Part 2: Dhamma Talk on the Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 43:12

So this is part two of a long and complicated talk. The first part was last week. This is the discourse to Vacchagotta about fire. I hope you're familiar with last week's discussion, but this is a dialogue between the Buddha and a Brahmin wanderer, Vacchagotta, or simply Vaccha. He was a seeker after truth, and very intellectual. So his search for truth involved exploring the deep philosophical questions of his day and trying to get to some kind of definitive answer. And he comes to the Buddha one day with a series of these questions.

There are 10 of them, which we looked at last time, but they're basically questions about the universe, the nature of the universe, the relationship between life and the body, and the survival of an awakened one after death. We pointed out last week that all of these questions—and these are the big questions of his time—all revolve around identity. What is, for example, the real nature of the universe? What is the real nature of the awakened one?

If you look at what Vacha is doing with these questions, he's searching for certainty. He wants to understand what is really going on because he thinks if he can just get the answer to these fundamental questions, then he will be at peace.

Now, the questions are about identity. And if you look at Vacha himself, we can see that the basis for his obsession with these questions is his sense of his own identity, his own place in the world. He came from a wealthy family of Brahmins. He walked away and joined a heretical sect that rejected the Vedic orthodoxy. He's living as a beggar. Basically, he's a dropout. He's a loser. And he has to be able to justify to himself and to others his abandonment of his family and his career. The only way he can do that is to find the answers to these questions.

It rather reminds us of the Buddha himself when he walked out of his home in search of enlightenment. Think of how frustrating it was after many years of practice that he still had not cracked that problem. Think of what a loser he must have felt, and how utterly wasted his life was—unless he could get that answer. This is where Vacha is. I think it's one of the reasons why the Buddha took an interest in him. He might have looked at his younger self.

So Vacha is going to the Buddha wanting answers to these questions, but the Buddha is refusing to engage with any of them. He just says, "I don't have that view. That's not my view." Because the Buddha's focus is not on theories and doctrines. That's not what he's interested in. He's interested in the felt actuality of our

experience. And he's also interested in our determination to push aside actual experience in favor of holding onto abstract ideologies.

Last week we talked about how, when these two characters are discussing, you get different words being used. It begins with *diṭṭhi*, view. Vacha wants to know, "What's your view on this issue?" And then the discussion shifts to *diṭṭhigata* and *diṭṭha*. *Diṭṭhigata* can be translated as conceptual view or conviction, and this implies something abstract that's constructed out of an experience, which is held onto: "This is the truth." So this is *diṭṭhigata*, conceptual views. And the Buddha speaks of his *diṭṭha*, which is an experiential view.

For example, let's say you're using breathing as a meditation object. You're tracking the experience of your breathing. There's the inhalation, exhalation, inhalation, exhalation. This is *diṭṭha*. This is view. You've got a direct view of what's happening with your breathing. Let's say at the end of the sitting, someone asks, "How was that sitting?" And you say, "That sitting was complete rubbish. I can't do this. I've never been able to do this. I don't know why I'm even bothering to try." That is *diṭṭhigata*. That's conceptual view or conviction.

Do you notice that they're both views? But one of them is grounded on the actual immediate experience. The other is blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah based on the actual direct experience.

So last week, the Buddha was making this distinction clear, talking about a state of liberation. He's pointing out how when we live in our concepts, what we do is create a fixed sense of identity—of me and my world.

And we do this in order to find certainty and stability. We don't realize that it's our very clinging to these concepts—and to the certainty and stability they're supposed to bring us—that creates our pain and our insecurity. So the Buddha speaks of a state of liberation where all these constructions of identity and possession are gone. That's the liberated one, the awakened one, liberated by not clinging.

So this is all last week. But Vaccha does not get it. He doesn't quite get this because he's so caught up in his sense of his own personal drama that he can't make the breakthrough to understand what the Buddha is talking about.

Vaccha says, in effect, "This is great. There's a liberation of the heart through not clinging, but who is the person who is liberated?" The way he asks this question is in the context of life after life, or rebirth. Vaccha takes for granted this idea—basically, you could say something happens next. So it's natural for him to inquire: the practitioner is liberated, then what? What happens next? But the way he frames the question is in terms of the next life. This is natural in the culture of the time. He says, "When a practitioner's heart is liberated in this way, Master Gotama, where does he appear after death?"

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

Again, the Buddha is dancing away from answering this question. But Vaccha goes on with four questions, exhausting the four logical possibilities—something either is, or isn't, or both is and isn't, or it neither is nor is not. He says, "Then the awakened one does not reappear?" Then, "He both reappears and does not reappear?" Then, "He neither reappears nor does not reappear?" These four questions cover all conceptual logical possibilities. Any answer to a question has got to be in there somewhere. But in every case, the Buddha simply says the term does not apply. *Na upetti*—does not apply.

Now what's going on with Vaccha? It's easy to dismiss him as some kind of fool, asking all these philosophical questions while the Buddha is laying out the teaching and he's not interested. But the question is very real. He's putting it in terms of rebirth, but even without rebirth, the question is real. Because if you think about what we're doing here when we practice, each of us is looking for some kind of transformation. Each of us is dissatisfied to some extent with who we are now. We want something different. We want to become someone different.

To the extent that we think about the goal of our practice, the destination of the path, how do we think about it? We think about it in terms of our own identity. What happens to me at the end of all this? I want to be awakened, whatever that means. Then what would that look like? Who would be the awakened me? How would the awakened me live? What happens to the awakened me in the future? What will my friends think about the awakened me? Have you ever thought like that?

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 we have to abandon in order to undergo the transformation the Buddha is talking about. And this is why we actually don't really want to change. Because to change, to transform, we have to let go of everything that is familiar to us and plunge into something entirely unknown. That's why in our practice, fear often arises, and we find ourselves pulling back from the unknown to the familiar sense of who we are. And this is what Vaccha is doing.

So he's caught a vague glimpse of what the Buddha is talking about, but he's still trying to understand it conceptually. And that very attempt is smothering the arising of his insight.

When he asked his ten questions before, the Buddha responded by rejecting the view that was on offer. "What do you think about the view that the universe is eternal?" And for each question, the Buddha said, "I don't have this view." He's just chopping away that view. Now he's rejecting the very question itself. The question itself is wrong. It does not apply.

This always reminds me of a story about a Zen teacher and some philosophers. A friend of mine who's a Zen teacher used to gather weekly with these old retired academics to have spirited discussions about the mysteries of life. Sometimes they would ask questions about Zen. And my friend, being a Zen teacher, would give rather Zen-like answers. This would cause frustration to the retired academics, who had no idea what he was talking about. One of them in frustration one day said, "Why can't you give me a straight answer to my questions?" To which my friend replied, "You cannot give a straight answer to a crooked

question."

The Buddha is doing the same thing here. The question itself is crooked. There is no straight answer to it.

But Vaccha is getting more and more confused. He says, "I don't understand, Master Gotama. I'm confused. Now I have lost the clarity I gained from our previous conversation."

At this point, the Buddha kind of eases off a bit. He explains, "Look, your confusion is perfectly reasonable under the circumstances, given that you come from a very different tradition and what you're trying to understand is very profound and very difficult to see." And then he gives him the fire metaphor. This is at last where we come to the fire.

This dialogue is the key to the whole discourse. The Buddha says, "What do you think, Vaccha, if a fire was burning in front of you, would you know it?"

"I would, Master Gotama."

You can almost feel Vaccha's relief. He's been pounding the Buddha with all these profound philosophical questions, and now the Buddha says, "Let me ask you a question." Vaccha must be thinking, "Oh my God, how am I going to handle this?" But the question is really basic, really straightforward. Imagine there's a fire burning in front of you. Do you know that there's a fire burning in front of you? Well, of course you do.

The next question: "If somebody 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, this 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 somebody asks you, Vaccha, when that fire in front of you goes out, where does it go? Does it go to the east, to the west, to the north, or to the south? What would you answer?"

And Vaccha says, "That does not apply, Master Gotama. The fire burned 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, perception, choices, awareness, and feeling by which one conceptualizing an awakened one conceptualizes him."

We're going to unpack this dialogue because it's really important. We begin with the obvious. That fire in

front of you—can you see it? That screen in front of you—can you see it? The question and the answer are simple, clear, obvious. It's about what's happening right here, right now.

Then the next question: What is it burning? Simple, clear, obvious.

When it goes out—when the fire goes out—can you see that? Again, simple, clear, obvious, immediate.

And then, with the Buddha's next question, everything jams to a stop.

When the fire goes out, where does it go?

This question is completely different. The previous questions are all about immediate experience. This question takes an immediate experience and then conceptualizes it in a way that a metaphor—a fire "going out"—is built upon the experience, and then the metaphor is treated as if it continues to be the immediate experience. But it isn't. It's something completely different.

The Buddha is taking us back to what he was discussing when he distinguished between experiential view and conceptual view. The example we explored last week: experiential view is the direct experience of a rainy afternoon. Conceptual view is when the experience of a rainy afternoon leads me to think about climate change and what we should do about it.

We would call both of these "view." I see outside a rainy afternoon. My view on climate change and what we should do about it is such and such. We use the same word—view—but they are completely different in their nature.

So the fire goes out. Where does the fire go? This question represents entry into the world of concept, where concept is mistaken for felt experience. And this is the world where we normally live. We make this mistake again and again. It's the basis for most of the decisions we make about our lives.

We begin with our actual experience here and now—this is experiential view. And then we slide into networks of 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.

In the dialogue, Vaccha gets it now. He understands that change. When the fire goes out, where does it go? Vaccha is struck by the absurdity of the question, and he says what the Buddha said to him: *na upeti*—it does not apply. Any answer to this question misses what is actually happening. Any answer to this question sends us off in the wrong direction.

What the Buddha is saying is that an awakened one and awakening itself cannot be captured by concepts.

Consider the question, "Who am I?"—which is a popular question. Notice how the question becomes, "Who do I think I am?" And notice how that's a different question.

I am this body—that's a pretty obvious one. This is me. You're looking at me. When you look at the image

of my body, you're looking at me. But if I am my body, what happens to me when this experience of body falls away and is replaced by another experience? Is this a new me? Is it someone else? Is the old me lurking somewhere behind this experience?

Who am I? I am my body. So which body is that? Is it the slim, active version of my youth? Or is it the fat, worn-out version of my old age? Which one? Is it one of the ones in between?

Or let's say I am my feelings—another experience we tend to identify with.

So if I am my feelings, which feeling is that? Is it the feeling that I like this pizza? Or is it the feeling that I don't like a TV show? Which one? Hence the words of the contemporary sage Leonard Cohen: "I don't trust my inner feelings. Inner feelings come and go."

So this is the world of conceptual view, where we normally live and where we normally place our reality. But the more we ground ourselves in experiential view, the less we can believe that our conceptual view is presenting us with what is really going on.

How do we ground ourselves in experiential view? Through the meditation practice. That's what we're doing. The more we are in the actual flow of experience, the less we can take the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves to be true. We can't take them seriously anymore.

These stories about myself that I tell to myself—these stories are not true any more than the fire has gone out to the west. 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.

To get a sense of what the Buddha is getting at here, we'll turn to another concept that he uses quite frequently. He uses the term *nimitta*. This is a Pali and Sanskrit word, a technical term that appears in different contexts. Usually *nimitta* is translated as "sign." A story is like a sign that points toward something else.

For example, this Wednesday night meeting, when it's not online, is normally held at the Buddhist Society of Victoria. Let's say I'm going to that meeting for the first time. I take a taxi and tell the cab driver, "Take me to the Buddhist Society of Victoria." We're heading down the street, and the taxi stops in front of a building. In the front yard, there's a big sign that says "Buddhist Society of Victoria." I think, "Great, I've arrived!" I'm very happy. I get out of the cab clutching my meditation equipment, and then I stand right in front of that sign. I walk around it thinking, "It's a funny place to meditate—rather exposed to the traffic." The meeting's due to start soon, but nobody else is here. What's going on?

Then I notice other people coming, but they walk right past me and go inside a building behind me. That's odd—they're obviously going to the Buddhist Society of Victoria too.

Clearly, I've made a big mistake. The mistake is that I think the sign that says "Buddhist Society of Victoria" *is* the Buddhist Society of Victoria. But it isn't—because it *points toward* the Buddhist Society of Victoria.

Whatever that sign is, it cannot be the Buddhist Society of Victoria, precisely because it's pointing toward it. Do you see that distinction?

Now, this does not mean the sign is not useful. In fact, it's extremely useful. It's what convinced both me and the taxi driver that we had arrived at the right place—and we had. As long as I can recognize the difference between a concept and the lived reality, the sign can help me find what's going on. It can help me navigate toward what's going on.

This is a basic way that the Buddha talks about the role of concepts. In a sense, all stories are false—although as we said, strictly speaking, to say they're false or to say they're true, both don't work. What works is that some stories are useful while others are not useful, and some stories are more useful than others.

If you look at the Buddha's teaching, it's a story. The Buddha is telling us stories. The fundamental story he's telling us is, first of all, that it's possible to live a flourishing life. And secondly, this is how you do it. This is a useful story. It's much more useful than a story about how I am so hopeless that whatever I do will be useless.

And I'm doomed. Now again, that story is neither true nor false. It's just a story. But it's not very useful. It creates suffering.

So some stories are more useful than others. They bring us closer to what the Buddha calls the cessation of suffering—in other words, a fully flourishing life. And also, some stories are closer to the felt reality of experience than others. None of them *are* the felt reality of experience, but some of them are closer to it than others.

For example, I'm in some kind of confrontation and I'm getting very upset. There are two possible stories I could tell myself about this situation. One is: "Right now, I'm very upset, and so I better be careful of what I'm about to say." That's one story. That is probably closer to the felt flow of experience than the story: "This person is my lifelong enemy, and I need to get my attack in first."

So some stories are more useful than others, and some stories are closer to reality than others. But all of them are just stories.

Now, this whole discourse is about nirvana. And so the question becomes: Where is nirvana to be found? This is essentially what the Buddha is talking to Vajra about. And the answer to that question is: nirvana is found here, now, in the direct encounter with the world before we apply any meaning to it. And we practice that direct encounter when we do the meditation. That's what we're doing when we're meditating. We're practicing that relationship, that encounter with the world. We're learning to live in intimacy.

Now, given that it can never be expressed through story—that is to say, it can never be captured through

story—is there anything that we can say about it? This problem very much preoccupies the Zen tradition. So I've got a couple of Zen stories to finish with, just to give a sense of how one tradition deals with this problem: How do we express what's really going on? How do we express awakening?

Let's start with Case 55 of the Blue Cliff Record. This is Daowu's Condolence Call. We have two characters in the story: Daowu—or we can just call him Wu—and his student, Yuan. Wu is a Chan teacher. Yuan is his student. They come from the local monastery. One of the parishioners of the monastery has died, so they've been invited to the funeral. At the funeral in the house, the dead person is in a coffin. The coffin's in the main room and people are coming and paying their respects. So Wu and Yuan go to this funeral, this commemoration. Again, Wu is the teacher, Yuan is the student.

Yuan hit the coffin and said, "Alive or dead?"

Wu said, "I won't say alive. And I won't say dead."

Yuan said, "Why won't you say?"

Wu said, "I won't say. I won't say."

This is the end of the first part of the dialogue. They continue their condolence call, and then they leave. But Yuan is not satisfied. He's a young man full of vigor, and he's not going to let this alone. So halfway back to the monastery, Yuan says to Wu, "Tell me right away, teacher. If you don't tell me, I'll hit you."

Wu said, "You may hit me, but I won't say."

Yuan hit him.

So Wu's on the ground, but he still won't say. Anyway, they get back to the monastery, presumably Wu patches himself up.

And time goes by. Eventually Wu, being an old man, dies. And Yuan is off searching for another teacher.

So the story continues. After Wu died, Yuan went to Shi Shuang and brought up this story. So Shuang is another teacher. Yuan lays this whole thing out in front of him. Shuang said, "I won't stay alive and I won't stay dead." Yuan said, "Why won't you say?" Shuang said, "I won't say. I won't say." At these words, Yuan had insight. He got it.

Did you get it? Would you like another one? Which is equally obscure. But totally clear, like this one.

This also involves two characters, the teacher and the student. The context here is a Chan monastery. The way they lived, twice a year they would do intensive retreat. Each retreat lasted three months—a summer retreat and a winter retreat. So if you're a meditation monk or nun, you did three months intensive retreat, you had three months off, three months retreat, three months off, boom, boom, boom. You could do this for years, for decades. And of course you could wander from monastery to monastery, checking

out different monasteries and different teachers.

In the intervals between retreats, monks and nuns would go off and do other things. They would travel, or study, or teach, or work at different projects.

So our story opens at the end of one of these three-month retreats where the teacher Lo Han is saying goodbye to his students as they leave. He's keeping his eye out for one of them, Fa Yen, because he knows this student is on the edge of insight—he just needs a little push.

When Fa Yen approached, Lo Han said, "Where are you going?" Fa Yen said, "I am on pilgrimage, following the wind." Lo Han said, "What are you on pilgrimage for?" Fa Yen said, "I don't know." Lo Han said, "Not knowing is most intimate." Fa Yen suddenly attained great awakening.

Clear as mud.

What Lo Han is pointing out is that this is where nirvana is found. This is where awakening is found. This. Most intimate. Not any story about this. Just this, here. And this is what we're practicing.

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