

## *The Flood of Views*

*April 19th, 2020*

The simile of the raft is one of the Buddha's most famous similes. You take the raft to go over the flood and then when you get to the other side you leave it there. You don't carry it around on your head. It's well known. It reminds us not to hold on to views when they're no longer necessary.

But one aspect of the simile that's often overlooked is the flood. The Buddha said it's the fourfold flood: the flood of sensuality, becoming, views, and ignorance. And yet that raft, the noble eightfold path, made out of the twigs and branches on this side of the river, also includes right view. So there are certain views you use to get over the flood of views. And it's important that you learn how to distinguish the two.

We live in a society where people define themselves by their views. A lot of them are based on the fact that we're staking out our territory. We're feeding off a limited range of resources, and there's a sense of competition for territory. Think about that image in Kurt Vonnegut's novel, *The Sirens of Titan*, of the harmoniums of Mercury. In his vision, Mercury is a huge honeycombed crystal with one side always facing the sun and the other side always facing outer space. Because of the difference in temperature, the crystal is always humming. And these little harmoniums—they're shaped like kites with little suction cups on the corners, a little bit translucent—don't feed off of one another, they feed off the vibrations of the crystal. So: an infinite source of food, no need to compete. They send messages to one another. The messages are two. One is, "Here I am, here I am, here I am," and the other one is, "So glad you are, so glad you are, so glad you are." That's what life would be like if we didn't have to feed on one another, if we didn't have to compete.

But even though we compete, if we want any happiness we have to learn to cooperate. We have to learn to get along with one another. We also have to watch out for that flood of views inside even when it's not an issue of other people's views. There are a lot of views that will sweep us down the river, to more and more becoming, which means more and more suffering. We need to focus on the views that will get us across: such as the view that skillful actions need to be developed, that unskillful actions need to be abandoned. Suffering and stress should be comprehended, their cause should be abandoned, their cessation should be realized, and the path to their cessation should be developed. Those are the views that get us across.

As for other views, we have to learn how to let them go because they'll pull us downstream. You don't want to get off the raft. If something comes floating down the river, no matter how attractive it looks, you have to watch out. If you get into the river, there are logs that come under the surface of the river and they can knock you out.

I knew a family in Thailand where the father had died years before. They'd been living on a raft on the side of the river, and one day there was a big flood. Their baby child, the youngest in the family, fell off the raft into the flood. The father had to jump in the river to save the child. He managed to do it, but while he was in the water, a huge log coming under the water rammed him in the ribs, and two days later he died.

Now, that was a case where he had no choice. He had to go in the river. But for a lot of us, we have the choice, especially now that people have a lot of free time, they get online, they have lots of opinions to share. Then once their opinion is challenged, it's hard to let go because they feel they're giving in to other people.

This is why seclusion is such an important part of the practice: physical seclusion, getting away from other people; mental seclusion, getting some distance between yourself and your cravings. In other words, an idea comes up in the mind and you can ask yourself: Is this part of the path? Or is this going to sweep me down? No matter how right the opinion might be, remember that there are a lot of right opinions about all kinds of topics, but they're not right view. They may be right about the world, but if you hold on to them you get into trouble.

I noticed this a decade ago in Thailand. Prior to that, very few Thai people really took their political opinions all that seriously. People got along fairly well. But then a certain politician came in and quickly the country was very divided. People were either on one side or the other. Families split over whether this particular politician was good or bad. They had a phrase, it's hard to translate into English: basically that two people each became exposed wires. When they met, there'd be this huge electric shock. And so that was the phrase: "This person comes from another wire." He or she had an opposing opinion. Families broke up; friendships ended.

It's when people can't talk to one another like this that all kinds of things can happen in society. There are people who are all too happy to take advantage of divisiveness in society, which is why we have to be careful about our opinions. It's hard to work together, and this is a time when people need to learn to cooperate. But if you hold on hard to your opinions, cooperation is hard.

When we built the chedi at Wat Dhammasathit, I had to work with a lot of people who came from backgrounds very different from mine, and otherwise I

would never have met them or gotten to know them. We worked closely together, we worked on a common cause, and there developed a strong sense of family. Every now and then, though, I'd get to know their opinions about certain things and I was really shocked. These were good people. Why did they have opinions like that? I realized that their goodness was more important than their opinions, so I let the issue go. We had a common cause to work on.

In the same way, we should want to keep society together because it's so easy for our society to break apart. You start out with the social distancing, you start out with differing opinions, people get further apart physically, further apart mentally. How are they going to work together? Physical separation can end easily, but if you hold on to the things that separate you mentally, it's as if you're in different worlds. Cooperation is difficult.

So try to sort through your opinions. Which ones are really important to hold on to in terms of putting an end to suffering, to make you more skillful, and which ones can you let go for the sake of something more important? You don't have to define yourself by your opinions. So try to get some seclusion. Try to get away from a lot of discussions. When you're with yourself, you can be more objective. There's no sense of territory and you can see: "This opinion that I'm holding on to really does make me suffer. Or it really will make me suffer down the line. It'll get me thinking in ways that lead to more and more becoming, more and more identities. And when will it end?"

When you read world history, you realize that this is not the first time we've had a pandemic, and this is not the first time society has been threatened. There's been a lot worse, and you want to make sure you don't *make* it worse by holding on to things that will be bad for you and bad for society. So hold on tight to right view. As for other views, you let them float past. Don't let them pull you under.