

2013-08-25 The Simile of The Raft

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SPEAKERS

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So I'm going to take you on a journey into a particular the world of a particular discourse of the Buddha maybe into into the world of ancient India. And it's a discourse, which has a very famous teaching, which gets quoted many times in the West, often out of context just kind of pulled out and just talk by itself. And that's the simile of the raft. Probably some of you have heard this. And the most common way that simile the raft is presented, is that with the story that kind of comes along with it, and this kind of story, or the narrative is that if a person comes to a river, and needs to cross the river, who's ancient India where there were no, you know, maybe bridges in the same way we haven't today. And so how do you get across the river we have to have a raft. So if you build a raft, and use the raft to get across and then if you get to cross the river, and you then pull the raft out of the water and put it on your back and start walking in through the forest to continue on your travels. Is that wise? and general answer is no, it's not so wise because unless there's a river just a few yards beyond again, because there is, you know, it's just cumbersome to carry a big raft and make your way through the forest. Probably a narrow path, like you do is you use the raft to get across the river, then you leave the raft behind. And in the same way the Buddha said or people nowadays people say the same way, this is how we relate to Buddhism. Buddhism itself can be seen as a raft. And so it has a pragmatic function. But Buddhism is meant to self destruct once you get across the river. You know, and you don't you don't you don't take it with you. You don't carry with you don't you don't burden your neighbors with it by you know, holding on to it. You just leave it behind. Once it's done, it's when it's done once once it's done its job. And so it's a nice teaching, especially for people who like to be kind of not too attached to their religion and, and, and don't feel like they're kind of a little bit religion, Larry. And so to see Well, it's kind of provisional, all this Buddhism, I don't have to really kind of, you know, adopt this creed, I just had to adopt it enough to get me across the river to freedom from suffering. That's usually I think it's probably fair enough, but one of the ways common ways in which it's presented here in the West, some of you have heard it, right, this teachings about the raft. So the discourse I'm going to present about is the discourse where this teaching appears. And it's a little bit of a follow up from last week's talk, where I got feedback from a few people that they didn't understand it. So This one can be just as that is the same fate, if you want to understand it, but to, but to take that into account, what I'll try to do is to let the talk develop slowly. And hopefully the beginning part will be the most understandable and then as you go along if you're able to follow, great, if not, then you've got something at the beginning before you before you're tuned out.

So the way that the simile is concluded the conclusion that the teaching the Buddha wants to get across this is just as the Dharma he teaches is like a raft. So you should let go of dharmas. Here dharmas can be understood as teachings, you should let go of teachings and even more So, wrong teachings, the wrong teaching here in Pali is adhamma. So, whatever teachings you have, you should let go of at some point. So, what is it? What? So why, emphasis on letting go of teaching once it's

done? It's his job, is it because, you know, because the Buddha didn't really wasn't so much into religion and so you should not, you know, get too caught up in it, you should let go of it. Or is there some other purpose or other value or the reason why it's letting go of something that we call teachings. There's a second simile in the same sutta, which is more dramatic. And this is a simile of the snake, which is what gives the title to the sutta is actually called this discourse in the assembly of the snake. And here it says that if you take a poisonous snake and hold it the wrong way, if you hold it by the tail, then it could turn around and bite you and kill you.

And the same way if you hold teachings in the wrong way, they can turn around and harm you as well. If you hold a poisonous snake the right way, if you hold it by the neck, then it can't turn its head around to bite, and then you can be safe. So in the same way, there's a way of holding teachings that makes the teachings say for you that your teachings won't undermine you won't bite you or cause problems for you. Hold the teachings by the neck. And so the so that's a little bit more dramatic. The first one says you know, just like a raft, take it or leave it if you want to get across you know, leave it behind. But here it says that the teachings you take on how you hold them is very important and you can be harmed by it. I think the implication being even even good teachings can be harmful if you hold them the wrong way. If you if you're really attached to the truth. The truth might be good, but yet attachment is, is not good for you. So, two similes that I think are understandable. The reason the Buddha gave the similes was because of a monk with a pernicious view. There was one of his teachers, one of his monks, who is going around saying that what the Buddha calls obstructions are not really obstructions. And that's we're not sure what the what he was referring to. But in context, you'll see we probably have a good idea. And so the other monk said, No, don't say that. In many ways, the Buddha said these things were obstructions and we shouldn't be involved. And he said, No, no, they are not obstructions. The monk said, his name is Rita. And so then the monks went to the Buddha and said, Hey, this guy's saying this stuff. And so the Buddha says, haven't come See me? And so the Buddha says, Is it true that you're saying that what I call obstructions are not really obstructions. And the guy says, How I understand the Buddhist teaching is that what he calls obstructions are not really obstructions. So he's really quoting the Buddha saying, This is what the Buddha teaches. And, and the guy says, Yeah, yeah, that's what I'm saying. And the Buddha, who can be stern in these ancient texts, said, I should quote him, otherwise, I'll get he called him. misguided man. You're a misguided man. And, and then he says, I've actually taught this many ways. I've taught that these are really obstructions. And then the Buddha goes on to say and this is where we Have a sense maybe of what this conflict this issue was about. The Buddha says that one can engage in sensual pleasures without sensual desires without perceptions or conceptions of sensual desire, without thoughts of sensual desire or essential pleasure, that is impossible. So it probably the translation here in English is, I've looked at the Pali it's probably a little bit different, slightly different, and you get a different sense if I translate it for you. It's not possible to indulge in or pursue sensual pleasure without having a desire for sensual pleasure without having concepts of sensual pleasure and without having thoughts about sensual pleasure. So it's not saying that sensual pleasure is bad, in and of itself. But central to pursuit of it requires desire, concepts, ideas, and all kinds, and then also thinking about it in what are you going to do? How many Get it? No, that's right. So probably this monk, remember monks were celibate, was saying that the pursuit of sensual pleasures, maybe even sexual pleasures are not really a problem. They don't they don't really get in the way of a monastic life. And so the Buddha was saying no, I've said many times that for a monastic this gets in the way. So, these are obstructions. And, and then he says this, and this is what he says, you know. So, this is interesting, the idea that sensual, the pursuit, or the indulgent and sensual pleasure requires here, three kinds of mental activities.

And the idea that requires mental activity is very important. It requires desire For conceptions ideas, and requires thinking about it like planning and things like that, focusing on it. They were just be tocom.

And these are mental activities. And what's wrong with mental activities? For someone who's interested in meditation, I think probably all of you know, because you meditated this morning. I suspect that a fair percentage of you had mental activities going on while you're meditating that you wish would quiet down a little bit quicker. You were thinking, maybe not sensual pleasures, but you were thinking about all kinds of things. And you said, you know, you've tried to let go and come back and be focused or be mindful of it, so you wouldn't get caught in it. But you're involved in mental activities probably. And some of you perhaps found that your mental activities quieted down the course of that meditation session. And so the strength of it Quiet down and got a little bit calmer and I mean, not completely calm, but it got calmer. So that movement of being involved in mental activities that keeps us agitated, to letting the mental activities fall away or relax. So we're calm and relaxed, is a primary movement in meditation in Buddhism. And so, as some of you probably know, especially if remember yourself as a teenager the concerns with sensual pleasure can be very active in the mind. And so you know, it's kind of like, you know, maybe then you have a lot of energy so you didn't notice how exhausting it was. But some of you are getting older. So maybe now you give me a break. The and so and so what what here what the Buddha is pointing to is not he doesn't he's not criticizing the monk on moralistic grounds, that sensual pleasures are bad. He's taking him to task because There is mental activities involved, that keeps the mind busy keeps the mind engaged and keeps the mind involved in the world of concepts and ideas. And for someone who's a serious practitioner, there has to be an ability to let that come become peaceful. But here the text gets more interesting. So he says that says this about this mental activities, concepts and tensions and, you know, thinking and then the Buddha switches, whether these two these two similes, that's, you know, the snake. So the way that we relate to thoughts, to desires, to perceptions and concepts, to ideas can be a snake that bites you, or it can be something that doesn't bite you depending on hold on. on it. So it's probably refer to saying this to the monk or Rita. If you hold those kinds of teachings that you're teaching, you're gonna hold them the wrong way. And the whole Dharma that I'm teaching is gonna come back and bite you. And then he talks about the raft. He this monk was so attached to his view, that three different times, other monks went to him and said, No, the Buddha didn't teach that. And he held on tight. He was holding on to his particular raft, even though it was not the Buddha's raft. So the Buddha says this. So it's so here the focus is not the moralistic idea of God, sensual pleasure, but rather, to how we hold on to ideas, concepts and teachings. You with me enough. So, and this is something we see over and over again in the teachings of the Buddha, that in addition to this question, what teachings might be true what teachings might not be true? much more interesting for the Buddha is How people hold on to their teachings. So they have and so what how does that affect our perception of a religious involvement? How are we involved with religion? If the focus is not on the religious truths of the religion, but rather and how we hold them. And we can hold them in ways that they come back and bite and bite us perhaps, or we can hold them away as we carry the raft with us after it's done its work.

So, he gives these two similes. And then the Buddha goes into discussion about views. And views here the word is *ditthi*. And views here can be understood to be teachings, religious teaching, especially because the Buddha was in a world of seekers in ancient time, people who are deeply engaged in searching for some kind of ultimate answers solution liberation in life, and apparently there was a large group of such people in ancient Indian his time and he was one of these wonder wonders and Brahmins and different people engaged in this process. And, and they had different views, different religious teachings that they saw as being ultimate as being the main thing. And so he had to contend he was in this environment. So now he goes into goes into further discussion about views. And what's interesting, he's left far behind this teachings about sensual pleasure. And we see this in other teachings as well. That whatever that the focus on would be called called ethics. As important as it is and teachings of the Buddha, he seems to be sometimes very quick to leave that behind as being kind of, of lesser importance. It's important, but he's clearly not as interested in those things, as he is what's

more important, and in many places, what's more important has to do with how we relate To views, our opinions about how things are the stories we tell ourselves, the concepts by which we understand ourselves. That's much more important. Then. Then our ethics, though ethics is important isn't like we're diminishing, don't bother with ethics. But he kind of quickly wants to go where it's more important for him and this is what he does here. So then the Buddha says, There are six standpoints for views six basic kind of approaches to having religious views ideas, or, and philosophical views. And but the column religious and philosophical views might make you think, well, I don't have to listen now. You know, this is now we're getting to philosophy and, and, you know, I knew it was getting too heady here feels intellectual and, but these are, I think the way that the Buddha understands these, these are more deeply more deeply embedded in the structure of human thinking than simply you know, some philosophy you can read in a philosophy book that underlying sometimes subconscious assumptions about who we are, can fit into these views that he's going to describe. So it's relates to all of us is just a matter of kind of finding how that works. So, here they are, whatever belongs whatever is the physical aspects of human being, the form aspect of your being, people will one way or the other take that, as me, myself and I, this is mine, myself in mind. This is mine, my body is mine seems innocent enough. But the sake My body is mine belongs to the world of concepts. It's a mental activity that we're engaged in to apply. This is mine and we know Now these fascinating studies of people have had certain brain damage and, and they'll look at their hand, and they can't they don't see it as their hand. It's just not their hand. And it seems it's kind of like in I can't quite understand how that could be. Because it's my hand, right? Like, so obvious to me, how could it not? But it's a particular mental functioning, maybe brain functioning, that sees the head as my hand. Is that activity of attributing it to mine? Something we always need to be involved in? Or can that be put to rest? And you know, that's pretty basic, pretty basic, my hand but what about you know, it's all kinds of things my hair. Right, I talked about my hair last week, there was no sort of Monday night. I said I could I could write a blog or Autobiography of my me and my hair. You know, it's a fascinating history of Gil's hair, and all the meanings of it and how I saw myself and how others People saw me and you know, it's uh, so you know, my hair was me, toes mine. And so me and myself in mind, so in many ways people take their body as me myself in mind. And probably all of you have in some way or other done that where your happiness or your suffering was directly tied to identification with some aspect of your body and it was too much this but not enough that of your body in some way.

So that's one view standpoint, reviews that people have. The other standpoint next one that the Buddha offered was one of the primary standpoints is we take our our word, his feelings, but the word is that inner when take I think it's better to maybe call it our, our sensing whatever we sense whatever our sensations are, we somehow identify with those as me myself or mine. And then he went on to say whatever we take as our concepts in through the we take is me, myself and mine. And so, I think in the modern world we can say that you can see people who identify very strongly with concepts, stories, I am this way you are that way and they hold on to that. And then one takes one's mental formations, here, this is a kind of way, once mental activities once thoughts, when ideas once bigger stories, once intentions or the whole inner world of kind of mental activities, when identifies that as being me, myself and mine. And then it kind of drive this home further in the context of ancient India and the kind of beliefs that people had there. The Buddha said, the fifth standpoint for these kinds of fundamental views when regards what is seen heard, sense cognized encountered, sought and mentally pondered, this is mine, this I am. This is myself being myself in mind. And what this is pointing to is in the ancient world. These were people who weren't in deep and meditation, deep spiritual life, who would see things in their meditation see things they would see. or cognize or hear different things that they took as being ultimate. One of the things if you get really quiet and still, people feel they can see the very kernel of a sense of I am ness. And so they like sometimes consciousness is seen this way. Everything else is

impermanent, but consciousness is permanent. And this is who I really am. When we see this consciousness, we see something.

So the last thing that we did here was six views the Buddha gave is, one identifies the or equates the self, your soul, with the world of the universe. And this was an ancient India kind of idea that people had. That Atman is Brahman, that somehow that the course kernel of self or soul, its permanent, everlasting, is somehow identified, or at one with the universal principle, the universal quality of aspect of the universe called Brahma Brahman. And that the goal of spiritual life was to realize the oneness of those things. And, and, and that also the Buddha saw as to come into this idea, this activity, of seeing things as me myself and mine. So what's the alternative? is there is there an other view that the Buddha has. So these are six views that clearly the Buddha is not happy with. And the but before I tell you that in order to add some drama and keep you connected, those of you starting to tune out.

So in these ancient world, there were people who said, Yes, a lot of the time, the ancient Yes, whatever we can see, hear, smell, taste, touch, whatever we can clearly see and perceive, whether it's inside our mind or in the world or anywhere, does not qualify as a real permanent self. This is my soul. But there is a soul there is an odd one that can't be seen. It's there. And the Buddha said, basically he said, Well, if it's can be if it's there, but it can't be seen and known and has no value for you. If he knows what uses it because the world which we suffer and hold on to and cling to, is the world that we can see and think about. So then people got concerned hearing what we had to say, wait a minute.

But then the Buddha says, if a person does not cling, or looks upon all this stuff without seeing it as me, myself and mine, then one will not be agitated about what doesn't exist. So it doesn't exist that these things are truly me myself in mind. But if it doesn't exist, some people got agitated by this teaching, because they it's so important to be someone. And so some monk at that time asked the Buddha can there be agitation about what is non existent? And the Buddhist says yes, you can get agitated but what doesn't exist externally and what doesn't exist internally? What doesn't exist externally externally is interesting here. Interesting. So this is how you get agitated when something doesn't exist externally. Someone does not think I see here. If a person has the following way of thinking, alas, I had it. At last. I have it no longer last May I have it Last, I didn't get it. Then he sorrows, grieves and laments, weeps, beating his breast and becomes distraught. This is how there is agitation, but what is non existent externally? So if something doesn't exist, you can either you know, you can want it or hope for it or you had it and then it goes away. So no longer is there, and so you get agitated. So, you can see, look, we have expectations, we have desires, we have many things that fit into this category. But I think what's also being focused on here, I believe, is that there can also be concepts of a self of a soul that's kind of seen here and this language externally. But if teachings come along and say that, that that is not there, or you've lost it, and it's so important to have it, then person gets agitated.

And then the Buddha goes on and talks about internally. And this is also very, very famous and very important sentence here and also helps begin understanding maybe more deeply what's going on these teachings. someone hears the Buddha teach the Dhamma teach the teachings, the truth for the elimination of all standpoints, obsessions, cleanings and underlying tendencies, for the calming of all mental activity for the relinquishment of all attachments, for the end of craving, for dispassion, for cessation for Nirvana. This is a little summary of the whole purpose of what the Buddha was trying to teach. Were certainly teaching for Nibbana for Nirvana for life. moment. But that process of coming to the kind of ultimate freedom that Buddha talked to talked about, involved, an elimination, relinquishing of all points of view, or philosophical views or ideas of who I am me myself in mind, is that okay? to do that? You know, it's, well, how does one do that in a way that's realistic and appropriate? How do you do it so we don't end up, you know, being homeless maybe or something. But this idea that it's that

letting go of all these views, religious points of view is a pretty radical teaching in a world where adhering to tenants of religion is very important. So someone hears about this and hearing this, the person thinks as follows Oh, no paraphrasing, oh no. I shall be annihilated I shall perish, I shall be no more. So he sorrows grieves and laments, he weeps beating his breast and becomes distraught. This is how there's agitation by what is non existent internally. So when these when is mental activities that are involved with having ideas about me, myself and mine, mental activities of the work or desires or wishes or concepts, when that mental activity quiets down, then there could come the idea of Oh, I'm going to disappear, I won't be here. I'll be annihilated. And that can be but you know, there's nothing to be annihilated to begin with. But we can because of these concepts we think there is. And this is how a person can get agitated by what doesn't exist internally. You're with me enough.

So then, Buddha says you may acquire, you may well acquire a permanent, everlasting, eternal, not somebody could change. You might acquire that possession that thing, something something possession that is permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and might endure as long as eternity. It might happen. But do you see any such possession any such thing? And the monks answer proper properly they say no, we can't find we don't see anything. Like that, there may be but we don't see it. And then the Buddha goes on and says, anybody said Buddha says good, good monks, I too do not see anything that is permanent and everlasting. Monks, you may well cling to that doctrine of self that may not arouse sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair in one who clings to it. But do you see any such strong doctrine of self? No. And the Buddha says, good, because I too, did not see any doctrine of self that would not allow sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair and one who clings to it. So this is interesting that there is no doctrine of self idea of self idea of soul, which doesn't cause suffering if you cling to it. That's quite quite a statement right? And then he says similar thing about views. You may well take as a support that a view a view that would not allow sorrow, limitation, pain and grief. And the one who takes it as a support, but you see such a view? Nope. Good monks, I too do not see any support of use any use that would not arouse sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair in one who takes it as a support. So not just a matter of clinging, but taking it as a support for one's life. That's a kind of radical teaching, right? So remember, last week, I was trying to point to the radical teaching. So it so this is pretty radical. So what's the alternative? Why would he teach this?

So we're running out of time here. So. So one of the reasons this is being taught, is because as long as we're involved in mental activity and clinging to mental activity, that we cannot be at peace. We cannot experience the possibility of being free from clinging, to really be able to free ourselves from clinging in a deep and thorough way. There has to be a letting go temporarily, at least of our involvement in concepts and ideas, past and future, self and other and all these things. And, and this is what the Buddha was pointing to. You might say, well, then I can't take care of myself. The Buddha is just taking care of himself very well right now. He's going into great detail. He's analyzing the teachings of his times. He understands them. He said he's engaged. With taking care of his monastic order, he is doing these things.

But as his teaching goes along, he says that for someone who gets liberated for someone whose mind is liberated, it's not possible. Or it says it says the gods. The gods cannot trace that person's mind. When could not be define or understand or categorize a person who doesn't base their life on concepts and ideas and teachings. So the idea of someone who's liberated it doesn't fit in nicely into the usual way of understanding. And so the gods who somehow have psychic ability that they look into that person's mind, they can't find anything there they can't find someone to measure understand. We might human beings might look at someone externally and say, Well, that's a man, a woman, a monk lay person. But if you go inside into the mind, the mind is free, and the mind is free from adherence to these concepts and ideas, and so, something is untraceable about that, that kind of person. So, I end

with the another, I think, kind of dramatic moment in this text. Therefore, whatever is not yours, abandon it. When you have abandoned it, it will lead to your welfare and happiness for a long time. What did is not yours. Your body is not yours. abandon it. When, when you have abandoned it, that will lead to welfare and happiness for a long time. Feelings are not yours, abandon them when you've abandoned them, that will lead to your welfare and happiness for a long time. concepts are not yours, abandon them. When you have abandoned them, that will lead to your welfare and happiness for a long time. mental activities are not yours, abandon them. When you've abandoned them, that will lead to your welfare and happiness for a long time. Consciousness is not yours. abandon it, when you've abandoned it, that will lead your welfare and happiness for a long time. So what is it like the Buddha has done this as abandoned? All these things, but from a conventional point of view or point of view, he still had a body. He had feelings, he had perceptions concepts, he had mental activities, he had consciousness. So he's certainly not saying you know, like just jettison leaving them in the dump and go around without them. But abandon them I think means to abandon any clinging whatsoever to them. And the adherence to them any dependence on them to be able to have them operate without being dependent on any of them. And if you then if the God in you turns around and looks at your mind, once you've let go abandon all these things, and look into your mind. You also will not find anything there. Isn't that nice? And you can go to the potluck too. So, for those of you who couldn't follow this talk, I apologize. I hope that I hope that the beginning of it but simile of the raft, is, you know something you remember. I think it's a wonderful simile and teaching. Leave the raft behind once it's done its job. Thank you