

# The Dharma of Challenges (2 of 5) The Importance of Action

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Hello everyone. This week, the series is on the Dharma of challenges. The focus last week was on the question, “What is the Dharma?” I offered five different meanings for the word dharma. Now, I am building on that. Each different meaning of dharma can be an approach to how to work and practice with the challenges we have.

This is still laying down a foundation. It is not getting into details. It is a foundation for a series of talks on particular ways of working with challenges. I am not exactly sure how this will unfold in the coming weeks. I am hoping that it is a journey into a deeper connection to oneself around this topic of the challenges we have as human beings.

One of the meanings of Dharma that I discussed last week was Dharma as action. There are places in the ancient texts where the Buddha is called a teacher of action, a *kammavādan*. His teaching is a *kammavāda*, a teaching of action. *Kammavāda* is related to the word Theravāda, with the same *vāda* at the end.

One way of understanding the Dharma and insight practice is that it is a practice of action. Insight practice meditation is a doing. Sometimes it is useful to emphasize this as an action – a doing – because otherwise we sometimes don't recognize we are doing something.

Sometimes in this tradition, we have a language of not doing anything – just allowing, just being. There is a way in which that is also a doing. We can be busy and active in the mind. If we choose to stop doing, stop it all and be still, there is a way that is also a doing. It is a doing of stopping. When we do that, we don't stop our life. Life continues. There is all this vitality.

If you are sitting upright in meditation, then there is action involved in being present for that posture, present here for this. Some people practice a radical letting go of all the normal doings of the mind and body. They are simply still, but there is still the doing of being aware. There is doing the action of awareness. Maybe

we are not doing it, but it is being done. It is action happening.

The reason I would like to emphasize action in relation to challenges is that when we are challenged by life in simple and deep ways, something inside of us springs into action. We have been activated in some way. We might find ourselves thinking a lot about the challenge, trying to figure it out, and problem-solve. Perhaps we are physically activated in some way. We want to run away or attack something because something is wrong. We may even want to shut down.

My default, when I am challenged, is the ostrich approach to challenge. It is like sticking my head in the sand, and pretending it is not there. Some people's default is to attack – to get angry and blame. Some people run away and shut down. Others spin out in thought with projections, fantasies, and ideas of what if, what could have been, or what should I have done. All kinds of actions can take place. These are all actions.

So we are already doing something. It turns out that when we are challenged, it is often very good for the heart, the mind, and the whole psyche to feel like we have some agency – that we can do something. We can act. One of the big challenges, a challenge squared, or a challenge on top of the challenge is when we feel it is too much. We feel like giving up; it is

hopeless. The feeling of hopelessness or helplessness is one of the great challenges within a challenge – feeling like giving up or that there is no opportunity to do anything.

In the Dharma, there is always something we can do. Maybe we can't do anything to fix this challenge, but we can find where we have some agency. What can we do here? How can we act?

Many years ago I talked to a woman. She was going in for major surgery. She had had a lot of surgeries, and now there was one more. I taught her to do loving-kindness meditation. After the surgery, she said: "Gil, that was so helpful. In the past, once I was on the gurney, laying there in the hallway waiting to go into surgery, I felt helpless. It was like my life was in someone else's hands. I couldn't do anything, but now I felt empowered. There was something I could do. I could do loving-kindness." She felt so engaged and empowered. In this crucial moment before going into surgery, she had her agency back.

We can find what we can do in a situation and learn we don't have to be helpless. Even when it is time for people to die, that is not necessarily a time to give up. There is a time to let go in a healthy way, which is also an action. Learning the value of letting go is an invaluable action. We appreciate doing it. We see the

value of letting go of so many concerns and things. Now, there is an opportunity to do something else, and not be snowed under or covered over with helplessness and hopelessness, even though the person might be dying. It is a challenge or crisis for some people, but it is happening anyway. Then a Dharma practitioner can ask, “What action can I engage in here that meets this nicely?”

One of the actions that we do in mindfulness practice meditation is to choose to stop, to not do. We choose, within reason, to not move the body too much. Maybe we have to move if it is uncomfortable, but we try to be still for a while. We might have a choice to still some of that thinking mind. There are things we think about and realize: “I have done this a lot. I don’t need to do this anymore.” There is a healthy, appropriate way to say: “Stop. I am not doing this.” This is an engagement of our agency, our choice of what we can do.

There are things we don’t have a choice about stopping. We have to learn to practice with this. For someone who is doing mindfulness meditation, one of the doings or actions we use is to meet this with attention. We meet it with investigation and curiosity, to be present here. That is something we do. Sometimes people undervalue the action of showing up for our experience. “Okay, here I am with it.” That is taking

agency. You have something to do. We are not helpless when we bring attention to something.

Sometimes we can simply be present for the experience of a challenge. Learn how to be present for it in a useful way. Sometimes the challenge we see seems out there. It's like an object. We objectify it somehow. I propose that the bigger the challenge, the more we are activated with our thinking or emotional mind. The more we are challenged, the more we experience fear, anxiety, or concerns.

That activation is something we bring attention to. Bring attention to it in a careful way. Explore and discover where you are activated. What is alive? What is activated here? Where does it feel most right to bring your attention? Where does it feel most grounding and centering within how you are feeling? Is there someplace within this agitation and instability where it feels pleasant and enjoyable to place the attention?

I remember yesterday when we had some trouble making the technology work, I was a bit more activated, energized, and spinning than I usually am when I sit down to YouTube. As I sat there, I brought my attention to how I was feeling energized and a little agitated. I noticed there was a flow of energy and a pleasant sensation in my upper arms. I don't usually feel the

upper arms that strongly when I meditate, but now there was a flow of energy that was part of the activation.

That flow, aliveness, and tingling felt nice. I wanted to be present for how this was. I wanted to be present in a way where I wasn't going to spin out more thoughts, ideas, and concerns. I wanted to be present in a way that entered and allowed for a deeper connection, settling, or calmness in the middle of the storm. Finding that place where it was pleasant might be too high a bar, but perhaps finding where it feels right is possible. I love this idea of where is the rightness; what feels right? Given how challenging it is and what is going on, where is the right place to be centered, to be present and attentive? I find just asking that question allows us to begin taking on agency: "I can do this; I can do something."

So, the Dharma as action. The Buddha was a teacher of action. We are learning how to act, to engage, to do in a way that is freeing and brings peace. It brings a sense of well-being. This path can lead to learning to feel confident in our capacity for agency. Even if we can't solve the challenge, we don't have to give up looking for a way to be present and alive so we can do something and don't have to feel helpless.

It might be interesting today to explore this for yourself. If you feel challenged by things, first look and see if you

have already been activated. Recognize if you are already acting and engaged. It might be like: “It is just hopeless. I am a disaster.” This is an action. This is a doing. See when you are challenged with what you are already doing. First, find what you can do that gives you a healthy agency to do something appropriate.

Then be more present for how you feel challenged. Feel where it feels most right. What aspect of your psychophysical experience is kind of pleasant in the middle of this very unpleasant event that is going on? Where is it most calming to connect? Don't choose the most difficult challenges for today's exercise. Maybe some small challenges would be interesting to explore this with.

I am aware that last week was a foundation for this week, and what is coming. The last week in December of 2022 where we talked about right effort is also a very important foundation for what is coming – a prequel for it. If you missed those talks, you might want to listen to them.

So, thank you.