

Guaranteed for Stream Entry Before Death

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Introduction

The title of today's talk is "Guaranteed for Stream-Entry Before Death." According to Buddhist doctrines, there are four stages of enlightenment or awakening, namely becoming

1. a stream-enterer or sotāpanna
2. a sakadāgāmi or once-returner
3. an anāgāmi or non-returner
4. an arahant who has attained the final stage of total liberation from the round of continuous birth and death.

What's So Great About Becoming a Sotāpanna / Stream-Enterer?

1. Stream-enterer

The first stage is a stream-enterer or a sotāpanna. Sota means stream, āpanna means enterer and sotāpanna means "one who has entered the stream". What does that mean? What is the stream? The stream is the Noble Eightfold Path.

Why is it important to become a stream-enterer? It's important because when one attains stream-entry, at that moment of attainment, one abandons the three lower fetters which are:

- a) sakkāya-diṭṭhi, i.e. the wrong view of personality or the wrong view that there is an unchanging person of 'I' or the sense of self or 'I'
- b) doubts, i.e. having doubts about the Buddha and his genuine awakening, his teachings that lead to awakening and his community of awakened disciples
- c) the abandonment of sīlabbata-parāmāsa i.e. wrong grasping at rites and rituals.

The sotāpanna or the stream-enterer has gone beyond grasping at rites and rituals or thinking that only by performing such practices can one become liberated or awakened.

How to get to the state of a sotāpanna?

A sotāpanna is one whose Dhamma-eye has arisen within oneself, which means that the eye of wisdom is able to perceive the important aspects of reality, particularly the ability to see that all things that are perceptible through the five senses are subject to arising and passing away due to changing causes and conditions. He is able to understand it through his direct personal experience. According to some suttas, he also has a glimpse of Nibbāna, which is the cessation of all conditioned phenomena. The experience of Nibbāna is something extraordinary and spectacular, which normal people cannot understand or experience.

Consequences of stream-entry

However, the experience per se may not be so important compared to the consequences of that first glimpse of Nibbāna. This is because at the very moment of attainment of stream-entry, that person will never go down to the lower realms again.

- Firstly this implies that whatever bad kamma he did in the past—even in past lifetimes before he became a sotāpanna—that could lead to or generate rebirth in the lower realms, all becomes defunct.
- Secondly he will henceforth be incapable of creating any new kamma that can land him in the lower realms or generate rebirth in the lower realms.
- Another important consequence is that he will not come back to this world again for more than seven times, which means that for him saṃsāra is no longer an eternity with no beginning and no end. Otherwise, one can't even count how many lifetimes one has gone through before this one or how many more one will go through if one does not become a sotāpanna. In other words, a sotāpanna is one who has an expiry date for his existence in saṃsāra with only seven more lifetimes of returning to this sensual world.

Virtues of the Attainers of the Other 3 Higher Stages of Awakening

2. Sakadāgāmi or once-returner

The second stage of awakening is a sakadāgāmi or once-returner. A once-returner has a deeper experience of Nibbāna and because of his deeper experience of Nibbāna, he attenuates two other fetters but does not actually eradicate or abandon them except they become diminished. These two fetters are sensual desire and ill-will.

So if a person was very bad-tempered when he was a sotāpanna, he will diminish some of his anger when he becomes a sakadāgāmi, i.e. the once-returner does not eradicate or abandon any fetters but just diminishes two additional ones;

as for the first three fetters, they were already eradicated when he became a sotāpanna earlier on. The once-returner is so called because he has an even shorter life span in saṃsāra. His expiry date is only one more lifetime of coming back to the sensual realm before his total liberation from saṃsāra.

3. Anāgāmi or non-returner

The third stage of awakening is that of an anāgāmi or a non-returner, which means that this person will no longer come back to the sensual realm. He has abandoned the two fetters that the once-returner had attenuated, which means no more sensual desire, no more ill-will and no more anger. So an anāgāmi cannot get angry, cannot be disappointed, cannot have any depression, cannot have any sadness and will not have any negative unpleasant mental feelings at all. He will also have no desires for pleasures of the five senses—desire for seeing beautiful forms, listening to pleasant music, fragrant smells, delicious food and pleasant tactile objects.

At this third stage of awakening, because he no longer has any sensual desires nor any ill-will, it is very easy for him to develop the jhānas because what prevents people from getting the jhānas is their attachment to the pleasures of the senses. Whether or not he deliberately practises to develop jhāna, when he dies from this human realm, he will automatically be reborn in the Brahma realm precisely because he no longer has any sensual desires. The Brahma realm is a place where people with jhānas are reborn after they die, provided they are able to maintain their attainment and be temporarily freed from sensual desire when they die.

4. Arahant

The final stage of awakening is that of an arahant or one who has overcome the five upper fetters.

1. The first fetter is a desire for existence in the Brahma realm, the subtle form realm of the Brahmas.
2. The second fetter is a desire for existence in the non-material Brahma realm, where there is no body and no form, just mind.
3. The third fetter is pride (*asmi-māna*), the sense of 'I am', 'I am great' or 'I am such and such a person'. This is very different from the view, the wrong view of a self that the sotāpanna or the stream-enterer has eradicated. Although the stream-enterer has eradicated the view that there is a self, the sense of self is still there. And this sense of self will still be there through the second and third stages of awakening. It can only be eradicated in the final stage of becoming an arahant.
4. The fourth fetter that an arahant has eradicated is that of restlessness. If you have been watching your mind, you will know how restless your minds are. Every time the mind comes into contact with any of the six senses, i.e. the five senses as well as mind objects, it will start to comment and or

proliferate. It's not something that we can stop as it's very automatic. But an arahant has eradicated that, so his mind will not be restless, and he is in total control of his mental reaction or response to the senses.

5. Finally, the fifth fetter is the total eradication of ignorance, i.e. avijjā, that basic or fundamental defilement or fetter that binds everybody to saṃsāra. The sotāpanna or the stream-enterer has eradicated a little bit of avijjā but avijjā can only be totally eradicated when one becomes an arahant.

Better not Come Back to this Human World

What do you want? How many want to come back to the human world? How many want to go up to heaven? Let's look at the state of the world right now! Do you think that it will become better?

Look at the ongoing environmental degradation and devastation on this planet. So much environmental devastation has resulted in global warming, natural calamities, catastrophes and so forth. What about the political situation throughout the whole world? There are despotic state leaders, heads of states, dishonest politicians, social and economic injustices and religious extremism. The fights in the Middle East have been ongoing for centuries until now. Do you think things are going to get any better? Definitely not.

Likewise for migrations. Look at the mass migrations which have been taking place since time immemorial. That's how we have landed here. You see Middle Easterners migrating to Europe; South Americans migrating to North America; the Bangladeshis and the Rohingyas migrating to Malaysia; Malaysians migrating elsewhere. It's a global phenomenon that has been happening all the time. In the olden days, there were no passports and no visas, and people just travelled in a boat or a caravan or whatever to unknown destinations. Nowadays, because of visas and passports, it has become more apparent.

Everybody is driven by what? By lobha, dosa and moha. They all want something better than what they are already getting. These people, those heads of states, are despotic because of greed for power, authority or fortune. Everybody is driven by desire for security, for success, for wealth or for promotion. Violence is resorted to when they can't get what they want and all are driven by greed, hatred and delusion which are keeping us in saṃsāra.

If we know that things won't be getting better in the future, why come back to the human world?

Perhaps you are influenced by some Dhamma preachers, mostly from the Tibetan tradition, who place emphasis on the preciousness of human life for various reasons, e.g. that only in the human plane or human realm can there be a sammāsambuddha. That only in the human realm, can someone make aspirations to become a sammāsambuddha. Unlike the deva realms, where pleasure predominates and the lower realms, where suffering predominates, in the human

realm, there is enough suffering and happiness to nudge you and to motivate you to seek liberation. The devas are all enjoying themselves, they don't see suffering, so they are just being complacent. The hell beings, the ghosts and the animals don't have a chance to do any good deeds or to cultivate their minds. In fact, they are so bound up by suffering that their aspirations cannot go beyond just being free from that physical suffering that they are undergoing. So people say that if you go to the celestial realms, because there is so much pleasure there, you might indulge in those pleasures, become negligent and forget all about the Dhamma.

Will it be better then to come back to this world so that you will be shaken to see suffering and practise to get out of saṃsāra? But there are dangers too. Who knows where you will be reborn? And who knows, what will be the state of the sāsana when you are back? Will there be people still around to lead and guide you to practise? Or even if you become a sotāpanna and you come back to this world, what would the environment be like? What would the political situation or the social situation be like? Will it be conducive for practice or for further progress OR is it better to make an aspiration to go up to the deva realm?

Not so Difficult to Be Reborn in the Deva Realms, but ...

It's not really that difficult to go up to the deva realm.

Let's refer to the first paragraph of Dānūpapatti Sutta in the Aṅguttara Nikāya, Book of Eights where Sutta No. 35 reads

“Here, someone gives a gift to an ascetic or Brahmin, food and drink, clothing and vehicles, garlands, scents and unguents, bedding, dwellings and lighting. Whatever he gives, he expects something in return. He sees affluent khattiyas, nobles, affluent brahmins, or affluent householders, enjoying themselves, furnished and endowed with the five objects of sensual pleasure. It occurs to him, “Oh, with the breakup of the body after death, may I be reborn in companionship with affluent khattiyas, affluent brahmins or affluent householders.” He sets his mind on this, fixes his mind on this and develops this state of mind. That aspiration of his resolved in what is inferior, not developed higher, leads to rebirth there. And that is for one who is virtuous, I say, not for one who is immoral. The heart's wish of one who is virtuous succeeds because of his purity.”

If any of you have any worldly successful idols in your mind, maybe some of you may aspire to become like Bill Gates or some big figure who is rich and wealthy and philanthropic. Because of the aspiration, whenever you do some merits, you may think, “Oh, may I be like him next time.” If you really have that aspiration in you to come back because you have somebody in this world whom you idolise and would like to emulate, then you nurture that aspiration, make it every time you do dāna. Then according to the Buddha, provided you also keep your precepts, your wish can come true. So, not really that difficult, right? But only if you are virtuous. If you are

not virtuous and you do a lot of dāna, what will happen to you? You may come back as a royal elephant or a royal stallion or the Pekingese of a multimillionaire, enjoying all the comforts of a luxurious life, but with no chance to practise. This is the first scenario from the Book of Eights. This first scenario is still confined to this world because you are trying to emulate, to aspire to become somebody whom you admire, some worldly, successful person.

There are eight scenarios altogether and the rest of the seven are as follows. The second one is about going to the deva realm.

“Now, someone else gives a gift to an ascetic or Brahmin, food and drink, etc. and lighting. Whatever he gives, he expects something in return. He has heard, the devas ruled by the Four Great Kings are long-lived, beautiful and abound in happiness. And because of what he has heard, he then aspires to be reborn in the company of the Four Great Kings. And because he made this wish, whenever he does dāna, he will reinforce it again and again, and also try to keep the sīla, then the person can realise his ambition.”

Similarly, for the other layers of the deva realms—Tāvatiṃsa, Tusita, Nimmānaratī (the realm where the devas delight in their creations), and then the highest realm, which is the realm where the devas delight in the creations of others. They don't create; others create and they enjoy. And all of these, the Buddha says, can be realised, provided you make this aspiration again and again, every time you do dāna to an ascetic or a brahmin and also provided you keep your sīla intact.

The eighth scenario is the Brahma realm. So this person has heard that the devas of Brahma's company are long-lived, beautiful and abound in happiness and because of that hearsay, he determines to be reborn there and keeps his sīla. So he can be reborn there if he does all these things. When he does dāna, he reiterates his aspiration, he tries to keep his sīla, and not only that, he has to go beyond sensual desires, which means to say, he must attain the jhānas.

So the Buddha says, for the first seven scenarios, all you need to do is to do dāna, maintain that aspiration in your mind steadfastly, and keep your sīla. Whereas for the eighth scenario, not only must you maintain your aspiration when you do dāna every time, not only must you try to be impeccable in your sīla, but you must also attain the jhānas. Then only will you be able to realise your ambition.

So, not so difficult, isn't it, to go up to the deva realm? There is one website which says, “Just be good and you can go to heaven.”

Let's look at two Suttas in the Aṅguttara Nikāya, Book of Fours namely Suttas No. 123 and 125. Sutta No. 123 is about jhāna, the four jhānas, and Sutta No. 125 is about the four brahmavihāras. In these two suttas, it is stated that there is a difference between the meditative results of a worldling and that of a knowledgeable disciple of the Noble One.

Sutta No. 123 says that a worldling may develop the four jhānas and upon his death, be reborn in the respective Brahma realms provided of course he maintains his jhāna until he dies, or when he dies. Then that worldling can take rebirth in the

respective Brahma realm. He enjoys his life there which is extremely long and at expiry of his kamma, he can come back to the human world or go down even to the deepest lower realms, even go down to hell. However, for a knowledgeable disciple of the Noble One, after he has attained the jhānas and gained rebirth in the respective Brahma realms, he or she will attain parinibbāna right there. The next Sutta No. 124, talks about how a knowledgeable disciple of the Noble One practises vipassanā using the jhānas.

Sutta No. 125 talks about the four brahmavihāras. Similarly, for a worldling (*puthujjana*) who practises the four brahmavihāras; after he dies, he can be reborn in the respective Brahma realms. And after that, when his kamma expires, he can even go down to hell. But for the knowledgeable disciple of the Noble One, he will be reborn in the respective Brahma realm and will attain parinibbāna there. Parinibbāna means total liberation. That means he becomes an arahant and passes away there. In the next Sutta No. 126, it talks about how this is done. It says that a knowledgeable disciple of the Noble One develops the four brahmavihāras respectively. And then he practices vipassanā after that, looking back at the five aggregates.

Not so Difficult to Become a Sotāpanna within this Lifetime

Perhaps it's good to make an aspiration. We have already seen that this world, this planet, is not going to become any better in the future. So, why not make an aspiration to become a deva? Go up to the deva realm and become a sotāpanna. Right? Good, isn't it? If you can't become a sotāpanna now, make an aspiration to become a sotāpanna there. But it's better to do it here. If you can do it here, it's safer, isn't it? Is it that difficult to become a sotāpanna? Today's talk may appear to be very good to many of you, but perhaps you will think it quite unreachable? But really, it's not that difficult either.

There is one story in the Saṃyutta Nikāya, in the Sotāpattisaṃyutta (SN 55), The Connected Discourses about Stream-entry. Number 25 is about a Sakyan by the name of Sarakāṇi. Now Sarakāṇi the Sakyan died and the Buddha declared that he was a sotāpanna. And then his friends started to go around saying that if Sarakāṇi could be a sotāpanna, then who cannot be a sotāpanna because he was a drinker and he did not fulfil his training.

What is meant by that? We expect a sotāpanna to be one who abstains from drinking, but he drank alcohol. His friends all knew that he drank alcohol. It was rather incredible to them that he could become a sotāpanna when he was a drinker. So in that sutta, Mahānāma, the Buddha's cousin approached the Buddha and told him what had happened. He was the laughing stock because the Buddha declared that he was a sotāpanna, but everybody knows that he was a drinker. How could a drinker become a sotāpanna?

The Buddha gave a very long discourse about people who will not go down to the lower realms. The first thing he said was,

“How could Sarakāṇi go down to the lower realms? Because one who has taken refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha will not go down to the lower realms. And Sarakāṇi had taken refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha for a long time. So how could it be possible for him to go down to the lower realms?”

Now, I would like to take this with a pinch of salt. It doesn't mean that every time you come and say, “Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi, Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi, Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi,” you won't go to the lower realms.

Then the Buddha went on to give a list of people who won't go down to the lower realms:

1. arahant
2. anāgāmī
3. sakadāgāmi
4. sotāpanna
5. dhammānusārī
6. saddhānusārī

The first four individuals have attained the four stages of awakening. They are incapable of falling into the lower realms.

The last two individuals do not have experiential, confirmed faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha like the other four, but one of them accepts the Buddha's teachings based on intellectual understanding, and the other based on mere faith. Plus, these two individuals have the five spiritual faculties:

1. faith or belief
2. energy
3. mindfulness
4. samādhi
5. paññā or wisdom.

So these two persons also will not go down to the lower realms. Does this mean that they will never go down to the lower realms for the rest of saṃsāra? Or is this only for the next life whereby they will not go down to the lower realms? This sutta does not provide any further details to answer these questions, but the answers will become apparent when we go on to the next series of suttas.

After giving this long discourse about these different types of individuals who won't go down to the lower realms, the Buddha again ended by saying that Sarakāṇi had taken refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha for so long, so it's impossible for him to go down to the lower realms. And the final sentence is that he became a sotāpanna because he fulfilled his training before he died. Which means to say that he abstained from drinking before he died and then he became a

sotāpanna since it was so obvious to everybody else that he was a drinker. So probably, he only stopped drinking before his final hours and attained stream-entry then.

More about the Faith and Dhamma Followers

Let's go on to the next series of suttas called the Okkanta Saṃyutta (SN 25); again in the Saṃyutta Nikāya. The first ten suttas are about the sotāpanna and these two individuals:

- A saddhānusārī (faith follower), one who accepts the Buddha's teachings based on faith alone
- A dhammānusārī (Dhamma follower), one who accepts the Buddha's teachings out of intellectual understanding.

Before introducing these two individuals, the Buddha talked about his teachings which these people believe and accept—that the six senses are impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise. And he said,

“One who places faith in these teachings and resolves on them thus, is called a faith follower.

- He has entered the fixed course of rightness, entered the plane of superior persons, transcended the plane of the worldlings.
- He is incapable of doing any deed by reason of which he might be reborn in hell, in the animal realm or in the domain of ghosts.
- He is incapable of passing away without having realised the fruit of stream-entry.”

So if you become a faith follower, you will be assured of stream-entry before you die, even though you are not yet one. Maybe like Sarakāṇi, at the last moment before you die, you become a sotāpanna.

And the Buddha continued to talk about the second type of individual who also ends up having exactly the same three qualities.

“One for whom these teachings are accepted thus, after being pondered to a sufficient degree with wisdom, is called a Dhamma follower.

- He has entered the fixed course of rightness, entered the plane of superior persons, transcended the plane of the worldlings.
- He is incapable of doing any deed, by reason of which he might be reborn in hell, in the animal realm, or in the domain of ghosts.
- He is incapable of passing away without having realised the fruit of stream entry.”

So if your faith faculty is not so strong and you are more of an intellectual, you still have a chance. What are the teachings you accept? Just these few things. The six senses are impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise. Isn't that true? Aren't the six senses impermanent and changing, becoming otherwise all the time? They are, right? So is this difficult to accept? So either you are faith followers or Dhamma

followers by definition, right? But there is a catch somewhere. You haven't got it yet.

Most Decisive Quality of the Faith and Dhamma Followers

Let me go on to the Buddha's definition of a sotāpanna in this series of suttas. Just now, these two individuals, the faith follower and the Dhamma follower, merely accept the teachings based on faith and on intellectual pondering respectively.

“One who knows and sees these things thus is called a stream-enterer, no longer bound to the netherworld, fixed in destiny with enlightenment as his destination.”

In other words, the sotāpanna knows and sees through his own personal experience that these things are impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise. Then only he is a sotāpanna. If you don't see, but just accept out of faith and out of intellectual reasoning, you're not a sotāpanna.

The Buddha's teaching on impermanence is similarly applied to other categories in nine subsequent suttas to complete the ten.

1. The first sutta is about the six senses. The six senses are impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise. So too are the
2. six sense objects
3. six sense consciousnesses
4. six types of sense experience (*phassa*, more popularly translated as contact)
5. feeling born out of each of the six sense experiences, e.g. feeling arises when you see something, or hear something
6. perception of the six sense objects
7. volition with regard to the six sense objects, eg. volition of wanting to see something you like, wanting to hear something you like
8. craving for the six sense objects
9. six elements: earth, water, fire, air, space and consciousness
10. five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, mental formations and consciousness.

So all these things are impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise. You all believe this, don't you? Either out of faith or out of personal experience to some extent. So, is it difficult to become a sotāpanna or not? Ok, but there is a catch here too.

You see, in the definition, the Buddha says that these two persons, whether he is a faith follower or a Dhamma follower, have “entered the fixed course of rightness (*sammattaniyāma*)”. Now the term ‘rightness’ (*sammatta*), actually refers to the Noble Eightfold Path. That means these two individuals have entered the fixed course (*niyāma*) leading to the Noble Eightfold Path.

They have also “entered the plane of superior persons, transcended the plane of the worldlings”. If they are no longer worldlings, then what are they? They are ‘ariyas’—noble ones, but they have not had a glimpse of Nibbāna yet.

“He is incapable of doing any deed by reason of which he might be reborn in hell, the animal realm, or in the domain of ghosts.”

This is where the catch is. Now, this will decide whether you are really a faith follower or a Dhamma follower. What sort of things, if done, will lead one to the lower realms? If you think that you are really a faith follower or a Dhamma follower, test yourself. What are the things that you do that can lead you to the lower realms?

Do you know the ten types of unwholesome deeds, the ten courses of unwholesome action—the 3-4-3? Three are connected with the body, four connected with speech and three connected with the mind.

The first three are in your five precepts. If you kill intentionally, if you take what is not given intentionally and if you intentionally commit sexual misconduct, this will create the kammic potential that can land you in the lower realms.

The four are with regards to speech. The first is lying, the one thing that most businessmen confess they are unable to refrain from. The second is divisive speech; divisive speech means speaking in such a way that you deliberately divide people who are harmonious, who are already in harmony, good friends, and you are saying things in order to split them, to divide them. Now, the things you say may be true or untrue, it doesn’t matter. If your intention is to split, wanting to create disharmony, then you have already committed an act that can land you in the lower realms. The third is harsh speech. Harsh speech means speaking in such a way that hurts another person. If you are a family person, you will know that spouses, when they are unhappy with one another, tend to speak hurtful words, say things that hurt the other party. One can be very sarcastic in one’s words, say and do things to hurt the other person. So that is harsh speech. The fourth one is frivolous speech, unbeneficial speech— you sit down and gossip for no good reason, just for enjoyment, with no benefit, worldly or spiritual.

And the last three are connected with the mind. The first one is covetousness, desiring something or somebody that belongs to someone else. And this goes on only in the mind. You have not done anything through speech or action yet. It’s only in the mind. Say you desire somebody’s wife, or somebody’s husband. You have not done anything yet. Haven’t seduced her or him. It’s just in your mind. That’s good enough to create the potential for you to land in the lower realms.

The next one is ill-will. It’s a very malevolent sort of ill-will; it’s like wishing for the harm of others. Like, you hate that person so much that you wish that he will be struck by lightning, he will get a heart attack, or a car will run over him.

I’ll tell you a true story. This happened in 1984 when I was helping Sayadaw U Paṇḍita in Barre, Massachusetts, in the Insight Meditation Society. He was leading a three-month retreat there and I was an interpreter. There was a yogi who seemed

to be a very bad-tempered woman. You could see the way she walked. Instead of doing very graceful walking meditation, she went around doing stomping meditation. She stomped around and you could see her scowling face, never happy. She was supposed to be doing vipassanā meditation and one day she came to report that she was sitting in the hall and right in front of her was her enemy, another lady whom she hated so much. So she sat behind her, closed her eyes and visualised that she was killing her. She was supposed to be doing vipassanā meditation, but instead she was visualising her enemy and killing her. That sort of malevolent thought is enough to create the kammic potential for you to be reborn in the lower realm.

And the final one is wrong view. Wrong view means not believing in the law of kamma, not believing in rebirth, not believing that there can be spontaneous birth, not believing that there could be spiritual practitioners who could see or be aware of other worlds besides ours. So these are the ten.

If you think that you are really a faith follower or a Dhamma follower who will definitely become a sotāpanna before you die, test yourself and see whether you qualify. Why do these two people qualify? Because their faith or belief in the Buddha's teaching of impermanence is so great that it is able to prevent them from committing these ten types of unwholesome actions. So, even though you don't go for meditation, if you have enough faith in the Buddha and belief in the Buddha's teachings on impermanence, that could actually help you to prevent the committing of all these ten types of unwholesome deeds. And if you can do that, then before you die, you are supposed to attain stream-entry. So it's a guarantee.

Even though you cannot become a stream-enterer right now, it's easier to become a saddhānusārī or a dhammānusārī, a faith follower or a Dhamma follower. That is basically about keeping your precepts. But it's also about the mind, because the last three are about the mind. So, in the meantime, while waiting to become a sotāpanna before you die, might as well start practising. Watch your mind. Keep on watching your mind every day, try to come back to the present moment, to keep it anchored in the present moment so that it doesn't get caught up in thoughts about the past, present and future, particularly all these thoughts that can land you in the lower realms.

Regardless of whether you can qualify to become a saddhānusārī or a dhammānusārī, you can still make an aspiration to become a sotāpanna, whether in this life or in the next life, but don't come back to this world. Don't come back to the human world. It's not going to get any better.

Questions & Answers

Q: Can a sotāpanna reborn as a human still suffer?

Just say someone becomes a sotāpanna and is reborn in a human realm. Could they still be suffering? Because people are not born with minds which are wise. Or will the conditions be good? Or will there also be suffering? There could be a lot of suffering, right? Or no?

A: A sotāpanna will not be reborn in the lower realms. He may come back as a human being. But then, as I said, our planet is not going to get any better. And you might land up in worse situations than you are right now. So that's why it's safer to go up, than to come back here.

Q: Can a non-Buddhist be a sotāpanna?

A: 'Sotāpanna' can only be found in the Buddhist teachings. Other people don't call themselves sotāpannas. So by definition, you have to be a Buddhist. Or when you become a sotāpanna, automatically you are a Buddhist because you have experiential and confirmed faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha.

Q: How can a practising Buddhist know when one has achieved awakening?

How does a virtuous lay Buddhist who practises dāna, observes sīla and is practising along the path know that he or she has arrived at perhaps the first stage, sotāpanna, maybe second stage, sakadāgāmi, or even third stage, anāgāmi, not to mention arahant? Just out of curiosity, because I think most people will think, "Yes, I do this; I do that; but how do I know where I am now?"

A: There are two criteria for that. One is that all these awakened disciples are supposed to have had a glimpse of Nibbāna. That is a very supramundane experience which is an out of the world experience. So if you have really become one, you will know it. However, some people can fool themselves. They have some spectacular experiences which they have never had before in a meditation retreat and they think that they've got it. So the second criterion, which is to look at your own precepts, is more important.

Before going into this, let's first look at the five fetters that I talked about, and whether they have really been eradicated, though they are not such stringent criteria. What is the first factor abandoned by the sotāpanna? Sakkāya-diṭṭhi, belief in a permanent unchanging self. Even without meditating, if you accept the Buddha's teaching, you could say, "I don't believe there is a permanent unchanging self. I'm changing all the time; all my cells are changing every moment; my mind is changing; my feelings are changing." So you could sort of fool yourself into thinking that you have abandoned this one. The second one is doubt. "I'm a very staunch Buddhist. I have no doubt about the Buddha; he was fully enlightened. His Dhamma is true and correct, the only true thing, nothing else is true", and so forth—

you can also fool yourself. The third one is about grasping rites and rituals. You can also fool yourself. You know that just by taking joss-sticks and praying to the Buddha or chanting everyday won't bring you to become enlightened. "I have to do something else like reading the suttas or practising meditation which I've already done and I think I got it." So these three are still not very convincing.

The more important thing is to check your five precepts. That's the next one. Then even more foolproof is the ten that I talked about. Ten courses of unwholesome actions. They are the root cause for any rebirth in the lower realms. So if you are really a sotāpanna, you will be incapable of doing them automatically, without having to restrain yourself.

Q: How to explain the disparity in the sutta definitions of a sotāpanna?

Earlier in Saṃyutta Nikāya 25, the Okkanta Saṃyutta, Bhante actually mentioned about the sotāpanna having developed the knowing and seeing (*ñāṇadassana*) in respect of the saḷāyatana to rūpa all the way to the dhātus and the khandhas as set out in the 10 suttas. But I also noticed that in some suttas in the Saṃyutta Nikāya 55 (Sotāpatti Saṃyutta), when the Buddha describes the sotāpanna, he only mentions that the sotāpanna has these four factors, i.e. unshakable faith in the Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha, and the ariyan sīla. And also having observed the five precepts impeccably. By these standards, a person would be a sotāpanna. So to me, there seems to be a disparity, a difference in how a sotāpanna is actually being described in terms of the level of wisdom that is required. So perhaps, Bhante, you could enlighten us on how that disparity can be explained. Thank you.

A: First of all, I want to correct one thing you said. Actually there is no explicit evidence in the suttas which says that the sotāpanna is impeccable in the five precepts. They only say that he is possessed of the virtue that is cherished by the Noble Ones. That is the stock phrase. But we can piece things together because the ten courses of unwholesome action which I mentioned just now are stated by the Buddha in several suttas as the root cause for rebirth in the lower realms. Now the Buddha explicitly declared that a sotāpanna would never go down to the lower realms and that a saddhānusārī or dhammānusārī would be incapable of performing any deed that could lead to rebirth in the lower realms. So by implication, they would not be able to do these ten courses of unwholesome action anymore.

That's one thing. Another thing you must remember is that the Buddha tailored his discourses to the audience he was speaking to. So he gave different aspects of a sotāpanna in different suttas to different people. Our job is to look at these different aspects and piece everything together to get a composite picture. Just like the terms dhammānusārī and saddhānusārī are mentioned in several suttas, but never completely. For example, in Sarakāṇi Sutta (about Sarakāṇi who was declared a sotāpanna but he was known as a boozier), the Buddha also talked about individuals who seem to have the qualities of a faith follower and Dhamma

follower, but he did not specifically mention these two terms, nor say what sort of teachings they accepted. But in this Okkanta Saṃyutta, it is specifically stated that they accept the teachings of anicca: impermanence, changing, becoming otherwise, with respect to the six senses and so forth. It is specified only in this Okkanta Saṃyutta.

Also in Sotāpatti Saṃyutta, there is nothing specified or mentioned about the sotāpanna having a glimpse of Nibbāna. If you really go through the whole saṃyutta, there's nothing mentioned about that. That's why people who just read the Sotāpatti Saṃyutta may come to the wrong conclusion that they are, they could be sotāpannas because they seem to fulfil all the conditions, like I said just now. If you look at other suttas, bits and pieces are mentioned here and there, and we have to try to piece the jigsaw together to get a whole picture.

Q: Where will anāgāmis who are not jhāna-attainers be reborn?

Bhante, you mentioned just now that non-returners, if they attain jhānas, will be born in the respective jhāna realms. How about those who do not attain jhānas? Where are they going to be reborn?

A: I said that even if they don't develop the jhānas, they will automatically be reborn in the Pure Abodes upon their death. The Pure Abodes, the Suddhāvāsa, is a realm exclusively for anāgāmis.

Q: When the merits causing rebirth in devaloka expire, can one still go down to a lower realm?

Bhante, I read in some sutta whereby the Buddha sometimes gives a gradual discourse to his listeners, explaining about how they can be reborn in the heavenly planes after having done dāna and sīla. And he also further explained that once they become a deva and all the merits have been used up, they may drop down to the lower planes of existence. So my question is: What if our good merits that propel us to be reborn into the heavenly plane are fully used up? We may drop down?

A: Not talking about just sense-sphere devas, but even after you have gone beyond sensual desire, attained the jhānas and go up to the Brahma realm, even from there you can come down back to the lower realms. There's no guarantee, unless you become a sotāpanna before going up there. So that's why this talk is "Guaranteed for Stream-Entry Before Death".

Q: So you mean after the first death as a deva, for the second rebirth, we can aspire to be reborn in the heavenly planes again? Because there will be seven rebirths.

A: You mean for the sotāpanna?

Yes, *for the sotāpanna*.

Sotāpannas can be reborn anywhere in the sensual realm, with a maximum of seven rebirths.

Q: How to define one who has entered the Noble Eightfold Path?

Bhante, in the virtues of the Saṅgha, we mention the eight individuals who are ariyas. So if one is a sotāpanna, then of course as one practises one is said to be on the path to become a sakadāgāmi. Now at what point do we define the path (*magga*) to become a sotāpanna? That means one who is on the path to stream-entry.

A: I just talked about the faith follower and the Dhamma follower. They have entered the fixed course of rightness, which is the Noble Eightfold Path. They have entered the path. So the faith follower and the Dhamma follower are the first of the eight types of individuals who are ariyas. They are not yet sotāpannas. They are on the way to become sotāpannas. And they will not go down to the lower realms. That's by definition. But they have not attained sotāpatti yet.

Q: But how do we define one who has entered the Noble Eightfold Path? In other words, when one is practising the Noble Eightfold Path, has one entered?

A: Yes, you enter when you find that the mind automatically refrains from these ten courses of unwholesome action. That's probably the criteria for it. Because in the *Okkanta Saṃyutta*, it doesn't say anything about the faith follower or the Dhamma follower having to verify the teachings of the Buddha personally, through personal experience. It just says that he accepts the teachings based on faith or after pondering over. But because of the strength of this acceptance, whether it's out of faith or intellectual, he is able to restrain himself from committing any of the ten courses of unwholesome action. That's why he will not go down to the lower realms. And that's why he is included in the 4 pairs of noble ones (*ariyas*) and is destined to attain the fruit of stream-entry before he dies.

Q: Can a faith-follower refrain from bad conduct without practising samādhi and vipassanā?

Does the faith follower practise samādhi and vipassanā? Because in my own experience, if I don't have samādhi, I don't think I can just have faith and then I don't know if I can be like that. I just thought of that. You know, I might not be able to control my samādhi, I might not have the wisdom to actually not do the ten bad things.

A: Well, it's just like Sarakāṇi, the Sakyan who was declared a sotāpanna by the Buddha. He was drinking all the way until before he died. Then he became a sotāpanna just before he died. So maybe if you are a diligent faith follower or Dhamma follower, you also might end up like that. You get that samādhi before you die.

Q: How can I plan to be a sotāpanna in my next life?

Let's say I still want to enjoy this life, but in the next life, I plan to be a sotāpanna, what do you say? Rather than having a weekly or yearly plan now, how to plan to be a sotāpanna in the next life?

A: Planning for stream-entry in the next life is risky. You'd better be a faith follower or a Dhamma follower, and then before you die, you'll become a sotāpanna. And after that, you can go wherever you want to.

Q: How can the anāgāmī not have the jhāna when the sotāpanna already has?

I want to go back to the earlier question asked about what if the anāgāmī does not develop the jhāna, where will the anāgāmī be reborn? It suddenly dawned upon me that in Saṃyutta Nikāya 55.5, there was a conversation between the Buddha and Sāriputta where the Buddha asked Sāriputta, "What is stream? Who is a stream-winner?" and Sāriputta said that a stream-winner is one who has actually fulfilled the Noble Eightfold Path, meaning that by implication, the sotāpanna would be somebody who has actually developed the first jhāna, by the definition of sammāsamādhī. So if that is the case, by inference, an anāgāmī should have also developed the first jhāna at the very least. So I do not see the possibility of an anāgāmī not having developed jhāna, or the first jhāna at the very least.

A: Ajahn Ṭhānissaro made a distinction between attaining the jhāna and mastering the jhāna. He says that in order to attain any of the four stages of awakening, one needs the jhāna. But that jhāna did not have to be something that you master. Like this Sarakāṇi, he was a drinker until just before he died. So he got his jhāna just before he died, not before that. He did not go for retreats, sit down and develop jhāna. It came just before he died.

Q: So he merely attains the jhāna and does not master it. So he doesn't abide in the jhāna until he dies?

A: Yes. If anāgāmīs don't deliberately develop the jhāna, before they die, they will still get the jhāna and then they will be reborn in Suddhāvāsa.

Q: Bhante, is the jhāna we are talking about the sutta-jhāna and not the Visuddhimagga-jhāna?

A: Yes.

Q: Why do some Buddhist get enlightened while some don't?

We as Buddhists learn Buddhism but somehow some can get enlightened, and some can't. What are the factors? Is it just kamma or other things that we should be aware of so that we can get enlightened?

A: If you are not possessed of the five spiritual faculties—faith or belief, energy, mindfulness, samādhī and wisdom—then you cannot attain anything. These must come with you from your past life. Whether a person attains awakening or makes spiritual progress quickly or slowly also depends on the maturity of these five

spiritual faculties. So if you have cultivated before in a past life and they are brought forward to this life, then it will be easy for you—very fast. If you only started this life, then it may be very slow and difficult.

Q: Is insight into not-self during a retreat a glimpse of enlightenment?

Someone in meditation retreat sort of has realised that actually there's no self. The brain is like leading the whole process. So is this a glimpse of enlightenment or just a normal meditative experience?

A: I would say this is a glimpse of anattā, a glimpse of not-self. But not a glimpse of Nibbāna yet.

Q: How about a glimpse of stream-entry?

A: No, it seems that the first fruit has to be a glimpse of Nibbāna itself.

Q: How long does it take for one on the Path to attain the Fruit?

How long does it take for an individual on the magga, the magga individual, to attain phala, to become a phala individual? One mind moment or many lifetimes?

A: According to the commentary, it's just one mind moment. One mind moment is ... Do you know how fast one mind moment is? In the snap of the fingers, there could be millions of mind moments. That's according to the commentary. But according to the suttas, it doesn't seem to be that way. Because the dhammānusārī and the saddhānusārī, the Dhamma follower and the faith follower, may have a long period before they actually attain the fruit of stream-entry.