Building a Raft to Cross the Floods of Sensuality and Views

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Last night, we spoke of the spiritual faculties, which are the strengths that develop from our spiritual practice and which help us combat difficulties in formal meditation and daily life. The teaching known as The Raft is related to this theme, and that's what I'd like to talk about tonight.

While the spiritual faculties help us reflect on and value the strengths we're building up, the teaching on the raft suggests how to put these to work in tricky situations. So it's a different perspective. In fact, all the Buddha's teachings are saying the same thing from slightly different perspectives. This one tackles the dynamic and powerful challenges we come across in life and gives us a vivid and quite undignified image for how we might somehow scrabble our way through.

The Sutta describes someone following a path that leads to a shore that is perilous and risky, owing to a great flood of water. Across the water he sees another shore where the ground is safe and secure. The Buddha then says, "The thought would occur to him: What if I were to gather grass, twigs, branches and leaves, and having bound them together to make a raft, were to cross over to safety on the other shore, independence on the raft, making an effort with my hands and feet?" So he builds the raft and makes it to the other shore.

Then there is the question of what to do with the raft. He's tempted to take it with him, but according to the Buddha, that's a mistake. After pondering the question for a while, he has the thought, "Why don't I, having dragged it on dry land or sinking it in the water, go wherever I like?" That, according to the Buddha, is the right decision.

In another Sutta, the various symbols are explained. The great expanse of water stands for the fourfold flood. The raft stands for the noble eightfold path. The near shore stands for self-identity while the far shore stands for unbinding.

Identifying with our normal limited sense of self is our problem on the near shore. When we believe we're confined within our body and mind, and expressed by a personality and described in our life story, then we're on perilous ground. At any moment our body can fall ill or die. Our personality can let us down when we get a shock or get depressed, and can wither away altogether through Alzheimer's or other diseases. We might suffer some calamity which makes a mockery of all we achieved and so our personal story becomes one of failure.

On the far shore we know we are not confined within our body, mind, personality or life history. So we can look on our physical, mental or social troubles with tender compassion but without distress. The ultimate unbinding happens when we're fully enlightened. But for the moment, we can think of the far shore as those temporary periods of ease in our practice, when we've worked our way through some hindrance and are now at ease.

To get to the far shore, we have to cross the expanse of water, the fourfold flood. In essence, these are the hindrances again, but from a different perspective. The hindrances describe the energetic manifestation of our troubles, without reference to any background story that may be prompting desire, aversion, restlessness, etc. This is an especially useful way to view these in meditation, where we're looking at moment-to-moment experience.

The floods describe these same troubles but in broader terms rather than momentary energies. They describe what we identify with in life. Thus, the floods are related to the *khandas*, and the first flood, termed the flood of sensuality, overlaps with the first *khandha*, termed the body.

The *khandhas* describe our identities in terms that encourage us to tease things out at the deep level we can sometimes achieve within the steady focus of *vipassanā*. It's often termed a deconstruction of our sense of self. This microscopic focus is powerful, but can seem puzzling or academic from our normal perspective. In order to facilitate our practice at times when we don't have so much calm objectivity, we have the image of a fourfold flood as a way to tease out the problems that come from identifying with aspects of our life.

The first three are the floods of sensuality, becoming and views. Underlying these three, we have the fourth one, the flood of ignorance.

We get swept away by the flood of sensuality whenever we indulge sense pleasure mindlessly, whether it be for food, sex, music, material goods, intoxicants, whatever the material world can offer by way of pleasure and escapism. This flood also drowns us when we are upset by the unattractive nature of the material world. Hunger, thirst and physical pain are our primary fears here, but we also deplore noise, ugliness, stinks and so on.

We might not think of ourselves as sensual. Perhaps we're more cerebral, easily absorbed by computers or books or abstract ideas, but not very interested in food or music or sex or whether the house is painted red or green or what the wallpaper looks like. Thus, we might think that sensuality is one flood we don't have to worry about. But our cerebral function depends on being warm and healthy and having food to eat. If we're cold or hungry, we won't be able to think straight or with any pleasure. It's only when we get a meal inside us and are tucked up in front of a warm fire that we'll feel like ourselves again, able to engage happily with our book or computer.

So even if we don't take much notice of sense pleasures, we're depending on them to let our minds pursue

their cerebral pleasures and there inform that all-important sense of me. As such, we're at risk from the floods of sensuality whenever our basic needs for food and warmth are not met, when any of our senses fail or when our body is wracked with pain.

The next flood, termed becoming, sweeps us away when we identify with our personal history and its projection into the future. It seems so obvious that we were the child we remember from our school days and that we will be the older person who will bear our name and passport tomorrow. In the steady gaze of *vipassanā*, this illusion can sometimes be seen through. We sense a mass of changing sensations, thoughts, moods, but no central control headquarters to call me.

But the belief in ourselves as a personal identity has been taken for granted throughout our lives and forms the basis for almost all our thoughts. And so the illusion of self returns again and again, both on and off the cushion. We are then prey to floods of regret for the past as well as worry about the future. How will I get everything done? Will I succeed in my career? Will people respect me? Does anyone love me?

That's not to say we can ignore our personal history and its likely course in the future. Life is a precious opportunity for liberation and unless we look after the unenlightened person we appear to be just now, we won't be able to liberate that person from suffering. That can mean looking after our career, our good name, our family and so on. The raft formed from the *anattā* perspective lets us do all this without worrying and obsessing over our future or regretting our past.

Another flood comes when we attach to views and opinions. How many of us can have a completely calm, rational discussion about politics or religion, abortion or euthanasia? If we've no opinion, that makes it easy. But perhaps we've chosen non-committal as a way of avoiding hurt if our views were rejected. And even if we can ignore these somewhat abstract questions, we'll probably have a cherished opinion on how to hang wallpaper or how to cook the best Christmas pudding. So the flood can sweep us away when someone dismisses our opinions on these matters and we feel small, hurt and disrespected.

Finally, and underlying all of these, we have the flood of ignorance. That term is often used insultingly, but here it means that we don't know how to make ourselves happy. Happiness comes when we live from the perspective of the Four Noble Truths. While ignorance means that we don't fully understand these, so we're looking for happiness in all the wrong places. We're assuming the next romance will make us happy or becoming a millionaire. That should do the trick. Basically, we get swept away by the first three floods because we're already drifting in the flood of ignorance.

It's worth reminding ourselves that we don't have to know everything in order to be free from suffering. We only have to understand the four noble truths. We can be quite ignorant about biology, music and gardening and still be perfectly happy. We might not know the best way to organise people or the best decisions to make in our life.

The Buddha's first sermon was a complete failure. The person walked away after the Buddha's attempt to

describe his enlightened state. So the Buddha wasn't omniscient. He could make mistakes. He had to experiment and see what worked. The only mistake he could never make after enlightenment was to let desire cause suffering.

Unlike the Buddha, here we are on our perilous shoreline. One moment it feels secure, the next it's collapsing like quicksand. The water in front of us is treacherous. But in the distance we see another shore that's stable and secure. This gives us the spark of faith we need to get started. It gets us looking around for materials that could make a raft.

And to be honest, they don't look promising. Grass and twigs and branches and leaves. The grass I can only imagine is long reed-like stems that could be used to bind twigs and branches together. Flimsy, makeshift, rickety fragile. That is the image the Buddha is giving us for our raft. It takes courage to set out at all. This means that we don't have to be experts before we start practising. We just use whatever bits of information or skill we have and get stuck in.

And don't expect the ride to be easy. It's not a cruise ship we're on. It's a very flimsy raft. We're spread-eagled on it, just barely clear of the floodwaters, paddling through these using our hands and feet. I think this is a great image to console us for the very unedifying picture we get of ourselves as we scramble our Dharma practice together in the midst of a crisis.

At times we'll probably lose sight of the far shore. To tell us whether we're still going the right direction, we have another water metaphor the Buddha gives for spiritual practice: swimming upstream. We're always going against the current of the floods, against the habitual desires of our conditioning. Whatever we don't want to do, that's what we need to do. If we want to gobble our dinner, we need to slow down. If we want to sink into despair, that's when we need to find some reason to be hopeful. Even when we can't see where we're heading, we can detect the direction that desire is sweeping us and work against that strong current.

Somehow we make it across. We're on that wonderful beach, safe and sound. Our little raft has done its job. We're naturally delighted with it. We might also be attached to it, thinking we might need it again, for who knows what the next shoreline will look like. And we might be justifiably proud of it and want it as a trophy, to show people how clever we were in getting across the stormy sea. So we're tempted to hoist it on our shoulder and take it with us on our journey. But according to the Buddha, this isn't wise. We're to leave our beloved raft behind.

This tells us that we can't cling to any aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path. Just because we practiced right speech in a tricky situation, we shouldn't think of ourselves as experts. It is so tempting to think, okay, I've learned that lesson, I'll never make that mistake again. But then to our utter dismay, we fall back into the same trap. The conditioning that pulls us into the floods goes deep and we have to relearn the Dharma, make a new raft in each new situation.

But it's also fair to say that we get better at finding materials for our raft and more skilled in binding these together, more sensitive to the flow of the current. Also our muscles develop so we can paddle more vigorously. And we gain more and more confidence that we will, at some stage, make it to the other shore. So we're willing to venture out in ever more skimpy rafts.

Let's look at a practical example. Suppose you had a really rough morning's meditation here at Satipanya. You've lost any confidence you ever had regarding meditation. All morning your mind kept wandering. By the 11 a.m. meditation you were totally fed up. Again and again you woke up to find yourself in the middle of a long moan about how hopeless things are. When the bell goes for lunch, you just want to gobble it all up and dive into bed for an hour.

What floods are at work here? We're unhappy and don't know how to make ourselves happy. That summarises our basic problem in life. Unhappiness at base stems from not understanding the Four Noble Truths. So we're adrift in the flood of ignorance. Lunch and bed represent sense pleasures. So the flood of sensuality is flowing over the flood of ignorance. And with a bit of luck, the pleasures of food and being stretched out on a warm bed will let us forget our troubles for a while.

But at what cost do we enter this flood? One episode of laziness might not do too much harm. But the trouble is that the next time you're feeling low, you'll want to gobble your lunch twice as fast and sleep for twice as long. If this goes on, then pretty soon you won't return for the afternoon shift at all. And then you'll feel even more rotten and depressed. Basically, the current starts off gently, but pulls us into ever faster currents that sweep us further and further from the shore.

So where can we find materials for our raft? First and foremost, we have mindfulness. We can acknowledge that we're fed up and miserable. Sounds easy, but the temptation to ignore our moods can be strong. We need a steady practice to work mindfully with bad moods such as this.

To start making a raft, you could resolve to spend a few minutes in mindful acknowledgement of the bad mood. In theory, this is what you've been doing all morning, but sometimes we lose sight of the broader picture in our effort to still the mind in meditation. As we relax when the bell goes, and as we're walking toward the lunchroom, that broader awareness might actually be the first real acknowledgement of how low your mood has descended.

Acknowledging the bad humour changes the situation radically and with this broader awareness it is worth re-entering the gaze of *vipassanā* for another few minutes. You could do this while sitting at table after serving yourself your lunch, noting the mood and feeling the bodily sensations associated with it. Even one minute will make a huge difference. Although you might still feel low, you will feel much better for having taken the time and trouble to acknowledge the mood mindfully. You might even make it all the way to the far shore and feel hopeful about your meditation practice again.

Vipassanā practice will always make a really good raft. But suppose you can't muster the energy for this.

Just like it was doing all morning, your mind gets sucked into negative thoughts the moment you decide to do a minute's practice at the dining room table. Instead of *vipassanā*, you could choose mindful eating as the framework for your raft, noting all the physical sensations.

For extra buoyancy, you could pick up some *mettā*. You could wish yourself well as you cut up a potato. As you're chewing this, you can wish that the meal will cheer you up. If your mood lightens, you could add in *muditā*, appreciating the meal and congratulating yourself for having looked after yourself well in a tricky situation.

Now suppose wishing ourselves well seems forced and contrived and puts us in even worse humour. In that case, compassion could be more appropriate, starting off by acknowledging that we're having a really bad time. It often helps to express sympathy with a gesture, perhaps a hand on the heart. The phrase, "may I be free from suffering," or "may I be free from anger and ill will," could feel more congruent than *mettā* good wishes. This is to work very tenderly with ourselves. If we can also be patient, not expecting ourselves to cheer up anytime soon, we can be assured that this is a very genuine part of our spiritual practice.

But if it's one of those times when we're too low or fed up for self-compassion, we could try to pick up some equanimity for our raft with a phrase like, "may I not make things worse for myself?"

If that stems the flow of negativity for a moment, we could add some other bits of wisdom. A phrase like "this too will pass" reminds us of *anicca*. No matter how we decide to work with bad humour, we've avoided the temptation to gobble and dive into bed. So we're buoying up our raft with renunciation.

When the Buddha first thought of a life of renunciation, he noticed, "my heart did not leap up with joy." We find it much easier to be enthusiastic about *mettā*, compassion, mindfulness and so on than renunciation. Deferring pleasure isn't easy, especially as we've no control over when and if any rewards will come through. But I'm sure you'll agree that you would feel immeasurably better for having worked mindfully with a bad humour than if you'd given in to all its demands.

Although the thought of renunciation doesn't make our hearts leap with joy, the practice of it brings a freedom. We realise we don't have to be controlled by our moods or obsessions. Such a relief. A soupsong of *Nibbāna*.

But if the flood of sensuality sweeps us off our feet and we're already gobbling our dinner, we could try making a supreme effort and note "indulging, indulging." Can we feel any of the pleasure this is giving? If so, can we focus on this as we eat? You could call it mindful gobbling. A rickety raft for sure, but if it keeps us present, it's doing its job.

It's also possible that when we note "indulging, indulging," we are immediately recaptured by our negativity. We remember our bad humour and now there might be a good dollop of shame added to this as well. Shame can be used skilfully because it tells us we're going astray. We've been reacting, indulging

in food as a means of escape. Although we might feel even worse after noting indulgence, that very discomfort can prompt us to look around for a few materials to start making a raft. It's never too late to start. Even if we're on the last bite, any of the options suggested above are still available, though we might now have to start with self-forgiveness and the resolve that we can mend our ways.

These are the times that it really helps to remember the image of being spread-eagled on a rickety raft. We don't have to look good to practice the *Dhamma*. In fact, the shame of knowing we've been acting unskilfully is always a good place to start building a raft.

I know one man who had earlier in life suffered from alcoholism. After one bad bout he was nursing a hangover and sitting in the kitchen feeling really miserable. He was watching his wife doing some housework, too sick and depressed to offer any help. As she passed him by, she gave him a look of total disgust. He had the thought, "you're right, I am a louse, but I can do better." He gave up drinking completely from that moment, went on to form and run a very successful business, and when I met him years later, he was regularly going to ten-day Vipassanā retreats. When we register guilt or shame mindfully, they can stir us to find a way to mend our ways. No matter how many break periods we've wasted gobbling and snoring, we can choose the thought, "I can do better than this," and make faith the first component of our raft.

Let's now look at a practical example of the flood of views. Suppose we've got ourselves into a heated debate about the refugee crisis. Our adversary is fiercely arguing for border closures while we are stoutly defending the refugees' rights to asylum. We're feeling threatened by the situation and getting agitated. It's a complex situation. On the one hand, we're expressing compassion for refugees, so we're developing one of the *Brahmavihāra*. On the other hand, we're in danger of ill will.

Mindfulness would be the main material to frame our raft. Unless we're aware of the anger rising within us, we could easily snap at our opponent, insult them, scorn their lack of compassion or taunt them with sarcastic comments. If we're a clever debater, we could find ways to ridicule their arguments and belittle them, unconscious of the irony that we're using cruel words to argue for compassion. If we're not good at debate, we could find ourselves on the receiving end of cruelty. If we take their scorn to heart and let it wreck our confidence, we might end up sowing seeds of enmity, unable to think well of that person again. We'll have been carried far away by the floods without any awareness of this, insisting that we're doing the right thing, standing up for the rights of refugees.

With mindfulness, we'll feel and acknowledge anger and be aware of the floods threatening us. Once we have the frame of mindfulness in place, the most useful material for this particular raft would be right speech. Here's the definition the Buddha gives: "And what is right speech? Abstaining from lying, from divisive speech, from abusive speech, and from idle chatter. This is called right speech."

In another teaching he puts it in positive terms: "It is spoken at the right time. It is spoken in truth. It is spoken affectionately. It is spoken beneficially. It is spoken with a mind of goodwill."

We're not likely to be able to sift every word through the Buddha's filters while we're in the middle of a heated argument. But the more often we reflect on these lists and let them influence our speech in less conflicting situations, the more easily we'll be able to attach right speech to our raft when we really need it.

So let's see how our communication is measuring up to the Buddha's standards in this particular situation. We're certainly not engaged in idle chatter. Our intention is beneficial and we're not using divisive speech. So far so good. Hopefully also we're being truthful, though this will be compromised if we're exaggerating facts and figures to score our point.

Another consideration, according to the Buddha, is whether our speech is timely. If we can see that our adversary is completely closed to our point of view, then our words are a waste of time. All we're doing is letting that person sow their own seeds of hatred, as well as putting ourselves in danger of the flood of views. Out of compassion for self and other, we should put an end to the argument.

We also need to ask ourselves whether we're speaking with a mind of goodwill, and whether our words are gentle or harsh. These are obviously related. If we're speaking with goodwill, we won't be shouting or letting sarcastic or insulting remarks slip out. At times we might believe we're speaking with goodwill, unaware of how anger has escalated in the heat of the moment. If we hear ourselves using harsh words or a scornful tone, we have the feedback we need to acknowledge that anger is getting the better of us. In that case, we have to scrabble around to find a way of binding the raft together again.

One of the *Brahmavihāra* might do the trick. *Upekkhā* is often the most practical place to start, with a wish such as "may I not do harm on account of my anger." If that steadies the raft, you could add a dash of *mett ā*, for example, "may this conversation be beneficial to us both."

It's tough work though, trying to bind a rickety raft together on stormy waters. So should we withdraw from the conversation as soon as we feel anger rising? That depends on how well we can trust ourselves to work with anger in a conflict such as this. If we're mindful of anger, we're not being controlled by it. We can feel angry but maintain an attitude of no harm or even of goodwill. This is the great benefit of working with the difficult person in our *mettā* practice. So long as we can maintain the no harm attitude, we can safely continue to argue our case no matter what fury might be firing through our veins.

In fact, engaging with the argument will be an excellent spiritual practice. We're mindfully watching anger and letting it transform into compassion, which is hard enough to do on the cushion, never mind in a social situation. If we can somehow make it to the other shore, we should give ourselves a major *sādhu* for steering our raft through such a flood.

Mindfulness and right speech are the primary materials we need when the flood of views threatens. It can also help to remember the Buddha's usual method of engaging people in debate. He would listen to their views carefully and then question them, drawing them out so that they eventually saw the weakness in

their argument. Only then would he give his own view. If we could use this model, we would be doing a lot more listening than we usually do during a heated argument. This will also help keep us calm and give us a much better chance of controlling any anger. In order to ask useful questions, we will have to consider their point of view seriously, which in itself is an act of *mettā*.

You might rarely get into controversial discussions like this. Perhaps you don't have strong views on many matters. Those of us in this category might therefore think that at least we're free from the flood of views. But if someone bullies us, it's hard to resist the view that they are horrid and cruel. Or if our partner repeatedly omits to do their share of housework, we'd probably be rehashing thoughts like "he's so mean and lazy," or "she's so thoughtless." These views can bind us, and so we might never appreciate how much attention our partner pays to the children, for example.

If we're sharing responsibility for a project, it's easy to get into arguments about how things ought to be done, convinced that our view is right. Even if we don't have strong political or religious views, we have opinions on almost everything we do. And if someone disagrees with these, we'll feel angry, hurt or threatened. Thus all of us, even the meek and mild, are at risk from the flood of views.

You can explore this flood here on retreat. Even though we're not talking out loud, how many arguments do we have in our heads, insisting over and over again how right we are and how wrong our imaginary adversary is? To make a raft, we use body awareness. Feeling the sensations generated by all those strident thoughts, we paddle our way through the flood. The far shore might come into view as a thought like "what does it really matter who's right or wrong" slips through the turmoil.

The more often we negotiate our way through this flood in Vipassanā, the more easily we make a raft when the tsunami comes our way in a heated conversation during daily life.

Another very good practice to prepare us for this flood is to reflect on the Buddha's list for right speech and ask ourselves whether we often transgress these unwittingly. Idle or untimely speech would be a danger for many of us. This doesn't mean we should only speak when we have something really important to say. The Buddha was always happy to exchange pleasantries. These are just a socially acceptable way of saying "may you be well and happy." So they are a *mettā* practice and to be cherished.

But conversations easily fall into moaning about our woes or giving out about third parties. In that case, we're being swept away by the flood of views. Our moans reflect the view that the world should not have done this to me or that the third party should have behaved differently. For example, "the car broke down and I had to get it towed away, cost me £300 and then my boss decides to dock me an hour's pay for being late."

If that's said mindfully, as a factual statement, or with clarity in our distress and need for sympathy, then no problem. We need to be able to tell others our bad news. It's part of the way we help each other to deal with the truth of *dukkha*. But if we're spitting the words out in anger and injecting swear words about our

boss and the car, then we're caught in the flood, proclaiming our view of how rotten the world is and especially our rotten car and boss. We're not so much looking for sympathy, more interested in having our view of the rotten world confirmed.

Suppose we've spat out that much and then suddenly remember our *Dhamma* practice. We need to start building a raft pronto. Mindfulness would be the best start, acknowledging anger. We then need to acknowledge this to whoever we've been talking to and apologise for having dumped our bad temper on them. This would be an example of right speech. The apology relieves some of the burden we've placed on them. So it is beneficial speech. All of this might have calmed us enough for some self-compassion, acknowledging in a sympathetic way how rotten we feel. *Upekkhā*-style good wishes such as "may I take care of myself wisely" would help us bear the burden until our anger dissipates.

In general, right speech is an important aspect of any raft to take us across the flood of views, as this flood will be at its swiftest when we're expressing our views to another person. The more often we take care to practice right speech in simple situations when we're not threatened by the flood, the easier it will be for us to build our raft when we need it.

We'll continue with this teaching on the raft tomorrow night and give some examples of working with the other floods. For the moment, let's remind ourselves that we don't have to despair when we find ourselves in a tantrum and acting as if we'd never done a moment's mindfulness practice in our lives. The moment we see our tantrum is the moment to start looking around for any branches or twigs that could make a raft. It's never too late to start.

The present moment never condemns us or shuts us out from its infinite store of wisdom and compassion. May this reflection help us build and trust our rickety rafts and paddle them swiftly to the far shores.

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