Practicing Freedom

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 58:04

There is a story about a Zen teacher who was giving a dharma talk in English, though English was not the teacher's first language. In the spaces between the words, while searching for the right English expressions, the teacher fell asleep while giving their own dharma talk. The colleague who told me this story, Gil Fronsdal, said, "I aspire to be so relaxed that I could fall asleep while giving a dharma talk." I have that same aspiration, and today my colleagues actually reminded me of this as we walked in here, because I have very low energy today. I even commented that I can't muster the energy to have any adrenaline before the talk, which is really unusual. So we'll see how this goes. The laughter helps to brighten my energy, which is partly why I told the story—to help lift the energy for myself.

Tonight I wanted to share some poems, in particular one text composed of sixteen poems. The text is called the Aṭṭhakavagga, found in the Sutta Nipāta. It's a favorite text of mine. I was asked at one point when I was in teacher training to teach a daylong retreat on this text. Gil asked me to do this, and I said I didn't know anything about it. He said, "Well, study it." So I spent six months studying this text, and it has become one of my favorites. I won't be able to go over the entire thing tonight—I'm not even going to try—but I'd like to offer some of the flavor of the teaching.

The title itself: Aṭṭhaka basically means "eight" and vagga means "chapter" or "book," so the English title would be "The Book of the Eights." There's some question about why it would be called that, because there are sixteen poems and none of them are limited to anything like eight verses. They're not about sets of eight or anything, so there's no particularly clear reason for the name. And yet that is what they're called.

There's general agreement among scholars who study the Pali texts that these suttas are fairly old within the strata of the Pali canon. They have a different flavor to them. Many of the teachings in the canon are very codified, with a lot of repetition and lists. In this teaching, it's much more organic. You get a picture of the Buddha as somebody wandering around India, meeting up with people who ask him questions, and he responds. You get a different picture of the Buddha in this teaching.

Another reason scholars think this is an older text is that the Pali used is more archaic. Some scholars say the fact that they're poems might account for that. But the real indication that they're an older stratum of the teaching is that this is one of the few teachings referred to elsewhere in the texts as a text. There are places where monastics are asked, "Have you memorized the Aṭṭhakavagga?" So it's referred to as teaching poems—poems to memorize and allow to infuse and inform your practice.

The main theme repeated throughout virtually all the poems is a reflection on clinging and its drawbacks. Clinging to sense pleasure and clinging to views are both highlighted. The teaching covers these from

different perspectives. Some poems come from the perspective of an ordinary person who's clinging, someone not exposed to the teachings—the perspective of someone who hasn't particularly practiced. Then there's a set of poems relating to how somebody on the path works with these teachings. And finally, there's a set describing someone who's free from clinging.

When I started studying this, the comments by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu were particularly helpful. He said it's really useful to recognize which of these three flavors is present as you read a particular poem: Is it about the ordinary person? Is it about the person in training? Or is it about the liberated person? You get slightly different teachings from each angle. Then there are verses that describe the training itself—how to move from being an ordinary person to being a liberated person.

Let me share some of these with you. For an ordinary person and their relationship to clinging—clinging to sense pleasure—here is one verse. All of these poems have been translated differently by various scholars; some I've taken from Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, some from Bhikkhu Varado, others from Sadātissa and other translators. But in all cases, I have altered the translation slightly to be gender neutral:

If one, longing for sensual pleasure, achieves it, yes, they're enraptured at heart. The mortal gets what they want. But if for that person, longing, desiring, the pleasures diminish, they're shattered as if shot with an arrow. One who is greedy is overpowered with weakness and trampled by trouble, for pain invades them as water a cracked boat.

Longing for what's over or for what's to come, yearning for pleasures in the present and pleasures of the past—those who are greedy for pleasure, hunting for it, deranged, selfish, have entered the wrong road. Look at them floundering amidst their cherished possessions like fish in a dwindling stream.

Some of these images have actually come to me directly. At one point, this image of fish in a dwindling stream—my mind actually felt like that. In one retreat I was sitting there watching my mind flopping around, looking for something, looking for something that would satisfy it. And the image of the fish flopping arose in my mind, and it actually brought some humor into the experience. Look at this mind flopping around looking for pleasure. I think this may be some of the reason why we're encouraged to memorize these verses.

And then there's something about clinging to views—some of the drawbacks of clinging to views and how an ordinary person relates to them:

Abiding by fixed opinions and pleased with themselves, they say, "My opponent's a fool, they're no expert." Upon whatever basis they regard their opponent a fool is the same upon which they regard themselves as an expert. To the extent that they rate themselves expert, they despise anyone else who makes the same claim. Those attached to perception and views roam the world offending people.

And then a questioner asks the Buddha: "Those who maintain a view and dispute, saying 'this alone is true'—is criticism all they experience? Do they not indeed also receive praise?"

And the Buddha responds: *What they receive is trifling, not enough to bring them any peace of mind. I say there are only two consequences of dispute: praise and criticism. Seeing this, you should not dispute, regarding instead non-dispute as the grounds for peace.*

So this points to several things about views. One of the key pieces is attachment to views, which is highlighted in several places. "Those attached to perception and views roam the world offending people"—attached and regarding oneself an expert. It's not necessarily saying, at least here, that views are bad, but that attachment to views is something to be on the lookout for.

One of the ways to be on the lookout for this attachment is by noticing whether there's dispute, whether there's quarreling. The ground for conflict, the Buddha points to here and in some other places in the texts in general, but also elsewhere in the Aṭṭhakavagga—the Buddha points to this attachment to views as being the root source of conflict. Any conflict in the world comes back to attachment to views. "This is what's true. Anything else is wrong." That framing is often used in the text to describe attachment to views—when somebody says, "This is what's true, everything else is false." It really highlights that distinction of picking something up as truth, as opposed to recognizing, "This is a view."

I hope to have more time to explore some of the ways this teaching talks about views. But I'd like to go back to the overarching direction of this teaching and then explore a little bit: What does this teaching have to say about, or how does it describe, someone who's free? How does it describe a liberated person?

What I found in exploring this and in reflecting on the descriptions here—the poems about liberated people—is that liberation is described in terms of the person who is free, the qualities of that person, and descriptions of how they are in the world. It's not described as something separate from the one who is free.

Here are some verses describing someone who's free. A questioner said to the Buddha: "I want to ask you about the perfect person. There are these people, those people we call one who is calmed. Can you tell me how they see things and how they behave?"

The Buddha responds: *One who is calmed, who has extinguished all cravings before the time the body disintegrates into nothing, who has no concern with how things began or how they will end, and no fixation with what happens in between—such a one has no preferences. They have no anger, no fear, and no pride. Nothing disturbs their composure and nothing gives them cause for regret. They are wise who are restrained in speech. They have no longing for the future and no grief for the past. There are no views or opinions that lead them. They can see detachment from the entangled world of sense impressions. They do not conceal anything and there is nothing they hold onto. Without acquisitiveness or envy, they remain unobtrusive. They have no disdain or insult for anyone. They are not full of themselves or addicted to pleasure. They are gentle and alert, with no blind faith, and show no aversion to anything. The sage, free from greed and selfishness, does not speak of oneself as among those who are superior, equal, or inferior.*

The sage regards nothing in the world as one's own and does not grieve because of what does not exist. Not blindly following religious teachings, such a one is called peaceful.

To me this is a description that's very recognizable. We can imagine someone being calm and peaceful and wise. The descriptions are largely about what they are not, how they do not behave. They are not angry, not fearful, they don't have pride, they're not fixated, they have no preferences, they don't have blind faith, they have no aversion, no comparisons, nothing relied on. It's what they're free of that comprises much of the description, and we've been exploring this understanding that freedom is not about acquiring—it's release. Freedom is release.

There are a few positive descriptions here of how the mind might be experienced, the qualities of the mind: calm, wise, gentle, alert, composed, peaceful. And elsewhere in other parts of the teaching there are additional descriptions. They're mindful. They see and know. They understand. They are equanimous.

This is actually quite inspiring to me—that the description of liberation in this teaching portrays the liberated state not in terms of some abstract idea, but in terms of the qualities and actions of people who are free. One of the things I also find inspiring about this teaching is that the whole flavor is very much what I would call a this-worldly teaching. The descriptions of freedom, the descriptions of the practice are very grounded in what seems recognizable. It's not a metaphysical teaching of some kind of freedom from rebirth.

There are a couple of places in this text where it could potentially refer to freedom from rebirth, but it could also just refer to letting go of clinging to the future. The flavor of this teaching actually contrasts quite strongly with the standard Theravada perspective of liberation, where there is this metaphysical alteration of being that means one is no longer subject to taking birth. In this teaching, that's not what is of interest. It is a teaching interested in looking at what freedom means here and now. What does it mean in this very life? And how can this happen in this very life?

One scholar, Grace Burford, reflecting on this particular aspect of this text, wrote her graduate thesis on it. Her thesis was published as a book, and that was one of my main resources during my six months of study. She wrote: "The Aṭṭhakavagga is exceptional even within the early Buddhist literature in its non-metaphysical presentation of the highest good achievable by humans. It is significant as an example of how the Buddhist ideal goal can be presented without all the usual problematic cosmological and metaphysical accessories that accompany it in its traditional Theravada doctrine."

Another scholar, Luis Gomez, says: "The Aṭṭhakavagga sets out to find or describe a practical solution to human sorrow—not merely the abstract sorrow of rebirth, but the everyday sorrow of strife and aggression."

This is one of the flavors of what I really love about this text. It points to freedom in this life, this possibility. What does it look like?

And then there are the poems that describe the path to liberation. These include poems about how someone in training should be. The path to liberation is basically describing how one should engage while being on the path. I'll read some of one text—there are several that do this kind of exploration. As I read this, listen to see if it sounds familiar.

The questioner asks the Buddha: "Now venerable sir, speak about the path of practice."

And the Buddha responds: "A person should not have covetous eyes, should close one's ears to ordinary chatter, should not be greedy for flavors, one should not cherish anything in the world. One should be meditative, not footloose. One should desist from worry. One should not be indolent. One should live in lodgings where there is little noise. One should not sleep too much. One should be devoted to wakefulness and keen endeavor. One should abandon laziness, deception. One should not fear blame, nor be conceited when praised. One should drive out greed, selfishness, anger, and malicious speech. One should not be a boaster, nor speak scheming words."

One should not cultivate impudence, nor utter quarrelsome speech. One should not be drawn into telling a lie, nor deliberately be treacherous. One should not despise others for their lowly way of life or wisdom or precepts and practices. If ascetics or ordinary people irritate one with their talkativeness, one should not respond harshly, for the peaceful do not retaliate. Knowing the Buddhist teaching, an ever attentive person who investigates it should train in it. Knowing the cooling of desire as peace, one should not be negligent in applying the teachings. With regard to the Blessed One's teaching, one who is diligent should constantly venerate it by following his example.

A couple of pieces stand out here in this description of one who is in training. It sounds a lot like the same kind of language we saw in the previous sutta describing somebody who is free—only here it is "should be" as opposed to "is."

And then these last two verses are particularly striking: "If ascetics or ordinary people irritate one with their talkativeness, one should not respond harshly, for the peaceful do not retaliate." And: "With regards to the Blessed One's teaching, one who is diligent should constantly venerate it by following his example."

To me this points to a teaching that is encouraging us to model freedom. In the process of training, when we see that there is irritation, we don't respond with irritation but instead model peacefulness.

I want to talk about this for a little bit because for me this has been such an amazing teaching, especially in daily life. It points essentially to the notion that the path and the goal are not so different. If you want to be peaceful, act peacefully. If you want to have love, act lovingly. If you want to be loving, act lovingly. It's pointing to this modeling—and all of these "shoulds." As I said, it's almost like this sutta could have been taking the previous one and changing "is" to "should be."

I've explored this in my own practice and found that there's a very powerful edge of practice around this kind of teaching. It takes a lot of honesty and a lot of integrity to explore, because it could sound like: if

people irritate one with their talkativeness, repress the irritation and pretend you're peaceful. That's not what works.

What does seem to have some power is to acknowledge and recognize, "Oh, there's irritation." Really fully knowing there's irritation, and yet exploring the possibility—I sometimes use the language of seeing if you cannot let the irritation leak out of any pore. Completely, fully knowing in the mind, in the heart-mind, that this irritation is happening, and yet exploring the possibility of behaving in a way that is peaceful.

This calls on intention. It calls on the intention to cultivate peace even as we are feeling irritation. We're drawing on that wisdom, that wish, that aspiration: may there be peace. Not through repressing the irritation, but also exploring—how might this irritation be leaking out of my system? It can be in very subtle ways: just a gesture, or an expression on the face, or a quickness of movement. Exploring what it might be. Modeling.

This is where there was great fortune for those who lived at the time of the Buddha, when there were many enlightened monks walking around. You could see how they were. You could explore modeling their behavior. We might have to conjure it up in our minds a bit, or model it after people we do admire—such as the Dalai Lama, or others. Greg mentioned the monks in Burma that we met: the deep peace of one Sayadaw that our colleagues named "the Angel Sayadaw," or the happiness and delight of the other monk we sometimes called "the Happy Sayadaw."

One practical example from my own practice: I was practicing this kind of thing around impatience. I had taken on a study of impatience because I noticed it was a major force in my life. So I began to get curious about it—looking at it, seeing it whenever it arose, noticing it with curiosity.

At one point I was wandering around a drugstore, shopping, and I noticed that I was moving quickly, picking up things and throwing them in my basket. That gave me a little bit of an "Oh, what's happening here?" I noticed that I was impatient. It was a kind of wake-up—the way my body was acting.

My body was acting impatient.

And so I picked up this exploration around modeling patience while fully recognizing, yes, there is impatience—but what might it mean to act as though I were really patient? And so I slowed down. I reached slowly out to the shelf, picked up the bottle of shampoo, and placed it very carefully in my basket. I did this with several things, really resting at this edge of knowing the feeling of impatience while holding the intention to see what it might mean to know that and to behave as if I were patient.

What surprised me—and this was one of the first times it really dawned on me how this works and how powerful it can be—within about thirty or forty seconds the impatience had vanished and the mind was patient. The impatience had gone away. And I understood that it wasn't repression of the impatience, but rather that in very subtle ways the impatience had been reinforcing itself through the action. That was how it was feeding itself. When I recognized the impatient quality in the mind and created the conditions

for not letting it leak out into my behavior, it was like the foot came off the gas pedal and that state of mind could simply release.

This is a practice we can do when we're in the grocery store, when we're walking down the street, when we're driving. What mind states are arising? And how is that leaking out in how you are engaging? It's really important—I can't emphasize this enough—not to repress the inner state in doing this. It's not about repression. It's about connecting to that intention. The intention has a rebound effect on our minds when we engage in a way that follows it.

Now, a little more dive into what this text has to say about views and clinging to views. There are different kinds of views. The deepest level is the view "I am"—that's a form of view. Then there are views about what we take to be metaphysical reality. This was a major category at the time of the Buddha. People explored and thought that wisdom and understanding would come by knowing the nature of the cosmos. There were views about the cosmos being infinite or finite, stretched in one direction or another. And we may have views like this too. They may not be so common in our culture, but even something like your views about rebirth are in the realm of metaphysical views—something beyond what we can actually directly know in this experience.

Then there's a whole other terrain of views: our ordinary views in daily life, the views connected with greed, aversion, and delusion that keep us engaged in those patterns. Clinging to views is understood to be one of the key ways we suffer. They're almost at the root of how we suffer, because even sense desire—clinging to sense desire—is based in a view that having that pleasure or getting rid of that unpleasantness is what's going to make me happy. It's based in that delusion.

As I mentioned earlier, clinging to views is also recognized as one of the main reasons we live in conflict, why we have wars. It's rooted in the human mind. Seeing this was actually a very powerful moment in my practice. At one point, watching my mind around anger and noticing what it did with that anger, particularly when there was anger at a specific person, I noticed this arising of a wish that the other person suffer.

That was a painful recognition. And yet it also opened my heart to compassion, because there was the recognition that the seeds of war are right here. An arising of anger connected to that wish that the other person suffer—that's where war begins. This understanding isn't just personal; it reveals how these states condition dispute, quarrels, anger, the picking up of weapons, and harming each other. The Buddha points to views as being the source of this conflict. So views are really worth examining.

One thing that's interesting in this teaching is that a liberated person is described as someone who does not cling to any views at all—maybe even something deeper than that. One description in the translation suggests something profound, though it's hard to know exactly what the original conveys. I don't read Pali, so I don't know the exact words. When I study a text, I read multiple translations to try to get a sense of what's being said.

But there's one place in describing a liberated person where it says there are no views or opinions that lead them. That's a pretty strong statement. "One who is pure has no preconceived view about anything in the world. Having abandoned delusion and pride, they remain without attachment. Therefore, by what view would they go? One who is attached argues over religious teaching. But how and about what can you argue with one who is without attachment? There is nothing they either take up or throw off. They are indeed free of every view in the world. Abandoning what has been taken up, free from any basis of attachment, they do not rely even upon knowledge. Amongst those in dispute, they do not take sides. They do not revert to any grasping of opinions whatsoever."

One of the teachings in the Aṭṭhakavagga around this non-attachment to views—one of the keys in terms of the training—interestingly, I did not see anywhere in there where it said one who is in training should not hold the view of the teaching, or that one who's in training should not hold any view whatsoever. It does not say that. There's some debate about this particular aspect of the teaching, whether the teaching around freedom from views is something that should be modeled on the path.

But in my read of this text—this is my own looking at it—when I read through it from this view that Thanissaro Bhikkhu suggested, distinguishing when it's describing someone who's attached or an ordinary person versus when it's describing someone who's liberated, the places where it talks about freedom from views, freedom from all views, that's when they are liberated. The training around freedom from views looks more like: one should refrain from quarrels, one should refrain from retaliation.

What's interesting too, however—and I think this is an important piece—is that elsewhere in this text the Buddha acknowledges yes, there is truth. But the instruction around not clinging to views points to basically this: whether or not a view is related to truth is irrelevant. It still should not be clung to.

Here's what it says: "A person who associates themselves with certain views, considering them as best and making them supreme in the world, they say because of that that all other views are inferior. Therefore they are not free from contention with others." So regardless of whether it's true or not, the Buddha encourages us not to cling to it.

To me this points to something very profound about wisdom and what wisdom is interested in. Our culture—and not just our culture, I think human culture broadly—is often interested in propositions and whether propositions are true or not. Interested in statements. Is this statement true or false? We feel like it's important to know whether it's true or false, that that's where wisdom will lie.

And yet the wisdom that we are cultivating here, the wisdom that frees us from greed, aversion, and delusion, that moves in the direction of liberation—that wisdom is not interested in the objective truth or falseness of a proposition. It's interested in the fact that a thought is arising in the mind, and it's a thought. And a thought is ceasing in the mind. This wisdom is interested not in the objective truth of our thoughts or our beliefs, but in the fact that they arise and cease.

This is a different kind of approach to truth. What is true about any experience is that it is arising and ceasing.

There's another text, another one of my favorites—I've got a lot of them, a lot of favorite texts—that points to the kind of view that might be useful to hold while one is in training. It's a text called Views, the Diṭṭhisutta, in the Aṅguttara Nikāya 10.93, for those of you who are interested in these things.

One of the other things I love about this sutta is that it's a layperson having a conversation with ascetics from other traditions. This is Anāthapiṇḍika, the Buddha's patron, who is a householder, not a monastic. Anāthapiṇḍika was wandering one day and came upon these ascetics from other traditions. They had been talking and chatting with each other, and when they saw Anāthapiṇḍika coming, they hushed each other, saying, "Be quiet, don't make any noise. Here comes Anāthapiṇḍika the householder, a disciple of the contemplative Gotama. He's one of those disciples clad in white who lives in Sāvatthī. These people are fond of quietude and speak in praise of quietude. Maybe if he perceives our group as quiet, he will consider it worth his while to come our way." So the wanderers fell silent.

When he approached them, they said, "Tell us, Anāthapiṇḍika, what views does the contemplative Gotama have?"

And Anāthapiṇḍika, holding to sīla, says, "Venerable sirs, I don't entirely know what views the Blessed One has."

And they seem to think this was rather telling, saying, "Well, so you don't know what views the contemplative Gautama has. Perhaps you can tell us what views the monastics have then."

"I don't even know entirely what views the monks have."

"So you don't know what views Gautama has, and you don't know what views the monks have. Well, maybe you can tell us what views you have."

And he says, "It won't be difficult for me to tell you the views I have, but please let the venerable ones first expound your positions. Then it won't be difficult for me to expound to you what views I have."

When this was said, each of them—there were about ten—said something different. One said, "The cosmos is eternal. Only this is true; anything else is worthless. This is the sort of view I have." Another: "The cosmos is not eternal. This is the only true view. Everything else is worthless." Others proclaimed: "The cosmos is finite." "The cosmos is infinite." "The soul and body are the same." "The soul is one thing, the body is another." These metaphysical views were what they were debating, each one insisting this is what's true. And clearly they can't all be true because they directly contradict each other.

After they had all expounded their views, Anandapindika gave the householder's little teaching. He said, "As for the venerable one who says, 'The cosmos is eternal, only this is true, anything else is worthless—this is the sort of view I have'—that view arises from one's own inappropriate attention or in

dependence on the words of another. Now this view has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently originated. Whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently originated—that is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress, suffering. This venerable one adheres to that very stress, submits himself to that very stress."

He was pointing out how holding to views—holding to something that is simply a construction of mind, that has the nature to arise and pass, holding to something that is inconstant—is suffering.

Then they said, "Well, we've told you our views. You tell us yours now."

And this is what Anandapindika says: "Whatever has been brought into being is fabricated, willed, dependently originated—that is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. Whatever is stress or suffering is not me, is not what I am, is not myself. This is the sort of view I have."

They tried his same argument on him, saying, "So that view has been brought into being and fabricated, so you're adhering to that stress."

And Anandapindika replied, "Venerable sirs, whatever has been brought into being is fabricated, willed, dependently originated—that is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is suffering. Whatever is suffering is not me, is not what I am, is not myself. Having seen this well with right discernment as it is actually present, I also discern the higher escape from it as it is actually present."

He was basically recognizing that clinging to view also needs to be released. This view holds in itself the possibility for transcending views—that possibility of recognizing, "Oh, a view is arising again." In some ways we would say this view is pointing to truth. And yet, even holding to that would be stressful, would be suffering. And so seeing, "Oh, this is a view that's arising, this is a view that's ceasing"—understanding it as a view, as an impermanent, inconstant phenomenon.

I offer this reflection this evening. For me this is inspirational, this teaching, this text around the freedom possible in this life. Teachings given by householders that contain deep wisdom pointing to freedom in this very life. Not sometime in the future. That possibility—the poems that Greg mentioned, the enlightenment poems of the nuns. In any moment, putting out a candle, the mind can be free. Right now, in this life.

Let's sit for just a moment.

Thank you for listening to the Dharma.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.