The Ten Fetters

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 23:01

What are the ten fetters? To understand the ten fetters you've got to have understood or know about the different paths and fruits. The way the Buddha said that people develop spiritually, there are four levels of deep insight, four levels of consciousness, meaning four levels in a change in the way we see things. According to his understanding, when we begin to see things through the three characteristics of existence, when we see things are transient, when we see things are not substantial, not self, and when we see how we cause ourselves suffering by having a wrong relationship of indulging in pleasure and running away from pain, when we see that, then there's a shift in the way that we relate to the world. And these shifts are called the *Magga Phala*, path and fruit.

The first one is called *Sotāpanna*. It means stream entrance. The second one is known as *Sakadāgāmi*, once returner. The third one is *Anāgāmi*, a non-returner. And finally there's *Arahant*, a fully enlightened being.

So the Buddha gives us some images to work with. He says that when somebody has the first insight into *N ibbāna*, the stream entrant, the one who enters into the spiritual stream and is coming out of *saṃsāra*, they've found the way out basically. When you have the first insight, it's like a flash of lightning. So the flash of lightning means that you see everything but you've only seen it for a moment. So you actually know what the truth is, what *Nibbāna* is, but it's just been that very sharp insight. The second one, the once-returner, is the one who sees things in a full starry night. The non-returner sees things as if it's a full moon. Even here the full moon can be bright, but those of you who've been to the East know that you can really see colours. It's very bright. But you don't get to see things like the noonday sun until you're fully enlightened.

There's also a teaching about what happens to a person and how long the training is after they've had these insights. So a *Sotāpanna*, a stream entrant, is said to have to come back as a human being seven times before they get out of the problem. A once returner is exactly that, comes back once. And the non-returner is someone who achieves that third level here, but doesn't have to come back to this realm of existence and works out the rest of their problems in a much better place. So those are your four levels of noble insight.

I'll give you one more image that he talks about which is rather interesting. He says that people who don't know the Dharma, who are stuck in delusion, are like people who are swimming underwater and have no clue where they're going. The trainee is someone who keeps bobbing up and just getting their head above water so they've got some idea as to where they might be going. The *Sotāpanna*, the stream entrant, is one who's treading water. That's rather interesting. Treading water. The *Sakadāgāmi* is swimming, hell-bent

for the shore. The *Anāgāmi*, the non-returner, is actually standing on the shore, on the shoreline. And the *Arahant* has found his seat on the island. That's another little image that he tells us.

There's another one which comes from the general tradition of spirituality about the mountain. So if you think about it, the higher you go, the more you see. But you don't get to see the full thing until you get to the top. You never get to see what's on the other side of the mountain until you're at the top. So something happens at the state of full enlightenment which is obviously quite a quantum leap. And that's the suggestion between a full moon and the noonday sun.

So what is it that these people see to make them ennobled? They have insights into these three characteristics. So the more you see transience, the more you see impermanence, then the less attached you are, the less suffering there is. The more you see how the psychology of seeking happiness in this world, real happiness, leads only to dissatisfaction, then, of course, you come off that drug. You come off the addiction of sensual pleasure. Stop running away from just the pain of living, sickness, old age and death. And the more you see that this body, this personality, is not me. It's not a me. It's not a person. It's just a conditioned state. It's just an energy form.

We know that, looking at those flowers, we know that matter itself is just energy. It's just a swirl of subatomic activity. They don't even talk about atoms these days, they just talk about energy forms. So even though at our level of perception they are real things, they're real colour and they've got a feel about them, when you drop down to a deeper reality about the way the material world is, then all that disappears. It's just a fuzz of just energy. So it's the same with this body. It feels real enough when you get your finger trapped in the door. And the same with the personality. It feels real enough when you're depressed or when you're happy. But it's just energy.

Now, there are two parts to becoming one of these noble people. The first part is called *Magga* and the second part is called *Phala*. *Magga* is entering into it. So the insight is what makes you enter into that level of consciousness. But the fruit of it is the falling away of fetters. Falling away of the fetters.

And *saṃyojana*, which is the word that fetter is describing, we get the word yoke from it, yoga, yoja, that which binds, that which holds. And sam is just a strengthener. So it's something that really binds you. And there are ten of these. And as you go up the different paths, the fetters drop away. And the definition of *Nibbāna* is unbinding. Unbinding. It's a process of unbinding.

So what are the fetters? The first one is *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*. It's the belief in the body or the personality as me and mine. So there's something about an experience of *anicca dukkha anattā*, transience, suffering or dissatisfaction and not-self, which allows that person to see that they are not this body, they are not this personality, they're not emotions, they're not thoughts. So they've experienced something beyond that, beyond something phenomenal. So that goes, but don't think that it's thereby entirely destroyed. What's happened is that the belief in it has gone.

I liken it to the leaving of mother. Some psychologists say up until about the fourth month there's no differentiation between the baby and mother. It's all one thing. In fact, there's a baby in the world, but specifically a baby and mother, and then suddenly, or at some point, mother becomes other. It's like it looms out of this me as something other than me. And that's your first what's known as object relations. So that's the first leave-taking. Now how long it takes to get rid of mother? My God. So you see our binding to our mother is very deep. So letting go of this body, letting go of this mind, letting go of these emotions is a very long process of leave-taking. But what the *Sotāpanna* has seen, at least, is that they are not that. That's a very important little insight.

We get hints of that when, in our meditation, we experience an emotion as something objective within us. When you become the observer and you feel you're looking at an emotion, experiencing an emotion as if it's not me, not mine. So that's the *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*, that's destroying or taking away the fundamental belief that this personality, this body is me. That's the first thing that goes.

The next one is *vicikicchā*, doubt. So obviously, if someone has experienced the ultimate truth, *Nibbāna*, then obviously all doubt in the Buddha's teaching goes, because now they know for themselves by their own personal experience. And having done so, they also know the way. So I liken it to somebody wandering around in a swamp and suddenly through the trees, through the swamp and all that, they see the top of the mountain. So now they've still got a load of swamp to go through, but at least they know where they're going and there's no doubt that there is a mountain and there's no doubt that there's a way out of this problem. So doubt in the Buddha's teaching disappears.

The third one is rather interesting. *Sīlabbataparāmāsa*. It's the recognition of wrong rites and rituals. It's understanding that the path to become enlightened has virtually nothing to do with rites and rituals. No matter how many times you bow to the Buddha, light candles, repeat your Om Mani Padme Hums. Nothing to do with it. If we could just hold the line of pure meditation, that's enough.

There's an interesting scripture where some young monks go to the elders and they say, how did you become enlightened? And the split even then is between those monks and nuns who like to live completely by themselves in the forest and those who were much more into towns and the study and all that, remembering, in those days, rote learning. So those, it was Kassapa, the very great ascetic, who said that you have to keep the rule very fiercely. You must keep the rule about renunciation. You must live out in the forest and you must meditate. And Sāriputta, who was considered to be the general of the Dharma, second only to the Buddha in understanding, said you must understand, you must learn what the Buddha's teaching is and you must meditate.

So this troop of young monks went off to the Buddha and they said to him, we've asked so and so this, we've asked so and so that, and we get these answers, what do you think? And he says, well, all teachers will bring you the way they came. They'll bring you the way they came. So they said, Lord, what is your teaching? And his reply was, meditate, meditate, meditate.

So if we can bear the horror of sitting and walking and continuing to meditate all the time, then that would be the most direct way. However, that doesn't mean to say we can't have rituals. It doesn't mean to say you can't have other practices. But there's an understanding in the stream entrant that they are not material, directly material to the path of enlightenment. So they're skillful means. It's a skillful thing to repeat a phrase, say a loving kindness phrase, may all beings be happy, than it is to let the mind wander off to Machu Picchu or Gold Coast. At least it's a skillful means. So that's what drops.

Now in the Buddha's day, remember, there were all sorts of very strange things. Remember, we're talking about medieval and pre-medieval times. And a lot of people, even these days, believe that ritual has some efficacy about it in itself which brings about some form of enlightenment. For instance, there were times in those times people thought that if you stood in the Ganges, just stood there, the purifying water of the Ganges would take all your bad *kamma* away. There was understanding that somehow you had to go through enormous suffering to get rid of suffering, mortification. Like if you, on a very hot day, you'd build a fire and sit next to the fire. And somehow that had this purifying effect. The purifying nature of fire. So you can see it's around superstition and around wrong beliefs.

So that's the third thing that goes. In other words, for the *Sotāpanna*, the stream entrant, their practice is very direct. They know where they're going. They don't get pulled off here and there with all sorts of stuff, I Ching, astrology, I don't know.

So then the next movement is to the once returner. And what these people break is, or they undermine the two next things, which are *kāmarāga*, translates as indulgence in pleasure, and *vyāpāda*, hatred, aversion. So those two things go.

Now, if you think about it, from an ego point of view, from this ego level, from this self level, which believes that this is what it is, you've got to make the most of this now. There's only two ways to behave. Wherever happiness seems to come to you, whether it's pleasure, straightforward pleasure, bangers and mash and beans, or whether it's something, a relationship or music or even spiritual delight, from the self point of view, if that's what happiness is going to be, there's going to be a clinging to it, a wanting it, a holding on to it, a wanting to develop it. And if anything is in any way oppressive or seems to undermine happiness, any form of dissatisfaction, then there's going to be an effort to push it away. So that's the only way a real self can behave. You don't have an option when you're down at the level of me and mine.

But now, when somebody has so broken the idea of me and mine, they're not playing that game anymore. That game is undermined. It doesn't mean to say that they won't indulge and they won't get angry and all that, but it's like the heaviness has gone. And it's only at the third stage that these two are completely undermined. And that's why there's a non-returner. They don't come back because there's nothing here attracting them anymore.

However, there's still attachment. And the attachment now is to the more finer mental states and more finer realms. And these are to do with the absorptions that we practice. Or you can practice. So these are

the *rūpa* and the *arūpa*.

So what do we mean by that? We mean that when somebody practices absorption meditations, ecstatic meditations, what they come to understand, what they realize is that they can create beautiful mental states independent of the world. So when we practice loving kindness, for instance, and we just put that phrase in our hearts, may all beings be happy, may all beings be happy, and we begin to feel the joy, that's just created by us, within us. So this releases you from dependence on sausage and mash and beans. You don't need the world out there. You can just engender this loveliness within yourself.

And the progress of that gets very fine until you come to a very fine place of absolute equanimity where there's not even an object. And those who experience these things always say that this is the highest happiness, not something else. All the way up that chain, all the way up those degrees of ecstasy to pure equanimity. Those people who have experienced these things always say, well, this is the highest happiness, not the other one. Everything begins to feel more and more gross. So that attachment doesn't go. Those two attachments don't go until you're fully enlightened.

The other thing that doesn't go is conceit. So the I, the me stays right to the bitter end. So don't think at any moment that you will not suffer from conceit and arrogance. It will stay with you to the bitter end.

The other thing is restlessness, which is interesting. Restlessness. And although it doesn't say so, in my own personal understanding, it must also include sloth. Because they're just two energy forms, one going out, one coming in. So, so long as there's an impurity in the heart, there's going to be that shaking, that restlessness. So our struggle with sloth, torpor and restlessness must also be carried on to the bitter end.

And finally, of course, what is completely undercut is ignorance. That's the last fetter. Ignorance here means don't know. So the *Arahant* now knows that. What does that person know? They know they are not the body, mind and heart. There's no confusion about that anymore. No confusion.

So the fetters are those things that drop away as we enter into the different paths and fruits. Which are the fruits. That's the fruit. That's the benefit. That's the return for all this hard work we have to put in. So therefore we must work hard. The fruit is there for the taking.

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