

Dharma of Challenges (4 of 5) Personal Responsibility

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To continue with the topic of the Dharma of challenges, we will be challenged in life. That is a certainty. How do we meet them? How does the Dharma help us with them? Building on last week's talks, the fourth meaning of Dharma is Dharma as teachings – for Buddhists, this means the teachings of the Buddha. How can they be a resource and support us in our challenges?

One way they support us is by orienting us in a direction that is effective and meaningful, and by taking in the teachings of the Buddha in their fullness – not necessarily what's predominantly taught, but the overall foundation for what is being taught.

When I read the suttas, two things stand out for me that point in a very important direction that can help us in times of challenges in life. I will start with a metaphor

because what I say might be more understandable. If an athlete is going to run an important race, they need to be at the very top of their physical ability. In the hour before the race, that person is going to take responsibility for how best to be ready for the race. They are going to be very focused on and intentional about that. Whatever they need to do, they will make sure it gets done.

Some of that is warming up, maybe by doing gentle runs – doing the very thing that they’re going to be doing in the race, but doing it slowly and warming up, going faster and faster, getting the body limber and the system ready for the race.

They are taking responsibility. They are not asking their trainer to run for them. If they need to get their mind in a certain state, they might meditate or take a nap. They might do something to clearly take their mind off the race, so they can relax more deeply and not be caught in any tension around it. They are very intentional, and they take responsibility for doing whatever will take their mind off the race.

The athlete is taking responsibility more than maybe anybody else. They are not looking at the weather every five minutes, thinking: “The weather’s not particularly good, and maybe it’ll get better.” They are not going around complaining that the track is not as even as they

would like it to be. They are not going around to everyone saying, “Look, this is not right.” They don’t do that. They take responsibility for how they are going to show up by getting themselves ready.

In the teachings of the Buddha, we find that his orientation can be a little like getting ready for life, taking responsibility for getting ourselves in the right frame of mind, with the right capacities, skills, and strengths, so that we can engage in life fully. There is a distinction here that I think is useful – the distinction of seeing Dharma practice as that part of life where we prepare ourselves for life. We are loosening ourselves up, freeing ourselves up, getting limbered up, getting ready, getting wise, and understanding ourselves in a way that only we can take responsibility for. When we are in the middle of a challenge, the challenge has its dynamics that we have to take care of and address. But in terms of the Dharma of the challenge, a big part of that is taking responsibility for our end of it: how we are participating.

For example, I imagine that when a racer is running along and a fellow racer running next to him says something mean to trip him up during the race, he does not argue with the person or tell him, “Let’s have a meeting and talk about this and work it out.” When you are in a race, you take responsibility for yourself in

order to manage what you are feeling, so you can run the race.

When we are in the world of challenges with other people, with arguments and difficulties, we take care of the difficulty in appropriate ways. Sometimes we do have a conversation with people. But it is important to remember that the Dharma is about always taking responsibility for how we are – seeing what we are contributing to the challenge, how we are contributing to our own suffering and distress around the challenge. Even though the other person has caused a lot of distress, the Dharma is found by centering here and finding out what we are doing – finding freedom here.

We do this so that when we are in the race of life, in the middle of challenges, we are in a good place to be able to do what needs to be done effectively, honestly, and clearly – not to avoid anything, but to come from a place of freedom, generosity, kindness, and non-stress.

In this very strong, individualistic teaching of the Buddha, we find a tremendous emphasis on taking responsibility for ourselves so that we can care for others. It is not an individualistic culture – it is very collectivist and connected to people and what's going on. But there is something we have to do *here* – this is where Dharma practice is found to a large degree. We do it together with other people, we are supported by

each other, we mirror each other, but the emphasis is on what we are doing here. What is our contribution?

When we do that, there is another part of the teaching that is phenomenal. In the modern world, we are learning how important it is in many circumstances. This is the willingness to feel pleasure. The Buddha's teachings are very focused on this. We take responsibility for what is happening, and we understand that what we do conditions us: what we do creates habit. It creates an environment that then conditions us. If we do things that are unhealthy, that creates unhealthy conditioning within us. Then we are more likely to feel off, and when we feel off, we are more likely to do unhealthy things.

In taking responsibility for ourselves, the idea is to find what conditions us positively – to do the things that create a good environment for us, so that influences us. This is not Pollyannaish. It is not coating things over and pretending that there are no difficulties and suffering. Dharma practice is the opposite of that. It is being honest about what is happening and showing up. But in doing so, how can we be present for all this so that the way we are attending – the way we are being with our experience – has a positive influence on us and is positive conditioning?

When we show up with stress, with resistance and anger, with greed for something, that is going to condition us in ways that are not helpful in the long term. Sometimes rather than showing up with positive states, the best we can do is show up with the absence of negative states. We can show up without giving in to anger. We might be angry, but we do not give in to it. We do not complain. We might be greedy, but we don't give in to it. The giving in and the participating are where the conditioning is.

A big part of mindfulness practice is to be mindful of what is happening. But along with awareness of the present moment, we can carry baggage with us. There can be a little complaining, a little fear, a little – or big – stress, or a little sense of duty, pushing, trying hard, expectation, or wanting it to be different. Many kinds of conditioning – things we do – reinforce something that is not very pleasant or beneficial for us, and do not prepare us for the race.

But we can learn how to be mindful, even of great difficulties, so that how we are mindful is satisfying and has a positive influence on us, even if that is only to be aware of what is happening with clarity (not a minor thing). We are clear, open, and available for what is there. Maybe we can't summon up kindness, compassion, or generosity. But it does feel good to step

forward openly and be aware, “Yes – that is good conditioning.”

It can seem like a big burden to be involved in a practice where a central feature is that we have to take responsibility for ourselves. And to start being conditioned by what is pleasant and enjoyable can seem somehow like an unrealistic spirituality. But it turns out that is a way of preparing ourselves for being in the world in a very realistic, beneficial, full way. When we show up with complaining, anger, fear, distress, clamping down, or giving up, we are not preparing ourselves. There are many things the mind does that we give in to or allow. It is phenomenal to begin to reclaim a certain kind of personal power and strength where we don't succumb, we don't collapse, and we don't give in to things that are unhealthy for us and the world.

Out of that grows the lotus in muddy waters. Rather than seeing as unfortunate all the complicated difficulties of our life – the ways in which we're caught up in attachments, clinging, and unhealthy behavior – instead we see them as the compost from which the lotus can grow. Difficulties become compost when we don't participate in them, when we don't grow them, but allow them to settle back into the soil, decay, and support the growth of something quite beautiful.

The Dharma is also teachings. I think this is one of the central teachings from the Buddha that can challenge us, enliven us, and give us directionality for being with challenges. This teaching of responsibility begins the process of showing up for challenges with a certain kind of personal strength and personal agency that are important for challenges. When we do not have agency – when we feel helpless and hopeless – that is powerful negative conditioning for us. The Dharma says we are never helpless because we can always show up and bring our practice to it.

Even if we can't change what is going on, even if we do all the preparations in the world, and we are at our peak shape for the race, we still might lose the race. But boy, was it good to show up and be present to run the race in the best state that we can be in. Maybe that is what winning is – not the literal winning of the race.

As you go through the day today, look at how you might be conditioning yourself by the state of your mind, the state of your reactivity to what's going on in the world, and how you participate in anything you're doing. What influence does your participation have on your state of being and your state of mind? Just study that. To get into that study, have some conversations with people about how this works for you. Thank you.