

The Dhamma Eye

November 7, 2020

Sometimes, while you're meditating and listening to a Dhamma talk, you want to hear about what you're experiencing right now and what you can do with it. Other times, it's good to hear about what *could* happen right now. These things might not be happening yet, but when they do happen, they'll be right here, and it's good to be prepared beforehand.

One of the major milestones in the practice is what's called the gaining of the Dhamma eye. It's also called stream-entry, and it's the first of the noble attainments. It's expressed in Pali: *Yaṅkiñci samudaya-dhamman sabbantarā nirodha-dhammanti*: Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation.

Now, some people see this simply as a statement that everything that arises, passes away. In other words, you accept the fact of inconstancy or impermanence. But what kind of experience would legitimately lead you to accept that principle, and why would it be a milestone? Actually, though, the Canon's language is very particular—notice that the insight is not about “arising,” it's about “origination,” the act of causing something—and you have to think about what experience would lead you to say something to yourself like that, where it would both be legitimate and natural. In other words, it really would be well-founded and would occur spontaneously to the mind.

In the Canon, there are some cases where people who already had a background as wandering ascetics are listening to the Buddha's teachings, and it's almost always in conjunction with the four noble truths that they would gain this particular insight. Other times, you see people who have no religious background at all. They listen to the Buddha's teachings, where sometimes they would be given the graduated discourse to build up to the four noble truths, and this is the insight they would come away with. Even in the case of the person who was sent to kill the Buddha—and then the people who were sent to kill the person who killed the Buddha, and then the people who were sent to kill the people who killed the person who killed the Buddha: The first man came toward the Buddha and was suddenly frozen stiff with fear. The Buddha said to him, “Have no fear.” The man came closer, the Buddha taught him the graduated discourse and the four noble truths, and the man became a stream-enterer right there, gaining the Dhamma eye. The Buddha then told him not to go by the path he had been told to go—where the other ruffians were waiting to kill him—and so the man left by another path.

The other ruffians saw that the first person wasn't coming, so they went to find him and they met up with the Buddha. He taught *them* the Dhamma, and they, too, gained the Dhamma eye.

You can imagine that these were pretty rough characters. So, what kind of experience would lead even people like that to come to the conclusion that “whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation,” and why would it be such a big milestone?

Part of the answer lies in the conversations that takes place when Sariputta—at that time just a wanderer of another sect—first hears the Dhamma from Ven. Assaji and gains the Dhamma eye. He goes back to tell Moggallana, his friend. Moggallana sees Sariputta coming from the distance and he says, “Your face is bright, your eyes are bright, has something happened? Have you seen the deathless?”

Sariputta says, “Yes.”

So, that's the first clue—you're not just watching things arising and passing away. You've seen the deathless, something that doesn't arise, doesn't pass away. In fact, it's *that* experience that there *is* a deathless element that can be touched at the mind: Once you've had that experience, you look back at everything else you've experienced up to that point, and you realize that *this* is not subject to origination or passing away—it has always been there, and it's not going to change. It's outside of time, while everything else is inside time and is subject to arising and passing away.

The other clue comes from the words “origination” and “cessation.” These are not the words simply of impermanence, of simple arising and passing away. These are the words related to the four noble truths and dependent co-arising, where the word “origination” is always used in conjunction with the way things arise from causes, and the causes are almost always *in* the mind. For instance, the origination of suffering is craving—and where is craving? It's in the mind. What's the origination of the causal chain that leads to craving? It's ignorance. That, too, comes out of the mind.

You then begin to realize all the other things that come out of the mind: fabrication, name-and-form, consciousness, your experience of the six sense media. The fact that you're aware of the six senses comes from the fact that there's something in the mind that flows out to the senses. That's what allows you to have that experience of the senses to begin with. But when you can see the mind at a point where it's *not* doing that, then the senses fall away, all six of them—what the Buddha refers to as “the all.” And the deathless is beyond the all. Although the texts say you have to be very careful of the way you talk about it, still, even though it's something that's not to be described, it *is* to be experienced.

So when you've had that experience, you come back from it—and *that's* the experience that cuts through the three first fetters. It's not as if you decide that you're going to give up on the three fetters—your identity-views, uncertainty, and grasping at habits and practices—ahead of time. These aren't things you decide. It's the experience of the deathless that cuts through those fetters. Your uncertainty is gone because you realize that what the Buddha said was true. He knew what he was talking about: There really *is* a deathless element. And you realize how you got there. It wasn't just through obeying rules. You had to use your concentration and your discernment to be really observant about what's going on in the mind when it's concentrated. That's why you don't grasp at habits and practices again. And the fact that there is an awareness that has nothing to do with the aggregates: That's why you would never give your allegiance to any idea that your self is in any way related to the aggregates—because there are no aggregates in that experience, and yet there is an awareness.

You don't take that awareness as your self, although the problem is that if you stay at stream-entry or in any of the first three stages of awakening, there is still going to be a lingering sense of self, although it's not defined in connection with the aggregates, either as identical with the aggregates or possessing the aggregates, or *in* the aggregates, or containing the aggregates within it.

So it's not as if you decide to cut the fetters—the fetters get cut for you through the experience of the deathless.

Another misunderstanding about the Dhamma eye is that some people say that stream-entry is when you see that there is no self. But again, you have to ask: What kind of experience would give you valid grounds for saying that there is no self? They say: "You let go of everything, you blank out, and there's nothing"—but that doesn't prove anything. After all, there *are* states of concentration that the Buddha calls non-perception where you totally blank out, but they're not noble states. If you happen to die while you're in them, you go on to the state of non-percipient beings, where you're totally unconscious. When that attainment wears off, you regain consciousness and leave that state, and then you come back to be reborn again. But that's not proof of anything. In fact, if seeing that there is no self were part of stream-entry, then why did the Buddha have to give the not-self-discourse to the five brethren *after* they had all become stream-enterers?

The answer comes from a passage in the Canon where a non-returner says that at his level of attainment you don't identify around the five aggregates, even though there is still a lingering sense of self, a lingering sense of "I am." He says it's like the smell of a detergent used to wash clothes. You wash the clothes and you wash the detergent out—but there's still some lingering scent. So, when the Buddha was teaching the five brethren the not-self-discourse, *that*

was what he was getting at: that lingering sense of self as well the conceit “I am.”

So, stream-entry is not simply accepting the fact of impermanence, and it's not seeing that there is no self. It's having an experience of the deathless. And you realize that you had to follow a path of practice to arrive at the threshold of the deathless, the deathless itself was nothing that you *did*. In fact, it comes at that part of the present moment where you're *not* putting any intentional input in at all—not even the intention not to do anything.

So—it hits you by surprise. When you come back from that experience, that's when the Dhamma eye arises. You've seen something that was not originated, not subject to cessation—and from that vantage point you realize that anything you'd experienced up to that point was fabricated through the actions of the mind, yet here you've found something that was *not* fabricated in the mind. That's why it's so radical—because you realize that it's also the end of suffering.

Now, stream-entry is said to be the arising of the Dhamma eye because you see this, but you don't fully experience it. In other words, you have your glimpse, and then it's gone—but it has already made a big change in you. There's an analogy given in the Canon: It's like seeing water at the bottom of the well. You haven't yet drunk the water or gone down to get immersed in the water. However, you know it's there.

Of course, the most useful thing to discuss about stream-entry is not what it is, but *how to get there*. One of the most useful discussions is simply the definition of the stream—the noble eightfold path, which is something you can *do*. You can't do the deathless, but you *can* do the path—the path takes you there. So, you focus your energy on the path.

The other discussion of how to get to stream-entry, of course, is the four factors for stream-entry: You find a person of integrity, you listen to the true Dhamma, you apply appropriate attention, and you practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. That's how you get there. It's all very plain stuff.

As the Buddha said, there were no secrets that he kept up to the last moment. In other words, it's not the case that he said, “You do this practice, and when you get near stream-entry, I'll tell you something special and new.” It's not like that at all. You just do what you've been doing—but you do it very well and you do it very carefully. Try to get the mind centered, try to protect that sense of the centered mind. When you detect any stress in that state of concentration, you ask yourself, “What am I doing to cause that?” When you see the action—and it's usually a perception, although sometimes it can also be directed thought and evaluation: any of the factors of right concentration that you have to let go of to get to higher levels—you just let the action go.

And how do you get the mind to see that? Once you've settled in, as the Buddha says, you first indulge in the concentration. In other words, you don't just skip across the different states of concentration. You have to learn how to inhabit them so that you get to know them well—so that when you see something that is disturbing your concentration, it's your own discernment that sees it. It's not because a book told you that you had to drop *this* factor or *that* factor. You see that you're doing something that's causing a disturbance—and that you can drop it, and yet the mind can stay concentrated. In fact, it gets more solidly concentrated when you drop whatever it was. If it so happens that you drop it and you lose your concentration, that's a sign you're not ready to let it go yet. But it's the same process, again and again, just that it gets more precise. Your mindfulness gets more continuous, your discernment gets sharper, and there comes a point when you realize that if you stay where you are, there's still going to be some stress—but if you move to any other form of concentration, there's also going to be stress.

So what's the alternative between staying or moving? This dilemma provides a possibility for there to be a moment where there's no intention, no intentional input at all. Nothing is fabricated. Things can open up, and the Dhamma eye gets to see.

So, regardless of your background, whether you've studied a lot or studied only a little, it doesn't matter. It's not a question of simply adopting the Buddha's views and getting to a point where you agree: "Yes—I now agree with the Buddha." It's more that he gives you a task to do, and as you do the task, you're going to learn some important things about what actually is possible in the mind. And *that* possibility is there for everybody—which is why the Dhamma eye is always the same for everybody. The five brethren who had practiced for many years, as well for the ruffian who was going to kill the Buddha, and then the other ruffians who were going to kill the earlier ruffians: They all saw the same thing.

So, the important part is *doing* the practice—doing it very meticulously and very well, while using your discernment and ingenuity to ask the right questions—so that the questions become the key that will unlock and open things up.