

BĀHIYA'S TEACHING

- in the Seen is just the Seen

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Many Buddhists think about the Dhamma too much and practise too little. Lacking the experience of what it is like to keep precepts, and lacking the data supplied by the Jhānas, they inadvertently distort the Dhamma with their own wishful thinking. Unfortunately, some of these Buddhists are Dhamma teachers.

An example of how the Buddha's teachings become distorted is seen in the Buddha's well known brief teaching to Bāhiya, as recorded in the Udāna (Ud 1.10). Bāhiya was not a monk. The sutta does not record him giving dāna,(1) nor taking refuge in the Triple Gem, nor keeping any precepts. Moreover, the sutta has no mention at all of Bāhiya ever meditating, let alone reaching a Jhāna. Yet, after receiving a very brief teaching from the Buddha, Bāhiya became fully Enlightened, an Arahant, within seconds!

This episode is very well known in Buddhist circles, because it seems to make Enlightenment so easy. It appears that you don't need to be a monk, you can be miserly and not give dāna, no ceremonies such as that of taking refuge are required, precepts are unnecessary, and even meditating can be avoided! What a relief – for some! All you need is intelligence, and everyone thinks that they are intelligent. (You think you are intelligent, don't you?) This makes Bāhiya's Teaching both attractive and notorious.

So what was this teaching? Here is my own translation.

"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(2) will be merely what is sensed; in the cognized will be merely what is cognized. Practising in this way, Bāhiya, you will not be 'because of that'. When you are not 'because of that' you will not be 'in that'. And 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."

And then Bāhiya became fully Enlightened. Sounds easy, doesn't it? You have just read the same teaching. Did you achieve Full Enlightenment? No! Why Not?

As usual, there is more to the story than is recorded in the sutta. It is often the case that the suttas record only the highlights of a long episode. Just like the wedding photos do not record the first meeting, the dating and the arguments, so many suttas do not record all that occurred before the finale. So what is the full story of Bāhiya? How can we put the finale, captured for posterity in the Udāna, into its full context? Fortunately, the whole story is recorded in the Apadāna (past lives of the Arahants) and in the commentaries.

In his previous life, Bāhiya was a monk under the Buddha Kassapa. Together with six other monks, he climbed a steep mountain, throwing away the ladder, and determined to remain on top of that rock until they became Enlightened or died. One of the seven monks became an Arahant, another became an Anāgāmī (Non Returner), the other five died on the mountain. Bāhiya was one of the five. In Bāhiya's final life, he was a sailor, successfully crossing the ocean seven times. On the eighth voyage, he was shipwrecked but managed to survive by floating ashore on a plank of wood. Having lost all his clothes, he made temporary garments out of bark and went begging for food in the town of Suppārakā. The townspeople were impressed with his appearance and offered him food, respect and even a costly set of clothes. When Bāhiya refused the new clothes, the people esteemed him even more. Bāhiya had gained a comfortable living and so did not return to sea. The people regarded Bāhiya as an Arahant. Soon, Bāhiya thought he was an Arahant too!

At that point, a deva discerned the wrong thought of Bāhiya and, out of compassion, reprimanded him. That deva was none other than his former fellow monk, one of the seven, the one who had become an Anāgāmi. (It is of interest to add that the remaining four fellow monks were also reborn at this time, and they all, like Bāhiya, eventually attained full Enlightenment. (They were Pukkusāti, Sabhiya, Kumārakassapa and Dabba the Mallian.) Then the Anāgāmi-deva informed Bāhiya about a true Arahant, the Buddha, living at that time on the other side of India, at Sāvatti. Bāhiya immediately left Suppārakā (present day Sopāra, just north of Mumbai) and reached Sāvatti (just 17 kilometres west of Balrampur) in only one night. Bāhiya met the Buddha while he was on alms round and asked for a teaching. The Buddha at first refused, for it was an inappropriate time. But on being asked a third time, the Buddha interrupted his alms gathering and gave the famous teaching presented above. Within seconds of hearing that Dhamma, Bāhiya was fully Enlightened. A few minutes later, the Arahant Bāhiya was killed by a cow with calf.

So, Bāhiya's background was exceptional. He had been a monk under the previous Buddha, Kassapa. His powers of determination were so strong that he went to meditate on the mountain with the resolve to become Enlightened or die. In this life, he could hear deva's speak to him and he could travel more than halfway across India, some 1,300 Kilometres as the levitator flies, in only one night. If you had such a background from your previous life, and had such psychic powers already in this life, then perhaps you too would have been Enlightened when you read Bāhiya's Teaching a few minutes ago!

It is usually the case that one requires very deep samādhi, Jhānas, to achieve such psychic powers. Certainly, Bāhiya would have had a pre-disposition for meditation, taking account of his previous life. And the psychic power of the 'divine ear' that enabled him to hear the deva, and the other psychic power that enabled him to travel so fast, suggest that he was practising Jhāna before he heard the deva. Perhaps this was another reason why he thought himself an Arahant. But there is more evidence to suggest that, though it was not mentioned in the texts, Bāhiya had been practising Jhānas.

Few people are aware that the very same teaching, that here I call Bāhiya's Teaching, was also given by the Buddha to the old monk Mālunkyaputta (SN 35.95). Mālunkyaputta appears several times in the suttas. In particular, in sutta 64 of the Majjhima Nikāya, occurring certainly before the occasion when Mālunkyaputta was given Bāhiya's Teaching, the Buddha first disparages Mālunkyaputta for his wrong view and then teaches the necessity of attaining at least one of the Jhānas in order to destroy the five lower fetters(3) (and thereby attain the level just below full Enlightenment called Non Returning). The Buddha said in front of Venerable Mālunkyaputta that it is impossible to achieve Non Returning (let alone Full Enlightenment) without a Jhāna just as much as it is impossible to reach the heartwood of a tree without first going through its bark and sapwood. Think about it.

So, Venerable Mālunkyaputta was first taught the necessity of Jhānas, and then later he was given Bāhiya's Teaching. After hearing Bāhiya's Teaching 'dwelling alone, withdrawn, diligent, ardent and resolute' Mālunkyaputta soon became an Arahant. It is therefore certain that Mālunkyaputta achieved Jhāna before Bāhiya's Teaching could be effective. Or else the Buddha would be blatantly inconsistent. It also adds weight to the inference that Bāhiya also had experience of Jhāna before he heard the same teaching – otherwise he would have reached the heartwood of the tree without going through its bark and sapwood!

The Vipallāsa (4)

So what did Bāhiya, and Venerable Mālunkyaputta, see in the Buddha's words that generated the Arahant experience? What does it mean 'In the seen will merely be what is seen'?

What it means is to see without any distortion of the data, without adding or subtracting from it. As modern psychology knows, what come to our attention as 'the seen' has already been sifted and distorted by our desires and aversions. This process of distortion occurs prior to the event of cognition. It is impossible to see this process as it occurs. It is subconscious. We can only infer its occurrence. We discover that our preferences have embellished the data to present to our mind what we wanted to see, while hostility has denied any access to the mind for those features that we didn't want to see. What we see is rarely, merely the seen. That which we see with bare attention is seldom the truth. It is not the way things are, it is only the way things seem.

We should have had enough experience of life to know this by now. When you men see a beautiful woman, what do you see? Most people, even monks, do not see what is really there – just muscle, sinew, skin and hair – they see instead a bimbo! Where did that come from? Our sexual desire added it on, distorting the reality. When you see the recently deceased body of your mother, what do you see? Again, you do not see what is truly there – just muscle, sinew, skin and hair again – instead you see a tragedy. Your attachment added on the grief. It distorted the reality.

In Northeast Thailand many years ago, in poor and remote jungle monasteries, I had to eat grasshoppers, frogs, ants and other crawling insects. That was all there was to eat. A regular dish was ant-egg curry. When you just read this, were you practising 'in the seen will merely be the seen' or did you add on your own disgust? Fried grasshoppers were actually quite delicious. How much do we add on our own likes and dislikes to the seen?

A tour company wanted to employ a dentist for their cruise ship. So they looked in the Yellow Pages under the section 'Off-shore Drilling'...! How much do we add on to what we see?

Twenty-five centuries before modern psychology, the Buddha identified the process that distorts cognition and called it the vipallāsa. He explained this essentially circular process starting from view. It is our views that bend our perception to agree with the view. The perceptions then form the evidence for our thoughts. Then the thoughts argue in support of our view. It is a self-justifying cycle. Views generate perceptions that make thoughts that support the views. This is the very process of delusion.

For example, someone believes in God. They hold a theist view. That view will deny access to the mind for any perceptions that challenge that view. Scientific facts such as astrophysics, quantum mechanics, geology, bio-chemistry become 'no-fly' perceptions. They are rejected before they even register in the consciousness, because they are antithetic to the view. Only perceptions that support and conform to the God-view survive the subconscious sifting process. These pro-God perceptions then form the data for our thoughts to work on. The data is convincing. It supports our view. We become convinced that there is a God, and our view grows ever more resistant to challenge. Such is the origin and progress of our many religions, which are all convinced that they are right. They are mistaking the way things seem for the way things are.

Or take the abortion debate. Are you 'Pro-life' or 'Pro-choice'? Whichever one of these two views you hold on to, it will corrupt your perception, selecting perceptions in support of your view and blinding your consciousness to any perceptions that challenge your view. Your thinking will be built up of your perceptions, in the same way that a house is built up out of bricks. Such misinformed thinking will justify your view, so strongly that you simply cannot understand why everyone else doesn't see it the right way, which is your way!

One last example, is meditation easy for you? If you hold the view that meditation is difficult, and you are very attached to that idea, then meditation will seem to be difficult. Where did that view come from? Maybe, a long time ago, someone with authority told you that meditation was difficult, you believed them, and that view has stuck. Or, perhaps, you began meditation without clear and accurate instructions, and you found it difficult then. On the basis of such limited experience, you formed the solid view that meditation is difficult. However that view arose, once it is there, it makes meditation difficult! Your attachment to this view twists your perceptions. The only perceptions that make it into full consciousness are those that perceive the difficulties in meditation. Based on those negative perceptions, you think meditation is, in fact, difficult. You, and only you, have just made meditation difficult!

When we have some understanding of what is going on, we might be able to change such a view on meditation. Allow me to brainwash you! Let me convince you that, in spite of who said what, in spite of all your previous lack of success; MEDITATION IS EASY! MEDITATION IS EASY! MEDITATION IS EASY! Let me coach you into believing that you can meditate well. Help me recondition you into believing in your innate ability to meditate well. You have been reborn into a precious human body and are now reading the priceless teachings of Buddhism. You are alive when the Dhamma is thriving and you have met that amazing Dhamma. You are such a rare being. You have worked for lifetimes for such an opportunity as this. With so much going for you already, of course you will be able to

meditate well. The fact that you are reading this proves that you have got a huge store of good kamma supporting you. Other people, much less able than you, have attained Jhāna, so why not you! Once, with my help, you have concocted a positive view of your ability in meditation – hey presto – you perceive only success in meditation and you think only success in meditation. You have just made meditation easy! You have opened the door to tranquillity, inner bliss and the Jhānas. Try it!

Discovering Truth

The point is, the view that meditation is difficult for you and the view that meditation is easy, are both untrue. They are both the product of distorting what is seen, heard, sensed and cognized. They are both delusion. It is just that the positive view is a more useful delusion. In fact, it is the view that will lead you to discovering the truth.

The Buddha explained that it is the Five Hindrances(5) that distort perception and corrupt our thinking. He called the Five Hindrances the nutriment that feeds delusion (AN 10.61). The first hindrance, Sensual Desire, selects what we want to see, hear, sense and cognize. It often embellishes the truth. It presents to our consciousness the product of wishful thinking. The second hindrance, Ill Will, is that negative impulse that blocks us seeing, hearing, sensing or cognizing, what we don't want to know. It blinds us to what is unpleasant, and to what is contrary to our view. Psychology knows the second hindrance as the process of denial. The third hindrance is Sloth and Torpor. This does not distort what we see, hear, sense or cognize. It buries it in a fog so that we are unable to discern clearly. The fourth hindrance is Restlessness and Remorse, which keeps our senses on the run, so fast that we do not have sufficient time to see, hear, sense or cognize fully. Sights do not have time to fully form on our retina, before the back of the eye has another sight to deal with. Sounds are hardly registered, when we are asked to listen to something else. The fourth hindrance of Restlessness, and its special case of Remorse (inner restlessness due to bad conduct), is like the over-demanding boss in your office who never gives you enough time to finish a project properly. The fifth hindrance is Doubt, which interrupts the gathering of data with premature questions. Before we have fully experienced the seen, heard, sensed or cognized, doubt interferes with the process, like a cocky student interrupting the teacher with a question in the midst of the lecture. You should now be able to appreciate that it is these Five Hindrances that distort perception, corrupt the thinking and maintain a deluded view.

It is well known among serious students of Buddhism that the only way to suppress these Five Hindrances is through the practice of Jhāna. As it says in the Nalakapāna Sutta (MN 68), in one who does not attain a Jhāna, the Five Hindrances (plus discontent and weariness) invade the mind and remain. Anything less than Jhāna is not powerful and lasting enough to suppress the Five Hindrances sufficiently. So, even if you are practising bare mindfulness, with the Five Hindrances still active at a subconscious level, you are not seeing things as they truly are, you are seeing things as they seem, distorted by these Five Hindrances.

Thus, in order to fulfil the Buddha's Teaching to Bāhiya and Venerable Mālunkyaputta, in order that '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, and in the cognized will merely be what is cognized' – the Five hindrances have to be suppressed and that means Jhāna!

Seeing Things as They Truly Are

It is true that the Five Hindrances become suppressed just prior to Jhāna, in what the commentaries accurately call upacāra samādhi, 'stillness of mind at the threshold of Jhāna' (my own translation). So, how can you know for sure that these insidious Five Hindrances, which usually operate at a subconscious level, are fully suppressed? How do you know if you are in upacāra samādhi? The acid test for upacāra samādhi is that you can move effortlessly over the threshold into first Jhāna! In upacāra samādhi, there is no obstacle, no hindrance, between you and Jhāna. In just the same way, you know that you are standing on the threshold of a house when there is nothing between you and the room inside, when you can enter the room easily. If you can't enter Jhāna, the Five Hindrances are still there. So, to make sure they are gone, you try entering a Jhāna, and you enter.

When the mind emerges from the Jhāna, it rests on the threshold, in upacāra samādhi, for a long time. Just like when you leave a house, you stand on the threshold again. It is at this point, during the period immediately after a Jhāna experience, when the Five Hindrances no longer invade the mind

and remain (according to the above mentioned Nalakaṇḍala Sutta), that one is finally able to practise 'in the seen is merely what is seen, in the heard is merely what is heard, in the sensed is merely what is sensed, and in the cognized is merely what is cognized'. As the Buddha repeatedly said (e.g. AN 6.50), only as a result of Jhāna (sammā samādhi) does one see things as they are (yathā-bhūta-Ānādapassanā) and not as they seem.

The End of a View of Self

An experience of a Jhāna can blow you apart. What do I mean by that? I mean that the data supplied by the Jhāna experience, contemplated just after in upacāra samādhi when the hindrances cannot distort anything, destroys the delusion of self, soul, me and mine.

In the first Jhāna mostly, and in the higher Jhānas completely, the potential to do, will, choice, what I call 'the doer', has disappeared. The data is so clear, and the Five Hindrances are no longer able to prevent you seeing that there is no-one at the controls, to put it bluntly, of you body and mind. Will is not a self, nor a product of a self. Will is just an impersonal natural process that can come to an absolute cessation. You have seen this for yourself, and you can trust this knowledge because it occurred when the corrupting Five Hindrances were suppressed. This insight is the most certain that you have ever known – free will is a delusion. You, the reader, will be incapable of agreeing with me. This is because your Five Hindrances are still active and they will prevent you from seeing this. So, experience a Jhāna first, then investigate this matter right after. Then try arguing with me!

Also, in Jhāna, real Jhāna not fake ones, the seen and the heard and the sensed all disappear. The external five senses cease. This data is also so clear. When one reflects on the complete absence of these five senses within the Jhāna experience, in the hindrance-free state of post-Jhāna upacāra samādhi, one will see with certainty that there is no self, soul or me observing the sight, hearing the sounds or sensing the smells, tastes and touches. There is no self, soul or me, knowing the known. Consciousness, too, all forms, is seen as an impersonal process that can come to a complete cessation. In short, you are not identical with your mind. The mind is just a natural process. It can completely stop. It does stop, once and for all, at Parinibbāna! Once again you, my reader, will be incapable of agreeing with me. The Five Hindrances active within you now, under the surface of cognition, prevent you from seeing the truth. It challenges your most basic view, the view that 'You Are! Just don't worry about such disagreements for now. Instead, meditate until you have experienced Jhāna and suppressed those Five Hindrances. Then see if I'm right!

The Final Part of Bāhiya's Teaching

"Bāhiya, you should train yourself thus: in the seen will be merely what is seen, ... in the cognized will merely be what is cognized. Practising in this way, Bāhiya, you will not be 'because of that'. When you are not 'because of that', you will not be 'in that'. And when you are not 'in that', you will be neither here nor beyond nor in between the two. Just this is the end of suffering."

What does it mean "you will not be 'because of that'"? The Pāli is na tena. Tena is the instrumental of the word for 'that'. Na is the negative. It means, literally, "not because of that, not through that, not by that". It means in essence, you will not assume that there is a self, a soul, a me; because of, through, or by; the seen or the heard or the sensed or the cognized. The Buddha is saying that once you have penetrated the truth of sensory experience, by suppressing the Hindrances through Jhāna, you will see that there is no 'doer', nor a 'knower', behind sensory experience. No longer will you be able to use sensory experience as evidence for a self. Descartes' famous "I am because I think" is refuted. You will not be because of thinking, nor because of seeing, hearing or sensing. In the Buddha's words, "You will not be because of that (any sensory experience)".

When the sensory processes are discarded as tenable evidence for a self, a soul or a me, then you are no longer located in the sensory experience. In the Buddha's words, "You will not be 'in that'". You no longer view, perceive or even think that there is a 'me' involved in life. In the words of the doctor in the original series of Star Trek, "It is life, Jim, but not as we know it"! There is no longer any sense of self, or soul, at the centre of experience. You are no more 'in that'.

Just to close off the loophole that you might think you can escape non-existence of a self or soul by identifying with a transcendental state of being beyond what is seen, heard, sensed or cognized, the

Buddha thunders, "and you will be neither here (with the seen, heard, sensed or cognized) nor beyond (outside of the seen, heard, sensed or cognized) nor in between the two (neither of the world nor beyond the world). The last phrase comprehensively confounded the sophists!

In summary, the Buddha advised both Bāhiya and Venerable Mālunkya-putta to experience the Jhānas to suppress the Five Hindrances. Thereby one will discern with certainty the absence of a self or a soul behind the sensory process. Consequently, sensory experience will never again be taken as evidence of a 'knower' or a 'doer': such that you will never imagine a self or a soul at the centre of experience, nor beyond, nor anywhere else. Bāhiya's Teaching put in a nutshell the way to the realization of No-Self, Anattā. "Just this", concluded the Buddha "is the end of suffering".

Conclusion

I hope that my argument has been strong enough to challenge you, or rather to confound the vipallāsa driving your sensory processes. The Buddha's brief teaching to Bāhiya and Venerable Mālunkya-putta is not some short cut for the super intelligent. The practice of 'in the seen will be merely what is seen...' requires the suppressing of the Five Hindrances. The suppressing of the Five Hindrances requires Jhāna. Jhāna requires the rest of the Noble Eightfold Path,(6) the first seven factors. It requires faith in the Triple Gem, the keeping of precepts and the practice of dāna. There is only one path to Nibbāna, and that is the Noble Eightfold Path. There are no short cuts.

MAGGĀN' ATTHANGIKO SETTHO...

ESO'VA MAGGO, NATTHI AÑÑO

DASSANASSA VISUDDHIYĀ

"The best of paths is the Eightfold Path...

This is the only Way. There in none other,

for the purity of vision"

Dhammapāda verses 273 and 274

(English translation from Ven. Nārada's Dhammapāda)

(1) Dāna: Generosity. Also used to describe the gifts of food and other requisites given to the monastic community.

(2) Sensed: Smelt, tasted, touched

(3) The Ten Fetters:

1. Personality belief
2. Sceptical doubt
3. Belief in purification by the external observance of rites and rituals
4. Sensual desire
5. Ill will
6. Craving for fine material existence
7. Craving for non-material existence
8. Conceit
9. Restlessness
10. Ignorance

(4) Vipallāsa: Perversion or distortion of perception, thought and view – taking what is impermanent to be permanent; what is suffering to be happiness; what is empty of a self to be a self; and what is not beautiful (asubha) to be beautiful (cognitive distortion).

(5) The Five Hindrances:

- 1.Sensual desire
- 2.Ill-will and anger
- 3.Lethargy and dullness
- 4.Restlessness and remorse
- 5.Sceptical doubt

(6) The Eightfold Path consists of:

(Wisdom)

- 1.Right View or Understanding.
- 2.Right Thoughts or Intentions.

(Morality)

- 3.Right Speech.
- 4.Right Action.

(Mind Development)

- 6.Right Effort.
- 7.Right Mindfulness.
- 8.Right Concentration, i.e. Jhāna.