Teachings to Bāhiya

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 48:18

Our practice here of receptive awareness is really just exploring the simplicity of being with experience and noticing what complicates that simplicity.

There's a very famous teaching in the suttas. Most of you have probably heard it many times, but that is what I'd like to explore this evening: the Buddha's teachings to Bāhiya. To me, this simple teaching is one of those succinct teachings where Bāhiya asks the Buddha, "Please tell me the teachings in brief so that I can practice." This particular succinct teaching feels very resonant with the way we practice in this style.

The backstory before Bāhiya meets the Buddha is that he's not one of the Buddha's followers, but rather an ascetic living at the time of the Buddha. He's practicing on the coast, about twelve hundred miles or so from where the Buddha lives. He doesn't know anything about the Buddha, but he's been practicing. Some of the stories say that he was living an ascetic life but not really doing that much practice. But I think, based on the story, he must have been doing some practice because the teachings of the Buddha landed really fast for Bāhiya. He must have been ready for it, at least.

So he was practicing, and the people in that area really admired him. He was such an ascetic, wearing bark for his clothes, doing some of the ascetic practices of the day. They were offering him alms and coming to him for advice. And he started wondering, "Gee, all these people think I'm so great. Maybe I am that great. Maybe I'm enlightened."

It's said that he was visited by a deva when he had that thought. This deva apparently was one of his relatives from either a previous life or from this life—it doesn't say. The deva had taken pity on Bāhiya for having this thought, "Maybe I'm enlightened," and said to him, "You know, you're not enlightened. And not only that, you're not even doing what might make you enlightened."

Bāhiya asked the deva, "Well, is there anybody that is doing this?"

The deva replied, "Yes, you should go see the Buddha. The Buddha lives about twelve hundred miles from here. Go find him. He's in Sāvatthī."

And so Bāhiya walked. I actually looked this up on Google today. I hit the walking icon and entered the place where Bāhiya was on the coast, which is near Mumbai, and then Sāvatthī, where the Buddha was. It said 303 hours of walking to get there. And it was a lot of elevation too—in one place it said there was something like 12,000 feet of elevation he'd have to go up and down to reach the Buddha by this route.

So he traveled, and he apparently traveled as quickly as he could. My guess is it probably took him some

twenty to thirty days to get to the Buddha.

He arrived where the Buddha was practicing and found the monastery where the Buddha was staying. The monks in the monastery said, "The Buddha's not here right now. He's out on alms round."

So Bāhiya went to find the Buddha on alms round. He found the Buddha in the village and said to him, "Will you teach me the Dhamma so that it will be for my long-term welfare and benefit?"

The Buddha, with his alms bowl, walking into the village, said, "This isn't the time, Bāhiya. We're heading to the village for alms."

A second time Bāhiya asked the Buddha, this time adding a little plea: "Please teach me the Dhamma. We don't know how long you'll live or how long I will live. Please teach me the Dhamma."

And the Buddha again said, "This is not the time."

But then Bāhiya asked the magic third time, which in the suttas is—

pretty much almost every time—not every time, but most times—if you ask the Buddha something three times, he did it.

So Bahiya asked again, and the Buddha stopped and gave him some teachings. Bahiya had asked for teachings in brief, and so he received teachings in brief. I'm going to read you the first part of the teachings that the Buddha gave to Bahiya. The result of the Buddha giving Bahiya this complete instruction—not just the portion I'm about to share, but the whole thing, which I'll give you in pieces—was that Bahiya became fully enlightened.

So listen well.

"You should train yourself thus: In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself."

This is basically what we're doing here. We're exploring our experience—our sense experience, our mental experience. This teaching—you should train yourself thus, and the seen is only the seen, and the heard is only the heard, and the sensed is only the sensed, and the cognized is only the cognized—this is a short form for the six sense spaces. Seeing, hearing, and then sensing encompasses smelling, tasting, touching. And cognized is the mind.

Essentially, this is the injunction: recognize your sense experience as arising experience. That's one way to frame what the Buddha said.

But what do these words mean? What does this teaching mean—in the seen is only the seen? It can be understood as a training in what might be called bare attention: just receiving experience as it is, without

judgment, without reactivity, without clinging.

And yet the text says it's a training. So what does that mean, to train ourselves to see thus? To train ourselves in "the seen is only the seen"?

To me this means partly that we're probably not going to be able to just pick up that instruction and have our experience be that pure, that unaffected by our thoughts or ideas or views or opinions. We're not going to be able to just flip a switch and have our experience be "in the seen is only the seen." We may think we're seeing things as they are, but as we've been exploring—especially around the conditioning, the constructing nature of the mind—the mental formations condition our perceptions, condition seeing, condition hearing. So when we're seeing, it's already not just "in the seen is only the seen."

What does this training mean, then? To me it's a pointing toward an important direction for us. We set our intention to explore experience with the understanding that it's valuable to see experience in this way. And the Buddha, in the subsequent part of the teachings, explains why it's valuable. I'll actually go ahead and read it now and then elaborate a little more on it later.

The training is what I said: in the seen is only the seen. We train in this way. And then the Buddha says:

"When for you this is the case—when for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized—then, Bahiya, there is no you in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

He points to the purpose of this training. He doesn't just say, "Train this way, come back later." He says, "Train this way and this is the result." Freedom from suffering is the result—and that results from this understanding of not-self.

But this last part is the result of the training. It's not something to do. Rather, it sets our compass. It gives us inspiration to explore. What might it mean to see experience in this way?

There's a kind of setting of the intention to explore experience from the perspective of "in the seen is only the seen"—which to me basically points to a practice that explores what's in the way of the seen being only the seen.

What's in the way of in the heard is only the heard. And that's what we actually get to see. We start paying attention to our experience—this is so much of what we've been exploring. What's in the way of just knowing experience to be experience? Knowing seeing to be seeing, knowing hearing to be hearing, knowing cognizing to be cognizing?

And so we start by seeing what we add, looking at what we add to experience. This is what we've been observing. We see how craving is added to experience. We feel that it is added. Actually, as we explore

experience in this way of receiving, just noticing what's happening, we're seeing the constructions. We're seeing the craving, the clinging, and we're feeling the suffering of that.

With this encouragement—that in this direction lies freedom from suffering—we may have some inspiration to observe. What else gets in the way? Views, beliefs, identity. We've talked about all of these areas. And guess what? All of this, everything that gets in the way, all of the stuff that gets in the way is in the realm of the cognized.

What's cognized? Craving is an arising in the mind. It's a cognition arising. And so the instruction "in the cognized is only the cognized"—can you notice craving is arising as a phenomenon? Can you notice clinging is arising as a phenomenon? When that's what's happening, that's the encouragement of this text.

So we explore "in the seen is only the seen" and we see craving. It's like, okay, craving. In craving is craving. Craving is arising. That can be known. In the cognized is only the cognized.

In another sutta, the Buddha describes in a way—at least this teaching to me—what it was like to be experiencing things. What's the state? He gives a description of his mind, what it's like to be experiencing things in the moment when in the seen is only the seen. He gives an elaboration of what that experience is. This is in the Aṅguttara Nikāya, the Kālakārāma Sutta, AN 4.24, for those of you who are interested in such things.

The Buddha thought it was valuable to describe this state to us. And when he refers to himself as a Tathāgata—meaning "one who's thus gone," "one who is such," something like that—he describes his experience:

A Tathāgata does not conceive of a visible thing apart from sight, does not conceive of an unseen, does not conceive of a thing worth seeing, does not conceive of a seer. In the seen is only the seen.

A Tathāgata does not conceive of an audible thing apart from hearing, does not conceive of an unheard, does not conceive of a thing worth hearing, does not conceive of a hearer. In the heard is only the heard.

A Tathāgata does not conceive a thing to be sensed apart from sensation, does not conceive of an unsensed, does not conceive of a thing worth sensing, does not conceive of a sensor. In the sensed is only the sensed.

A Tathāgata does not conceive of a cognizable thing apart from cognition, does not conceive of an uncognized, does not conceive of a thing worth cognizing, does not conceive of a cognizer. In the cognized is only the cognized.

Let us start an exploration of what this might mean. I can only offer you some of my reflections on this. There are a few comments in some of the commentaries and suttas, but there's not a lot. A key word here is *conceiving*. Remember the other day I used that phrase, offered this phrase in one of the morning meditations: "In whatever way they conceive, the fact is ever other than that."

Conceiving is understood in many places in the suttas to be a kind of distorted way of experiencing that attributes to the experience things that are not actually in the experience but are instead, as Bhikkhu Bodhi said, derived from one's own subjective imaginings. And conceiving does seem to relate to this birth of subject and object—the birth of a thing to be seen, an object existing, something like that. When an object exists, a subject is born. They're born together, is my sense. So the conceiving piece—one of the distortions that seems to be present in it—is a subject-object distinction and a belief in that distinction.

I'm giving you a bit of a tour of some of the suttas tonight. One of my particular joys is sutta study, so I'm offering you a little taste of that.

There's another place in the suttas that's relevant here. We'll come back to this description of the Buddha's mind in a moment, but first I want to flip to the other side, which describes what an ordinary person's mind does with experience—with seeing, with hearing. Here's the description in the suttas:

One perceives the seen as the seen. Having perceived the seen as the seen, one conceives oneself as the seen. One conceives oneself in the seen. One conceives oneself apart from the seen. One conceives the seen to be mine. One delights in the seen. Why is this? Because it has not been fully understood.

This is from Majjhima Nikaya 1, for those of you who like that reference.

So there are four different ways of conceiving elaborated here. First, "I am whatever experience it is"—I am the seeing, I am the body, I am the emotion. It's got that kind of flavor to it. Second, "I'm in the experience"—I'm in the body, I'm in the physical experience. Maybe not so much "I'm in the seeing," but "I'm in the physical experience." Third, "I'm separate from the experience." Now, that one resonates for me with seeing. It's like, yes, I'm separate from that tree. Again, pointing to this subject-object distinction. And fourth, this flavor of "This experience is mine"—this hearing is mine, this body sensation is mine. This knee pain, that's mine. It's my knee pain, my body sensations.

These are different ways of conceiving ourselves in relationship to experience. Again, it's bringing in this notion of a self, this subject-object kind of distinction.

One translator of this particular text—the precursor to Bhikkhu Bodhi, Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli—had a slightly different understanding that I noticed today for the first time in one of the notes to the sutta. It struck me as adding something to the picture in terms of understanding conceiving. It does make sense to me that conceiving is about this sense of subject and object coming into being. But Ñāṇamoli had a subtler perspective that I think I've seen in my own experience. There's something interesting there.

His alternative understanding is something like this: having perceived the seen, one takes that perception to be the seen. That's a pretty profound kind of confusion—one that I think we engage in a lot. We don't notice that we're perceiving "tree." We don't notice perception at all. We take the perception to be the thing.

It's a very profound misunderstanding—a misunderstanding of perception itself. To me, this was a very interesting way to think about conceiving: potentially as simply being misperceiving perception to be reality. Something like that. Almost even before any sense of self comes in. Just that mistake in the perception. We take it to be what's actually there, not seeing it as perception. Not seeing perception as perception. That would be "in the cognized is only the cognized"—oh, perception is happening.

So back to the Buddha's description of his mind: "A Tathagata does not conceive of a visible thing apart from sight, does not conceive of an unseen, does not conceive of a thing worth seeing, does not conceive of a seer."

My reflections on this. "Does not conceive of a visible thing apart from sight"—to me what this says is that the conceiving part is attributing or creating or conceiving of the idea of a thing that exists independently of the perception. This is kind of counterintuitive to the whole way we live our lives and walk around the world. To live in that space of so deeply understanding that we cannot know what is out there—even if there's anything out there. All we can know is the experience created by the mind. And so, not conceiving of anything that is out there. This is the Buddha's description of his experience: not conceiving of a visible thing apart from sight. That's kind of mind-blowing to me.

"Does not conceive of an unseen." This one I could find very little to support an interpretation or an understanding of. But just the way of hearing it, and also that it follows the previous one—does not conceive of a visible thing apart from sight, does not conceive of an unseen—to me this might mean that we also don't conceive or create the idea or the notion, the imagining. And imagining is another translation for this word "conceiving." We don't imagine that there is nothing out there, that it is all mind, entirely constructed by the mind. So the mind of the Buddha doesn't conceive any kind of substantive reality about the world itself. That's my sense of the understanding of these two. The Buddha simply understands the experience of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, cognizing. I hope this is making sense.

"And does not conceive of a thing worth seeing." To me this points to craving. A thing worth seeing is something that we want, something we want to have. So that may be the flavor there.

"And does not conceive of a seer." That points back to belief—or rather, the absence of a belief in one who sees. Does not conceive of a seer. Does not conceive of one who sees.

The absence of all of these things—this again is kind of interesting to me. The Buddha describes his experience, this very subtle experience, not in terms of what's there, but in terms of what is not experienced. "A Tathagata does not conceive of a cognizable thing apart from cognition, does not conceive of an uncognized, does not conceive of a thing worth cognizing, does not conceive of a cognizer."

In a way this feels like it kind of pulls apart, or just falls apart, our whole usual way of navigating experience. It all falls apart. It feels untethered.

And so there might be—the other day Carol spoke about disenchantment. This perspective of seeing this way, not seeing a thing worth seeing. Just "in the seen is only the seen, in the heard is only the heard, in the sensed is only the sensed, in the cognized is only the cognized." This creates the conditions for basically understanding there's nothing to cling to. There's no point in clinging.

And so this disenchantment—we have been enchanted by seeing. "Oh, it's a thing worth seeing! Oh, there's a seer!" Enchanted in that way, believing the constructs of our own mind. It's just a magic show in there—another beautiful analogy in the suttas. It's a magic show and we've been enchanted by that magic show, believing it's reality when it's just smoke and mirrors.

And yet, there's one description that Bhikkhu Bodhi uses for disenchantment—something like, "disenchantment is a serene withdrawal from the desire for clinging." And it's like, well, in my experience, it's not quite that serene.

You know, the mind goes kicking and screaming to disenchantment. We see there's not much to cling to. We begin to understand it's not worth clinging to. And yet the mind protests: "No, there's got to be something worth clinging to. This is not okay—to not have some place to land."

So there are mental arisings in response to this. As we begin to see in this way—as we begin to understand that in the seen there is only the seen, in the heard there is only the heard—the mind goes, "Well, really? There's nothing to cling to?" And that doesn't feel so good. It can feel like dread or confusion or terror. Sometimes boredom or depression: "Yeah, yeah, I get that it's not worth clinging to, so why do I keep being impinged on by seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching? Can it stop already?"

We have these relationships to these understandings. And those are arisings that need to be known. In the cognized there is only the cognized. That's just the next thing. Not liking nowhere to land—okay. It might be more than not liking. It might be dread or terror of nowhere to land. Okay, dread. That's what's arising. In the cognized there is only the cognized.

This deconstructs everything we could possibly cling to.

Our practice, at least one way to explore this—and the Buddha was quite concise in this teaching, he didn't offer much to Bāhiya—but to me it's a pointing to look at experience, particularly at the processes of mind that are constructing experience. The five aggregates I spoke about a couple weeks ago—body, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness—these are what's arising moment to moment. And they keep arising.

My understanding is that the Buddha was still perceiving and feeling. There are descriptions in the suttas of enlightened beings perceiving and feeling. Enlightenment doesn't turn off these processes. But my sense of what the Buddha is describing is that they are understood for what they are—understood as processes. Feeling arising and being known. Perception arising and being known. Craving arising and being known. Love arising and being known. Releasing of craving experienced.

We can at least start there, exploring in our experience what's arising, what's being added, recognizing these processes at work as processes. Feeling feels. Perceiving perceives. Cognizing cognizes.

So back to the Bāhiya Sutta again, the ending: "When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized—then, Bāhiya, there is no you in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

There will be no you in terms of that. No you in terms of seeing. No you in terms of hearing. No conceiving of a seer apart from sight. No conceiving of a seer. No you there.

Feeling feels. Knowing knows. Cognizing cognizes. Perceiving perceives. Intending intends.

You are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of suffering.

Freedom comes with this understanding.

To me this is inspiring—the pointing in this teaching of: here's the training, and it leads to freedom from suffering. But you don't have to believe that. When for you, in the seen is only the seen, in the heard is only the heard, in the sensed is only the sensed, in the cognized is only the cognized—when the mind opens to that way of meeting experience, there's no need to do any kind of insight or understanding. That is the natural result. When for you this is the experience, when for you this is the way the mind is meeting experience, the mind is free.

So our basic instructions come back again just to the simplicity of knowing experience as experience arising in the present moment. Just what we're doing. Just simple. And to me it's like these successive layers of seeing—oh yes, another way of attributing a sense of self here. Another way of recognizing that, oh, clinging to that too? As we practice with this, the layers and layers and layers of delusion begin to fall away.

It doesn't seem to happen in one big bang explosion. In fact, the Buddha often talked about the gradual nature of this path—that it happens moment by moment, grain by grain. The analogy of the rope: I think I used that in the hall the other day. The rope that's left on the shore, day by day being worn away by the sun, the sand, the wind, the waves. At a particular moment, if you look at it, you're not going to see in the next moment what's worn away. But over time, that natural action wears away at the rope and it falls apart.

And likewise, in that analogy, the Buddha compares the mindfulness and the effort and the practice to the wind and the sun and the sand, wearing away at the fetters, wearing away at the delusion. This is a picture of a gradual practice, one where we may not even see day to day what has been released, what has been understood even. We may not know. And yet every moment of mindfulness—Gil Fronsdal

sometimes says no moment of mindfulness is wasted. It is contributing to this direction of freedom.

So at the end of the sutta, almost immediately after hearing this teaching, it says that Bāhiya became fully awakened. And then within moments, he apparently came between a cow, a mother cow and her calf, and was killed by the cow protecting against a perceived threat to her calf.

And so this brings me back to how Bāhiya had enjoined the Buddha: please, we don't know how long we're going to live, teach me the Dharma. That urgency of practice. While it is a gradual practice, there's no time to waste. We don't know what the next moment will bring.

You should train yourself thus: In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself. When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then, Bāhiya, there is no you in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of suffering.

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