subtle degree of defilement. They still grieve and lament when encountering separation.² They still have preferences and aversions like unawakened people, although these are attenuated and do not lead to serious misconduct. Their suffering is minor compared to the suffering they have abandoned. They are firmly established and secure in a happy, wholesome and faultless life.

Prominent stream-enterers from the Buddha’s time include: Bimbisāra, King of Magadha, who offered Veḷuvana, the first Buddhist monastery, and who kept the weekly Observance Day precepts;³ Anāthapiṇḍika, founder of the famous monastery of Jetavana and incomparable benefactor to the monastic community and to the poor;⁴ Visākhā, foremost lay-woman supporter, who was renowned in the Kosala country—she was very active in promoting social welfare despite having twenty children of her own;⁵ Jīvaka-Komārabhacca, celebrated physician of King Bimbisāra, of the Buddha, and of the monastic community, who is revered by traditional medicine practitioners to this day;⁶ Nakulapitā and Nakulamātā, husband and wife who were utterly faithful to each other into old age and vowed to meet again in future lifetimes.⁷

Attributes of Stream-Enterers

The attribute of a stream-enterer that was mentioned earlier is the abandonment of the first three fetters (*saṃyojana*)—personality-view, doubt, and attachment to rules and vows. Freedom from these fetters focuses on the absence of certain qualities. There is, however, much emphasis in the scriptures on positive, active qualities. There are many of these active qualities, but essentially they can be incorporated into a group of five qualities: faith (*saddhā*), moral conduct (*sīla*), learning (*suta*), generosity (*cāga*), and wisdom (*paññā*). Below is a description of the attributes of stream-enterers, both in terms of active, present qualities and of abandoned qualities.⁸

A. Active Qualities:

1. Faith: stream-enterers possess a firm trust in truth, goodness, and the law of cause and effect. They have confidence in wisdom, that it is possible for human beings to overcome suffering by realizing the conditioned nature of reality. They have faith in the virtuous people who follow this path of wisdom and have a profound respect for the Triple Gem (*ratanattaya*).⁹ Their faith is secure and unshakeable because it is rooted in true understanding.
2. Moral Conduct: their behaviour through body and speech is appropriate and their mode of livelihood is honest and upright. Their conduct is ‘free’; it is not enslaved by craving.¹⁰ They act in accord with truth to promote virtue, simplicity, dispassion, peace and concentration. Generally speaking, this means following the five precepts, which is considered perfect moral conduct.
3. Learning: ‘those learned in spiritual knowledge’ (*sutavant*); they have studied the ‘noble teachings’ (*ariya-dhamma*).¹¹
4. Generosity: they delight in giving and sharing; they relinquish what they have for others; they are not stingy.
5. Wisdom: they possess the knowledge of a ‘learner’ (*sekha*): they see clearly into the Four Noble Truths, Dependent Origination, and the three characteristics; they abandon all wrong view (*micchā-diṭṭhi*); they have no doubt concerning the Four Noble Truths; they know the world as it truly is.
6. Social Action: stream-enterers abide by the ‘virtues conducive to communal life’ (*sārāṇīya-dhamma*), which engender social unity and concord. They do this perfectly because they maintain the last virtue (of right view, below), which connects all the others. These virtues are as follows:
 - 1) Physical acts of loving-kindness (*mettā-kāya-kamma*); mutual assistance and respect.
 - 2) Verbal acts of loving-kindness (*mettā-vacī-kamma*); well-intentioned advice and instruction; well-mannered speech.

- 3) Thoughts of loving-kindness (*mettā-mano-kamma*); thinking well of others; wishing to assist others; cheerful demeanour.
- 4) Distributing lawful gains with others (*sādhāraṇa-bhogitā*).¹²
- 5) Possessing a similar virtuous conduct as one's companions (*sīla-sāmaññatā*); acting in an agreeable manner.
- 6) Sharing right, noble views with one's companions (*diṭṭhi-sāmaññatā*), which lead to the end of suffering.

In the scriptural passages that describe 'noble views' (of virtue 6) there are two special characteristics mentioned of stream-enterers:

- 1) If they have transgressed the discipline (*vinaya*), it is their nature to confess this transgression without delay to their teacher or wise companions and to show restraint in the future. This restraint is similar to that shown by a young child who has touched a burning coal and immediately retracts his hand.
 - 2) Although stream-enterers endeavour to assist their companions with various activities, they have a keen interest for training in the higher virtue, the higher mind, and the higher wisdom. Just as a cow with a new calf, while she grazes watches her calf, so too does a stream-enterer look to both the collective good and to personal progress on the path.¹³
7. Happiness: stream-enterers have begun to experience transcendent happiness, which is profound and independent of material things. They have realized 'noble liberation' (*ariya-vimutti*).

B. Abandoned Qualities

1. Three Fetters:

- 1) *Sakkāya-diṭṭhi*: the delusion in 'self'; the mistaken belief in a 'self,' which leads to selfishness, conflict and suffering.
- 2) *Vicikicchā*: doubts and uncertainties concerning, for example, the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, and the training. These doubts prevent the mind from rousing energy and advancing on the path.
- 3) *Sīlabbata-parāmāsa*: the misapplication of moral precepts, rules, observances, and traditions; these rules are not used as they are intended, as tools for developing such qualities as tranquillity and concentration. Instead, they are tainted by craving and fixed views, by seeking personal reward, enhancing self-stature, or blindly following others.

2. Five Kinds of Selfishness (*macchariya*):¹⁴

- 1) Possessiveness in regard to one's dwelling (*āvāsa-macchariya*).
- 2) Possessiveness in regard to one's family, group, institution, etc.; partisanship (*kula-macchariya*).
- 3) Possessiveness in regard to one's wealth and good fortune (*lābha-macchariya*); preventing others from sharing these gains.
- 4) Jealousy about one's reputation and social standing (*vaṇṇa-macchariya*); displeasure when someone else competes for one's gain or beauty; intolerance when hearing praise for others.
- 5) Possessiveness in regard to the truth (*dhamma-macchariya*): possessiveness of knowledge and attainments; a fear that others will gain knowledge or attain realizations that match or excel one's own.¹⁵

3. Four Biases (*agati*):¹⁶

- 1) Bias caused by desire (*chandāgati*).
 - 2) Bias caused by aversion (*dosāgati*).
 - 3) Bias caused by delusion or stupidity (*mohāgati*).
 - 4) Bias caused by fear (*bhayāgati*).¹⁷
4. Defilement: they have abandoned coarse or acute greed (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*), which lead to an unhappy existence; stream-enterers do not commit any serious misdeeds which would lead to perdition; they are secure from rebirth in 'states of woe' (*apāya*).¹⁸
5. Suffering: they have quelled mental suffering and misfortune arising from transgressions of the five precepts; the suffering remaining for stream-enterers is minor.¹⁹

The active qualities and the abandoned qualities are two sides of the same coin. The abandonment of personality-view occurs with a profound understanding of the conditioned nature of reality. With the arising of this understanding, doubt vanishes and a solid confidence based on wisdom remains. At the same time, moral precepts are observed appropriately, leading to 'conduct pleasing to awakened beings' (*ariyakanta-sīla*). The attachment to rules and observances ends. When a person develops generosity, selfishness wanes. Wisdom weakens the force of greed, hatred and delusion, which in turn frees a person from bias and clinging. The reduction of clinging leads to a release from suffering and an experience of great joy.

Stream-enterers are endowed with virtue and happiness. There is adequate virtue to ensure that they will not cause danger, distress or harm to anyone; on the contrary, their behaviour will benefit both themselves and others. This virtue is secure because it stems from thorough knowledge, which leads to a new way of seeing the world. As for happiness, stream-enterers have encountered a profound

inner happiness that is of tremendous value. Although they still experience sensual or mundane pleasure, they are not carried away by this coarser form of happiness; they will not sacrifice the refined happiness to increase mundane happiness. Mundane happiness is balanced by transcendent happiness. This transcendent happiness is both a consequence of and a supporting factor for virtue; it is confirmation that a person will not regress and it supports further spiritual growth.

Stream-entry is of great value to the person who has realized it and to society. The Buddha assigned stream-entry to the first stage of enlightenment; it is the point where life as an awakened being begins. Stream-enterers are 'true disciples'; they are part of the 'noble community' (*ariya-saṅgha*), which is the 'crucible' in which humanity is refined.

The Buddha greatly emphasized the importance of stream-entry and urged his disciples to set it as a goal for their lives. He said that the realization of stream-entry is better than going to heaven, being an emperor, or attaining *jhāna*. A teacher who is free from sensual lust due to the power of concentrative attainments and who leads his many disciples to 'merge with Brahmā' in heaven is considered excellent, but he is surpassed by the stream-enterer who still has sensual lust.²⁰

Better than ruling the whole world, better than going to heaven, better than lordship over the universe, is reaching the stream of awakening [the fruit of stream-entry].²¹

Those people who feel that *Nibbāna* is too distant to reach, too esoteric, too desolate or ethereal, should use the state of stream-entry as a bridge for understanding, because stream-entry is closer to their experience and easier to understand. At the same time, stream-entry is directly linked to *Nibbāna*, as it is an entry into the 'stream leading to *Nibbāna*' or is a 'first glimpse' (*paṭhama-dassana*) of *Nibbāna*.²² This approach with double benefit is appropriate for contemporary people and still accords with the Buddha's principles. Stream-entry should be the goal of individual practitioners and of the Buddhist community as a whole. In the meantime, one can reach an intermediate stage, as either a 'faith-devotee' (*saddhānusārī*) or a 'truth-devotee' (*dhammānusārī*),²³ whose members are considered to 'have approached stream-entry,' 'dwell in the Path,' and 'progress without falling back,' and are sometimes included as 'noble' (*ariya*) or 'true disciples' (*sāvaka-saṅgha*).

Those who hesitate or for some reason are delayed can dwell in the preparatory stages of 'virtuous person' (*kalyāṇa-puthujjana*),²⁴ 'possessing beautiful qualities,'²⁵ or 'learned noble disciple' (*sutavā ariya-sāvaka*).²⁶ These individuals have studied the 'noble teachings' (*ariya-dhamma*); they have responded to the 'call' of the truth. They have escaped from the 'jungle' (of confusion) and recognized the starting point of the path. Although they may still falter, they possess the necessary factors to begin the journey. At the outset, these virtuous persons, whose faith, moral conduct, generosity and wisdom is not yet truly secure, can generate the quality of 'learning' (*suta*)—of having 'listened,' of seeking knowledge—until they reach the stage of 'great learning' (*bahussuta*), of being steadfast in knowledge.

It is precisely this learning (*suta*) that helps in the development of the noble path, beginning with a recognition of where the path begins.²⁷ Indeed, correct understanding leads to faith, moral conduct, generosity and wisdom, because faith springs from such an understanding, followed by the energy to cultivate other virtues. These five qualities—learning, faith, morality, generosity and wisdom—are called the five mundane ‘accomplishments’ (*sampadā*)²⁸ or the five mundane ‘treasures’ (*vaddhi*).²⁹ With the attainment of stream-entry, these five accomplishments or treasures become transcendent qualities.

A notable feature of stream-enterers is that they are not possessive of their material wealth:

*(Stream-enterers) dwell at home with a mind devoid of the stain of stinginess, freely generous ... delighting in giving and sharing.... Whatever there is in their family that is suitable for giving, all that they share unreservedly among those who are virtuous and of good character.*³⁰

Because of this unbounded generosity, stream-enterers grow in virtue but may diminish in material wealth, and the Buddha even established a training rule as a result of this trait. If the bhikkhu sangha sees that members of a family have increasing faith but diminishing wealth, it can formally assign them the title of *sekha* (‘learner’), regardless of whether they are actually enlightened or not. (It is usually not possible to determine the level of realization in another. Here, behaviour is used as the standard.) If a monk who is not ill and has not been previously invited goes to members of this family and eats their food, he transgresses one of the training rules.³¹

From this, one can discern two important principles. First, this training rule focuses on and declares a person’s inner, spiritual qualities for the benefit of the community, by dictating a standard of behaviour suitable to the circumstances. Second, it reveals how those people who are endowed with certain qualities—whose faith is correctly aligned with the Buddhist teachings, or who have realized the Dhamma as stream-enterers—do not seek reward for their good deeds. They do not chase after pleasurable sense objects for gratification. These questions do not arise for them: ‘I have done good; why don’t good things come back to me?’ or: ‘I have been generous; why am I not rich? I haven’t got what I wanted.’

They possess not only the physical eye, which sees material things, but they have developed the ‘eye of Dhamma’ (*dhamma-cakkhu*)³² or the ‘wisdom eye,’ which sees clearly into the truth. Stream-enterers have complete confidence in the power of goodness, a confidence that can never be shaken regardless of unfavourable material circumstances. When they have clearly seen the truth and walked the virtuous path, no one including devas can tempt them to deviate. They are steadfast in virtue. The commentaries use the example of Anāthapiṇḍika to show the degree of a stream-enterer’s rectitude.³³ They cannot be enticed or intimidated by devas; on the contrary, devas pay respect to them.

- ¹ S. V. 364-5; the ‘four factors of stream-entry’ (*sotāpattiyaṅga*) refer in some cases to the factors that bring about stream-entry and in other cases to the qualities of a stream-enterer.
- ² For example, the story of Visākhā at: Ud. 91-2; UdA. 417; DhA. III. 278.
- ³ Important sources at: Vin. I. 35-9; PvA. 209. (Translator: the Observance Day precepts include celibacy and fasting after midday.)
- ⁴ Important sources at: Vin. II. 154-9; A. I. 25-6; AA. I. 384.
- ⁵ Important sources include: Vin. I. 290-4; A. I. 26; AA. I. 404; DhA. I. 384.
- ⁶ Important sources at: Vin. I. 71-2, 267-82; Vin. II. 119; A. I. 25-6; AA. I. 398.
- ⁷ Important sources at: A. I. 25-6; A. II. 61-2; A. III. 295-6; A. IV. 268-9; S. III. 1; S. IV. 116; AA. I. 399.
- ⁸ Unlike the Pali, which first lists the absent, abandoned qualities, I list here the positive, active qualities first, which is a more contemporary format. In any case, the absent and active qualities are directly linked with one another.
- ⁹ The Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha.
- ¹⁰ ‘Free’ conduct is conduct from which one does not wish for personal gain, say worldly pleasure or a heavenly birth. Note that good conduct always includes right livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*)—see: VbhA. 88 = Vism. 511. Of the many Pali words describing the moral conduct of stream-enterers, there are two words in particular that have been introduced into the Thai language: *ariya-kanta-sīla*: conduct cherished or praised by enlightened beings; and *aparāmatṭha-sīla*: conduct that has not been ‘grasped onto’; conduct untainted by craving and fixed views; conduct that springs naturally from virtue—one need not attach to this conduct since no impurities exist that would lead to its transgression.
- ¹¹ The teachings of the noble ones; virtuous qualities. On ‘learned ones’ (*sutavant*), ‘noble disciples’ (*ariya-sāvaka*), and the ‘noble Dhamma’ (*ariya-dhamma*), see Appendix 3.
- ¹² (Translator: As this teaching was given to bhikkhus, this virtue refers to sharing alms and other donations, which can be a source of conflict and disharmony.)
- ¹³ These special characteristics are attributes of right-view, which fall under the heading of wisdom, but due to their detailed explanations I have created a separate heading. The Buddha gave this sermon (M. I. 320-25) in reference to bhikkhu stream-enterers, but it is applicable to lay stream-enterers as well. For transgressions of the Vinaya, see: A. I. 231-4. The Buddha said that even arahants are subject to minor transgressions. Enlightened beings of all stages of enlightenment, however, are incapable of transgressing fundamental rules of the holy life, and their minor transgressions are unintentional. See Vin. V. 117, and see examples of transgressions at AA. II. 348.
- ¹⁴ Also translated as ‘stinginess,’ ‘narrow-mindedness,’ and ‘envy.’
- ¹⁵ A. III. 272-3 (while possessing these five kinds of selfishness, even the first jhāna is unreachable); Vism. 683, 685.
- ¹⁶ Also translated as ‘misconduct.’
- ¹⁷ Vin. II. 285; Vism. 683, 685.
- ¹⁸ S. III. 225; A. III. 438.
- ¹⁹ S. II. 133-40; S. V. 388, 441-2, 457-65.

²⁰ A. III. 371-4; cf.: A. IV. 135-6.

²¹ Dh. verse 178.

²² E.g.: MA. I. 74; SA. III. 55; KhA. 188; SnA. I. 193; PsA. I. 282; DhsA. 43; for *sotāpatti-magga* referred to as *dassana*, see, e.g.: M. I. 7-8; Dhs. 182, 220.

²³ See the earlier section describing faith- and truth-devotees. Later, the term ‘small stream-enterer’ (*cūla-sotāpanna*) was coined, referring to those disciples who had great love for and faith in the Buddha but whose wisdom was not yet developed (see: M. I. 141-2). The commentaries say this refers to those practitioners who have developed insight and reached ‘knowledge of recognition’ (*ñāta-pariññā*) and the ‘purity of transcending doubts’ (*kaṅkhāvitarāṇa-visuddhi*), and who have attained an ease and sense of security. See: MA. II. 120; VbhA. 254; Vism. 606; VismṬ.: *Kaṅkhāvitarāṇa-visuddhi-niddesa-vaṇṇanā*, *Paccayapariggaha-kathā-vaṇṇanā*. See also the discussion on ‘settled confidence’ (*okappanā-saddhā*) at: DA. II. 529; DA. III. 1029; MA. III. 326; AA. III. 257.

²⁴ This term is used frequently in the commentaries and is paired (contrasted) with *andhabāla-puthujjana*. In the Pali Canon it is found at: Nd. I. 131, 138, 232, 313-4, 477-8. In some locations it is spelled *puthujjana-kalyāṇaka*, e.g.: Ps. I. 176; Ps. II. 190, 193. In the Pali Canon *andhabāla-puthujjana* is only found at: S. III. 140 & Thag. verse 575; more often the term *assutavā puthujjana* is used, meaning ‘unlearned, ordinary person,’ e.g.: M. I. 1; Nd. II. 44; Ps. I. 149; Dhs. 182; Vbh. 364, 368, 375; this term is frequently used as a pair with *sutavā ariya-sāvaka*. The commentaries include these ‘virtuous persons’ (*kalyāṇa-puthujjana*)—especially those who make great effort in their spiritual practice and whose virtues indicate they will attain stream-entry imminently—as ‘trainees’ (*sekha*), along with the other seven kinds of (awakened) trainees; these virtuous persons are included in this classification from the level of faith-devotees and truth-devotees (see: VinA. I. 242; MA. I. 40; VbhA. 329; AA. II. 147; ItA. I. 60; VinṬ.: *Pārājikakaṇḍam*, *Bhikkhupadabhājanīya-vaṇṇanā*, and compare with the ‘small stream-enterer’ mentioned in the previous footnote.

²⁵ A. I. 74.

²⁶ For learned noble disciples who are *kalyāṇa-puthujjana*, see: M. I. 8; MA. I. 72; for those who are stream-enterers or higher, see below.

²⁷ In reference to the two factors for right view, learning (*suta*) is knowledge derived from others (*paratoghosa*)—it relies on wise and trustworthy companions. This learning leads to faith and wise reflection (*yoniso-manasikāra*).

²⁸ A. III. 53.

²⁹ A. III. 53; these five treasures are also known as the five noble treasures (*ariya-vaḍḍhi*), although the more common group of noble treasures contains two more qualities, of moral shame (*hiri*) and fear of wrong-doing (*ottappa*), e.g.: D. III. 251; A. IV. 5-6.

³⁰ S. V. 351-2.

³¹ Vin. IV. 180; even if he visits their house and they offer food, he should not receive it, not to mention going and asking for food as this is an offence under any circumstance (except with relatives or one who has given a formal invitation); see: Vin. I. 45; Vin. IV. 87, 193. It is the same with the other three requisites (see: Vin. III. 148, 212, 256; Vin. IV. 102-3). See also: D. III. 224-5; S. II. 195; A. II. 27-8; A. III. 108-9; Nd. I. 495; Nd. II. 59; Vism. 39-42.

³² See, e.g.: Vin. I. 12, 16; in most cases the Dhamma eye refers to knowledge resulting in stream-entry (*sotāpatti-magga-ñāṇa*), e.g.: VinA. V. 973; DA. I. 278; AA. II. 356; AA. IV. 102; UdA. 283; Nd2A. 8. Sometimes the term includes the path of once-returning and the path of non-returning, e.g.: VinA. III. 537; DA. I. 237; PsA. I. 77; DhsA. 306. Sometimes it refers to the three paths and the three fruits, e.g.: SA. III. 297. And in some places it refers to all four paths and all four fruits, including the fruit of arahantship, e.g.: NdA. 83; MA. III. 92; MA. V. 99; SA. II. 392; VinṬ.: Mahākhandaḥkaṃ, Dhammacakkappavattanasutta-vaṇṇanā. One passage in the Pali Canon refers to two occasions for the arising of the Dhamma eye; the first is the path of stream-entry and the second the path of non-returning (A. I. 242).

³³ DhA. III. 9; J. I. 226.