

## Analytical Study of the Raft in Buddhism

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**Abstract:** In the Alagaddupama Sutta, the raft is concerned with the dhamma, the dhamma should be seen as instrumental to achieving religious goals; it is not an absolute to be clung to. So the Buddha says “you should abandon the dhamma, all the more what is not the dhamma”. This statement has led some interpreters to suggest that the enlightened person, having crossed over from saüsàra to nibbàna, does not live by the dhamma, that the Buddha’s teachings are to be abandoned once enlightenment is attained. But such an interpretation of the parable of the raft is unwarranted. The Buddha does not mean that one gives up living by the dhamma after achieving enlightenment. Enlightened existence is not a life beyond good and evil with no ethical and religious principles.

**Keywords:** Raft, Buddhism

### 1. Introduction

This is a parable which appears in different forms in several Buddhist texts. Like all parables, it attempts to communicate a concept by reference to an experience which was familiar to the audience. This parable is supposed to offer a metaphor for understanding our progress on a spiritual journey. Let’s imagine that we are preparing to cross a vast river by boat. Before the boat arrives at the port, our perceptual interest will be focused on the preparations for the journey, who are fellow passengers may be. What we cannot focus on in any clear sense is our ultimate destination – we cannot see the far shore – and having never been there, we have no idea what it really will be like.

From first to last, the Buddha taught a practice whose goal was overcoming suffering. Though his teaching has significant theoretical dimensions, both metaphysical and epistemological, these are always subservient to the aim of the practice. According to Christopher W. Gowans says that “The heart of the teaching involves the idea of non-clinging or non-attachment”[1]. As first desires may be like the trickle of a stream, but they grow into a river of craving which carries us away like the current of a swift flowing river. Craving is understood to crystallize as ‘grasping’ or ‘attachment’ (upadana): the various things we like evoke desires in us : these turn to cravings; as a result of our craving we grasp at things and try to take possession of them; in short, we try to call them our own. Buddhist texts provide a stock list of four kinds of attachment: attachment to the objects of sense desire, attachment to views, attachment to precepts and vows, attachment to the doctrine of the self [2]. These suggest the complex and subtle network and web of attachment that Buddhist thought sees as enmeshing beings.

### 2. The title of this article is “Analytical Study of the Raft in Buddhism”

What is the use of a raft? The raft is a thing of value, and it has a value because it helps the man escape danger and cross the river. It ceased to have value, the implication seems to be, when the condition was no longer met: to a man not in danger and in no need of crossing a river, a raft has no value at all. The true teachings of the Buddha have a value too. They help a man to ‘cross over’, to leave behind the world of craving and attachment and reach the state of enlightened life [3]. When their purpose is finished, the simile seems to imply, the Buddha’s teachings are of no further use or value. If attachment in any shape or form is a cause of suffering, then so is attachment even to the truth.

In the Alagaddupama Sutta, the raft is concerned with the dhamma, the dhamma should be seen as instrumental to achieving religious goals; it is not an absolute to be clung to. So the Buddha says “you should abandon the dhamma, all the more what is not the Dhamma”[4]. This statement has led some interpreters to suggest that the enlightened person, having crossed over from samsara to nibbana, does not live by the dhamma, that the Buddha’s teachings are to be abandoned once enlightenment is attained. But such an interpretation of the parable of the raft is unwarranted. The Buddha does not mean that one gives up living by the Dhamma after achieving enlightenment. Enlightened existence is not a life beyond good and evil with no ethical and religious principles.

In the majority of cases, nibbana is represented by the further shore. The symbolism is helpfully spelt out in Samyutta Nikaya [5], the water is the ‘four floods’ ; the near shore is belief in a self (sakkaya) ; the further shore is nibbana; the raft is the Eightfold Path; and the man who has crossed over is the Arahant.

### 3.The Doctrine is like a raft to be used in crossing the flood and then to be abandoned

Even good things must eventually be discarded, therefore, how much more bad things? To explain the idea of crossing over, the Buddha used the simile of a raft [6]. Let us listen to him:

“Bhikkhus, I shall show you how the Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping. Listen and attend closely to what I shall say”. “Yes, venerable sir,” the bhikkhus replied. The Blessed One said this:

“Bhikkhus, suppose a man in the course of a journey saw a great expanse of water, whose near shore was dangerous and fearful and whose further shore was safe and free from fear, but there was no ferryboat or bridge going to the far shore. Then he thought: There is this great expanse of water, whose near shore is dangerous and fearful and whose further shore is safe and free from fear, but there is no ferryboat or bridge going to the far shore. Suppose I collect grass, twigs, branches, and leaves and bind them together into a raft, and supported by the raft and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across the far shore’. And then the man collected grass, twigs, branches, and leaves and bound them together into a raft, and supported by the raft and making an effort with his hands and feet, he got safely across to the far shore. Then, when he had got across and had arrived at the far shore, he might think thus: ‘This raft has been very helpful to me, since supported by it and making and effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore. Suppose I were to hoist it on my head or load it on my shoulder, and then go wherever I want. ‘Now, bhikkhus, what do you think? By doing so, would that man be doing what should be done with that raft?’”

“No, venerable sir”.

“By doing what would that man be doing what should be done with that raft? Here, bhikkhus, when that man got across and had arrived at the far shore, he might think thus: ‘This raft has been very helpful to me, since supported by it and making an effort with my hand and feet, I got safely across to the far shore. Suppose I were to haul it onto the dry land or set it adrift in the water, and then go whererver I want’. Now, Bhikkhus, it is by so doing that man would be doing what should be done with that raft. So I have shown you how the Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping

“Bhikkhus, when you know the Dhamma to be similar to the raft, you should abandon even good states, how much more so bad states”.

The Dhamma [7] taught by the Buddha is compared to a raft used to ferry a man from the dangerous and fearful shore of a river, to the other, safe shore: from the unenlightened world of the suffering to the state of the enlightened person, the arahat. Once on the far shore, the man would be unwise to carry the raft around with him when its function was fulfilled. This is to show that one should “abandon”, that is, not be attached to, the teachings, practices, and engendered states of the Buddha’s Dhamma. The Theravadin commentary on the passage plausibly explains that what is meant is that a Buddhist practitioner should not be attached to the states of calm (samatha) and insight (vipassana) that the meditative path cultivates[8].

This statement that “you should abandon even good states, how much more so bad states” could almost be a summary of the Buddha Dhamma itself insofar as our subjective attitude is concerned. If the Buddha’s teachings are to make people realize that clinging is the source of suffering, wouldn’t clinging to these teachings defeat the very purpose of them? This does not mean that we should disregard the teachings or hold them lightly. It does mean, however, that they are useless to us if we don’t put them into practice and that when we have gotten the point we no longer need to make an issue of them

Another point at issue here is the fact that the realization of the Buddha goes beyond the many metaphors and analogies that the Buddha used to convey it. It is commonly observed that all analogies eventually break down, and yet when it comes to religion, people seem to forget that the Ultimate Truth cannot be fully expressed in terms of conventional ideas and concepts. The Buddha, however, used his analogy of the raft to underline the merely metaphorical nature of his own teachings. He wanted to be sure that his disciples did not fall into the common trap of mistaking the map for the territory or the menu for the meal. The four noble truths, the eightfold path, the twelve-fold chain of dependent origination, even nirvana itself are all very helpful teachings in that they can point the way to the sam experience of awakening that Shakyamuni Buddha himself had, but the realization itself is organic and alive and cannot be so rigidly contained. In the end, the Dharma is something that one cannot take anyone else’s word for. This is something that Shakyamuni Buddha knew very well, and so he never presumed to replace the

individual's own insight with any kind of fixed revelation, he merely showed the way so that each person could cross the stream, reach the other shore and see the truth for themselves.

The parable of the raft in Alagaddupama Sutta is supposed to represent our spiritual journey toward enlightenment-----and the ferryboat is the particular religious doctrine which aids us on that journey. The point of the parable is supposed to be that once we have outgrown the doctrine, we can leave it behind and move forward. The worst thing that could happen is for the ferryboat to begin circling in the middle of the river and for the passengers to think that they were still making progress.

According to Damien Keown, the parable of the raft is concerned essentially with illustrating the danger of a wrong grasp or misappropriation of good things rather than advocating their transcendence.<sup>9</sup> The Buddha sums up the parable as follows: "Even so I have shown you that the Dhamma is comparable to a raft, which is for crossing over (the water to the far shore), not for the purpose of grasping". As Damien Keown notes:

The word 'grasping' (gahana) echoes the "wrong grasp" (duggahita) of the by Arittha, and also the "wrong grasp of the scriptures. (dugahitatatta dhammanam) by the foolish men who master them for the wrong purpose. The Buddha is saying that he has taught dhamma in the Parable of the Raft so that people will realize that his teaching are to be used for the purpose he intended, namely, reaching salvation, and not for anything else. It is a warning to the brethren not to pervert the teachings as a means to gratifying their personal desires, be it for carnal pleasure as in Arittha's case, or "reproaching and gossiping" in the case of foolish men.

The wrong grasp of religion can lead man to justify his greed (lobha), hatred (dosa) and delusion (moha). His wrong views, wrong perception and wrong consciousness force him to grasp a religion wrongly and undermine its very foundation, causing more pain and suffering (dukkha) as does the wrong grasp of the snake.

The total of the article "Analytical study of the Raft in Buddhism" is not transcendence but a warning that even good things can be misused. As Known summed up that "The scriptures are good but some people twist them to their own ends. The raft is good but becomes a handicap if misused by being carried around. Calming and insight meditation are good but can be a hindrance if an attachment for them is allowed to develop. From a Buddhist perspective, those who do not follow the way have little hope of salvation"[9].

We are supposed to use the Buddha-Dhamma without clinging to it, but only to cross this cycle of birth and death-----Samsara. He advised us to use his teaching like a raft which is used only to cross a body of water not to cling to it. It is the passionate clinging to what we believe, rather than understanding how we should use it to guide our daily lift in the right direction, that arouses our deeply rooted hatred which may force us to solve our problems through violent means. It is the passionate clinging to things that creates all kinds of problems.

#### 4. Concussions

The Raft Parable. In this parable, the crossing over from the mundane, unenlightened life to a religiously liberated life (nibbāna) is compare with crossing over a river. Like saūsāric existence, the near shore is dangerous and frightening, whereas the farther shore promises peace and security. But, as the Buddha explains, there is neither a bridge nor a boat to use for crossing over. In such a case, a person might build a raft and use it to cross over. But once one has crossed over the river, the raft would become an impediment, if it is retained while walking on land. So when the raft is no longer useful, it should be discarded. Like all parables, it attempts to communicate a concept by reference to an experience which was familiar to the audience. Since Buddhism began in Ancient India, rivers, water and ferryboats figure prominently in the mythology and stories of the era. This parable is supposed to offer a metaphor for understanding our progress on a spiritual journey.

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#### References

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2. Rupert Gethin, The Foundation of Buddhism, Oxford University Press, p. 71.
3. S.IV. 174-175 repeats the simile, and decodes it: "The near shore".....this is a designation for identity. "The further shore".....this is a designation for nibbana. "The raft".....this is a designation for the noble

- eightfold path'. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*' trans., Bhikkhu Bodhi, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000, p. 1239; cited in Jonardon Ganeri, *The Concealed Art of the Soul : Theories of self and Practices of Truth in Indian Ethics and Epistemology*, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 46.
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