

Crossing the River

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Recently, when we were in Canada, camping in the Kootenay mountains, we camped next to Kootenay River, which is not an especially large river, but the current is extremely fast. It's very strong. Whole trees have been carried off by the river. You had the sense they if you went down into the river, you had no idea: Maybe a tree right under the surface of the water could come along to knock the wind out of you and carry you off, too.

So you can understand why the Buddha used, as one of his main images of life, a swift-flowing river that you have to get across. Change happens so quickly in life, it can be so strong, that it can knock the wind out of you and carry you off.

What you need is some way to get across the river. The image he has is of a raft. The raft is the noble eightfold path. The standard image is that you take the raft across the river and as you finally start approaching the other bank, there comes a point where your feet can touch the bottom of a river. That's called gaining a foothold. It's a symbol for your first experience of the deathless. You gain a foothold in the deathless. Then, ultimately, you get up, out of the river. You stand on high ground. That's nibbana. At that point, you're totally safe. At that point, you don't even need the raft anymore.

But we're still on the near shore, not on the far shore. We've got to get across. This shore is not safe. That shore is safe. So we have no choice but to go across. And we have to use a raft as our support. There's no bridge, no boat coming from the other side to pick us up. Now, as with all rafts, you look at it, and it's just twigs and pieces of wood bound together by vines. It may not seem especially stable. But it's your only hope. And as you cross, you find that you have to keep fixing the raft to make sure it doesn't get torn apart by the current.

But at least you're up on the raft. You're not down in the water, where the currents beneath the surface can come and knock you over. As long as you stay on the raft, you're relatively safe. It's your support.

The word they use in Pali for the object of the mind is support, *arammana*, and you find that some supports are more supportive than others, more reliable than others. When you're meditating, you try to find a reliable support, something you can stick with for long periods of time, something you can get to know very well. That's why we focus on the breath. Or you can focus on thoughts of goodwill—anything you find is easy for the mind to stay with, congenial, and gives you a sense of being firmly supported in the present.

Even before you get to the meditation, there's the teaching on refuge. We've got the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as our refuge in the sense that we have their example that it is possible to get across the river safely and to find true safety on the other side. And following their example, you put this raft together. Sometimes it's discouraging, though. You put it together little bit, but it's not very carefully tied, and you see all the twigs just scattering and floating downstream. So you have to do it again and again and again. But after a while, with practice, you find that you learn how to tie the raft together in such way that it holds together. As long as you take good care of it, it'll get you across.

So the Buddha is not leaving you without any grounding. You hear some teachings where they make a big point that they're trying to cut the ground out from underneath you, as if they were doing you a favor—or as they call it, cutting the ground out from under your ego. And it's amazing the amount of hatred that they've focus on the ego. But that's not the way the Buddha taught. When he teaches the not-self, he isn't saying he's going to deprive you of anything. He's simply pointing out that there are other ways of finding happiness than creating this sense of self. And there are many points in the practice when he actually has you use a healthy sense of self: a self that's responsible, a self that can make sacrifices in the present moment for the sake of a long-term happiness, i.e., a mature self. That's part of your raft.

So don't think that the teaching on inconstancy or not-self is meant to leave you without a grounding. It's simply pointing out the things that, in the past, you've taken for a solid piece of ground is just a bank that's being eaten away by the currents of the river, the currents of craving. As the Buddha once said in another spot, there is no river like craving. This is the strongest thing that pulls you down.

But you can negotiate your craving and get across it. That's what the teaching on the path is all about. That's what the teaching on the raft is all about. It is possible to negotiate your way across your craving with relative safety until you reach true safety. At the very least, you get that foothold as you approach of the far shore.

So when you look at your life, and everything seems to be swept away, remember that not everything gets swept away. There's always the possibility of reaching the other shore or, at the very least, of putting yourself on the raft. When you're on the raft, you're up and above those under the surface currents that can carry logs that can kill you. You've got more than just your nose above water.

So even though your raft seems to fall apart every now and again, you can tie it back up again and again. There are always more branches, always more twigs. You

can try setting out across the current again. Even though this raft of your body, this raft of your breath, may seem ready to disintegrate at any point, with practice you stick with it long enough, you can stay with it longer and longer and longer, and it does get more and more solid. It offers the support that can keep you above water.

So even though it may involve work, and you can see that this breath, too, is inconstant, nevertheless, don't let the effort leave you feeling daunted, and don't focus on the inconstancy of the breath too quickly. Look for its other side as well. It's constant in that, as long as you're alive, there's always going to be the breath. Wherever you go, you've got the breath with you. You can take that as your foundation so that you're not placing your happiness on things outside, people outside, situations outside, outside purposes. Your purpose is here to train the mind. And the breath provides you with a foundation right here—the more you get to know it, the more you feel at home with it. You get a sense of when you have to adjust it, when you don't have to adjust it. It becomes like an old friend.

In the beginning, when your friendship is new, there are bound to be misunderstandings. But as long as you maintain your goodwill in your determination to make this friendship work, then the breath is always happy to keep coming back, coming back, coming back. So take this as your support. Take this as your object. It's a lot more reliable than the objects out there in the river. Keep looking after your raft, and ultimately someday it'll take you to something that really is solid. At the very least, when you get your footing in the deathless, you know that you're safe. You've got a grounding, and the currents will never pull you away to dangerous places again.