

The Graduated Discourse

July 22, 2022

Ajaan Fuang was orphaned at an early age, around eleven, and as he said one time, he lived as a temple boy for five years without really listening to the Dhamma at all. Then, when he turned sixteen, he began to listen. He started thinking about himself. The teachings on kamma told him that he must have had some bad kamma. Here he was, orphaned, poor, didn't have much of a schooling. If he was going to find any happiness in life, he would have to change his ways.

It was that turn-around that got him interested in practicing, and why, when he finally ordained as a monk at age twenty, he was really upset when he discovered, after reading the Vinaya, that they weren't observing the Vinaya very well where he was staying. And they certainly weren't practicing meditation.

Which is why he was so happy to find Ajaan Lee, when Ajaan Lee came the following year to Chanthaburi. At that point, he took to the Dhamma like a fish to water. But he wasn't always that way: As the texts say, the mind untrained is very unpliant, it's very resistant, like the kind of wood that snaps when you try to bend it. Whereas the trained mind is pliant. When you try to bend it in the right direction, it'll go that direction.

The problem is that *you* have to train your mind. It's the mind training the mind. So how does it go from being totally unpliant to being pliant? Well, Ajaan Fuang's story gives an illustration: You have to see that you've been foolish, that you've been unskillful, that you're suffering, and then you may be willing to change. Then maybe you'll be willing to listen to the Dhamma.

One of the ironies of how Buddhism has come to the West is that if you're introduced to Buddhism in college, take a course either in Buddhism itself or in comparative religion, one of the first things they tell you is the four noble truths. Whereas, when the Buddha was teaching the four noble truths, he was very careful about how he would introduce them. You don't just start out with those truths.

There are a few cases where he did, as with the five brethren. But their minds were already inclined in a direction away from sensuality. Most people, as the Buddha found, see sensuality as their only escape from pain. And as the four noble truths point out, our craving for sensuality is one of the reasons why we're suffering. Clinging to sensuality is suffering in and of itself. Those teachings go against the grain.

So, how do you change the grain of a person's mind? The Buddha would usually give what's called a graduated discourse, or step-by-step discourse—*anupubbi-katha* is the Pali. We're told many times in the Canon that that was the kind of discourse he would give before

introducing the four noble truths, especially to lay people, but we don't have the text of any of those discourses.

It may have been that the Buddha tailored each discourse to the needs of the person who was going to hear it. One of the cases was the householder Upāli, who had been a strong supporter of the Jains and had gone one day to argue with the Buddha, thinking that he would bring greater glory to his Jain teacher by showing that even a lay disciple of a Jain teacher could defeat the Buddha. Well, he ended up getting converted. So, as the Buddha taught him the step-by-step discourse, you can imagine one way in which he would have taught it.

There's another case where there was a leper, Suppabuddha. One day he's going through the city and he sees a large group of people gathered. He thinks, "Maybe there's a food distribution. Maybe I can get some food there." As he gets close, he realizes: no food distribution. It's a group of people who've come to listen to the Buddha teach the Dhamma. So he says, "Well, I might as well listen to the Dhamma myself." As the Buddha surveys the crowd, he sees that the leper is the one who's going to be able to benefit from the teaching. So he gives a graduated discourse for him, which you can imagine would be somewhat different. Even though the main outlines were the same, it would be different in the details from what he taught Upāli.

And of course there are the cases of the archers who were sent to kill the Buddha... and then to kill the archer who'd kill the Buddha, and then to kill those archers, then to kill *those* archers. He taught them all the graduated discourse, and they all gained the Dhamma eye after their minds were ready to hear the four noble truths.

So there probably were a lot of variations in the details. The general outline is this: He would start with a talk on generosity and the good that comes from generosity: the fact that people respect you, people love you, and you gain a sense of self-confidence.

He would then talk about virtue in a similar way: People would respect you. He said the wealth that comes from being virtuous tends to be solid. In other words, it doesn't fly in, but it doesn't fly out. And again, when you go to a meeting of your fellow citizens, you're not abashed. You're not afraid that somebody will accuse you of a breach of virtue, because you don't have any breaches of virtue.

Then, when the Buddha saw that people were amenable to hearing about what was good about generosity, what was good about virtue, he would talk about the pleasures of heaven. And here, it's interesting: In the Canon there are a lot of suttas on generosity, there are a lot of suttas on virtue, but there's almost nothing on heaven. There are two big suttas on hell, but about the pleasures of heaven the Buddha simply says: Take the pleasures of a king who is loved by his subjects, who doesn't have to engage in war, rules over a wealthy kingdom, who enjoys his wealth, and then multiply that many times—that's heaven.

Now, one of the reasons the Buddha may be talking about these topics is that he's going to be pointing out the drawbacks of sensuality, but first he wants people to see that, yes, he

does appreciate the fact that there are pleasures in the sensual realm, the pleasures that come from goodness. So it's not that he's denying the fact of the pleasures, but as he says, it's because of the pleasures of form, feeling, perceptions, fabrication, and consciousness that we're stuck on them—that's the problem. But still, he wants people to have a sense that, yes, he does appreciate that there are pleasures in life. Then, when he gets that far, he turns the tables and starts talking about the drawbacks of sensuality, even heavenly sensual pleasures.

To begin with, they're not going to last forever. They're going to end. And when you've been used to food appearing when you want it to appear, and whatever pleasure you want appearing when you want it to appear, and then you fall from there, you find that pleasure is hard to find. It's a sharp fall.

You also think about the mental qualities that were developed through virtue and generosity, but then they begin to get eaten away by the fact that everything is so easy for the devas, and they get so complacent. That's the problem: The very rewards for generosity and virtue eat away the goodness that you developed, and you're back where you started, sometimes worse.

At that point, then the Buddha would see if you were ready to see renunciation as rest, renunciation as a good thing. This comes from seeing the dangers of complacency. This is how heedfulness arises: You realize that you've been complacent all along, and you've suffered for it. How much longer do you want to suffer? It's *sensing* that suffering: that's what makes the mind begin to be a little bit pliant, and willing to develop heedfulness.

Heedfulness, of course, is the basis for the five strengths, and the first of the five strengths is conviction. There's a passage where the Buddha talks about how conviction arises out of suffering. And it's precisely in this way: You see that you've been suffering and you realize it's because of your own actions—you can't blame other people. You were the one who fell for the pleasures that made you complacent. So you begin to realize: Okay, there's something you've got to do.

This is how you develop conviction in the Buddha's awakening: "Maybe this is the way out." Again, conviction is not necessarily one hundred percent sure. There's a *maybe* built in, but it's a maybe of a possibility. You're at the very least willing to listen to the Buddha's teachings, especially on the power of your actions, and you're willing to take them on as a working hypothesis.

That's when you're ready for the four noble truths. What you've done is that you think about your sensual pleasures and the mind's quality of what they call *sensuality*, which is its fascination for planning for sensual pleasures, fantasizing about them—and then you step back, saying, "Maybe that's the problem."

The mind really resists, but when you have a sense of your own foolishness and the suffering that you've gone through because of your foolishness, that's when you're willing to step back. That's what helps you to develop a noble attitude. When the Buddha calls the noble

truths “noble,” there have been people who’ve complained, “What’s noble about suffering? What’s noble about craving.” The suffering and the craving themselves are not noble, what’s noble is the *attitude* the Buddha has you take toward them.

If we see, “Oh. The clinging: That’s the suffering. That’s a problem.” That’s when we develop a noble attitude. We usually don’t see our clinging as a problem at all. That’s what we like to do: We’re expert clingers. The same with craving: As the Buddha says, “Everywhere we go, we go with craving as our friend.” It whispers into our ear, and whatever it says, we tend to believe it. But now you step back and say, “Wait a minute, the things that I like because of my craving and clinging, the things that I hold onto most dearly: Maybe I’ll have to learn how to let go of them.” That attitude is noble, and that’s what’s noble about those two noble truths.

The same with the truth of the path. You say, “I can’t blame anyone else for my complacency. I was the one who fell for these things to begin with. I’ve got to do something about it.” That’s why the path is noble: You take responsibility for your own suffering, and you take responsibility for putting an end to it.

Think about that question the Buddha said results from suffering, results from pain, even for little children: Who knows a way to bring about the end of this suffering? Now, the question itself is not too picky about what the way might be. Especially when we’re children, we probably hope that somebody will just come and take the pain away for us. Like when you go running to your mother with a cut on your finger, and she blows on it to make the pain go away: That’s the kind of thing we look for all too often—somebody who’ll do the work for us.

Finally, though, we’re beginning to realize that we’ve got to do the work ourselves because we’re the ones who were foolish enough to create the problem to begin with. That’s why the path is noble. And of course it’s noble in the sense that it leads beyond just putting an end to particular pains. It takes you to a dimension where there is no pain, there is no suffering, there’s no stress anymore.

That’s when the mind is really pliant, when it’s ready for that solution. But the graduated discourse is what makes the mind pliant to begin with.

Now, there were cases where the Buddha may have started out on a graduated discourse and found that he could take his listeners only so far. That’s why we have the talks about generosity, and they just stop with generosity. Or the talks on virtue, and they stop with virtue. There were people who had trouble getting their heads even around the fact that virtue and generosity could be good. Those were the minds that were really brittle and stiff.

But the Buddha would plant a seed: Maybe someday they would be able to look at themselves and see that there was something wrong in what they’d done, and they could have listened to the Buddha and could have benefited.

But if you’re wise, you’ll follow that line of thought in the graduated discourse all the way through, until your mind is ready for the four noble truths. As the Buddha said, when you’re ready to see that renunciation of sensuality would be a good thing, then it’s as if your mind is

like a piece of cloth that's ready for the dye. It's been cleaned, has no stains, and it can take the dye easily.

Don't be the sort of person who takes just a little bit of the dye, and the cloth comes out all splotchy. Try to make your mind pliant enough to listen, pliant enough to follow along. We tend to be stiff and proud of our pride, and that's why there are so many people who claim to be Dhamma teachers here in the West but keep on wanting to change the Dhamma.

There's something about the Dhamma they hate. They don't want there to be four noble truths, they don't even want there to be truths, or noble even. That attitude goes nowhere.

After all, here's the Buddha, who's put all that effort into finding the way, and he's offering it to us for free. Don't be the sort of person who turns him down.