Non-clinging Part 1: Exploring the Aṭṭhakavagga

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:15:13

This morning I wanted to structure the teachings around one particular text. It's a relatively lesser-known text in some ways, found in the Sutta Nipata, which is one of the smaller books in the smaller collections of the suttas. Until recently, there hadn't been very many translations into English. In fact, Bhikkhu Bodhi is coming out with a translation of the Sutta Nipata—I think that will come out next year. So this text hasn't been too accessible in English translation.

I first got interested in it maybe six or seven years ago, when Gil, my colleague at IMC, said, "This is a really important text, and I think we need to give a daylong on it, but I don't have time to do it. Would you do it?" I said, "I don't even know what that text is. I've never even read it. What is it?" He told me a few things about it, and I said, "Well, that sounds interesting, but I'm not ready to give a daylong on something I've not even looked at." He said, "Well, let's put it on the calendar." So I said, "Okay, let's put it on the calendar in six months." I spent those six months studying this text, and it was a really powerful time for me.

I mention this because in talking about orientations to practice, some of you have mentioned wanting to pick up a theme for a while and explore it. Sometimes we can enter into a study and just see where it goes. Don't give yourself a limitation on it. In my case I did have a deadline—I had to have something to say in six months—but really giving yourself time to explore a teaching can be valuable. I found this particular text to be very, very rich.

There are a couple of interesting things about the Aṭṭhakavagga. One is that scholars generally understand this particular text to be an early teaching of the Buddha. A couple of things indicate this. One is that it's one of the few texts referred to in other places in the suttas. There's commentary about it, with people saying, "Have you memorized the Aṭṭhakavagga? Can you repeat that?" So it is mentioned and held up as a revered teaching in the suttas themselves.

Another indication is that the Pali in which this particular text is recorded is a more archaic form of the language. The text is written in poetry, however, and Thanissaro Bhikkhu points out that poetry in the texts—when the Buddha breaks into verse or people use poetry in the suttas—tends to be in this more archaic form of Pali. So he says it's not necessarily a good argument for it being an early text simply because it uses this earlier form of the language.

But there's another quality about this text that strikes me—this is more my sense rather than something

from scholars. The picture it gives of the Buddha is that of a solitary monk. It's the Buddha wandering around without a big retinue of people. He's not sitting there talking to five hundred monks. He's wandering around the countryside, running into people and having conversations with them. That's the flavor of this text. As I read it and let myself settle into it, I got a very visceral sense of what some of the early teaching years of the Buddha might have looked like.

The other thing I find interesting about this text is that it doesn't refer to most of what we think of as the Buddhist teachings. The Four Noble Truths are not mentioned. The Eightfold Path is not mentioned. Transcendent dependent origination is not mentioned, although there is a place where a kind of conditioned chain appears that is very much like transcendent dependent origination.

The theme of this particular teaching is suffering resulting from clinging. How clinging leads to suffering is a key theme. Non-clinging as the path to freedom is a key theme. So really, this text points to perhaps some of the early teachings of the Buddha directly pointing to non-clinging—simply, don't cling.

Temple mentioned Joseph's quote the other day: "Nothing should be clung to as I, me, or mine." That particular quote is not in this text, but the orientation is the same—don't cling. Don't cling to anything. Keep looking at where you're clinging and release that, release that, release that. Freedom is the result of non-clinging. That's the direction this teaching points.

The text itself is relatively short—sixteen poems, about two hundred and ten verses. The title, the *Aṭṭhakav agga*, means something like "the chapter of the eights" or "the chapter of the octads." It's a little mysterious why it's called that, because the first couple of poems have eight verses or eight sections to them, but after that there's no connection to eights as far as I can tell. So we don't know why it's called this, but that's the name it's been given.

Because it's relatively short—though long enough and deep enough—all we're really going to be able to do in this session is get a sense of how this teaching teaches, what it points to, and I hope to give you some interest in exploring it. To me, it has the flavor of direct pointing—direct pointing to liberation, direct pointing to freedom. It uses almost koan-like teachings at some points to shake the mind up, particularly around views, around clinging to views.

We're not going to be able to go through the entire teaching in detail. What I'd like to do is give you a flavor of it and hope that some of you find this teaching of interest and pick it up for study. It is complex in some ways—because of this koan-like nature, it deserves time. You read something and you go, "What?" You read it and go, "I'll just sit with that for a while." Not trying to figure it out intellectually, but just letting yourself sit with it. So I hope this inspires some of you to look at this text.

Now, the way this set of poems teaches—I spent six months studying it, and I used a couple of key sources. I used one PhD thesis on the topic by Grace Burford, if any of you are interested in going into an academic study of it. I think it's called *Desire and...* I'll get the reference for you. So she wrote a PhD thesis on the

topic. And then I also used Thanissaro Bhikkhu's comments, his notes on this text. He's translated it, and that translation is on Access to Insight.

I found as many translations as I could while doing this study, and that's another thing I'd point you to if you want to study a particular text—it's useful to find as many translations as you can. I searched the internet and found several others. One of the key ones I found that I use a lot here is a version by Bhikkhu Varado. So Thanissaro Bhikkhu has a translation. Saddhatissa has a translation. Norman has a translation. There are some out there. Gil Fronsdal is coming out with a translation later this year with commentaries, so that may be a great source if you're interested in studying it.

Primarily I used this PhD thesis and Thanissaro Bhikkhu's notes on the text. One of the key points he made that really helped me in the study of this teaching is that there are three key perspectives this teaching looks at. You can look at any of the verses and basically see it's coming from one of these three perspectives. As you read this text, he said, see which of the three perspectives this teaching is coming from.

Those three perspectives are: first, the perspective of an ordinary person, someone who's caught by clinging—that perspective. Second, the perspective of someone who's free—what does it look like when somebody is not clinging? And third, how do we get from one to the other? What's the training?

So the structure is very simple. If you see this overarching structure, it's really simple: What's it like to be caught?

What's it like to be free? And how do we become free?

I'd like to explore some of these verses with you. I have made selections, and I took the liberty in putting this handout together to edit these translations for gender neutrality. It began to feel a little heavy to me, hearing "he, he, he, he" everywhere, so I changed them. These are not the direct translations, but I have modified them for gender neutrality.

This first one, Sutta 1, the Kāma Sutta on sensual pleasures, is a description of somebody who's caught by clinging—clinging to sense pleasure. There are key ways that we cling, and in later teachings, the Buddha codified the four kinds of clinging. I think another interesting thing about this teaching is its absence of lists. It doesn't say, "Here are the four kinds of clinging." It simply talks about clinging. But in later teachings, the Buddha spoke about clinging to sense pleasure, clinging to rites and rituals, clinging to identity view, and clinging to views separate from identity view. These are the main four kinds of clinging. This particular text focuses on sense pleasure and views as the real exploration of clinging.

So this first one looks at what it looks like when we're clinging to sense pleasure. How does that appear?

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 pleasure diminishes, they're shattered as if shot by an

arrow. One who is greedy is overpowered by weakness, is trampled by trouble, for pain invades them as water a cracked boat.

This points to the drawbacks of sense pleasure. We all know that this is something which takes some practice to really begin to understand. When we achieve what we desire, yes, we get that moment of "this is good." And yet, because of the law of impermanence—the truth, the reality of impermanence—the getting of that is not lasting. So there's this cycle: "Oh, that didn't last. Where else can I get something? Let me find it." And when we lose the things we've gained, the Buddha talks about that pain invading us like water leaking into a cracked boat.

Another discourse on this, the second one I've included, is the Discourse on the Cave:

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.

Again, this points to the sense that there may be some pleasure or gratification we get from obtaining what we want, but that ultimately this is not the road to a deeper happiness, a truer happiness, a more free kind of happiness—one that's not dependent on the conditions of the world.

And then verse 777 says:

Look at them floundering amidst their cherished possessions like fish in a dwindling stream.

That image came to me in my meditation. I think the Buddha's analogies are very evocative. I was sitting in meditation at one point during a long retreat, just watching my mind flipping around—where can I get happiness, where? And it felt like this flopping, this fish flopping around. The mind is flopping around looking for something to make it happy. This image came to me of the fish in a dwindling stream, and I laughed. That's what he's talking about. That's the sense of the mind just grasping for someplace to find pleasure. The dwindling stream.

So those are some of the drawbacks, what happens as we cling to sense pleasure. We have to have the understanding that there's a drawback to clinging to sense pleasure, or we're never going to look at what else might be possible.

Now the next piece I want to look at: we've examined clinging to sense pleasure, and now comes the second piece—what happens when somebody clings to views? Because this is the other key element of this teaching on clinging.

These verses describe the drawbacks to clinging to views:

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 an expert. To the extent to which they rate themselves expert, they despise anyone else who makes the same

claim. And one of my favorite lines of this whole text: "Those attached to perception and views roam the world offending people."

We see this. We see this daily right now in our political primary season.

"Those who maintain a view and dispute, saying this alone is true—is criticism all they experience?" This question comes from someone in conversation with the Buddha. It's one of those suttas that describes the Buddha just talking to somebody. He's having a conversation with this person about views, and he's said, "Clinging to views isn't helpful." And this person responds, "But when they maintain a view and dispute, saying this alone is true, is criticism all they experience? Don't they also get something useful? Don't they also receive praise?"

The Buddha responds: "What they receive is trifling—not enough to bring any peace of mind."

Again, here we're pointing to what is possible. The whole notion of clinging to views bringing some kind of praise, the value that people put on praise—thinking that's what I want to go for—the Buddha says that's trifling. That's like this tiny benefit. It does not bring them any peace of mind. "I say there are only two consequences of dispute: praise and criticism. Seeing this, you should not dispute. Regard instead non-dispute the grounds for peace."

Now, this can challenge us—this particular kind of statement, in some ways. When we have people holding up a particular perspective that is oppressive, a certain political candidate holding up the perspective of "let's build a wall"... To just let that sit in the world, it kind of feels to us like if I don't dispute that, aren't I letting that go forward? Aren't I letting that take over?

And I think to some extent, when we look at what's happening in this text, there are times—I don't have an example in the handout, I don't think—but there are times when the Buddha is saying something quite different. I can remember one where somebody says, "Aren't there many kinds of truths? Doesn't everybody have their own truth?" And the Buddha said, "No, there is one truth." So it's not that the Buddha doesn't come forward and say this is what's right, this is what's true, this is what's valuable, this is the direction we should go.

But I think non-dispute is around the clinging. The clinging that I'm right, you're wrong—the clinging is where we get caught. Not through the recognition of "this wholesome direction needs to be put into the world."

The Buddha didn't just sit there when people said things he felt were inappropriate. He didn't just sit there. He said, "No, that's not the way it is." And so this is a little bit of a paradox. The Buddha said non-dispute is the grounds for peace, and yet when we read this text, it sounds like he's disputing. So what is that? What does that mean? How can we understand non-dispute within what seems to be dispute?

That's what I'd like to encourage us to explore in our own lives. I want to get out there and say building a

wall is not the way. Kicking out all the Muslims is not the way. This is not what's helpful, this is not what's wholesome. I want to get out there and say that—but what does it mean to do that without hating, without constriction?

That's the exploration here. Non-dispute is the grounds for peace. It doesn't mean not saying what's in the direction of the wholesome. But how can we do that without the constriction? And if we do it with the constriction, know that. This is our practice. We feel, "Oh, I hate you for saying that." That doesn't feel good, but that's where I am. Okay, can I know that? Can I know the suffering of that hatred? I'm not at the point of being able to let that go, but I can know it and know that it's suffering.

That begins—and I think so many times as we explore suffering, this speaks to some of that spiritual bypass.

If we were just to say, "Oh, I shouldn't hate," well, that's not what's happening right now. If I were to step aside from that feeling of not liking what's being put out into the world, that doesn't feel good. I constrict around it. I get angry about it. Can I open to that?

Through that opening, my sense and understanding of how the practice works is that as I open to that constriction, wisdom begins to tease apart the piece of that which is wisdom from the piece of that which is aversion, greed, confusion. And so if I were to just step aside from it entirely, I would miss the wisdom that needs to be revealed in that exploration. So open to those places of constriction, confusion. Don't be afraid of them. They open us to wisdom and compassion and understanding how to hold on.

You know, this is a koan for me—that non-disputing dispute. But can I hold that? Can I hold that possibility and explore where it feels like it's not happening?

So, clinging to views. The next way this teaching teaches is by showing us what it looks like to be someone who is liberated. Liberation in this text is interesting. Let's read some verses from the Aṭṭhakavagga describing someone who is free.

The questioner, again a solitary person the Buddha is having a conversation with, asks: *Having what vision, being of what character is one called peaceful? Gautama, tell me about the supreme person.*

The Buddha responds: *A person who is not angered, not frightened, not boastful, not fretful, who gives wise advice, who is calm, restrained in speech, who is indeed a sage. A person who is not attached to the future, who does not sorrow over the past, who finds solitude amidst sense contact and is not guided by fixed views. A person who is retiring, not deceitful, not covetous, not greedy, not impudent, not arousing contempt, who does not engage in malicious speech. A person who does not relish pleasure, who is not arrogant, who is mild and of ready wit, who is not credulous, who by nothing is repelled. A person who does not take on the training in hopes of material gain, who is unperturbed if they get nothing, who is not hampered by wishes and not greedy for flavors. A person who is even-tempered, ever-attentive, who does not suppose that in the world they are equal, superior, or inferior, who is free of conceit. A person for whom there are no tethers,*

who in knowing the truth is not tethered in any way, and in whom no wishes are found for existence or non-existence. This is someone I call peaceful. They are indifferent to sense pleasure. In them bonds are not found. They have overcome attachment. The sage, free of greed and selfishness, does not speak of oneself as among those who are superior, equal, or inferior.

A couple of pieces about this. Mostly what it describes is not "someone who is peaceful has attained this refined state of nibbāna." It describes them living in the world and what that person looks like living in the world. Primarily, it reads as a description of what they are *not*—not angry, not frightened, not boastful, no blind faith. There are a few areas where it points to qualities of mind that are present: wise, calm, even-tempered, attentive. This may also be challenging for us to some extent.

But I think the fact that it points to what we are not—what is a free person? It doesn't say what that person *is*; it says what they're *not*—this speaks to a really radical direction of the Buddhist pointing. He wasn't talking about freedom as something we get, as something to have. He was speaking about what needs to be released for freedom to happen.

This to me speaks to something important. The Buddha didn't say, "When somebody is free, this is what they do, this is what they look like." He said, "This is what's not happening." Someone who's not angry, not boastful, not frightened, not clinging to blind faith—how that person is in the world, what they do, can look many different ways. There's not one result of freedom. So to me, while it's a little unfamiliar to hear about what somebody is *not*, it leaves space for a lot of different expressions of freedom.

One thing that is kind of absent in this teaching, and I need to hold this a little bit—I'm not sure how to live with this or be with this.

It's a question I hold, a kind of koan in my heart. This text does not speak of the brahmavihāras as much. It doesn't say this person has love, is compassionate. It speaks of the absence of suffering, the absence of fear, the absence of hate.

We often speak about how, as those things fall away, the natural result of the heart—and we have been speaking about the brahmavihāras in this practice—is the natural expression of the heart that's free. This is how I hold this in the text. The Buddha isn't saying you have to go out there and find love. Rather, with freedom from all of these constricting qualities, what results? What happens? Maybe certain beings have an expression of it that looks like just equanimity, just wisdom. Maybe other beings are more active in the world, expressing compassion and love. So again, this is something to hold in our hearts.

Elsewhere in this text, aside from what I've read, liberation is described in terms of qualities of someone who's free. And again, it brings in wisdom, silence, calmness. They're mindful. They see, they know. They're equanimous. So the liberated person is described in terms of what's released and certain qualities that are present. To me this is actually inspiring, because the picture of freedom in this text is one that I can envision living in the world. It's one that I can envision walking around and acting and speaking and

being in the world.

This text emphasizes freedom in this life. There are a few places where the Theravada tradition has said, "Oh, here's where it's talking about freedom in the next life," or "Here's where it's talking about the transcendent quality of liberation." But as I read those verses, I think, I don't know—it sounds like it's just describing not clinging to future existence. It doesn't say whether future existence exists or not. So the transcendental quality of liberation, of freeing ourselves from the cycle of rebirth, is not particularly found in this teaching.

This teaching, in some ways, contrasts pretty strongly with the standard Theravada description of one who's liberated—that being who has freed themselves from the cycle of rebirth, the transcendent quality of Nibbāna that breaks the bounds of rebirth. Here the teaching is: don't cling to either rebirth or non-rebirth. Just don't cling. Clinging is the issue. Let go of clinging.

To me, this is a direct pointing teaching. Clinging is the exploration. When there's clinging, can I know that? Can I not do a spiritual bypass and say, "Oh, I shouldn't cling here," but can I open to that? Can I know that? As clinging releases, certain wisdom is understood. There are deeper and deeper levels of clinging that get revealed. As the grosser kinds of clinging to sense pleasure are released, we see how we're clinging in other ways. And then those we explore and release.

My inspiration here is that I don't know what Nibbāna is. I don't know what full liberation is. I don't know. I know the freedom that comes from the non-clinging I've experienced. That direction—it's like, yes, I'm heading that way. I trust that way lies more and more peace. What it looks like with full non-clinging, I have no idea. But I'm willing to go there. I trust that is a good direction to go.

So the overwhelming majority of teaching in this text, the Aṭṭhakavagga, points to freedom in this very life, primarily as an unselfish, non-clinging, non-desirous way of living in the world. That's a description of someone who's free.

Grace Burford, the scholar who wrote the doctoral thesis, said: "The Atthakavagga is exceptional even within the earliest 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." This teaching presents a coherent understanding of liberation without resorting to multiple lives.

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

Then there's the path to freedom. Let's read a few of the verses that describe the relationship to views from the perspective of liberation:

"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 that they either take up or throw off. They are indeed free of every view in the world. Abandoning what they have 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."

Again, some challenging words about views, which I hope you can hold as a koan, as a question.

So now the next piece is the training. The other set of teachings in the Atthakavagga describes the path of practice—what does it actually look like? Clinging is the place where suffering is born, so how does one move from clinging to non-clinging? Here are some descriptions of that:

The questioner says, "Now venerable sir, speak about the path of practice." The Buddha responds: "A person should not have covetous eyes. One 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. Should not be indolent. Should not live in lodgings where there is little noise."

Skipping down a little: "One should not be drawn into telling lies, nor be deliberately treacherous. One should not dispute others for their lowly way of life or wisdom or precepts or practices. If ascetics or ordinary people irritate one with their talkativeness, one should not respond harshly, for the peaceful do not retaliate. Knowing the Buddha's 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 Gautama's teaching. With regards to the Blessed One's teaching, one who is diligent should constantly venerate it by following his example."

What's interesting to me about this is that as you read it, some of it may resonate with the description of someone who is free. In the basic path of practice here, instead of describing how one who is free naturally has no greed for flavors, has no worry, is not indolent—instead, this says one *should* practice this. The path, especially in terms of our engagement in the world, is described as modeling the behavior of those who are free. What does that look like? It's a kind of practice I sometimes explore.

Now this is important. In my exploration of this—for instance, around patience—I did a practice for a while on patience because impatience was huge in my life. A big, big pattern. And what I discovered around this modeling piece is: what does it look like when I'm feeling impatience to act *as though* I were patient? The key to this practice is not to sidestep the impatience. You have to be completely, deeply honest with yourself about where you are in doing this modeling practice.

In cultivating or practicing patience, at one point I was in a drugstore walking through the store, and I was

really impatient. I noticed the impatience, and I noticed that this impatience expressed itself by picking up things off the shelf and throwing them in my basket. There was a physical manifestation of the impatience expressing itself through the body.

So I began to look at this teaching of modeling patience. And that exploration of fully acknowledging—yes, impatience inside—it's not about trying to create the mind of patience. But what I did is I began to smooth out my behavior. I felt fully that urge to throw things in the basket. I felt it completely, and yet I just moved, and I gently placed things in the basket, feeling into that impatience all the while. It's almost like this practice of fully knowing the impatience inwardly and seeing if it cannot leak out through any pore. What does that mean?

As I explored that, it was actually shocking—and this is a small example. I encourage you to try this in the small, because in the large ones, if you're in the midst of a very charged situation, trying to model that is probably going to create the spiritual bypass. I don't think that's useful. But in the small places, it can be useful to explore this—the little places like impatience in the drugstore.

So that practice of exploring: here's the feeling, and here's how I might act if I were patient. Within about a minute, the impatience had released, and I was patient. That very modeling had a rebound effect on the mind. By not repressing—I think if we're repressing, it's not going to have that same impact. This is a delicate practice. I found it interesting and inspiring to play with, but it's very easy for this to be interpreted as spiritual bypass. So I really want to be careful in how we pick up this teaching of how the Buddha encourages us to model. But to me, this speaks to the sense that the path of practice and the goal of practice are not so different. We cultivate the path of practice by modeling, heading ourselves towards where we end up—the non-clinging.

I want to talk about views, because this too is a major aspect of the teaching in the Aṭṭhakavagga. There's a lot of teaching on clinging to views here, and in this place it gets a little more nuanced in terms of how the path of practice works around views—at least that's my understanding.

What kinds of views are there? There's the view "I am"—the identity view, the sense of identification. There's views around metaphysical reality that are clung to. A lot of the various debates that happened in the time of the Buddha were debating: Is the world infinite? Is the world finite? Only this is true, everything else is wrong. The world is transcendent. All of these different views about the world—speculative views about the nature of reality, essentially. And then all other views, opinions, and beliefs, views that we have in our cultures and our societies around everything.

The Buddha pointed to views and clinging to views as one of the key ways suffering happens in our world. This is expressed through the results: clinging to views leads to dispute, to conflict, to war, to contention. And we see this. The view of race—this is clearly a concept, an idea, and how much suffering, conflict, sense of better, less than, equal to comes out of this perspective. The Buddha pointed to any clinging to views as leading to strife and suffering.

We may not be able to know what views we're clinging to. Often views are in the realm of delusion, below the surface. Views are created in dependence on our culture, on our society. The paper that Larry offered really points to that—how our sense of self, our sense of identity is conditioned by our culture. The views that we pick up, the beliefs that we pick up are so deeply embedded.

Views from family, views from culture, views from who we spend our time with as a child. Views that are created as we move into ourselves as an adult. The whole mind we're swimming in is often views that are not consciously articulated. And so views are often in this realm of not seeing. We're swimming in our views—it's like the fish in the water not knowing the water. We're swimming in our views and we don't know them.

And so in our relationships with each other, rather than having the notion or the idea of "I'm right, you're wrong," it's more like, "Oh, different views are happening." Let's see—what view does this expose when there's conflict? We can be curious about that. When there's conflict, what views are being held to? This is an exploration.

Beginning to look at this, anytime there's suffering, my understanding is that some view is being clung to. Some view is operating. We may or may not be able to recognize the view immediately, but this can be a question we explore. So there's suffering happening here. We can feel into the suffering of that, feel into the constriction, the pain, and use this wisdom or this question—not necessarily to find the answer, but simply to ask: there's suffering here, what's being believed? Just to begin to burst those bubbles of delusion, to recognize what's being believed, as opposed to the sense of that suffering coming from the conviction that this is true. We begin to recognize our beliefs as beliefs. This is really powerful, this exploration, as we begin to recognize, "Oh, this is a belief." Maybe we can't immediately let go of it, and I would not encourage a spiritual bypass of saying, "Well, I shouldn't believe that." Instead, acknowledge it: "Ah, this is what is being believed." Let's explore that, look at that, get to know what's happening there around that belief.

In the Aṭṭhakavagga, it's interesting that the attachment to beliefs is really singled out as the issue. There's a statement at the top of page five: "A person who associates themselves with certain views, considering them as best and making them supreme in the world—they say, because of that, all other views are inferior. Therefore, they are not free from contention with others. In what is seen, heard, cognized, and in ritual observances performed, they see a profit for themselves. Just by laying hold of that view, they regard every other view as worthless."

This statement apparently applies to views whether they are true or not—that we should not cling even to views that are true. The Buddha actually said in one place in the text that yes, there is truth, there is a single truth. It's hard for us, from our perspective of our usual way of relating to views, not to see that as clinging to views. That's a koan, another koan in this teaching to me. What does it mean for the Buddha to say, "Yes, there is a single truth," and not be clinging to that? I don't know what that means. But I do know

that when I see myself clinging to views, I feel the suffering of that, and so that can be explored. What did it mean for the Buddha to say there is a truth and not be clinging to it? I don't know, but I'm willing to explore it. Willing to explore not by sidestepping it, but by recognizing, "Okay, this is belief. Belief is happening."

I'm going to skip over some of what I was going to talk about here and move on to the question: given that this teaching says we should not cling to any views, what about right view? Where does right view come in? Again, another koan in this teaching to me. There are questions, actually, whether this particular teaching holds the perspective that using any kind of view is not the path. Essentially, the question is: does this teaching point to a non-path path?

Some argue that yes, this text teaches the training where the path itself includes not holding any view at all. This might be in the flavor of: not holding any view is the path as well as the result of the path. Not holding to any view whatsoever is the path as well as the result of the path. To some extent, this is the flavor I get when I read some of the Zen teachings. There's no path. Freedom is just there. It's like, well, how do you do this? I don't know.

My sense is that when I look at the passages in this text that refer to one who does not hold any views at all—and this came from the encouragement by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu to look at it from these three perspectives—we need to ask: who is this verse describing? Is it describing someone in the training?

Not holding any view—or is it describing someone who's free, not holding any view? And my read of these teachings is that whenever it's describing someone not holding any view at all, that person is liberated. And so the Aṭṭhakavagga, to me, does not point to "don't hold any view at all." How would we get there? The whole teaching is a direction, a pointing for us.

So perhaps some people might say, "Well, we're not supposed to cling to the teachings." Well, good luck. Here's another text—the very first mentioning of views in the Aṭṭhakavagga. And I think this is a teaching that points to two sides of the question. You can take this teaching from two angles:

How would one, led on by desire, entrenched in their likes, forming their own conclusions, overcome their own views? They dispute in line with the way that they know.

This points to when we are entrenched in our views—we hold to those and we don't let other things in, or we dispute in line with that. But this speaks to all of our predicament in the world. We can't usually simply say, "I'm not going to cling to the Dharma." That would be spiritual bypassing again. It's like, "Well, yeah, I am going to cling to the Dharma."

And in fact, there is a teaching that I think speaks to this. I have some teachers that don't like my talking about clinging to the Dharma. But at the same time, there's this teaching—the simile of the raft. Many of you, I know, are familiar with the simile of the raft. That description talks about the path of practice moving from being caught on this side of the stream, to crossing the stream—the stream representing the

flood of greed, aversion, and delusion—and landing on the far shore, free from clinging.

The analogy talks about building the raft on this shore. And I like the fact that it's a raft—something we build out of sticks and mud and stuff that we find around us. The analogy says that the raft is basically the Eightfold Path. The Buddha points to the raft being the Eightfold Path. But it's put together out of our sense experience. It's put together with what's around us—sight, sound, smells, taste, touch. Our orientation towards that through the Eightfold Path. We build the raft and we cross over the flood of greed, aversion, and delusion.

The raft, you know, I'm envisioning this raft—it's pretty rickety. It barely keeps me above the water. This is a piece I love about this analogy. The flood is said to be the flood of greed, aversion, and delusion. We're on this raft. We're going to get wet. So the path of practice is about being in contact with greed, aversion, and delusion with this support of the path of practice.

I don't think the Buddha would teach, "Let go of the raft in the middle of the river." We have to hold on to the raft. We have to make the effort with our hands and our feet to cross the flood of greed, aversion, and delusion. And so the analogy goes on. When we get to the other side of the flood, the Buddha asks his monks, "Is it useful at that point to say, 'Oh, this raft has been really useful to me. I think I'll carry it around on my head'?" At that point, no, that's not useful. You've crossed the flood. You can set it down.

And at that point, in that analogy, the Buddha says the Dharma is not to be clung to. Wholesome states are not to be clung to—and how much more so unwholesome states not to be clung to. And yet, that analogy points to letting go of clinging after we've crossed the river. Letting go of the clinging to the Dharma after we've crossed over.

And so there's probably some transformation over that time. We start out gripping onto the practice.

I remember sitting there, thinking, "Oh, I really have to work to do this. I have to try to be present for this difficulty." Just clinging to the Dharma, creating an identity around being the meditator. And it served. It served.

At some point, I began to experience the suffering of that clinging. And then that's the time to begin to look at it. When the suffering becomes obvious, we begin to see the clinging that's there and let it go.

I understand the path of practice as being an uncovering of subtler and subtler forms of clinging. And as we reach them, that's when we work to let go of that clinging. If we're clinging to sense pleasure, that's not the time to let go of the identity of the meditator. So it's a staged kind of release that can happen.

There's also another perspective on views. This is one of my favorite suttas too, for several reasons. It points to what kind of views are helpful, views that allow us to move in the direction of transcending views. One of the reasons I love this teaching is that it's given by Anāthapiṇḍika, a householder. So this

teaching is given by a householder to monks from other wandering sects.

The monks see Anāthapiṇḍika and they say, "Oh, let's talk to Anāthapiṇḍika. He's a follower of that Gautama, so let's see what he has to say." They come up to him and say, "Tell us, householder, what views the contemplative Gautama has."

Anāthapiṇḍika, being very honest, says, "You know, I can't tell you what views the Blessed One has." The monks think this is a little strange—if you can't tell us what views he has, then you obviously don't know his teachings. So they say, "Well, if you don't know what views the contemplative Gautama has, then tell us what views the monks have."

He says, "Well, I can't tell you that either."

"But I can tell you what views I have."

They say, "Okay, tell us what views you have."

And he says, "Okay, I'll tell you what views I have, but first tell me what views you have."

They start spouting off their views—those speculative views I mentioned before. Things like, "The cosmos is eternal, only this is true, anything else is worthless." "The cosmos is not eternal, only this is true, anything else is worthless." You can see these different opinions: the cosmos is finite, the cosmos is infinite, each holding this perspective that only this is true, anything else is worthless.

When they were done, Anāthapiṇḍika said—and he goes through this for every view they've stated—"As for the 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 their own inappropriate attention, or in dependence on the words of another."

This is how views are formed. Views are formed from our own meeting the world with our experience. We contact the leg of an elephant and think, "That's an elephant." We contact the trunk of an elephant and think, "That's an elephant." Perhaps not seeing the entirety—I'm referring to the teaching story about the blind people and the elephant. Creating views out of our own direct experience, but perhaps not the entire picture. When views are created out of our direct experience, we tend to cling to them very tightly. Or we create views based on the opinions and views of others. Somebody has said, "This is what's true." Oh, then that must be what's true.

And again, a koan here, because the Buddha says the Eightfold Path is what we need to follow. It's like, "Okay, I'm going to pick that one up." This view has arisen in dependence on his words.

So here's what Anāthapiṇḍika goes on to say: "The views arise from their own inappropriate attention or in dependence on the words of another. This view has been brought into being, is fabricated, is willed, dependently originated. Whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently

originated—that is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. The venerable one holding this view adheres to that very stress, submits himself to that very stress."

Here Anāthapiṇḍika is pointing to the holding to that view.

The holding to something that is inconstant, something fabricated, creates stress. So again, it's the holding. It's the "this is true, everything else is wrong." It's the holding to the view that Anandapindika is pointing to as creating the stress. The view itself is there—it's fabricated, it's inconstant. Clinging to something that's inconstant is stressful and will create suffering.

After Anandapindika has responded to all of the views of the other monks, they say, "Okay, now tell us what view you have." And Anandapindika says: "Whatever has been brought into being is fabricated, willed, dependently originated. That is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. Whatever is stress is not me, is not what I am, is not myself. This is the sort of view I have."

They try to pull the same argument on him: "Well, you submit yourself to that same stress. You're just holding to that view." And Anandapindika responds that when he sees the stress of holding to the view, he understands it is fabricated. He understands that it is inconstant and that it creates stress to hold to it. And there is release in that understanding.

When this was said, the wanderers fell silent, abashed, sitting with their shoulders drooping, heads down, brooding, at a loss for words. Then Anandapindika went to the Blessed One and reported this exchange. And the Blessed One said, "Well done, householder. This is how you should periodically refute the wanderers of other sects."

This teaching points to the using of view in a particular way. In a sense, the view that Anandapindika pointed to is a view that leads us in the direction of understanding that clinging to views is not helpful. So we can keep recognizing that. And I think this is some of the paradox of the teachings—we have to keep deepening, keep deepening. Oh, clinging to that. Oh, and there's suffering there. And clinging to that, and clinging to that. Clinging even to the teaching of non-clinging. Okay, let go of that too.

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