

Flowing to the Ocean

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July 19, 2025

Keywords: water simile, Pāli Canon, gradual training, saddhā, samādhī, Four Noble Truths, Saṅgha, Dhamma, noble eightfold path, seven factors of awakening

So as we've been exploring a few water similes over the last few hours and practicing, I was doing a little walking out front, just really appreciating the goodness of everyone here in dedicating a beautiful Saturday to some practice together. I was thinking of the phrase that Kim brought forward about drop by drop, the pitcher is filled, or drop by drop, the water jug is filled. These practices together being just such a drop. So we'll end with yet another water simile. And this one, in a way, as I've been listening to my colleagues speaking, I've been thinking and rethinking how this particular way of bringing the water simile into the teaching can be thought of. I guess I won't change too much of what I'm thinking as I go, but I have to bring in some of what's been talked about so far.

This last passage, when we were kind of thinking about how we might do this, I had this sense that I really wanted to bring this passage forward. It's long been something, I guess I could say a favorite, but something that I found really inspiring and moving in the discourses. And just to begin with it, and some of you may have read it over lunch, this is the one that says, just as practitioners, when the rain pours down in thick droplets on a mountaintop, the water flows down along the slope and fills the cleft, gullies, and creeks. And these being full, fill up the pools, and the pools being full, fill up the lakes. The lakes being full, fill up the streams. These being full, fill up the rivers. And these being full, fill up the great ocean.

This is a passage that appears in very similar forms, at least 50 times in the different collections of discourses in the Pāli Canon. Frequently, it ends with one additional line, having said this being full, that is the rivers being full, these fill up the great ocean. It'll end, and that's the fuel or the nutriment for the ocean. This is how the ocean is filled up. So we can maybe keep that phrase in mind.

One of the things the meditation allows us to do and allowed us to do today was to take these evocative phrases and let them sit in the meditation and just see what happens, how

they can be part of how we meet the next moment in the meditation. I think that's their purpose in a way. They're not just didactic tools or pedagogical technique. They're meant to land in the meditating mind and go to work in ways that may be mysterious and yet point onward. So we could look at a couple of these other contexts that this same phrase turns up in. You've probably already noticed that water, as water, doesn't mean the same thing in these similes.

It actually means very different things. It's used because of its natural qualities and the way it, I like to think of the way it shows up in the world, the way it moves, the way it lives in the world. This is what keeps being drawn upon in these similes. So in another discourse, and I won't give the numbers of these, but this is a discourse from the numbered discourses, this is said. Practitioners, when four times are rightly developed, they gradually lead all the way to freedom. Which four? A time for listening to the teaching, a time for discussing the teaching, a time for serenity, and a time for discernment.

I'll just say those again. Time for listening to the teaching, time for discussing the teaching, time for serenity, and a time for discernment. It's like when the heavens rain heavily on a mountaintop, and the water flows downhill to fill the hollows and crevices and creeks, and these becoming full, fill up the pools. The pools fill up the lakes, the lakes fill up the streams, the streams fill up the rivers, and as the rivers become full, they fill up the ocean. In just this way, when these four times are rightly developed, they gradually lead to the end of suffering.

So I hope you notice that this is what we're doing today: a time for listening, creating a time for listening to the teachings and discussing the teachings, a time for serenity in the meditation, a time for discernment as we notice what happens as we meet the moment, as we find ourselves in these floods, as we cling to the raft of the teachings. Maybe not cling is the wrong word, as we build a raft from what we have available and meet the flood with it. So another passage, and one that's in the quote sheet, says, practitioners, suppose the heavens rain heavily on the mountaintop and water flows downhill to fill the hollows, crevices, and creeks, and these becoming full, they fill up the pools. The pools fill up the lakes. The lakes becoming full fill up the streams, and the streams fill up the rivers. And as the rivers become full, they fill up the ocean.

In the same way, a noble disciple has experiential confidence in the Buddha, in the Dhamma, that is in the teachings, and in the Saṅgha, and in the ethics loved by the noble ones. These things flow onwards too, and after crossing to the far shore, they lead to the ending of suffering. So here we have something that has been referred to earlier, I think, by Kim, that

something that gathers in the practice is this experiential confidence in the possibility of becoming awake, in the teachings that point in different ways to that possibility and give us some ideas about how to practice, and the Saṅgha, a community of practice including this one here, and the sort of virtuous conduct that characterizes the Saṅgha. So, in a way too, this same phrase, this idea of this movement of water downhill toward the ocean can capture these, maybe some of the deepest aspirations we have for our practice, to be awake, to engage with the teachings, to commit ourselves to practice together in a community where virtuous conduct creates a safe space to be. A high bar, something that perhaps is a farther shore, and one might ask, how do we get there? And perhaps this gradual training that's been referred to today is a way we get there.

And in another quote that we passed out, the gradual training or a way of training that certainly has this gradual aspect to it was presented and it says, so when a factor, when associating with good persons is fulfilled, this fulfills the factor of listening to the true teaching. And when this factor is fulfilled, it fulfills the factor of saddhā, of confidence or faith that Kim spoke of. This fulfills the factor of the rational application of mind, the engagement of mind with the teachings. This fulfills the factor of mindfulness and situational awareness, and this, that of sense restraint. This factor once fulfilled, fulfills the factor of three kinds of good conduct and four kinds of mindfulness meditation. These being fulfilled, fulfill the factor, fulfill the seven awakening factors. And when the seven awakening factors are fulfilled, they fulfill knowledge and freedom. This is the fuel for knowledge and freedom. That's how they're fulfilled.

You might say that it's like when the heavens rain heavily on the mountaintop. The water flows downhill to fill the hollows, crevices, and creeks. They become full and fill up the pools. The pools fill up the lakes, the lakes, the streams, the streams, the rivers. And as the rivers become full, they fill up the great ocean. That's the fuel for the ocean. That's how the ocean is filled up.

So one more context. The last one. Within the training, there's the meditation practice. And in some places in the texts, this wonderful simile, which I hope you're getting a flavor and taste for, perhaps a love for, is used to describe one aspect of how the meditation works. There's a particular group of five aspects of the meditation that, or descriptions of the meditation that are sometimes called the gladness pentad. And they go something like this, again, within a larger context of how practice toward awakening happens: that with confidence or faith, saddhā, as a proximate cause, gladness develops, gladness arises. With gladness having arisen, or as a proximate cause, energetic joy arises. As this energetic joy is developed,

tranquility arises. As tranquility becomes present, energetic contentment arises. And with this energetic contentment as proximate cause, *samādhi*, the stillness of mind, of deep meditation, accompanied with a feeling of ease, as proximate cause, knowledge and visions of things arising and passing arises.

Just as bhikkhus, just as practitioners when rain pours down, in thick droplets on a mountaintop, flows down along the slope to fill clefts, gullies, and creeks, filling up pools and lakes and streams, filling up rivers, filling up the great ocean. One monk practitioner has even related each of these five aspects of the pentad with the simile, saying, for example, there's a lot of different ways one could do this, but I like that it can be done. It's available somehow when this passage that occurs again and again is put against different aspects of the path. That water flowing down the slope, filling clefts, gullies, and creeks might be like the gladness that arises in meditation. When that becomes full, it fills up the lakes. And this kind of energetic enjoyment of the practice or of the meditation can be there. He relates the filling of the streams to the gathering of tranquility in the practice, to the growing of rivers, to the deep contentment that can develop in meditation. In the great ocean, he connects to *samādhi* or to this stillness of mind in the meditation, collectiveness of mind.

So just to sum up, this passage occurs in a lot of different places, and I've just kind of cherry-picked, and there are many other ways that it works, I think. But at least in these four ways, describing the kind of thing we're doing today, is gathering together to take the practice seriously, do some of what we call study and practice. It captures in other places the deepest aspirations of practice and sort of the ultimate objectives of practice. It captures the gradual training and how it progresses. And it captures aspects, too, of the meditation practice that is in a sense the heart of the training. So I can go on and on, but I won't. I don't. Turning instead to just some observations about how this passage works and hopefully tying it in a little bit with things I've been hearing today from Kim and Diana and Yang.

Sort of related to things that Diana brought up, the first thing I'd mention is that this provides, maybe in contrast a little bit, to the earlier way that water turns up in these similes, quite a positive view of the practice. And Kim pointed to this too in her comments, that there's this sense in which this is a counterpoint, or can be in our practice, I think, to some of the way we tend in practice frequently to go looking for trouble instead of resting in, enjoying, leaning into some of the sort of natural positive movement of the practice, the filling of a jug drop by drop, for example. And as Kim also pointed out, this along the same lines of this sort of positive message is this message that little things make a big difference. Occasionally they appear as fat droplets falling on the mountaintop. But usually there just could be just a little

shimmer of rain, but it too gathers into larger currents of water flowing inevitably downhill toward the great ocean.

So it's nice to think sometimes when we're wondering where it all goes or whether this particular sit, which was so challenging, for example, whether it helps, whether it makes a difference. This, it doesn't provide maybe reassurance, but it provides, I think it helps build that experiential confidence that, oh yeah, this sit too. One of our teachers says no moment of mindfulness is ever wasted, implying in a sense that they're cumulative in something like this fashion. It doesn't appear in the suttas as far as I know, Diana. Kim, Yang may correct me. But this is a little bit similar to another water simile, which we sometimes use, which is to comment on how something snowballs. But I don't think on the Gengetic plain snowballs were sort of handy for the creation of similes. But there too, you get the sense of little bits and some momentum creating force that over time can, in that case, I guess, be kind of destructive, but in the case of our similes, can be positive and constructive.

So a second observation is just about that momentum, that something that happens here that's not so much part of the jug metaphor, for example, where there's still drop by drop, is a sense of momentum here, of force gathering, of inevitable almost movement toward an objective, a goal, an end. And we might now recognize that there is a larger force that helps that water downhill, or of which it's that downward movement of the hill, downward movement of the water, the hill doesn't move down, downward movement of the water is drawn down by gravity. And I did just a little looking around. Ideas about gravity seem to appear in India later, only about the same time they do in the rest of the ancient world. And so this kind of natural downward flow of water, which was obvious, and there was some recognition of a hydrological cycle at work, but seemed to be understood not as an effect of gravity, but as a reflection of a natural tendency of all things to move toward the center of the Earth, which, okay, is like some understandings of gravity.

I'm not going to say much about gravity because Kim's a physicist, and I know there's a lot of different competing understandings of gravity at different scales, but I don't know anything about it. I'm not going to say anything about that. But the thing I love about it is that I think there was a way in which some of that downward movement was a mystery. And maybe some of that mystery, unless you know something about physics of gravity at different scales, I mean, maybe something, maybe there's less mystery now to it. But I like the idea because it kind of reflects something, echoes something that was said earlier, that it's not that important to understand exactly how it works. It's enough to know that it works. And that's where that confidence comes from. This understanding that, this observed phenomenon in

nature of water moving downhill is like practice in the way that we can trust that it is going to happen.

You pour drops of water on a mountaintop, and there's a knowing, an understanding, just from having observed it many times, that it will eventually go downhill, and some understanding that its ultimate resting point, at least maybe observed resting point, is the ocean. There are a couple other things that appear in the suttas, and here I move away from water for just a minute, that have this same kind of sense of inevitability. And one that I love in a sutta from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, it's called the simile of the sun, Saṃyutta Nikāya 56.37. And it says, practitioners, the dawn is the forerunner and precursor of the sunrise. In the same way, wise view is the forerunner and precursor of really deeply penetrating the Four Noble Truths. A practitioner with wise view can expect to truly understand this is suffering. This is the arising of suffering. This is the cessation of suffering. This is the practice that leads to the end of the suffering. This is why you should practice meditation.

So in here too there's a sense of that same kind of, it's kind of a mystery. Again, ancient Indians understood that among other things, the earth was a sphere and that there were planets, but they didn't understand the exact working of perhaps dawn and sunrise. But here too there's that same sense of from observation, we know that getting to the end of this path, once you've started and committed to it and practice with a true heart, it's sure to lead you to awakening as dawn will lead to the sunrise. I also like how it subtly says, if you get too caught up in philosophizing or different views of physics, just meditate.

So final general observation is about direction. And because we're focused on water today, I won't spend much time. There's some sort of different views on what the mountain in this simile is about, what it means. But because we're focused on water, I thought I'd say just a couple things about what the ocean might represent. And this might refer to, you know, might have some bearing on the earlier question and discussion about what's the distant shore, what's the far shore, what's the near shore. Kim and I both sort of answered with riddles, like there's no far shore. I pull one rug out from underneath, and then Kim said there's no near shore. So there's no rug anywhere. But yeah, what is the ocean?

And it's interesting, and I sort of didn't look around at length, but in Saṃyutta 3.25, or no, sorry, it's in the Aṅguttara Nikāya, there's a sutta that talks about the ocean. And it goes something like this. On one occasion, the Buddha was dwelling at Varanaja at the foot of Naluru's neem tree. And then Paharada, ruler of the Asuras, approached the Blessed One, the Buddha, and paid homage to him, stood to one side. And the Blessed One said to him, Paharada, do the Asuras take delight? The Asuras are a form of being in the great ocean. And

Paharada says they do. And the Buddha asks, How many astounding and amazing qualities do the Asuras see in the great ocean for which they take delight in it?

I'm not going to read all eight, but these are the ones that stood out to me in the context of our exploration today. They say, the great ocean, Bhante, teacher, slants, slopes, and inclines gradually. It doesn't drop off abruptly. The great ocean is stable and does not overflow its boundaries. And when great rivers, the Ganges, the Yamunā, the Aciravatī, the Sarabhū and the Mahī reach the Great Ocean, they give up their former names and designations and are simply called the Great Ocean. Besides this, the Great Ocean has but one taste, the taste of salt. And even more, the Great Ocean contains many precious substances, numerous precious jewels and gems such as pearls, gems, lapis lazuli, conch, quartz, coral, silver, gold, rubies, and cat's eye.

The Buddha responds that this is like the practice of the Dhamma and the awakening that it leads to. And he says, just as Paharada, the great ocean slants, slopes, and inclines gradually, not dropping off abruptly, so too, this Dhamma, this discipline, this penetration of final knowledge occurs by gradual training, gradual activity, and gradual practice, not abruptly. As Kim said earlier, this is a practice of drop by drop filling the water jug. The Buddha says, just as when great rivers reach the ocean, they give up their names and designations and are simply called the great ocean too. When members of the four social classes, Khattiyas, Brāhmaṇas, Vessas, and Suddas, go forth into practice, they give up their former names and clans and are simply called practitioners. The Buddha continues that just as the great ocean has but one taste, the taste of salt, so too this practice, this Dhamma and discipline has but one taste, the taste of liberation. And finally, just as this great ocean contains many precious substances, numerous jewels such as pearls, cat's eye, etc., so too this Dhamma and discipline contain many precious substances: the four establishments of mindfulness, the four right strivings, the four bases of psychic potency, the five spiritual faculties, the five powers, the seven factors of enlightenment, the noble eightfold path. This too is an astounding and amazing quality that practitioners come to see in this Dhamma, this discipline, and the freedom to which they lead.

Interesting here, seems to me, given what we talked about earlier today, is just that where all this practice flows, where all this goodness, where all these drops flowing down the mountain to the ocean, is this great ocean of practice and awakening. And much as we had in the very first simile, and as we've said each of us in different ways, the practice itself has freedom in it. And that seems to be, to me, one of the ways to read this simile of water as we find it in the ocean. So why don't we sit together a little bit? I'll just do a little guidance that draws

on some of this last simile, and hopefully brings to bear some of the other teachings on the other similes today.

We can take our posture and bring our eyes down. We'll only sit for about 20 minutes, so we won't do any extensive movement. We'll just be sitting a little shorter. And we might, as we kind of bring attention to what's here and now, the various resources that we have at hand to build our, to construct, to fabricate our raft of practice, maybe we just notice the breath happening and we use it for an anchor, for a way to return attention to here and now when that seems like a necessary return. And maybe we can just bring to mind some of our intention in coming here today as we get toward the end of the day, this commitment to come together, to listen to the teachings, to share in the teachings, to share practice in a community of practice.

We can maybe bring to mind some of our aspirations for the practice that in meeting our experience as it is, as it arises, we can be freer in it. That we can let this freedom grow drop by drop as the water jug is filled and overflow to benefit others with experiential confidence that it just gets replenished. It's not diminished by sharing. We can maybe make an internal bow to this practice that helps us live these aspirations day to day and recognize that at the heart of that practice in the meditation process we can lean into whatever goodness arises, whatever stillness is available. We can enjoy the pleasantness of the meditation. And we can have confidence that these little actions that we take to meet our suffering, to meet our experience, without judgment, without a lot of pushing, pulling, doing, that they make a difference for ourselves, make a difference in the world.

That there's a momentum in our practice. We can ride that momentum. We are riding it. We can just notice that, lean into, enjoy that momentum, sense of being carried along, and maybe bring to mind a sense of direction that this practice leads to deep ease here and now, leads to a deep ocean of wisdom and wise action, ocean with this one taste of freedom. I've repeated this last simile several times, and I want to do one more time as we meditate. Just let it fall into practice. Remember, as you hear it, as it lands, that from coming here today to our big aspirations for practice, to the training we undertake, to the meditation that we trust to help us toward freedom, there's this sense of inevitability. There's this sense of inevitability. We can trust in it, we can be sure in it, because we've been reminded in these discourses that this practice is like when the heavens rain heavily on a mountaintop and those raindrops flow downhill to fill hollows, crevices, and creeks. And as those hollows, crevices, and creeks become full, they fill up the pools. The pools fill up lakes and the lakes' streams. The streams fill up rivers, and as the rivers become full, they fill up the ocean. That's the nutriment for the

ocean. That's how the ocean is filled up.

So I guess before we move to walking, I'll just say again that when these similes first came into being and were associated with the teachings, they would have been heard again and again. They would have been memorized probably and chanted, and they would have occurred again and again in practice, and maybe they would have provided a way to think about, they would have come to mind when challenges were met in life or in the meditation practice, or they would have reminded one that little, that drop by drop, the water jug of goodness in the practice is filled, or of the inevitable outcome of good practice. And so, hopefully this exploration today will give you some tools. You might take photographs or we have a few more copies of the things. I used to sometimes read a passage before I sat in meditation or just have it kicking around so that it could turn up in meditation as needed, as useful. And hopefully you'll find that these passages, these similes, or others like them can actually support your practice and find ways into your practice that are supportive for it.

So we'd like to now walk for about 15 minutes, and then we'll come back here at 3:30 and we'll do some more question and question, or question and answer, possibly. Questions, certainly there will be. Answers, we'll see. So question and discussion. Anyway, enjoy the walk, the walking meditation. We'll be back here at 3:30.