

Samyojana — The First Three Fetters

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 11:02

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa (x3)

Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

The word this evening is *samyojana*. It translates as the fetters, chains, something which binds us. And there are ten of them. Personality belief, skeptical doubt, clinging to mere rules and rituals, sensuous craving, ill will, craving for fine material existence, craving for immaterial existence, conceit, restlessness and ignorance.

What's particularly interesting about the ten fetters is that they are joined with the four paths and fruits of the four sainthoods which are stream entrance, once returner, non-returner and *arahat*, the free, self-enlightened one. So what the Buddha is saying here is that every time you make one of these paths and fruits, one of these fetters begin to drop away so the insight which we get every time we enter one of these fruits destroys the ability to go back on it. This will become pretty obvious to you as we go along.

So, if we just take the first three, because the first three are connected with the first path and fruit of *Sotāpanna*. *Sotāpanna* means stream entry. So, at this point, the person becomes a noble person. When we talk about an *Ariya*, a noble person is somebody who has gone beyond the ordinary, worldly consciousness and has touched upon the *Nibbāna* consciousness. That's what they've done.

The Buddha talks about it as a flash of lightning. So in a flash of lightning you see everything but it's only for that moment. It's not particularly deep but one thing that person knows which a person who has not had that does not know is that there is *Nibbāna*. There is a different transcendent state to ordinary consciousness. And it's upon that that these first three fetters go.

So the first one is personality belief, *sakāya-dit̐hi*. It translates as believing this body personality, this human form, is Self. So some deep delusional misunderstanding has been snapped. It's not as though that's the end of self. In fact, some people who have this experience don't believe they've had it. Even though the teacher tells them they've had it, they don't believe they've had it because their sense of self is still so great. Some people have it and they don't know they've had it. It's just come to them. Like, for instance, somebody at the age of seven doesn't know that they've shifted the way they look at the world.

And for others it's a wow experience and they can't believe what's happened. And there's no explanation for this in the scriptures, but my own understanding is that if a person has already reached this state in a previous life, then in this life they're just making their way back up to where they left off in the last life. So in a sense it's just as natural for them as somebody of the age of seven. But if it's for the first time then it's

such a veil that falls off the world that it seems just enormous to them. Such people tend to be happy to stay at that place not to move on so much but to just enjoy and absorb that level of consciousness.

And one of the insights of having that is, of course, that because there is this higher consciousness, we can say we're not this body and mind. So something has snapped there.

The second one is skeptical doubt. So until we've personally experienced or personally had a *nibbānic* experience, we don't know. We don't know if the Buddha's teaching is actually true. Whether it is an experience, we don't know by personal experience. And therefore, there's always a possibility of skeptical doubt.

And remember, skeptical doubt has the power to stop us practising, because we won't commit. That's when skeptical doubt becomes a real spiritual disease. When doubts just pass through our minds of, well, I can't do it, everybody else can, and I'm special that way. If you have that sort of doubt, then it sometimes arises and passes away. But when it becomes a frame of mind, this doubt, then of course it becomes a barrier. You won't commit, you won't do, and therefore you don't move. That skeptical doubt is cut asunder, because now you know. That's it.

And the third one is clinging to mere rites and rituals. So that's the understanding that rites and rituals in themselves are material to the path of liberation. So if you go back to the Buddha's time, and even today you'll find people thinking that their karma is washed away by standing in the Ganges or doing something like that. And that's a wrong understanding of rites and rituals.

People go overboard with that sometimes. They think that all rites and rituals are a complete waste of time. But the Buddha didn't think that. I mean, we have quite a rite to go through when you want to join the order, for a start. There's a whole series of things, taking refuge and precepts, for instance. It's something that he instigated. In fact, it was the second way into ordaining to the order. Well, the first way was when somebody would say to him, I'd like to be a disciple, I'd like to follow you. And his response was, *Ehi, Ehi Passiko*, come and try. That was it, that was the ordination. Just come and try, stay with me.

As the order grew a bit, then it became just slightly more formal. So they had to take the refuge and precepts, which we do in the evening. And then finally it turned into this slightly elaborate ceremony which had a question-and-answer format to make sure that you were ready for going into the order.

So it's not as though rites and rituals in themselves have no purpose. I personally think that they're very good for setting a mood, so I always start a retreat taking refuge precepts. People take them at their own level, but it's like a gateway and helps you move into it. So even in the morning, when you do your refuge, when you're doing your two-hour morning practice, to begin with a little bowing or something, which is an entrance into it.

But that itself, of course, is not specifically material to the process of liberation. What's material to the process of liberation is seeing things as they really are. It's the insight which liberates. But so long as

there's some sort of belief, then it becomes a little barrier, because some of your energy goes into believing it.

And interestingly enough, it also manifests in the way that a person's relationship to the technique they're using in meditation. The technique becomes a mystique. It becomes a sort of, if you haven't got the technique right, you can't make it. So people like that are very worried about whether they've really got the technique right and how they're doing it properly. And of course they miss the point. They're turning the technique itself into a ritual whereby they can attain liberation. Whereas the technique is only there to support mindfulness. Full stop. You're supposed to let go of it after a while.

So, these first three fetters, the one where this deep identity we have with this human form, that's cut asunder. The skeptical doubt completely disappears in the sense that one now knows what the Buddha was talking about. And rites and rituals are put into the right perspective. We're not clinging to them for wrong reasons. And these are the three fetters that go when a person has what we call this *sotāpanna*, this stream-entrant experience. And that's how they're connected. These fetters are connected to the process of liberation.

So here you see what it is you're liberated from. When we talk about liberated, what are you liberated from? This is what you're liberated from. The *Sotāpanna* is liberated from these three fetters. And remember they can't go back on it, you can't go back on the level of consciousness that's it wherever they're born in whatever state they're born they'll always rise to that point you can't lose that knowledge.

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance may you be liberated from these three lower fetters sooner rather than later.

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