Freedom in an Ordinary Moment

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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Good evening. Welcome. Nice to see you all.

Last week I was on the East Coast, and the second night I was there, it snowed. It was this beautiful snow with these giant, white, puffy flakes. It snowed all that day, too. Waking up in the morning and looking out, I saw how everything had this beautiful white cloak on it. It wasn't windy. There was something about it; I just felt really touched. Being a Californian right here in the Bay Area, I don't see snow that often. But there was also a certain letting go, or a little sense of a sigh that happened.

I want to talk a little bit about how ordinary moments felt extraordinary to me—to be with the snow. I knew that it might snow, so I had brought all kinds of warm gear. It was fun for me to be outside when it was snowing. But tonight, I want to talk about this idea of ordinary moments. Just looking out the window can be an opportunity—unplanned, unexpected. Just a little bit of this opening of the heart and the mind, this softening, this letting go that helps support this movement towards greater and greater freedom.

I'd like to start us off with a poem that maybe points to this in some kind of way—how an ordinary moment can have an extraordinary impact or effect. This poem is entitled *Paṭācārā*[1]. I'll talk a little bit about it afterwards, but first I'll say it.

Plowing fields with plows, sowing seeds in the ground, caring for children and family, people gain wealth.

Why is it that I, thorough in virtuous conduct, doing the Buddha's instruction, not lazy or proud, why is it that I have not attained release?

I watched the water, the foot-washing water flow from high ground to low. With this, the mind concentrated like a thoroughbred horse. Taking an oil lamp, I entered my hut. Looking over the bed, I sat down on the bed. Taking a needle, I pulled out the wick. As the flame went out, the mind was freed. As the flame went out, the mind was freed.

This poem begins with this person noticing that other people are getting what they want. They are sowing seeds and they get the fruits of their labor. They're raising a family and they have the benefits of being in a family. And why isn't this person who really wants to have freedom... why can't they have freedom?

There's something very beautiful about this because it feels so human. When we want something, there can be this sense of, "Well, other people have that or have what they want. Why can't I get what I want? I'm doing what I think I'm supposed to be doing." Paṭācārā is saying that she follows the Buddha's instructions. She's not lazy or proud, and she has virtuous conduct. So, she's doing what she believes she should be doing. Perhaps she's feeling some frustration or disappointment, or maybe even some confusion, wondering, "What am I doing wrong?"

Then she watches, as was common—this poem was written thousands of years ago, captured in the Buddhist literature. The oldest literature that humans have that is attributed to women is in this Buddhist Pali Canon[2]. Paṭācārā was a nun, and this is her awakening poem. She describes how she watches the water flowing from high ground to low ground, washing her feet at the end of the day. There was no such thing as pavement thousands of years ago, and they didn't have shoes like we have today. Of course, they washed their feet at the end of every day before going to sleep. Her whole life she had been washing her feet, probably every day. And probably her whole life they did it so that it would run downhill.

But this time, there was something about just watching the water that the mind just kind of collected. For me, maybe it was like watching the snow fall. There was something just beautiful, just this ordinary thing. For many people, they see it regularly. But there was something that moved in me when I was just watching the snowfall. Maybe it was like Paṭācārā's mind when she was watching just the water go downhill.

Then she turns off the wick of the lantern. Poof, it's dark. With that big change, all of a sudden, she can't see anything. It's completely dark; there are no other sources of light. Then there was a way that there was no longer anything for the senses to hold on to. The vision was no longer there. So the mind just let go. And with that was the freedom which she had been looking for. It wasn't found while she was on the cushion straining and striving and huffing and puffing, even though she had been doing the Buddha's teachings. The awakening happened in an ordinary moment.

I've heard this, and I've had my own experiences too. It's like having the first cup of tea, or standing up after a meditation to go do whatever is next. I've heard somebody say taking a bite of breakfast, or driving. Sometimes people have things that happen with driving—ordinary things that we've done over and over again so that the mind has a different way of being present. It's there, but it also has some ease because it's done this activity so many times. That allows some deeper letting go that we didn't even know we were holding on to.

This poem for Paṭācārā occurs within a background of difficulties. As I said, she was a nun, but she was one of the preeminent nuns. She was an esteemed teacher, so she taught other women

and allowed them to have freedom and become awakened. But she came to practice after experiencing tremendous tragedy in her life. Her husband died unexpectedly. Then her parents died unexpectedly. And then her children died unexpectedly. Three different events. I just can't even imagine. So heartbreaking. They said that she was crazed with grief and didn't even know what to do with herself anymore. I can only imagine—just terrible.

Then she meets the Buddha accidentally, and the Buddha could see, "Oh, here's this poor person who is really suffering." The Buddha gives her some teachings. I'm imagining that she thinks, "I've lost everything. I might as well do these practices. What else is there?" In the poem that I just read, she talks about her virtuous conduct and doing the Buddha's teachings and not being lazy or proud. So, she probably gave herself wholeheartedly. She did ordain, and then became awakened.

As I mentioned, this is part of the *Therīgāthā*[3], which is this collection of women's poems about women's awakening experiences. They have some unique feminine topics. It doesn't feel like it's men writing about women. It definitely feels like women's voices.

In general, the Buddhist literature has these maps of the path of practice and lots of lists and things to do. It's beautiful; I love this kind of stuff. But it also has poetry—something different that touches a different aspect of us. Maybe there are seasons in our practice, seasons in our life, where we don't want to do lists and some structured practice. We want to maybe just follow our heart. Or maybe there's a time when we *do* want to do lists and practice and feel like, "Okay, what should I do next?" and follow the instructions in that kind of way. I appreciate so much that there is both. I would say practice requires both: some of this diligent effort and structure, and then some opening up, softening, and unstructured letting ourselves be touched by our experiences. Making some room so that some of these ordinary moments might open up into something extraordinary.

There's this idea that we find in the Buddhist scriptures of this word *kalyāṇa*[4]. It can be translated as beauty, beautiful, but we might say "spiritual beauty" because it's not about what's visually pleasing. It's not about aesthetics. It's this beauty that touches us in some kind of way. It might be aesthetically pleasing, but it's more a quality of the inner life. Maybe it feels like the heart getting simpler in some way, or maybe there's an unclenching or ungripping that we didn't even know was gripping. There's a sense of "Ah," when we're touched by something.

Often, it's easy to think about this with visual art or maybe certain music, but there's often just seeing children playing in a fun, playful way. There can be something very sweet about that that just feels great. Maybe there's the mind not needing to argue with the present moment for the time being. The mind just being with what's there.

We find in the suttas also this expression that the Dharma is beautiful in the beginning, the Dharma is beautiful in the middle, and the Dharma is beautiful in the end. There are so many different ways we can interpret that, but I kind of like thinking that it's just through and through. It doesn't matter from which angle you're looking at the Dharma or experiencing the Dharma; there's this beauty all throughout. Some of this poetry can help us touch into that. For some of us, we like the lists, too. Maybe there's some of the beauty there also. I would say, yeah, we need both—the structured and the more poetic. Maybe clear guidelines can be really helpful, and maybe some inspiration can be really helpful.

So now I'd like to read another poem by another nun. Her name was Cittā[5]. This is translated by Bhikkhu Sujato[6].

Though I'm skinny, sick, and very feeble, I climbed the mountain, leaning on a cane. Having laid down my outer robe and overturned my alms bowl, propping myself against a rock, I shattered the mass of darkness.

Very simple. Climbing a mountain, even though it's difficult. It can feel like our lives are like climbing a mountain. We're just putting one foot after the other. And sometimes it's not so easy. Sometimes it feels like we're going uphill.

I appreciate that in this poem she's leaning on a cane, leaning on a staff. She's recognizing that it can be helpful to have support. So she's using support. There's some real wisdom in asking for support, getting support, recognizing that sometimes we need support.

And then she puts everything down. Here it's mentioned literally. She puts down the alms bowl. She puts down her outer robe. She's a nun, so monastics have outer robes and inner robes. She puts down the outer robe, and then she puts down the body. She sits down, and there's a way in which everything gets put down and released.

We could just ask: what would it be like for us to put down whatever it is that we're carrying that's extra? Whatever it is that we don't need, that feels burdensome and unnecessary. In this poem, she is literally sitting down. But is there a way that we can feel what it's like to not be carrying what we are so often carrying? Maybe rehashing the conversation that we had earlier with somebody and thinking, "Oh, I should have said this," or "I can't believe they said that." Or maybe we are rehearsing over and over something that we're going to do in the future. And then, of course, when that conversation actually arises, it's never exactly how we thought it was going to be.

Then in this poem, "the mass of darkness is shattered." The darkness is a way that can represent ignorance, not seeing clearly, having this veil of delusion. So there's this way in which we could see what couldn't have been seen before. And again, just like we saw with Paṭācārā who went

from light to dark, here maybe we're going from dark to light. But this idea of change—of what's clear and what's not clear, or what the senses can see and what they can't see.

And then of course, here we are again in an ordinary moment. Just something let go. She sat down, and there was this letting go that allowed this greater freedom and ease.

Having read that poem from thousands of years ago, translated by Bhante Sujato, another poet wrote his own version of this poem—a modern-day version. He was inspired by this poem and he wrote his own, which I think is beautiful. The poet is Matty Weingast[7]. His version of this poem goes like this:

Somehow I kept climbing, though tired, hungry, and weak. Old too. At the top of the mountain, I spread my outer robe on a rock to dry, set down my cane and bowl, took a deep breath, and looked around.

It was windy up there. As I was leaning back against a large gray rock, the darkness that I had carried up and down a million mountains slipped off my shoulders and swept itself away on the wind.

I just kind of like this lovely idea that the wind just takes away what had been so burdensome. Just a little being in nature. Nature doing what nature does, and allowing ourselves to be touched by it.

Here's another poem. This one, the nun's name is Sāmā[8]. It includes this expression that she "went forth." That means to ordain. So, she became a nun. And again, this idea of the bowl—this is an alms bowl. The monastics have all their meals in alms.

In the twenty-five years since I went forth, I don't know that I ever found serenity in my mind. I had failed to find peace of heart or any control over my mind. When I remembered the Victor's instructions, I was struck with a sense of urgency. Though subject to so many painful things, I have through my love of diligence reached the ending of craving and fulfilled the Buddha's instructions. This is the seventh day since my craving dried up.

I just love this. Here's somebody who's saying, "I've been practicing for a long time and my mind still hasn't settled down." She had this idea of how things should be, and it kept on feeling like, "Oh, I'm not doing it right. I'm inadequate. I'm doing it wrong."

But this "love of diligence" that Sujato here is translating... the word could also be "love of heedfulness," "love of attention," "love of zeal," because "diligence" sometimes can feel really heavy-handed. The point is this appreciation for just hanging in there, and just coming back and doing it again and again.

And then it's just this: "reached the ending of craving." Which is a freedom to not be pushed around and always after what we think we want or what we don't want. The specific moment this happens, she doesn't say in this poem. But I'm imagining maybe there was an ordinary moment where something let go also. It's this reminder that we might have this idea about how things should be and think that this practice isn't working. She had this idea, and she became free. Maybe that was what got let go of initially—this sense that things had to be different. But she had this willingness to hang in there.

So then this same contemporary poet, Matty Weingast, read that poem that I just read you and he wrote his own poem inspired by Sāmā. This is his version, which has a little bit of whimsy which I appreciate very much.

After twenty-five years on the path, I'd experienced almost everything except peace. When I was young, my mother told me that I would find true happiness only in marriage. Remembering her words all those years later, something in me began to tremble. I gave myself to the trembling. And it showed me all the pain this little heart had ever known. And how countless lives of searching had brought me at last to the present moment, which I happily married.

Can you imagine? We've been living together ever since without a single argument.

Just this great idea, right? This twist. She thought she was supposed to do something, but finds freedom her own way—not exactly the way that maybe others were telling her it should be or the way that she thought it should be.

There is a playfulness in here. I'll just highlight some themes in these poems that I've shared. There's a whole collection of these poems. Some themes are difficulties on the path. All these poems are mentioning the impacts of their labor. "Why aren't I getting... I'm working so hard, why don't I find it?" Plus Paṭācārā's backstory of having her whole family die. Cittā, in the second poem, was climbing up the mountain and feeling very weak and needing a cane. And then Sāmā, in the third poem, not finding peace despite being a monastic for twenty-five years. So that's one of the themes that we see in these poems.

But also we see that all of these poems, these women, express this sense of confidence and maybe a little bit of delight. There isn't this hemming and hawing. There's a directness and a clarity that I appreciate very much. You can imagine them sitting up straight and just saying this, right? Instead of being shy or coy. There's something beautiful about this because it doesn't feel boastful. It just feels like, "This is what happened, and I'm sharing it."

We could ask: what would it be like for us to have that kind of confidence and delight in our own practice? Because there's a way we can feel like, "Okay, I should go meditate. [Laughter] One more thing on the to-do list." Sometimes when I meet people for practice discussions, I'm surprised that one of the first things they'll say is, "Oh, I haven't been meditating regularly."

That is not my concern. My concern is, what's happening in the heart and the mind? How are you meeting your life? Meditation practice is a tremendous support, but it's not the only measurement of how we practice and how our practice is going.

And then there's this theme of a shift that happens in the in-between ordinary moments. Turning off the lamp. Leaning against the rock after climbing a mountain. Following her love of practice. Then this ordinary moment arises.

Also, this theme in these three different poems: their awakening, that freedom that they're discovering, is described in different ways. It's not like there's only one description and it shows up in only one way. Paṭācārā, her mind was freed. Cittā shattered the mass of darkness—delusion or ignorance. Sāmā had the ending of craving. It's not like it's one exact experience for everybody. I know talking to practitioners when they are experiencing some more freedom in their lives, it's not like everybody says the exact same thing. Of course not, because the particulars of our lives are all different and the way that we show up for our life is different. So the freedom will be experienced differently.

I'll read this one last poem. This is from Matty Weingast. He was inspired by a poem in the *Therīgāthā*. I'm not going to read the original one; I'm just going to read Matty Weingast's version. There's something kind of tender—at least I find it tender. He titled this *Grandma Suma*. Sumanā[9] is the name of the nun, but in the Pali, Sumanā ordained late in life, and he calls her "Grandma Sumanā," kind of like a term of endearment. Here's her poem according to Matty Weingast:

After all those years looking after others, this old heart has finally learned to look after itself. Each act of kindness a stitch in this warm blanket that now covers me while I sleep.

I don't know, there's something very sweet about this. Sometimes we can be taking care of others and not recognizing how maybe in some ways we've abandoned ourselves in some aspects. Or maybe it's not uncommon for some people to always be taking care of others and not be present for their own life and taking care of themselves.

And then this last stanza: "Each act of kindness a stitch in this warm blanket." So there's no distinction between kindness for others or kindness for oneself. It's just this kindness helps create something that covers us as we sleep. A way in which we can feel comforted, soothed, and feel safe with some of the ways in which we have kindness for others.

May we all contribute a verse to the poem of the human race, and may this verse be for the benefit of all beings everywhere.

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1. **Paṭācārā:** A prominent early Buddhist nun (bhikkhunī) and a significant figure in the Pali Canon. She is known for her tragic backstory of losing her entire family before ordaining and attaining awakening. ↩
2. **Pali Canon:** The standard collection of scriptures in the Theravada Buddhist tradition, as preserved in the Pali language. ↩
3. **Therīgāthā:** "Verses of the Elder Nuns," a Buddhist scripture, a collection of short poems by early nuns who were Awakened disciples of the Buddha. ↩
4. **Kalyāṇa:** A Pali word meaning "beautiful," "good," "virtuous," or "helpful." ↩
5. **Cittā:** An early Buddhist nun whose verses are recorded in the *Therīgāthā*. ↩
6. **Bhikkhu Sujato:** A contemporary Australian Buddhist monk and translator, known for his translations of the early Buddhist texts. ↩
7. **Matty Weingast:** Author of *The First Free Women: Poems of the Early Buddhist Nuns*, a collection of poems inspired by the *Therīgāthā*. ↩
8. **Sāmā:** An early Buddhist nun whose verses are recorded in the *Therīgāthā*. ↩
9. **Sumanā:** An early Buddhist nun whose verses are recorded in the *Therīgāthā*. ↩

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