

Crossing over the Flood.

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The underlying theme of the talk was simplicity. Practice is an opportunity to be simple.

At first, one may approach a subject with the simplicity of a child, or the simplicity born of ignorance. This simplicity comes from not knowing. Later, as a subject is studied, and its rules and variations are learned, the subject becomes complex - it is not as simple as it first appeared. Later still, with mastery, the essence of the subject is discovered, the underlying principles appear, and once again it becomes simple.

As Oliver Wendell Holmes said, *"I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity."*

The Buddha taught the importance of the simplicity hidden within complexity. It is the simple truths that are most valuable, even though they may be hidden in a forest of facts.

A HANDFUL OF LEAVES

The Blessed One was once living at Kosambi in a wood of simsapa trees. He picked up a few leaves in his hand, and he asked the bhikkhus, 'How do you conceive this, bhikkhus, which is more, the few leaves that I have picked up in my hand or those on the trees in the wood?'

'The leaves that the Blessed One has picked up in his hand are few, Lord; those in the wood are far more.'

'So too, bhikkhus, the things that I have known by direct knowledge are more; the things that I have told you are only a few. Why have I not told them? Because they bring no benefit, no advancement in the Holy Life, and because they do not lead to dispassion, to fading, to ceasing, to stilling, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbana. That is why I have not told them. And what have I told you? This is suffering; this is the origin of suffering; this is the cessation of suffering; this is the way leading to the cessation of suffering. That is what I have told you. Why have I told it? Because it brings benefit, and advancement in the Holy Life, and because it leads to dispassion, to fading, to ceasing, to stilling, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbana. So bhikkhus, let your task be this: This is suffering; this is the origin of suffering; this is the cessation of suffering; this is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.'

[Samyutta Nikaya, LVI, 31]

One of the simplifying principles that the Buddha taught was things which lead to freedom from suffering are good, and things which lead to suffering should be left behind. Finding the handful of leaves that end suffering from among the forest of complexity requires Right View.

Standing on the bank of a flood before entering represents not knowing. Entering the flood, things become complex, spinning out of control. Those who cross the flood and reach the bank on the other side of the flood have learned to understand and pass over the flood, reaching the simplicity on the other side.

The opening Sutta of the Samyutta Nikaya tells the story of a devata (which is somewhat the equivalent of an angel in the Hindu religion), who approaches the Buddha to ask him how he managed to cross over

the flood. The Buddha replies with a paradox, to help the devata break through her pride into true understanding.

Ogha-tarana Sutta
"Crossing the Flood"

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Savatthi in Jeta's Grove, Anathapindika's monastery. Then a certain devata, in the far extreme of the night, her extreme radiance lighting up the entirety of Jeta's Grove, went to the Blessed One. On arrival, having bowed down to him, she stood to one side. As she was standing there, she said to him, "Tell me, dear sir, how you crossed over the flood."

"I crossed over the flood without pushing forward, without staying in place."

"But how, dear sir, did you cross over the flood without pushing forward, without staying in place?"

"When I pushed forward, I was whirled about. When I stayed in place, I sank. And so I crossed over the flood without pushing forward, without staying in place."

[The devata:]

*At long last I see
a brahman, totally unbound,
who without pushing forward,
without staying in place,
has crossed over
the entanglements
of the world.*

How can one cross the flood without pushing forward and without standing still? The Buddha often used paradoxes to teach his monks to break out of either/or linear thinking, and reach an "Aha!" moment.

A physical analogy to paradoxes of this nature can be found in the martial art, Aikido. In Aikido, the practitioner is taught, "Do not resist an attack, but do not ignore it or submit to it." How is it possible to fight an attack and not fight it at the same time?

In Aikido, the practitioner blends with the attack, guiding it back to the attacker, dancing with the attack. For example, watch the teacher (about 50 seconds into the video), as she flows with the attacks and then redirects them away from her.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEUeP7hx8fs>

This way of neither resisting nor submitting is the Middle Way, neither trying too little nor trying too much.

Here is the story of the monk who tried too hard.

Sona was the son of a rich businessman. He liked most of all to listen to lute music and to play the instrument. He had been raised in wealth and luxury, so his skin was very delicate and soft.

Sona lived near the Vultures' Peak Rock in Rajagaha, where the Buddha stayed during some rainy seasons. One day, Sona went to the Vultures' Peak Rock to listen to the Buddha's

discourse, which was about the happiness experienced from non-attachment to worldly desires. As he wanted to experience this happiness, Sona asked to be ordained as a monk.

After becoming a monk, he was taught to be constantly mindful, even when walking. Sona was very enthusiastic. Every day he walked to and fro in meditation in the monastery until one day his feet developed blisters and bled.

But even after all his efforts Sona did not experience happiness, only pain and disappointment. Thoughts of craving for worldly things still came to his mind. "It is no use," Sona said to himself. "I have tried so very hard, but have still not achieved what I wished for. It is better for me to return to lay life and enjoy the happiness I used to experience by performing charity."

When the Buddha heard about this he went to see Sona. "Sona," he said, "I have heard that you are not getting good results from your practice of mindfulness and want to return to the lay life. Suppose I explain why you did not get good results, would you stay on as a monk and try again?"

"Yes I would, Lord," replied Sona.

"Sona, you were a musician and you used to play the lute. Tell me, Sona, did you produce good music when the lute string was well tuned, neither too tight nor too loose?"

"I was able to produce good music, Lord," replied Sona.

"What happened when the strings were too tightly wound up?"

"I could not produce any music, Lord," said Sona.

"What happened when the strings were too slack?"

"I could not produce any music at all, Lord," replied Sona

"Sona, do you now see why you did not experience the happiness of renouncing worldly craving? You have been straining too hard in your meditation. Do it in a relaxed way, but without being slack. Try it again, as if you were dancing, and you will experience the good result."

Sona understood and stayed on in the monastery as a monk and soon attained sainthood.

The way to know if you are trying too hard or too little is through mindfulness. Do not fight the flood nor give in to it. Follow the Middle Way, and dance over the flood to the understanding on the other side.