Vaccagotta and Fire Part 2

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Last night we were talking about Vacchagotta and his discussions with the Buddha. We're looking at the Aggivacchagotta Sutta, Majjhima 72, "To Vacchagotta about Fire."

So we have two characters in this particular discourse. We've got the brahmin wanderer Vacchagotta, or simply Vaccha. "Gotta," as we said, means clan name, so essentially Vacchagotta would be something like "descended from Vaccha." The Buddha just calls him Vaccha. He is a wandering mendicant searching for truth through philosophy, investigating the most profound philosophical questions of his day. These are the ten questions which we went through last time, about the universe, the relationship between the life force and the body, and the survival of an awakened one after death. We commented that all these questions revolve around the issue of identity. What is the real nature of the universe? What is the real identity of the awakened one?

Now, Vaccha is really focused on these questions because what he's searching for is certainty. He's trying to get to certainty by finding answers to these questions which will justify his whole career. He came from a wealthy family. He walked out and engaged in this strange world of wandering philosophers and mendicants. If he can crack these questions, then he can justify what he's been doing. Others will respect him, and he might even become a well-established teacher, like the Buddha. So he's questioning the Buddha about these issues.

But the Buddha is playing a different game. He's refusing to engage with these questions because his focus is not on theories and doctrines. What he's focused on is the felt nature of experience and our determination to push aside direct first-hand experience in favour of clinging to convictions instead. So the Buddha refuses to become entangled with diṭṭhigata, conceptual view or conviction, and instead he's talking about diṭṭha, experiential view.

He points out that when we live in a world of concepts, what we're doing is creating and clinging to a stable sense of identity within a stable, meaningful world. We do this, like Vaccha, to find certainty and security, not realizing that it's this very clinging which creates pain and insecurity.

So the Buddha speaks to Vaccha about a state of liberation where all constructions of identity and possession are deconstructed. And along with those, the underlying potential for separating from experience as the one who undergoes the experience—that too is destroyed. We talked about this when we were discussing the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta. This is māna, usually translated as "conceit," literally "measurement" or "measuring." It's the fundamental sense we have of being separate from the world: I'm in here, you're out there.

This state of liberation comes about, the Buddha says, through not clinging. So the Buddha says 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, and the underlying potential for separation. Notice how that potential for separation is underneath all of it. That's the bottom. It's when this goes that full awakening takes place.

However, Vaccha doesn't get it. He's trying to engage, but he's so caught up within himself that he can't grasp what the Buddha is talking about. For Vaccha, there is liberation of the heart through not clinging—let's agree on that. But who is the person who is liberated? And what happens to him? Vaccha believes in life after life. He just takes this as obvious. In other words, something happens next. So it's natural for him to ask, what happens next to a practitioner who is liberated in this way?

He asks, "When a practitioner's heart is liberated in this way, Mr. Gautama, where does he reappear after death?"

The Buddha replies, "The term 'reappears' does not apply."

And suddenly we're back to the same dance. Vaccha goes on to explore the four logical possibilities that we talked about yesterday.

Then he does not reappear. Then he both reappears and does not reappear. Then he neither reappears nor does not reappear. So again Vaccha goes through the four logical possibilities. This third one—both reappears and does not reappear—means that in some ways it would be true to say he reappears, but in other ways it would be true to say he doesn't. It seems a bit absurd when spoken aloud, but it actually does make sense.

And for each of these possibilities, the Buddha replies, "This does not apply." In Pali, *na upeti*. Very simple, very direct—*na upeti*. Chuck it out.

So Vaccha's problem is that he's stuck in identity. Awakening and the liberation of the heart has been achieved—but what happens to the awakened one whose heart is liberated? These are the circles we've been going around. And it's easy to dismiss Vaccha as some kind of fool. If you're coming from a superior Buddhist position, it's tempting to say, "Oh, he's an idiot." But his question is real and quite valid.

If you think about our situation in this room, each of us has come here to do this retreat. Why? Because we're looking for some kind of transformation. Each of us is, to some extent, dissatisfied with who we are now. We want something different. We want to become someone different. And to the extent that we ever think about the goal of the practice, we think about it in terms of our own identities.

So let's say I actually want to be awakened. Let's say that's the ambition. What would that look like? Who would be the awakened me? How would the awakened me live? Would the awakened me have to quit his job and float about being enlightened? Could the awakened me make a career out of being awakened?

And most importantly of all, what will my friends think about this awakened me?

We all think like this. And the problem with this kind of thinking is that it continues to use the conceptual view of identity in order to understand transformation. But this is precisely the view that has to be abandoned for the transformation to take place. That's why, really, we don't want to change. We say we do, we think we do. But really, what we want is just a slight adjustment from what we've already got. Because if we actually wanted to change, we'd be willing to jump into something completely unknown.

This is why, as the practice progresses, people often report fear arising in some form or another. We find ourselves spontaneously pulling back from the unknown to return to a familiar sense of who we are and what's going on.

And this is where Vaccha is caught. He's got a glimpse of what the Buddha is talking about, but he's trying to understand it conceptually. That very attempt is smothering his insight.

When Vaccha asked the Buddha his ten philosophical questions, the Buddha responded by rejecting the particular view that was being presented. He said, "I don't have this view." But now the Buddha is rejecting the very question itself. The question itself is wrong. *Na upeti*. This does not apply.

This reminds me of a story about a local Zen teacher. Once a week he would meet with various retired academics and have wide-ranging discussions about philosophy and such. Because Zen has a certain cachet to it, people would sometimes talk about Zen, and they had a Zen teacher sitting right there. The problem was that when the Zen teacher would say something, the retired philosophers would get irritated. One person in particular got really annoyed. Finally he said, "Why can't you give me a straight answer to my questions?"

To which the Zen teacher replied, "You cannot give a straight answer to a crooked question."

And this is the situation that the Buddha is in. As far as the Buddha is concerned, the very questions are crooked. So he won't give a straight answer.

But Vacchagotta is getting more and more confused. So he says, "I don't understand, Master Gotama. I'm confused. Now I have lost the clarity I previously gained from our conversation."

At this point the Buddha has compassion on him. He explains that his confusion is perfectly reasonable. He says to Vaccha, "Look, you come from a different tradition, which is very different than mine. And what you're trying to understand is very profound and very hard to see. So of course you're confused. It's perfectly reasonable and natural."

I like this response because I think it's something we might keep in mind when we're trying to work out what exactly the Buddha is talking about. Because often we end up being very confused.

Anyway, the Buddha then explains using the fire simile. And this is where we come to the heart of this

discourse.

The Buddha says, "What do you think, Vaccha, if a fire was burning in front of you, would you know?"

Vaccha gives the obvious answer: "I would, Master Gotama."

"If someone asked you, 'This fire burning in front of you, what does it depend on to burn?' what would you answer?"

"Asked that, Master Gotama, I would answer: the fire burning in front of me burns depending on grass and sticks."

"If this fire in front of you goes out, would you know this fire in front of me has gone out?"

"I would, Master Gotama."

"If someone asked you, Vaccha, 'When that fire in front of you goes out, where does it go? To the east? To the west? To the north? To the south?' What would you answer?"

"This does not apply, Master Gotama. The fire burns depending on its fuel of grass and sticks. When that is used up, if it does not get any more fuel, in the absence of fuel, it is regarded as gone out."

"So too, Vaccha, an awakened one has abandoned that body, feeling, perception, choices, awareness by which one conceptualizing an awakened one might conceptualize him."

This dialogue is what the discourse is all about. Notice how the dialogue is structured. We begin with the obvious—really seriously obvious. This fire in front of you: can you see it? The question is simple and the answer is simple. The whole thing is simple, clear, obvious. It's about what's happening right now.

And the next question: What is it burning? Again, simple, clear, obvious.

When the fire goes out, can you see that? Again, simple, clear, obvious, immediate. What's happening here and now? There's nothing esoteric, there's nothing complicated.

And then the next question—everything jams to a stop. When the fire goes out, where does it go?

Now this question is completely different.

The previous questions were about immediate experience. What's happening here and now, right in front of your eyeballs? This new question takes an immediate experience and then builds a network of concepts around the image of the fire "going out," treating this conceptual network as if it were an immediate experience. But it isn't. It's something completely different.

Can you see how this question takes us back to what the Buddha was talking about yesterday when he was distinguishing between experiential view and conceptual view or conviction? An experiential view—we

gave the example last night—is the experience of a rainy afternoon, in this case a rainy evening. A conceptual view or conviction encompasses theories, beliefs, and convictions about climate change and what to do about it.

In making this distinction, it's very important to realize that the Buddha is not saying we should not have theories, beliefs, or convictions. What he is saying is that we need to be able to distinguish between these two aspects of view and not mistake one for the other. That way, we're less likely to get entangled in our conceptual views. We're less likely to be lost in ideology. And we're more likely to be grounded in our actual experience.

So the fire goes out. Where does the fire go? This question represents our entry into the world of concept, where the concept is mistaken for felt experience. They get jumbled up. And this is the world that we normally live in.

We begin with our actual experience, here and now. This is experiential view. And then we slide into concepts about our actual experience. This movement is so habitual and so subtle that we tend not to notice it. We think nothing has changed. But in fact, everything has changed.

We get a sense of this in the meditation practice—this transition, this slide. Every time we slide unseen, unknown, from direct engagement with our meditation object to thinking about ourselves and our world. That slide into distraction. Have you noticed that at first we take this transition for granted and we don't recognize that anything has changed? Have you noticed that the world of imagination you conjure up seems at least as real as the world of direct engagement with experience? Anyone been having very real and vivid imaginations about after the retreat? When they're there, aren't they at least as real? At least. And we just take that for granted. We just don't notice it.

Now, in our dialogue, Vacchagotta notices the change that the Buddha is talking about. When this fire goes out, where does it go? He's struck by the absurdity of the question. And he responds to the Buddha the way the Buddha responded to him: This does not apply. Any answer to this question misses what's actually happening. Any answer sends us off in the wrong direction.

"This does not apply, Master Gotama. The fire burning, depending on its fuel of grass and sticks—when that is used up, if it does not get any more fuel, in the absence of fuel, it is regarded as gone out."

"So too, Vaccha, an awakened one has abandoned that body, feeling, perception, choices, awareness by which one conceptualizing an awakened one conceptualizes him."

The Buddha is saying that an awakened one cannot be captured by concepts. As you know, this list of body, feeling, perception, choices, and awareness constitutes the five aggregates, which for the Buddha are the raw materials from which we construct the sense of who we are and what the world is. They represent the fuel that feeds the fires of identity, clinging, and aversion.

For the Buddha, clinging and identity are very closely aligned because fundamentally we are what we think we are. If I ask the question, "Who am I?" the question becomes, "Who do I deeply feel I am?" I am this body. I am these feelings. I am whom I perceive myself to be.

I am the maker of my choices. I am the one who is aware of all of this.

But the Buddha is saying that when we directly experience these events of body, feeling, perception, choices, and awareness, all of them are just events. They come and go within the field of awareness. And even awareness comes and goes within the field of awareness. So they come and they go. How can I be any one of them?

If I am my body, then what happens to me when this particular experience of body falls away and is replaced by another one? Does this represent a new me? Or is the old me lurking somewhere behind, unseen but seeing? If I am my body, which body are we talking about? Is it the relatively slim, active version of my youth? Or is it the fat, clapped-out version of my old age? Which one? Because they're not the same.

As the contemporary sage Leonard Cohen said, "I don't trust my inner feelings. Inner feelings come and go." After all, he was a Zen student.

Now, the more we ground ourselves in experiential view, the less we can actually believe that our conceptual view is presenting us with what is really going on. The more grounded we are in the actual flow of experience, the less we take the stories we tell ourselves to be true. The stories we tell ourselves are not true any more than the fire has gone out to the west. But equally, these stories are not false any more than the fire has gone out to the east. The stories we tell ourselves are just stories. That's all.

The example I like to give, being a dedicated coffee drinker, is this: if you're fond of a good cup of coffee, and if you have a friend who has never had coffee, can you communicate to her the taste of a good cup of coffee through your stories about it? And the answer, obviously, is no. She has to actually taste it. So a story about something is not that something. It's something else.

Again, this does not mean that our stories are not useful. They can be very useful. Equally, they can be very dangerous. Because our stories help us navigate through life, we could say that although our stories are not true, some stories are more useful than other stories.

The Buddha, for example, is a storyteller. And he tells us a story that a flourishing life is possible if we are careful about our choices. This is the story of kamma-vipāka, action and its ripening. And this is more useful than a story of how I am so hopeless and the world is so broken that whatever I do will be useless, so I may as well not try. They're both stories, but one of them is actually much more useful than the other.

We may notice that the most useful stories are those that are closer to the felt flow of experience than stories that are far removed. For example, the story "Right now I am very upset, and I better be careful of

what I'm about to say"—that story is probably closer to the felt flow of experience than "This person is my lifelong enemy, and I need to get my attack in first." And it's not just closer to the actual flow of experience, but it's more likely to lead to a satisfactory result in terms of the way that we live.

So this going out of the fire—this is a standard explanation for Nibbāna. In fact, if this fire in front of you goes out, that going out comes from the verb *nibbāyati*—to Nibbāna. You can actually translate that as "If this fire in front of you nibbānas, would you know this fire as Nibbāna?" Nibbāna is the going out of a fire, its cooling, the extinguishing of a fire. This image of the fire is central to the Buddha's presentation of Nibbāna, or Nirvāṇa.

So where is Nibbāna to be found? And of course the answer is pretty obvious. It's here, now, in a direct encounter with the world—before we get lost in stories about the world. And this is what we are practicing. We are practicing this encounter.

This is the practice of noting—being directly aware of one experience after another without getting caught up in concepts about the experience. And when we do get caught up in concepts about the experience, we directly experience the concepts. We note the concepts. So we're learning to live in intimacy. And this is why the Buddha calls this practice the one-way street to Nibbana.

Now, is there anything we can actually say about this Nibbana? Well, of course, heaps. In fact, people have written PhDs about it. But none of it captures this reality. I think we've already looked at one Zen story which can suggest what it's about, so let's just repeat ourselves.

Case 20 of the Book of Serenity: the encounter between Lohan Kui-Chen and Fa-Yen Wen-Yi. Lohan was a teacher at a meditation monastery where he taught the classical two three-month retreats per year. As we said, meditation monks would spend six months of the year meditating, six months not in retreat anyway, and then they would wander about—they'd do whatever they liked. They could stay at the monastery, they could go to another monastery, they could travel, they could study, whatever.

At the end of one retreat, Lohan is saying goodbye to the departing monks, but he's keeping an eye out for Fa Yen, who he knew was on the edge. He just needed a bit of a push. So when Fa Yen approached, Lohan said, "Where are you going?" Fa Yen said, "I am wandering about on pilgrimage." Lohan said, "Pilgrimage? What is that to you?" Fa Yen said, "I don't know." Lohan said, "Not knowing is most intimate." Fa Yen suddenly attained great awakening.

This is very typical Zen teaching. It leaves you scratching your head. Now, why is Fa Yen's not knowing so powerful?

Well, first of all, what's the problem with knowing? As soon as we "know" something, what have we done? We've created a story around it. And in creating a story around it, we've separated ourselves from it. We have become someone—someone with an agenda which we are imposing on the experience.

Now, at first, Fa Yen just didn't know. He did not yet understand that he did not know. Only with Lohan's teaching—"not knowing is most intimate"—did he clearly recognize not knowing. In other words, recognize what was already available. But with Lohan's prompt, Fa Yen saw that it's not about having a story about pilgrimage, or not knowing pilgrimage. It's understanding that there is no one who is intimate. There is no concept to be lost in. Instead, there's just the world where the three characteristics play out freely without us getting in the way.

And this is the world which the Buddha sometimes calls the unconstructed, the asankhata, the not-constructed. Sometimes he talks about the not-born, the not-become. But most frequently, the not-constructed. This is the world of Nibbana.

So how do we know the not-constructed, the not-born, the not-become? Well, we could approach this by asking an easier question: How do we know mind itself?

We cannot see the mind. We cannot hear it, we cannot smell it, we cannot taste it, we cannot touch it. So how do we know it? We know mind by recognizing its activities, what it does. And what the mind does, fundamentally, is aware an object. That's what it does. And in its elemental quality, that's all that it does.

But normally this awareness is obscured by, for example, upadana—clinging, appropriation. We cling to our experience, we cling to what we are aware of, we conceptualize it as something, we hold it as me and as mine. So we are lost in this familiar world of our projects and our concerns.

And when this happens, the activity of the mind is no longer free. It's stuck, bogged down in "I," "mine," "should," "should not," and so on. But when mind is liberated, when it's not dominated by upadana, by clinging, by appropriation, then it functions freely. And then the unconstructed, the unconditioned, is intimately present—but not present as something in particular. Rather, it's sensed in the freedom of its activity.

So when we're truly intimate, when we don't know and we know that we don't know, we're not swept away by clinging, because clinging is simply another activity that we're present to. The mind is not obscured, its functioning is clear, its activity is clear, and this activity, undisturbed by clinging, expresses the unconstructed. In this state, the heart naturally cools and we experience nirvana—but again, not as any particular thing, rather as the world itself when it's cooled and at peace.

So our task as practitioners is to be intimate. We don't separate ourselves by being lost in our thoughts about what is going on, but simply stay grounded in this now. And it's in intimacy that we discover understanding. We're no longer constructing a world that we're appropriating as "I" and "mine" in order to justify ourselves and manipulate the world so it suits us. Instead, we let go, and in this moment, we are released from birth and death.

And if this sounds a bit Zen, look up the Saṃmasatha Sutta, sometimes translated as "Exploration"—Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.66. SN 12 is the collection on dependent origination, so it's the

sixty-sixth discourse in that section. If you go to Sutta Central and type in "Saṃmasatha Sutta," you can find it there. It was actually from Mahasi Sayadaw—that dried up old Arahant—that I came to realize this discourse is in fact talking about nirvana.

So at those moments, we drop into the coolness which characterizes nirvana. We start to open up to a new world. But we enter this new world at first as visitors, as tourists. Then we lose it again. But gradually, over time, we learn to actually inhabit this new world. And this is the world where the fires have gone out.

That's enough for tonight. Any questions?

Someone asks about social life and practice.

What I'm trying to get at is this: you do this often enough and long enough, it changes who you are. And people notice that. They don't know what to do. If you do this practice, you lose friends—this is my guarantee. If you make progress in this practice, you will lose friends. But then you gain other friends. And you also learn to keep your mouth shut.

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