The Bāhiya Sutta: A Teaching on Direct Experience and Liberation

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 20:35

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

Very good. So last week we tackled this very cryptic teaching from the Buddha. He couldn't have reduced his teaching any further, I don't think. It was about Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth. I said that this week we would actually read the discourse and revise what we said, because it's quite difficult.

The collection that this belongs to is called the *Udāna*, U-D-A-N-A. I'll try to remember to put it in the chat box for you. You can buy it as a little booklet translated by John Ireland. That's where this translation comes from.

The Bāhiya Sutta

This is about Bāhiya. Thus have I heard. At one time the Lord was staying near Sāvatthī in the Jeta Wood at Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery. At that time Bāhiya the Bark-cloth was living by the seashore at Suppāraka. He was respected, revered, honoured, venerated and given homage, and was one who obtained the requisites of robes, alms food, lodging, and medicines.

We said last week that he was probably a follower of a particular Brahmin sect, depending on the Upanishads, and that their signature was wearing bark cloth. But here, it's talking about the myth that arose from him, whereby he gets shipwrecked and he must have had a Damascene moment out at sea. When he lands, he doesn't want to be a merchant anymore. He wants to be a *samaṇa*, an ascetic, and he gains the respect of everybody. These four requisites - robes, alms food, lodging and medicines - are the requisites of the Buddhist order. It's really basic. That's all you need to live: something to wear, something to eat, a roof over your head, and medicine when you're sick.

Now, while he was in seclusion, this reflection arose in the mind of Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth: "Am I one of those in the world who are *arahats* and who have entered the path of *arahatship*?" The word *arahat* is an honorific. It's the blessed one or the holy one, but of course, it's given to somebody who's completed the path.

Then a *devatā*, who was a former blood relation of Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth, understood this reflection in

his mind. Being compassionate and wishing to benefit him, she approached Bāhiya and said, "You, Bāhiya, are neither an *arahat*, nor have you entered the path to *arahatship*. You do not follow that practice whereby you could be an *arahat* or enter the path of *arahatship*."

That's a bit crushing. I mean, a poor man's living, doing the best he can, and this *devatā* has told him he's wasting his time.

Then he asks, "In the world, including the *devas*, all the gods, who are the *arahats*, and who have entered the path of *arahatship*?"

"There is, Bāhiya, in a far country, a town called Sāvatthī. There the Lord now lives, who is an *arahat* and fully enlightened one. That Lord, Bāhiya, is indeed an *arahat*, and he teaches the *Dhamma* for the realization of *arahatship*."

Then Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth, profoundly stirred by the words of that *devatā*, then and there departed from Suppāraka, stopping only one night everywhere along the way. He went to Sāvatthī, where the Lord was staying at the Jeta Wood at Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery.

At that time, a number of *bhikkhus* were walking up and down, doing walking meditation in the open air. Then Bāhiya the Bark-cloth approached those *bhikkhus* and said, "Where, revered sirs, is the Lord now living, the *arahat*, the fully enlightened one? We wish to see the Lord who is an *arahat*, the fully enlightened one."

"The Lord, Bāhiya, has gone on alms round among the houses."

Then Bāhiya hurriedly left the Jeta Grove, entering Sāvatthī. He saw the Lord walking for alms food in Sāvatthī, pleasing, lovely to see, with calm senses and tranquil mind, attained to perfect poise and calm, controlled, a perfected one, watchful with restrained senses.

That's a classic trope describing the Buddha. On seeing the Lord, he approached, fell down with his head at the Lord's feet and said, "Teach me *Dhamma*, Lord. Teach me *Dhamma*, *Sugata*, so that it will be for my good and happiness for a long time."

Sugata translates literally as "well gone." It obviously means somebody who's transcended, gone to *Nibbān a*.

Upon being spoken to thus, the Lord said to Bāhiya the Bark-cloth, "It is an unsuitable time, Bāhiya. We have entered among the houses for alms food."

A second time, Bāhiya said to the Lord, "It is difficult to know for certain, revered sir, how long the Lord will live and how long I will live. Teach me *Dhamma*, Lord. Teach me *Dhamma*, *Sugata*, so that it will be for my good and happiness for a long time."

A second time the Lord said to Bāhiya, "It is an unsuitable time, Bāhiya. We have entered among the

houses for alms food."

But Bāhiya wouldn't give up. A third time Bāhiya said to the Lord, "It is difficult to know for certain, revered sir, how long the Lord will live and how long I will live. Teach me *Dhamma*, Lord. Teach me *Dham ma*, *Sugata*, so that it will be for my good and happiness for a long time."

This is one of these things that perhaps was part of the age. You could ask three times, and if the answer was still no, there was no point in asking again.

This time, the Buddha took pity on poor Bāhiya, and he said this: "Here, Bāhiya, you should train yourself thus: In the seen will be merely what is seen. In the heard will be merely what is heard. In the sensed will be merely what is sensed. In the cognized will be merely what is cognized. In this way you should train yourself, Bāhiya."

Now this is referring directly to our *vipassanā* practice. The Buddha categorizes consciousnesses according to the sense base. You have eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose, taste, and body consciousness, and the mind consciousness. What the mind is aware of is the internal life, the interior life of emotions and thoughts. These are your six bases, and it's upon these bases that consciousness arises.

So he says, "When, Bāhiya, when for you in the seen is merely what is seen, in the heard is merely what is heard, in the sensed - which means smelling and tasting - in the sensed will be merely what is sensed, in the cognized is merely what is cognized, then, Bāhiya, you will not be with that. When, Bāhiya, you are not with that, you will not be in that. When, Bāhiya, you are not in that, then, Bāhiya, you will be neither here nor beyond, nor in between the two. Just this is the end of suffering."

He's saying to Bāhiya, "you will not be in that." Remember, if we go back to the Upanishads, they're talking about the unknowing knower, always pointing to somebody, the one who understands, the senser. What Bāhiya seems to have been doing is looking for this knower. Of course, he's not finding it. So the Buddha tries to avert him from that and draw him down to the level where he's just experiencing things without the sense of I.

At that very base level, there's always a sense base. A sense base has some object that it's sensing. Obviously, if you've got eyes and you're looking, then you'll see something. Like for instance, now you're seeing me. Those two then have to have some way of relating that information onto something that can be seen, can be known. That's what consciousness is. That's the *vijñāna* consciousness, the consciousness of the aggregates. All these consciousness are dependent on a sense base.

In our meditation, what we're trying to do is to get down to that level where there isn't an I. What happens normally is we see something. We don't see it as it is. We see it within a category, which is our conceptual understanding. When I see, for instance, an apple, I don't see that apple as something distinct and spare. I see it within my concepts of what apples are. Depending on that concept, I'll be able to say to myself, "Well, this is a sweet apple or it's not so sweet." Then, of course, there's "I like sweet apples. I don't like

unsweet apples." Once you've said that, you have a relationship with it. "I want a sweet apple," and then you get "I want a sweet apple."

What he's asking Bāhiya to do is to cut through that whole mentation dependent on a delusion of an I and get down to basics. Once he does that, of course, he recognizes that there is something which is aware of what's on that screen of consciousness. That separation allows him to make the insight of what he really is before he becomes an I.

I hope that hasn't confused you completely. The teaching is quite difficult. When he says "you are not with that," in other words, you don't identify with the object by way of conceptual understanding - the apple. "You're not in that" - you're not identifying with the sense base, the taste, the sense of taste. When you don't identify with that, what comes up on the screen is pure without the manipulation, the distortion of liking, not liking, wanting, not wanting. That's when we're able to see that there is something which is distinct from everything that we're experiencing. That's the process of awakening. That's what it is.

Then he says, "Through this brief *Dhamma* teaching of the Lord, the mind of Bāhiya the Bark-cloth was immediately freed from the taints without grasping. Then the Lord, having instructed Bāhiya with this brief instruction, went away."

This is the point. This is what happens when we become fully liberated. We are freed from the taints. The word is *āsava*. There is in that word the meaning, a word *su*, which means to flow. It's like the corruptions are flowing out of us. Sometimes they're called inflows, sometimes outflows. They are the basic delusions that are affecting our lives for the worse. The first one is the taint of craving for sensual pleasure. The second one is the craving for existence - in other words, always becoming. That's why, anytime death approaches us, we panic. We want to continue from moment after moment. We want to be somebody. We're always redefining ourselves. Finally, of course, the taint of ignorance, which is not understanding the way things really are. So he's freed of all that. Because he's freed of all that, he's come to the end of suffering.

Not long after the Lord's departure, a cow with a young calf attacked Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth and killed him. When the Lord, having walked for alms food in Sāvatthī, was returning from alms round with a number of *bhikkhus*, on departing from the town, he saw that Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth had died. Seeing this, he said to the *bhikkhus*, "*Bhikkhus*, take Bāhiya's body, put it on a litter, carry it away and burn it and make a *stūpa* for it. Your companion in the holy life has died."

A *stūpa* would be a mound in those days, that's all.

"Very well, revered sir," the *bhikkhus* replied to the Lord. Taking Bāhiya's body, they put it on a litter, carried it away and burnt it, and made a *stūpa* for it. Then they went to the Lord, prostrated themselves, and sat down to one side.

Sitting there, those *bhikkhus* said to the Lord, "Bāhiya's body has been burnt, revered sir, and a *stūpa* has

been made for it. What is his destiny? What is his future birth?"

"*Bhikkhus*, Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth was a wise man. He practiced according to the *Dhamma* and did not trouble me by disputing about *Dhamma*. *Bhikkhus*, Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth has attained final *Nibbāna*."

I love the way this little phrase has been put in there: "and did not trouble me by disputing about *Dhamma* ." He was constantly hassled by people questioning what he understood, what he taught. I find that a lovely little phrase to tell you something about the Buddha's life.

Then on realizing this significance, the Lord uttered on that occasion this inspired utterance. This is where he's stating what *Nibbāna* is:

"Where neither water, nor yet earth, nor fire, nor air, find a foothold. There gleam no stars, no sun sheds light, there shines no moon. Yet, there no darkness reigns."

The first, of course, is our physicality, which includes the whole psychophysical organism. "Neither water" - these are the four great elements: water, earth, fire, and air. And then the outer world, the material world that we live in: "gleam no stars, no sun sheds light, there shines no moon, yet no darkness reigns."

I was listening to a talk by Bhikkhu Bodhi, in which he was asked, "What is the understanding of this *Nibbāna*?" He said that in Theravāda Buddhism, there were two understandings. The first one was that when you finally purified your heart and it's time to become liberated, the five *khandhas*, the psychophysical organism, comes to an end, and that's it. I know people who believe that, that that's what the Buddha's teaching, and I cannot just cannot know the difference between that and annihilation. The Buddha often in the discourses says he is not teaching annihilation. He says the only things that are annihilated are greed, hatred, and delusion.

Bhikkhu Bodhi says the second understanding, which is the traditional understanding, is that when the psychophysical organism, the five *khandhas*, come to an end, there is a transcendent experience. That's what this "yet there no darkness reigns" is pointing to. If you actually get that book, the *Udāna*, the inspired verses of the Buddha, you'll see that there's a whole section on *Nibbāna*. They're all basically pointing to the same thing.

Dogen Zenji, the great Zen master, talked about his moment of liberation by saying, "The body and mind fell away. The body and mind fell away." That's another way of stating it.

Then he goes on: "When a sage, a Brahmin, has come to know this for himself through his own wise experience, insight experience, then he is freed from form and formless, freed from pleasure and from pain."

In other words, he's gone beyond. He's gone beyond all the amazing stuff you can get from absorption techniques, and he's gone beyond all that we can experience of pleasure or pain from our physicality. He's always pointing to something which is beyond. He doesn't want to give it a name. He doesn't want to

substantiate it because then you end up like Bāhiya, completely confused looking for your soul, looking for your eternal self. That's why he's constantly pointing to it but not giving it a name. Of course in later Buddhism, in Mahāyāna Buddhism, they began talking about it as the *Dharmakāya*, the body of the truth, sometimes Buddha nature.

"This inspired utterance was spoken by the Lord also. So did I hear."

Very good. Well, as usual, I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that they have not caused confusion, and that by your careful investigation, you will be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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