

Third Fruition

The third fruition of the Sound-hearer Bodhi is the fruition of the anāgāmin (non-returner) after the five lower fetters have been eliminated. One who has realized and attained the third fruition will have attained the first dhyana as well; hence, the attainment of the first dhyana is one of the characteristics of the third fruition. There are five constituents of meditative absorption accompanying the first dhyana—perception, contemplation, transcending rebirth or one pointedness, physical rapture, and mental ease.

There is a sequence in the attainment of dhyanas. Starting from the attainment of the first dhyana, the second dhyana is attained with the first dhyana being the foundation; the third dhyana is attained using the second dhyana as the foundation, all the way to the attainment of the fourth dhyana with the third dhyana as its foundation. It is impossible to attain the fourth dhyana prior to the attainment of the first and second dhyanas.

In the Dharma of Sound-hearers, a stream-enterer who has realized the first fruition has eliminated self-view while a once-returner who has realized the second fruition has subdued craving and aversion. Strictly speaking, they cannot be considered as true saints but only someone who has entered the stream, paving the way to become a saint, because they still have not eliminated desires for and attachment to the desire realm, are not capable of liberating themselves from the desire realm, and will still return to the human world in a future rebirth. Only those who having attained the third fruition can be considered as a true saint. An individual who has realized the third fruition is like an arrow that has left a bow heading directly toward liberation with no return, hence the name “non-returner.” This is what the Buddha says in the Miscellaneous Agama Sutra [Samyukta Agama]: “Detached from craving for sensuality, the mind is liberated and, therefore, the attainment can be verified.” It means that an individual with the third fruition has already detached himself from the craving and desire of the desire realm, a mind well liberated as well as the first dhyana attained, and verified for himself the physical rapture along with mental ease.

If an individual who has eliminated self-view and realized the first fruition can further attenuate or subdue the attachment to the desire realm, he can attain the second fruition of sakṛdāgāmin. If he can further eliminate the attachment to the desire realm, he can attain the third fruition of anāgāmin. Therefore, the process of advancing from the first fruition to the third fruition is the process of subduing the attachment to the desire realm

not the other way around. In the history of Buddhist cultivation, there are the Tachikawaryu school of Japanese Shingon Esoteric Buddhism and the practice of sexual union of wisdom empowerment of the Highest Yoga Tantra advocating the use of sexual yoga, which is the very coarse form of sensuality, as cultivation methods. These approaches diametrically oppose and violate the true Dharma and Buddhist cultivation. Such practices will not subdue, let alone eliminate the attachment to the desire realm but only deepen and strengthen attachment to the desire realm on the contrary. We should know that these practices will never enable us to eliminate the fetters and attain the fruitions but are only evil and erroneous practices of the non-Buddhist disguised as Buddhist practices.

An individual who has eliminated the three fetters as well as the craving for sensuality of and aversion to the desire realm, collectively called the five lower fetters, is someone who has realized the third fruition (a non-returner). There are different grades of non-returners based on the different degree of elimination of the five lower fetters, the quality of the attainment of the first dhyana, and the different merits and benefits derived. All these will lead to differences in the time and circumstance of the liberations of the non-returners in the future. Hence, there are five kinds and seven types of third fruition attainment.

The first kind is called a third fruition who achieves “parinirvana in the intermediate state,” referring to the third fruition of those who have noticed that they have not yet entered nirvana during the state of intermediate existence after death in the current life, but managed to figure out the reason behind and continue on to eliminate the five higher fetters and hence attain the fourth fruition of arhatship and enter nirvana right then; or it can refer to those who have managed to eliminate the five higher fetters and enter nirvana only after the body of intermediate existence has arisen for a period of time; or it can also refer to those who have managed to eliminate the five higher fetters and enter nirvana before the next rebirth. These are non-returners with extremely keen capacities and predisposition because their attainments are already very close to the fourth fruition.

The second kind is called a third fruition who achieves “parinirvana with last rebirth,” which refers to the third fruition of those who, after having passed through the body of intermediate existence, are capable of eliminating the five higher fetters right after taking the last rebirth in the five heavens of no-return and almost immediately enter nirvana.

The third kind is called a third fruition who achieves “parinirvana without effort,” which refers to the third fruition of those who are capable of eliminating the five higher

fetters after taking the last rebirth in the five heavens of no-return for sometime and subsequently enter nirvana.

The fourth kind is called a third fruition who achieves “parinirvana with practice,” which refers to the third fruition of those who are capable of eliminating the five higher fetters and subsequently enter nirvana only after making intensive and diligent effort after taking the last rebirth in the five heavens of no-return for sometime.

The fifth kind is called a third fruition who achieves “parinirvana through up-stream heavens,” which refers to the third fruition of those with weaker skill of concentration, lesser wisdom along with lower capacity and disposition, and hence are incapable of taking the last rebirth in the five heavens of no-return but have to take birth in the first, second, third, and fourth dhyana heavens, and finally to the Akaniṣṭha Heaven, or maybe even up through the four formless heavens of the formless realm so as to experience all the heavens and finally enter nirvana after their last lifespan in one of the heavens. Regardless of the kind of third fruition attainment, non-returners will not return to the desire realm, which is why they are called anāgāmins (non-returners).

The primary emphasis and essence of the cultivation of the Sound-hearer Path is the elimination of the manifestation of the attachment to the desire realm but not the elimination of the hidden habitual seeds (tendency). Therefore, it is not surprising that individuals with the first or the second fruition will still have behaviors associated with craving for sensuality, aversion, and ignorance while individuals with the third fruition might still exhibit the manifestation of the habitual seeds. However, those habits are merely manifestations of the habitual seeds and will not continue to be fully developed into craving for sensuality, aversion, and ignorance because the attachments to the desire realm have already been completely eliminated among individuals with third fruition attainment.

Whoever pays careful and subtle attention to the Agama Sutra will notice that every arhat has his own personality and character, which is the manifestation of the habitual seeds unique to the individual. Only the Buddha is impeccable because He has eliminated all habitual seeds of ignorance. Therefore, in Buddha’s era, none of arhats dares to claim themselves as Buddhas, or to announce themselves as being close to become a Buddha. When the Buddha declared that the succeeding Buddha is the coming Venerable Maitreya Buddha, none of arhats voiced any different opinion. No arhat dared to succeed

the status of Buddha after the Buddha entered parinirvana. All these indicate that arhats and Buddha are different, and arhats are still way behind the Buddha in every aspect.

Whether it is the first, second, third, or fourth fruition, the prerequisite of the Sound-hearer cultivation is the elimination of self-view. One is able to eliminate self-view because one has profound faith and confidence in the existence of the true essence that is affliction-free, inextinguishable, and the ultimate origin as taught by the Buddha. With such faith and determination, one will be able to gradually eliminate the four kinds of entrenched afflictions and attain the fourth fruition and have no fear either internally or externally. This is the theory that the Buddha had admonished in the Miscellaneous Agama Sutra: "Knowing the dwelling of the dharma first, one is then be able to know nirvana." As such, one can attain the state in which self-view has been eliminated, which is also called the inextinguishable origin or the unmoving suchness.

In the Agama Sutra, the World Honored One admonishes repeatedly that only the disciples who have both entered the path of and have abided in the first to the fourth fruitions (the four kinds of fruitions of recluseship) as well as the disciples who have only entered the path of but have not yet abided in the first to the fourth fruitions are all true saints and sages among the Buddha's disciples. They have achieved liberation as well as the liberation insight, and, therefore, are the ones worthy of offering as well as the fields of merits in the mundane world. In the Ten Wheels of Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha's sutra, the Buddha admonishes that regardless of the appearance of being a lay or a monastic practitioner, whoever has attained the four fruition of recluseship is called the sangha of definitive meaning. Otherwise, one is only an ordinary monk even if one assumes the appearance of a monastic who has received the complete precepts. Some have claimed: "Lay practitioners can only attain the third fruition at the most." Such individuals have misapprehended what has been inferred in the Agama Sutra that the lay practitioners can attain the third fruition. What it means by lay practitioners can attain the third fruition is that as bodhisattvas, they purposely retain the last bit of afflictive hindrances to nourish future rebirths so that they will attain only the third but not the fourth fruition so as to not enter nirvana and be able to abide permanently in the mundane world.

This is the Dharma-ending Age; it is, therefore, very difficult to come across a person who has truly eliminated the fetters and attained any fruitions of recluseship. It is also very difficult to be able to hear the correct cultivation sequence and stages of liberation. As a result, many people take the achievement of samadhi or dhyanas as attainment of fruitions, or take the practice of asceticism or subduing the attachment to the desire

realm as attainment of fruitions. As long as self-view has not yet been eliminated as a prerequisite, any practice can only be classified as meaningless exercise and conceptual elaboration of ordinary people.

