Vacchagotta and Fire Part 1

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 34:59

Tonight and tomorrow night, we're going to look at Nibbāna—or in Sanskrit and English, Nirvana—from the perspective of the Buddha, and we're going to do it by going through one discourse to Vacchagotta about fire. We'll do the first part tonight, and the second part tomorrow night. This is, if you want to look it up, Majjhima number 72, the Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta.

So we'll start with our central character: Vacchagotta. In Pāli, *gotta*—or in Sanskrit, *gotra*—refers to one's ancestry or lineage. So Vacchagotta means something like "descended from Vaccha." It's his clan name, not his personal name. As I think we mentioned before, in the suttas we often don't get people's personal names; we just get their clan name. The Buddha's clan name is Gotama, and we actually don't know his personal name. Later on, the name Siddhattha was given to him, but that seems to be a later addition. In the earliest tradition, outside of being the Buddha, he's just known as Mr. Gotama.

So we have Vacchagotta, and the Buddha simply calls him Vaccha. We're going to follow that example. Vaccha comes from a wealthy Brahmin family, but he's dissatisfied with the Vedic tradition, and so he's left home to become a wanderer, a *paribbājaka*—a mendicant living off the generosity of the lay people—and he has dedicated himself to the search for truth. One of the things that characterizes him, which comes up very clearly in the discourse, is that he's got a very deep intellectual and existential curiosity. He really wants to know what's going on, and he's not satisfied with the conventional answers provided in his time.

Vaccha had a number of dialogues with the Buddha, and in the Majjhima Nikāya there are three successive discourses in which you see the Buddha spending a lot of time with him and bringing him along in his Dhamma quest. This discourse to Vacchagotta about fire is the second of the three.

The place is Jeta's Grove outside the city of Sāvatthī. Jeta's Grove is one of the Buddha's two headquarter monasteries, and they're both located just outside Sāvatthī. Sāvatthī is the capital of the kingdom of Kosala, which is located in what is now close to the border of Nepal in the eastern part of Uttar Pradesh. Sāvatthī is the headquarters of the Buddha's movement—but this is not the early Buddha. This is the later Buddha. He's built up this international empire, this international community. But he is a wanderer. He's just walking around like everybody else, so he can be quite difficult to find. Let's say you decided you needed to see the Buddha. How would you find him? He could be anywhere in the Ganges Valley.

What he did was make Sāvatthī his headquarters and basically announce that during each of the rainy seasons—when the monsoon is too intense to go wandering around—he would be at Sāvatthī in one of his two headquarter monasteries. He did this for over twenty-five years. So this became the headquarters of

his movement, and a lot of people who wanted to track him down would come here. This is the obvious place to go.

Vaccha comes to visit him, and he's got some urgent questions. These are a standard list of the ten profound and difficult philosophical questions of the day. Vaccha comes along and he wants answers. There are questions about the universe, questions about the relationship between the life force and the body—those are questions five and six—and questions about the survival of an awakened one after death, which are questions seven to ten.

The point is that none of these questions are easy. All of them are difficult. So it tells you something about Vaccha that he cannot let them go. He's determined to crack them.

The Buddha agrees to discuss this, and so we begin with four questions about *loka*. Loka is often, if not usually, translated as "world." But that's a bit misleading, because for us, the world is the planet Earth. But Vaccha's not talking about the planet Earth—if he even knows about the planet Earth.

He's talking about something much bigger. So we could translate loka as universe.

In each question that he asks, what Vaccha wants to know is what the Buddha's view is on this particular question. What does he think about it? And the questions are: Is the universe eternal? Is the universe not eternal? Is the universe finite? Is the universe infinite? These are the same questions being asked today, aren't they? Not that I keep up with science. But in any event, in each case, the Buddha simply says, "I do not hold this view."

Vaccha does not give up, and he proceeds to two questions about the relationship between the life force and the body. The term translated as life force is jiva. Usually you see it translated as soul, although I'm not quite sure that soul quite fits. Jiva literally means life. It comes from the root jiv, to live or to breathe. So it is perhaps more accurately rendered as life force—that which gives life to a physical body, that which holds on to the body to sustain it. We might get a sense of it in our instinctive movements to avoid danger or death. Let's say we accidentally fall. We surprise ourselves by the rapid instinctive movements we make to protect ourselves. Sometimes we wonder, how did I do that? This is the jiva coming out and manifesting itself.

So there is jiva, and there is body, which here is sarira. This is body, but specifically the material body that has no life. A corpse is sarira. Bones, a skeleton, are sarira. A physical relic is sarira. By the way, the stupa up there has relics of the Buddha and of Arahants. I don't know if you can feel them pulsating, but there are two holy places on this property: that stupa and this meditation hall.

These questions of Vaccha are about the relationship between material bodies on the one hand and what gives life to them on the other. In other words, what's the difference between a dead body and a living body? How does a body come to be alive in the first place? The questions are: Is the life force the same as the body? Or is the life force separate from the body?

In modern terms, if the life force is the same as the body, this would be the doctrine of materialism. If the life force is separate from the body, this would be the doctrine of eternalism. In both cases, the Buddha says, "I do not hold this view."

Vaccha is persistent, and he moves on with four more questions. These relate to the fate of an awakened one after death. The term used for awakened one is Tathagata. Now, why is he obsessing about what happens to an awakened one after death? It sounds a bit strange. But basically, what he's really asking about is the nature of awakening itself.

According to the Buddha's teaching, when we awaken, when we gain enlightenment, we abandon the three unwholesome roots. These are the akusala mula: attraction, aversion, and delusion—or more usually translated as greed, hatred, and ignorance. They're gone. Now, given that these three unwholesome roots condition pretty much all of human experience, what's left when they're gone? Clearly the awakened one is left. The awakened one is wandering about doing his or her thing. But what happens after she dies? What's left then?

So the question is, when we strip away all the surface appearances of the physical world and all the psychological movements and inclinations of the mind, what's left underneath? This is another way of asking, what is Nibbana?

The way Vaccha puts this is he asks: Does an awakened one exist after death? Does an awakened one not exist after death? Does an awakened one both exist and not exist after death? Does an awakened one neither exist nor not exist after death?

Now, we're not going to delve deeply into these, though we would if we were studying Indian philosophy, because these four possibilities represent what in the European tradition is called the tetralemma—the four assumptions that cover all logical possibilities in Indian logic. The four possibilities are: A, not A, both A and not A, neither A nor not A. That covers every possibility logically. So if you ask the question, the answer has got to be somewhere there. And in each case, the Buddha says, "I do not hold this view."

By this time, Vaccha is getting frustrated, and quite understandably so. He wants to know what's going on. He has enough faith in the Buddha to feel that if anybody knows the answers to these questions, he does. But the Buddha stubbornly refuses to answer. And finally, light dawns. Vaccha realizes the Buddha is not rejecting or accepting these different beliefs and stances. What he's rejecting is the very idea of view.

Here we come to a distinction that is really important in this discourse. What is view? In Pali, this is *diṭṭhi*. View is very important to the Buddha—for example, the first factor of the Eightfold Path, the beginning of the Eightfold Path, is right view, *sammādiṭṭhi*. But both the Pali word *diṭṭhi* and the English word "view" have two levels of meaning, which we need to understand.

For example, I step outside looking for some fresh air. I look up and see a bright blue sky but with dark clouds roiling towards me. Suddenly there's the sound of thunder and the rain comes pouring down. I see

people scatter for shelter. The traffic slows. The street fills with water. Now, what am I describing? I'm describing a view. This is what I'm seeing.

Then the rain reminds me of the strange things that have been happening in weather patterns in recent years. Extreme weather events have been increasing in number and they've been linked to climate change and potential catastrophes. So I'm thinking, what is the best strategy to limit global warming? Should we go nuclear? Or should we focus on renewables?

In all this, I am describing a view. But you see the difference between the two views. The first is confined to actual, immediate experience. The second moves away from the immediate experience and creates a complex narrative, a story based on abstract thinking. It is conceptual, not experiential. They can both be called view, but they're very different.

Vaccha is beginning to understand that what the Buddha is concerned with is the nature of view itself. So he shifts his ground and says, "What disadvantage does Mr. Gautama see that he does not take up any of these convictions?"

Notice, first of all, that Vaccha calls the Buddha "Mr. Gautama," indicating he's not formally a student. He's a wanderer coming to ask a professional colleague, as it were, a question. But also notice that his language is changing. Instead of saying *diṭṭhi*, view, he says *diṭṭhigata*, which is literally "gone to view" or "immersed in view." Here it's translated as conviction.

What *diṭṭhigata* suggests is both view in the abstract conceptual sense that we described before, and also a clinging to this view. There are both sides to it. You get different translations depending on which is being emphasized. Bhikkhu Bodhi translates *diṭṭhigata* as "speculative view," bringing out its abstract nature.

And Bhikkhu Sujato translates it as conviction, which suggests clinging. And Ajahn Thanissaro translates it as position. And again, he's indicating clinging in the sense that we take our stand on our convictions and we're determined to defend them.

So you notice that the discussion is moving from what is happening in the world—for example, is the universe finite or infinite?—to what we believe is happening in the world and how we respond to it. For example, am I clinging to my belief about the universe? And this movement is really important for the Buddha because he is more interested in how we live than in what we believe. For him, our beliefs are important because they condition the way that we live. But what is central is the way that we live, not our beliefs.

So Vaccha wants to know, what is the disadvantage of holding any of these convictions or positions, regardless of whether or not they're true? And the Buddha goes through all ten, but we won't do the repetition. We'll just look at the first one.

The Buddha says, "Vaccha, the conviction that the universe is eternal is a jungle of views, a wilderness of

views, a twisting of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views. It is characterized by pain, by distress, despair, and fever, and it does not lead to disenchantment, the fading of obsession, cessation, peace, direct understanding, awakening, nibbana." And so on for all the other views.

Now, you notice what the Buddha is talking about. He's not looking at whether or not these views are true. He's looking at the effect that clinging to them—or clinging to any view—will have on us and the way that we live. Does holding this view move me toward awakening? Or does holding this view move me away from awakening? The Buddha has a very pragmatic attitude towards truth.

In other words, when the Buddha talks about views, what he's really interested in is clinging—our relationship to view. And this is another reminder that although there is such a thing as Buddhist philosophy, which developed after his death, the Buddha is not a philosopher. He's a yogi. He's a practitioner.

So Vaccha is getting confused again. He thought he had it for a bit, but then this latest answer has thrown him because he's not quite following all this. He's still preoccupied with whether or not these views are correct. Are they right? Are they wrong? He's still thinking in terms of truth or falsehood, rather than thinking in terms of clinging and liberation. And he's starting to wonder if the Buddha actually believes anything at all. In other words, he's starting to wonder, is this guy a skeptic?

So he says, "Then, does Master Gotama hold any conviction at all?" Like, do you believe anything?

And the Buddha replies, "An awakened one has done away with convictions, Vaccha, because he has seen this: Such is body, such its arising, such its disappearance. Such is feeling, such its arising, such its disappearance. Such is perception, such its arising, such its disappearance. Such are choices, such their arising, such their disappearance. Such is awareness, such its arising, such its disappearance."

So again, the conversation moves. And this time, the Buddha is talking about the nature of experience itself and the clinging, the appropriation that's bound up with what we experience, with experience itself. You notice what he's doing is going through the five aggregates. When the Buddha talks about the five aggregates, he's talking about constructing yourself. So he's talking about clinging to a view that results in the construction of a soul and the dukkha which is involved in this.

And he's making a clear distinction between two ways of considering view. The first is "an awakened one has done away with convictions"—this is ditthigata, a conceptual view, or a conviction that if it matures, it matures into an ideology of some sort. And this ideology explains the world to me and how the world works and who I am.

Now, it might be a grand ideology or it might be really basic and simple. For example, "I am the kind of person who is too distracted to be able to meditate." It's amazing how many people say, you know, the mind is very disturbed, what to do? You might say, why don't you take up meditation? And they say, oh, I couldn't do meditation.

My mind is so distracted, it never stays still. Which is rather like saying, oh, you're not very fit—why don't you take up tennis? That'll get you running around the court. Oh, I couldn't play tennis. I've never hit a ball over the net, so I couldn't do it. Which is incredible nonsense.

But anyway, so this is a view which can turn into an ideology. And you notice this is bound up with clinging and a sense of identity. I can't meditate successfully. Why? Because this is the nature of me and the world. Which means it's always been like this, it will always be like this, there's nothing I can do about it. So this is *diṭṭhigata*—this is conviction or conceptual view that's being held to.

And then we have *diṭṭha*. The Buddha says an awakened one has done away with convictions because he has seen. And this seeing is *diṭṭha*. This represents a direct, immediate encounter with something. So it might be, as I practice, I'm with my meditation object. Then I'm swept away by thinking, and then I suddenly realize I am thinking, and I am faced with the choice whether to continue with the thinking or go back to the meditation object.

Now notice that this experiential view is not caught up with clinging and identity. It's not constructing a self out of it; it's just a situation which is happening now. What do I do about it? And again, it's not self. It's not me. And it doesn't belong to me. So this movement right now into distraction—it's not me, it doesn't belong to me. This choice now to continue with the thinking or return to the meditation—it's not me, it doesn't belong to me.

So the Buddha expresses this direct experiential nature of view by talking about the arising and disappearance, the coming and going of the body, feeling, perception, choices, awareness. He's saying that an experiential view is unstable, changing, dynamic—and that's its nature. But a conceptual view appears to be stable, especially when it takes the form of an ideology or a conviction. If it changes, it changes slowly and often imperceptibly. And this is the nature of concepts.

So the world changes around us. And if we're paying attention, the world is changing all of the time. But our convictions tend to remain the same. While experiential view, in contrast, changes and flows with the immediacy of experience.

For example, some of us in this room have reached a certain age—I'm not looking at anyone in particular. And people of this certain age might be overheard complaining about how the world has changed. "This isn't the country I was born in." Now this kind of complaint is so widespread that exploiting it can become the basis for successful political careers.

From the Buddha's perspective, the foundation of this complaint is clinging to conceptual views while pushing away the actual felt reality of experience itself. The world as directly experienced is changing around us, but we deny this in favour of the stability of the world represented by our conceptual views. And when experience clashes with concept, often we side with our concepts and reject the experience. We do this because we're looking for safety, and we find safety in the stability of our convictions.

So this is the danger that the Buddha sees in these views.

And at this point we could go back and look at Vacchagotta himself and his questions. You notice that all his questions revolve around identity—the identity of the universe, the identity of the life force, the identity of the awakened one. And this means all of them are pointing toward Vacchagotta's own identity. Because why is Vacchagotta so caught up with these questions? It's not that he's sitting for an exam. He's personally invested in these issues.

Remember that Vacchagotta is a wanderer. He has walked away from home, and in his case, he's walked away from a secure and high-status life in order to resolve the existential questions that are eating him up from the inside. Does it remind you of anybody? The Buddha. And maybe this is one reason why the Buddha has a lot of time for Vacchagotta.

Vacchagotta has got a lot invested in finding the answers to these questions. If he can find these answers, then he has justified that rash decision he made years ago when he walked out of his conventional life. He can finally be at peace. He can be recognised among his peers as someone who has successfully resolved the fundamental questions. But if he cannot resolve these questions, how can he justify the sacrifices he's made in pursuing awakening? Doesn't he just turn out to be a loser who couldn't make it in the real world?

So this is what seems to be driving Vacchagotta. This is why he's so passionate about this whole thing. And of course, it would remind the Buddha of the struggles that he went through. He has sympathy for Vacchagotta's dilemma.

But what the Buddha is doing is refusing to play Vacchagotta's game. He's keeping his focus on the deeper longing in Vacchagotta's heart. Vacchagotta wants awakening and peace—that's what's driving him. He's going about it the wrong way, but that's what's driving him. And so the Buddha refuses to engage in a philosophical discussion which he knows is going to accomplish nothing whatsoever. Instead, he's pointing to Vacchagotta's determination to cling to concepts in order to create a stable world that means something. He's keeping Vacchagotta's gaze on what is happening right here, right now—not the theories that he's learned to take seriously, not the abstractions he's come to think of as what's important.

And this comes up in the language that the Buddha uses. "An awakened one has seen this—such is body, such is arising, such is disappearance." In English we don't really get the emphasis, which is clear in the Pali. The Buddha is saying that an awakened one doesn't just see, but sees specifically *this*, right here. This sensation, this thought, this feeling. And the emphasis is contained in the "such is body, such is arising, such is disappearance." This sensation now is arising as exactly this. And now it's ceasing as exactly this.

The Buddha is telling Vacchagotta to abandon the world that he's created through his concepts and instead learn to live in a world which is grounded in the felt actuality of experience, of what's happening right now. Ground yourself in this experience right now, and learn to relate to the world of concept from

that place. Don't get lost in your concepts about what is happening, but learn to be intimate with what is actually happening. And then the liberation of the heart becomes possible.

The Buddha goes on to say that's the way the awakened one is liberated—by not clinging, with the weakening, fading, cessation, and letting go of all disturbances, all constructing of identity and possession, along with the underlying potential for separation. Because remember that *māna* is one of the basic movements of the self.

And of course, this is what we're practicing here. We're practicing to be mindful. We're practicing to track experience over a period of time. We're using what Mahasi calls noting—directly aware-ing each experienced event as it comes and goes. And when we do this, we're not lost in our concepts about the world. Instead, we're grounding awareness in the immediate movements of the world itself.

And this is one reason why the role of the body is so important. Because as we've said, physical sensations are, by their very nature, here and now. And they do not mean anything at all. They're just what they are. So when we ground ourselves in the immediacy of experience, we're learning to live firsthand, not second or third hand.

This is the practice of noting and understanding. When we note, we deliberately direct awareness to whatever is happening, and we're not interested in what we might think about what is happening. We're just interested in what is in fact happening. And as the noting develops, our mind becomes increasingly sensitive, and in the background of our awareness we notice more and more of what's going on.

But again, what we're noticing is what is actually happening right now. We're not noticing what we remember as happening in the past or what we imagine might happen in the future. And we're not noticing what we think is happening over there somewhere. We're just focused on what is actually happening here and now.

And as we do this, we start to loosen our grip on our convictions that the conceptual mind generates. Which, of course, does not mean that we never use concepts to develop a wider understanding of the world. But these concepts are grounded on our actual experience as it unfolds over time. And we learn to recognize that ultimately concepts are just concepts. That's all they are.

When we live like this, when we're living in what is actually going on rather than our concepts about what is going on, then we come closer to nirvana. And how this happens, we'll look at tomorrow. We don't have time now, and besides, it's too technical. Your minds are probably already spinning and about to explode.

On the other hand, I may comfort you with what a very old meditation friend of mine once told me: you haven't really started on this practice until your head explodes.

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