The Rebellious Path of Freedom from Habits of Mind

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 43:06

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Thank you for having me. I appreciate the invitation. Several months ago, I was asked to provide a dharma topic, which is really my least favorite thing to do because I have no idea what I'm going to talk about or want to talk about several months in advance. So I just said, "Rebelling against the habits of mind," because I feel like that's the essence of this practice. We have so many habits, don't we? So that's the title of the talk. We'll see how it goes. Another version of this topic is "The Liberating Power of Awareness."

I'm going to start with a poem by Kabir:

Hold this mind you carry on your back.
Your actions are like a heavy sack.
Strains enough to break your neck.
So drop that stupid load.
This is the last stop on the road.
Stay.
Be love's guest.

I was reflecting on that as I was giving instructions about just being aware of sound. Every time the clapping happened, it was like an encouragement. I felt encouraged. Just now. Just now.

This mind has a mind of its own, doesn't it? It's often unruly, inappropriate—just thinking what it thinks. I remember when I first realized that it's not *my* mind. It's just the mind. It's just this mind. Your mind, our mind, minds. And that realization helped me. I just didn't personalize it as much all of a sudden. There was some space.

So this idea of rebelling against the mind, rebelling against the mind's tendencies—I believe this is really the heart of what the Buddha is asking. He's saying, okay, first see that the mind is crazy and out of control. That's the first step. One of my teachers says that's the first insight. So if you were new tonight and you experienced flooding thoughts and images and memories and aversions and smells and all the things, that's just the way things are. But when we can see that, when we have some space between us and it,

when we're not caught by it, there can be a real liberation from the chaos of everyday life.

A lot of what comes up in meditation—what the Buddha talked about and what is talked about from the Buddhist perspective—are the hindrances: the things that hinder the natural peace and ease of the mind, its resting place. Yet we have these hindrances, these things that get in the way. I'm sure you know them.

So don't worry. Be easy on yourself about that. Because until the Buddha's enlightenment, he battled with the hindrances. Until the evening of his freedom, he battled with anger, with wanting, with craving, with ill will, with drowsiness, with restlessness or worry, irritation, agitation, doubt and disbelief. These are the flavors of this mind, of this mind-body complex.

So this theme of where the rubber meets the road is really, in my opinion—for tonight or this moment anyway—it's really about how we can both befriend and rebel. We're not rebelling against the mind's tendencies towards these hindrances as an enemy, but more as a friend. So I gave the instruction to recognize where the mind goes, and then with a sense of friendliness or kindness with the mind.

Towards the mind, we're inclining friendliness and kindness right in that moment of being lost. That is where the rubber meets the road. Because you can do that however many hundreds of thousands of times a day. Ten is good.

These hindrances—it's important to reflect on them. I was on a retreat once, long ago, at the beginning of my practice. Robert Hall, who is a well-known veteran dharma teacher and also a psychiatrist, retired now, studied with Fritz Perls—smart guy, I really like him a lot. I just visited him down in Mexico; he has a group in Baja.

So he came out one evening. I had been struggling with the hindrances for several days. The lights were low and it was just him. Sometimes there's a parade of dharma teachers, but it was just him that night. And he said, "So, have you figured it out yet?" Of course, I was like, absolutely not. He said, "Have you figured it out? We're not our thoughts. We're not our feelings."

And that was the essence of his dharma talk. That's pretty much all I heard him say. He might have spoken for another forty-five minutes, but all that I heard was: you're not your thoughts, you're not your feelings.

The moment that sunk in on a deeper level, I was able to see that I don't have to be afflicted by my thoughts and feelings. I don't have to be run by them. And actually, now that I could see that, I could even rebel against the tendencies my thoughts have. At that particular time there were lots of themes of anger, resentment, unworthiness, doubt—tons of doubt that first retreat. So it gave me a little space. I wasn't *of* my thoughts; I was *with* them. That was really helpful for me.

Meditation—not only in my view, but in many people's view—is a fierce practice in the way that it reveals the stark reality of our everyday mind. We're constantly muttering and scheming and planning, wondering under our breath. Trying to comfort ourselves, I think. This is a strategy of trying to comfort

ourselves.

Our internal life is constantly preoccupied with these voices: I like this, I don't like that. She hurt me. He left me. How can I get that? More of this. No more of that. Just this constant chatter. It's in the background, subtle. Sometimes it's very much in the foreground.

The important thing is that we can see it. This is what this practice gives us. This is what's liberating about it. Because if we can't see it, we're just mindlessly grasping.

Like monkeys swinging from one vine to the next, from one thought, from one want to the next want. I have a long-standing relationship with monkeys—I've traveled through Asia and Southeast Asia, through India. Monkeys are a trip, but they're very focused on what they want and what they don't want. And so often, as I'm sure you've heard, Western dharma teachers talk about this unruliness, or the hindrances, as a kind of monkey mind—the restlessness, the jumping back and forth.

So this is all an attempt to find pleasure and comfort, and possibly avoid discomfort or unpleasant thoughts or feelings, even situations. Vipassana takes this untrained everyday mind as a natural starting point. That's the first thing to understand. Whether you're a beginning meditator tonight or someone who has been doing this for ten years, this is the natural starting point.

And you know, the wonderful thing about practice is that it's just that—practice. There's that saying from the Dalai Lama. I heard it a long time ago, but I've been reflecting on it recently. A student asked, "How long will it take before I really notice some progress in my practice?" And the Dalai Lama—I'm paraphrasing obviously—said something like, "It's a good idea to evaluate your practice every ten years." Not to focus on where you are in your practice, how free you are, after you've been doing it a year or two years or even five years. Ten years.

That was really helpful for me when it first sunk in. I heard it a few times before I really let it sink in. And it was helpful because I stopped evaluating my practice. I started just being the practice, doing the practice, exploring the practice, instead of evaluating it. Where am I? Because that's the way our Western minds often think. And it's not just Western, but it's definitely in our culture, in our ethos—this "get more now, fast, quick." You can look on the internet for "enlightenment now, five easy steps" for ninety-nine dollars. "Learn to be a meditation teacher in five weeks." It's just the way we are. It's important to recognize that. It's just the tendency. The Buddha called it greed. Wanting. Desire—unwholesome desire, unskillful desire. Grasping, really. Craving.

So Vipassana takes this untrained everyday mind as a natural starting point and gives a clear and systematic way of developing awareness of this process. That's helpful.

So it's been twenty years now that I've been practicing. And just recently, I was in meditation, and it actually happened a few times—a few periods, a few days, a few weeks—of just checking in: What's going on in here? The Dalai Lama said I could do it. I waited, actually, an extra ten years because I'm

particularly stubborn in my mind.

And you know what I've come to recognize? I'm less angry. I'm less quick to judgment. I have a lot less suffering in my life. Not that there isn't difficulty, and there hasn't been difficulty, but I have less attachment to the difficulty. And so I see it arising and passing away sooner—days and weeks instead of months and years. I feel much more connected to my heart, to this emotional self that I, in a lot of ways, for a lot of years, as a survival mechanism, denied.

One of the topics I was thinking of focusing on is kind awareness, or mettā, loving-kindness. It's super important. It's really helpful to focus on seeing the mind and seeing the habits of mind. And equally as important to focus on compassion and loving-kindness and the cultivation of that. I denied that for a long time. I was like, "I just want wisdom. I want the wisdom to see clearly. I want to get enlightened." There was a craving around that, although I had no idea what enlightenment meant. I thought it meant I could levitate or something, read people's minds—some kind of cool power.

But what I've come to find is that the balance of both wisdom and compassion is exactly what the Buddha taught. And it is liberating. Even the awareness, the liberation, the liberating power of awareness that is found through metta or through karuna—loving kindness or what I like to think about as unconditional positive regard. I think of metta that way because "loving kindness" is just a little too woo-woo for me, although I'm more open to it now than I was. I'm not going to talk a whole lot about that, but just to name it—I feel like that's super important. And for a long time in my practice, as I said, I denied it.

This bare awareness or attention is defined by Mark Epstein, who wrote several books. He's a psychotherapist and psychiatrist, and also a Dharma practitioner and teacher across multiple traditions. He described bare awareness as "a clear and single-minded awareness of what actually happens to us and in us in successive moments of perception." What is happening within me and around me in every given moment?

The challenge I have for you—and I think the Buddha gave this same challenge—is how often can you check into that throughout the day? What's happening within me and around me? Not evaluating, not fixing, not problem solving, not judging. Just awareness. What's happening here, just now, just this breath? That's my challenge for you.

Bare awareness takes the unexamined mind and opens it up—not by trying to change anything, but by observing the mind, our emotions, and the body just the way they are. Just the way they are.

The Buddha spoke of the power of mindfulness, sati, in a very emphatic way several times throughout the suttas. I have just a couple here. "Mindfulness, I declare, is all helpful," said the Buddha in the Samyutta Nikaya. "All things can be mastered by mindfulness," from the Anguttara Nikaya.

The third Zen patriarch had this to say, and it stuck out to me. I heard it in a teaching first and then later studied the text directly: "Stop thinking and talking and there's nothing you cannot know." This was really

helpful. I think it's helpful for us with this kind of intellectualizing that we may tend to do, especially in the Dharma.

One of the things I'm really grateful for is that when I learned to meditate, I knew nothing about Buddhism. I knew that in a Chinese restaurant there's the happy Buddha—put a little quarter on his belly, maybe you get good fortune or something. That's really all I knew about the Buddha. And somewhere in Asia, I don't even know where. But I just learned to practice. I'm really grateful for that, because the practice became experiential. Then later, as I started taking philosophy classes—I started meditating when I was about sixteen.

So this teaching, "Stop thinking and talking and there's nothing you can't know"—it points to the practice. The rubber meets the road. Doing it, which we're doing. My friend Noah Levine talks about how there's the spiritual revolutionary, the one percent of our population that actually does the practice, that actually meditates. He calls it the spiritual one-percenters.

So how might we work with this in our day-to-day life—this present-time awareness, this mindfulness, this seeing things as they really are? Love and loss. People die. People leave. How do we go on?

As I work with others—one of the things that I do is I'm a psychotherapist and a Dharma teacher and consultant and educator—I come into contact with those who are in denial of the reality of change, in denial of anicca, impermanence. That which arises, passes away. And in turn, they cause much suffering for themselves.

I'm not saying don't feel pain, or that you're not going to have pain and loss. The Buddha never claimed that. But he made a very clear differentiation between pain and suffering. Suffering being when we cling or crave for things to be other than they are. There's the story of the two darts, the arrow of life.

Pain. The First Noble Truth talks all about it, all the ways. Not getting what we want. Or getting what we don't want—that's a particular kind of pain. And then suffering being when we push it away or grasp. This is another way of thinking about the relationship between pain and suffering.

There's a story I heard some years ago, a Zen story. There was this Zen priest who was the abbot of a monastery, and he had all of these monks that were ardent in their practice. He was always talking about seeing through the illusion. And one day, he was off at the edge of the monastery, and he was weeping, crying. Some of the younger monks came upon him and said, "Abbot, Sensei, what's the matter?" And the Sensei said, "I lost my brother. My brother died." The young monks responded, "But it's all illusion. Nothing really—it's just conditions arising and passing away." And he said, "Yes, but this is a very painful illusion."

It was that moment of teaching: yeah, we're still of this world. There still is pain and grief and loss and separation. How can we be with it, actually? Turn toward it, not away from it. The instinctual part of our psyche, our ego, is to turn away or we'll be overwhelmed. So it's important, I think, just to see that.

And then the Buddha's teaching on the mindfulness of impermanence—so helpful in this. That which arises passes away as we experience the pains of life: old age, sickness, death. No escaping it.

So there are a few ways of looking at this mindfulness or this awareness. Being aware of its arising—being aware of the arising of really all kinds of mental fabrications, thoughts and feelings. And then there's the establishment. Once we've established mindfulness, we can develop mindfulness. This is less about what is arising and passing away, but more the minute changes, which is really a nuanced practice. I actually think working with pain can be really helpful—chronic pain or just the dharma pain, the pain of sitting. Seeing how it's changing constantly. It doesn't feel like it all the time, right? Ten years, remember? Ten years of practice.

There are a couple of things I was thinking about. The Buddha talked of this development of mindfulness: "It's better to live a single day seeing the rapid arising and passing away of all phenomena than to live a hundred years not seeing." That's pretty weighty, pointing to the liberating power of this awareness and how we need to rebel against our tendencies to numb out, to check out. To be on our iPhones or work eighty hours a week.

This liberating power of seeing clearly reorients our mind towards freedom from attachment and in turn freedom from suffering. Non-clinging.

I heard you had a talk recently on the four foundations of mindfulness. This is the beginning and the end of the four foundations of mindfulness, which I think talks specifically and emphatically about how necessary this is. This is the only way, folks—he says monks or bhikkhus, but—this is the only way, folks, for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the destruction of pain and grief, for reaching the right path, for the attainment of Nibbana. Namely, these four foundations of mindfulness.

I believe what the Buddha is saying is that the only way is to start by seeing clearly – our relationship to our thoughts and our feelings, this body, this life, our attachment to it, our aversion towards it. We have to start there again and again. The only way out is through.

How many people have heard the acronym RAIN? I think this is a really helpful way to work with the content of experience and non-identifying with it. I'll briefly go through it.

RAIN begins with recognize – you need to recognize what's happening. That's essentially what I've been talking about for the last twenty minutes or so. Then accept it. Accept that it's there – not that it's taking over, but accepting that it is present. There is whatever: pain, sickness, loss, story, habitual response. You have to have some acceptance.

And then begin to investigate. So then we're turning actually away from the mind. This is part of the rebellious quality, rebelling against the mind's tendency to just do the rat race – thinking, thinking, thinking, thinking about thinking, thinking about thinking about thinking. How many people do that? Yes,

the engineers in the room perhaps.

So investigate: How does it feel in this body? Where can I feel sorrow or grief or loneliness or agitation or anger or joy? Where can it be felt? And how does it change?

Then comes this non-identification, sometimes called dis-identification. One of the ways I've been talking about it more recently is non-personalizing. How can I be with experience without being overwhelmed by it or overcome or lost in it? This non-personalizing, dis-identifying – it's a very complicated thing to do. That's at the crux, actually, of the teaching of anatta, not-self.

If we can see how we're not our thoughts and we're not our feelings, then we can begin to see how it changes. But if we're identified with it, then we're identified with it as a self – as an "I am my anger," "I am this pain," "I am even this joy," or "I am this meditation." Anytime we're clinging or identifying, we're creating a sense of self: "I am spiritual." So this process can develop – this is a process of developing a non-judgmental awareness to our experience – and it can be liberating and healing.

I'm going to read something called "Habits of Mind" by Mahagosananda. Mahagosananda was a Cambodian monk who was alive in the time of the Khmer Rouge. He was exiled to Thailand during the Khmer Rouge because they were killing monks and nuns and the educated – just this horrible genocide. So Mahagosananda was training in Thailand and came back after the Khmer Rouge lost power. He went on a mission, walking around to villages teaching the Buddha Dharma. And there was a lot of anger, a lot of frustration, a lot of vengeance – "Kill the Khmer Rouge! Look at what they've done to us."

Their own people.

And so there's one particular story—the way I understand it—where Mahagosananda actually went back to the village he grew up in and lived in. So many of the elders he knew had died, so many people he'd known his whole life were gone. And he gave a teaching there, and this was part of his teaching around forgiveness and around loving-kindness and compassion.

He said this: "The thought manifests as word. The word manifests as the deed. The deed develops into the habit. Habit hardens into character. Character gives birth to destiny. So watch your thoughts with care, and let them spring from love born out of respect for all beings."

I believe he's saying: rebel against the tendencies of greed, hatred, and delusion. Rebel against those tendencies.

There's another teaching I want to share. This is from the Buddha. There's a great little book called *The Teachings of the Buddha* by Jack Kornfield—it's my little cheat sheet. I take it with me pretty much everywhere I go. This passage is from the Dhammapada:

"We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world. Speak or act with an impure mind, an unskillful mind, and trouble will follow you as the wheel follows the

ox that draws the cart. We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world. Speak or act with a pure mind, a skillful mind, and happiness will follow you as your shadow, unshakable. How can a troubled mind understand the way? Your worst enemy cannot harm you as much as your own thoughts unguarded. But once mastered, no one can help you as much—not even your father or your mother."

We are what we think. With our thoughts we make the world.

So this awareness of what's happening within us and around us in any given moment is the key to not being a slave to our thoughts. It's learning to rebel against those tendencies. The precepts are also extremely helpful—they help us from spilling over. And this is intention, the very thing Mahagosananda is speaking about. He's talking quite a bit about intention.

So this final quote comes from Ajahn Sumedho, Luang Por Sumedho, the lineage holder of my tradition—the Theravadan tradition, Thai forest tradition. He wrote a book called *Intuitive Awareness*, and he had this to say:

"Awareness is your refuge. Awareness of the changingness of feelings, of attitudes, of moods, of material change. Stay with that, because it is a refuge that is indestructible. It's not something that changes. It's a refuge that can be trusted in. This refuge is not something that you create. It's not a creation. It's not an ideal. It's very practical and very simple, but easily overlooked or not noticed. When you're mindful, you're beginning to notice: it's like this."

"It's like this" is one of the simplest and most difficult practices. And it points again and again to the ever-changing phenomena. When we can see this, when we can be open to this—which is exactly what this practice does—it helps us to see moments of change, moments of openness.

So we're not so locked in.

I call my group in Santa Cruz "Rebel Dharma" because I believe that the essence of the Buddha's teaching—and actually the essence of the Buddha's life—was rebellious, was revolutionary. It had to have been. It's carried on for so long. And so his teaching's challenge to us is to rebel against our own tendencies toward greed, hatred, and delusion, and to incline the mind towards openness, freedom from suffering, loving-kindness, care, compassion, and equanimity.

Let's end with a little compassion, a little loving-kindness. Mettā. One of my friends calls this the after-dinner mint of the Dharma—after the hard work.

So just sitting relaxed, allowing the eyes to close. Connecting with the breath in the body. This heart space, this emotional center.

Breathing in, silently saying the phrase: *May I be happy. May I be happy.*

From the head to the heart and the heart to the head: *May I be peaceful. May I be peaceful.*

May I be free from suffering and the causes of suffering. May I be free from suffering and the causes of suffering.

Oh, this mind you carry on your back—your actions are like a heavy sack. No wonder that your shoulders ache. Another strain's enough to break your neck. So drop this stupid load. This is the last stop on the road where you can find rest. Stay. Stay. Be love's guest.

May any goodness that's come from our practice—may this goodness be dedicated to the freedom from suffering for all beings everywhere. May we all be free.

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