The Simile of the Cloth

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:01:02

We're at a very interesting point in the retreat in that for about half of you, the retreat is coming to an end, and for the other half of you, you're right in the middle of it. So reflecting on what to share this evening, I thought of exploring a teaching about one way the arc of practice unfolds from one of the Buddha's discourses.

The discourse I'd like to explore this evening is called The Simile of the Cloth. It offers a description of how the path of practice can unfold. What I find inspiring about this teaching is that it points, at the beginning, to what we have to do to really get on the path of practice—how we engage—and then once we're there, it points to a very natural unfolding, a process that sounds almost more like you're on a slide heading towards release rather than having to climb up a hill.

This teaching on the simile of the cloth begins with the simile itself. The Buddha is talking with some of his followers about a cloth that has a lot of stains on it. He asks if that stained cloth—even if it's a white cloth—if it's been ground in the mud or has various kinds of stains on it, and you dip that cloth in dye, what happens when you take it out? The cloth takes up the dye, but in the areas where it's stained, the dye looks different colors. So the cloth does not look very purely dyed if it has stains on it.

Now the word used for stain, the Pali word, is *kilesa*. That word is often translated as "defilement," but it literally means stain. This is one of the main places where it's used—in this discourse where it's talking about this stained cloth. We can consider this word *kilesa* to be a simile for the mind having stains, which are not inherent in the mind, just as the stains are not inherent to the cloth but can be removed.

The simile goes on. The Buddha says, suppose a cloth is pure and bright, and a dyer dips it into some dye or other—it would look well dyed and pure in color because of the purity of the cloth. Later in the sutta, there's a reference to inner bathing, the kind of inner washing of the mind, which helps to release these stains.

One thing I want to point out about this simile is that there's some work that has to go into removing the stains from the cloth. You can't just put it in the vat of dye and wish that it would dye beautifully. You have to do the work of scrubbing, rinsing it with water, scrubbing again, rinsing it with clear water, and checking to see: is the cloth more pure in color? There's some work that goes into removing the stains.

But then, when you put the cloth into the vat—and you do have to put the cloth into the vat—once you put it in, the cloth absorbs the dye. Very little work is involved. You don't have to push the dye into the cloth. You put the cloth into the vat and it takes up the dye.

The Buddha points to wholesome qualities of mind, saying that when the mind is not stained, a happy destination may be expected. The analogy of the dye, in a way, represents wholesome qualities of mind. As the mind, through the work of the practice we've been doing, begins to release the hindrances, begins to release these reactive emotions and patterns and habits, very naturally it begins to take up the wholesome qualities of mind—especially when we incline our mind in that direction.

This sutta describes the progress of what happens over the course of a lifetime of practice, or lifetimes of practice. The Buddha starts by describing a whole list of different defilements. I'll read them out in a moment—it's a great list if you're looking for what might be going on in this mind. He says that once we know these are defilements—I'll give you a few of them: ill will, anger, resentment, contempt—once we know, recognizing that they're defilements of mind, one abandons them. We'll go into what these words mean and how this process unfolds. Knowing that they're defilements, one abandons them. Having known and having abandoned them, confidence in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha arises.

This points to part of how the practice works: once we see these reactive emotions and have experienced some of their letting go, we know this works. That's confidence. Confidence grows as we see this process of abandoning at work.

With confidence, the description begins to sound like a natural unfolding. With confidence in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, it is said that inspiration and gladness in the Dharma arises. From that inspiration and gladness, rapture, tranquility, and concentration arise. Again, this is described as a very natural process.

From there, it describes one abiding in the mind of *mettā*. With that mind of *mettā* and awareness, there's an inclination or pointing towards understanding the nature of all experience as impermanent, unreliable, not self. Because the mind is so stable, abiding in *mettā* with concentration, gladness, joy, and delight, the mind releases. Essentially, one turns the mind towards insight, towards understanding.

the mind will let go.

For me, this overall teaching about the direction of the path is inspiring because it means the path opens to us and invites us. It almost pulls us along. Wisdom pulls us along. We don't have to figure out the wisdom.

The other piece of this that I think is useful to remember: this is described as an arc of practice. It sounds like it happens with one stage simply following another. And in a way it does, but my experience of it is more of a spiral. There's some experience of letting go of the defilements, of the reactive patterns and habits of mind, an experience of freedom in that moment that brings in a lot of confidence, delight, joy, happiness resulting from that experience. So right there, there's this almost immediate tumbling forward in the process that's described. Sometimes the heart opens to metta in that space. And then something happens, another level or another layer appears. To me, it feels like this work of cleaning the cloth. We

clean the cloth and it's as clean as we can see, but then as we go further, we notice, oh, there's actually a little more there. So there's more seeing, knowing, abandoning of the staining that can happen. It really is a spiral kind of process.

So this first part—what are the defilements or imperfections, the stains of the mind? Covetousness and unrighteous greed is a stain of the mind. Ill will, anger, resentment, contempt, insolence, envy, avarice, deceit, fraud, obstinacy, rivalry, conceit, arrogance, vanity, negligence—all imperfections that stain the mind. And then for each one of these, he says, "Knowing that ill will is a stain of the mind, one abandons it."

This is what we've been doing: looking at what arises in our hearts and minds, sometimes the reactive habits and patterns. When those arise, we observe them. Now this word *abandon*—often it sounds like an active kind of process. We may even have some relationship with this word based on our history with it. I think often the word abandon is used in a way that is not such a positive thing. We talk about children who have been abandoned. But the word also, in its definition—I looked up the definition and there are some definitions that really resonate for this teaching about what it means to abandon these stains.

One definition of abandoning is to leave a place because of understanding its danger. That would be like "abandon ship." When the boat is going down, you don't stay on the ship. You understand the danger. This is a natural movement of the heart, to remove oneself from a place of danger. And so we can sometimes see, with observing anger, ill will, contempt, greed, we can sometimes feel the danger of those in the way they produce suffering in our hearts and minds, and in the way they incline us to engage unskillfully in the world and potentially harm others. We can see the danger. And when we see it, when we feel into that danger, sometimes there's a very natural withdrawing from that. Not something we have to push away, but it feels more like the heart just says, "No, not going there."

Another definition for abandoning is to let go of something we understand is not valuable for us. And again, this is what we begin to recognize so clearly about these reactive states of mind. We feel, "This is not helpful, this is not valuable," given our history with these difficult states of mind. I certainly have seen in my own practice, especially in the first few months, really looking at anger—at some point I truly saw that my mind believed I was getting something out of it. It could believe that partly because it wasn't actually acknowledging the impact of it personally, here and now, on the body and mind, and also on how I engaged in the world and impacted others. It believed I was making myself happier by having that anger, and it was exposed as being a lie. The mind directly seeing: this is not valuable. Again, with that seeing, the mind begins to let it go.

It doesn't let it go once and for all upon seeing that once, unfortunately. It seems like the habits and patterns are so deep that the letting go, the seeing, needs to happen many times, because some part of our system says, "Yeah, but I know it really has to help"—that deluded part of our mind believing that anger helps us, that greed helps us.

So in our practice, this abandoning, this releasing, this letting go, can have a more organic feeling to it that comes just through understanding. If we look at this understanding—knowing that anger is a defilement of the mind, knowing that anger stains the mind—when we see that, when we understand that, there can be a natural abandoning. One abandons it.

And there's a big place right in the middle of practice where sometimes the mindfulness is not quite strong enough to see the danger or the lack of value directly in the moment, but our minds know this is not helpful. We may see ourselves getting pulled in, we may see the reactivity getting stronger, and in those cases we take some action to turn our attention to something else, to settle our attention, ground in the body again. So there can be the active form of abandoning here in the practice—and we've been doing this for five and a half weeks. This is a big place of what our practice is about, this understanding.

And really, in some ways, as the understanding gets strong, it's like that's the work of the practice: to understand the suffering. That's the enjoinder the Buddha gave us about the first noble truth. There is suffering. Suffering should be understood. And if we make that movement to understand suffering, the rest of the path just begins to unfold and the reactive habits and patterns begin to unravel.

The next piece of the text addresses what happens having known. "When one has known that negligence"—I'll pick one at random here—"when one has known that negligence is a stain of the mind and has abandoned it, one acquires unwavering confidence in the Buddha. One acquires unwavering confidence in the Dharma. One acquires unwavering confidence in the Sangha."

Now, this unwavering confidence that's described here is, I think, part of where the practice becomes more of a spiral. There is often, in the moment of seeing how reactivity can be released, a sense of, "Wow, there's a possibility here." There's a direct understanding of the direction of the practice, of the possibility. For myself, the first time I really saw and understood that the mind did not have to follow that intention towards anger, so much gratitude just coursed through me. My sense was, "Wow, this practice works. This is possible." There was a surge of confidence in the practice, and at that moment I think I knew I was going to be doing this for the rest of my life.

And yet, I would not say it was unwavering confidence. It might have been unwavering in that moment. But confidence has definitely wavered over the past twenty-five years of practice. It's definitely been a spiral—confidence growing and then wavering, confidence growing and wavering.

The unwavering confidence described here is a description of someone who has entered the stream, their first taste of awakening. There's a deep understanding and no longer any doubt in the possibility of freedom. With stream entry, freedom is not continually present, but there's been this taste of that possibility. And so this deep understanding of these reactive habits and patterns can give us this taste of freedom.

This confidence that arises—confidence in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha—gives us inspiration

to continue because we see in those moments that it's possible. We understand it's possible, and we also understand we're not there yet. So there's a strong sense of spiritual urgency, and the arising of inspiration and gladness in the Dharma, that sense of gratitude. The Dharma—it's possible. This teaching is helpful. There's this inspiration.

The text says, "When one has given up, abandoned, and relinquished the imperfections of mind *in part*, one considers thus: 'I'm possessed of unwavering confidence in the Buddha,' and gains inspiration in the meaning, gains inspiration in the Dhamma, gains gladness connected with the Dhamma."

So the imperfections of the mind are abandoned *in part*. More work to do. But the gladness, the confidence, the inspiration propels us onward.

And the next part just lists this tumbling forward: "When one is glad, rapture arises. In one who is rapturous, the body becomes tranquil. In one whose body is tranquil, one feels pleasure. In one who feels pleasure, the mind becomes concentrated." Again, it just describes this as a natural unfolding.

This set of qualities—gladness, joy, tranquility, happiness, and concentration—appears in several places in the suttas, where these five qualities are linked and pointed to as arising naturally one from the other. My colleague Gil Fronsdal calls these "the gladness pentad." Five qualities related to and arising out of gladness. The gladness pentad—it's a lovely phrase. I don't know if he made it up. When I googled "the gladness pentad," the only places it came up were in connection with Gil and with his students who teach. Perhaps it appears in scholarly works, but I'm not certain about this term. In any case, it occurs multiple times in different contexts in the teachings.

I think it's worth taking a little time to linger here and reflect that based on the understanding, the abandoning of the defilements of mind, this process unfolds where these beautiful qualities of mind and heart—joy, delight, tranquility, happiness—are present. This path has a lot of joy in it.

The other day in one of my meetings, someone was asking about joy in the practice, and why isn't it more highlighted? In the wisdom teachings of the Buddha, he's talking about how to do the abandoning, how the defilements come to be, how the abandoning happens. But the process, when we engage in it, is very happiness-making, very joyful. Here in this teaching, and in a couple of others I'll point to, it describes joy as being a very natural result of doing this work of understanding.

I'm going to read a sutta that Tara read very early on, perhaps even in the first couple of nights of the retreat, called "The Lawfulness of Progress." In this you'll see these five qualities appearing. This one starts from virtue:

"For one who is virtuous and endowed with virtue, there is no need for an act of will: 'May non-remorse arise in me.' It is a natural law that non-remorse will arise in one who is virtuous.

For one free of remorse, there is no need for an act of will: 'May gladness arise in me.' It is a natural law

that gladness will arise in one who is free from remorse.

For one who is glad at heart, there is no need for an act of will: 'May joy arise in me.' It is a natural law that joy will arise in one who is glad at heart.

For one who is joyful, there is no need for an act of will: 'May my body be tranquil.' It is a natural law that the body will be tranquil for one who is joyful.

For one of serene body, there is no need for an act of will: 'May I feel happiness.' It is a natural law that one who is serene will feel happiness.

For one who is happy, there is no need for an act of will: 'May my mind be concentrated.' It is a natural law for one who is happy that the mind will be concentrated."

And it goes on: "No need for an act of will: 'May I know and see things as they really are.' No need for an act of will: 'May I experience disenchantment and dispassion.' No need for an act of will: 'May I experience freedom.' It is a natural law for one who experiences dispassion to experience freedom."

In another place this gladness pentad arises, in a sutta that refers to the teaching of transcendent dependent origination. In that teaching, it gives an analogy for the unfolding of practice. Actually, in this sutta it starts from the very beginning of the chain of dependent origination—that based on ignorance there's volitional formation, and so forth, up through suffering. But then it says that with suffering as a condition, faith can come to be. Faith comes to be, and then rather than moving from virtue to non-remorse to gladness, it moves from faith, from confidence, to gladness. This whole teaching is described as a natural process:

"Just as when rain pours down in thick droplets on a mountain top, the water flows down along the slope and fills up the clefts, gullies, and creeks. These being full fill up the pools. These being full fill up the lakes. These being full fill up the streams. These being full fill up the rivers. These being full fill up the great ocean. So too, with faith as proximate cause, gladness comes to be."

With gladness as approximate cause, joy. With joy as approximate cause, tranquility. Again, this image of natural processes flowing downhill, water flowing downhill.

As I thought about this image, I realized that not all the water gets to the great ocean. Some of it gets absorbed in the ground, comes up in the plants. The plants transpire the water and oxygen into the air, which gets carried back and comes down as rain. Some of it simply evaporates into the air and returns as rain. So again, this kind of cyclic process is part of this natural unfolding. And I feel that the momentum of mindfulness and wisdom carries us in the direction of freedom.

The next piece of this teaching, after pointing to the concentration: one abides pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with loving-kindness. This chant that we've done is found in this sutta. One abides pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with compassion, with a mind imbued with altruistic joy, with

a mind imbued with equanimity. One abides pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with equanimity, likewise the second, likewise the third, likewise the fourth. So above, below, around, and everywhere, and to all as to oneself, one abides pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with equanimity—abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill will.

Reflecting on this point in the sutta, on this image of natural unfolding, the natural causes and conditions that lead us toward freedom, I noted that it says: when one is glad, rapture is born. In one who is rapturous, the body becomes tranquil. In one whose body is tranquil, one feels pleasure. In one who feels pleasure, the mind becomes concentrated. One abides pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with kindness. It doesn't say one has to work really hard to do that. Again, it's simply the sense of abiding—that word we explored at the beginning. Abiding is this natural opening to these qualities.

To me, this speaks to how, as the heart becomes more present, as the defilements have been abandoned, as there are those places and times of purity—the feeling of purity in the heart—mettā, compassion, joy, and equanimity become available.

Now this is the place where perhaps we can think about that image of the cloth in the dye. It may be that for some of us, we need just a little dip into the vat of mettā, the vat of compassion. For myself, I definitely needed a little tip—just a bit of checking in. What's here? How is the heart and mind, given this place of the mind having let go and finding some mettā? It wasn't obvious to me, not until I began to explore: What's here? What's here?

In this image, when the mind is pure, when the cloth is pure, and it's lowered into that dye, it's going to take up that beautiful color. It will take up the beautiful qualities of mettā, of compassion, of joy, of equanimity. Again, a very natural process. And we may feel this at times—the beauty of that. Let yourself feel it in those moments. Appreciate it in those moments.

I've spent some time reflecting on why these qualities of love, compassion, joy, and equanimity might follow from understanding reactive states of mind. Some of it is the intention we bring to that understanding. The intention we bring is one of kindness, of allowing. Early on we talked about allowing. That first talk I gave: relax, receive, allow. And how allowing is a very loving thing to do. It's one of the kindest, most loving things we can do for ourselves—to open to and allow what's here to be here. So that is cultivating the quality of mettā.

Mettā is the base quality for compassion and joy. The open heart, when it meets suffering, responds with compassion. The open heart, when it meets delight and success, responds in kind with happiness and joy. So the open heart, with that quality of kindness, begins to open us to all of these.

And equanimity—the practice of allowing—is also cultivating equanimity by not resisting, by cultivating that non-reactivity, just opening to, being with. So we're cultivating all of these qualities by exploring and understanding these reactive states of mind.

I've also seen in my own practice how it's not just the practice cultivating metta and compassion, equanimity and joy. It's not just the intention that we bring to the mindfulness practice. We can actively cultivate these qualities through formal practice of the Brahma Viharas. But there's also a way in which, as the very reactivity we're looking at starts to be understood, it can feel as though the metta—the wish for our well-being and happiness—is uncovered right within the midst of these reactive patterns and habits.

Metta itself is this wish for well-being: for our own well-being, for the well-being of others, for the well-being of both. And that wish gets distorted out of fear, greed, anger, confusion. I think there's an intimate connection between our suffering and this deep human wish for happiness, safety, well-being. This movement—this almost biological human movement in the direction of happiness—our minds are pretty short-sighted about it. The habits of mind that have been well conditioned, not only in our lifetimes but in our evolutionary experience, are conditioned to take the shortest route to feeling a little bit better.

So there's a deep, fundamental misunderstanding about how to find happiness, safety, well-being. Our minds, through aversion and greed, go for the quickest, most immediate gratification. Get rid of this unpleasant thing right here. Get this pleasant thing and hold on to it. We don't see the greed and aversion in the moment and how they affect us. Our minds and bodies are willing to let go of happiness here and now for the idea of some possibility of happiness in the future.

But these patterns are trying to make us happy. They're trying to create well-being. They just really don't know how to do it. They're so confused—that's the delusion. And I think this is why some of our habits and patterns have such a grip on us: because they are entangled with this very deep wish for well-being. It's just entangled with confusion and ignorance and delusion.

As we start to untangle that tangle, as the delusion begins to fall away, as we see directly in the moment—this is not helpful, this way lies danger, this is not valuable—then the delusion about that falls away and the wish for well-being and happiness can remain.

The fundamental confusion around the direction toward happiness gets tangled up with our relationship to the truths: the truths of impermanence, unreliability, uncontrollability. That's where the mind gets confused. With this sense of wanting to be safe, happy, healthy, and at ease, we are fighting against these truths that things are impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable. And so we want control, we want to hold on, we want to fix, we want to change—or we experience fear.

In the middle of all this dukkha that we experience, we have the threads of truth and the threads of wishing for our well-being. There's a sense of wanting to be safe, but things are unreliable. And there's the tangle.

So what the practice begins to do is untangle the tangle. When I first started looking at some of my deeper habits and patterns of mind—anger, self-hatred—it was such a knot. I believed, I thought, that I needed to get the scalpel out. Cut that tumor out. Wholly bad. Got to get rid of it. But it was not so easy to do that. And

I think part of the reason it's not so easy is that the tangle is the anger. The tangle is the defilement. The tangle is the confusion. But the tangle is a tangle of threads of love and truth. And so if we take the scalpel and cut out the tangle, we get a hole in the cloth. Our hearts and minds won't seem to let us do that.

So the practice of mindfulness is like putting that tangle into a lubricant that slowly allows it to untangle. And then we can see the possibility, we feel into this possibility, that what seems to be a conflict between the wish for well-being and the unreliable, uncontrollable nature of experience is not a problem. It's more like a weave than a tangle—a strong weave of the mind that feels deeply the metta, the love, the compassion, and feels deeply the truths, the equanimity.

In many experiences when I've had this kind of opening around a particular deep habit or pattern of mind, as there's an opening there, there is a touching into those threads: the love, the wish for well-being, the wish for happiness, the wish for safety, right here.

And understanding these truths at the same time. Our practice can reveal that this love is not something to fear, and that the truths are also not something to fear.

The last part of this teaching: "Abiding with loving-kindness, compassion, joy, equanimity, one understands thus." Now this language is a little unusual—I don't know if it's used elsewhere. "One understands thus: there is this"—and by that I take it to mean this experience in this moment—"there is this, there is the inferior, there is the superior, and beyond there is an escape from this whole field of perception."

The commentaries say this means the understanding of the Four Noble Truths in the moment. There are times in the texts where the Buddha points to the Four Noble Truths not as a teaching simply to be understood, but as insights. I talked about that a little when I discussed dependent origination. Any place you are in your experience, there's a teaching that says you can simply see it from the perspective of the Four Noble Truths. You can see: this is craving, this is the arising of craving, this is the ending of craving, and this is the path leading to the ending of craving.

That's my understanding of what this passage is pointing to—that seeing in the moment, these states too, these beautiful qualities of heart and mind all the way up: gladness, joy, tranquility, happiness, concentration, metta, compassion, joy, equanimity—these are unreliable arisings of mind that are not to be held to. There is an escape from the whole idea of clinging to anything, including the wholesome states.

Again, this is described as being just the natural unfolding. But I think there is a possible tendency at times to kind of land in those wholesome states and maybe get stuck there a little bit. And so again, we might need a gentle inclining towards freedom—inclining towards the recognition that this too is just an arising conditioned experience. This too, like the raft, is not to be clung to.

This sutta, to me, speaks of an overarching practice that resonates with practice here on retreat, but also practice in the world. Because it starts in the place of looking at all of those reactive habits and patterns

that are relational—looking at how we are in relationship to our families, our friends, the news, whatever's out there. Angry, contemptuous, envious, deceitful. It's pointing to looking at our relational world, internally and externally.

And then the transformation also speaks to not only the transformation internally, but this connectedness. These qualities of the brahma-viharas are relational. It's not just about what happens here internally. It's not just about what happens here on retreat. This is carried into the world.

Whether you are staying or will be leaving next week, this is an amazing thing that you're doing—offering for yourselves and for the world. We can't really just practice for ourselves. Even if we're trying to do that, it will spill out.

Thank you for your practice.

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