Part 1: Dhamma Talk on the Aggivacchagotta Sutta

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Tonight and next time we're going to take two nights to look at Majjhima 72, the Aggivacchagotta Sutta—"To Vacchagotta About Fire."

This is a very important discourse, but it will take a bit of time to work our way through, so we're doing it over two parts. It's about Nirvana, which is obvious from the title, because it's about fire. One of the basic images that the Buddha uses to talk about Nirvana is the going out of a fire. So let's get into it.

First, let's begin with our central character. This is Vacchagotta. This is his clan name—gotta in Pali, gotra in Sanskrit, means clan. So this is a person of the Vaccha clan. We don't actually know his personal name, but the Buddha calls him Vaccha, so we'll just do that.

He comes from a wealthy Brahmin family, but he's dissatisfied with the Vedic teachings. He doesn't find any sustenance in them. And so he's left home to become a wanderer—a paribbājaka, a wandering renunciate—dedicated to the search for truth. It's quite clear from the discourses where he appears that he has a very deep intellectual and existential curiosity, and he's not satisfied with any of the conventional answers to the deep questions of his day.

He appears in a number of discourses, and the Buddha clearly established a relationship with him and cultivated him over a period of time. In the Majjhima Nikāya, the middle length discourses, there are three discourses one after the other where he appears, and this is the second one. So this is our main character, Vaccha.

The Buddha is staying at Jeta's Grove, his monastery outside the city of Sāvatthī, which was essentially his headquarters. Sāvatthī is the capital city of Kosala, located near the border of present-day Nepal in what is now the eastern part of Uttar Pradesh.

One morning Vaccha comes to visit the Buddha, and he's got some urgent questions to ask. These are ten questions—a famous list. They're questions about the universe, about the relationship between the soul and the body, and about the survival of an awakened one after death. These are the big questions of his time. Let's briefly have a look at them.

The first four questions are about the world, loka—although loka could also be translated as "universe." It's not "world" in the sense of planet Earth. These people don't know about planet Earth. So it's got a much wider implication than "world" in the way we normally talk about it. The questions are: Is the universe

eternal? Is the universe not eternal? Is the universe finite? Is the universe infinite?

For each question, what Vaccha wants to know is the Buddha's view on this issue. Vaccha is going through the big questions of his day, and what he wants to know is: what's your view on this? In every case, the Buddha replies, "I do not hold this view." It's like a cricketer just batting the balls away.

The next four questions concern the relationship between the soul and the body. In Pali, it's the relationship between the jīva and the sarīra. Jīva literally means "life" and comes from a root meaning to live or to breathe, so it could be translated as "life force." Jīva is what gives life to a physical body. Sarīra is one word for body, but in particular it's used for a material body that does not have life. A corpse is sarīra. Bones are sarīra. A physical relic is sarīra. So essentially, these are questions about the relationship between material bodies and what gives life to them. Why is it that some entities are alive and others aren't?

The questions are: Are the jīva and the body the same? Are the jīva and the body different? In both cases the Buddha gives the same answer: "I do not hold this view."

So Vaccha persisted. He's got four more questions, and these are about the fate of an awakened one after death. This is really about the nature of awakening. According to the Buddha's teaching, when we wake up, when we are enlightened, we abandon what he calls the three unwholesome roots of attraction, aversion, and delusion. These three unwholesome roots condition pretty much all of our experience, so the question is: what's left after they cease? What's underneath? Clearly there's an awakened one—a human being wandering around being enlightened—but what happens after she dies? Once you drop away all the normal psychological movements and all the surface appearance of the physical world, what's underneath? This is really a question about the deep nature of awakening itself.

The questions are: 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, these are the four logical possibilities. All possibilities are contained in these four questions. And for every question, the Buddha replies, "I do not hold this view."

By this time, Vaccha is getting quite frustrated, understandably. He wants to know what's going on. He's got this deep urge to understand. He has enough faith in the Buddha, because they've met before, to feel that if anybody knows the answers to these questions, the Buddha does. But the Buddha is stubbornly refusing to answer.

And at last, light dawns in Vaccha's mind. He realizes the Buddha is not rejecting or accepting these different beliefs and stances. He's rejecting the very idea of view. It's the very idea of view that he doesn't like.

Now we come to a distinction which is very important and lies at the heart of this discourse. What is view?

In Pali this is *diṭṭhi*, and it's very important for the Buddha. If you know about the Eightfold Path—which is the standard template for the Buddha's teaching—the first factor is *sammādiṭṭhi*, right view. And without right view, nothing else happens. It's absolutely foundational for the Buddha.

But the Pali word *diṭṭhi*, like the English word view, has two levels of meaning which are quite distinct. Let me give an example.

I step outside looking for some fresh air. Looking up, I see a bright blue sky, but there are dark clouds rolling towards me. Suddenly there's the sound of thunder and rain comes pouring down. I see people scatter for shelter as the traffic slows and the streets fill with water.

What am I describing? I'm describing a view. That's what I can see.

Now, as this is happening, the rain reminds me of all the weird things that have been happening to weather patterns in recent years. I've read about climate change and its potentially catastrophic consequences. I start to wonder what is the best strategy to limit average global warming. Should we go nuclear? Is that the answer? Or should we focus completely on renewables?

What am I talking about here? I'm describing a view.

You get the distinction. They're both views. But there's a big difference between them. The first one is confined to actual immediate experience. It's experiential. The second one moves away from the immediate experience to create a complex narrative based on abstract thinking. It's conceptual. They can both be called view, but they are very different.

Vaccha is beginning to realize that the Buddha is concerned with the nature of view itself. So his next question: he asks, "What disadvantage does Master Gotama see that he does not take up any of these convictions?"

You can see the discussion is moving. Vaccha's language is changing. Before, he wanted to know, "What is your view? What is your *diṭṭhi*?" Now he's speaking of conviction: "What is your *diṭṭhigata*?" *Gata* means literally "gone to"—so, gone to view. It could be translated as "immersed in view." Here I'm translating it as conviction.

Diṭṭhigata, as opposed to *diṭṭhi*, implies both view in the abstract conceptual sense—the second meaning of view—and it suggests a clinging to view. Both. If you look up Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation, he renders *diṭṭhi gata* as "speculative view."

So he brings out its abstract nature. Bhikkhu Sujato translates it as conviction, which I quite like, and that brings out its suggestion of clinging, holding onto it. Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro translates it as position, and again it suggests the clinging in the sense that we take our stand on our convictions, determined to defend

them. This is where I take my stand.

So our discussion is moving from what is happening in the world—for example, is the universe finite or infinite?—to how we respond to what we believe is happening. Am I clinging to my view about the universe? For the Buddha, this is vital because he's much more interested in how we live than in what we believe. Our beliefs are important because they condition the way that we live. They condition, for example, what we think is possible, what we think is impossible, what we think is desirable, what we think is undesirable. But for the Buddha, what's central is the way that we live, not our beliefs.

So what is the disadvantage of holding any of these convictions or positions, regardless of whether or not they are true? This is not an issue about truth. 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 suffering, by distress, despair, and fever. And it does not lead to disenchantment, the fading of obsession, cessation, peace, direct understanding, awakening, nibbāna." And so on for the other nine views.

Notice what the Buddha is talking about. He's not looking at whether or not these views are true. He's not offering an opinion about that. He's looking at the effect that clinging to any one of these views has on us and on the way that we live. In other words, does holding this view, whatever it is, move me towards awakening or not? When the Buddha talks about views, what he's really interested in is clinging.

Now Vaccha was getting confused again because he's really not quite following this. He's still preoccupied with whether or not these views are correct. He's still thinking in terms of truth and falsehood—that's what he's focused on, rather than clinging and liberation. In fact, he started to have doubts about the Buddha. He's starting to wonder if the Buddha believes anything at all. So he says, "Then does Master Gotama hold any conviction at all?"

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 discussion has moved. This time the Buddha is talking about the nature of experience itself.

Let's go back to these two aspects of view, which is central to this discourse. We've got conceptual view—an abstract view or conviction, like an ideology, something that explains the world and its workings to me. For example, I might have a view: I am too easily distracted to be able to meditate successfully. I can't do it. It's too hard. Not with a mind like mine. Can't do it. This is a conceptual view, a diṭṭhigata.

Notice that this is bound up with clinging to a sense of identity. I cannot meditate successfully. Why? Because of the nature of me and the world. It's always been like this. It will always be like this. All of these

movements are typical of conceptual view.

Now let's take experiential view. This is direct and immediate.

So it might be I'm practicing with my meditation object, and suddenly I am swept away by thinking. Then equally suddenly I realize I am thinking, and I'm faced with a choice of whether or not to return to my meditation object. This is the flow of actual experience. And you notice that this view is not bound up with clinging and identity.

This awareness now of the meditation object—it's not me. It doesn't belong to me. It's just awareness now of the meditation object. This movement into distraction—it's not me. It does not belong to me. This choice to continue with the thinking or return to the meditation object—it's not me. It does not belong to me.

So this is what the Buddha is talking about here when he's speaking of the arising and disappearance of body, feeling, perception, choices, awareness. And the reason why he chooses those five—these are the five aggregates that construct identity. What he's saying is that an experiential view of an experienced event—now you notice he's saying arising, disappearance, arising, disappearance—an experiential view of an experienced event is unstable, changing, dynamic. But a conceptual view is stable, especially when it takes the form of an ideology or a conviction. If it changes, it changes slowly and even imperceptibly. This is the nature of concepts—they are much more stable than actual experience.

So the world changes around us, but our convictions tend to remain the same. In contrast, experiential view changes and flows with the immediacy of experience itself. Conceptual view tends to be stable, even fixed. Experiential view is moving on all the time.

Going back to our example of climate change: "Yes, there's been some weird weather. And there's been the odd bushfire. Okay, more extreme than usual, I get it, I read the newspapers. But there's always been bushfires, hasn't there? There's always been weird weather, hasn't there? It can't actually be changing, can it? No, it can't be. It's these bloody greenies—it's their fault. They're just causing trouble." And you notice it's stable, and it resists the actual impact of direct experience. And you can build an identity and a sense of the world upon it.

So let's look again at Vaccha's questions. You notice that they all revolve around identity—the identity of the universe, the identity of the soul and the body, the identity of the awakened one. And that means they all point to Vaccha's identity. Why is he so caught up in these questions? Because he's personally invested in them.

Now remember, he's a wanderer, a *paribbājaka*. He's someone who has walked away from a secure, high-status life. He came from a wealthy family. He walked away from that in order to resolve the existential questions that are really bugging him. He's got a lot invested in finding the answers to these questions. If he can find those answers, he has justified that rash decision he made many years ago when as a young man he walked out of his normal life. At last he can be at peace, and he can be recognized

among his peers as someone who has successfully resolved the fundamental questions—as opposed to being just a loser who couldn't handle the real world.

But if he cannot resolve these questions, then how can he justify, even to himself, the sacrifices that he's made in pursuing awakening?

So this is why Vaccha is so invested in these questions. And the Buddha can see this. He's keeping his focus on this deeper longing in Vaccha's heart for awakening and for peace.

So the Buddha refuses to engage in a philosophical discussion, which he knows will accomplish nothing at all. Instead, he's pointing to Vaccha's determination to cling to concepts in order to create a world of stable meaning, even if this meaning brings him pain. He's keeping Vaccha's gaze firmly on what is actually happening here and now, not on the theories that he's learned to consider really important.

And this comes out in the language that the Buddha uses. Remember that phrase: "an awakened one has seen this—such his body, such its arising, such its disappearance." In English, it's difficult to get the emphasis that is clear in the Pali. The Buddha is saying that an awakened one doesn't just see, but he sees *t his*. This right here. This sensation, this thought, this feeling.

And this emphasis is reinforced by "such his body, such its arising, such its disappearance." The words he uses for arising and disappearance are the same words you would use for the rising and setting of the sun, which implies natural process. So this body sensation now is arising now as exactly this. It is disappearing now as exactly this.

The Buddha is telling Vaccha to let go of the world that he's created through his concepts and that he takes as real. Instead, learn to live in a world that is defined by the felt actuality of experience, by what's happening here and now. Ground yourself in this felt present experience 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. Then the liberation of the heart becomes possible.

And 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, all constructing of possession, and the underlying potential for separation."

Vaccha wants to know what's going on. And the Buddha is saying, forget about it. This is how liberation comes about.

And this, of course, is what we're practicing when we're practicing mindfulness meditation. We're learning to be mindful, to track our experience over time by being directly aware of each experienced event as it comes and goes. When we do that, for that moment at least, we're not getting lost in our concepts about the world. Instead, we're grounding our awareness in the immediate movements of the world itself. In other words, we're learning to live firsthand, not third hand.

It's rather like someone who is told a story about what their friend is doing and saying. And rather than simply believe it, he goes and checks for himself. This is the practice of mindfulness, where we're interested in what is happening.

What the Buddha is suggesting is that when we are grounded in this practice, we learn to abandon the obsessions that our conceptual world generates. This does not mean that we don't use concepts to develop a wider understanding of the world. But it means that our concepts are grounded in our actual experience. And when we do that, then we come closer to nibbāna.

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