Awakening Here and Now

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 44:46

The title of tonight's talk is Awakening Here and Now.

It's a slightly provocative title because you've all been practicing diligently for a week or so, and yet awakening may feel like just as distant and unattainable a goal as when you arrived here at the start of retreat. But of course, the belief that I can never reach awakening, that I can never actually free myself from suffering, is just another concept. It's another view based on the mistaken idea that I am fixed, unchanging, a real permanent entity.

So tonight we're going to look at awakening, and particularly at this paradoxical quality that it has. Awakening is a gradual process, but it's also available here and now.

Let's start with what is meant by the term awakening. Awakening is the translation of the Pali word bodhi, and it's preferred by many over the earlier translation, which was enlightenment. Enlightenment is a familiar term, but awakening is a more literal translation of bodhi. It suggests waking up to reality, waking up to the way things really are. What we awaken from is our delusion of a separate self—liberation from the view that I exist.

There are two levels to this realization. The first, attained at the initial stage of awakening called stream entry, is the understanding that everything in my experienced universe is empty of a self. That is, there is no self to be found anywhere. This is the realization of anattā, not-self, after which a stream-enterer cannot take things as personally as they did before, because they understand that nothing they experience is really me or mine.

But nonetheless, a subtle sense of "I am" persists. The letting go of this deeper sense of self doesn't occur until final awakening, full awakening. In one discourse, the elder monk Khemaka likens the subtle sense of "I am" to the scent of washing powder that remains on a cloth when it comes back from the washerman. The cloth has been cleaned of stains in the same way that the stream-enterer's citta has been cleaned of the belief in self. The cloth is spotlessly clean, but because the stream-enterer is not yet fully awakened, the sense "I am" lingers in the background like the scent of the washing powder.

This analogy works better in ancient India because, apparently, what they used back then to wash their clothes didn't smell very nice. The things Khemaka mentions are lye, which is a caustic chemical that can irritate the nostrils when inhaled, and cow dung, which I think speaks for itself. So the cloth is spotlessly clean, but it still has a bad smell about it. This is the lingering sense of "I am." Khemaka compares full awakening to the owner of the cloth putting it away in a scent-infused wicker hamper so that gradually

the scent of cow dung is obliterated.

That's the realization of awakening, what we awaken from—the dispelling of the delusion of a separate self. The reality we awaken to is nibbāna, most clearly explained as liberation of the heart from the fires of craving and aversion. When there is the dispelling of passion and desire for things that are cherished—pleasant sights and sounds, thoughts and feelings—the deathless state, nibbāna, appears. Mindful in the here and now, those who know this are forever calmed, crossed over beyond the world.

Nibbāna is described as a state of sublime peace or supreme happiness, characterized by the complete ending of suffering and rebirth. But because it's a state that is beyond concept, and also beyond the experience of anyone who's not yet awakened, it's most often described in negative terms, by what it isn't. Literally, nibbāna means extinguishment—the cooling of the heart, the extinguishment of the fires of craving and aversion.

The nun Sumedhā, whom we met the other night with her fiery diatribe about letting go, describes nibbāna like this: "There is this beyond aging, this beyond death, this the unaging, undying state, this free from grieving, from all animosity, unobstructed, unhindered, free from all fear, not burning." You can see she's talking about nibbāna in terms of what it isn't, what it's free from—free from aging, from death, grieving, animosity, obstruction, hindrance, fear, and burning. And this is all she says about it.

This is what I'm referring to when I'm talking about the awakening process: the complete liberation of the mind from the delusion of a separate self, and the resulting liberation of the heart from craving and aversion.

Let's turn now to the idea of awakening as a gradual path, a gradual process. This is one familiar way that awakening is presented, particularly in this Theravādan tradition. It accords with our experience and with what we're taught to expect. We come on retreat once or twice a year, and in between we do what we can to maintain our practice. We listen to dharma talks, and we hang on to this idea that gradually, as we get a little better at this dance of meditation, we're inching closer to the goal.

This idea of awakening as gradual, and indeed as a natural process, is one that's emphasized in the early teachings. The most well-known formulation of this is the threefold training of sīla, samādhi, and paññā, where we lay a foundation of ethical conduct, sīla, and on that foundation we establish steadiness of mind, samādhi, and on that basis we cultivate wisdom, paññā.

The Theravādan tradition elaborates on this idea of a gradual path in various ways, providing other sequential frameworks, such as the stages of insight expounded by Buddhaghosa, an early Theravādan scholar from the fifth century AD. These stages of insight have been taken up by more contemporary traditions, followed by Mahasi Sayadaw, for example, and other Burmese lineages. These stages of insight map out the successive deepening of insight into impermanence, dukkha, and not-self in the practice.

So on a gradual path, we train in ethical behavior and meditation, and over time it naturally and

inevitably leads to the result of awakening.

And the Buddha himself uses a variety of similes to suggest that awakening is a gradual process. In one sutta he says that meditators flow towards nibbana like the river Ganges flows towards the sea. A drop of water in the river doesn't instantly become part of the ocean. It flows towards it steadily, and eventually, at the end of its journey, it merges into the great ocean. But there's no shortcut to this journey, which winds and meanders as the river itself winds and meanders. And perhaps at times it even comes to a standstill, or gets caught up in a little eddy and whirls around and around.

Similarly, the Buddha uses the analogy of a goldsmith removing impurities from gold to describe how a practitioner works with and purifies the mind in the practice. First, the goldsmith thoroughly washes the gold to get rid of the gross impurities. Then they wash it again to get rid of the moderate impurities. Then they wash it another time to get rid of the minute impurities. Then they smelt it to get rid of the dross—which, according to Google, is a scum of impurities that forms on molten metal during the refining process. And then they repeat this process again to make the gold pliant, workable, and bright. The point the Buddha is making here is that this is a natural and sequential process. By removing the impurities from gold, starting with the large impurities and down to the fine ones, you naturally create the conditions for the pure gold to emerge, and each step is dependent on the one before.

Perhaps the most convincing evidence that awakening is gradual is the fact that it is always presented in the suttas as a process with four stages. We've mentioned this a few times during the retreat: stream entry, once returning, non-returning, and arahantship, which is full awakening. At each of these stages, different fetters are abandoned. A stream enterer, for example, is someone for whom the belief in a separate self has been abandoned, but the roots of craving and aversion have not yet been significantly cut at this stage. A stream enterer still feels their likes and dislikes very strongly.

This framework of a gradual and natural process of awakening is a comforting one to us as meditators because it allows for the possibility of progress along a path. It gives the experience of awakening depth, which makes it more accessible. It's not all or nothing, but a project over time of liberating the heart and mind that can encompass many momentary freedoms and liberations along the way.

But there are also examples in the early teachings that suggest awakening is a sudden breakthrough—a world-altering flash of realisation. In fact, the suttas are littered with examples of people who, in the Buddha's time, heard the Dharma being taught by the Buddha himself or one of his senior disciples and experienced a spontaneous breakthrough, either full or partial awakening.

My favourite description of a sudden breakthrough comes from another of the women disciples. We heard a little bit about the nun Sumedha the other night. But there's another nun who was one of the Buddha's senior disciples, a woman named Patachara. Like Sumedha and the other women disciples of the Buddha, not much is recorded about her. But she was obviously a gifted and charismatic teacher in her own right, because it's recorded that she had one of the largest followings of nuns of any of the senior disciples.

Patachara was a significant figure in the Buddha's Sangha, yet not much is recorded about her beyond the story of how she came to the Buddha's community and one poem that she left behind about her awakening.

Patachara was led to the Dharma after intense tragedy and suffering. She was actually the victim of a catastrophic natural disaster, a violent storm that killed everyone in her family except her. But she was clearly a survivor with a strong personality. She was the daughter in a high-status family, but she fell in love with one of the servants and ran off with him, eloped with him. They had one child together, and then she became pregnant with another. By then, she wanted to reconcile with her family. She wanted to give birth in her family home, which was the custom in ancient India at the time.

Against her husband's wishes, she took her little toddler and set off heavily pregnant and otherwise alone, apart from the small child, to head back to her parents' house to give birth. This was in a different town and involved traversing a section of wild forest. It would have been an arduous journey while heavily pregnant with a toddler. When her husband realised she was gone and where she'd gone, he hurried to follow after and catch up with her. He did indeed catch up with her along the path. By then they were deep in the forest, a catastrophic storm was brewing, and Patachara's labour was just starting as well.

Patachara ended up giving birth there in the forest, exposed to the elements in the middle of this huge storm. In a heartbreaking series of tragedies, the storm and then the subsequent flooding of the river she had to cross the following day claimed the lives of not only her husband but her two young children as well. Patachara struggled on alone, not knowing what else to do, and when she finally arrived at the town where her parents lived, she found that their house too had collapsed and been swept away in the flood.

At this point, having lost her entire family, Patachara understandably went mad with grief and pain. She wandered around in rags and people threw sticks and rubbish at her. And eventually, mad and naked, she stumbled across a gathering listening to the Buddha teaching.

And the people who were in the crowd tried to drive her away. But the Buddha saw her and he came and spoke to her. And by pointing out to her the universal nature of suffering and grief, and the inevitability of death, he managed to calm her heart-mind, and she asked to be ordained. So that's how she entered the community.

And as I said, she went on to be a respected senior leader of the nuns. The poem she left behind is recorded in the Therigatha, the Book of Elder Nuns, in which the women describe their understanding of the teachings and declare their awakening.

What's interesting about Patachara's poem is that she gives quite a precise account of how awakening happened. The poem starts with her lamenting that even though she's been practicing diligently, she hasn't yet attained the fruit of nibbana. And then she continues:

Having washed my feet, then I watched that water, noticing the water flowing from high ground to low. With

that the mind was calmed, just as a noble thoroughbred horse. Having taken my lamp, I went into my hut, inspected the sleeping place, then sat upon the bed. Having taken a pin, I pushed the wick right down, and just as the lamp went out, so all delusion of the heart went too.

So this is Patachara's account of how awakening happened. And there are a few things that are interesting here.

Firstly, it's spontaneous. It happened suddenly and without warning. One moment she reached out her hand to snuff out the wick of the lamp, and the next moment—bang—her mind was free.

Secondly, it didn't happen on the meditation cushion. Do you sense some sort of agenda here? Or in Patachara's case, it would likely have been the root of a tree. But instead it happened when she was going to bed after a period of intense meditation. And in fact it was precisely when she allowed her mind to relax after diligent practice that the awakening experience occurred.

This poem is her lion's roar—her declaration of complete liberation. What we don't know is how many stages she went through in that one experience. But this is her declaration of the breakthrough to final awakening.

Now, some may have heard that certain traditions say a woman cannot attain arahantship. If you look in the early teachings, there are many examples to the contrary. In fact, I believe all of the poems in the Therigatha, the collection of poems by the elder nuns, declare their attainment of arahantship. This idea that women cannot attain full liberation came in the later Theravadan tradition, but it certainly wasn't there in the early teachings of the Buddha or during the time of the Buddha's community. You won't find this in the early texts. It's a reflection of the gender bias in the cultures that came later in the 2,500 years since then.

So it didn't happen on the meditation cushion—that's another interesting feature of this account. And thirdly is how embodied, even mundane, the moments leading up to this experience are in her description. She's just getting ready for bed. She washes her feet. She watches the water running off. She goes inside and sits down on her bed and turns out her lamp. The door to awakening was being fully mindful of her body as she went about her everyday tasks.

Patachara's account challenges the common conception of awakening as being esoteric and unattainable. Often when we hear stories about people getting enlightened, it can seem like such an alien and unlikely experience. How could something like that possibly happen to me? But when we look at descriptions like Patachara's more closely, a different understanding emerges. Her poem points to something profound and exciting about awakening: that when our minds are sufficiently ripe, awakening happens spontaneously.

It has this quality of sudden penetration, right here and right now. Through intimacy with mundane experience, the mind suddenly lets go and opens into the experience of nibbana. And what this means, of course, is that the possibility for awakening actually exists in every moment.

It's still very hard to believe this. We're sitting here, dealing with our own internal struggles, thinking, well, how is that relevant to me? Awakening's not happening to me in this moment, and it's unlikely to happen in any of the moments that are going to come soon. So to see how this might be available as an experience here and now, let's look at another example from the Buddha's disciples. This is Bahiya of the bark cloth.

Bahiya is a famous character in the ancient Pali suttas. He is famous for being the quickest of the Buddha's disciples to attain awakening.

Here's his story. Bahiya lived at the time of the Buddha and was a sailor by trade, until one day when he was shipwrecked and washed up on the west coast of India with all of his possessions lost. He'd been stripped even of his clothes, and so he fashioned some clothing out of bark and headed to the nearest town to seek help. He ended up going from door to door, begging.

But even then, there must have been something a bit out of the ordinary about him, because instead of seeing him as a penniless beggar, the people mistook him for an awakened sage, a spiritual wanderer. He ended up establishing himself in the area, and over time he became the respected leader of a spiritual community. And since everyone else thought he was awakened, he began to believe that he must be.

But in his heart of hearts, Bahiya did have doubts about his own enlightenment. One day, when he was pondering whether he really was an arahant, a passing deva—a divine spirit—tuned into his thoughts and took it upon himself to set Bahiya straight. He appeared before Bahiya and told him, "Bahiya, you are not an arahant, nor are you on the way to becoming one."

Bahiya is quite shocked by this revelation. He wants to know: are there any arahants living anywhere in the world? The deva tells him about the Buddha, living thousands of miles away on the other side of India—which in those times was a very long way away. But being a seeker of the truth, Bahiya doesn't waste a second. He leaves his home immediately and makes the journey from west to east India on foot, stopping only a night in each place along the way.

When he finally arrives at the Jeta Grove in Savatthi, where the Buddha is camped out with a group of monks and nuns, he marches straight up to the nearest monk and says, "Where is the fully enlightened one? I must see him straight away." To which he's told, "Well, you'll have to wait. The Buddha has gone into town on his alms round. He'll return a bit later and there'll be a time for teaching and asking Dhamma questions."

But Bahiya can't wait. He rushes into Savatthi, finds the Buddha, and falls onto the ground in front of him saying, "Teach me the Dhamma, Lord, please teach me the Dhamma."

The Buddha is halted in his tracks in the middle of the street. He says to Bahiya, "This is not a suitable time. I'm on my alms round." To which Bahiya replies, "I can't be certain how much longer you or I have to live. Please teach me the Dhamma now." Again, the Buddha refuses him. But when Bahiya pleads for a

third time, the Buddha relents and gives him a concise and profound teaching.

He says, "Here, Bahiya, 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, Bahiya. When, Bahiya, for you, in the seen is merely what is seen, in the heard is merely what is heard, in the sensed is merely what is sensed, 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.' When you are not 'in that,' then you will be neither here nor beyond nor in between the two. Just this is the end of suffering."

With that short instruction, the Buddha moves off to complete his alms round. And in that very moment, Bahiya gets it. He is instantly awakened by the Buddha's words.

It turns out that he was right to have a sense of urgency about receiving the teachings, because the next thing that happens is this: as he's wandering away, he is gored to death by a cow protecting its calf. The Buddha and his companions come across Bahiya's body on their way back from their alms round.

And the Buddha sees him lying there, and he instructs the monks to take Bahiya's body and make a stupa for it. When they inquire why, he informs them that Bahiya died an arahant. He heard the Buddha's teaching, and his mind was released on the spot. And that's why Bahiya goes down in Buddhist history as the quickest to attain awakening.

So what does this teaching mean? The first part is the Buddha's instruction to Bahiya about how he should practice: *In the seen is merely what is seen. In the heard is merely what is heard. In the sensed is merely what is sensed. In the cognised is merely what is cognised.*

It's talking about pure intimacy with our sense perceptions. Simply seeing, simply hearing, and so forth, without adding on top all the layers of perceptions, judgments, intentions, clinging, and aversion that are part of our everyday experience.

This might sound simple and straightforward, but of course it isn't. Because we automatically perceive, organize, categorize, and judge our experience in every moment. These are not functions that we can easily turn off.

For example, if you're meditating and you hear the sound of a bird, you instantly know it's a bird. Even if there's no mental chatter about which bird it is or how lovely it is to be hearing the bird, you still know it's a bird. So you're not experiencing pure intimacy with the senses. A layer of perception has already come between awareness and the aware, interpreting the sound hitting your ear as "bird." It's very hard to imagine our experience of the world without this.

A useful analogy is language. Language, of course, is nothing more than a particular collection and rhythm of sounds. This becomes very apparent whenever we hear someone speaking a different language to our

own. But when our own language is spoken, it's impossible not to hear the words and understand the meaning, because perception and cognition are already at work.

So the Buddha is instructing Bahiya to develop intimacy with the senses, to strip away all the things we do with sense experience in our minds. Instead of a beautiful bird or an annoying bird or a delicious dinner or a pain in my knee, it's just this. Just this. Just this.

In his teaching to Bahiya, the Buddha goes on to say: *When, Bahiya, for you, in the seen is merely what is seen, in the heard is merely what is heard, in the sensed is merely what is sensed, in the cognised is merely what is cognised, then, Bahiya, you will not be with that. When you are not with that, then you will not be in that. When you are not in that, then you will be neither here nor beyond nor in between the two. Just this is the end of suffering.*

So what's he talking about here? He's suggesting that the layers we add to bare sense experience are what create our world and our sense of self. When we don't layer our perceptions, our judgments, our intentions on top of our sensory experience, then we don't construct an identity out of them. This is what he means when he says, "You will not be with that, you will not be in that."

To go back to the example of hearing the bird call, we can identify the layers involved in constructing a sense of self and world out of this simple sensory experience.

At the gross level, there's what we do with our perceptions about the world. If we're sitting here and we hear a bird call, we might act with either pleasure or perhaps aversion. That might generate a thought, and then we begin to weave a story about me and my relationship to the bird. "Oh, that's such a beautiful sound. This is such a precious place to be on retreat because of all the wonderful birds." Or it might be, "Oh, that bird is so noisy and raucous. How can I possibly meditate with that squawking going on outside?"

We're heaping our mental reactions on top of the sensory experience, and we're creating a sense of "me." I'm the one who loves being at BMIMC because it's such a sublime garden setting. Or I'm the one who can't meditate with all this noise going on.

If we apply our mindfulness, we may manage to stop this chain of mental reaction and story. By doing so, we cut through one of the layers of self that we're adding to the experience. But even then, as I mentioned earlier, we still immediately recognise the sound as a bird, without even thinking about it. We've already applied the label of "bird." And this already brings into being a world of concepts which we inhabit. There's me, and the meditation hall, and the tree outside, and the bird.

So instead of hearing only the heard, we've already constructed a world and we've constructed a self. If we were to truly hear only the heard, there would simply be sound. It would not be perceived as birdsong, which would mean no bird, which would mean no tree outside, which would mean no here, which would mean no me.

So without my stories about my sense experience, then where am I? I'm nowhere to be found. There's just this. There's simply sense experience, nothing more. I am neither here nor there, nor in between.

On the one hand, the Buddha's teaching to Bahiya has a beautiful simplicity to it. It's a very practical meditation instruction because the senses are always available to us, and the instruction to simply be with them intimately is clear and uncomplicated—as in Patachara's example, where she was simply being mindful of the flow of experience as she washed her feet and turned out her lamp. On the other hand, it's a deeply profound practice that, as both Patachara's and Bahiya's stories show, can lead us to complete freedom from suffering here and now.

The Bahiya Sutta ends with a poem uttered by the Buddha, in which, inspired by Bahiya's sudden breakthrough, the Buddha describes awakening:

Where water, earth, fire and wind have no footing, there the stars don't shine, the sun isn't visible, there the moon doesn't appear, there darkness is not found. And when a sage, a Brahmin, through sagacity has realised this for himself, then from form and formless, from bliss and pain, he is freed.

This poem's placement at the end of the Bahiya Sutta beautifully illustrates the two sides of the Buddha's teaching: the radical simplicity and the profound depth. On the one hand is the instruction to Bahiya, which involves cutting through the complexity of conceptual thought and being completely grounded and intimate with the body and with the present moment. On the other hand is what this practice opens us up to—an experience that's beyond the senses, where water, earth, fire and wind have no footing and where the sun isn't visible. This seems at odds with the very embodied instruction that in the seen is just the seen. And yet what the Buddha is implying is that there's no contradiction between these at all.

Awakening is fathomless and indescribable, but there's a simplicity and an immediacy to it as well. Freedom from suffering is not in some sort of distant transcendental realm—it's accessible by simply being fully intimate with our sense experience, by simply being aware of whatever we're experiencing right now. Awakening is right here, right now, in this body. Just this.

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