Crossing The Flood

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 55:07

When I reflect on the Buddha's teaching, the way it's presented in the suttas, I'm amazed at the brilliance of how he portrayed the teachings. In particular, I love the way he uses analogies. He seemed to be a master of analogies. I like analogies because they can speak to us really directly. And yet when I spend time with the Buddha's analogies, not only do they speak to us directly, but they also bear a lot of fruit in unpacking them a little bit and exploring them in some depth.

That's what I'd like to do tonight—to look at an analogy the Buddha used for the path of practice: that of crossing the flood. To do this I will explore two different texts that use this analogy of crossing the flood as representing what we do when we engage in this path of practice.

In one of the flood analogies, the flood being an expanse of water, the Buddha talks about needing to cross this expanse to get to the other side, where this side represents where we are now, our ordinary everyday life, and the other shore represents freedom. We have to cross this difficult flood to move from our ordinary everyday way of being to freedom.

The Buddha equates this flood with the floods of greed, aversion, and delusion in the mind. There's actually one list that the Buddha talked about called the four floods: the floods of sensuality, of existence, of views, and of ignorance. These inclinations in our everyday mind tend to keep us swept away, tend to keep us submerged, caught in our patterns, caught in our habits, caught in the ways that we struggle and suffer.

In my own understanding of this flood, it does connect back to the patterns of greed, aversion, and delusion in the mind—all of those *kilesas*, those patterns that arise, the many forms of patterns that arise from those basic three roots. We get swept away. We drown, literally almost a feeling of drowning in these states of mind.

We try to arrange things to suit us. That's our way of dealing with things on this shore—trying to figure out how we can arrange the world so that we'll have this little moment of happiness, get rid of this little moment of aversion. We try to arrange things to suit us but it doesn't last long. We get submerged again. We struggle, we swim a little bit, we come up for air, we maybe get things arranged for another few moments, we get a gasp of air, and then we're submerged again. Because it's just not possible to do this arranging. It's a kind of endless running just to find these little moments of happiness.

We're under the delusion that this is as good as it gets. If I could string together moments of happiness, even though I know that they go away, but if I can just create the situation where I have this moment and

this moment and this moment of happiness, then that would be what happiness was. That would be as good as it gets. But it takes so much work to do that—endless arranging. As soon as we arrange something, it's already falling apart.

In *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, there's a part where Alice meets the Red Queen and suddenly the Red Queen just starts tearing off at a run. Alice struggles to keep up with her, but as she's running, she realizes they're not getting anywhere. And the Red Queen says, "Yes, now here you see it takes all the running you can do to stay in one place." That's the way we actually operate. We try to accumulate and grab on, and it takes so much effort to do this.

This is the flood—the flood of greed, of aversion, of delusion. And how do we cross this flood? There are two similes for this, two texts that explore this.

The first is very famous. I'm sure most of you, if not all of you, have heard of this simile: the simile of the raft. I'll read it to you and we'll explore the various parts of the analogy together.

The Buddha said: "Bhikkhus, I shall show you how the Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping." And I'll come back to this point. "Listen and attend closely to what I shall say."

"Yes, Venerable Sir," the bhikkhus replied.

The Blessed One said this: "Bhikkhus, suppose one in the course of a journey saw a great expanse of water whose near shore was dangerous and fearful and whose further shore was safe and free from fear, but there was no ferry boat or bridge for going to the far shore."

This is the near shore of our usual way of being. In another version of this text, the Buddha equates the near shore with identification, with identity, with selfing. This near shore, the way we typically engage in our lives, is so much bound up in this process of creating identities—many identities. We actually don't just have one self; we have many selves, which we begin to see as we explore what's going on in our minds. Our senses of selves are ways that we arrange ourselves in order to meet the world in certain ways, ways that we try to make ourselves feel stable, secure. And yet they're anything but stable and secure, these identities that we have.

As we cling to an identity, as we orient around an identity, we find that we must make sure other people agree with that identity—that they see us the way we see ourselves. And if they don't, we have to convince them to see us as we do. There's an endless need not only to arrange our world but to arrange ourselves in order to prop up these identities. Even identities that are uncomfortable. We spend a tremendous amount of effort propping up the identities of self-hatred, for instance. I have a lot of personal experience with that as an identity. The familiarity of those contractions around self-hatred—somehow it's like slipping into an old glove. Even though very uncomfortable, it feels somehow like, "Yes, I know this at least. I don't have to jump out of this familiar glove to be in a different way."

And so there's this endless need to prop up identity, and we suffer when others don't see us in the way we want to see ourselves, or when experience intervenes and we see ourselves clearly—"Oh, I'm not the perfect yogi. I'm not the one who's the best at everything." This was one of my patterns: a back and forth between feeling like, "Yes, I can do this, I'm good at this, I'm probably the best yogi here," versus those moments when experience obviously proved that I was not always continuously perfectly mindful—unable to meet my own standards of perfection. And so I would spin into self-hatred.

It doesn't just take others to burst these bubbles. Our own experience will burst the bubble of our identity. And then we feel like we've failed, we've done something wrong, we're bad, we're hopeless. This is the near shore: identity, the way we typically and habitually engage with others, with ourselves, with the world.

And then the expanse of water being the floods of greed, aversion, and delusion—back to the analogy—and the far shore: safety, freedom. The Buddha equates this with Nibbāna in his teaching. He actually unpacked this analogy himself, saying, "I'll give you this simile and then I'll tell you what the parts mean." And he said the far shore is Nibbāna: freedom from clinging, freedom from greed, aversion, and delusion. This is the most simple definition of Nibbāna found in the texts: "Freedom from greed, freedom from aversion, freedom from delusion—this indeed is Nibbāna," the word of the Buddha.

I particularly like that framing of freedom, because I can envision the possibility of life here and now without greed, aversion, and delusion. It doesn't necessarily feel like it needs some transcendent, otherworldly domain. In this very life, this possibility of freedom from greed, freedom from aversion, freedom from delusion.

So the analogy continues. This person in the course of a journey has seen this expanse of water. That person thought, "There is this great expanse of water whose near shore is dangerous and fearful and whose further shore is safe and free from fear. But there's no ferryboat or bridge for going to the far shore. Suppose I collect grass, twigs, branches, and leaves and bind them together into a raft, and supported by the raft and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore." And then the person collected grass, twigs, branches, and leaves and bound them together into a raft, and supported by the raft and making an effort with hands and feet, got safely across to the far shore.

The raft in this analogy is how we cross the flood. The text says, "Suppose I collect grass, twigs, branches, and leaves and bind them together into a raft"—just gathering what's nearby to create something with which to cross the flood. We build the raft out of what's very close at hand.

Ajahn Sumedho, in discussing this analogy, said, "The Buddha referred to his teaching as a raft which you can make out of the things around you. You don't have to build a special motorboat or a submarine or a luxury liner. A raft is something you make from the things around just to get across to the other shore. We're not trying to make a super-duper vehicle. We're able to use what's around us for enlightenment."

And so what are the grass, the leaves, the twigs, the things that are in the immediate environment? This is our present moment experience—just what's here now. We gather it, we bring it together with mindfulness and wisdom. To me it's as if mindfulness and wisdom are the binding that puts together all of the grass and leaves and twigs and allows us to get across to the far shore. We build our raft out of our sense experience together with the Eightfold Path. In another teaching, the Buddha equated the raft with the Eightfold Path.

So the teachings support us in building this raft. The raft is built not simply with teachings, though—it is the meeting of those teachings and the application of those teachings to our direct experience. Really, it feels like we build our raft moment to moment as we cross greed, aversion, and delusion. Actually, the raft is built by meeting greed, aversion, and delusion. We don't cross the flood by magically elevating somehow and floating over the surface of it. We are right in contact with the flood as we cross it.

In this analogy, we build a raft out of leaves and twigs. If you imagine yourself floating on such a raft, you are not going to be dry. In fact, you're using your hands and your feet to propel the raft. That's the effort that we make. We meet the flood in order to cross the flood. We meet greed, aversion, and delusion with mindfulness, with wisdom, with concentration, with wise view, with wise intention, with a non-harming attitude, with kindness.

It's not a mistake when we turn with mindfulness to our experience. Meeting the flood, it's not a mistake when we see suffering. It's not a mistake—it's how the path unfolds. We meet the suffering and understand it in a different way. If we didn't have the Eightfold Path, we'd be stuck on the near shore.

So we see the layers of anger, aversion, hostility, frustration, confusion, desire, pride, longing. Some things we know are there, and other things we are taken aback by as we see them. That self-hatred that I ran into—I had no idea that I had so much self-hatred in my mind until I started looking at the mind.

Being on the raft doesn't create all of the things that are revealed. It reveals them. It reveals the deeper undercurrents of the flood. And because it's revealing them with some degree of mindfulness and wisdom, some degree of ability to meet them, we are not pulled under. These patterns, these habits, come into consciousness and have the possibility to be released. Brought into consciousness, they have much less opportunity to make our choices for us. If they're making our choices for us, we'd be submerged again. We have the Dharma to help us stay afloat with all of the difficulties.

I'm going to leave this analogy for a little while. I'll come back to it and move to another one.

This is another sutta where the Buddha talks about crossing the flood. In this sutta it's said that a deva, a heavenly being, came to the Buddha while he was meditating and approached him. This heavenly being approached the Buddha and began a conversation with him, saying, "How, dear sir, did you cross the flood?"

"By not halting, friend, and by not straining, I crossed the flood."

"But how is it, dear sir, that by not halting and by not straining, you crossed the flood?"

"When I came to a standstill, friend, then I sank. But when I struggled, I got swept away. It is in this way, by not halting and not straining, that I crossed the flood."

Another translation of this uses language I particularly like. These are all Pali words being translated, and so different English words can be used to convey the meaning. The translation that I used over and over again in my practice, this image, this analogy: "By neither tarrying nor hurrying, I crossed the flood. When I tarried, I sank. When I hurried, I got swept away. And so by neither tarrying nor hurrying, I crossed the flood."

The commentaries say that this image of neither tarrying nor hurrying and crossing the flood is meant to be somewhat paradoxical. Because if you think about how you might cross a flood—if it's a flood of water across a wash—you might find a foothold on that flood, find a place where you can stand firmly, then get both feet there and stand, then search for another place and move to that one quickly. The commentaries say that this is meant to make us stop a little bit. It's like, well, that's not how you normally would cross a flood, a raging stream. It's not how you would cross it, by just slowly, methodically moving.

I love this part. It can slip right by you. "When I tarried, I sank. When I struggled, I got swept away. In this way, friend, by not tarrying and not hurrying, I crossed the flood."

The Buddha says, "When I tarried, I sank." He sank! He sank in his practice. He didn't do it perfectly. It wasn't one easy thing from one end of his path to another. He had to experiment. He tarried, he sank. He hurried, he got swept away. He learned from that.

And so I take inspiration from this. The Buddha too tarried and sank. The Buddha too hurried and got swept away and learned from that. He tried different things and noticed what was helpful, what wasn't helpful.

So tarrying—what does it mean to tarry in our practice? What does it mean to tarry as we cross the flood? There are a number of different ways that this image of tarrying might resonate.

Sleepiness, dullness—when that part of the mind is present, when we have those states of mind, we sink into oblivion. Laziness. Indulgence in thought. Sometimes it feels like we're caught in whirlpools of thought, another way of sinking, tarrying.

When we get greedy for something, we latch onto it, we hold onto it thinking, "This is it!" And what are we doing? Basically we're grabbing onto a heavy rock and we're sinking in our flood. We're tarrying with that sense desire.

Aversion is a similar kind of thing actually. At one point I recognized—and I'm a self-professed aversive type—what I recognized for myself around aversion is that I would get stuck to something. If I didn't want this thing, I would be like stuck to it with sticky glue trying to get rid of it. Not this, not this, not this, not

this. And in that way, we are stuck, we are sinking, we are tarrying when we're aversive also. Again, it's a form of clinging, this aversion. Clinging to "not this."

Stuck to views—a very powerful way of tarrying. Some idea or other we have: it's like this, it needs to be like this, it's supposed to be like this, this is wrong, this is right. All of those keep us stuck in one place, not able to just meet this moment and move to the next moment.

Hurrying. How do we hurry across? Where do we get swept away?

Restlessness is the obvious analogy for this—the mind not able to meet experience moment to moment. But also anxiousness for results, over-efforting. When we're trying so hard, running so hard to stay in one place.

Aversion and greed can also have this quality. Aversion and greed are not always tarrying. Aversion and greed can be rushing over experience. Greed rushing not to this experience but to the next experience where pleasure will be. Aversion: don't want to be with this one, let's get to the next one.

So depending on how we hold in our minds, how we are relating to greed and aversion, it may be that we're just skimming across experience. Sometimes we get stuck to experience. Sometimes we skim across experience.

And the Buddha suggested neither tarrying nor hurrying. Meet each experience.

Give each experience its due. Contact with it. But not sticking to it and not slipping off of it.

For me, this image of neither tarrying nor hurrying—just meeting each moment of experience, really meeting each moment, and then the next moment, and then the next moment—this sutta provided me with a little mantra for my practice: Neither tarrying nor hurrying. Just this moment. Am I mindful? Am I here? And this moment, and this moment, and this moment.

Giving each experience its due, meeting it, but not clinging to it. We can't really cling to it. It's already changing. It's already slipping away. The next moment is arising. Meet that moment. It's already slipping away. Every moment, neither tarrying nor hurrying. Meeting things we like with balance of mind—not holding on to them, trying to keep them, or getting lost in thoughts about how to control it or fix it, how to keep it, always have it, get more of it. Meeting things we don't like with balance of mind. Really meeting it. Not rushing over it to cover it up. Not trying to get rid of it by using the practice. Really meeting it. Understanding it. Not by trying to stop and fix or change it. Moment by moment. Each moment, neither tarrying nor hurrying.

This analogy of crossing the flood has us in direct contact with the flood. There's no raft. We're just right there walking with the water. And so to me, these two analogies come together where it feels like what we're doing as we cross the flood, if we bring the analogy of the raft back in, is building the raft out of the stream with the Dhamma.

So back to the raft analogy. After having made an effort with hands and feet and gotten safely across to the far shore, one might think: "This raft has been very helpful to me. Since supported by it and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore. Suppose I were to hoist it on my head or load it onto my shoulder and then go wherever I want." Now Bhikkhus, what do you think? By doing so, would that man be doing what should be done with the raft? "No, Venerable Sir." By doing what would the man be doing what should be done with that raft? "Here, Bhikkhus, when he had got across and arrived at the far shore, he might think thus: 'This raft has been very helpful to me. Since supported by it and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore. Suppose I were to haul it onto the dry land or set it adrift in the water and then go wherever I want.'" Now, Bhikkhus, it is by so doing that that person would be doing what should be done with the raft. "So I have shown you how the Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping. When you know the Dhamma to be similar to a raft, you should abandon even the teachings, how much more so things contrary to the teachings."

And so this famous statement: letting go even of the Dhamma, letting go even of the teachings. In some translations it says let go even of wholesome states, how much more so unwholesome states. Let go of clinging to the teachings, let go of clinging to the wholesome states. It's not that we have to push away the wholesome states, it's not that we push away the Dhamma, but carrying around the Dhamma with us as if it's a raft on our head—it's like holding a view and saying, "This is the Dhamma, this is the Dhamma, this is the Dhamma," instead of just living life freely.

So the Buddha points to not clinging even to wholesome states, not even to the Dhamma. But in this analogy, the person has crossed to the far shore using the Dhamma. You can't let go of the raft in the middle of the flood. We do have to use the teachings.

Even sometimes we cling to the teachings while we're crossing the flood. We can't let go too soon. This is sometimes a danger of seeing or hearing this kind of teaching—we think, "Oh, I want to be mindful. I'm clinging to mindfulness, therefore I shouldn't be mindful." That wouldn't get us very far. We can't think that way. We have to build the raft.

So we use the teachings. We use the teachings to cross the flood. And while we are using the teachings, while we are engaged with the practice, there may be times that we are actually creating identities as a meditator. There's likely to be some clinging in the way that we use the practice as we are crossing the flood.

I've certainly seen this in my own practice. In my very first meditation retreat, my very first ten-day retreat, I recognized that I was creating an identity of myself as a meditator. And yet there was at least some amount of wisdom that could see this. I saw, "Yes, I'm creating this identity." And I realized from hearing the teachings that this too would have to go someday. But I saw that this identity was really helpful right now. It was helping me overcome things far more problematic, far more submerging, than

an identity as a meditator—self-hatred, for example.

And so we use the teachings. We may be clinging to the teachings, or craving, holding on to those teachings that will help us let go of more unwholesome things. There's actually one sutta that speaks to this. It talks about different ways that we use things that seem unwholesome to overcome their very nature: "This body comes into being through craving, and yet it is by relying on craving that craving is to be abandoned. By relying on craving, craving is to be abandoned. Thus it was said. And in reference to what was it said? There is a case where one hears, 'This person named such and such, they say, through the ending of fermentations, has entered and remains in the fermentation-free awareness release and discernment release, having known and realized them in the here and now.' When hearing that, the thought occurs to one, 'I hope that I too will, through the ending of the fermentations, enter and remain in the fermentation-free awareness release and discernment release, having known and realized them for myself in the here and now.' Then at a later time, one abandons craving, having relied on craving."

And so craving to move to the far shore supports us to get there. And in the process, we do have to begin to recognize when the craving for the practice, the craving for the path, the craving for freedom is in our way. When is it in our way, and when is it not in our way? I would encourage you to use suffering as a guide there.

At times early in our practice, dukkha is really obvious. It's afflictive emotions—it's anger, it's hostility, it's self-hatred, it's pride, it's all of the variety of difficult states that we go through in our daily lives. And as we practice, as we meet that with mindfulness, as we engage in the work of the path, some of those may start to settle down. They may begin to fall away. Some parts may let go and release. And at that point, some subtler kinds of craving may become obvious. As the mind settles down its ways of craving in the world, we begin to see how the craving is operating in the practice itself. We begin to see some stress in those states that have supported our ability to meet experience. There's not stress in the wholesome states themselves, but in our clinging to them, our doing of them.

Here are some examples. Probably the most obvious one that we meet early in our practice is an agenda around mindfulness—wanting something painful or difficult to go away. When we practice for a little while, we begin to see, "Oh, when I meet something difficult with mindfulness, it doesn't hurt as much anymore." And so then we start turning toward painful experience. I remember turning my attention to very painful experience, thinking, "Oh, if I just get in there close enough, it won't be painful anymore"—basically using aversion in the mind to try to get the mind close to the experience. And there was a lot of suffering in that.

So some of these agendas—we'll start to see agendas around mindfulness. This is a form of clinging to mindfulness. When we start to see suffering around the practice, we turn to that too. It doesn't mean to abandon the wholesome states; it doesn't mean to abandon mindfulness. It means to look at how we are engaged in the practice. What is our relationship to the practice? We don't have to let go of

mindfulness—only the agenda.

Another example, this one from a more recent time in my practice: my mind has a very strong capacity for investigation. It sees things very clearly, with very little work on my part really. I can't take any credit for this investigative mind—I came into the world this way. And yet there's been a lot of identification around that, a lot of *doing* of the investigation. And boy, it served me really well for many, many, many years. Even in propping myself up, thinking "I'm really good at this kind of mode," it was still serving me in so many ways.

At a certain point in my practice, the suffering around the investigation, the doing of it, began to be very painful. When I would try to turn my attention and practice by doing the investigation, there would be so much suffering. And this was a real conundrum for me. It's like, how do I investigate investigation? How do I deal with this? What do I do here?

The understanding around that happened slowly over maybe eighteen months of just beginning to try, exploring, tarrying and hurrying around this pattern of investigation. And at some point the mind recognized: this mind investigates. Let it investigate. But don't jump on the bandwagon of investigation and try to do it. And so that was my clinging—I had owned the investigation.

It's not that the investigation stops. That's needed. Mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture, tranquility, concentration, equanimity—the seven factors of awakening, beautiful states of mind that are necessary for our path—and yet we can cling to every one of them. And again, sometimes that clinging will be supporting us to let go of something more painful, more unwholesome. At some point, the suffering of that clinging will begin to be obvious, and that's when we need to turn to it and explore, understand: what's that suffering about? So let suffering be your guide around that.

The Buddha actually talked about this kind of staged release in his own practice. He said: "Before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened bodhisatta, I too clearly saw, as it actually was with proper wisdom, how sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering, and much despair, and how great is the danger in them. But as long as I did not attain to the rapture and pleasure that are apart from sensual pleasures, apart from unwholesome states, or to something more peaceful than that, I recognized that I could still be attracted to sensual pleasures. But when I clearly saw, as it actually is with proper wisdom, how sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering, and much despair, and how great is the danger in them, and I attained to the rapture and pleasure that are apart from sensual pleasures, the rapture and pleasure of concentration, or to something more peaceful than that—freedom—then I recognized that I was no longer attracted to sensual pleasures."

And so we can use, in some ways, the pleasure of concentration to help us let go of the pull towards pleasure in the sense realm. We see there is no comparison in terms of the pleasure and peace that are available from the practice.

So the teaching of the simile of the raft points us to eventually letting go altogether of the raft, letting go of the teachings altogether. But what is the mind of someone who has completely liberated themselves? The mind of someone who's free from greed, aversion, and delusion.

There's a description in the suttas of such a person. There are different descriptions; I'll just read this one: "In one of right view, right intention comes into being. In one of right intention, right speech comes into being. In one of right speech, right action comes into being. In one of right action, right livelihood comes into being. In one of right livelihood, right effort comes into being. In one of right effort, right mindfulness comes into being. In one of right mindfulness, right concentration comes into being. In one of right concentration, right knowledge comes into being. In one of right knowledge, right release comes into being. Thus, the path of the disciple in higher training possesses eight factors. The path of the arahant possesses ten factors."

And to me what this says is that an arahant, someone who is fully awakened—the word is *possesses* this tenfold path, the eightfold path plus right knowledge and right release. It is in someone who is free, in their very being, that they are living the Dharma. They don't have to hold it up on their head and say, "This is the Dharma."

They are the Dharma. They are living the path very naturally.

And so, letting go of the Dharma—someone who has crossed the flood, they don't need the teachings. They are living the life of freedom. Very naturally, the awakened mind chooses skillfully.

Transcending the teachings, transcending virtue, doesn't mean that we wouldn't behave ethically. The expression of someone who is free walks in the world with compassion, with wisdom, with love, living in the world in a very ethical way.

And so crossing the flood—this is what we're doing here, participating all together as a community in this process. This community will be going our separate ways in a couple of days, yet we continue wherever we are. The flood crossing does not just happen here in this room at IMS. Every moment of our lives we can build our raft, whether we're here or in our workplace, meeting our flood moment to moment.

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