Neither Tarrying Nor Hurrying

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 51:24

Earlier this year I had the opportunity to sit a three-week retreat. That's the longest stretch I've been able to do this year. I appreciated it when Greg said the other day that we could think about how, a couple of days ago, we were starting a three-week retreat. It was great—a lovely stretch of time to settle into practice. I hope you're settling in here in the first few days of your three-week retreat.

When I'm on retreat, often some snippet of poetry or phrase from the suttas can arise in my experience, much as Jaya was describing last night—how our mind can connect or resonate with texts or poems that we've been exposed to. Sometimes it can seem like those arise at just the right moment, almost like an instruction appearing in the mind.

On this three-week retreat, there were a couple of phrases—not whole poems so much, but really just a few very succinct phrases—that kept coming up. Each time they came up, they would illuminate something in my experience, some way in which I was holding or grasping after something, and they supported a letting go. So I thought I would share with you some of those reflections that came for me, partly on that three-week retreat that I sat in May.

This particular phrase that I'd like to explore with you is from a very brief sutta. I'll actually read most of the sutta to you tonight. It just kept resonating for me over and over on the retreat.

The sutta I'd like to share with you is the very first sutta in the collection of discourses known as the Connected Discourses of the Buddha, or the Samyutta Nikaya—the very first sutta you run into there. It's very short and succinct, and it's a simile. The Buddha often taught in similes and analogies, and I've of late, in the last few years, really appreciated diving into the similes because they are so evocative.

This is a way in which a particular piece of this simile arose for me as an image in the mind. Similes often evoke images for us, and I think the teaching power of similes is that they can connect to us on many different levels. They can connect to us on the intellectual level, through meaning, and they can also connect with us on a very evocative level through the imagery that's created. This is mostly how this particular simile came for me during this retreat.

This simile is of water—a flood simile. I mentioned the flood last week in my talk. I talked about the simile of the raft a little, and how we cross the flood by using the Eightfold Path. We build a raft out of what's around us, cross the flood on the raft, and then let go of that raft once we've crossed over.

In this simile, there's a flood again. The flood is understood to mean the flood of our suffering, as it is in the simile of the raft. But in this particular image, the Buddha does not have a raft. It's like he's crossing a

flood with just his body, walking across the flood.

The imagery of the flood resonates for us. Unpacking the simile a little bit, looking at the various pieces of it—the flood of our suffering, the flood of the ways that we struggle—that language even resonates for us. We talk sometimes about feeling like we're drowning in our emotions or moods, feeling like we can't get our head above water. This imagery speaks to us of a flood of struggle.

In thinking about this flood and its imagery, it seems like something in the conditions of the world. In our experience of suffering, we often connect to stuff happening. Stuff does happen in the world. People engage in certain ways that feel harmful, or there are circumstances or conditions that feel out of our control. Things happen in the world that are a part of why or how we are suffering.

And yet the pointing in the Buddhist teachings, over and over again, is that it's not the stuff. It's not the stuff that is the real suffering. That's actually really good news for us, because if it were the stuff, it would be hopeless. We couldn't become free from suffering. We cannot control the conditions of the world in the way that we'd like them to be.

Yet fortunately, in this teaching the Buddha says it's not necessary to fix the world to be the way we'd like it to be. Instead, he points to this relationship in our mind—how we are with that stuff that's happening is the crucial part of whether or not we suffer. If we are reacting to it out of greed, aversion, confusion, or delusion, we will be drowning. We will be struggling. We'll be feeling like we're swept away, like we can't get our head above water.

This is the flood that's being referred to.

Not the flood of stuff happening in the world, but the flood in our minds of greed, aversion, and delusion. The Buddha offered a very succinct definition of freedom: the ending of greed, the ending of aversion, the ending of delusion—this is Nibbana, this is freedom.

With this simile of crossing the flood, I think the first thing to take in, having understood a little bit about what this flood is—this flood of greed, aversion, and delusion in our minds—is that it is possible to cross the flood. There is hope.

The sutta begins with the Buddha meditating in a grove. A deva came to him and asked, "How, dear sir, did you cross the flood?" The Buddha responded, "By not halting, friend, and by not straining, I crossed the flood." The deva asked, "But how is it, dear sir, that by not halting and by not straining you crossed the flood?" The Buddha replied, "When I came to a standstill, friend, I sank. But when I struggled, I got swept away. It is in this way, friend, that by not halting and by not straining, I crossed the flood."

There is a little more to the sutta, but this is the bulk of it—a pretty succinct and brief teaching. And yet it can evoke quite a bit for us, so I want to take some time this evening to unpack this simile with you.

One thing I like to do when I reflect on a sutta is remember that it's a translation. I find other translations

because different language lands for us in different ways. Certain words have more of an evocative feel, resonate more fully for us. Sometimes different translations pull out different subtleties of meaning.

The translation I read for you today was Bhikkhu Bodhi's, and it is not the phrasing that resonates most with me. There's another phrasing by a translator, Jnanananda, that uses the words: "How did you cross the flood?" And the Buddha responds, "By neither tarrying nor hurrying, I crossed the flood." That language is what came up during my retreat, and it was very evocative for me. For this mind, for the way my own mind works, that language lands more with how my mind functions in terms of clinging to things or sticking to things—holding on, tarrying with something, spending excessive time with it, or hurrying, rushing past it. That language is very evocative for me.

Another translation from Thanissaro Bhikkhu: "Without staying in place and without pushing forward, I crossed the flood. When I stayed in place, I sank. When I pushed forward, I got swept away."

What this describes is a kind of what we've been exploring in some of the teachings here. This is a description of how the Buddha met suffering. He's walking across the flood—not hurrying, not straining, not tarrying, not hurrying.

The commentaries say this imagery is meant to be a little paradoxical for the mind. When we normally think about crossing a flooded stream, what would we do? We would stop. We'd search, look for a place to get a toehold. Put our foot down, make sure it's stable, hold it there, and then maybe quickly move the other foot to get to that spot. Then do the same thing—look for another toehold. In actually crossing a flood, we would probably do exactly the opposite of what this teaching tells us.

The commentaries say it's meant to startle the mind a little bit. It's like a koan: What does he mean, "By neither tarrying nor hurrying I crossed the flood"?

This speaks to how we are on the path. It's really a succinct description of how to be connected with experience. It's not so much about what we're experiencing, although the flood is understood to be the flood of suffering—and that's what we're meeting in each moment. Neither tarrying nor hurrying, neither stopping nor straining with this flood, just very calmly moving on.

This is about how we meet experience. It's the attitude of mind that Sayadaw U Tejaniya refers to: How are we in relationship to experience? This neither tarrying nor hurrying speaks to a balanced attitude of mind. In Sayadaw U Tejaniya's words, this kind of balance means being at ease with whatever arises moment after moment, not reactive.

checking in on our experience, checking our relationship to experience. And we've encouraged you to do this at times. It's like, what's arising? And then how are we in relationship to it? If we're looking at a pain, for example, and there's aversion in the mind, that aversion needs to be acknowledged. If there's a thought pattern going on and the mind is reactive to it, if we're not noticing the reactivity and we're trying to observe the thought, probably that reactivity is driving how we are being aware of the thought. And so

this checking into the relationship is an important piece to recognize whether the mind is balanced in relationship to what's happening.

So being at ease with what's happening moment to moment, Sayadaw U Tejaniya speaks about checking in. Is there greed in the mind? Is there aversion in the mind? Is there delusion in the mind? The three roots of all of our suffering. And so this balanced attitude is one where there is not greed, aversion, or delusion in the mind.

And yet here in this sutta, the Buddha is not using that language. He's using a different imagery around what it would mean to be on this path with a balanced mind. Neither tarrying nor hurrying, I cross the flood.

Another piece of this teaching that I find inspiring, that helps me in reflecting on my own experience, is the next phrase. How, dear sir, without tarrying, without hurrying, did you cross the flood? And the Buddha responds, "Well, friend, when I tarried, I sank. And when I hurried, I got swept away. So without tarrying, without hurrying, I crossed the flood."

Now this is the Buddha describing his own practice and acknowledging, when I tarried I sank. The Buddha acknowledging he sank, he drowned in suffering in his practice. The Buddha acknowledging he got swept away in his own practice. So to me this is somewhat inspiring because it's like, oh yes, I'm not alone when I'm drowning. The Buddha drowned too. And he didn't give up. He looked at his mind. He began to check in. What are the conditions here? What's going on? And from this teaching, what he's saying is that he understood that the tarrying and the hurrying were the cause of the drowning and the being swept away. It's not the flood that's the culprit. It's the tarrying or the hurrying.

And so beginning to look, well, what's the possibility? What's the possibility in the practice? Is there some agency here? There's not so much agency about the stuff that's happening in the world. Sometimes we can change things that are happening in the world. But where is there some capacity for this being to act? Maybe not about how other people are behaving towards us, but maybe about how we are in relationship to it. Agency in our practice.

He was looking at the conditions of the experience and seeing that certain aspects of the experience were possible to work with within this being, and other parts of the experience weren't something that could be changed. And so looking at what, based on the conditions, what can we do? This is what we're doing here. We're looking at the conditions and exploring how we can learn about the conditions that lead to suffering and how we can learn about the conditions that lead to freedom. It's looking in our experience.

And we've talked a little bit about how this works. Mindfulness and wisdom paired together make this work for us. As we observe our experience, we get to know what's happening. And everything that's happening in this hall is conditions. The dharma talks are conditions that plant seeds in your experience. What's arising in your experience is a piece of what you know and what you learn. The instructions to be

present and aware are there, and the mind has interest to act on them.

None of this takes an entity, none of this takes a self to do this. It's simply the way that mindfulness and wisdom inform us.

We've talked about how with mindfulness and wisdom watching anger or frustration or confusion or greed—when we watch that with mindfulness just as an arising, recognizing "this is what's arising in this moment"—the mind learns something different about it. We begin to understand the vast difference between being caught by a reactive mind state and being aware that a reactive mind state is arising. In that difference, the mind learns something fundamentally different about that experience and how it is contributing to its own suffering. Wisdom begins to support the mind in letting go. And so mindfulness is a huge support for us in navigating these conditions.

This is what I believe the Buddha was doing. He was looking at the conditions and seeing that this aspect of tarrying and hurrying was somehow participating in the drowning and being swept away.

There are many different ways tarrying and hurrying come up in practice. As I reflected on these words and the feeling of the experience—because that's what was happening in this particular retreat this past May—the feeling of tarrying and the feeling of hurrying was what was being pointed to as this phrase arose in my mind: "By neither tarrying nor hurrying, I crossed the flood." Sometimes it was an image of the Buddha walking across the flood that arose in my mind—just very calmly, with that calm abiding, walking across this mass of flooding water.

As I explored these words, there was a clear felt sense of this quality of being stuck to something, of tarrying with something—or a felt sense of skipping over, rushing past something. These experiences seem to be a different way into exploring that balance of mind than reflecting on things as greed, aversion, or delusion. In some ways it felt simpler. Is the mind stuck to something or is it rushing past something?

The mind being stuck to something could be greed, having us stick to something pleasant. "Ooh, this is really pleasant. I think I'll hang out here for a little while." Tarrying with something pleasant. Or it might be aversion. In my mind at least, the aversive nature of mind when there's something unpleasant happening—I would get completely stuck to it, trying to figure out how to get rid of it. Tarrying with the unpleasant, with the difficult. The aversion sticking me to the experience with a tarrying quality.

So the tarrying could be greed, it could be aversion. It might also be a kind of over-emphasizing some experience, putting it under the microscope with excessive investigation. That too could come from greed or aversion—aversion if it's "How do I figure this out? Can I pull this apart so I can get rid of it?"

One of the things that really began to intrigue me was getting a sense of familiarity with the quality in the experience of tarrying, recognizing that this was a clue the mind is a little bit—or a lot—out of balance.

Likewise with hurrying. Hurrying can happen out of greed, rushing to get the next thing, grasping after pleasant, after pleasant, after pleasant. Or maybe it's connected with aversion, the wanting to rush away from something unpleasant.

One quality that was perhaps a little subtler in my experience was the experience of searching for something. As the mindfulness got more subtle and there was less clear experience, my mind was whirling about. "Where is there something to land on? I want to find something to land on." A kind of searching, a rushing.

We might be able to get familiar with these qualities of tarrying and hurrying as a different way to explore what imbalance of mind means, and be led toward balance of mind. This is largely how we find our way to balance. Sayadaw U Tejaniya often says that we get to know a wise attitude, a wise relationship with experience, by getting really familiar with unwise attitude. We get familiar with the way our mind wants things to be a certain way, the way our mind doesn't want things to be a certain way. And that very familiarity begins to help the mind let go. It's that shift of relationship—rather than buying into or observing experience through greed or aversion, we are knowing it as a phenomenon, as an arising in the mind.

The same thing holds true here: by getting familiar with the experience of tarrying and hurrying, the mind begins to understand how to not tarry and how to not hurry. Tarrying and hurrying can have other flavors too—the qualities of the hindrances of sloth and torpor and restlessness seem to map very well onto these qualities.

Tarrying—the sinking into laziness or indulgence, just spacing out, sinking into oblivion. Or restlessness, where the mind is popping all over the place, very much like that quality of hurrying.

In my own practice, as this phrase arose in my mind—"by neither tarrying nor hurrying"—it served as a little reminder. Oh, there's some subtle quality here, maybe even very subtle, like landing on something and holding onto a concept or an idea. Just a little feeling of that, one that didn't even necessarily feel like greed or aversion. It had more this quality of creating or holding onto something—a view. More in the realm of delusion, perhaps. But there was a quality of sticking, a little bit of sticky quality to the concept. This phrase pointed to: oh, maybe we don't have to keep sticking. By neither tarrying nor hurrying.

And so we explore the way to neither tarrying nor hurrying by being curious about tarrying and hurrying. What is that experience? We can know tarrying, sticking to something, with a mind that is neither tarrying nor hurrying. Oh, sticking to something is what's happening. That's what's happening. It's that shift from believing or being bought into something, bought into the perspective of a view, versus knowing: oh, this is a view that's arising. This is being believed right now.

Another teaching feels resonant for me around this exploration of tarrying and hurrying. It comes from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Buddha's Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. In the third

foundation, it asks: "And how does one abide contemplating the mind as the mind? Here one understands a mind affected by greed is a mind affected by greed. And a mind unaffected by greed is a mind unaffected by greed. One understands a mind affected by aversion as a mind affected by aversion, and a mind unaffected by aversion as a mind unaffected by aversion." Likewise with delusion.

Here the Buddha points to those three root states and simply knowing, being aware: Is the mind affected by greed, or is the mind not affected by greed? There's the possibility of a balanced mind knowing: oh, this is a mind affected by greed. This is a mind unaffected by greed.

Then, continuing in this sutta, the piece that feels very resonant with respect to tarrying and hurrying: "One understands a contracted mind as a contracted mind, and a distracted mind as a distracted mind." He points to a different way into looking at what might be going on in the mind. Contracted—tarrying, perhaps. Or distracted—the mind bouncing around, hurrying, perhaps. The contracted mind pulling inward. The distracted mind jumping around.

And again, there's almost an energetic experience that can be very simple to check into. Is the mind pulled in, or is it bouncing around?

In this teaching from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, it says one understands a contracted mind as a contracted mind, and a distracted mind as a distracted mind. We see that possibility of balance no matter what is arising. Even contraction and distraction can be known. So tarrying and hurrying can be known with a mind that is neither tarrying nor hurrying, with a mind that is balanced. It's just that tarrying is happening right now.

I love that in this sutta it says, "One understands a mind affected by greed is a mind affected by greed." It's not "one understands a mind affected by greed and does something to get rid of the greed." It's just the understanding. It's pointing to the power of that mindfulness, the power of mindfulness and wisdom to support the mind understanding something about greed, which then creates conditions for learning to happen.

We have to acknowledge, and we've been talking about this, that it's not always possible for us to simply understand a mind affected by aversion is a mind affected by aversion, or a mind affected by greed is a mind affected by greed. But it is possible, actually, perhaps more often than we think it's possible. What happens often for us is: oh, there's greed arising in the mind, that means I'm not paying attention properly. We think that. Rather than: oh, there's greed arising in the mind, and the mind can know this. That shift to simply being curious is more available for us than we might realize, especially the further into retreat we are. This deep into retreat, it's much more possible than you might think.

And so give yourself a chance to see: is it possible to neither tarry nor hurry around the fact that greed is arising? Just a moment of greed arising, the mind neither sticking to it nor rushing past it. What happens with that kind of attitude of mind?

Sometimes we can't do that, and so we do need to use our skillful means—to change the channel, to put down some experience and redirect the attention because there's too much agitation in the mind, or to find ways to balance the mind. We all have been working with this; you all have your own tools at this point to help you balance the mind. And that's not a problem when that happens.

For me, this image of neither tarrying nor hurrying is really one of great patience. But it's not a patience that is inactive, because it's not tarrying. Maybe we have the idea of patience as being that quality of tarrying, but it's not tarrying. And it's not impatience. It's not a hurrying. It's meeting each moment of experience—this flood that the Buddha is crossing, the imagery of the flood, the Buddha crossing the flood.

And in this case, as much as in the simile of the raft, there's this notion of contact with the flood. The image for me is the Buddha walking on water, contacting the flood. And somehow, as this image evolved in my mind, as the mind explored this phrase through the imagery, as the Buddha was crossing this flood, touching the flood, touching the suffering—this is a meeting, meeting experience. It's not somehow floating above the flood. This neither tarrying nor hurrying is not about growing wings and floating above the flood. We're in contact with it, learning about the flood as we are connecting.

But in the image for me, it's the Buddha walking across this flood. Instead of hitting that piece of the flood and sinking underneath it, it's almost like somehow in that landing on that spot, a little bit of stability grew in that place where the foot lands. And then the next foot lands, and there's just a little place for there to be some way for the walking to continue—without tarrying, without sticking to it, and without hurrying past it. It's almost like these magic stepping stones appeared in my image of the Buddha crossing the flood. These magic stepping stones growing out of neither tarrying nor hurrying. Just that patient quality, walking, walking across the flood.

And then the image evolved further in my meditation. It became just an image of the Buddha calmly walking, no flood in sight. And that one startled the mind a little bit. The understanding that arose there with this imagery was almost a shock. It's like, oh—it's the tarrying and the hurrying that make the flood. Without the tarrying and the hurrying, the flood vanishes. The tarrying is what's drowning us. The hurrying is what's sweeping us away. It's not separate. And then as we neither tarry nor hurry, there's nothing to drown us or sweep us away. It's just moment after moment of experience.

Another phrase arose during this retreat that felt connected in some way. I wasn't completely clear on the connection, but this other phrase kept arising in my mind. And this evening, as I was reflecting back on the retreat and on the phrases that had been coming to my mind, I understood maybe something different there.

The other phrase that kept arising in my mind was: "One has no perplexity or doubt that what is arising is only dukkha arising, and what is ceasing is only dukkha ceasing."

This phrase, to me, is referring to dukkha in the sense of unreliable experience—dukkha having that meaning at times. Unreliable. What is arising is only unreliable experience arising. And what is ceasing is only unreliable experience ceasing.

The word dukkha means unreliable. It also means suffering. And so this evening I kind of connected: oh, that flood, that flood of suffering—maybe we could think of it also as just the flood of experience. It's the experience, everything we experience. Nothing in our experience is reliable. It's all impermanent. It's all coming and going.

So whatever is arising is only impermanent, unreliable experience arising. Nothing in our experience has the quality of being stable, permanent, lasting—someplace where we could land or tarry. Nothing is permanent or reliable. Everything that's arising is only unreliable experience, impermanent experience arising.

That's it. Everything that's ending, every experience that's ending, is only unreliable experience ending.

With this phrase, this reflection, my mind kind of settles. What's arising is only unreliable experience. Why tarry with it? It's just ending. What's ceasing is only unreliable experience ceasing. Why hurry to it? It's just unreliability arising and ceasing.

Neither tarrying nor hurrying is the way to relate to that unreliability without suffering happening.

How did you, dear sir, cross the flood?

Without tarrying, friend, and without hurrying did I cross the flood.

But how did you, dear sir, without tarrying, without hurrying, cross the flood?

When, friend, I tarried, then I sank. When I hurried, I was swept away. And so, friend, un-tarrying, un-hurrying, did I cross the flood.

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