The Buddha's Use of Similes

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 20:19

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

I thought we'd spend at least an occasional meeting on the scriptures themselves. And I thought to start with the way the Buddha constantly uses simile. The discourses are just full of them, cleverly used to make us understand things from a slightly more experiential point of view, you might say.

Those of you who've read this masterwork by Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary*, about left brain and right brain, will know that the left brain is associated with logical, analytical, linear, verbal, factual and sequential thinking, and that the right brain is linked with creative, intuitive, artistic, non-verbal, emotional and imaginative abilities. Now, actually, according to McGilchrist, these two sides work very well together. The one needs the other. But really, the right brain should be in charge. That's what he's saying. And in our society, in our culture, it's all left brain stuff—very linear and so forth.

So the Buddha intuited that—I'm sure he didn't know the psychology in the same way that Iain McGilchrist knew—but he definitely intuited that people understand by way of simile, imagery, and metaphor what might be difficult to understand as just a straightforward logical explanation. We call these similes upāya, skillful means.

I've just chosen some, and most of them I think you will know. They're very famous.

So first of all, how much patience and forbearance should we have? This is talking about right speech. There are five aspects of speech by which others may address you: timely or untimely, true or false, affectionate or harsh, beneficial or unbeneficial, with a mind of goodwill or with a mind of hate. In any event, you should train yourselves: "Our minds will not be affected and we will say no evil words. We will remain sympathetic to that person's welfare with a mind of goodwill and with no inner hate. We will keep pervading them with an awareness imbued with goodwill, and beginning with them, we will keep pervading the all-encompassing world with an awareness imbued with goodwill equal to a cat-skin bag—abundant, expansive, immeasurable, free from hostility, free from ill will." That's how you should train yourself.

A cat-skin bag—I presume it's made from cat skins. But he's saying that we should develop this affectionate awareness no matter what, even when somebody is very rude, very harsh, saying silly things to us.

But now he reinforces it. How patient should we be? How forbearing should we be? This is a very famous

simile:

"Monks, even if bandits were to carve you up savagely, limb by limb, with a two-handled saw, he among you who let his heart get angered even at that would not be doing my bidding, would not be following my teachings. Monks, if you attend constantly to this admonition on the simile of the saw, do you see any aspects of speech, slight or gross, that you could not endure?"

"No, Lord."

"Then attend constantly to this admonition on the simile of the saw. That will be for your long-term welfare and happiness."

This is what the Blessed One said, and gratified, the monks delighted in the Blessed One's words.

So there we have it. I once read this out in a talk and somebody said, "Well, the Buddha had a great sense of humor." But I think he's actually telling us that there's no end to patience. That's it. And that anger has no place anywhere.

Then there's a famous one about the end of training, or what's the training for? Here we have the simile of the raft. He puts this training in perspective to the goal, which is, of course, liberation.

"Supposing there was a person traveling along the road. They'd see a large deluge whose near shore was dubious and perilous, while the far shore was a sanctuary free of peril. But there was no ferryboat or bridge for crossing over. They'd think, 'Why don't I gather grass, sticks, branches and leaves and make a raft? Riding on the raft and paddling with my hands and feet, I will safely reach the far shore.' And so they would do exactly that. And when they'd crossed over to the far shore, they'd think, 'This raft has been very helpful to me. Riding on the raft and paddling with my hands and feet, I have safely crossed over to the other shore. Why don't I hoist it on my head or pick it up on my shoulder and go wherever I want?' What do you think, mendicants? Would that person be doing what should be done with that raft?"

"No, sir."

And what, mendicants, should that person do with a raft? When they've crossed over, they should think: "This raft has been very helpful to me. Why don't I beach it on the dry land or set it adrift in the water, and go wherever I want?" That's what a person should do with a raft. In the same way, I have taught how the teaching is similar to a raft—it's for crossing over, not for holding on to. By understanding the simile of the raft, you will even give up the teachings, let alone what is against the teachings.

Now, I think we have to be slightly careful here. What he's saying is that once we are completely liberated, we don't actually need to remind ourselves about the training, because it has become interwoven into ourselves. In another discourse, he's asked whether he actually thinks about what he's going to say when teaching the Dhamma, or whether it comes to him spontaneously. And his reply is again another simile. He says, "Well, what about a very highly skilled chariot maker? Do they think about what they're doing, or

do they just make the chariot?" Because they simply have that know-how, that physical know-how. And he says, "Well, it's like that with me. Whenever I talk about the Dhamma, it comes out spontaneously."

So then we have: what is nibbāna? It is simply beyond words, concepts, images—getting across something that is inexplicable. Here the Buddha uses this famous, very well-known metaphor of the fire.

There are three discourses where he's talking to a person called Vacchagotta. Vacchagotta is, shall we say, very sceptical, and he doesn't really get it often. There was once when he asked the Buddha, "Is there a self, or is there not a self?" And the Buddha wouldn't answer. He was very quiet, you see. And Vacchagotta leaves with a click of his tongue, fed up. Ānanda then asked the Buddha why he didn't reply. One of the reasons is that if he had said there was a self or there wasn't a self, it would just have made Vacchagotta's confusion even greater.

So here the Buddha is again talking to Vacchagotta, trying to explain what nibbāna is:

"What do you think, Vaccha? Suppose a fire was burning in front of you. Would you know, 'This fire is burning in front of me'?"

"Yes, I would, worthy Gotama."

"But Vaccha, supposing they were to ask you: 'This fire burning in front of you—what does it depend on to burn?' How would you answer?"

"I would answer like this: 'This fire burning in front of me burns in dependence on grass and logs as fuel.'"

"Suppose that fire burning in front of you was extinguished. Would you know it was extinguished, that it was quenched?"

"Yes, I would, worthy Gotama."

"But Vaccha, supposing they were to ask you: 'This fire in front of you that is quenched—in what direction did it go? East, south, west, or north?' How would you answer?"

"It doesn't apply, worthy Gotama. The fire, dependent on grass and logs as fuel—when that runs out and no more fuel is added, the fire is reckoned to have been quenched for lack of fuel."

"In the same way, Vaccha, any form by which a realised one might be described has been given up, cut off at the root, made like a palm stump, obliterated and unable to rise in the future."

Now unfortunately, this passage has often been used as a way of saying that the Buddha is just talking about annihilation, complete extinction. But in fact, that interpretation doesn't take into consideration—which has only come out fairly recently, within the last twenty or so years—the science of the time.

The fire element, like the earth element, the water element, and the wind element, was understood to be all around us, existing as latent possibility. Given the right occasion, the element of fire would come down and grasp the object. So that's why it serves as a simile for grasping. It's not the way we think of it—the log catching fire, meaning there's something in the log that happens. You might say the oxygen in the air grasps the log, something like that. But in their understanding, the element of fire exists everywhere, the element of heat. Given certain circumstances, it will congregate around a particular object, a log.

And in so doing, it will consume it. Once it's consumed, it's not as though the fire is extinguished and gone completely. It goes back into its latent form, and then it can't be described. You don't know where it is. It's just around you, you might say. And this is the way that the Buddha tries to explain that Nibbāna is simply beyond any conceiving, any imagination, anything like that. It's just beyond it.

And now we come to another great simile, the simile of the house builder. This, of course, is what we call his victory verses. They come from the Dhammapada, verses 153 and 154:

Oh, how many a birth in samsara have I wandered in vain, seeking the builder of this house! Repeated birth is indeed suffering. Oh, house builder, you are seen! You will not build this house again. Your rafters are broken. Your ridge pole is shattered. My mind has reached the unconditioned. I have attained the destruction of craving.

This house builder, of course, is the self—this delusion of the self. And he's actually found the core of it.

Then there's another discourse where he uses the same image. This comes from a whole group of discourses known as the Opama Sutta, or the Sutta on Similes, which is devoted entirely to discourses given with similes. It's in the Saṃyuttanikāya, the Connected Discourses.

This one, number one, reads like this: *So have I heard. At one time the Buddha was staying at Sāvatthī in Jeta's Grove in Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery. There the Buddha said, "Mendicants, the rafters of a bungalow all lean to the peak and meet at the peak. And when the peak is demolished, they're all demolished too. In the same way, all unskillful qualities are rooted in ignorance and meet in ignorance. And when ignorance is demolished, they're all demolished too. So you should train yourself like this: 'We will stay diligent.' That's how you should train yourselves."*

Here again we have a very obvious little simile about the houses they built. Most of them were just single stories, of course. There was a presumption that you'd be very rich if you had a two-story house, so they were all bungalows. The ridge pole is the one right at the top of the roof, and if the roof collapses, that's real bad news for the house—especially in the rainy season, you're going to be washed out.

So here again, he uses this peak, this ridge pole, to point to the essential delusion of ignorance, which is the self. And when that goes, everything that has been created by the self is also demolished. You can't do anything unwholesome again, because the root cause of the unwholesome is this delusion of being a self.

What do we mean again? Reminding ourselves, what do we mean by being a self? We mean that we think, we believe ourselves, we experience ourselves to be this human being as such. And this human being is seeking happiness, but it does so through the sensual pleasures that the body offers and the mind offers, the heart offers—and that's the problem. So when the self goes, all the unwholesome stuff that's dependent on that also disappears. But you still keep living. The Buddha said the only thing that goes is this essential delusion, greed, acquisitiveness, and aversion—aversion meaning both aversion and fear.

And as a final one, the preciousness of human birth. This again is number two within this collection of similes:

Then the Buddha, picking up a little dirt in his fingernail, addressed the mendicants. "What do you think, mendicants? Which is more—this little bit of dirt on my fingernail, or this great earth?" "Sir, the great earth is far more. A little bit of dirt on your fingernail is tiny compared to the great earth."

It doesn't count. There's no comparison. It's not worth a fraction.

"In the same way, the sentient beings reborn as humans are few, while those not reborn as humans are many. So you should train yourself thus: We will remain diligent. That's how you should train yourself."

And this is supported by another very famous simile about the turtle—the blind turtle. This also comes from the Connected Sayings:

"Monks, suppose this great earth were totally covered with water and a man were to toss a yoke with a single hole there. A wind from the east would push it to the west. A wind from the west would push it to the east. A wind from the north would push it to the south. A wind from the south would push it to the north. And suppose a blind turtle were there. It would come to the surface once every hundred years. What do you think? Would that blind turtle, coming to the surface once every hundred years, stick his neck into the yoke with a single hole?"

"Oh, it would be sheer coincidence, Lord, that the blind sea turtle coming to the surface once every hundred years would stick his neck into the yoke with a single hole."

"It is likewise sheer coincidence that one obtains the human state. It is likewise sheer coincidence that a Tathāgata, worthy and rightly self-awakened, arises in the world. It is likewise sheer coincidence that the Dhamma and the Vinaya expounded by the Tathāgata appears in the world. Now this human state has been attained. A Tathāgata worthy and rightly self-awakened has arisen in the world. A Dhamma and a Vinaya expounded by the Tathāgata appears in the world. Therefore, your duty is to contemplate: This is suffering. This is the origin of suffering. This is the cessation of suffering. Your duty is to contemplate: This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of suffering."

So here we have this idea of coincidence, and we can begin to understand this when we realize that every moment is this meeting of all our past causes with present conditions. These past causes are coming, and

they meet the present conditions. We never know exactly what's going to happen moment after moment. When we live in a country that is fairly peaceful, we can normally predict that we're going to wake up tomorrow. But not if you're in Ukraine, or if you're in Lebanon, or Gaza. There's a sense of unknowability, of sheer coincidence. And this is how the Buddha gets across to us the sheer fortune of this birth—being born as a human being.

Why is it that as human beings, this is the best place to be to become liberated? Because there is this joy and woe, and there is this awakenedness, this intuitive awareness developed enough to investigate. It's that process of investigation into the three characteristics of existence which is the process of liberation.

There we are. I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, and that by—in the words of the Buddha—through our diligence, we will become fully liberated sooner rather than later.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.