Crossing The Flood

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:02:00

The Buddha is said to have been an extremely skillful teacher. The other day, I mentioned how he was tracking someone during their meditation and could give them just the right instruction at just the right moment—a kind of example of that understanding of the Buddha as such a skilled teacher.

One of the ways I think this manifests for us at least—since we don't have the luxury of being able to stumble into the Buddha in a potter's shed—is in exploring the teachings he offered. He often used analogies for deepening someone's understanding of the teachings. Analogies are useful because they can provide something familiar from our lives that, as it's connected with the teachings, that sense of experience becomes something we can recollect, and the teachings come alive for us through that example.

The Buddha was really a master of analogies. As I reflect on his teachings and explore the analogies in some depth, I find more and more layers that can help us unpack some of his wisdom. Tonight I'd like to take a couple of analogies and explore them with you—to unpack them and look at all the different pieces and how the teachings relate to those pieces, and what we can learn as we reflect.

The two analogies I'd like to explore cover similar terrain. The Buddha actually often used analogies about water in his teachings. In this particular case, he used the analogy of a flood or a large expanse of water, and the idea of crossing that flood as being what our journey is—crossing a flood of greed, aversion, and delusion.

In one of these flood analogies, the Buddha equates this large expanse of water with what he calls the four floods: the flood of sensuality, the flood of existence or becoming, the flood of views, and the flood of ignorance. My understanding of why they're called floods is because they keep us submerged in dukkha. They keep pulling us back to our habitual ways of orienting in the world, making it challenging for us to cross to freedom. This understanding that we have to cross this terrain is what these analogies point to.

The Buddha pointed to these four aspects as being the floods, but in a simpler way—and for me it's meaningful to think of this expanse of water we're trying to cross as really the flood of greed, aversion, and delusion. These are very familiar forces of mind that make it really hard for us to navigate our lives with ease. We keep getting caught by them, stuck by them, pulled into eddies, pulled into whirlpools, swept downstream by these states of mind. There can even be that sense of being swept away as one of these sticky states captures us, being pulled by a current. This imagery of the flood has some connection to what happens in our minds, being swept away by greed, aversion, and delusion.

The first of these two similes is a very famous one—many of you have probably heard of the simile of the raft. I'd like to look at each piece of this simile because as I began exploring it again, it really began speaking to me in different ways.

"Suppose someone 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 sets the stage for our analogy. Looking at these various pieces, there's the near shore, which is dangerous and fearful. In another sutta that uses very similar imagery, the Buddha says the near shore is how we identify. It's these identities that we connect to, that we hook to, that we get stuck to.

Identities are often strategies for us, familiar ways of navigating our lives, navigating what's challenging. We have familiar habitual strategies that have been conditioned for us, that at times—in many ways as we grew up—helped us to navigate challenging situations. Yet even though they may have been helpful during our lives, they have an inherent suffering to them. There's an inherent kind of what the Buddha calls danger on this near shore of identity, of identification. We try to make ourselves feel stable and secure through identities. "I'm the kind of person who..."—that landing in an identity is often a way of finding safety or security. We think it feels safe and secure, but actually it's anything but.

As we cling to identities—and we can cling to different kinds—I've certainly seen myself cling to identities such as self-hatred. In seeing it and seeing how I'm clinging to it, I think, why on earth do I cling to this? But that kind of identity, which we do cling to—those kinds of identities of "you're no good, you're a failure"—they're inherently suffering. We know the suffering of those immediately when they come. As to why we cling to them, the mind thinks it's getting something out of it. That's a whole talk in and of itself, but look in your own mind. There are often beliefs in there. For me, in a way, that self-hatred was a way to make myself do the right thing—like if I hated myself enough, I would behave properly. So sad to see that in our own minds. And then there are other kinds of identities we hold to, identities of being someone who knows what they're doing, someone who...

does certain things in a certain way. Often with those kinds of identities, we are invested in making sure that other people see us that way too—that others hold that same identity of us. We spend time trying to convince people: "No, that's who I am, that's me, that's who I am." It's an endless project, trying to make sure others see us through that identity. And we suffer when they don't.

So this is the near shore the Buddha points to—this sense of self, the identities, the congealings of ourselves.

And then there's the expanse of water. In this analogy we have the near shore which is dangerous, and the expanse of water where there's no bridge, no ferry boat to cross it. But the far shore, we know, is safe and free from fear. We'd like to try to get across this expanse of water.

In this analogy, the expanse of water is the flood—the flood of greed, aversion, and delusion. As I reflected this evening about this analogy of the near shore being identity, and the flood being what's difficult to cross, what keeps us from reaching the place of safety, I contemplated these four floods: of sensuality, of existence or becoming, of views, and of ignorance. These are the activities of mind, the patterns of mind, the habits of mind we could say, that make it difficult to let go of these strategies of identities. They keep sweeping us back. The views that we have, the beliefs, the ignorance—they keep sweeping us back, thinking, "Oh, these identities are how I feel safe."

The strategies of identities are hard to let go of because of views, because of ignorance, because we're drawn to sense pleasure. These make it hard for us to realize the possibility of release from the perspective of identification.

The far shore in this analogy the Buddha equates with freedom, with Nibbāna. The most succinct definition of Nibbāna that I have heard through the teachings of the Buddha is the absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion. It's a letting go of greed, aversion, and delusion that is the ultimate safety.

In this analogy, the far shore seems like a place or something. But the definition of freedom in the Buddha's teachings is freedom *from*. Freedom from greed, freedom from aversion, freedom from delusion. It's not having anything.

I like this for a couple of reasons. One is that greed, aversion, and delusion are things we have a handle on. We know what they're like. Through our meditation, we begin to really touch into these qualities. The fact that the Buddha defines freedom as the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion makes it seem like something that might be possible in this very life.

Every now and then I've had a taste, perhaps, of a mind that lets go of greed, and that's a pointing to this possibility. When I first started practicing and heard this idea of enlightenment—or even before I started practicing, when I was in my twenties—I heard about enlightenment and had some idea of it being some transcendent thing that you have to get to or attain or have. But this teaching about Nibbāna being the release of greed, aversion, and delusion makes it seem like something possible in this very life. And in fact, that is what the Buddha says: Nibbāna can be touched, freedom in this very life.

I can imagine, perhaps, what it might be to walk around in my daily life—I can kind of imagine, I can't really imagine—but it doesn't seem too far-fetched to me that I could walk around in my daily life and interact with my family and friends in that place of freedom from greed, aversion, and delusion. Whereas whatever this idea of mind-blowing enlightenment was, that wasn't anything related to being connected with my friends and family. At least that was the case for me. This really brings the teaching of freedom into the realm of possibility. It's inspiring for me. It brings it into the possibility of living freely.

So the next part of the analogy. This person, seeing this expanse of water—the near shore dangerous, the

far shore safe—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 ferry boat or bridge for going to that 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 so 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, they got safely across to the far shore.

This is the raft, the piece of the analogy that's the raft. This whole talk was really inspired by a reflection from Ajahn Sumedho about this raft. In one of his essays he wrote: "The Buddha referred to his teaching as a raft, which you can make out of the things around you—the grass, the twigs, the leaves. You don't have to have a special motorboat or submarine or luxury liner. A raft is something you make from the things around just to get to the other shore. We're not trying to make a super-duper vehicle. We're just able to use what's around us for enlightenment."

I like this reflection. What's around us? On the near shore it's twigs and leaves and grass, but here, what's around us? Sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, things happening in the mind. That's part of what we build the raft out of—our present moment experience. That's what's available. That is our raft: our present moment experience, our sense experience. We also build the raft out of the teachings.

The Buddha, in his own exploration of this analogy, said that the raft is the Noble Eightfold Path. I think of that as being the binding that holds the grass, the leaves, the twigs together—maybe the twine or the mud that cakes it all together to make it into something that can float across the river.

And then we think about being on that raft, in the swirls and eddies of this vast expanse of water. It's a raft. It might be falling apart as we're going across. We are definitely getting wet. We are in contact with the flood. We are touching the flood. We are touching all of that greed, aversion, and delusion, with the Eightfold Path keeping us afloat. But we are getting wet.

It's not a mistake. It's not a mistake when in our practice we turn to our experience—our sights, our sounds, our smells, our tastes, our touches, the things going on in our minds—and we notice this hurts, this is unpleasant, this is painful. The mind of aversion, the mind of greed—it's not a mistake. It's meeting the flood. We're right on that raft.

We don't cross the flood by magically transcending it, as if we've built a hovercraft to float across, fly across above the flood. We are in touch with the flood. And so we meet dukkha.

The other day, Alexis in his talk said that it's not a mistake that we meet the dukkha. In fact, the purpose of meeting the dukkha is that wisdom grows; understanding happens as we contact the dukkha. He mentioned Joseph's famous quote: we'd like to have insight into dukkha without experiencing dukkha. But it doesn't happen that way. The contact with the dukkha is where the wisdom grows, as we're contacting it with the Eightfold Path as our support.

With the path, with the support of wise view, of wise intention, of understanding the perspective we bring to practice—which we've been talking about, particularly with the hindrances—we understand that if we are bringing mindfulness to a hindrance, if anger is arising and we are knowing anger in the present moment with mindfulness, it's not functioning as a hindrance. It's functioning as our path. When we're lost in anger, the Eightfold Path isn't supporting us. But when we bring wise understanding, wise intention, ethical conduct, wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration to whatever's arising—maybe it's as simple as sights and sounds, but maybe it's a hindrance attack—when we're bringing that perspective, we are crossing the flood. And yet we're getting wet.

Then the sutta mentions making effort with hands and feet: "Supported by the raft and making an effort with the hands and feet, they got safely across to the far shore." This speaks to the reality that we don't just get on a raft and hope for the best. We know basically the direction of the far shore, though in the midst of that vast expanse of water we may not quite know where it is. We have to have other guides. We may use the feeling of the moisture in the air as a guide, or we may use the stars to help guide us toward the far shore.

In our practice, we use wise view and wise intention—this perspective of recognizing what's wholesome and what's unwholesome. Essentially, we explore cultivating the wholesome and letting go of the unwholesome, or being aware of the unwholesome. When something unwholesome is arising and we bring awareness to it, it's like it turns us back toward the far shore, back in the direction of crossing the flood. Because that unwholesome state of mind is no longer driving the mind or running the show. Instead, wise mindfulness, wise effort, and wise concentration allow us to meet it and learn something about that challenge, that difficulty—heading us toward freedom through the growth and development of wisdom and understanding.

Thinking again about this analogy, about making effort with hands and feet, about the way a vast expanse of water or a flood works: sometimes in crossing a river or going across a body of water, the conditions may be the wind in your face or the current going against you, and you have to work. You have to really paddle. You have to work hard with your hands and feet to keep the raft going in the right direction. Sometimes it feels like—as the Red Queen says in Alice Through the Looking Glass—"it takes all the running you can do to stay in one place here." Sometimes it feels like that, like we are working really hard and not making a lot of headway.

And yet, no amount of effort, when it's connected with this perspective of wise view, is wasted.

There's an analogy that my colleague Gil Fronsdal uses around this sense that you're not getting anywhere sometimes. He uses the analogy of chopping a big piece of wood. You have this big piece of wood and you take a hatchet and you come down on the piece of wood with that hatchet—pretty unlikely that piece of wood is going to split the first time. So you keep trying, keep making that hatchet movement. And at some point, as you do that, you bring the hatchet down and the log splits.

I know that when I did this—I really loved splitting logs when I was a teenager. Whenever we went camping, I would ask to do that. I just loved that feeling of hitting the log and feeling it split. And I always thought it was just that I hit it right that time. But Gil points out that each time you hit that log, it's weakening the fibers inside. You don't see it from the outside. You don't see that weakening happening. And then at some point you hit it and there's been enough weakening and the log splits. Every single moment before, when you hit that log and nothing seemed to happen, contributed to the possibility that it split the last time.

It can be like that with our practice. We look for progress. We look for how we know that we're doing okay. We look for those log-splitting moments. But so much of our practice has this gradual nature—this gentle wearing away, gentle weakening of greed, aversion, and delusion. And then sometimes there's a moment where we see aversion just drop away, or we see, as I mentioned the other day, the arising of the thought of self-hatred and knowing: this is just a thought. This is the mind thinking this thought and believing it. It has no reality other than what the mind is constructing. Seeing that in that moment was like that log falling apart. But I'd spent weeks watching self-hatred, feeling the pain of it, feeling the struggle of it, understanding little bits and pieces of it. All of those moments contributed to that moment of really understanding how self-hatred is simply a construct in the mind—a thought being believed.

This is a lot of our work. We really just have to keep a steady kind of effort even in the face of it seeming like we're making no progress. In that way, this touches into faith and trust. If we are meeting our experience with mindfulness and wise effort and concentration, if we're able to stay with our experience, whatever is unfolding is heading us in the right direction. So it does take some trust at times—the confidence to not keep checking. Not thinking, "I've been mindful for three minutes, have I understood something yet?" Rather, just patience. A lot of patience with that process of wisdom developing.

Sometimes I've seen wisdom kind of developing and presenting itself after the fact—like recognizing that a pattern, a very strong pattern of anger, had disappeared. I had been watching this pattern of anger over the course of weeks, maybe even months, maybe even years. That was a long time. And just seeing this anger come, recognizing how hard it was to be with that anger. "I need to just be with my feet right now." Setting it aside over and over again, setting aside the anger. And then beginning to recognize over the course of those months that the anger started happening less often. It was getting weaker. It was clear to me because it wasn't happening so much.

And then one day I noticed it hadn't happened for a really long time. In thinking about it, I thought, "Wow, I haven't experienced that anger for a long time." In that moment of realizing this, of course the person—it was a particular person I was angry with—that person came to my mind. But I could not even call up the anger. I couldn't find it anywhere. I didn't believe it. I thought, "It's got to be there somewhere. It's got to be there somewhere." It had disappeared without my knowing when it disappeared. I understood in retrospect that it had released.

So sometimes we don't even get to see the release. We just get to experience the benefits of it sometime later.

So there are very different ways that wisdom grows as we meet the flood. We make the effort to just stay present. Sometimes when we're crossing a stream, or we've got the wind at our back, it's kind of smooth sailing. It may be that there's just a little bit of directing we need to do—making sure we're not getting caught on that rock or that branch—but only a little steering is necessary. So sometimes in our practice, the effort can be lighter.

There's an analogy I sometimes like to explore around making effort in our practice. We have a habit, I think, of making effort in our practice in the way that we tend to make effort in our lives. If we have to do something really hard, we gather all our strength and apply it right at the beginning. Sometimes we may have that sense of sitting down in our meditation, thinking, "I'm going to sit here for 45 minutes, and I'm going to stay present for the whole 45 minutes." It's like we pick up the entire 45 minutes in that first second and try to gather the effort we need to stay present for the whole time. But it doesn't work that way. We can be present for a moment, and then we can do it again, and again, and again.

The analogy I like to explore for this is that of riding on one of those little kick scooters that kids ride on—Razor scooters, I think they're called. You have one foot on the scooter bed and the other foot you use to tap the ground to get the momentum going. You could, at the beginning, make one really gigantic push, but it's probably going to be pretty wobbly if you do that. It's not going to lead to stability. So it's much more skillful to just do these little taps—tap, tap, tap, tap—let the scooter gain some momentum. Then, after there's some momentum, you can just ride the scooter. You get the feeling of that scooter riding, and you get familiar with when it starts to feel a little wobbly. Then you put your foot down and tap again.

Applying effort in the practice is more like that. At the beginning, we connect frequently. If you're practicing with the breath, every half breath: Can I be with this half breath? Just enough effort to be with half a breath. And then another half a breath. Just enough effort—that much. Right now, be with an in-breath. How hard is that? And now an out-breath. Just enough. That's all you need. And we just keep that tap, tap, tap going.

As we make enough effort to stay with an in-breath—or if you're doing another kind of practice, open awareness practice, it may be just enough effort to be with this experience, asking, "Am I aware of what? And now, am I aware of what?"—just connecting moment after moment. Light touch, just enough to be with this moment of experience. As we explore that light touch of being present, a momentum of mindfulness starts to build. We can get familiar with that experience of what it feels like to ride that wave of mindfulness.

At that point, we don't have to keep tapping. We don't have to keep reminding ourselves every single breath. Perhaps we can just sit here and be with four or five breaths without really much effort at all. We get familiar with when it feels like the mindfulness is getting a little soft or mushy, and then we bring in

another connection, really connect—just like tapping the scooter.

So this is how we can explore this light touch of effort. It's a light touch, but there's a commitment to it. It's not commitment like bearing-down commitment. It's commitment to keep going. In the walking meditation, we can do this too. There have been times when my mind is really scattered in the walking meditation, and I'll pick a spot like two feet out on my walking path.

Find a little stone or a little leaf there, and I'll think, okay, can I make it to that? It's like two feet—a step, two steps. Can I be mindful for two steps? Yeah, I could do that. Okay, now pick another spot. That spot on the sidewalk—can I be mindful until I get there? It's like hand over hand, gently, gently pulling yourself along in the mindfulness. Just enough effort to be present, ride that wave of mindfulness, and then do it again and again.

And then sometimes we have the wind at our back on this stream, on this raft, and the current is heading us right in the right direction. All we need to do is just let go and let the current carry us. Sometimes in our practice, mindfulness and wisdom are strong enough that it doesn't require a personal effort. We don't need to remind ourselves to be mindful—it's just happening. And if that's happening, then making that effort is actually getting in the way of the unfolding of wisdom and mindfulness.

There are so many different ways of making effort, and the conditions require us to make different kinds of effort at different times. As we're crossing a flood, we're not always going to have the wind at our back, and we're not always going to be able to just flow with ease. Sometimes there may be moments where we can flow with ease, and then conditions shift—there's an eddy, a whirlpool—and we have to work to get through that.

I think there can be a sense sometimes with effort in the practice that it functions something like effort in our normal lives—that when we've learned how to do something, like ride a bicycle, we don't forget, and we can just do it. We don't run into the same problems we did when we first learned. But with practice, the conditions are so varied. We may have stretches of time where the flow seems very natural and easy, and it's like, "This seems so easy—how can I not just do this all the time? It's so obvious! It's so obvious that something arising is just something arising. And anger's not a problem; it's just a fleeting thing and it vanishes as soon as it's seen. How can I not see this all the time? Of course I understand this now." We think we've figured it out.

And then conditions change, and we discover that actually maybe it's not so obvious. Conditions change and we're caught again. So the level of effort that we make doesn't progress from making a lot of effort, to making a little less effort, to just riding the wave of mindfulness and wisdom. It doesn't tend to just head in that direction. Sometimes it's very simple, and sometimes we really have to apply ourselves—to not get pulled under, not get pulled into the whirlpools, to not go down the rabbit hole, to not get sucked under the waves. Sometimes we really have to make effort. Recognizing the conditions—we've talked about this over the course of these weeks—we've talked about skillful means for meeting challenge, when there's an

overwhelming state of mind or something where we really have to take some care to be with it.

The second analogy I'll read as well. This is a different crossing-the-flood analogy. This one for me just had a real resonance as I touched into the language.

The Buddha was meditating in a grove, and a deva, a heavenly being, 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." "But how is it, dear sir, that by not halting and by not straining, you crossed the flood?" The Buddha responded, "When I came to a standstill, friend, then I sank. But when I struggled, then I got swept away. It is in this way, friend, that by not halting and by not straining, I crossed the flood."

The commentaries point out that this image of neither tarrying nor hurrying—that's the translation I particularly resonated with, the one that kept coming back to me in my mind. Here Bhikkhu Bodhi translates it as "by not halting and not straining." For me, "not tarrying and not hurrying"—by not tarrying and not hurrying I crossed the flood.

The commentaries say that this is meant to be a little bit paradoxical, because typically if you're crossing a stream with rocks in it, you find a foothold, you pause there, you get your balance, and you search for the next foothold. You go to the next one, so you kind of halt and then you move, halt and then search and then move. The commentaries say this is supposed to jar the mind a little bit—oh, it's not the way I would think about crossing a flood or crossing a stream. It's different. It's got a different quality to it, by neither tarrying nor hurrying.

One of the pieces that I'm inspired by in this particular analogy is that the Buddha says—

When I came to a standstill, I sank. And when I struggled, I got swept away. So basically, the Buddha struggled. He sank. He got swept away. He had to experiment. He learned through his own practice how to cross the flood. He made mistakes—he tarried and he sank, he hurried and he got swept away. The Buddha had to experiment. He tried different things, noticed what was helpful, noticed what was not helpful. We need to do this in our own practice: understand what's helpful and what's not helpful.

For me, this image of neither tarrying nor hurrying is one of meeting every moment of experience. That's the visceral feeling it gives. Neither tarrying with the moment—think about this flood as just the stream of moments. Neither tarry with the moment, holding on to it, trying to keep it or understand it or fix it or change it, nor do we hurry past it trying to get to the next moment. Each and every moment receives its full due, its full honoring, whatever it is. And then we realize that that moment is passing, and we meet the next moment. Moment after moment, really meeting every moment.

Sometimes I would use that language in my mind when I found myself in a struggle, or during a period of time where I felt I needed some inspiration. I would use this language: neither tarrying nor hurrying, neither tarrying nor hurrying, meet each moment. It helped me to just settle and connect. Connect with this. Not connect and hold and try to keep it. Sometimes I find with certain kinds of experiences it's like we

hold on to them in order to look at them, rather than recognizing they're already changing as we're looking at them.

It's like a handful of sand. We can hold on to a handful of sand and try to understand a handful of sand in that way, and there's some things we can learn about it that way. And we can also relax our hands and just feel the sand slipping through our fingers and learn something different about the sand in that way. Neither tarrying nor hurrying, meeting each moment.

At the end of the simile of the raft, the Buddha says: "When this person got across and arrived at the far shore, they 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 hoist it on my head or load it on my shoulder and then go wherever I want.'" The Buddha asks, "Now, do you think that person is doing what should be done with the raft?" And his disciples said no.

The Buddha went on: "When that person got to the far shore, if they thought thus: 'This raft has been 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 dry land or set it adrift in the water and then go wherever I want'—it is by doing that that the person would be doing what should be done with the raft. So I have shown you how the Dharma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping. When you know the Dharma to be similar to a raft, you should abandon even the teachings—how much more so things contrary to the teachings."

This is an interesting piece: abandon the teachings. The Buddha is pointing out in this part of the analogy that the raft is abandoned when one has reached the far shore. We can't let go of the teachings, we can't let go of the practices too soon. If you try to let go of the raft in the middle of the expanse of water, you'll be drowned. We need to use the raft, we need to use the teachings to navigate the flood.

And sometimes we do have this sense of realizing that we're kind of holding on to mindfulness, or holding on to being a meditator, having that identity of being a meditator. In my very first ten-day meditation retreat, it was pretty clear to me that I was constructing an identity as a meditator. I was like, "Yeah, I'm going to be a meditator and I'm going to be good at this. I'm going to try to really do this." There was a construction of identity, and I did recognize that this was something new. And I did hear the teachings that said clinging to identities is suffering.

And yet, somewhat to my credit, I decided and realized that this seemed like a useful identity. I don't think I'll let go of this one just yet.

And indeed, this is partly how our practice can unfold. In some ways, we hold to the teachings. We may even cling to them, holding on for dear life to mindfulness and wise effort. If we're holding on for dear life to mindfulness and wise effort while being battered by greed, aversion, and delusion, that holding to the wholesome qualities of mindfulness and effort—yes, there's some suffering there, but it is helping us let go

of a much greater suffering.

This is how much of our practice unfolds. It happens in stages over time. We meet great challenges, the grosser and more obvious forms of greed, aversion, and delusion, by perhaps clinging to mindfulness. Maybe craving being a meditator. Maybe that happens. Helping us to let go of a more unskillful state, we construct another identity.

At some point, however, as those more obvious forms of suffering begin to fall away, our mind begins to get attuned to subtler forms of suffering—including the suffering of clinging to mindfulness. In my example of having that identity of being a meditator, I wasn't in that first retreat, or even the first few years of retreat, suffering over that identity. I was suffering with anger and suffering with self-hatred. That connection to the identity of being a meditator was helping those to weaken. And then, as those patterns began to weaken, yes, I had to look at the suffering of that identity. Oh yes, I want to be the best meditator in the room. Oh, it's so painful to be comparing myself to everybody—comparing myself to my best friend who's on retreat looking so concentrated. Her mind is so concentrated, and look at mine, all over the place. I'm never going to be as concentrated as she is. All of that identity of being a meditator being felt at that point.

When we feel the suffering—I sometimes say, let suffering be your guide. When you feel the suffering of a clinging, when we feel the suffering of holding to mindfulness, feel the suffering of wanting to understand something, that's when we begin to explore the suffering of it. Not to let go and say, "Oh, I should stop being mindful now," but to explore the tightness, explore the suffering of that. That's our path. We meet the suffering; that's the flood at that point. We don't let go of the raft before we're across the flood.

And yet the Buddha says that we let go of the teachings. My understanding of that, based on my readings and study and a little bit of my own experience, is that the more greed, aversion, and delusion fall away, the more the mind naturally gravitates towards living with wise view and wise understanding, with ethical conduct, with wise mindfulness. The effort becomes less necessary to exert. There's even one sutta that describes someone who is fully awakened as being someone who just lives the Eightfold Path. It's not necessary to hold it. It's not necessary to think about it. It is the natural manifestation of someone for whom greed, aversion, and delusion have fallen away. And so there's no need to hold to the teachings. They're being lived.

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