

Crossing the Floods



A way of talking about transcendence, liberation or however you conceive of a spiritual path, is to use the metaphor of ‘crossing the floods.’ Interest in deep change gets triggered by the feeling of being swept along by events; by the sense of being overwhelmed by, and even going under, a tide of worries, duties and pressures. That’s the ‘floods.’ And crossing them is about coming through all that to find some firm ground. It takes some work, some skill, but we *can* do it. This book offers some guidelines and themes for practice that can get us fit for the task.

So: floods. Our experience is a meeting and merging of external and internal currents of events. The awareness of something out there triggers a moment of recognition as to what the thing is — a piece of music, an old friend, a familiar flavour — along with degrees of interest, pleasure or alarm that may act as further triggers to action: to draw closer, start talking, or search one’s memory for further information about that thing. This internal experience normally occupies our attention, sometimes to the point of congestion as our minds add a swelling amount of internal activity to an ongoing flow of external data. The mind has creative potential, but that isn’t always a happy experience. At times the internal activity of analysis, speculation, memory, investigation, cross-referencing, decision-making and self-evaluation can amount to a volume of overwhelming proportions. Then the experience of overload develops into one of exhaustion, or of a pressure in our lives that diminishes peace and joy and can incline the mind to either the temporary oblivion offered by drink, drugs

and entertainment, or a need for therapy to find some ways to manage the daily round. This is the loss of balance that we can rightly experience as being flooded. It isn't the world per se, nor is it that we are chronically unbalanced; it's just that the right relationship hasn't been struck.

On the other hand, we may have had an experience of aware stillness in which the concerns of the day and all those habitual inner activities stopped or abated. Perhaps it was in the presence of a natural wonder, or maybe it was in a temple, or under a night sky, where we felt for a moment lifted by awe. For a few instants or minutes perhaps our normal sense of who we are, a sense based on the movement and concerns of all that mental activity, dropped away and was replaced by a sense of greater breadth, or depth, or of feeling at one with the universe. In such an experience, the world around us changes to a place of beauty or spiritual presence. Maybe we framed the experience in the language of a particular religion, or interpreted it as a divine revelation. It could have triggered a whole range of such further activities. Or we could have surmised that there are other states of consciousness than the one we've called ordinary, and that the normal self that we experience as being in the world is not a fixed or ultimate identity. For a moment, without creating or rejecting anything, we experienced a shift both in terms of our self and the world around us.

Now if we were to find a method of experiencing such shifts and stopping on a regular basis, we could examine that sense of stopping and know that it's anything but nihilistic — it's not oblivion, but a vibrant stillness. It's as if the mind had been crinkled and folded in on itself, and now it has unfolded. An underlying restlessness and tension that we hardly noticed because it was so normal, has ceased — and with it, our normal sense of what we and the world are has changed for the better. This 'unfolding' to a wider and deeper sense is what we call 'transcendence.' We change, and our apparent world changes. In terms of the previous metaphor, it is an emergence from the floods.

Dhamma: A Way Rather Than a Technique

The methodologies for transcendence are varied: meditation, prayer, devotion, yoga, fasting, even psychotropic drugs. In the long run, the ones that are the most useful will be the ones that can be integrated into daily life with the minimum amount of dependence on external circumstances or internal ideology. Then the method will be applicable to a wide range of people and it will not become the source of more stressful mental activity. Such is the spiritual alignment that the Buddha called ‘Dhamma,’ and which he described as: ‘Directly accessible; not bound up with special events and times; encouraging interest and open-mindedness [rather than belief]; furthering and deepening; to be realized directly in one’s experience through wisdom [rather than induced by ‘another’]’. Dhamma supports and is supported by practices such as careful reflective thinking, cultivation of kindness and compassion to oneself and others, calming the mind in meditation and gaining a transcendent understanding of the phenomena that make up and arouse our mental activities. All of these practices are to be undertaken in the light of Dhamma — that is by looking directly at the results and not subscribing to dogmatic views about any of it.

The vision of Dhamma is that if the mind is healed, strengthened and calmed; if we are no longer swept away by our ideas, doubts, plans, regrets, grudges and phobias (to name but a few) — then we can cross the floods and, to use a Buddhist metaphor, be standing on ‘the Other Shore.’ Whatever the analogy, such transcendence means that we’re neither generating stress nor caught in stressful consequences. Accordingly the most usual summary of the Buddha’s Dhamma is that it presents Four Noble Truths concerning suffering and stress — or *dukkha* (the word has a range of meanings from anguish to unsatisfactoriness). These Truths present this stress and suffering as unavoidably bound up with the human condition, yet as something that has a cause; and that the cause can be eliminated; and finally, that there is a Path of practices that will lead to the elimination of that stress.

Like any unfolding, the elimination of stress requires care. So in order to facilitate this, the Buddha's teaching encourages persistent strengthening, healing and refining of mental activity. To this end he presented themes and instructions, often in clusters (such as the 'the five spiritual faculties' or 'the seven factors of Enlightenment'). The culmination of these is in meditative Dhamma practices, ones that depend on a calm and secluded context to support close examination of the mind. If this were the only scenario for the spiritual alignment of Dhamma, it would limit the occasions in which such Dhamma could be practised, and narrow the meaning of Dhamma to a set of meditation techniques. However when we consider how the Buddha defined Dhamma, and how he framed liberation quite broadly in terms of acknowledging and building a path out of suffering and stress, then we must also use a broader focus as a more long-term foundation for Dhamma, one which will fit the contexts and energies of our active life. Accordingly, a set of instructions called '*pāramī*' or '*pāramīta*' have become paramount in their usefulness and daily-life applicability. The terms '*pāramī*' and '*pāramīta*' carry meanings such as 'furtherances' or 'perfections,' and refer to cultivating skilful intentions and actions throughout the day.

Daily Perfections

The reason why this set was put together, some years after the Buddha's passing away, seems to have been that Buddhists speculated on why this one person arose in the world who surpassed all others in the depth and range of his wisdom. Many of his disciples developed qualities that the Buddha manifested, and also crossed over to the Other Shore, but none came close to the Buddha in terms of depth, range and versatility in presenting Dhamma. And, unlike his disciples, he realized the Path without a teacher. So people reckoned that this unique person must have inherited a huge stock of strengths and virtues in the process of many lifetimes. Stories and fables were created to describe this process whereby the Buddha-to-be ('Bodhisatta' or 'Bodhisattva') developed *pāramī* as a foundation for his future Enlightenment (or Awakening). Different schools of Buddhists selected different

qualities to be *pāramī*, but in the school that came to be called ‘Theravada’ ten were so designated. Theravada uses the Pāli language, referring to them as *pāramī*, whereas other schools use the classical Sanskrit language, hence ‘*pāramita*.’ The ten *pāramī* are:

Generosity — *Dāna*
Morality — *Sīla*
Renunciation — *Nekkhamma*
Discernment or Wisdom — *Paññā*
Energy — *Viriya*
Patience — *Khanti*
Truthfulness — *Sacca*
Resolve — *Adhitthāna*
Kindness — *Mettā*
Equanimity — *Upekkhā*

These *pāramī* form a set of themes that are used in the Theravada tradition to this day. They provide a template for the mind’s energies and activities that isn’t an extra to all the other things we might have to do, but encompasses our talking and working, our relationships and interactions with others, our times of private introspection, our decision-making and the forming of our life directions. We practise morality, patience and all or any of the rest while we are engaged at work, or minding the children, or stuck in a traffic jam. When it comes down to it, why not? When you’re in a jam, you can either get irritable, worry — or you can practise patience. So which is going to take you out of stress right now? You get the picture. The *pāramī* take spiritual practice into areas of our lives where we get confused, are subject to social pressure and are often strongly influenced by stress or stress-forming assumptions. Providing alternative ways to orient the mind in the stream of daily events, the ‘perfections’ can derail obstructive inner activities and leave the mind clear for. Cultivating *pāramī* means you get to steer your life out of the floods.

The Four Floods

The term ‘floods’ speaks for itself: the overwhelmed, swept-along feeling that comes as we get plunged into stress and suffering. In the Buddhist texts, the word is sometimes used in the broad sense of the mind being overwhelmed by sorrow, lamentation and despair in full-blown *dukkha*, or to the existential *dukkha* of our being carried along in the flood of ageing, sickness and death. On occasion the floods refer to five key hindrances that clog the mind: sense craving, ill-will, dullness and torpor, restless worry and doubt. Meditators in particular know how any of these five can hinder the mind from realizing the clarity and peace that they are aiming for.

In their most specific use however, the floods (*ogha*) refer to four currents, also called ‘outflows’ (*āsavā*), that run underneath the bubbling stream of mental activity. There they remain unseen but yet direct the flow of that stream. Sounds eerie? Well if you sit still in silence for a while, with no particular preoccupation, you’ll notice the mind starts wandering ... to this and that ... towards things you plan or have to do, to memories of what you’ve done, good or bad, or had done to you ... to ideas of things that you’d like to have. At times you may find yourself reliving a fragment of your history, or anticipating a scene that you’re going to have to deal with. And along with that come judgements, opinions of what you should have done, or about the other person. All of this has a certain reality, though based on a few scanty observations. Yet this is the stream of mental activity that absorbs our attention and informs our actions — and it arises unbidden, and seems unstoppable. We have little, if any, control over it, and the stream is so usual that it’s difficult to imagine how we would sense ourselves without it. In fact, the only conclusion that this inner stream presents, as it takes us into past and future, desires and problems, is the implication that this uncontrollable wandering on (*samsāra*) is what we are.

But we can study it; and that indicates that a degree of stepping out of *samsāra* is possible. And, following on from that, we can take

note of the four currents (floods) that the Buddha pointed out. This will give us a vantage point from where we can jump in or stay out of the stream of mental activity. The four floods are: the flood of sensuality, the flood of becoming, the flood of views and the flood of ignorance.

Floods of Sensuality and Becoming

The first flood to note is the current that accompanies the senses with emotional impressions of their desirability or interest. This is the flood of sensuality (*kāmogha*), a torrent under whose trance sense objects seem to offer pleasant sights, sounds, tastes, fragrances and touches. With some experience and considered attention, we can note that none of these — once seen, heard, etc. — actually induce the kind of feeling that the current promises in any but the most fleeting way. In the gentle or pulsing waves of this flood however, the objects of the senses seem irresistible, charming and productive of real satisfaction. And yet the manifest truth of our lives is that we are not blissed-out or even satisfied for long by any sense contact. It happens all day long, and with luck it's mostly OK. Sometimes it's pleasant for a short while and sometimes it's unpleasant; but the pleasant, once established, gets to be normal ... and then boring, so desire for newer sources of pleasure kicks in. However, we can't really have any of it because it runs through consciousness like water through our fists. Sensory input, with its pleasure and displeasure, passes. That's it. That's all there is. Why make anything more of it? We would have figured this out by the age of three were it not for the hypnotic power of the sensuality flood. But in that trance we assume we have no alternatives.

Secondly, there's the flood called 'becoming' (*bhāvogha*). This is the flood that carries time and identity. When you look at experience directly, it's obvious that all we are or have is happening right now. Our memories happen now, and the results of what we've been involved with happen now. Our projected scenarios for the future happen now, and our actions, whose consequences may occur in the future, happen now. Furthermore,

our awareness of this state of affairs, feelings about and responses to all that — happens now. And yet, there's a current in the mind that creates a felt identity who was, is and will be. Rolling on its surface are worries and expectations about what I will be, nostalgia and regret about what I was. A conceit may form: 'Having been this, surely I deserve to become that'; or its negative form: 'I've never been this, so I'll never become one of those.' There's a lot of drama and suffering and stress in this flood — so much so that we fail to question 'Who is this character?' Since I have only pictures of what I was, and stories of what I might or will be, can I be clear as to who I am now? When we do question and give full attention to the present — in the focus that should surely give us the clearest, most stable impression of who we are — we find that the images break up like reflections in a stream poked with a finger. And as those images break up, all the weight, the desperate need or the embarrassing anxiety, suddenly sinks with no footing. There is a fumbling, a blur of attention, a shift of energy, and we're left groping at ripples. The spell of the flood of becoming doesn't work in the present. This is why we study it — because through investigation we come out of it.

But, as with the flood of sensuality, it's very difficult to stay out of it. The power of these floods is based on the fact that to the ordinary level of consciousness and the world, there are concrete sense objects, there is time and identity, and they are important. And so they are. However it is possible to separate sights, sounds and the rest from the trance of their ultimate desirability, in order to clearly apprehend them as they are. For this we need to attend to the sense world with wisdom and truthfulness. We need to note that it is in flux, and that the feelings and mind states that the flux evokes also change. Then the dream of sensuality doesn't arise; you can be *in*, but not *of*, the sensory world — and this helps you to handle it skilfully. So we study the sense world in order to rescue it from the flood of our trance; and in the course of so doing, we develop *pāramī* such as wisdom, truthfulness, morality and renunciation.

Much the same is true of *bhāvogha*. Our actions have effects. If you act mean and cheat, you become a mean cheat. Act compassionately and you become grand-hearted. So we do apparently ‘become’ the results of our previous actions; we do have an inheritance and a potential for the future. But when we study becoming more closely, we can notice that what has become — that is, the mind state of the present — is just that. It is a good or bad mind state, but it isn’t an identity. If it were an identity, you’d be in that state from birth to death; there’d be no possibility for change or development or decline. However, good and wise people do lose their temper sometimes, and cruel people may very well have a tender spot for their dog, or revise their ways and reform. Now we can step back from that current of who we seem to be and the world-view that it projects. And we can say, ‘No! Adherence to this generates suffering. It either drags me down, or it makes me callous or negligent.’ By reflecting on where the flood is taking us, and who we seem to be in that, we can step out of it long enough to choose an alternative direction. The capacity to do so depends again on an underlying current of *pāramī*.

In brief, becoming can’t be skipped over, but it can be reflected on, handled and directed. Rightly directed, this stream of causality can take the mind to the fruition of *pāramī* in the meditative skill of the Enlightened mind. Here the legend of the Buddha arising in the world out of the long cultivation of the ten perfections has a verifiable ring of truth. The very word ‘Buddha’ means ‘unbounded wisdom,’ and that arises from the ongoing cultivation of the inclinations, attitudes and intentions that constitute the *pāramī*. These bear their richest fruit in meditation, but are rooted in the daily life wisdom that lifts the mind out of the floods.

Floods of Views and Ignorance

There are two other floods: of views (*ditthogha*) and of ignorance (*āvijjogha*). ‘Views’ refers to the instinct we have to hold beliefs, opinions and dogmas in order to gain a standpoint. They could be anything from ‘Buddhism is the best religion’ to ‘The liberal party

is fair and just and seeks for the welfare of the nation' to 'Women are hopeless drivers' to 'Our nation is the source of truth and harmony in a brutal world.' Or a view could be a lot more personal, 'I'm a Taurus, and that means that I'll get on well with Scorpios.' Such broad-brush generalizations form an easy basis for our decisions, loyalties and world-view. And so, throughout history, societies have adopted views such as, 'There are witches who consort with the devil and bring blight onto the crops and plague into the city.' Or they have adopted the view that Jews are a contamination and should be eradicated; or that communists are infiltrating public life in the USA and about to take over. And these views, based on a sense of the pure, the right and even of Divine Will, have justified slaughter and cruelty, hatred and loss of liberty. We can indeed be horrified by such events, often to the degree whereby the extreme nature of these views blinds us to the fact that we are all susceptible to the flood of views. 'Joseph is an idiot who should never be allowed to drive a car.' 'Start letting those kids have their own way and you'll be heading for trouble,' etc. Even 'I never subscribe to any view, political or religious because it's all hot air' — that's just another view.

There are several salient features to the flood of views. One is that it puts life into the abstract, sums people into groups, and makes a 'something' that we can stand back from. From this perspective the mind can form neat divisions: between my party and the others. The flood of views therefore isolates; and more tellingly it draws a dividing boundary across which negotiation, empathy, and at times even ethical standards, do not cross. So having decided that you're an idiot who shouldn't be allowed to drive, I'm not going to discuss with you why I think that way (though I may shout it in your face), and if I think that you are innately unskilled, I'm probably not going to offer to instruct you. And in the cases of those whom views have labelled as the 'evil', the 'condemned' or the 'insignificant', not only is there liable to be no negotiation and no checking of facts, but also actions may be administered without compunction, even though they bring death, ignominy and punishment. In sixteenth century Europe animals were deemed

as feeling no pleasure or pain, and lowering cats into bonfires to witness their antics was a source of entertainment. And so on. With the adopting of views, empathy and ethics are under threat.

Another feature of the flood of views is that it gives one a standpoint whose loftiness at times exceeds reason and the life-instinct itself. In the twentieth century, the Heaven's Gate Christian sect so fervently believed that a heavenly space ship was tailing the Hale-Bopp comet as it swung by the Earth that they committed suicide in order to get on board. Prior to that, mothers in Iran had gladly sent their sons marching across mine fields as human martyrs in that country's war against Iraq, delighted by the view that their children were thus bound for Heaven. Extreme examples again; but notice when you get that sense of standing up for your beliefs, how the energy flows, or floods, through your heart and up into your head where it shuts off alternate ways of seeing things. Wait for the next domestic argument and witness how wronged and just and firm you become. The flood of views inflates the ego and supports the identity flood of becoming.

This flood is difficult to check, because views are the benchmarks we have for our reality and our actions. We all use abstraction to define things in accordance with certain perspectives. There is a degree of usefulness in talking about Belgians, or film directors, or Carthusians, but it's in the blind adherence to those concepts as ultimate definitions of an individual that the flood arises. If it is blindly adhered to, even the view that 'all views are problems' creates problems, as that condemns any relative statement as invalid — and then what can be said about anything? No, it's the *adherence* to any view, not the view itself that is the crux of the problem. The flood of views is this intoxication and adherence, an ongoing mental action that cuts off those who believe a view from the 'rest of the trouble-makers.'

A remedy that is recommended then is to note a view as a starting place from which to investigate or enter dialogue with others. In this we acknowledge that we have a personal perspective and can't

avoid having one. This is already a breakthrough, because the fallacy that supports the flood is that any individual can have an all-encompassing view — whereas the very act of holding a view immediately places the viewer in a state of isolation from scrutiny. To acknowledge subjectivity may lead to the recognition that ‘my’ position isn’t really mine, but one that is conditioned by the information I’ve received or an experience I’ve had, and is therefore capable of being reviewed and moderated. So: ‘I think you’re a terrible driver because I saw you reverse into the gate post, and I heard that you never indicate when you’re making a turn, and Susan said that she was terrified at your speed when you drove her to town.’ If I’m practising truthfulness, then at least I’ll acknowledge that most of my information is second-hand, and that I was angry at having to fix the gatepost. And if I’m also inclining towards equanimity, I’ll also be willing to have my reasoning examined and even refuted. Then it may be that the partial truth in that view (after all, you did drive into the gatepost) would encourage us both to look into how we are all liable to do such things — and mutually review driving skills and standards. Thus we overcome the sense of division, and specific kindness gets established.

These floods of sensuality, becoming and views are carried by the most fundamental torrent, that of ignorance. Ignorance is the force that undermines our direct investigation of experience. Under its influence, if we do notice the problems that these floods arouse, we may attribute them to flaws in culture or religion or human nature, either wagging a finger of disapproval or shrugging our shoulders in resignation. We may in other words adopt pessimistic views — but that strategy doesn’t check the floods. Hence the approach that the Buddha encouraged was to see these floods as they are, as phenomena, without attributing self, others, culture or religion to them. But he didn’t advocate a passive acceptance of them. Instead he presented the template of the Four Noble Truths, which we may apply to our experience in the form of questions. That is, we can ask ourselves: ‘Is suffering and stress for myself or others bound up in this experience?’ ‘What mental

factor/s cause/s it to be so?’ ‘Is there an inner shift, an immediate psychological change, that will stop that cause?’ ‘What process will give me what it takes to bring around and sustain that shift of perspective?’ Using the Four Noble Truths is thus the way out of ignorance, the way of transcendence. But to keep using such a means, we need to keep turning the mind’s intentions that way; this is why we develop the *pāramī* — they build a temple from whose vantage point we can investigate the floods.

Stages and Fruition of the *Pāramī*

The *pāramī* are then inclinations and potentials that we develop into clear intentions. Their development comes in three stages — the initiating, the gathering, and the completion. Initially, one brings the topic to mind. Even this much is useful; it means that *pāramī* get built-in as a frame of reference, when other values such as fun, convenience, style, worldly performance and success can be taking over the mind. The ‘gathering’ stage is when you apply the perfection in the face of opposition. Something in you doesn’t want to bother, other people don’t see the point, it’s not convenient, etc., etc. The third stage, of completion, is when you know your fullness in that perfection will take you through any obstacle — you can give up your life for it. You realize: ‘Why not? Life is going to end anyway — why not establish the mind in a position of strength while there is time?’

So when we establish our minds on one of these *pāramī*, we can put aside inclinations as to who’s right and who deserves what, and we can focus on the intention of our own minds. As we get clear in that respect, we then have to meet the resistance that results from going against the current of the flood. This is the gathering stage, in which there is often an emotional and energetic turbulence in the mind in which doubt and imbalance come to the fore. Here’s where one has to use resolve, patience, wisdom, kindness, or the examples of wise friends in order to get steady. This is the stage in which perfections get established to supplant impatience, intolerance and other defilements that cramp our potential. As we look for that balance within the shifts

of our mind and world, we keep checking out the current in accord with the Buddha's own line of enquiry: 'Does this behaviour cause me and/or others long-term harm, suffering, indignity or stress? Does it lead to my welfare, the welfare of others and peace?'

As a result of that work, our inclinations and intentions get established on the good and the whole and we are able to review the fractured, the stained or the afflicted. You could say that on touching into truth, your mind is able to return to healing. This is how the 'Bodhisattva' arises — it's a mind that is in touch with truth but not fully absorbed in it, gone beyond your previous standpoint, capacity or view, and opened to a place of wisdom and compassion. Instead of referring your actions to some self-image of 'what I deserve' and 'should I really?' and 'this is what I always do and all that I'm capable of,' there's a shift to a response that refers to a wider parameter than that of the habitual self. The great intention arises: for my welfare, for the welfare of others, and leading to peace. Then that twisted loop in the circuitry of intelligence, the loop of self-view, gets untangled. The mind unfolds a deep crease; and in that unfolding, nothing is lost except a propensity to unnecessary suffering. It's not the case that 'I'm perfect,' but that a perfect balance has been struck. This is the third stage of the *pāramī*, the completion. It's a change of life.