Cooling the Fire

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

So as Ted said, the title for this talk is Cooling the Fire. The inspiration for that name came from the word that is typically translated as enlightenment. When we talk about the Wesak Festival at the end of the month, we're celebrating the Buddha's birth, death, and enlightenment. Typically we do think about the Buddha becoming enlightened, and we might think about that as being the goal for the path. When Shaila invited this group of us to teach this particular series, she asked us to reflect about the goal—what we explore, what we think of as the goal of the path, and how we might find our way towards that.

The first thing I wanted to reflect on here is the Pali word that the Buddha used for his awakening: Nibbana. The literal meaning of that word is nothing like enlightenment. I don't know how people came up with that translation or why people use it, because the word itself basically means something like cooling—the act of cooling. I was told by one colleague that he understood this was a very ordinary word in the time of the Buddha, that you would speak about a fire cooling or the rice cooling. The nature of things when they're heated is to cool. That's just what happens when you no longer keep adding the heat. When you no longer keep adding the fuel to a fire, the fire goes out, the fire cools. And so the word for this freedom—what the Buddha spoke of as the possibility, the freedom that he discovered—it was a cooling of something.

When asked about what is cooled, I'll read some excerpts from the suttas about this word nibbana and what it means to have that freedom. These are from four different passages, but they weave together nicely:

"The extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion—this indeed is called Nibbana."

If we replace cooling there: the extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion—this is cooling.

"Enraptured with lust, enraged with anger, blinded by delusion, overwhelmed, with mind ensnared, one aims at one's own ruin, at the ruin of others, at the ruin of both, and experiences mental pain and grief. But if lust, anger, and delusion are given up, one aims neither at one's own ruin, nor at the ruin of others, nor at the ruin of both, and experiences no mental pain and grief. This is nibbana, immediate, visible in this life, inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise."

"And for a disciple thus freed, in whose heart dwells peace, there is nothing to be added to what has been done, and nothing remains to be done. Just as a rock of one solid mass remains unshaken by the wind, even so, neither forms, nor sound, nor odors, nor taste, nor contact of any kind, neither the desired nor

the undesired can cause such a one to waver. Steadfast is the mind, gained is deliverance."

"This is peace, this is exquisite. The resolution of all fabrications, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbana."

This is a description of what the Buddha understood to be the freedom that the path he found offered—this freedom, this release, this cooling of greed, aversion, and delusion. In one of the Buddha's early teachings, he used the analogy of fire for greed, aversion, and delusion. He said everything is burning with the fire of greed, everything is burning with the fire of aversion, everything is burning with the fire of delusion. We could look at nibbana as the cooling of those fires, the cooling of the fires of greed, aversion, and delusion.

To me this conveys something completely different than enlightenment. When I first heard the term enlightenment and started practicing, I had this image of getting something, of having some particular state or being in some particular way. But these descriptions speak not of what one gains, but what one lets go of. That to me is interesting because it actually leaves a lot of room for what's here. When one lets go of greed, aversion, and delusion, it means that the goal—how we are, how we might manifest in the world having let go of greed, aversion, and delusion—there's a lot of room for many different ways that would look. And that to me is inspiring.

When I practiced in Burma, I met a number of very wise and very kind and very practiced people. And they were very different. One that I met—I'll tell these stories because it feels like it might give a little flavor. I was practicing and supporting a retreat in the northern part of Burma in the Sagaing Hills. That particular part of Burma has hundreds and hundreds of monasteries in the hills. You can just walk in the hills and move from one monastery to another. We knew some of the monks in various monasteries in that area, so we would take hikes in the hills and go visit them. At one point we were hiking—it took about thirty minutes or so to hike to this one monastery—and we were chatting along the way. As we approached the monastery gate, one of the people with us who had been to this particular monastery a lot turned to us and said, "We need to be in silence as we walk into this monastery. We need to be in silence as we walk through the gate."

And so we fell into silence. As I walked through that gate, just the setting itself was remarkable—kind of set in a bowl, with cliffs on three sides of the monastery, so it was nestled in this protected area. The cliffs had been whitewashed so that rainwater could fall down into a catchment system. Something about the visual and the feeling of walking in—I felt like I was being immersed in an ocean of tranquility. It was quite remarkable.

And then I met the monk that lived there. I got so happy just sitting with him. He was such a calm and peaceful person that I felt like this quality was being transmitted through his very being. I was simply happy sitting in his presence, feeling so at ease and so peaceful.

We went to visit several monasteries repeatedly during that time. I'll tell one story of another monk I met. He had a very lively mind and was so delighted by the world that he was pretty much constantly laughing. We came in one day—he was probably ninety at this point. He had shriveled over the years that I had known him, and he looked like this little tiny being sitting in his chair. We knew he had been sick, and we asked him how his health was. He just laughed and laughed. I was hearing this through a translator, but it's so interesting how I feel like I heard it right from him. He said, "Oh yes, I've been really sick. I almost died the other day." I thought, wow—that's a happy guy. Something about him was so delighted, and it just made you delighted to be in his presence.

In both of these cases, such different expressions of freedom. This inspires me because it points to something important: whatever expression of the release of greed, aversion, and delusion happens here in this being, I can step into whatever that is. I don't have to model anybody in terms of how I engage. There's a way in which freedom, I think, will express itself in each of us in its own way.

In those quotes I read earlier, there are also some things I find deeply inspiring. The first is what the Buddha describes as the state of mind of one who is cooled, whose greed, aversion, and delusion has been released: such a one experiences no mental pain or grief.

Now, that might seem kind of unfathomable. Wouldn't one grieve if one lost a dear friend? Or saw the state of our country? Isn't grief a natural response to that? But I think the grief being pointed to here, and the mental pain—this is the suffering the Buddha spoke of—includes within it a form of aversion. The mind is rejecting something, pushing something away or holding on to something. The way things are, the way the world is, the fact that every single one of us—all of our family members, our parents, children, brothers, sisters, friends—every one of us is going to die, and we don't know the order in which that will happen: this is truth. The state of the world as it is right now has come to be. It is happening. It is truth in a way—this is what is here.

The resistance to what has already come to be is, at least in my understanding, part of what the Buddha is speaking about with this mental pain and grief: we are resisting what is already here. The heart is constricted or closed or rejecting something that is already present.

What the teachings also point to, though, is that when we see suffering happening in the world, if the heart is free from greed, aversion, and delusion—if the heart is not constricted by these forces—that heart feels suffering very profoundly. This is a place where we may need to come to a new understanding: what would it be to feel the suffering of the world very profoundly and deeply, without constriction?

The Buddha doesn't call that mental pain and grief. He calls it compassion—the heart that responds to the suffering of the world instead of fighting against it, instead of pushing against it.

When the heart that is free from greed, aversion, and delusion meets suffering in the world, the way that heart responds is qualitatively different. I feel like the heart constricted by greed, aversion, and delusion

is somehow hard, encased, encrusted.

It feels stiff. It doesn't resonate in sympathy with what's happening. It may shake, or it may break, or it may prove very brittle.

The heart that has become free from greed, aversion, and delusion—my sense of that, just from little tastes maybe every now and then, little tastes of the heart that is freed from at least chunks of greed, aversion, and delusion—there's a feeling of resonance. There's a feeling of quivering. The heart resonates. It feels almost like a bowl of jello. It doesn't shatter when some kind of energy shakes it. It just vibrates and wobbles and wiggles.

So when the heart that is free from greed, aversion, and delusion is contacted by suffering, it resonates with that suffering. And it wants to act. It wants to alleviate that suffering. When that same heart contacts joy in the world, it also resonates with that very deeply, feeling the delight of empathetic or sympathetic joy.

The heart that is free from greed, aversion, and delusion is not the heart of uncaring indifference or non-action. It is the heart infused with the qualities of love, of compassion, of joy, of equanimity, of generosity—that connected quality.

And yet, the usual way that we engage, when our hearts are covered by greed, aversion, and delusion, when they're operating from that perspective, it's very difficult for that heart to fathom that there's something else, another way to act in the world. It's like we're blinded. The delusion embedded in aversion says, "You have to act on me in order to be okay in your life when things are difficult." The delusion embedded in greed says, "You have to follow through with me in order to be happy, in order to get the things that you want."

These states of greed and aversion have an embedded delusion in them that basically believes they are the reason why we do anything. And they can't fathom that if they go away, there would be anything that we would do. Wanting believes, "Why would I do anything if I didn't want?" Wanting is not going to tell you that if it goes away, there are other beautiful motivations for life and for connection and for engagement.

One piece that I find inspiring is this: no mental pain and grief. What might that be? Just to even contemplate what a heart free from greed, aversion, and delusion might look like—I find that inspiring.

The other piece that I find inspiring is this: "This is nibbana immediate. Visible in this life. Inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise." Visible in this life. To me, that points to the possibility of living in the world, of being engaged in the world from this perspective of the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion. When I think of enlightenment, I kind of envision myself floating somewhere above the planet, not really engaged. But the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion—little tastes of moments of that in life, in engagement—reveals a possibility for being in the world, cooled, free from greed, aversion, and delusion.

So what does it mean then to come to this? What does it mean to find our way to becoming free from greed, aversion, and delusion?

Another teaching the Buddha offers around suffering points to a connection: when we are acting motivated out of greed, aversion, and delusion, we are destined to suffer. We will suffer. We may not suffer immediately, but we will. It's like we're setting into motion the seeds of suffering if we are acting out of the energies of greed, out of the energy of aversion, out of the energy of delusion. We're setting that suffering into motion.

There's an equivalence, in a way, between a mind with greed, aversion, and delusion and a mind in which there is suffering. This is the statement of the First Noble Truth: there is suffering, the truth of dukkha. And the Buddha encouraged us about suffering. The encouragement is to find our way to release from suffering, but the instructions are not "get rid of it." The instruction about suffering is to understand it.

This is our path. The whole of the Eightfold Path—wise view, wise intention, wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood, wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration—is designed to help us come to an understanding of suffering.

So what does understanding mean? In a really simple way, all packaged together with the wisdom of the Buddha and his Eightfold Path, it's a simple instruction to be aware of the arising of greed, aversion, and delusion, and get to know what that experience is as a human experience.

This is important—that there's a sense of coming into awareness around these states of mind: greed, aversion, and delusion. Beginning to know: greed is happening right now, aversion is happening right now, delusion is happening right now.

And yet that may not quite be enough. One of my teachers has pointed out that if you go to somebody on the street who's yelling and screaming and say, "Hey, do you know you're angry?" they'll look at you like you're nuts. "Yeah, of course I know I'm angry." But they're not knowing anger in the way of understanding what the human experience of anger actually is. They are knowing anger in terms of what it's going to do for them and how it's going to get them what they want.

This is not the kind of awareness that will support becoming free from greed, aversion, and delusion, because essentially that kind of awareness of anger—"How's it going to get me what I want? How's it going to help me figure out this problem or get rid of this thing or make sure that person never bothers me ever again?"—if we're caught in that cycle, we are reinforcing that anger is what's going to make us feel better at some point.

We get caught on this cycle. Something happens, we get angry, we yell at somebody, and they go away. For a little while, okay, that feels better—they're gone. So we've gotten what we wanted. But there's been a lot of mess put out into the world in the meantime, and we have also cultivated this quality of anger internally.

What we're asked to do, what the understanding the Buddha is pointing to when he says "understand suffering"—it's not to understand it only intellectually. That's helpful; it's helpful to have a framework of understanding. The Buddha taught that aversion is a form of suffering, and it's useful to have that perspective. But that's not enough. Even that isn't enough. We have to actually do the work for ourselves and begin to experience and recognize that anger itself is already suffering. The feeling of anger, the human experience of anger, hurts. It creates pain internally.

This is what the Buddha asks us to do in terms of understanding what's happening in our minds—understanding greed, aversion, and delusion. He asks us to look at the human experience. What does it mean to be a human being feeling greed? What is that experience of greed?

We might not usually think about that. Typically with greed, again in terms of the reinforcement of greed, we think, "Get what I want—that's what makes me happy." We follow through on greed. We look at the things we want and say, "Yep, that's what I need and I'm going to go after it." In that going after, we are missing that the feeling of wanting is itself already painful. The feeling of wanting. When wanting springs up, there is already suffering there. There's already a feeling of lack, a feeling that something's wrong, that something's off.

As I mentioned earlier, when we are caught by that view of wanting, wanting is not going to tell you, "Oh, by the way, if you hang out long enough, wanting will go away, and that particular desire is no longer going to be a problem." Wanting is not going to tell us that.

So the instruction around exploring greed, aversion, and delusion in practice is to bring mindfulness to the experience. What is the experience of wanting? See if we can take our attention out of the thing that we want, or in aversion, the situation that we don't like. Take the attention out of that for a little while and turn the attention to the inner landscape. What is the experience that's happening inside?

Now, this kind of instruction can be challenging, particularly around social injustice. It might feel like, in removing—I said remove the attention from the thing that we are wanting to have or to get rid of and put the attention on the aversion itself. This is a beginning instruction.

This is an instruction that helps us become familiar with these qualities and states of mind. Over time, what we begin to do is recognize: okay, there's this thing out here, and here's my relationship to it. Yes, I don't like that. That's happening, and yes, that feels like a bad thing to be happening, and I don't like it. I want it to go away. So there's aversion there.

But there's also the possibility to know the aversion while we are engaged with the situation. It's almost like we've taken another step back. We have some sense of: yes, there is aversion happening, and this is what that aversion is in relationship to. We may be able to recognize that aversion puts filters on our mind and has us start to see things in a particular way. And seeing things in a particular way means we're also not seeing other things.

When we start to see the filters that aversion creates, we can begin to act in a way that takes this into account. This aversive state of mind is happening right now, so perhaps I should take some care about how I engage. As I said earlier, the absence of aversion in the face of even social injustice does not mean that we would not engage. This is hard to understand, but it is the way the heart works—when the heart does not have that encrusting of aversion and it sees suffering happening in the world, it will act.

When we're caught by aversion and thinking, "This is wrong, I hate this, I need to annihilate this situation because it is so unjust—I have got to bring everything that I have in terms of all of my anger to bear on this situation"—when we're caught by aversion, that's the belief operating: that this is the only way something would change, if I act out of that aversion. It takes a little bit of a leap of faith to recognize that aversion is not the only motivator possible.

We need a little bit of care and caution when we see this, because as we go through this process of looking at greed, aversion, and delusion, it's not like one time looking at aversion will do it for us. It's a process. There's a gradual learning and a gradual releasing of these energies. There will be many times when we are engaged in the world and also experiencing aversion or greed. If we can have that step back and recognize, "Yep, I'm caught by aversion right now," that can help us balance the mind a little bit. We might recognize that part of what's going on in that mess around the aversion is also the contact with the pain of the suffering. The anger can be a kind of rejection of that pain. And yet the heart that is free from aversion is going to feel that pain and not resist it.

Embedded even in the aversive reaction, there is this movement of the heart towards wishing there not be suffering in the world, towards wishing that human beings didn't do this to each other. Recognizing that the anger is there, maybe we can connect to the thread that leads into that connection between us—the wish that beings be safe, the wish that beings have ease in their lives. Often the anger is tangled up with that wish.

In that tangle, I do sometimes speak about any form of suffering as a tangle between the deep, natural, human, wholesome wishes—to be happy, to be safe, to be at ease, to have health and well-being. This is the wish for metta for ourselves. This is wholesome. And yet those wishes come into contact with the way the world is: impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable. Our minds get it all tangled up. When that wish for safety meets the uncontrollability of life, it feels like a problem. The threads get all tangled up there.

Any kind of suffering, my sense is, is a tangle between these threads of truth—the thread of impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable, the ultimate nature of experience—and the deep wish for happiness, well-being, safety. Our mind just cannot comprehend how these can simultaneously coexist. We might think, and I've heard people say in meetings, "Yeah, I know it's all impermanent and uncontrollable, and so I shouldn't want that happiness." But no, that's not the way it works. That wish for happiness, for well-being for ourselves, is natural. It is not going to just disappear. There's a way we might use these truths to bludgeon ourselves. "Oh, you shouldn't want to be happy. You shouldn't want to be safe." Trying

to go to emptiness or something. "Everything's impermanent—okay, yeah, I'm fine with that." Meantime, the part of us that wants to be healthy, happy, and safe is going, "What's going on here?"

And so on the other side of it, if we are connecting to those wishes for happiness and health and safety, and we see that things are impermanent, unreliable, we might feel betrayed by the world, or might feel like the world is just wrong.

So what might it mean to hold both of these? Because both exist—the love that's very natural, that's a part of our human wholesomeness and well-being, and these truths. The mind that can't comprehend that they can coexist gets tangled. And this is suffering. Anger is a tangle between uncontrollable and wanting to be happy, in a way we could say that.

And so we've got this tangle. We might think that what we need to do is get rid of the anger, get rid of the tangle, take some scissors, cut that knot out of the fabric. But what are we doing there? It's composed of these threads. The knot itself is the suffering, not the threads.

And so the practice of being with that anger, the practice of opening to it and understanding—this is the human experience of anger. My sense of it is it's kind of like a lubricant or something that allows these threads to untangle. And then we have a weave in our lives between love and wisdom. They're woven together, supporting each other and informing each other, but not tangled anymore.

So that practice of understanding suffering—that's my sense of what the Buddha is pointing to: to understand the knot has these threads, and that this can be known and can be seen. The understanding of that creates the conditions for the untangling. It's a very gradual untangling. And the Buddha pointed to that too, the gradual nature of the untangling.

At one point he gave an analogy of a shipwreck. Parts of a ship are strewn over a beach—the wood and the rigging, the rope—and he said the sun, the sand, the wind, the water, all the elements act on all those parts of the ship, and gradually, slowly, over the course of months, they wear away.

Unpacking that analogy a little bit, that's pretty much all he said—that the sun, the sand, the wind are like the mindfulness. But if we think about it, think about that rope on a beach. You go back one day after the shipwreck, and the rope is there. It's pretty solid. You can pick it up and it's hard to pull apart. Go back the next day—what's worn down? Can you see any wearing down that's happened? Probably not. But the inexorable nature of the elements acting over the course of months and months and months... you come back six months later, you try to pick up that rope, and it falls apart.

This is the way he described the practice working. This gradual unfolding.

Now to me, this actually is happiness-producing, this gradual nature of the path, because it fits my experience. I've had a few experiences where there's a kind of momentary seeing of something really clearly that lets something go. But the vast majority of the way that the practice has unfolded has been this

very gradual releasing of greed and aversion and delusion.

Sometimes I look back at something, kind of in surprise at one point, seeing a pattern. Wow, yeah, that one—what happened to that one? I don't remember seeing it go, but I sure remember having it there. And not even being able to call it up in that moment. And it never returning. A particular hatred at a particular person. Gone. Replaced by mettā. Through this gradual path.

So I have confidence in this goal stated as the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion because of seeing, in small ways perhaps, the way they are released. We get flavors of this, we get tastes of it. Maybe just in a moment, for a second—seeing how the mind, when we meet aversion or greed, some difficult reactive state, with that curiosity of, "Huh, what's this? What's this state of mind?"

When we meet it that way, there is a feeling of a little space around it, not being quite so hooked in it, not quite so squeezed by it. We feel a shift. Sometimes we might even see a particular pattern, in a moment, just let go when it's met in that way. And again, a taste, a flavor of that possibility of being free from greed or aversion or delusion.

Just a little taste gives us the sense of that possibility. We get this little taste, and in this life, this possibility opens before us.

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