



This document is an extract from the full chapter which is available for download in the table via this [link](#) and is intended for use by participants of meetings.

Gotama's intoxications: a troubled young man in turbulent times

Surveying the dangerous shore: Gotama's world in his own words:

*"Violence gives birth to fear.
Just look at people and their quarrels.
I will speak of my dismay
I will tell you how I experienced terror.*

*I saw this population flounder,
like a fish in a little puddle.
Seeing them at odds with each other,
fear came upon me.*

*The world around was volatile,
all directions were in turmoil.
Wanting a home for myself,
I did not see any place unoccupied.*

*I felt discontent
at seeing only conflict to the very end,
then I saw an arrow here, so very hard to see,
embedded in the heart.*

*Overcome by this arrow
you run in all directions.
But simply by pulling it out
you don't run, you don't sink."*

Recognising the landscape of human suffering

As we begin the first stage of our journey, we find ourselves on what the 'RAFT to Freedom' programme calls the 'dangerous shore'. This is the landscape of our familiar suffering, a place of turmoil and confusion where our most destructive cravings and habits hold sway. Before we can build a vessel to carry us away from this shore, we must first survey the terrain around us and understand its nature. This is the task of the 'R' in RAFT: to 'Recognise' that life is naturally painful, difficult, and disappointing.

To help us recognise the 'dangerous shore', we turn to the life story of Gotama (the Buddha), a historical figure who lived in India around 2,600 years ago. His journey is not a myth but a deeply human account of him confronting this same dangerous shore. By exploring Gotama's story, we can see our own struggles reflected in his, not as personal failings, but as part of our shared human condition. His path serves as a guide, showing us the pitfalls and dead ends, but also revealing the possibility of us finding a way across the turbulent waters to the 'safe shore' of lasting well-being. This chapter, therefore, is not just a history lesson; it is the first step in gathering the understanding needed to construct our own raft.

Self-reflections

Take a few moments for honest self-inquiry, approaching these questions with a caring and curious mind:

- ★ Reflect on a time when external comforts or acquisitions failed to bring

you lasting peace. How did this ‘arrow’ of dissatisfaction make itself known to you?

- ★ In what ways has your life sometimes felt confined by duties, expectations, or inner turmoil? What would ‘open space’ feel like for you?
- ★ Reflect on the two extremes of indulgence and self-punishment. Do you recognise a pattern of swinging between these in your own life?
- ★ What strategies or beliefs have you tried in the past that proved unhelpful? What did you learn from letting them go?
- ★ When have I noticed myself “running in all directions” instead of pausing to recognise the arrow?
- ★ What are the ‘golden bars’ of your own gilded cage? (for example, a comfortable but unfulfilling job, a relationship based on habit, a reliance on digital distraction). What does this comfort cost you?
- ★ Of Gotama’s Four Propositions (the world is unstable, has no shelter, has no owner, is insatiable), which one resonates most strongly with your own experience today? Why?
- ★ The ‘Ignoble Search’ involves seeking lasting happiness in things that are impermanent. What is one object of your ‘ignoble search’ that you can see clearly today?
- ★ https://raft2freedom.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Practice_2_The_Dangerous_Shore_9.png

Journaling prompts

Use your journal to explore these themes further:

- ★ **The gilded cage:** Write about a time you were in a ‘gilded cage’ – a situation that looked good on the outside but felt empty or unsatisfying on the inside. What did this teach you about where lasting happiness can (and cannot) be found?
- ★ **Confinement and open space:** Reflect on Gotama's feeling of being

confined by a ‘dusty’ home life. What aspects of your life feel confining or ‘dusty’ with passion and conflict? What would it mean for you to step into ‘an open space’ of greater clarity and freedom?

- ★ **Committing to the journey:** The ‘Noble Search’ begins with a powerful resolve. Write down your own intention for this journey. What kind of peace are you searching for? What commitment are you making to yourself as you begin to build your raft?
- ★ **Materials for your raft:** Gotama’s story shows him gathering and discarding materials for his journey. What ‘materials’ from his experience – such as courage, clear-seeing, self-compassion, or the willingness to discard what doesn’t work – feel most essential for you to gather for your own raft right now?
- ★ **An act of self-compassion:** Gotama realised that punishing his body was a dead end. Write about one way you can abandon self-punishment this week and offer yourself an act of nourishment or care instead.
- ★ **A weather report from the ‘Dangerous Shore’:** Write a short ‘weather report’ from your dangerous shore today. What are the prevailing winds (habitual thoughts)? What are the hidden reefs (triggers)? What storms (emotional reactions) have passed through recently?
- ★ **Dialogue in the gilded cage:** Write a short dialogue between the part of you that wants to stay safe and comfortable in the gilded cage and the part that yearns for the ‘open space’ of the Noble Search. Let both voices speak honestly without judgment.
- ★ **An act of nourishment:** Gotama chose nourishment over self-harm to find the Middle Way. Identify one way you typically engage in self-punishment (e.g., harsh self-talk, skipping a meal, depriving yourself of rest). Plan and write down one specific, compassionate act of nourishment you will offer yourself instead this week.
- ★ **The ‘Four Propositions’ in your life:** Choose one of the Four Propositions (unstable, no shelter, no owner, insatiable). Write about a specific time in your life when you experienced the truth of this proposition directly. How did it feel? What did it teach you?
- ★ **A new map:** How does viewing your journey through the lens of Gotama’s story—as a universal human quest rather than a personal failure—change

your perspective on your own struggles?

- ★ **Shelter and ownership:** Reflect on something you thought would provide security or permanence. How has it changed or slipped away? What did this teach you?
 - ★ **The insatiable world:** Journal about a desire or pattern that never truly satisfied you. How does seeing it as “insatiable” shift your relationship with it?
 - ★ **Daily GOTAMA check-in:** At the end of the day, revisit the acronym. Which step (Ground, Observe, Taste, Acknowledge, Map, Awaken) felt most alive? Which do I need to strengthen tomorrow?
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Remember to remember

Gotama was an ordinary man who had some extraordinary insights. His initial journey, his metaphorical raft, from suffering to freedom took six years. After he woke up to how life really is, he continued to practice for the rest of his life. He was still subject to pain but he chose not to suffer for it.

He left home at the age of 29, *“while still a black-haired young man endowed with the blessings of youth in the first stage of life.”* He died 51 years later in pain but at peace with himself and the world, as an ‘old homeless beggar’.

“Just as one would use a raft to cross the turbulent waters and reach the safety of the far shore, so too my teachings are like a raft, intended for crossing and not for holding onto.” ~ Gotama

Gotama finally arrived at the ultimate destination. His teachings never promised rainbows and unicorns but he did promise the possibility of individual peace, freedom and a perfect unshakable liberated heart. His last words to his followers can be paraphrased as:

‘Everything falls apart. Be careful and you will succeed.’

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