Becoming Freedom

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 48:31

When Shaila invited me to this series, I jumped at it. One of my favorite things is to talk about some of these teachings that are not so common or lesser known. The teaching I picked is from a lesser known book in the Pali Canon called the Sutta Nipata. It's a set of poems sometimes called the Chapter of the Eights. The Pali name for this teaching is the Atthakavagga, which basically means the Chapter of the Eights. It's not really clear why it's called that, because there's not much eight about it. There are sixteen poems, and some of them have eight sections or couplets, but most of them don't. Nevertheless, that's what it's called.

There are a couple of reasons I like this text. One is that historically, most scholars agree this is probably one of the earliest recorded teachings of the Buddha—not only early in its compilation, but also early in his time as a teacher. The way this is recognized is that the Pali itself, the language, is a little more archaic than in some of the other suttas. Thanissaro Bhikkhu points out that for poems that's not so unusual. But the real giveaway is that this is one of the few suttas which is referenced in other teachings. There are texts where people are saying, "Have you memorized that set of poems? Do you know that set of poems?" The Buddha is also talking about memorizing these teachings as a useful teaching tool. From that standpoint, it is somewhat of an earlier teaching.

One of the interesting things I find about this text is that it seems to be from before some of the standard ways that the teachings were codified. There's no mention of the Four Noble Truths in these teachings. There's no mention of the Eightfold Path. The picture you get of the Buddha in these teachings is of a solitary teacher wandering around and talking to people. What he chose to talk to them about in this collection of poems was suffering, and that suffering is created by clinging—clinging to sense pleasure and clinging to views being the two main areas addressed.

So it's a very direct teaching. In some ways it's simple because it's focused around this very basic inquiry: How do we cling? What do we cling to? And what are ways that support letting go of clinging?

There are three different types of verses in these poems. All sixteen chapters contain verses with one of three flavors. They are either describing what it's like to be an ordinary person caught up in clinging and the suffering that comes from that. Or they describe the perspective, the state of mind, the experience of a person who is free. Or they describe how one moves from being a person who's caught to being one that's free.

In this way, the text has a very simple structure. I credit Thanissaro Bhikkhu a lot for my study of this text because he pointed out this structure and said, when you read these poems, look for which kind of verse

you're reading—that will help you to understand what's happening. I used that in my own study.

Given that there are sixteen poems and about 210 verses, I'm not going to go through the entire thing. I'm going to pick out a few themes, read a few sections, and highlight pieces that I find interesting about this teaching—a few of the key aspects that I find inspiring about this text.

The two kinds of clinging—clinging to sense pleasure and clinging to views—are central. The first thing I'd like to explore are some of the poems that talk about what it's like to be an ordinary person clinging to sense pleasure.

This is from the very first poem, and I'm using excerpts here rather than reading entire poems. I took the liberty, with all of the translations, of drawing from several sources—Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Bhikkhu Virado, and Sadatissa. Another way I studied this text was to read as many different translations as I could find. In general, if you're studying something in this way, it's often useful to read different translations because they give you different flavors.

To start looking at the perspective of clinging, how an ordinary person relates to their life, here is the first poem in Thanissaro Bhikkhu's translation. I also took the liberty of editing these for gender neutrality:

If one longing for sense pleasure achieves it, yes, they're enraptured at heart. The mortal gets what they want. But if for that person, longing, desiring, the pleasures diminish, they're shattered as if shot with an arrow. One who is greedy is overpowered with weakness and trampled by trouble, for pain invades them as water a cracked boat.

This pointing to the way that as we go through our lives, if we're orienting our experience toward trying to hold on to sense pleasure, hold on to pleasant experience, and get rid of unpleasant experience—this incredibly natural and human way of orienting to the world, which we all do—if that's our way of thinking we'll find happiness, we are destined to experience suffering in this life because things are impermanent. We are bound to be confronted by pleasant things going away and unpleasant things being here. And so the Buddha describes this as "pain invading them as water a cracked boat."

Another verse on this, from the second poem: "Longing for what's over or what's to come, yearning for pleasures in the present and pleasures in the past, those who are greedy for pleasure, hunting for it, deranged, selfish, have entered the wrong road. Look at them, floundering amidst their cherished possessions like fish in a dwindling stream."

That image of fish in a dwindling stream—that one is very evocative to me. At one point during a long retreat, I was experiencing the mind just flopping around, trying to find some pleasure somewhere. And it had that feeling. It felt like a fish. This image from the poem came to me, and I laughed. It brought some amusement to just watch the mind flopping around: "Isn't there some pleasure somewhere?"

These teachings point to the way it is for an ordinary human being clinging to pleasure. And that clinging

to pleasure does include clinging to getting rid of displeasure, clinging to getting rid of the unpleasant. But then another major area of teaching in this text is around clinging to views.

Clinging to sense pleasure is something we all do. It's often how we orient, the way we live our lives. It's very natural. We learn from the moment we're born that if we get something we like, something pleasant, it feels good. We get a little bit of a feedback hit: "Oh, that feels good." Or if we manage to get rid of something we don't like, again there's a little bit of a feedback hit that feels good. So it's very natural that we orient around that. And yet as we begin to practice, as we begin to explore our experience, we see the pain of it—the pain of holding onto pleasure and trying to get rid of pain. We begin to recognize that this may not be so helpful, and so we may begin to have a way to let go of some of our holdings around sense pleasure.

A deeper level, a deeper layer of holding, is around views—clinging to views. Views about who we are, what we're capable of. Views about other people. Views about what's good, what's bad, what's right, what's wrong. So many of our views are absorbed through our upbringing, through our culture, through our families.

We have views about how close you should stand to somebody when you're talking to them. Whether and how much you look them in the eye. Whether you shake hands when you meet somebody you don't know. These are just things that come in through our culture. They're views. They're not the right way—these are simply examples of how views get absorbed.

But when you meet somebody from a different culture and they stand at a different distance, or look you in the eye a little longer, or don't look you in the eye, or perhaps hold your hand while they're talking to you, there can be discomfort because it's not familiar. The holding to views is around believing or having the perspective that this is the right way to do it.

Now these are simple examples I'm giving here—very simple examples. But we hold to views, and in the Buddhist teaching, views are actually some of the main reasons why there's conflict in the world. People holding to views. In our country at this point, views around race are a huge source of conflict. Different perspectives, different beliefs, different views. The Buddha pointed to clinging to views as being one of the main reasons there's conflict in the world. Holding to fixed opinions creates a sense of self and other—this perspective of view.

Some of the teachings from the Aṭṭhakavagga on the drawbacks of 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 opinion upon which they regard themselves as an expert. To the extent to which they rate themselves expert, they despise anyone else who makes the same claim.

And my favorite—one of my favorite verses from the entire teaching: "Those attached to perception and

views roam the world offending people."

There's another verse where someone asks a question and the Buddha responds. The questioner says, "Those who maintain a view and dispute about the view, saying 'this alone is true'—is criticism all they receive, all they experience? Don't they also receive praise?" This person is pointing to something the Buddha has apparently been talking about—that when you express these opinions, you may be criticized. And he asks, "But don't you also get praised?" As if that makes it better.

And the Buddha says, "Whatever they receive is trifling, not enough to 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."

There's so much to explore around views. To begin to recognize that we hold views, to begin to see that if there's conflict, there is a view being held somewhere. And so, curiosity about that. If there's conflict in yourself, sometimes there's a view being held about yourself. This can be something we explore in our experience: if there's some kind of conflict, curiosity—what view am I holding? Just hold that question for yourself.

I gave a teaching this morning around perception and concepts and how these lead to views. There's a classic teaching around this—the blind people and the elephant. I'm sure many of you have heard this teaching story. It's actually a teaching story from the Pali Canon, found in the suttas.

The story goes that a king asks his ministers to bring both an elephant and blind people, and to show the blind people the elephant by having them touch it. Some touched the legs, some touched the side of the elephant, some the tail, some the tuft of the tail. When asked, "What is an elephant like?" they each responded with a different analogy. Some said an elephant's like a post—those who touched the leg. An elephant's like a wall—those who touched the side. An elephant's like a broom—those who touched the tuft of the tail.

And then, hearing each other's responses, the teaching story goes on, they started arguing. "An elephant is like this—you're wrong." "No, an elephant is like that—you're wrong." The view, based on their own experience, became hardened. "This is what an elephant is." And the story goes on that they actually came to blows over this. Rather than being curious—"That's interesting. You think it's like a broom? It sure felt like a wall to me. Let's see if we can figure out what's going on here"—rather than doing that, people tend to solidify around their views.

This particular story is really a teaching for us because it's pointing to views that are created based on our own experience. These are some of the most tenacious views we have. We experience something; we think we know from our direct experience. But maybe we've only got a piece of the picture. Maybe we've only seen a little bit of it. When we come up against conflict in this way, perhaps we can think: maybe there's a bigger picture in which we can explore how these parts connect.

This morning, talking about this, the question came up about political views. Some people are saying it's like a post, and some people are saying the tuft of the tail is like a broom. We are entrenched in our opinions. Is there a way? It seems imperative to me at this point in our country that we find a way to step back and talk about the elephant. Or the donkey—either one. Let's see if we can find a way to the bigger picture. This is creating so much suffering and division and pain in our world. And the Buddha pointed to this 2,600 years ago: views are going to create suffering.

Views are going to create conflict. And so the Buddha spoke directly to this.

The next thing I'd like to share are some verses in this text that describe somebody who is free—somebody who has freed their mind from clinging. Really, these poems are directly pointing to one of the most pithy teachings of the Buddha. When the Buddha was asked at one point, "Could you describe your teaching in a short phrase?" he said, "Nothing should be clung to as I or me or mine."

I think this whole text might be considered a commentary on that one phrase: Nothing should be clung to as I or me or mine.

Those who have released that clinging to I or me or mine—that person is understood in this context to be free of the suffering that comes from such clinging. And that, in the Buddha's understanding, was everything we actually call suffering. We think what we call suffering is something that's unpleasant. But pleasant, unpleasant, neutral experience will come and go through our lives. That's just flowing through. What's really going on is that we react—we become averse to the unpleasant, we hold on to the pleasant. And so it's something happening in our own minds that is creating this struggle, this suffering. This is what the Buddha is pointing to: the release of that clinging.

Some of the poems describe liberated people—people who are free from this clinging. There are different ways they're described, and this is one of the most interesting aspects of this particular text. The way that people who are free are described is primarily in terms of how they are in the world—how they act, how they walk in this world, what they do. Sometimes it talks a little bit about their state of mind, but mostly it's this very ordinary description of somebody living in the world.

Here's a description of somebody who is liberated. A questioner asks the Buddha: "I want to ask you about the perfect person. There are those people we call those who are calmed. Can you tell me how they see things and how they behave?"

"One who has calmed, who has extinguished all craving before the time the body disintegrates, who has no concern over how things began or with how they will end, and no fixation with what happens in between—such a one has no preferences. They have no anger, no fear, and no pride. Nothing disturbs their composure and nothing gives them cause for regret. The wise person is restrained in speech. They have no longing for the future and no grief for the past. There are no views or opinions that lead them. They can see detachment from the entangled world of sense impressions. They do not conceal anything

and there's nothing they hold on to. Without acquisitiveness or envy, they remain unobtrusive. They have no disdain or insult for anyone. They are not full of themselves or addicted to pleasure. They are gentle and alert with no blind faith. They show no aversion to anything. They are not people who work because they want something. If they get nothing at all, they remain unperturbed. There is no craving to build up the passion to taste new pleasures. The sage, freed from greed and selfishness, does not speak of themselves as among those who are superior, equal, or inferior. The sage regards nothing in the world as one's own and does not grieve because of what does not exist. Not blindly following religious teachings, such a one is truly called peaceful."

Mostly the description here is in terms of what they don't do. They're not angry, not fearful, not proud; they don't have fixation, no preferences, no blind faith, no aversion. A lot of things have been let go.

This is an interesting aspect of the Buddhist teaching. In general, the Buddha doesn't talk so much about what we can get, but what can be released. Clinging can be released. All of these areas are areas of clinging released. There are a few positive descriptions here: calm, wise, gentle, alert, even-minded. Elsewhere in this text there are some other descriptions of qualities of a liberated person.

Serene, wise, calm. They're mindful. They see, they know. And they're equanimous. These are beautiful qualities of mind that result from this letting go.

So this is a picture of someone who's free in this teaching—someone walking around the world, engaged in the world. It's a picture that may not be very close to where we are, you know: not averse, not frustrated, no preferences. But we're working on that. It's a picture of a person that I can imagine myself to possibly be someday.

This description, this way of describing the liberated state, doesn't present some abstract idea of liberation apart from the qualities of someone who is free. This is in contrast with the standard Theravada description of someone who's liberated—being someone who is free from the round of the cycle of rebirth, someone who on their final passing at death is no longer born again into this world. A metaphysical difference, some fundamental shift of being that changes the metaphysical state of a being. This is a piece of the Theravada tradition that can be found throughout the Pali Canon, but it's not found in this teaching. This teaching really emphasizes this-worldly freedom. I find that to be very inspiring, personally.

There are some quotes from my research around this text. One person who wrote a scholarly text on this, Grace Burford—I believe it might have been her doctoral thesis—gives this quote: "The Atthakavagga is exceptional within even the earliest Buddhist literature in its non-metaphysical presentation of the highest good achievable by humans." Metaphysical presentation is often something that is beyond what can actually be known in this life. "It is significant as an example of how the Buddhist ideal goal can be presented without all of the usual cosmological and metaphysical accessories that accompany it in its traditional Theravada doctrine."

So there's a lot in the Theravada that brings in different realms of existence, things that some Westerners have difficulty connecting with. And this particular teaching is a coherent teaching in which that is not brought in.

Another quote from another scholar: "The Atthakavagga sets out to describe a practical solution to human sorrow—not merely the abstract sorrow of rebirth, but the everyday sorrow of strife and aggression." Again, this is one of the reasons I find this particular teaching so inspiring. It speaks to me here and now, in this very life.

The next set of verses relates to the path of practice—how to get from being the ordinary person to being the liberated person. The training is described in quite a bit of detail in the last three poems. I'll read some of this and see what you might notice about it.

A questioner asks, "Venerable sir, speak about the path of practice."

The Buddha says: "A person should not have covetous eyes. One should close one's ears to ordinary chatter. One 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 live in lodgings where there is little noise. One should not sleep too much. One should be devoted to wakefulness and keen endeavor. One should abandon laziness, deception, merriment, various kinds of amusement. One should not fear blame nor be conceited when praised. One should drive out greed, selfishness, anger, and malicious speech. One should not be a boaster. One should not speak scheming words. One should not cultivate impudence nor utter quarrelsome speech. One should not be drawn into telling lies nor be deliberately treacherous. One should not despise others for their lowly way of life or wisdom or precepts and practices."

If ascetics or ordinary people irritate one with their talkativeness, one should not respond harshly, for the peaceful do not retaliate.

If you want to cultivate peace, act peacefully.

We sometimes think—I know you know there's this really strong feedback loop between our mind and our bodies. What's going on in our mind will filter out into our bodies, as that example around impatience shows. But this feedback loop goes both ways. As we engage in the world, not repressing that we don't feel patient or peaceful, not pretending we're not anxious, but fully acknowledging what's present while choosing how we act—something interesting begins to happen.

Basically, in this teaching, the Buddha is encouraging us to behave as though we were free.

When I read these kinds of paired texts—the description of somebody who is free and the description of somebody who is in training—the difference is the word "should" versus "is." Very much the person who is free *is* meditative, not footloose, *is* desisting, *is* not worrying, *is* not indolent. So the word "should"

here—this isn't, to me, "stop your mind from doing what it's doing." Because we can't do that. Good luck with that.

Rather, in some ways the path of practice he's recommending is to try to model the behavior of those who are free. In my own experience, this is a very valuable practice, but only when I am willing and very honest with myself about what's actually going on in my mind.

Here's one example around patience and impatience: Cultivate patience by acting patiently. That could be something expressed here. Cultivate patience by acting patiently. If you're experiencing impatience, it may be tempting to repress that impatience in order to act patiently. But in my experience, this is not what the Buddha is teaching, and it is not actually effective.

What is very effective is to fully recognize: "Yep, wow, there's a lot of impatience happening here."

I'll give you an example. I was in a Long's drugstore, before it became something else, shopping. I was very impatient, kind of in a hurry to get through the store. And I noticed that this impatience was being expressed through my body. We see this often—our mind states are expressed through our body, even in subtle ways. Through expressions on our face. Through the way we engage with the world. And so this impatience was coming out of me by picking up things off the shelf and throwing them into my basket.

I noticed this and decided, okay, I'm going to practice patience here. I'm noticing the impatience. I'm going to see—not repressing this impatience—but I'm going to see if I can act as though I were patient.

So I slowed down my movements. I fully acknowledged, "Yep, there's impatience here." This was not about repressing. Not about repressing the impatience. This was an act of deep honesty, really acknowledging, "Yep, there's impatience here." The way I explored it was like, "Okay, I'm going to see—can I fully know this impatience but not let it leak out of my skin? Can I not let it leak out of my behavior?"

I began picking up things more carefully and placing them in my basket. Within about thirty to forty seconds, the impatience had fallen away and the mind was quite calm.

This kind of practice, I think, is some of what the Buddha is suggesting here. He encourages us to model the behavior of wise beings—but watch our minds. Not repress. Worry is arising? Notice how worry leaks out into your actions and see: can I really know this worry but behave as though I was not worried? See what might happen there. It's an interesting dance to play with.

Not repressing anxiety in order to act peacefully, but just watching and seeing that movement of rebound on the mind.

In some ways we trust, and we're a culture of "let it out." What's going on in our minds we have to be fully honest about and let it out. This may not be the best approach all the time, especially with something like anger. I'm not suggesting that you repress anger, but expressing it and letting it out tends to reinforce that pattern. And so what might it mean to fully know, "Yep, there's anger here," and what might it mean to act

as though I were not angry? It's kind of a fake-it-till-you-make-it teaching. But again, we have to be really honest with ourselves about what's actually going on in our minds.

One thing I'll mention briefly: there's a huge other part of the teaching of this text that relates to views and not clinging to views—not clinging to any views, including the Dharma. This is a somewhat paradoxical teaching in some ways. There are people who believe that the teaching of the Aṭṭhakavagga encourages us to not hold any view at all. I don't get that sense from the texts and from this teaching.

To me, the way in which the teaching of "don't cling to views" is expressed makes it really clear that clinging to views will create suffering. If we're clinging, even clinging to the Dharma—"This Dharma, what the Buddha teaches, this is right. I'm willing to kill for this"—this is going to lead to suffering in the world. Even the Buddha's teaching would lead to that if we're holding it in that way. "You don't believe in this teaching, you're wrong. You're bad." If that's how the Dharma is held, the Buddha said, that's not the way. That's not going to lead to the lessening of suffering. And so even the Dharma, he says, should not be clung to. And yet I don't believe he's saying the Dharma should not be used, should not be valued.

I see this exploration on letting go of clinging to views expressed beautifully by another sutta. This one is very famous, so it doesn't really fit in the category of lesser-known teachings. This is the simile of the raft, where the Buddha talks about the Eightfold Path as being like a raft. We make a raft to cross over our suffering. The suffering is described as the near shore where we are standing. We see the far shore where there's peace. And there's this flood of water in the middle that needs to be crossed over to get there. All you see on this side of the shore are sticks and mud and maybe some vines. And so gathering those together, he uses this analogy, we make a raft to cross over the water, to get to the other side.

There are a number of things I like about this analogy. The first one: we make the raft out of what's available, what's right here. We don't have to build this amazing luxury liner to cross the stream. We can build this raft out of what's available, out of our direct experience and the teachings. The Buddha says that the raft is the Eightfold Path, put together with our sights and sounds and smells and tastes and such—knowing our experience through the Eightfold Path. And so we build our raft.

You can envision a raft made out of sticks and mud and vines. It's going to have a lot of holes in it. You're crossing over this flood—the flood is said to represent the suffering of greed, aversion, and delusion—and you're going to get wet. When you're crossing over this stream, you're going to be in contact with the pain. The raft is keeping you afloat on top of it, not sucked under, not swept away. You're making effort with your hands and your feet to get across. But you're going to get wet. You are going to experience suffering. And yet the raft is giving us a new perspective. The Eightfold Path is giving us a new perspective.

Now, if the teaching is "don't cling to anything," well, if you let go of the raft when you're in the middle of the stream, you are going to drown.

So use the raft. Cross over the stream with the raft.

And then the last part of this teaching is that the Buddha says: suppose somebody, having made use of this raft to cross over the stream, once they're on the other side, thinks, "Wow, this raft has been really useful to me. Maybe I should put it on my head and carry it around with me wherever I go." Would that be useful? No. Instead, let the raft drift away and go about your business.

So in that way is my understanding of not clinging to the Dharma. At the very end of that teaching, the Buddha even says that even the Dharma and wholesome states should not be clung to—how much more so unwholesome states should not be clung to. And yet that analogy has described making use of the Dharma to free ourselves, to be in contact with suffering in a way that helps us move from being pulled under and sunk by it to being able to meet it in a new way, to transform our suffering. We do that by being in contact with it, not by somehow magically transcending it and floating above to land on the other side.

I hope this has given you some sense of appreciation for this early teaching of the Buddha. There are a few translations out there if you're interested in this text and want to read it. I will warn you, it's hard to read—a little dense, with some archaic ways of expressing things. Thanissaro Bhikkhu has a full translation of the *Aṭṭhakavagga* on Access to Insight, with helpful notes, but again, it's challenging to read. My understanding is he does a fairly accurate, literal translation, but that creates some challenges in English. There are other translations available online—"Chapter of the Octads" or "Chapter of the Eights" are good search terms.

Gil Fronsdal has also written a book that will be coming out with a publication date of October 27th this year, called *The Buddha Before Buddhism: Wisdom of the Early Teachings*, from Wisdom Publications. He's writing commentaries to each of the poems, so that may be of interest to you. There aren't many English language translations of this poem out there—Bhikkhu Bodhi, as far as I know, has not done one yet.

Thank you for your attention.

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