Bāhiya of the Bark Cloth

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 11:51

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble, and fully self-awakened one.

So I thought today we'd tackle a slightly more, for want of a better word, mystical discourse. It's called, or it's called after, somebody called Bahiya of the Bark Cloth.

Now, whenever you get people writing about saints and holy people, hagiography, they always pump it up to make sure that either the person is amazing or the teacher is. It's not that the Buddha wasn't an amazing teacher, but in order to make him more amazing, we got this story about Bahiya.

So he was a merchant and he used to ply up and down the Indian coast. One day he was shipwrecked and on a raft he made land. Suddenly he starts wearing a bark cloth. Now, for those of you who want to know what a bark cloth is, you have to peel the inner bark off trees and beat it until it's soft. Then it can be used as a loincloth, skirt, draperies and wall hangings and in thick layers make an excellent bed. So that's what you can do tomorrow. But it also says it's an ancient art which is deeply involved in religious and ceremonial life. So remember that bit.

Anyway, he starts wearing this bark cloth and he becomes a mendicant. Of course, people feed him. After a while, he got the impression that, in fact, he was fully liberated. Well, as these stories go, a god appeared to him, an old relation, and said to him, "No, you're not liberated. You're not enlightened. In fact, spiritually speaking, you're as thick as a plank. The person you want to go and meet is the Buddha." So, of course, off he goes to meet the Buddha. He must have been a bit disappointed at that revelation.

Now, I think a better story, which seems more true, is that the Brahmins were developing their own scriptures, which were called the *Upanishads*, translates as connection. They're also known as the *Vedanta* , the end of the Vedas. They were specifically interested in who we were, what was the ground of our being – ontology.

This is a passage from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*: "That imperishable is the unseen seer, the unheard hearer, the unthought thinker, the un-understood understander. Other than it there is naught that sees, other than it there is naught that hears, other than it there is naught that thinks, and other than it there is naught that understands." In other words, it's pointing to this self, which is transcendent of everything. But it's interesting to see how it is expressed. The imperishable, that which does not change, is the unseen seer. It's very Zen, like the effortless effort, the unseen seer.

Now these people who followed this particular Upanishad used to wear the bark cloth. That was their signature dress, just like the Buddhist monks went around with a bald head. Everybody else had long matted hair, dreadlocks, but the Buddha made us shave our heads. So all these sects had their own little way of manifesting who or what they were following.

So he's obviously heard about the Buddha and he comes to find him and he finds him on alms round. The Buddha says this isn't the time. He says, "Look, I'm a very old man and you're not so young and we could die any moment. So really, please give me the teaching." So the Buddha, out of his compassion, does so.

Now as the story goes, not long after he was fully liberated, he got gored by a cow who was looking after her calf. Again, I think we can take that with a little pinch of salt.

Anyway, this is what the Buddha says to him: "Here, Bahiya, you should train yourself thus. In the seen, there is merely the seen. In the heard, there is merely what is heard. And in the sensed, there is merely what is sensed. In the cognized, there is merely what is cognized. And in this way, you should train yourself, Bahiya." Now, if you're listening to this, you may very well become fully liberated.

Here's the crucial bit: "When Bahiya, for you, in the seen there is merely what is seen, in the heard merely what is heard, in the sensed merely what is sensed, and in the cognized is merely what is cognized, then, Bahiya, you will not be with that. When you are not with that, then you will not be in that. And when you are not in that, then you will neither be here nor beyond nor in between the two. Just this is the end of suffering."

Anybody awaken? No? Don't worry, it didn't work for me either.

So now what's the Buddha saying here? In Buddhist psychology, we have a sense base. We have something that the sense base is aware of, or senses, rather, senses. And there is the awareness, the consciousness. This consciousness is dependent on the sense base. That's why the Buddha enumerates consciousnesses according to the sense basis. So you have eye consciousness, nose consciousness, ear consciousness, etc.

Here, what the Buddha is saying is that in any given experience, there's an object. It could be a video you're watching. It could be a biscuit you're eating, whatever. That's the object. He's saying when you are not with that – so that's a connection of being with something. When you're not with that, then the sense base, if you're not aware of something through a sense base, then you're not in the sense base. If you're not in the sense base, then consciousness cannot arise. So you're neither there with the object, here with the sense base, and in between with that consciousness, which is a screen upon which these two things arise. When you experience something beyond that, then you've experienced something which is not part of the psycho-physical organism. And just this is the awakening.

Now, the thing is that when Bahiya hears this, he is actually immediately enlightened. The Buddha actually gives him a title. He gave titles to certain disciples who had special gifts. For instance, Sāriputta was called the *Dhammasenapati*, the general of the Dharma, because of his understanding of the Dharma,

which was said to be second only to the Buddha. So he called Bahiya "*Pipabina Tichim*," the quickest person to become liberated amongst all those who were quick to become liberated. That's the title he gave him. As I say, later on, he dies from an attack from a cow.

So this is the story of Bahiya of the Bark Cloth. It fits into the *Udāna* Sutta. These are a collection of the inspired verses of the Buddha. Next week, I'll actually read that discourse and the Buddha's own response in verse, which will add to this meaning. That's if I explain it correctly.

So I hope that has been of some use, that it has not confused you, and that by your insight meditation, by seeing this process of how we create the world, you will be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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