

Spiritual streaming¹

1. More and more practising Buddhists today are seeking the real thing. After all, this is our life's goal. We can believe in the grandest teaching by the greatest guru there is. We might even fall in love with the guru, but not love the Dharma. In other words, we are crowd followers. Our destiny or rebirth, then, would be the animal world: animals mostly live in herds and follow the bellwether. On the other hand, if we confuse others with false teachings, and they believe us, our destiny is the lowest of the realms – the hellish states – because we are bringing greater pain to a greater number of beings.²

2. What is this safest true goal we can and should work for as a Buddha follower? The suttas call it “streamwinning” or “stream-entry” (*sot'āpanna*), that is, going down into the boat (the Dharma) on the stream (the eightfold path) that flows upwards to the source of the stream: nirvana. This is the stream that flows against the current (*paṭisota, gāmī*).³ The person is called a streamwinner (*sot'āpatti*).

3. “Against the currents” here means against the ways of the world. The world is caught up in a game of “opposites” of gain and loss, fame and obscurity, blame and praise, joy and sorrow – like being blown around by 8 powerful winds.⁴ Since we are unawakened being, the 8 winds will often blow us around. However, when we understand the impermanent nature of these winds, we are less affected, or even untouched, by them, because of our inner peace and joyful generosity.⁵

4. The key practice for attaining streamwinning is the perception of impermanence (*anicca, -saññā*) – the constant reflection on the impermanence of things, living or not. This is a mindfulness of the nature of the “world,” here meaning our 6 senses: the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. Every one of these sense-faculties is impermanent. Their respective sense-objects, too, are impermanent. The respective consciousnesses behind each of these experiences, too, are impermanent.⁶

5. The 6 sense-faculties are the tools with which we know the world; they are all impermanent. The 6 sense-objects are what we can know; they are all impermanent. The 6 consciousnesses are our mental reactions to these tools and their objects. They, too, are all impermanent. In-

¹ Dedicated to the aspirants to streamwinning who met with Piya Tan & Ratna Lim in the Buddhist Missionary Society Malaysia on 24 Dec 2015, and to all streaming aspirants. This is also an invitation to you to aspire for streaming in this life itself. “Streaming” is a colloquial term for “streamwinning” or “stream-entrance” which are quite a mouthful.

² (**Sotāpatti**) **Sāriputta Sutta 2** (S 55.5), [SD 16.5](#).

³ “Against the current,” *paṭisota, gāmī*: V 1:5,10 ([SD 12.1 \(2.1.2\)](#)) = D 14,3.2.3 (SD 49.8) = M 26,19 ([SD 1.11](#)) = S 6.1 ([SD 12.2](#)); A 4.5/2:5 f (SD 78.15) (opposite, *anusotagāmī*, “going with the stream”). On *anusota, gāmī*: A 4.5 (SD 78.15); Sn 319c (SD 78.16).

⁴ See **Loka, dhamma Sutta 1** (A 8.5), [SD 42.2](#) & **Loka, dhamma Sutta 2** (A 8.6), [SD 42.3](#).

⁵ A streamwinner is naturally generous, like any of the other true saints. See **Macchhariya Sutta** (A 5.254); **Macchhariya Pahāna Sutta** (A 5.255) & (**Sotāpanna**) **Macchhariya Pahāna Sutta** (A 5:268). These suttas essentially teach that the giving up of 5 kinds of miserliness, viz, of lodgings, families (source of support), gains, praise and the Dharma. The last kind of miserliness is the “vilest.”

⁶ See (**Anicca**) **Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1), [SD 16.7](#), or any of the 10 suttas of **Okkanta Saṃyutta** (S 25).

deed, whatever exists – things (earth, water, fire, air) or beings (animals, humans, gods, God) – must be impermanent.

6. There is only meaning in impermanence. Impermanence means that nothing is complete in itself, but are interdependent with everything else. Neither we nor our lives – even when we live “fully” and die a good death – are ever complete. The meaning of life, then, is that it is *imperfect* and *incomplete*; hence, the purpose of life is to *learn*. And the **true learner** is the streamwinner.⁷

7. To be a streamwinner, we need to practise 4 things, and to reflect in 4 ways. We need to practise **the 4 limbs for streamwinning** (*sotāpatti-y-aṅga*).⁸ These 4 constant practices prepare us for the path of streamwinning:

(1) Associating with true individuals. The highest of the true individuals are, of course, any of the 4 kinds of saints. More broadly, they are those who are wise and diligent in keeping to the 5 precepts and mental cultivation. They are spiritually wholesome people who would inspire us on the path.

(2) Hearing the true teaching. There are numerous teachers and teachings that can easily confuse us today. A basic rule is to carefully examine if the teacher has any greed, any hate, or any delusion. Then, we must examine if his teaching is in keeping with the Dharma (the suttas) and the Vinaya. The rule of thumb is that neither the teacher nor the teaching should go against the 5 precepts or mental peace.

(3) Wise attention. Simply, this means constantly reflecting on impermanence, and applying it to challenges in our lives, such as difficulties and failures, losses and disappointments, that is, when any of the 8 winds shake us up or knock us down. When things are good, even at their best, we need to understand that they are all impermanent. We become only more self-assured with such a practice.

(4) Dharma-spirited practice. We should practise the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma, that is, with a wholesome understanding of the suttas. We should avoid those who misrepresent the Buddha, the Dharma or the sangha, or who teach that answers to life’s problems can be found outside of oneself, that is, without any self-effort.

8. As aspirants to streamwinning, it is helpful for us to reflect on the 4 qualities of a streamwinner, that is, **the 4 limbs of a streamwinner** (*sotāpannessa aṅgāni*),⁹ namely,

(1) **Wise faith in the Buddha**. As humans, we evolve by learning through our sufferings – that we are still incomplete and imperfect. The person who is the most evolved of *all* beings (all that live, including divine beings) is the Buddha. The Buddha was born a man, lived as a man, and died as a man. However, his mind is liberated, which means that he is not reborn, he no longer suffers mental pain; he has risen above all possible existence, whether human or divine. We, too, can

⁷ “Learner” (*sekha*) is a term for the first 3 kinds of saints: the streamwinner (*sotāpanna*), the once-returned (*sākadāgāmi*), and the non-returned (*anāgāmi*). The “non-learner” (*asekha*) or “adept” is the arhat (*arahata*), since he has awakened and has nothing more to learn about awakening, and is free from mental suffering.

⁸ See (Sotāpatti) Phala Sutta (S 55.55), [SD 3.3\(4.1\)](#).

⁹ See Pañca Vera Bhaya Sutta (S 12.41,10-14), [SD 3.3\(4.2\)](#).

be liberated just like him.¹⁰ Like the lone radiant Buddha under the Bodhi tree, we should not fear even being alone in our practice. Wisdom arises in us only when we are in true mental solitude, even in a crowd.¹¹

(2) Wise faith in the Dharma. “Wise faith” comes from our experience of the reality of impermanence. We may deny God, but we cannot deny impermanence. The Buddha’s teaching – the true Dharma – is a natural truth, that is true of all life and existence. We are still asleep (ignorance) and the Buddha wakes us up through the Dharma. We need to open our eyes, and see for ourselves. When we see true reality (impermanence), then we can truly have faith. If we have faith without really knowing, it is blind faith. Then, we can only hope what we believe is true – which will bring on some serious problems in due course.¹²

(3) Wise faith in the sangha. The sangha here, with the small “s” refers to a natural community of those who have fully understood and realized the truth of impermanence, so that they are on the way to awakening, and also those who are fully awakened, that is, the arhats. This is a spiritual sangha comprising laymen, laywomen, monks and nuns – the streamwinners, the once-returners, the non-returners and the arhats.¹³

(4) Noble moral virtue. “Moral virtue” (*sīla*) means understanding the nature of our body and speech, and directing them to only what will help us grow as an individual. Here, “body” refers to the 5 physical senses (the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body) [5]. “Speech” refers to how we communicate with others, which should be wholesome. When we restrain our senses and speech in this way, we are said to be “bodily cultivated.” This prepares us to be “mentally cultivated” through mindfulness and meditation. This is the kind of moral virtue “dear to the noble ones,” because they, too, have cultivated it to become liberated beings.

If we live wisely, constantly reflecting on impermanence, we shield ourselves against the traumas of life’s sufferings, so that we can fully learn the lessons they are teaching us. We are then creating good habitual karma so that our minds are sufficiently free from greed, hate, and delusion, to attain streamwinning – the first step of sainthood and awakening – in this life itself, if not, surely at the moment of passing away.¹⁴

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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¹⁰ On the meaning of *buddha*, see [SD 36.2 \(2\)](#).

¹¹ This is a way of speaking more broadly about “mental concentration” or “mental cultivation” (*samādhi*).

¹² See **Emotional independence**, [SD 40a.8](#).

¹³ On the 4 kinds of saints, see **Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22,42-47), [SD 3.13](#); **Ānâpâna,sati Sutta** (M 118,9-12), [SD 7.13](#).

¹⁴ See **(Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1), [SD 16.7](#), or any of the 10 suttas of **Okkanta Saṃyutta** (S 25).