What is Awakening? (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:15:55

We mentioned in the first part of this talk that even a little attentive listening and curiosity into different teachers' positions or teachings on what awakening is and what stream entry is—just even within Theravadan-based teachings or Pali Canon-based teachings, and even within the Insight Meditation tradition—will quickly reveal something important. Just a little attentive reflection, listening, reading across a range of voices of both teachers and fellow practitioners will make it obvious that despite a lot of similar vocabulary taken from the tradition—dukkha, end of dukkha, four noble truths—despite this similarity of vocabulary, there's actually quite a wide range of interpretations of what awakening and different stages of awakening mean. There are many takes on what the Buddha outlined as the first stage, stream entry.

I think that's good. I'm pleased that there are many different takes. Different visions of awakening and different ideas about what it encompasses will suit different people, and that's important. The diversity in the modern Theravadan tradition, the modern Pali Canon tradition, and Insight Meditation tradition—the plurality there, the divergence, the lack of agreement—I think that's important and healthy and actually necessary these days.

More and more, for myself, engaging in or even just hearing other people argue about etymology of certain words and quibble over texts in the Pali canon, trying to insist on just one interpretation of a certain word or passage as if it's the only true possible interpretation or the correct interpretation, narrowing down the hermeneutic possibilities that way—it seems to me, where I am right now at this point in my practice and life, which is different than what it was before, a little bit silly. Something that I would have engaged in myself a fair amount and put quite a lot of stock in now seems silly to me, this arguing about etymology and words and picking over texts in that way. That's just my personal feeling at this point in my development, life, and practice. I'll return to perhaps why I feel that way.

Related to what I said in the first talk, I feel there are other ways to orient to this question of what is awakening, rather than going back to the text and quibbling about word meanings. There are other ways which I feel, for some people or some people at certain points in their path or trajectory of practice, are perhaps more fruitful, more interesting, and actually more helpful. There are other ways to orient, which we'll return to.

Also, as I mentioned in the first talk, I feel it's important to realize, to be aware of: why am I adopting any view I have? If I have a view that this is awakening, this is what this word means—why? What's going on for me that I lean towards this view or grasp at that view or insist on this view or adopt that view,

whatever it is?

For example, with stream entry—sottāpanna—as I said, the Buddha in the Pali Canon talked about different stages of awakening: stream entry being the first stage, the beginning stage; once-returner and non-returner, the second and third stages; arahant, the fully enlightened, the final stage.

Someone told me that they were speaking to a fellow retreatant after retreat, and that retreatant was saying that he thought he was a stream-enterer, or considered himself a stream-enterer, because he could go with the flow. I'm not sure where he heard that idea—not important—but he could go with the flow in life, and that made him what the Buddha called a stream-enterer, because streams flow, and if you're in a stream, you're going with the flow, perhaps.

We could get into a whole argument with that and say, well, the Buddha did not teach going with the flow. You could trawl through the Pali Canon, and there's very little language about going with flow or even that kind of trope or tenor of things. Going with the flow is quite a modern western notion. The Buddha did talk about flow in the word saṃsāra. Saṃsāra, one meaning of it, is the flow, the flowing on. Sara is from the root sr in Pali and Sanskrit, and that actually means to flow. It was exactly this flow that the Buddha was interested in stopping—stopping that flowing on, ending it, ending saṃsāra.

So there's very little textual support in the Pali Canon for teachings about going with the flow. Or we could say there was a teaching of flow, which is saṃsāra, which is really problematic. Then there's this teaching of stream entry, where with a lot of effort and with a lot of striving and diligence—and these are the Buddha's words—one attains to a stage where one has seen something or understood something, or something has opened or changed in the being that forms a kind of platform for further realization and a kind of platform from which one cannot fall. One cannot go back. One progresses inevitably from this. One has entered a stream that will take one inevitably—it's a different kind of stream, one could say. There's the stream of saṃsāra, the sara of saṃsāra, and there's another kind of stream that leads towards awakening.

Rather than argue all that, which, as I said, doesn't seem particularly fruitful to me now for different reasons that I'll mention as we go on, I'm more interested in what's going on that someone would adopt such a view and believe, "I feel like I'm a stream-enterer now because I go with the flow, and that's my understanding of it." That's what I'm more interested in: What's the motivation? What's going on that's directing, propelling, inclining the adoption of such a view and such a self-view?

As I said, it's quite a contemporary Western idea, this idea of going with the flow. You could trace it to certain Taoist ideas. It's a very simple idea, and simple ideas—and certainly ideas that are popular in the culture—can be attractive. They're attractive because they make sense to us and they sound simple to us because we're familiar with them.

it's also a relatively kind of low bar for what the first stage of awakening is.

So it's quite easy to understand what it means because we're kind of, or at least it seems easy, but actually if you probe into it, what does it mean to flow, to go with the flow? So if neo-Nazis come to power, I just go with the flow? No.

It's actually a deceptively simple idea – it's not really a simple idea, but it seems simple and it also seems like it's relatively easy to attain. And so it might be that what's going on is that because it's a popular, relatively simple sounding idea, because it sounds like it's relatively easy to attain such a thing as going with the flow, or pretty much going with the flow in one's life as a kind of lifestyle, then it might be attractive. Again, I'm not insisting or claiming that that is what was going on for this person. I don't know because I said it was second-hand. But I'm more interested in what's actually going on. What's the motivation? What's propelling me to adopt this or that idea of what awakening is and what it looks like, a vision of it, an image of it, and also a self-view in relationship to it?

So, actually, if we do go back to the text just a little bit, having said all that, when the Buddha kind of outlined the different stages of awakening and what was involved in each, he didn't say that much about it, actually. In relation to all stages of awakening, he describes ten fetters, and the different stages of awakening sort of remove or severely attenuate different of those fetters. So an arahant has destroyed, eradicated, once and for all and for good, all of the ten fetters. A stream entrant, the first stage, has uprooted three fetters, and those fetters are doubt, attachment to rites and rituals is the way it's usually translated as a second, and a third, *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*, is usually translated as something like personality view or the theory of individuality or something like that.

But again, it's not an easy proposition to ask what actually, exactly is meant by each of those three fetters. So even that one, attachment to rites and rituals, one has disregarded that. I've heard many different interpretations of that. Some say it's not being attached to believing rituals will have a magical effect in one's life. Some people say it's not being attached to practice meditation or certain styles of meditation over others and insisting this is the right way, that's the right way. You have to meditate like this. No, you have to meditate like that.

And especially when we get to this one about this *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*, this is really interesting. What does that mean? So I don't know the history of that term, but just a little kind of rummaging around makes me wonder whether it was a term – *sakkāya* was a term that already pre-existed the Buddha. It was something he picked up, and it might have been a positive term, and he said, no, you need to get rid of that. It's not an experience or a view you want to attain, you want to get rid of it. So the renunciation, the letting go, the seeing through of... *Diṭṭhi* means views, or some people translate it as theory – I'll come back to that – but the letting go of this *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*.

When we look, just dwell on this for a little bit, when we ask, well, what does this mean, this *sakkāyadiṭṭhi* ? I know the translation, or the most common translations put it that way: personality view, individuality theory, or something like that, the theory of the individual, *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*.

In Pali, *sakkāya* is actually what's called a compound word, which means it's two words jammed together, like they have in German and some other languages. And those two words are... So we spell it, *sakkāya*, S-A-K-K-A-Y-A. And that compound is actually made up of two words: *sat* and *kāya*. So S-A-T and one word, and the other word is *kāya*. And what happens when you jam the words together in a compound is the T kind of elides with the K, and you just make it a double K. So *sakkāyadiṭṭhi* is actually short for *satkāyadiṭṭhi*.

So you've got two words there: *sat* and *kāya*.

Kāya, the second word, is quite an interesting word. So it means body, but just as in English, that word body has different meanings. So it means body as certainly this physical body, but even then it carries a second meaning often of like we have in English body as a sort of group or collection or a mass of things or a totality of things. So we talk about in English a body of work or a body of people or a body of water, for example. So it also in Pali carries this kind of double meaning. Sometimes the physical body was also regarded as a collection, a heap, a kind of bag of stuff – what of the four great elements, earth, air, fire and water?

So *kāya* has this kind of double meaning. It also can mean the term for kind of an organ, the organ of touch, meaning you touch with your *kāya*, you experience touch with your *kāya*. So like the eye is the organ of vision, the mind is the organ of thought, the *kāya* is the organ of touch. It can also be kind of just the locus or the seat of sensation or awareness. It can also be regarded as that which we act through. So it has an ethical component because we're responsible for our actions, we've judged our actions, and this is what acts in the world, is the *kāya*.

Then you've got this word *sat*. And *sat's* an interesting word. And it can mean, as some of you will know from the Hindu traditions, being or existing or being present.

That's one of the meanings. So you would have the existing or existent body—the belief, the theory, and the view of the existent body. This is what we're giving up, or the view that this collection of elements exists in some real way.

Sat can also mean real or actual. Satya, as some of you know, is the word for truth in the Four Noble Truths. So we're speaking of the belief that this group of elements is somehow real. What's real—the group or the individual elements?

This word sat can also mean "that which is," that which is real. So we're talking about this really existent or true body, if you like. With stream entry, I'm giving up belief in a true body.

Sometimes in compounds like satkāya, sat can mean "that which is possessed of"—possessed of this body or this heap or collection of elements. So I'm not believing in something that possesses all this.

Sat can also mean living—to live, to be, to exist. So I'm not believing in a theory of the living body.

You can see that a word like sakāya is quite open to slightly different interpretations. Often, as I said, it's translated as personality views—sakāyadiṭṭhi—or identification with the aggregates.

The second word, diṭṭhi, is usually translated as view, sometimes opinion, but some translations say theory. To me, that translation doesn't really work that well. If I speak to my mum about what her theory of personality is or her theory of self is, she'll say, "What the hell are you talking about?" If I ask, "Well, can you explain how you conceive of the self?" I think she would just cut short the conversation. She has no theory of self as an intellectual position to articulate.

Sometimes people interpret the giving up of sakāyadiṭṭhi—this fetter in stream entry—as a kind of giving up of any intellectual position, or holding this intellectual view or that, or positing this or that about the self. But for me, it has to be something much more fundamental than a theory. There are plenty of people in the world who have no theory of self at all, and I think one would be hard-pushed to call them awakened or stream-enterers.

Sometimes I've heard people interpret sakāyadiṭṭhi as meaning just the ending or the radical quietening of the inner critic. It's quite interesting that this view arises—it's a particularly modern, I'd say modern Western view. There's so much pain around the inner critic and so much suffering people have once they've got the basic prerequisites and are quite affluent, with material wealth and ease and comfort in their life, but they're really suffering with the inner critic. So it makes sense to fit the framework of the inner critic to the Buddha's teachings, or fit the framework of the Buddha's teachings to the inner critic, when that's what's predominant in one's life.

The freedom from that, either completely or to a large extent, is regarded by a few people I've heard—not very many—as stream entry, or the ending of this fetter, which is the most significant fetter with stream entry: this ending of sakāyadiṭṭhi, letting go of sakāyadiṭṭhi.

Other people view this personality view, or view of the individual, or self-view, differently. For them, the realization, the letting go or cutting of that fetter, the removal of that fetter, is to realize that what this self is, is a process. That realization—"I realize what the self is, it's a process"—is a process of the psychophysical aggregates in time. It's the process of the bodily processes and the processes of vedanā and perception and mental formations and consciousness, moment to moment in time. To realize that this is the true nature of the self is to realize the emptiness of self, or to let go of personality view, and let go of this third fetter. This view is around as well, quite a lot in certain circles.

The Buddha also talks about—often it's a slightly enigmatic, puzzling phrase, because it's never, to my knowledge, really explained exactly what it means in the Pali—but you often hear stories of such and such a person attaining stream entry. The epithet for that is "his or her Dharma eye was opened." There was the opening of the Dharma eye at that point. It's a kind of epithet for stream entry—the opening of the Dharma eye. What does that mean? I'm not aware of any place where it's actually explained exactly what that means.

The opening of the Dharma eye. I wonder, might it be any of these that we've mentioned—any of these interpretations of what's involved in stream entry, and particularly what's involved in letting go of that fetter of sakkayaditthi?

Might it also be when the Dharma—what's central in the Dharma—becomes clear? When the Buddha talks about after awakening, he says this Dharma is hard to see, hard to fathom, discernible only by the wise. It's somewhat ambiguous what he's talking about at that point, what he means by "this Dharma" that's hard to see, hard to attain. He wonders whether he should bother teaching it because he doesn't think people will understand.

But at least part of that quote identifies this Dharma as paticcasamuppada—dependent co-arising, dependent origination. So that's at least part of it. Opening the Dharma eye might be connected to that sort of centrality of dependent origination. When the Buddha talks about the Dharma, it's like the nutshell of his sense of what the Dharma is. Perhaps opening the Dharma eye means this understanding of dependent origination—understanding it experientially for oneself, not just intellectually.

But then we have another problem: what does it mean to understand dependent origination? Again, if you've listened to enough teachings, read enough books, asked enough questions, you'll see that the range of interpretations of what dependent origination means or points to—even the level of existence at which it applies, what understanding of it involves and delivers—all of that is up for grabs. Some of you know my version, my preferred take, would be quite different from others. So we still have that question.

At other times—and some of you have heard me stress this in various talks—the Buddha says several times, "That dimension should be known, monks and nuns. That dimension should be known where there is no seeing, no hearing, no smelling, tasting, touching, no thinking, imagining, or mental perception. That sphere should be known."

Other times he talks about what's beyond perception—the cessation of perception, no form, no mental factors, no sun, no moon, no coming, no going, no stopping, no starting, no long, no short, no coarse, no fine. There are many passages in the texts pointing to this kind of dimension beyond perception, beyond the fabrication of perception.

It's clear that when the Buddha says "that dimension should be known," he's talking about what we call the unfabricated. In his descriptions, there is not the fabrication of perception at that point. That dimension should be known. He's not saying it's just some cool experience that some of you might want to check out. It should be known—that's the grammatical construction. The implication is for awakening, for or by an awakened person. That dimension should be known.

Having said I'm not particularly interested in making cases for this or that, I just want to lay a few things out. If you go to the Pali Canon, these are the kinds of things you find. I want to spill them on the table and ask: how does all this fit together? Does it fit together? But in a way, that's secondary to the main point I'm

interested in.

Regarding the unfabricated and that dimension that should be known—which the Buddha talks about quite frequently in the Pali Canon—we're really at the edge, if not actually beyond, what language can articulate. In describing or pointing to that dimension that should be known, the unfabricated, we reach the limits of language.

Sometimes the Buddha talks about it as a kind of awareness, a kind of consciousness—consciousness without limit, without feature, or consciousness without an object. Awareness without an object. Sometimes the Buddha articulates this unfabricated that way.

At other times he makes it very clear that it is not the same as consciousness or awareness. The opening to it only arises with—and he actually says this—the complete cessation of all six consciousnesses: the consciousness of sight, smell, taste, touch, sound, and mental consciousness—thought, imagery, and so forth. With the cessation of those consciousnesses, there is this opening to something, and he talks about it more in the negative.

So sometimes it's put in the positive—either as consciousness or in some other positive way—and sometimes, more often than not, it's put in the negative. We're at the point where, in trying to articulate or even point to that dimension that should be known, that unfabricated, the Buddha was at the point—anyone who tries to articulate or describe that is at the point—where language cannot do justice.

And so you get contradictory statements, paradoxical statements, completely cryptic statements. Just in what I've said so far—is it awareness, is it not awareness—it's clear that what's being pointed to here is not simple. It's not simple for us to understand.

The cessation of all consciousnesses - we can't conceive of that other than... Most people wouldn't be able to conceive of that other than being either completely dead in the modernist sense of the word, or in a coma, or under anesthetic, or something of that nature.

So in a way, there's something here that's really not simple for us to grasp - not simple for a consciousness that hasn't opened to it, or hasn't at least moved significantly in that direction, to grasp. You could say it's not simple. You could equally say it's so utterly simple that it's beyond the kind of level of simplicity that the mind can get to - or that the usual mind can get to, the conditioned mind can get to. It's simpler than awareness. It's simpler than oneness. It's simpler even than nothingness.

I want to point to these difficulties with language, which are part of the inheritance of particularly this area around awakening, and particularly the constellation of texts that describe or point to or teach the unfabricated. You get similar problems with language around emptiness, starting in the Pali Canon for sure, but picked up even more and exacerbated over a thousand years of Mahayana teachings. What you get - and I include myself in this at times - is teachers being at times very precise in their use of language with the concept of emptiness, and at times quite sloppy, the concept being used in different ways at

different times and in quite a slippery way.

On top of that, different traditions use the same words like "emptiness" and mean very, very different things - different Buddhist traditions using the same word to mean very different things, almost diametrically opposed meanings. All this gives rise to a lot of confusion for the modern practitioner: what does this word "emptiness" mean? What's it pointing to? What is involved in a realization of emptiness?

Just briefly on this - what's my response? What's your response to hearing all that? It can be quite frustrating as a student, as a practitioner, to be in the thicket of a bewildering and very slippery range and use of a single concept. So what does it do to you? Does it make you want to jack the whole thing in and give up? Do you hear it and think, "Oh, that's all just intellectual and fussy, and I don't want to fuss like that, I don't want to be involved in that kind of fussing"?

Or is there something like: "I really want to find out what these two - actually way more than two - what are all these different strands of tradition, these different teachers saying? What exactly is the difference, and where do I stand in all this, and what do I gravitate to, and what can I see in my practice?" Is it over-fussiness, or is it important fussiness? What is at stake here in this profusion and confusion and difficulties with language and terms? And again, why do I have the response that I have? That it feels really important to me, or it just feels like a bunch of silly intellectuals arguing over how many angels fit on the head of a pin? Why? What's going on for me? Is it, or in what way is it, or is it not, a soul question for me?

If I was going to spill out the pieces of the Pali Canon - different references and so forth - put them on the table and see how that jigsaw, how those pieces of a jigsaw fit together, and also what makes sense for my practice, I guess I would say: what does this Dharma mean?

It means knowing the unfabricated experientially. But that knowing of the unfabricated, pursuing this meditative exploration into less and less fabrication - as I've described in detail elsewhere - also means understanding dependent origination. In other words, in pursuing this question of fabrication: how does the self sense, how does the sense of various objects in my perception, how does the world sense get fabricated, in what ways, and with what conditions? How does it get built, fabricated, constructed, saṅkhāra-ed, and how not, and how much less? Understanding that everything is a dependent arising, that everything is a fabrication, and how it is fabricated.

These two - the experiencing of the unfabricated and understanding dependent origination - should be intimately tied together with understanding the fabrication of all phenomena: that they are fabricated and how they are fabricated. In other words, understanding dependent origination not just intellectually, but in one's experience and through one's experience. This includes intellectual understanding but goes to a certain level beyond intellectual understanding, because there is the dissolving of the concepts and the elements involved.

Those two go together: the knowing of the unfabricated and the thorough, deep understanding of dependent origination. And this means the same thing as the knowing of the emptiness of things, or it's involved in that trajectory. To understand that something is a dependent arising, that it's fabricated, means to know it's empty.

Sometimes a practitioner in the broad range of practitioners of different sub-traditions of modern Theravada, Pali Canon-inspired Dharma, reports - and they've reported to me and other teachers - a cessation experience, what's called a cessation experience, the cessation of perception. In other words, the non-fabrication of perception. So an experience of what we could call non-fabricating, or the unfabricated.

Now, when someone reports an experience like that, it can be quite tricky, again, based on the language. It's really a struggle to articulate what that experience is or how it is. So someone can report an experience, and it could be, could not be...

And this is where the wisdom of the Buddha comes in—though I will dwell on this for a moment—the wisdom of focusing more on the fetters. Well, what's gone now? What's changed now? Not so much: what was that experience? Partly because the difficulty in describing such experiences is actually enormous.

People could be describing many different things. I remember being a student on a retreat, and in a group interview, someone described what sounded very much to me like just his first experience of the first jhana. What he said was "everything disappeared." It wasn't until he was asked a few more questions that it became very clear that everything did not disappear. This is quite common as one goes through the jhanas—one hasn't quite ascertained or discerned what has disappeared and what remains.

In the first jhana, hindrances have certainly disappeared, and in many cases, the solidity of body perception has disappeared. But much remains: perception as subject and object, time, piti as the main experience, sukha—all of that continues. So when people say "everything disappeared," there's both a language difficulty and a discernment question. Really, did everything disappear, or was there other stuff remaining?

For instance, all perception of form can disappear in the fifth jhana—does disappear in the fifth jhana—and a person can say "everything disappeared." Or in the seventh jhana, in the realm of nothingness, and actually there is still something there. What's the something? It's the nothing. In the seventh jhana, a perception of nothingness still remains. You see how subtle this gets, how deep it becomes.

To say there was a cessation, everything disappeared, there was a cessation of all perception—it goes very, very deep in terms of the more refined perceptions that remain and that can then be transcended.

But even if one thinks, "Well, maybe this person did have a cessation experience," my experience as a teacher is that that cessation experience, cessation of perception, may or may not bring freedom with it. In

some instances, unfortunately, it just seems to give rise over time to clinging—clinging to that experience or clinging to the memory of it.

A person looks at their life, and sometimes an authority, a sayadaw or someone, has said, "No, no, it's stream entry." The person says, "But I don't feel any different." And the sayadaw says, "No, you're a stream enterer now." Sometimes what happens is a person has an experience and actually there's not much freedom coming out of it. Or even worse, the effect is to cause clinging.

Sometimes there's a kind of devaluing of the world of perception, or dualism emerges: there's that fantastic thing, and all this around me is just rubbish. In other words, their experience of the unfabricated—they have arrived at it. It has opened up through intense non-clinging in a moment, so there's not the fabricating, and then there's the opening to the unfabricated. But because they haven't been exploring in a way that prioritizes the exploration of fabrication—fabricating more, fabricating less, the dependent arising of perception—that hasn't been a theme. They've just been, for instance, contemplating impermanence really intensely.

Then what you get is this kind of amazing opening to an experience so different from ordinary worldly experience, so different from the realm of perception, which is all this. And it seems to have nothing to do—these two realms of perception and the transcending of perception, the fabricated and the unfabricated—seem to have nothing to do with each other. There's a radical dualistic split.

The function of that split sometimes can be helpful in one's life. There is something beyond, and that shines through on this life or implies something about this life that's very helpful. There can be freedom. For someone else, it might be that this dualism between the fabricated and unfabricated just creates a dismissal and disconnect from this life of perception, from the fabricated world, in a way that isn't that helpful. Then one's got just this thing that I want to get back to—this unfabricated—and what about this world of fabrication?

Now another person, another practitioner, another student coming in may be really getting interested in this question of dependent origination and fabrication—how self, other, world get fabricated through different forms of clinging and to what degree—watching this movement up and down the spectrum of fabrication. They've never had a full cessation experience. It's never been for them that everything completely disappears. But they see this movement of the relative fading of perception to different degrees, maybe really deeply, and then fabricating up and down, up and down on this spectrum. They see its dependency on the way of looking. They see the dependency on clinging.

Because they see it, they understand dependent origination more and more. Even without experiencing a complete cessation of all perception, a complete unfabricating of all perception, understanding this movement up and down—at some point, the intuitive wisdom just gets it. I don't even need that experience.

I just grasp it scientifically, inductively. I just understand something.

And this brings—they haven't had a cessation experience, but it brings a liberation that is greater than the other person I alluded to who's had the cessation experience, got the certificate from the teacher or whatever, but hasn't understood dependent arising, hasn't understood the relationship of the fabricated to the unfabricated and how fabricating works, dependent on way of looking, dependent on clinging, and different degrees and kinds of clinging.

So that's something I know will be important for some of you to know.

It also seems to me more and more, as I hear from more students, that one can have, of course, a sort of what we might call a full cessation experience. It's fully vivid and immediate—in the sense of unmediated—experience, opening to the sense experience of the unfabricated. In other words, there's nothing else going on. All other perception has stopped.

Or, at different times—and I remember saying this in a Q&A on some retreat in the last few years in response to a question—one can have a kind of sense of it, an intimation of this dimension that should be known, kind of shining through, if you like, the experience of this world.

Now, certainly one will get that sense—some people get that sense of the shining through of the unfabricated—after they've had a sort of complete cessation experience. But I think it's also possible for some people to kind of get it before they've really fully opened up to it, with something of the genuine unfabricated shining through.

We have to be a little careful here because—and again, some of you who know the different jhānas, especially as it gets into the formless realms, will know that in the aftereffects on perception of a different jhāna, it's quite common for that perception to kind of shine through the world of the fabricated, this world of experience and perception. And so what we can get is all kinds of onenesses can shine through. The oneness of cosmic love, the oneness of cosmic consciousness, the oneness of awareness, the oneness of nothingness, etc., can be sensed as shining through as we are moving about in the world with our senses open. There's this mystical shining through and the blessedness of that. There are actually many different versions.

So how do we discern the, so to speak, genuine unfabricated? I think it's difficult. I would say, though, that the unfabricated is characterized, if we can say that, by being timeless. It's beyond time. It's somehow not even a now, not even a present. And so if there's that quality of—we could say eternity, but let's say timelessness—not just beyond past and future, but beyond present as well. That quality shining through is particularly characteristic of the unfabricated, this dimension that the Buddha said should be known.

And also, secondly, and connected with what I mentioned earlier about how the Buddha talked about this realm, is that it's kind of got this... Is it or is it not aware? It doesn't quite feel right to say it is aware in the usual sense of awareness—A, because it's not in time; B, it has no object. And it doesn't quite feel right to

say it's not aware. So those two elements—the timeless and this kind of middle way of whether it is or isn't aware—perhaps can help in discerning whether it's that unfabricated shining through.

So one version... as I hope you can hear, I'm actually really not interested in selling you any particular version of all this. But one way of thinking about it—and I can't remember if I shared this in talks before or just individually with certain students—one way of thinking about awakening, or a sort of metaphor I had, was of a ball bearing in a U-tube.

This ball bearing can be—when the tube is shaken, the ball bearing can kind of zip up the sides of the tube. Up the sides of the tube indicates away from the bottom point of the U. I hope you can picture this—at the bottom of the U, that's the point of knowing the emptiness of everything, knowing the dependent origination of everything. And everything means self, any phenomena, awareness, time, the now—you name it.

So this is one view. The ball bearing can be right there, in the knowing of that emptiness. And then out of that comes the freedom from suffering because we know that things are empty and there isn't the clinging.

With a stream-enterer, it's like the knock of the eight winds and just the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune and all that. Knock the tube and the ball bearing can go up the tube, climbing the walls. And as it goes up the tube, it's away from the kind of rootedness in that view of emptiness. So there is the relative forgetting of that emptiness. I might know it somewhere in my being, but right at that point I've lost access to it and I'm caught up in reification and clinging and then dukkha. In that moment the ball bearing is up. But because of gravity, at some point the ball bearing falls back. It falls back down the sides of the tube and reconnects with that place at the bottom of knowing complete emptiness.

So you can fill out this analogy if you like—it might be quite interesting. An arahant, someone who's fully awakened, perhaps is someone who doesn't move from that point at the bottom.

This, though, I have problems with, as you can maybe guess. If I completely know emptiness thoroughly, utterly and deeply all the time—or rather, in the moment that I completely, thoroughly and deeply know the emptiness of all things—there will be a cessation of fabrication of perception. I won't perceive anything except the unfabricated. So if an arahant is someone staying just exactly at the bottom, it doesn't quite work with this understanding. There's some conundrum there.

Historically—I can't remember if I've explained this again, either just individually to people or on other retreats—actually out of that conundrum was one of the philosophical conundra that the Mahāyāna had to deal with.

They had to come up with an answer. How does a Buddha get reborn into the world of perception so that he can save other beings and help them be there with the world of form when a Buddha knows all the time, one hundred percent thoroughly, about the utter emptiness of all things? Because if a Buddha is in

that knowledge and with that knowledge in the mind, then there isn't the fabrication of perceptions. How can you be in the world? How is there a world then? So we could play with that analogy, but I'm just pointing that out.

The other stages of awakening might be that, just as for the stream-enterer, the ball gets knocked out of that center point of stasis, lowest gravity, and gets knocked out up the sides of the U-tube and then falls back down due to gravity, due to the stream of wisdom being in that momentum. A once-returner would be someone who, when it gets knocked up, perhaps does so less often, or the ball bearing rises less high, so it comes back more quickly to that sense of emptiness, and thus less clinging, less reification, and so more freedom, less suffering, less dukkha. So that's one way of understanding the stages of awakening—an analogy or metaphor that may be useful to some people, that's seemed useful to some people in the past.

If we dwell again, just a little bit, on the ten fetters that the Buddha outlined, we touched on three of them for the stream-enterer. For a once-returner, there are two other fetters. A once-returner makes a major dent in greed and aversion—sense desire and aversion. A non-returner has eradicated those two fetters. And then an arahant has five other fetters that they eradicate. So from non-returner to arahant, there are five more fetters.

The point I want to make, though, is that according to that theoretical scaffolding that the Buddha outlines with those ten fetters, the stream-enterer has not made any impact on sense desire and aversion. It's only at the stage of a once-returner that these are addressed. I'm saying this because sometimes what happens is practitioners get really hung up on their relationship with sense desire, their relationship with food or whatever it is. In this theoretical scaffolding, if we take it strictly as the Buddha points out, it would seem that actually the first thing to address is the sakkāya-diṭṭhi and the other two fetters that go with stream entry.

In other words, look at fabrication, in the outline that I gave. Explore fabrication, because through that you will see the emptiness of any self-view—which is to say, you would see the emptiness of any and all self-views, rather than worrying too much about your greed or apparent greed. So it might suggest something about the order of our practice, of what we kind of aim for and preoccupy ourselves with, what we focus on. This question of fabrication may be the one to look at first, and probably for a while. Then out of that, building on that, the others may be easier.

It's important, I think—again, much of what I'm saying is really a response to the kinds of things that students bring or the kind of places where people often get stuck—to point out that when we talk about awakening, we're not talking about an experience. So for some people, certain experiences like an experience of non-fabrication may be really significant, but awakening itself is not an experience. It's not an experience of no-self, for example.

The way I tend to teach is that there is a spectrum of fabrication. So when someone comes in and says, "I had an experience of no-self," in the way I would interpret things, it's really that they've had an

experience of usually a relative degree of less fabrication of the sense of self. The sense of self is on a spectrum. It can get fabricated more—higher on the spectrum, so to speak—or much less, or much less. So when people say "an experience of no-self," they might mean an experience of the temporary quieting of the more gross personality constructs or beliefs. There's really a spectrum of degree of fabrication of self, and we need to understand that spectrum. But awakening is not an experience of no-self or an experience of whatever.

If it's an experience, then often what you get is someone saying, "I had this experience and it lasted for X amount of time." Sometimes it can be, "I had this experience, it seemed to last for months"—sometimes people report this. Again, one wonders about the closeness and level and subtlety of discernment involved in scrutinizing what was actually involved in that experience. Was there really no-self? And was it really without fluctuations during those several months or days or hours? Then they say, "I had this experience and it lasted X long and then now I've lost it. So I was liberated and now I've lost it. I was in awakening or nibbāna and now I've lost it."

To me, there's a problem in clinging to any experience and calling that awakening, for several reasons I've just touched on very briefly. I think there's another kind of freedom that comes from a kind of understanding—an understanding of that dependent origination, understanding of how fabrication of self and of phenomena works with clinging, and understanding the implications of that.

And when I say understanding, I don't just mean intellectual - I mean something that permeates one's heart and body almost. This understanding allows us to recognize that the self is empty. The self-sense is a dependent arising. The self is a phenomenon that gets fabricated more or less at different times depending on certain conditions.

Once I know that it's empty, once I truly understand it's a fabrication, this actually allows the self-sense to move up and down on that spectrum of fabrication. It can be more fabricated or less fabricated, appear less solid, appear very refined, appear in this way or that way, appear as a process, appear as an atomistic process of aggregates, or as a mist, or a space, or a vastness of awareness, or disappear completely at times in cessation of everything. But I understand - oh, it's just the fabrication of self. It's fine. It's really fine.

So I'm not trying to cling or believing that I should be in some kind of stasis of a certain experience - whether it's cosmic consciousness or no-self or this or that. Understanding, really understanding and digesting a certain understanding, allows fabrication to move up and down this spectrum, allows more or less fabrication of self. And we come to understand - oh, self is not-self. Self is not-self. It's just this fabrication happening. It's not self. It's okay. It's okay to move on the spectrum. It's okay to fabricate. It's okay that certain constructions arise.

In all this, you can hear how I construct the jigsaw when I want to map the Pali Canon elements to the whole picture. My solution to the jigsaw tends to be like this. Again, I'm not going to convince anyone - it doesn't really matter.

But we can step back from this and approach it with a whole different set of questions and ponderings, different probings in our approach. How high is the bar for what we're calling awakening? How high is a different teacher, or yourself, or I, or anyone, setting the bar for stream entry?

In what you've heard of my solution to the jigsaw, yes, stream entry is, relatively speaking, a pretty high bar. In fact, it's a very high bar compared to some of the other possible interpretations one could have. Seeing really the emptiness of all and any self-view involves seeing the emptiness of any and all phenomena.

For instance, to see that there is a process in time - if I then decide that the self is a process in time of the psychophysical aggregates or the five aggregates or the eighteen sense constituents, if I see that the self is that, or if I decide that's my self-view, to me that's still a self-view. I've decided that's what the self is, or I'm clinging to that position. And there are suttas where the Buddha makes it clear that any self-view is a wrong view to be let go of.

But more importantly, I think, when one realizes that those elements of the process - the aggregates themselves - are empty of inherent existence. The body, the atoms, the vedana, the moments of consciousness, time. The elements of the process and the time it happens in are also empty. That's like dissolving any possibility for forming a self-view there. It can't form on anything. You can't say the self is the process of these elements in time, because one has seen that time is empty and not a reality. It doesn't form a basis for any kind of self-view. And the elements themselves that make up this process are also empty.

So for me, it's relatively speaking quite a high bar. Just so you know.

But more interesting questions, or questions that interest me more now, include: How much is the inclination to measure myself and want to measure up, or the pain of the inner critic, or the dominance in our psyche of the inner critic, influencing the decision or the view or the interpretation we adopt of where the bar is for stream entry? Why am I adopting this or that view? Is it actually that in the background the inner critic is running the show, deciding what views I have and what practices or interpretations or views I'll turn away from because it's just too painful? Because if I feel like I can't, or I fail, or the inner critic says "you haven't yet" or "you can't" - does it pull all the strings actually? Or does it say, "just drop the whole thing with awakening - it's just way too painful"?

That's one question. There are other questions - as I said, we could argue over Pali Canon etymology and different texts that seem to contradict each other, or this one emphasizes this and another emphasizes that.

To me, that's much less interesting at this point. What draws my attention is a whole other set of questions.

In setting the bar, if you like, or the definition of stream entry at one level or at a more difficult level, what

does that do? What's the result? Not so much what's the cause—"I'd set it there because I've read this in the Pali Canon" or "this word means this"—but actually, what's the result?

What kind of person is made when we set the bar here? And what kind of person is made when we include this in the definition?

If I say that stream entry is simply a softening of the inner critic, what kind of person results from that view? If I say stream entry just means going with the flow in one's life, what kind of person emerges there? If I say stream entry means seeing the radical emptiness of all phenomena through dedicated exploration of the mysteries of dependent arising, what kind of person results?

What kind of person do we want? What makes an interesting person? What are we after?

As I alluded to at the beginning of yesterday's talk, do we dare to bring a kind of radical questioning into all this—even a bold questioning of what has been established in terms of the meaning of awakening or stream entry, and the different claims that people might make? Is that possible for us? Do we dare? What would make that possible? What would justify that?

And again, we could ask: what is the soul's relationship—your soul's relationship—with this question of awakening? With your awakening and your journey toward that, or this question of stream entry? What does it mean for this to be a soul question? How does the soul hold that very question?

How does it relate to awakening, or relate to the possibility that there are potentially different interpretations, and your movement toward that or opening toward that? Is there even a soul relationship with these questions and notions, or does the soul simply not get involved in those questions and notions? And if not, why not?

Without any preconceived answers of "it should" or "it shouldn't," but just: what's actually going on there on a soul level in relation to all these questions?

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