

Dharma as Raft - Going Deeper in Meditation Sat 16th September 2017

The focus in this session is quite broad, exploring an approach to dharma practice as a whole.

In a famous discourse in the Pali Canon the Buddha compares the dharma to a raft.

The Raft Simile

"Monks, I will teach you the Dhamma compared to a raft, for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of holding onto. Listen and pay close attention. I will speak."

"As you say, lord," the monks responded to the Blessed One.

The Blessed One said: "Suppose a man were travelling along a path. He would see a great expanse of water, with the near shore dubious & risky, the further shore secure & free from risk, but with neither a ferryboat nor a bridge going from this shore to the other. The thought would occur to him, 'Here is this great expanse of water, with the near shore dubious & risky, the further shore secure & free from risk, but with neither a ferryboat nor a bridge going from this shore to the other. What if I were to gather grass, twigs, branches, & leaves and, having bound them together to make a raft, were to cross over to safety on the other shore in dependence on the raft, making an effort with my hands & feet?' Then the man, having gathered grass, twigs, branches, & leaves, having bound them together to make a raft, would cross over to safety on the other shore in dependence on the raft, making an effort with his hands & feet. [7] Having crossed over to the further shore, he might think, 'How useful this raft has been to me! For it was in dependence on this raft that, making an effort with my hands & feet, I have crossed over to safety on the further shore. Why don't I, having hoisted it on my head or carrying it on my back, go wherever I like?' What do you think, monks: Would the man, in doing that, be doing what should be done with the raft?"

"No, lord."

"And what should the man do in order to be doing what should be done with the raft? There is the case where the man, having crossed over, would think, 'How useful this raft has been to me! For it was in dependence on this raft that, making an effort with my hands & feet, I have crossed over to safety on the further shore. Why don't I, having dragged it on dry land or sinking it in the water, go wherever I like?' In doing this, he would be doing what should be done with the raft. In the same way, monks, I have taught the Dhamma compared to a raft, for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of holding onto. Understanding the Dhamma as taught compared to a raft, you should let go even of Dhammas, to say nothing of non-Dhammas."

The Buddha, *Alagaddupama Sutta, MN 22*

Dharma as method or lens

Basic Buddhism teaches that suffering comes from clinging, and the Buddha is pointing out here that this also applies to the Dharma itself: if it is clung to it causes suffering.

So what would it mean to cling to it, or let go of it, as the Buddha asks us to?

Some teachers have framed this in terms of the need to distinguish between doctrine and method: eg Sangharakshita, in *A Survey of Buddhism*, pg 147, on approaching the Four Noble Truths as method, and Thich Nhat Hanh:

If we try to make the Buddha's teaching into a doctrine, we miss the point. We have caught the snake by its tail. (From *'The Diamond that Cuts Through Illusion'*.)

So if we make certain teachings into a **doctrine** – a belief or set of beliefs, 'this is how it is' – we are clinging to them as fixed and immutable. This is out of line with the dharma teaching that nothing is fixed or immutable. We need to see the dharma too as fluid, dependent on conditions: it exists as a living, dynamic reality, inseparable from the beings that practise it.

If we approach a teaching as a **method**, then the emphasis is on whether it works, whether it is helpful. In the simile of the raft, the raft is useful for a particular purpose - getting to the other shore - and when that purpose is fulfilled, it must be put down. In the same way, we need to check whether a teaching is still fulfilling its purpose, and if not, put it down, and perhaps find a different teaching/mode of transport!

This puts the onus on us to check in our own experience to see if a teaching is helpful. Is it freeing us, is it opening the heart? Maybe it was at one point, but we change – is it still working now? If we think of a dharmic method as a way of perceiving, or lens, we can ask – as an optician does when testing our sight – when we look with this lens, is experience better, or worse? Does it conduce to freedom from suffering – or not?

This approach can bring a lightness, and a freedom

- to be creative in our practice,
- to experiment
- a freedom from worrying about ‘getting it right’
- and from having to find consistency on a conceptual level, and reject teachings on that basis.

All this can bring an independence of mind, a true individuality where we are trusting our own experience rather than overly relying on others to validate our practice. This can deepen our confidence-trust that the dharma can really bring freedom (sradha).

A way of seeing Emptiness

At different times we might employ different lenses which could seem contradictory, but in reality are not. Eg in metta practice we might at times employ the lens ‘this person is just like me’, and at other times ‘this person is a completely unique being’. Under certain conditions the one might be more helpful, whereas at a different point in the time it is the other one that is most freeing.

Creatively applying different lenses to our experience can also bring insight into emptiness, showing that nothing we experience has inherent existence; it all arises together with and inseparable from a matrix of conditions.

When we apply different lenses we can see how experience shifts, and it is shown that no experience exists separately from the lens that views it, the way it is perceived, the processes of perception/consciousness/mind. It is just like with sub-atomic particles: if observed in one way they appear as a wave, but observed another way, they appear as a particle. It becomes clear that there is no inherently existing world out there, an objective ‘how things are’, separate from the process of perceiving.

Applying different lenses, we see not just that perception/consciousness is part of what forms or fabricates experience, but that some ways of perceiving create the illusion of solidity and separation more than others, and in doing so, fabricate more dukkha. Other ways of perceiving conduce to a dissolving of illusion and thereby bring freedom. The key factor determining how much illusion and dukkha is fabricated by a particular way of perceiving is the degree of clinging, or letting go, which that way of perceiving brings.