

## *The Graduated Discourse*

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We read stories about how people listening to the Buddha would gain the Dhamma eye, sometimes gain full awakening, while listening to a Dhamma talk. That inspires several questions: One is, why aren't *we* gaining awakening listening to Dhamma talks? Another is, how did they do that? After all, gaining the Dhamma eye, gaining awakening, requires that you have all eight factors of the noble eightfold path. How could you get those simply listening to a Dhamma talk?

Part of the reason why we don't gain awakening, of course, is that we don't have the Buddha giving the talks. He knew his listeners a lot better than I know you all, and he could tailor the talks precisely to their needs.

But he also pointed to the ideal qualities of the listener, the attitudes you have to bring if you want to get the most out of listening. There's one passage where he lists five. The first three are: not looking down on the speaker, not looking down on the talk itself, and also not looking down on yourself. In other words, you have an attitude of respect for the teacher, respect for the Dhamma, and you respect yourself, that you're capable of practicing the Dhamma you're hearing.

The other two qualities are singleness of mind and appropriate attention. Singleness of mind starts out, of course, by being focused totally on the talk. How do you move from that kind of singleness of mind, say, to the singleness of right concentration? Part of the answer has to do with appropriate attention.

Appropriate attention usually means seeing things in terms of the four noble truths. But it's interesting that when the Buddha describes the four noble truths in the context of appropriate attention, he expresses them this way: "This is stress. This is the origination of stress. This is the cessation of stress. And this is the path leading there"—the implication of the word "this" being that you're actually seeing these things in your own mind as they're happening. So it's not just a matter of thinking about the four noble truths. It's looking at your own experience and applying those truths to what you're actually experiencing.

It's good to keep this in mind when you think about one of the ways in which people were prepared for the four noble truths by the Buddha: what was called his "graduated discourse" or "step-by-step discourse." There are stories about people coming to see the Buddha, and he would start with a talk on generosity, a talk on

virtue, then a talk on the rewards of generosity and virtue in heaven, and then the drawbacks and, as he said, even the degradation involved in sensuality—in a sense, what those rewards in heaven are all about: sensual pleasures. And then seeing renunciation as rest, as peace. If you were listening to those topics and following along, then when the Buddha saw that you were ready for the four noble truths, he would teach them. While listening, applying those truths to your experience, you'd gain awakening.

It's an interesting psychological dynamic. He starts by talking about things that are very close to you. We've all had some experience being generous. We've all had some experience being virtuous. We know that it feels good, deep down inside, to do these things. So the Buddha's affirming that fact. In that way, he's helping to give rise to a sense of self-respect within you. And you respect him for pointing out the goodness of these things. Even more so when he talks about the rewards of these things in heaven: It gives you a sense of joy that you have some goodness to you. You're capable of practicing the Dhamma.

But then he turns the tables on you. He says: Okay, those rewards—even though they're very good, very enjoyable—have their drawbacks. And not just drawbacks, he says—degradation. The fact that the mind is feeding on sensuality: He wants you to see that you're feeding on something that's really lower than you deserve. You should aim higher.

Then he talks about renunciation. Renunciation doesn't mean just giving up. It means looking for pleasure in things that are not sensual. This, of course, would be the pleasure of right concentration. That right there gives you some idea of how the singleness of mind that you have focused on the talk gets converted into right concentration. After being focused, you're now focused on something that's not sensual, and you're beginning to develop right view.

We talk about the graduated discourse leading from mundane right view—the principle of kamma, the goodness of generosity—and then taking you to transcendent right view: the four noble truths. But it's also doing more. It's developing other factors in the path as well. You have a sense of well-being. But you also have a sense of heedfulness, the dangers of sensuality, and the desirability of looking for pleasure someplace else, looking for happiness someplace else—like focusing on the breath right here, right now.

This is how the Buddha instigates more of the path factors in the minds of his listeners. In the case of some of those listeners, it might have been pretty challenging. The most dramatic example, of course, is the time Devadatta got King

Ajatasattu to lend him some of his archers to kill the Buddha. The plan was that one archer would kill the Buddha, and then the archer, after doing that, was told to escape by a certain route. There would be two archers waiting for him along that route. They would kill *him*. And they were told to escape by another route. There would be four archers waiting to kill them, and so on up to eight archers to kill the four.

The first archer comes. He sees the Buddha and he's frozen with fear. He realizes that this is not something he really wants to do. Already, his fear shows that he has some sense of right and wrong. So the Buddha extends goodwill to him and tells him to come and see him. He puts down his bow and arrow, and he comes to see the Buddha. The Buddha gives a graduated discourse.

This is one of those times when you wish the discourse was recorded, because precisely what the Buddha had to say on these topics is never recorded in the Canon. You get the impression that, with each person, he would tailor his instructions to that particular person's needs. So you wonder what he would say to this archer about generosity and virtue.

When I listened to this story, it reminded me of a short story I read one time about a kid who had joined a gang in the inner city. The gang needed some money, and they talked him into trying to steal something from his mother. So he sneaks into the house at night and he walks past a part of the kitchen where he actually helped his mother when he was a little kid. He has a pang of regret that he used to have a life of goodness. Now he feels far away from that.

I imagine that's how the archer felt. He must have known goodness, he must have known generosity and virtue when he was younger, but then he took on a job as a hired killer and got far away from that. So imagine what the Buddha would have to say to get him thinking in good terms about generosity, about virtue. He must have had some goodness in there. So the Buddha focused on that, bringing that out, so that he could give the guy a sense of self-respect.

He talked about the rewards of virtue—but then the drawbacks even of those rewards. You can imagine the guy realizing that he had stepped to the edge of the abyss, but now was going to pull back. You can think of his gratitude to the Buddha, his willingness to open his heart to what the Buddha had to say. So this is one of those cases where you wish you knew precisely what the Buddha had said to this person. It would have been a great lesson in the Dhamma.

But the question is: How about us? What lessons should *we* draw from this? Well, one is that the attitude you bring to the meditation to get the mind into

concentration requires two things: One, self-respect. This is why we have the recollection of generosity, recollection of virtue as themes to give yourself that sense of self-respect, that sense of joy in the practice, that you are competent.

Remember that story of Ajaan Suwat noting how grim the meditators were at the Insight Meditation Society. He chalked it up to the fact that they didn't have any background in the Buddhist attitude toward generosity and virtue.

Otherwise, they would have come to the meditation with an attitude of joy.

But at the same time, when the Buddha starts talking about the drawbacks of sensuality, that's where you have to reflect on the principle of heedfulness. You can't live *just* for the rewards of being virtuous, *just* for the rewards of being generous, because those things can pull you down.

Remember the Buddha's image: Taking a little dirt under his fingernail, he asked the monks, "Which is more, the dirt under my fingernail or the dirt in the entire world?" Of course, the dirt in the entire world was much more. The dirt under his fingernail was only a little tiny bit. He went on to say, in the same way, those who are born as devas and then who go on either to being devas or human beings after that are like the dirt under his fingernail. Those who fall further down are like the dirt in the entire earth.

Think about that: You're way up high as a deva, and all of a sudden you drop really low. That thought should inspire a sense of heedfulness and *samvega*—that the concerns of your life so far don't guarantee that you'll be able to maintain your status as a human being or improve your status to be a deva and then stay there. These things have their drawbacks. They have their dangers. When you think about that, you start thinking about looking elsewhere for your happiness.

And where is that elsewhere? It's right here, as you inhabit the body from within. The pleasure that comes from focusing on the breath, the rapture that can come from focusing on the breath: This is safety, this is peace. When you have that sense of peace and well-being, you're ready to continue with this theme of heedfulness, because even the concentration can't guarantee anything unless you combine it with the rest of the path. You use the concentration to understand where it is that you're causing unnecessary stress and suffering for yourself.

What are you doing? What are you holding on to? Why do you cling? Try to apply the four noble truths to what you're doing right now. If it seems too abstract to think in those terms, just remind yourself of the questions that go with them: Where is the stress right now? And you remember what the Buddha said:

The stress lies in the clinging. Okay, where is the clinging right now? What kind of craving are you engaged in right now that leads you to cling?

Or your state of concentration: Is it as peaceful and as calm as it could be? Can you detect any disturbance in it—disturbance from outside or, more importantly, disturbance from within the concentration itself? In other words, you're looking directly at these things and applying the duties of the four noble truths to what you see. Remember the way the Buddha expressed these truths under the topic of appropriate attention: "This is stress. This is the origination of stress." "This, this, this": Look right here. These things are showing themselves right here. And the Buddha's told you what to do with them, what the duties are. Are you doing your duties, or are you doing something else?

This should give you an idea of what was going on when the Buddha was giving those Dhamma talks that led people to gain awakening. Maybe you'll never get a chance to hear a Dhamma talk that's precisely like that for you. But you can talk to yourself in these ways to give yourself a sense of confidence—by reflecting on your generosity and your virtue, cultivating a sense of heedfulness when you think about the drawbacks of sensuality, and a sense of appreciation in getting the mind to be still in concentration when you see renunciation as rest. Then start applying the duties of those four noble truths. That way, maybe by listening to your own Dhamma talk inside, you can get a glimpse of the deathless as well.