

Murderers, Vipers, & Floods, Oh My!

July 15, 2013

There's a sutta where the Buddha gives a very extended analogy for the practice. He starts with a man being presented with four vipers. The man is told he has to care for them: feed them, bathe them, lift them up, put them back to sleep. "You have to do this time and again," they say. "And if any of these vipers gets provoked with you, you'll meet with death or death-like pain." So the man runs away.

Then he's told that five murderers are following him right on his heels with the thought that whenever they can catch up with him, they'll kill him. So he runs away even more. Then he's told there's a sixth murderer, someone who used to be an intimate companion but now has his sword raised and is ready to slice off the man's head.

The man keeps running until he gets into an empty, deserted village. He goes around the village, as people would do in those days, to check out what treasures might have been left behind when the village was deserted. But everything he looks at is totally empty, void, hollow. Every house is empty, void, hollow. Every pot is empty, void, and hollow. Then he's told that village-attacking bandits are about to attack the village. So again, he has to run away. He finally gets to a stream. He sees that this shore of the stream is dangerous, but the other shore is safe. He has to cross the stream, so he does that by putting together a raft. And, using his hands and feet to swim, he gets across to the other side—finally to safety.

The four vipers stand for the four properties of the body, which are always ready to be provoked. The five murderers, of course, are the five aggregates; the sixth one is passion and delight, ready to cut off your head. It's something intimate, but it's ready to cut off your head at any time. The empty village stands for the sense organs. The bandits attacking the village stand for the objects of the senses. The raft stands for the noble eightfold path, and the far shore, of course, stands for nibbana. The near shore stands for self-identity. Everything you identify with is there. The five aggregates and the four elements, the sense spheres, everything that's you or yours: That's all on the near shore, and you create your self-identity out of that.

But notice the stream that you cross. It's not a smooth lake; it's got a strong current. It stands for what they call the fourfold flood. That's the flood of sensuality, the flood of views, the flood of becoming, and the flood of ignorance. In other words, as you practice the path, it's very easy to get swept away by any of these things.

So don't think that when you sit here with your eyes closed, you'll just float your way over to nibbana. The dangers are not only on this shore; they're also on the river you have to cross.

Take the flood of sensuality. You sit here and all of a sudden you find yourself thinking of all the different sensual pleasures you'd like to get engaged in—things you're missing right now. And you can embroider them with all kinds of details that make them appealing. The Buddha calls these thoughts sensual resolves: your plans for sensual pleasures. You'd like this, you'd like that. You can cook up all kinds of narratives around how nice it would be to get this pleasure, how nice it would be to get that pleasure. And your attachment to this kind of thinking pulls you away. That's one thing that keeps you from getting across to the other shore.

The antidote there, of course, is to look at the downside of those pleasures. First, just look at how much your sensual pleasures and plans are lying to you. There's that great story in Ajaan Lee's biography about the time he was a young monk and was feeling tempted to disrobe. He goes up into an empty spot in the chedi at Wat Sra Pathum in Bangkok. He makes his plans: how he's going to disrobe, what lay life is going to be like. And at first, the story is really amazing. He gets an ideal wife from a noble background and lands a good job. He gets a kid. But then reality sets in. The wife is not all that healthy. After all, she came from a noble background; she's not used to having to work. She dies. And things just go downhill from there, until he says, "Gee, I wish I hadn't disrobed." Then he reminds himself, "Well, no, I haven't disrobed. Here I am!" Simply by being truthful to himself, he

began to realize, with all the sensual pleasures he was planning and thinking about: All that thinking and planning was a lie.

Notice that when the Buddha's talking about sensuality, it's not the objects that are the problem. The problem is the stories that we like to create around them. We're really, really attached to our story-making. But still, we have to look at the downside and that includes looking at the downside of the objects. The human body is the number one sensual attraction. We start out being attracted to our own bodies—attached to them—and then from there, we go on to other people's bodies.

So we have to turn around and look at our bodies. This is why the Buddha has that meditation on the 32 parts of the body. Or he had 31; the Commentary added another one. But there are not just 32. A lot of parts are missing in the list, and you can add any parts you like that help remind you that this body you've got here, if you take it apart and look at all the different parts, is pretty disgusting. The clothing you use: If you wore it for several days at a time, you couldn't stand it. You'd have to wash it. And it's not from the dust outside; it's from all the sweat and other stuff that comes oozing out through the skin. So this contemplation is one of the weapons you use against that flood of sensuality that comes washing over you while you're sitting here and meditating.

Then there's the flood of views. Number one is, "What are you doing here, sitting here, just doing nothing with your mind? Can't you be doing something more creative?" Okay, what about the creations? What do they accomplish? And what is this voice? Where is it pushing; where is it coming from? There are lots of views that could get you to give up the practice, especially if you're born in the West. Lots of our cultural values push us away from the Dhamma, push us away from really trying to look deeply into ourselves. We've got a lot of those voices within us that we identify with, and they've got lots of clever arguments. But don't think that people raised in Buddhist countries don't have similar problems. They've just got difference voices—different ways of getting pulled away from the practice based on views of one kind or another.

So you've got to have good arguments against them. If they're going to be stubborn, you have to be stubborn, too. Sometimes they refuse to divulge why they want you to do something. They simply adopt a threatening or a seductive tone and insist that you've got to do it. You say, "Well, I'm not going to listen to you until you give me a good reason." They'll try to push you. They'll yell at you, they'll get into your breath, and from there they'll get into the hormones of the body and make it seem like you can't stand to sit here. As they say in Thai, those voices will put a squeeze on your nerves. But you've just got to be stubborn. "I need a good reason for why I should stop meditating." And when they finally offer a reason, ask yourself: Is this going to take you any place you've never been before? The meditation promises to take you all the way to the other side of the river where you've never been. And the people who stand there, beckoning you: They're reliable people.

This is one of the reasons why the ajans in Thailand stress so much the principle of practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, and not in accordance with your views. There are so many people in the West who say the Buddha tells you to trust yourself, rely on yourself, don't believe anything you don't already agree with. But he never really said that. He did say that you have to test things for yourself, but you also have to take into consideration the counsel of the wise—because after all, your perceptions can really be skewed, especially around the area of sensuality.

There's that great passage where he talks about the leper. The leper sits there and takes a stick, heats it in the fire and then, when the stick is nice and hot, cauterizes his wounds with the stick because it feels good. Why does it feel good? Because as the Buddha said, his perceptions are skewed. If he were actually cured of leprosy, would he take a stick, put it in the fire, and stick it on his skin? No way! And does it really help his wounds? His wounds just get more and more festered. It feels good for a bit, but the wounds get worse down the line. And again, it's all because of his skewed perceptions.

The Buddha said that this is what people who are attached to sensuality are like. And only if you're beyond sensuality can you really trust yourself. This is why we need guidance when the Buddha talks about taking yourself as your refuge. He doesn't stop with that

statement. He immediately adds, take the Dhamma as a refuge, and he equates the two. That means turning yourself into Dhamma—taking the Dhamma as your pattern for who you want to be.

That, of course, connects with the third flood, which is becoming: the sort of person you want to be, the sort of world you want to inhabit. Do you want to inhabit the world of artists? Do you want to inhabit the world of lawyers? Do you want to inhabit the world of... whatever? At the very least, the Buddha says, you can take on the identity of a meditator. Be a good meditator, but watch out for what happens when you get tied up in your self-identity.

There's a really fine passage where he talks about the practice of a person of integrity as opposed to the practice of a person of no integrity. The person of no integrity is constantly comparing himself with other people. If his virtues are better than others, he exalts himself over that. If he lives in the forest, whatever his ascetic practice, he exalts himself over that. That's what it means to be a person of no integrity. You can do the things. You can do the practices. You could even get in the very high stages of jhana and yet still be a person of no integrity because you're constantly building a sense of self-righteousness that you use as a bludgeon against other people. Or even if you just think it—"I'm better than those people"—there! You've missed the whole point.

As the Buddha says, the person of integrity is one who realizes that even if you've attained something like this, as soon as you start building an identity around it to compare yourself with other people, the basis has already changed. Build a basis around a nice state of concentration and start getting proud of it? The concentration's gone; the value of that practice is gone. So you have to be very careful. You have to learn how not to create a sense of self, of your identity around these things. That's how you get to the other shore. There can be a provisional sense of self as you gain the pride and satisfaction that comes from just mastering things—you're able to do something you couldn't do before—but when you start comparing yourself to other people, that's when it gets bad. So watch out for that flood.

And then finally there's the flood of ignorance, which covers all the other things that are going to come washing over you as you practice, all the wrong ways of paying attention to things that don't view those things in line with the four noble truths. You've got to stand firm. Keep paddling away. You hold onto the raft. Of course, we know that once you get to the other side, you can let go of the raft. But while you're practicing, you've got to hold onto your concentration. If it starts seeming dumb to be sitting here and not thinking anything, remember: It's a skill. It needs to be protected. You have to watch out for it, to look after it. There's that phrase where the Buddha talks about protecting your mindfulness by putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Okay, there are lots of things out there in the world that are going to pull you away saying, "This would be better; that would be better." Or, "This is something you want to get upset about." You have to learn how to inure yourself to these things. To protect yourself. And that's a skill. It requires questioning all the values you've picked up from the world.

That's how you make yourself your own refuge, your own island: by taking everything—all the aggregates that are usually used to make your sense of self—and turning them into the path. That's what will get you over to the other side. You have to realize that even though there are lots of dangers on this shore and you don't want to stay here, still you're going to have to face a lot of dangers as you practice, things that'll pull you away. They'll pull you back to the shore and carry you down, as the Buddha said, to the rapids and whirlpools of sensuality, becoming, views, and ignorance.

So you always have to be vigilant as you practice. Don't think that as soon as you propose the idea to the committee of the mind, "Hey, let's meditate!" everybody in the committee will chime in and say, "Yes, that sounds great." We've all had opposition in our internal committees. The important thing is to realize that you don't have to identify with the opposition. It's normal, it's going to keep on resisting, but you don't have to identify with it. As the Buddha said, these currents are strong but they can be overcome. There is that safe shore. And all the people who get there were people on this shore before. It's not like they were born superhuman. They simply had a really strong sense of the dangers here

and a willingness to face the dangers that you encounter on the path—with the support from the Buddha. We talk about taking refuge in ourselves and at the same time, taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. It's all the same thing because you take them all as examples you want to emulate. Without the examples, where would you gain any idea of how to do this?

This is why the Buddha said the whole of the practice is admirable friendship. It's not that the admirable friend is going to do the practice for you. It's simply that, because we have the Buddha as an admirable friend, we know that this can be done. We have his guidance. We have his example. And we have the Sangha to show that the Buddha wasn't the only person who could do it.

So make yourself a member of the noble Sangha. That's when the refuge will be inside you, and you can be an example to others. That's where all these versions of refuge come together.