

Path & Raft

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The Buddha uses a lot of images to explain his teachings. One of his images for the teachings themselves—in fact, his underlying image—is of a path. The whole point of a path is that it goes someplace. It has a goal. So as you're practicing, think about the implications of that image.

You're on a road and you're going someplace. The road is not like the place you're going to go. You don't really have any true peace until you've reached the end, but that doesn't mean you have to be tired and worn out all along the road. In fact, one of the main elements of the path is right concentration with its sense of ease, well-being, refreshment, and even rapture to keep you going. It's your food and your shelter along the path.

As with any path, on the one hand you want to make sure you're headed in the right direction. But on the other, you can't focus all the time on the goal. If the path leads to a mountain and you spend all your time looking at the mountain, you're going to walk off the path. So you have to pay attention to where you're stepping now—right now, right now, right now—the kind of lesson you learn when you're walking around the monastery here.

I was coming up the hill the other day and wasn't looking too carefully beyond my next step. If I had looked three or four feet further on, I would have seen a rattlesnake. The rattlesnake actually saw me first, which is why I knew it was there. It started rattling. So you do want to have a sense of where you're stepping and where you're going to be stepping in the next two or three steps so that you don't go off the path.

Now, the problem with our path is that it's not like a road to a mountain, where at least every now and then you can get a glimpse of the mountain. It's more like the road to the Grand Canyon. You're following the road and you can't even see the Grand Canyon from where you are. Sometimes you wonder if it's there, or if there is such a thing. But at least we have a map and guidance from people who've been further along the road and had their glimpse of the Grand Canyon. So we have faith in them that it's there, even though the road doesn't look like the Grand Canyon. In fact, it often looks like the opposite. Everything looks very flat on all sides. But as long as you're confident that this is the road, you want to keep on it and have a mature attitude toward it.

The road is not going to take you there. You can't hope that it's going to be a moving escalator: Just stand still and it's going to move you along. You have to

make an effort. But at least the path has been paved and it's been scouted. We're convinced that as long as we follow the path, we're going to get to where we want to go.

Another image the Buddha uses is of the raft, and it's a similar sort of thing. The raft helps make it easier to get across the flood, but it's not going to do all the work for you. If you don't do any work, you may just end up floating down the river. So, as the Buddha said, you make an effort with your hands and feet. In other words, you lie on the raft and you kick with your feet, make swimming motions with your hands, and that gets you over to the other side. What most people focus on is the part when you get over to the other side and you don't have to carry the raft with you. What they forget is that while you're on the river, you have to stick on the raft. Otherwise, you're in trouble.

The Buddha explains the image. The near shore, he says, is self-identity. You're identifying with form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness—all the five aggregates—building a sense of self around them. Either you identify with a particular aggregate or group of aggregates, or you feel that they belong to you. You have a self that owns these things, or your self is in these things, or these things are in yourself. Any of these ways of relating to the aggregates, he calls self-identity, and this is where we suffer. This is why we keep coming back again and again and again, because we take on these identities.

We want to get over to the other shore, which is unbinding—total liberation. But to get over to the other shore, we have to cross the flood. He says there are four kinds of floods. There's sensual passion, views, becoming, and ignorance. These are the things we have to deal with—the currents that sweep us along.

If you've ever lived near a river, you know how dangerous they can be. I knew a family in Thailand one time. The kids had been orphaned early on because they lived in a house on a raft, right at the edge of the river. One day, one of the babies in the family fell into the river, and the father had to jump down into the river to save the baby. While he did this, a log came floating just below the surface. It came right at him and hit him in the chest. A few days later, he died. So rivers are dangerous.

It's interesting that basically, what this comes down to—this river you have to cross over is composed of your defilements. If your own defilements weren't bad enough, when you're living with a lot of other people you tend to pick up on their defilements as well. This is one of the reasons why you have to be very clear about the fact that you have a goal. You want to get over to the other side. If you don't have that goal in mind, it's so easy to flow down the river.

Sensual passion: They're always trying to take advantage of your sensual passion with all the advertisements, all the pictures, all the songs, all the whatever out there. They've learned that they can make a lot of money off people's defilements.

The same with views: You go out in the world, and people expect you to have views on this or that political issue, this religious issue, and that whatever. You get swept away by those things as well.

Your sense of becoming: This gets deeper inside you. It's your world or your sense of the world—of what's really important—and your role within that particular world. We create these senses of the world all the time. When the Buddha was trying to discover where birth came from, he was thinking originally in macro terms: birth outside after you die from this body. He was searching around for why it is that people take birth. He found that it's in this mental process we have of creating a world inside our minds and then trying to take on a role within that world. This can sweep us along really far.

Finally, there's ignorance, which is what underlies all these other currents of the flood. We don't really pay attention to where we're causing the stress, what we're doing to cause the stress, and what we could do to put an end to it.

To counteract that ignorance, we have right view as the first factor of the path. That's the first piece of the raft. The first piece you have to find as you put your raft together is realizing that you're here to try to comprehend: Why does the mind keep on creating stress and suffering for itself? And where are you going to look inside? How are you going to notice what the mind is doing to create these states of becoming that cause that stress?

This is where you bring in the other elements of the path, and then you make the effort to stick with it. This is where you really have to be really self-generating, self-motivating, self-starting as you go out in the world, because there's so much out there to discourage you from being on the path. You might hear the variety of what sometimes seems like a Dhamma teaching saying that you shouldn't have any goals. Being goal-oriented means that you have craving or desire, and, of course, we're trying to put an end to desire. Or sometimes you hear that the last thing that keeps people from awakening—that final step that stands in the way—is the desire to be awakened. And you tell yourself, "Well, I can cut through that one right away." But that's not how it works.

You have to let go of everything else first, actually take the sticks and branches on this bank of the river, assemble them into a raft, and swim across. You have to put some effort into swimming across on the raft, too. That's what right effort is for. Then, when the raft finally touches the other shore, you can get off the raft

and onto the shore. It's at that point where you can abandon your desire for awakening because you're already there. If you abandon your desire for awakening halfway through, you just get off the raft and you float down the river. And those logs floating along under the surface of the water: They can get you.

So it's important that you have this sense of the goal because that's what keeps you from getting deflected by your own defilements, by other people's defilements, or by a combination of the two.

It's also important that you have a mature attitude towards goals. This is probably one of the reasons why a lot of teachers say not to have any goals. They know that most of us have very immature attitudes towards goals. We get really worked up and upset that we're not at the goal and we try to force it in various ways. We're impatient. If you're on a short retreat, you put yourself in a pressure cooker.

This doesn't mean there's anything wrong with goals. It just means that we're not mature about them. This is why it's important when you think about the path to think about the skills you've developed the past—the ones where you had to be very patient about getting good at this step, getting good at the next step, and gradually seeing it all come together. Even though at the beginning it may have seemed hopeless, you begin to realize there are certain things that if you work at them consistently enough and patiently enough, you finally get a sense of mastery. You finally gain an understanding.

That's a lot of what we have to work on. One is having a clear sense of the fact that we do want to have a goal and, two, having a mature attitude toward the goal. When those two things come together, then it's just a matter of putting in the effort as you can. That will be determined by how much energy you have at any one time and also by what that particular problem requires. Some problems require that you put in a lot of effort to figure them out, to change the way you think about them, change the way you relate to them, even change the way you breathe around them. Whereas with other problems, all you have to do is just look at them and they go away.

Now, the looking here has to be looking with a quizzical, "Why-on-earth-would-I-ever-want-to-go-with-that-particular-mindset?" kind of attitude as you watch. In other words, you see one of these processes of becoming arising in the mind, but instead of jumping in and taking birth in that little thought world, you watch it and say, "Gee, why would I want to ride in that one? That's just going to take me down the river." Whereas with others, there's a much stronger pull, in which case you have to pull in the other direction. That's the kind of effort we have to make.

Even though sometimes it seems like it's far away—that other shore—at least you're headed in that direction. That's the important thing. Otherwise, you get pulled down the river and, as they say, in the river there are whirlpools, there are waterfalls and, in the old days, they also believed there were also weird spirits that were going to get you. Whether you believe in weird spirits or not, you look at the weird attitudes that people out in the world have. Do you want to get sucked up into their attitudes? It's crazy out there.

So keep reminding yourself that you've got a good goal. It's totally harmless and totally safe. You get to the other shore and you're beyond the flood. Then as the Buddha said, you don't have to carry the raft around any more. You do have a sense of appreciation, though, for the raft, because the raft was what helped you get over. So you pull it up on the shore in case someone else may ever need the raft.

I found that if I wanted to get a really rip-snorting Dhamma talk out of Ajaan Suwat, I would mention some of the things that are being taught in American Buddhism. He'd give a little sigh, and then that night, we'd get a really great Dhamma talk. He explained himself one day. He said that as you're walking on the path, you want to make sure there are no weeds and no obstacles, no brambles or thorns or anything to get in your way. So you do your best to clear them out, clear them away.

When you get to the end of the path, as far as you're concerned, the brambles and weeds, the thorns and everything can grow back. But you turn around and you see other people coming along the path. And you also see other people putting obstacles in their way. You feel sorry for the first group of people. They sincerely want to put an end to suffering. So you clear away what you can to help them. It's like the man pulling the raft up on the shore. He has an appreciation for the raft. It doesn't mean he has to carry the raft around, but he appreciates the help it gave.

So it is important to remember that we do have a goal here. The path is not the goal; the goal is not the path. The path takes you to the goal. That's what the path imagery is all about. The same with the raft: We tie the raft together with branches and vines and whatever because we want to get to the other shore. If you keep that goal in mind, it really helps you from getting deflected by these things that are going to pull you down the river.

If you can learn how to develop the patience and persistence needed to use the raft—or to walk along the path—some day it will get you there. It may not be as quickly as you'd like, but the fact that you know you're on a path, not wandering lost through the jungle—or you're on the raft and not subject to the things

floating in the river right under the surface—you're in a good place. And you're headed in the right direction.