The Mind of Freedom

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 54:56

Tonight I'd like to reflect a little bit on a sutta in which the Buddha basically describes what the mind of freedom is—in a way describing his experience. I've been reflecting on this sutta for the past few years and speaking about it in this form, and I find this reflection is really best held as a reflection. Not necessarily trying to track every word or understand all the concepts. In fact, the description sometimes seems almost paradoxical or hard to understand. So rather than trying to grasp it, simply open to the words, the reflection, and see what lands, what resonates. I encourage receptivity during this talk—receiving what I'm offering and being curious about what your experience is as you're hearing the words, as you're taking it in.

This sutta is from the Anguttara Nikaya. I first learned about it from a book by the scholar monk Nyanananda called *The Magic of the Mind*. In that book, Nyanananda says that the description the Buddha offers of his own mind—I don't know if we can call it experience exactly, but the quality of the mind of a Buddha—could be understood as an elaboration of the Bahiya Sutta, which we talked about last week.

In the Bahiya Sutta, we explored those phrases: "In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, there will be only the heard. In reference to the sensed, there will be only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, there will be only the cognized." In that sutta, there wasn't much description about what that meant. In this sutta, we find a little bit of a description of what perhaps it means for the mind to have that space or that opening to "in reference to the seen, there will be only the seen."

I'm going to read a section of the sutta. This translation is from an early version by Nyanananda. He chooses particular words for this translation, and in a later translation he chose different words, but I'm going to start with his first choices and then shift to his later choices.

"Whatsoever is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, attained, sought after, and pondered over by the mind, that I have fully understood. All that is fully known to the Tathagata"—the Tathagata is basically his name for himself, meaning something like "one thus gone"—"but the Tathagata has not taken a stand on it. 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 one who sees. 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 one who hears. Does not conceive of 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 one who senses. 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 one who cognizes."

That description uses the word "conceives" repeatedly. The Pali word translated as "conceiving" here is *ma nyati*. There are a couple of different flavors of that word. The Pali Text Society dictionary says it can mean to imagine, to think, or to be convinced, to be sure. Later, Nyanananda chooses to translate *manyati* as "imagine," and it creates a different flavor to that passage, which I'll read using that word later. I found it quite interesting to listen to the different way it lands with different words.

Conceiving is also often talked about in terms of the sense of self—how we conceive ourselves to be the same as, less than, or equal to others. So it often is used in relationship to the sense of self and measuring ourselves against others or measuring ourselves against ourselves.

In another passage, there's another flavor of how an ordinary person relates to the seen, heard, sensed, and cognized. Last time, during the talk on the Bahiya Sutta, I went through a passage that described how our minds usually relate to sense experience—not in the flavor of "in the seen is only the seen," but how the mind picks things up and runs with them. This is another flavor of how an ordinary person relates to experience:

"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 that? Because it has not been fully understood."

This is really pointing to different flavors of identification. "I am this"—conceives oneself as the seen. "I'm in this"—conceives oneself in the seen. "I'm separate from this"—conceives oneself apart from the seen. "This is mine"—conceives the seen to be mine.

These are simply different flavors of our relationship to experience through the sense of self. The conceiving probably has a relationship to this process of selfing, this process of identification, this process of constructing an "I," a "me," one who possesses.

Conceiving is also understood in the suttas as being closely related to *papañca*, that word I talked about last week—the reification, the mind running amok with thoughts. But I also spoke about how *papañca* could be understood as a solidification of an object: how what one perceives, one thinks about; what one thinks about, one objectifies; what one objectifies, one makes into a thing. And in that process of thing-making, there's also a process of I-making, of separation.

I sometimes think of these processes of conceiving and *papañca* as flip sides of a coin. At times we may notice the mind making a thing, and at times we may notice more clearly the mind engaged in the process of selfing. Or we may not notice at all—we get caught in this all the time. But we can be curious about these processes. They are simply processes at work in the mind to create the sense of self, to create the sense of separation, to create a thing. And in someone who is not craving, who is not clinging, whose mind is free, these processes are not happening.

This is one interesting thing about this passage, really. The Buddha uses words to describe the mind that is free, and he's using language largely that talks about what is *not* happening. He's not talking about what's been gained or appropriated, but about processes that have stopped occurring: not conceiving of a visible thing as apart from sight, not conceiving of an unseen, not conceiving of a thing worth seeing, not conceiving of one who sees.

I want to go through each of these four things—four processes that aren't happening in the mind of the Buddha—and reflect a little on each one. When I first went through this, I used Ñāṇananda's teachings in his book to help me begin to unpack and understand what some of these might mean. But what was most fruitful was really a curiosity: when I explore these reflections, what does it do in the mind? How does it land?

I'll go through each of these largely through the realm of seeing. Occasionally I'll bring in one of the other flavors—seen, heard, sensed, cognized—to point to some of the other ways we might encounter resistance.

A Tathāgata does not conceive of a visible thing as apart from sight. What this points to is that an ordinary person *does* tend to conceive of a visible thing as apart from sight—believes their experience of seeing to be the reality of what is experienced. That's the flavor of it to me.

In my own exploration, I turned each one of these around. So: the Tathāgata does not conceive of a visible thing as apart from sight. When am I conceiving of a visible thing as apart from sight? What does that mean? What is the mind doing there? Again, I think it has to do with that sense of creating a thing. The mind creates a thing and then believes that thing to have a reality. The Tathāgata's mind does not construct—does not internally construct any idea of a thing that exists apart from the experience of seeing.

The Tathāgata does not conceive. Let's throw "imagine" in there: the Tathāgata does not imagine a visible thing as apart from sight. This points to the process nature of our experience. What we are experiencing through our sense bases is the phenomenon of eye and forms meeting. There's the process of that contact—eye consciousness and contact. The experience is a process being constructed, and what we are experiencing *is* that process. We're not actually experiencing what's "out there." We're experiencing a construct of our minds.

We don't usually understand it that way. We believe that what we are experiencing is what's out there, and so much delusion can arise because of this. Everything we experience is constructed by our minds, and all kinds of ideas, opinions, and views influence that construction. That a Tathāgata does not conceive of a visible thing as apart from sight means simply understanding that seeing is happening, but the thing that is seen is a result of the process of seeing. It's not separate from that process. The sight that is seen cannot be separate from seeing. The process of seeing creates the sight and then knows that sight.

Thinking a little about the flavor of this with respect to the cognized: one does not conceive or imagine a

cognizable thing apart from cognition.

We can make a thing, an idea, out of mental processes as well. There was one time I experienced a lot of suffering because I had taken ownership of a word. I had expressed that word to one person, and then later I heard other people using that word and attributing it to this other person. And I'm like, "Wait, no—I defined that word. I made that word." So much suffering. Creating, taking ownership, making a thing out of a word. Creating a cognizable thing apart from cognition.

The Tathagata does not imagine a visible thing separate from the process of seeing. One understands the process of seeing as the process that both creates the sight and knows it. All experience constructed by the mind and known by the mind.

And then this next one: a Tathagata does not conceive of an unseen. Now this one's maybe a little different. This one, for me, I've been exploring for a while, and Ñāṇananda even says that the commentary's definition of this seems really shallow. The commentaries say that what this means is the Tathagata does not conceive, "I am seeing things that ordinary people don't see." And this could be a piece of it, in a way. It's a kind of superiority conceit—"Look at me, I'm seeing all of these processes at work as processes. I'm seeing what ordinary people don't see." But Ñāṇananda and Bhikkhu Bodhi both say this just seems like not really what this is pointing to.

This is pointing to almost the opposite: the Tathagata not conceiving of the unseen. So again, flip this around. How might an ordinary person conceive of something unseen? Well, there are some obvious ways this might happen. If somebody says, "Gee, I saw this thing," but somebody else hasn't seen it, then they could be conceiving, "Well, maybe you saw that, but I'm not going to believe it until I see it myself." And so there's a conceiving around things not seen—that unless I've seen it, it doesn't exist. That's one flavor, perhaps, of this.

Or here's one that I experienced on one three-month course. There may be a relationship to something not experienced, conceiving around something not experienced, and then desire arising around that, having not experienced it. So again, conceiving of something unseen and then deciding, measuring oneself against it.

In my case, on my first three-month course, I was listening to the dharma talks and hearing the teachers talk about all these experiences. Arising and passing was one that they talked about. And it sounded very cool, and I really wanted to see it. I had never seen it, but it was described, and it was like, "Ooh, I want that." And so I began creating ideas around it and wanting it. At one point, there was so much suffering around this—feeling like I was failing because I hadn't seen this thing, trying to imagine what it would be like to see this thing.

And then at one point, this arose in my mind: going up to my teacher in the interview and telling him I had experienced this. And we were laughing and celebrating that I had seen this insight and

understanding. As I watched this story play out in my mind, I realized I had no idea what I wanted, but what I did want was being seen as someone who had seen that. That began to help me let go of that whole craving around something I had not seen.

Now, if we think about this, what's really happening there is there's a craving happening around an idea. So that's a cognized. There's a craving around something that is cognized, a thing-making around something that's cognized. And so that kind of puts it into that side of things—the conceiving of a cognizable thing apart from cognition.

That's what the mind was doing. But it was around something that I didn't know, didn't understand. It had created this idea. And this is so much of what we do—we create ideas around things and then want them.

Another way to understand this conceiving of an unseen, how we tend to do that: again, we're probably not going to just land in the Buddhist mind, this mind of freedom, but we can begin to see how we participate in these processes, how the mind participates in these processes, how it participates in this process of conceiving of something not seen, something not heard.

Sayadaw tells a story of a time he was here. He was being escorted around and shown the area. One of the staff members, or somebody the staff had asked to help take Sayadaw around, was driving him through the area. The person mentioned that there were all these deer, and happened to mention there was a deer alarm on the car—a very high-pitched tone so that the deer hear it and don't come close to the road when the car is driving by. He said Sayadaw might be able to hear it.

Sayadaw couldn't hear it, so it was unheard. It was described as being something, but he couldn't hear it, so it was something unheard. And he tried to listen for it. He said he tried hard to hear it, and he couldn't hear it. And then he said, "I just relaxed myself. And I heard it."

So it was the conceiving of the idea that it could be heard, and that he could try to hear it—the conceiving around it kept it from being experienced. Maybe this is another way to reflect on this: how do we conceive of an unseen and unheard and unsensed and uncognized?

But an alternative reflection on this that feels in some ways more profound is perhaps along the lines of when we begin to understand these processes, when we begin to recognize, maybe see directly, that our mind is creating what is experienced—that what we are experiencing is a creation of our mind. Then perhaps conceiving of the unseen could be the view, the possible view, that if everything is constructed by my mind, then there isn't anything out there actually. A kind of mind-only perspective.

Nyanananda has a parable or analogy that elaborates on both of these first two: conceiving of a visible thing as apart from sight, and conceiving of an unseen. He's exploring an image of a dog that's crossing a stream on a plank. There's a kind of bridge across the stream, and the dog is trotting across. It's an area where there's a pool in the stream, and the dog trotting across catches sight of itself in the pool and gets intrigued. It starts looking into the pool, starts wagging its tail, maybe barking, trying to communicate

with this dog that's a reflection of himself.

Nyanananda says, "When a dog crossing a stream stops halfway on the plank and starts wagging its tail and peeping curiously down, the reason is the sight of his own image in the water. It imagines another dog there. The dog thinks there's something there to see apart from the process of seeing. It is unaware of the fact that it is seeing what it sees because it is looking. It thinks it is looking because there is something out there to be seen."

It is unaware of the fact that it is seeing what it is seeing because it is looking. It thinks that it is looking because there is something out there to be seen. The moment it realizes that it's seeing because it's looking, it will stop looking at its own image in the water.

Nyanananda says it's because of personality view—this sense of separation, this sense of identification, the view of self—that the world is carried away by this illusion. One goes on looking, saying one is doing so because there's something to be seen. But the seen is there because of the looking. This is again the sense of the idea of something separate from the process. There is just this process of seeing happening. And then, not imagining a visible thing apart from sight, we might come up with the idea that there isn't anything out there to be seen—that notion that if it's all processes in the mind, it's all just mind-made.

This reminds me of a sutta, one of the phrases in the Samyutta Nikaya: "For the most part, the world depends upon a duality, upon the notion of existence and non-existence." So if it doesn't exist in the way we thought, then it must not exist at all. And so if we see, as we see, that what we are experiencing in sight doesn't exist in the way that we're used to thinking about existence, then it must not exist—conceiving of an unseen.

Nyanananda says again, "Apart from the fact of having seen, there's nothing substantial to see. One does not imagine a visible thing apart from seeing. On the other hand, it is not possible to deny the fact of seeing happening. One does not imagine an unseen."

Let this land. Again, we can almost think of these as koans, or as invitations to be curious—not to try to figure it out, but to explore. To be open to: how might I be conceiving, or imagining, an unseen? Or imagining something apart from sight?

One does not conceive of a thing worth seeing. To me, this pretty directly speaks to craving—the sense of wanting, of something to have, something to hold on to. One does not conceive of a thing worth cognizing. That may be a little harder to feel into. I mean, isn't the Dharma worth cognizing? That might be. Again, what might it mean to allow for that cognizing, the reflection of the Dharma, to arise without grasping it? Without holding to it?

Another translation of this phrase comes from Ñāṇananda: "does not conceive of a thing worth seeing, does not conceive of a thing worth hearing." Thanissaro Bhikkhu translates it more along the lines of how I was speaking to it in terms of papañca. He translates this as "does not construe an object to be seen"—the

thing seen, the creation of the object itself. That to me is very resonant with the way we were exploring that first phrase: does not conceive of a visible thing as apart from sight. Does not construe a thing to see. Just seeing, hearing, sensing happening.

And "does not conceive of one who sees"—this is that sense of self. We've been exploring this. What is this experience of the sense of self? And with all of these, we notice where we are. We notice what's arising. We don't try to pick up these phrases and impose them on ourselves. But we can use them as explorations. What's arising is a feeling of one who's seeing. That can be seen, not clung to. That can be recognized as an arising. It can be recognized as an arising cognition. The sense of self that's seeing is a cognition. It's a function of the mind, just a process in the mind, believing itself.

I'm going to reread the section using "imagines." Just don't try to think through this. Having kind of explored these sentences, just let this land. What is it like to hear these words?

The Tathāgata does not imagine a visible thing apart from sight, does not imagine an unseen, does not imagine a thing worth seeing, does not imagine one who sees. Does not imagine an audible thing apart from hearing, does not imagine an unheard, does not imagine a thing worth hearing, does not imagine one who hears. Does not imagine a thing to be sensed apart from sensation, does not imagine an unsensed, does not imagine a thing worth sensing, does not imagine one who senses. Does not imagine a cognizable thing apart from cognition, does not imagine an uncognized, does not imagine a thing worth cognizing, does not imagine one who cognizes.

To me, the word "imagines" really makes it land that these processes are our minds making things up and believing them. And even that believing is an imagining.

I want to go back to the first part of the section I read: "Whatsoever is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, attained, sought after, and pondered over by the mind—that I have fully understood. All that is fully known to the Tathāgata, but the Tathāgata has not taken a stand on it."

This phrase "not taking a stand"—I want to reflect on this a little bit. At the basic level, taking a stand would mean there is this, that thing-making and the craving, the holding to, the attachment to, the solidifying with. And so not taking a stand is non-craving, non-clinging, non-conceiving, not attaching to views about. Not creating a thing to stand on. This is what we do. Our minds create a thing and then think we can stand on it. We think it's stable, think it's reliable.

Following that section, the next sentence in the sutta is: "The Tathāgata being such-like in regard to all phenomena seen, heard, sensed, and cognized—is such."

And so "such-like" is basically this description of not conceiving, not imagining a visible thing apart from sight, imagining an unseen, imagining a thing worth seeing, imagining one who sees. Such-like.

This word "such," *tādī*—it's a simple word, actually. It means something like "this" or "that" or "such." The

Tathagata being such-like in regard to all phenomena. The Tathagata being just this—just this process of seeing, the process of hearing, the process of sensing, the process of cognizing, nothing other than that. Just this. Such.

As I feel that word, it lands. The Tathagata is such—nothing other than this, than just this, just experience tumbling on. Not conceiving in any way with respect to seeing, hearing, sensing, cognizing. Not imagining in any way with respect to seeing, hearing, sensing, cognizing. No cognizer, no thing cognized. Just the processes of cognizing happening, the process of seeing happening, the process of hearing happening—nothing other than that, and understanding that. Processes create and experience what is experienced. That is all. Nothing other than that. That's a phrase that has landed for me with respect to this "such." Nothing other than the processes.

Now, an interesting thing about this word *tādī* is that sometimes it's translated as "stable." And so to me, the fact that in this first part of the sutta the Buddha says the Tathagata does not take a stand on this, and yet the Tathagata is stable, creates a little bit of a dissonance for us, perhaps.

Ñāṇananda says this quality of being *tādī* or "such" is often rendered or translated as firmness, steadfastness, and immovability. Generally one associates firmness, immovability, or stability with landing on something, with holding on or leaning on. But here we have just the opposite. Not to hold on to anything is to be such. Not to hold on to anything is to be stable. This suchness has a flexibility of a higher order and an adaptability.

So: not taking a stand, and yet stable. We normally try to find stability by landing on something, by our minds creating something and trying to land on it. We think this is where stability would be. But what might a different stability look like?

Ñāṇananda says this quality of being unshaken, this immovability, this stability, is the result of not grasping. It comes when there is no clinging. It is for the one who rests on or leans on something that there is instability.

Why is that? Why is landing on something unstable? Because what we land on is inherently falling apart. It's already falling apart. Ñāṇananda says if you're leaning on a wall and the wall is damaged—I think earthquake, because I live in California—you're leaning on a wall and the wall is shaking. It's like the earth is shaking. The earth is not stable. We think of it as being stable. So when we are leaning on, holding to, feeling like that stability in something we think of as stable, landing on something, we find it's not. Because everything is arising in dependence on conditions and falling apart when those conditions change.

And so the Buddha points to this—the such, the not-clinging, not-landing mind that's aligned with experience as impermanent and is not trying to find stability in that. It's like this slipperiness, this alignment with the truth of instability. That's a different kind of stability. Nowhere to land, changing

experience, understood as changing experience.

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