The Ten Fetters

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 26:46

Good evening. I trust you had a fruitful day. I do not say happy, though I hope it has been happy.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa — Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

Very good. So we shall just finish off the taints. I just, as a last reminder, just in case you've forgotten, what are the taints again? They are all the desires, the sensual desires, all the senses, the longing to keep living, to become, and ignorance, which often manifests as wrong view. Remember that wrong views is often listed with ignorance.

So there are taints that should be abandoned by seeing. So that's your insight through *vipassanā* and specifically around not-self. So that first one will take you directly to full liberation. The next one, by restraining and then by using and then by enduring and avoiding and removing, all those will certainly help, but they will not lead to full and entire liberation. But the last one will, which remember, is the development of the seven factors of enlightenment.

So the first and the last, number one and number seven, are the ones to remember more. But remember that as soon as you see something coming into your heart, into your mind, which is unwholesome, jump on it and then reflect and say, now which one of these wonderful techniques the Buddha has given us is to be used here? And that way we'll find ourselves becoming more pure of heart.

So I just want to read the last paragraph, the conclusion. And when the taint had been abandoned by all the seven that we've mentioned, then he is called a *bhikkhu* who lives restrained with the restraint of all the taints. He has severed craving, flung off the fetters, and with complete penetration of conceit, he's made an end of suffering. So that's somebody who's finally completed the path. And of course, as usual, the *bhikkhus* are very satisfied and delighted in the Buddha's words.

So severed craving — see, that's the end of those wrong desires based on seeking happiness in the sensual world. He's flung off the fetters, and that's what we're going to look at this evening, and he's made complete penetration of conceit. In other words, that whole sense of self has disappeared. So remember, self in this sense is identity with what we're experiencing, an identity.

So we shall now move to number 64, which is the Mahāmalunkyaputta Sutta. So it's the great discourse to Malunkyaputta. Often it would seem people were named the son of their mother. So this is the son of Malunkyā. Like Sāriputta, the son of Sāri. So I suppose in those days, instead of saying Johnson, you would say Jameson and then you'd know who you were.

So the Buddha's back in Sāvatthī. That, remember, is his favorite place. Anāthapiṇḍika's park there. The local king, Pasenadi of Kosala, was a great supporter.

So now he asks the venerable Malunkyaputta, "Do you remember the five lower fetters taught by me?" And I suppose before I go into this, I ought to just go through them very quickly. So the first one is identity, a belief in identity. That's a self. Sceptical doubt. Remember that sceptical doubt isn't the wonder, the honest doubt, the desiring to know for oneself, which is based on "I wonder if it's true." It's the doubt that stops you doing something. We'll come to that another time maybe. Clinging to mere rules and ritual. And then there's sensuous craving, ill will. And then there's craving for fine material existence and fine immaterial existence. That's number six and seven. So those are the *jhānas*, the absorptions. Then there's conceit. That's a big fetter. "I am." It's how you finish that sentence is your conceit. "I am" — see? And then finally there's restlessness. So this refers to any leftover agitation from the defilements and, of course, ignorance. So we'll come to them in the fullness of time.

So here he's asking Malunkyaputta, "What do you remember of the lower fetters as taught by me?" And he replies, "I remember personality view as a lower fetter, doubt as a lower fetter, adherence to rules and observances as a lower fetter, sensual desire as a lower fetter. And I remember ill will as a lower fetter taught by the Blessed One. It is in this way, Venerable Sir, that I remember the five lower fetters taught by the Blessed One."

Now, without the commentaries, we wouldn't actually understand the Buddha's reply. What the commentary says is that the Buddha, from this — or I mean, this is only a résumé, really, of the conversation — has understood Malunkyaputta to say that these fetters only arise here and now, only arise on occasion.

So this is what he says: "To whom do you remember my having taught the five lower fetters that way? Would not the wanderers of other sects confute you with the simile of an infant? For a young, tender infant lying prone does not even have the notion of self-personality. So how could personality view arise in him? Yet the underlying tendency to personality view lies within him. A young tender infant lying prone does not even have the notion of teachings. So how could doubt about the teachings arise in him? Yet the underlying tendency to doubt lies within him. A young tender infant lying prone does not even have the notion of rules. So how could adherence to rules and observances arise in him? Yet the underlying tendency to adhere to rules and observations lies in him." And then, of course, he says the very same thing about desire, sensual desire and ill will.

So then Ānanda steps in and says, "Blessed one, it is time, sublime one, for the blessed one to teach the five lower fetters." So although he's talked about it before, he obviously needs to talk about it again.

"Then listen, Ānanda, and attend closely to what I say." "Yes, venerable sir."

So now here he says, "An untaught ordinary person who has no regard for the noble ones and is unskilled

and undisciplined in their Dhamma, who has no regard for true men and is unskilled in their Dhamma, abides with a mind obsessed and enslaved by identity view. And he does not understand as it actually is, the escape from arisen identity view. And when that identity view has become habitual and is uneradicated in him, it is a lower fetter. He abides with the mind obsessed and enslaved with doubt, rules and observances, sensual desire, and ill will. And when that ill will has become habitual and uneradicated in him, it is a lower fetter."

And then he says, of course, there is an escape. That's his usual way of doing it. For the underlying tendency is abandoned in him.

So what we have here is the Buddha telling us that at an obvious level, these fetters, unwholesomenesses, arise through our speech, through our actions, etc. But even when they don't, the tendency is there within us. So that's an underlying thing. There are, in fact, three levels of that. The first one is called *anusaya*, which is a latent tendency. Now in the discourses, they're not actually enumerated, but they were later, especially in the Abhidhamma, the higher teaching. And then the next part is that they obsess the mind. And then, of course, they express themselves in what we say and do. So those are the three things. And, of course, it's occasion that brings them out. It's an occasion that brings them out. We find ourselves falling into some sensual desire when the object of sensual desire arises. Otherwise, it won't manifest, but it's there as a potential.

Again, he gives us some similes. Just as when a great tree standing possessed of heartwood, that's the inner part, it is not possible that anyone shall cut out its heartwood without cutting through its bark and sapwood. So, too, there is a path — we can't get on that path until we go through the process of training. And then, of course, he says that is possible.

He then talks about — suppose the river Ganges were full of water right up to the brim so that crows could drink from it. And then a feeble man came thinking "By swimming across the stream with my arms, I shall get safely across." Remember, the further shore is always a metaphor for *Nibbāna*. Yet he would not be able to get safely across. So when the Dhamma is being taught to someone for the ending, the cessation of identity, if his mind does not enter into it and acquire steadiness, confidence and decision, then he can be regarded as a feeble man. In other words, this has to be truly investigated by us through the process of *vip assanā*, but also just any time of the day the notion of investigating who I am might arise. And of course he says the opposite of someone who is strong — abandoning unwholesome states quietly, secluded from sensual pleasure etc. And in this particular case he takes us through the absorptions.

Now, just before we go on to the last bit, it's good just to go through these fetters. So a fetter, a shackle, a chain is what's keeping us to this form of existence. So one of the definitions of *Nibbāna* is to be unshackled. It's an awareness, the *sati*, which is unshackled, liberated from its delusion with the world, its illusion with the world.

So we have this personality belief. That deep identity with the human being, with our psychophysical

organism, with all our thoughts, with all our relationships, etc. Sceptical doubt is this particular doubt which stops us doing things. I'm sure you probably have a memory of being at the public baths and climbing on the diving board and getting right up to the top one and not having the confidence to jump until somebody pushed you and then after that it was dead easy. So sceptical doubt, doubting ourselves, unable to meditate properly and all that, doubting the Buddha's teaching and doubting the teacher. It's a case of sceptical doubt stopping us doing something. It becomes a barrier even in ordinary daily life. If you apply for a job but you doubt if you can do it, then you never go for the interview.

Mere rules and regulations or mere rules and ritual ceremonies — the mistake is that they are actually important to the path. But no, they're just aids to the path. When we take refuges and precepts, for instance, or when we light candles, they're aids that help us to establish the right sort of atmosphere, the right sort of attention within us. They're just aids, really, but in themselves are, of course, useless in attaining liberation as such. In those days, there would have been lots of rituals to get what you want. The belief in ritual would have been very strong. And of course, it still is in some religions.

Now, those three go when we enter the stream. The Sotāpanna. So remember, there are four levels of attainment. The first one being that insight into one of the three characteristics, either not self, that everything we're aware of is not me, not mine, and itself is not a self. Impermanence, that also will help us to enter the stream, to see that everything actually does perish, does come to an end. There is no continuity. And the third one is *dukkha*, suffering, and that's really seeing how we create suffering. It's a direct understanding of the role of desire. And those insights have to be deep enough to have a change, to bring about a change in our lives. So those are the first three fetters, as they're known.

By the way, that first insight that person might have into not-self, it's a change of view. The sense of self is still very strong. And often people doubt whether they've had that insight because the sense of self still remains very strong, but the actual view has been changed or the insight has broken the illusion. I mean, the example I normally use is about smoking because when my father smoked, you know, pre-Second World War, 1940s, 50s, it wasn't considered to be particularly harmful. But as the science finally got through, when the tobacco companies finally admitted that they'd been fooling everybody, deluding everybody, everybody began to understand that smoking is really, really bad for your health. But it didn't stop them smoking. See, the obsession was still there. The view was changed, but the desire to smoke had not been undermined. It's surprising how when some people actually had the consequence of that — I'm thinking particularly of a father of one of my friends who had a heart attack, smoked all his life, had a heart attack and after that completely stopped.

Now the next two — the sensuous craving, craving that arises on all the senses including the inner sense of the mind, whatever the mind is offering, our dreams, our fantasies, etc. And all the ill will, all the negativity that's in us — they are only attenuated. They're only undermined with the second path. And they lose their power with the third path. And what that really is saying is that the attraction of the sensual world is no longer there for somebody who's a non-returner. So the second path is called a once

returner, suggesting that you have to come back for a bit more suffering in another rebirth. But the one who has broken through the delusion of seeking happiness in the sensual world, they don't have to come back to this form of existence. They can be reborn in a particular heaven, it is said, where they attain full liberation.

And then the final ones, the craving for material and immaterial existence, that's really to do with these absorptions, which are in themselves very delightful, beautiful places to be. And often the fine immaterial ones can be mistaken for *Nibbāna*. The conceit of "I am" — remember, that comes right at the end, the breaking of that conceit. And then restlessness is always there. That's the little bits of agitation that's left from old habits that the person has had. And then finally, undermining ignorance as such. And that suggests, of course, that they know what or who they really are. The Buddha within. That's the moment of complete liberation.

So that takes us through the ten fetters. So this is "whatever exists therein of feeling, perception, habits and consciousness. He sees these states as impermanent and suffering, as a disease, as a tumor, as a barb, as a calamity, as an affliction, as alien, as disintegrating, as void," in other words, empty, insubstantial, "as not self. He turns his mind away from those states and directs them to the deathless element."

That's really confusing, isn't it? I mean, what does that mean, direct them to the deathless element? It's a way, remember, of the Buddha pointing out that there is something which is not phenomenal, something that doesn't belong to the mind, etc., etc. Now, how do we do that? You can't obviously see *Nibbāna*. If we were to be able to see or experience *Nibbāna* as an object, then of course it would be conditioned. So it can't be that. It's not looking at that.

What he's saying is to turn away from that desire to involve ourselves in the world and to pull ourselves away. So that's why when we're in that position within ourselves of the objective observer, when we've accessed that observation post, to recognize that there is that distance, there is that separation, that everything we're observing is an object. And then, of course, to realize that the very sense of self, the observer, is an object, so we can't be that. And it's just a case of remaining in that position, which is beginning to see the deathless.

And when we're in that state, we can always ask ourselves what's it like, what's it like being the observer where there is no body, no physicality, where there is no emotion, where there is no thought. This comes to us usually at some time on a retreat but even in ordinary daily life, you know, depending on what's happened during the day, as long as you're calm, as long as you can get concentrated, as long as you can lift yourself up to that position. You can always ask yourself, what's it like being this observer? Because that's what we mean when we say those who are mindful are in the presence, in the vicinity of, in the presence of *Nibbāna*.

And just that little insight tells us this is peaceful, it's sublime, the stilling of all formations, all habits, the relinquishing of attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation. That's the ending of the

world as a place where we're going to find happiness and *nibbāna*.

And this is, of course, right at the end of the whole process. This is when we become fully liberated. And standing upon that, he attains the destruction of the taints. But he does not attain the destruction of the taints then. So if he doesn't attain the destruction of the taints then, because of that desire for the Dharma, the delight in the Dharma, with the destruction of the five lower fetters, then he becomes one due to reappear spontaneously and there in the pure abodes and there attain final *nibbāna* without ever returning to this world. This is the path, the way to abandoning the five lower fetters.

And then here's the clincher at the end. So Ānanda says, "Venerable Sir, if this is the path, the way to abandoning the five lower fetters, then how is it that some bhikkhus here gain deliverance of mind and some gain deliverance by wisdom?" Now, deliverance by mind is through these *jhāna* and the purity of the mind. But then, of course, there has to be insight. And there are some who are delivered just through insight. So that's the *vipassanā* only way.

And the answer is the difference, Ānanda, is in their faculties, in how they are. And of course, the Venerable Ānanda was satisfied and delighted in the Blessed One's words, as I'm hoping we are too.

So I hope this describes the fetters well enough for you to understand them and gives us pointers, and that of course you're not confused by it all. I trust that you will devote your meditations to investigating the fetters.

May you be fully liberated.

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