

# What is the Dharma? (3 of 5) Dharma as Truth

January 4, 2023

## **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

relatedness, actions, impact, consequence, truth, Buddhism, greed, karma, activity, beneficial, hostility, relationship, non-harming, freedom, beauty, mindfulness

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Hello, everyone. This is the third talk discussing the topic, “What is the Dharma?”

In Buddhism and India in general, dharma is a multivalent word. In Buddhism, there are many different meanings attributed to this word. It is used in all kinds of ways. Some of the traditional, classical commentaries have long lists with all the different meanings of the word dharma.

I started this week by talking about how the Dharma has to do with the relatedness between things. Things exist, dependent on or in support of other things. Things arise in relation to other things being present, and so

the Dharma has to do with that relatedness. It is nice to begin talking about the Dharma by first emphasizing relatedness and relationships as opposed to me, myself, and mine.

Yesterday, I talked about how one of the many meanings of dharma is a variation of the word “action” or “conduct.” It often refers to good conduct, but it can refer to bad conduct. When monastics transgress from their monastic rules, it is sometimes called the *dhamma* or the Dharma. The emphasis here is on action, activity. This early tradition focuses on the dynamic qualities of life. “Activity” might be a better word than “action” – the activity of life, the activity of phenomena. Everything is in motion, everything is moving.

Today I would like to emphasize a more common meaning for dharma that is often called upon or highlighted. Dharma can mean truth. This requires some explanation of what truth means. In this dharmic context, the primary truths that we are looking for, such as the Four Noble Truths, are what happens in relationship – the impact our actions have on other things. We live in relatedness. Our actions impact or are a part of that relatedness. Our actions affect the quality of what transpires in the association, the connection, the relatedness, the support, or the impact of what comes as a result of the action.

It is very important to understand that Dharma as truth is about the impact of action – the impact on others and the impact on ourselves. Seeing the truth of that is important because if we understand the impact of our actions, then we can adjust our actions. We can take more responsibility for our actions. If the impact is harmful, we could stop what we are doing. If it is beneficial, we would continue. If it is a combination of both, then we have to use our best wisdom to figure out the wisest way forward.

Care and sensitivity to impact is a very important part of the Dharma as truth. To see, “Oh, what I do has consequences.” The simplest way of describing the Buddhist principles of karma is that karma is the teaching, the idea, the insight, or the truth that our actions have consequences. All actions have consequences one way or another, and we have some choice about the consequences we create in this world.

To simplify that to kind of the core truth around this focus on consequences, or the impact of our actions, is to understand what is harmful and what is not. And to avoid harmful actions; to avoid causing harm in the world and to ourselves as best we can.

This idea that the Dharma as truth is a truth that we can see and know for ourselves. If we are paying attention, we can know if what we are doing is harmful. If we are

very attentive, we can feel the harm not only in the impact but also in the activity itself. If we do something with hostility, that will have negative consequences for others. It could have a negative consequence for us in the future. It also has negative consequences in this moment, because the hostility itself involves stress, tension, *dukkha*, pain. There is pain in the very nature and activity of hostility.

Greed is the same. Greed can cause problems in the world. Human greed has a monumental impact on the planet. The greed and desire of many individuals have a cumulative effect. There is something very different in greed than just open-handed desire. Greed itself is painful. It is an activity that has pain, *dukkha*, within it.

Begin seeing the truth about consequences. See the truth of not only consequences but also how what we may be doing has negative consequences. Really see the truth of this.

This is one of the reasons why mindfulness practice is so important in Buddhism. Mindfulness practice is not just about being in the present moment to enjoy our tea, the sunrise, or this moment here. More importantly, we can carefully and even minutely see how our actions have an impact in the related world we live in. We can see that any craving or clinging will bring suffering, at a minimum to oneself, and many times to others as well.

And so, when we are doing this, we are also entering into this world where Dharma kind of means the way in which the coordinated and cooperative nature of reality either supports us or undermines us. That is a little bit of a modern construction based on the etymology of different elements of the word dharma.

Dharma is often considered a very positive word. It is often synonymous with actions that are healthy, wholesome, and supportive. Dharma is the support, the help, and the benefit that is offered. A big part of *the* Dharma, Buddhist Dharma, is that because all action is in relationship to other things, supportive action has beneficial consequences for other things. This can be for ourselves psychologically or out in the world. Dharma encompasses all of it.

A simple way of saying all this is – if karma is our attention to the consequences of our actions, then karma is Dharma, and Dharma is karma. The two really can't be teased apart.

So we have relatedness. Be sensitive to relationships that are kind of invisible. They are invisible in that the relatedness can't be seen or touched literally. We can know it and recognize it in the impact that goes on in the source and ourselves.

Start being attuned to the relatedness in all things. Go out and look at a tree. Appreciate the relatedness we have to the tree. The tree produces oxygen and takes in our carbon dioxide. It converts it back into oxygen. We live in dependence on it. We live in dependence on clouds and rain. They bring us the water we drink so we can live. Start looking at the relatedness and the mutual support – the back and forth.

Start to appreciate how we live in this world. Are the actions that we do beautiful? “To walk in beauty” is a Native American expression. In Buddhism, the literal words for good karma are beautiful karma or beautiful actions. We want to live in a related world where our actions are beautiful and to focus on the beauty and wonderfulness of the impact of our actions.

I wanted to review all that because I propose it is a radically different way of understanding the world. It is very different to look at the world and be in the world without an excessive focus on oneself as a static thing – this is all about me, and what I can get for myself – or an excessive focus on the world out there, that things have to be a certain way.

More important than things is relatedness. When we have relatedness, then we can see the truth of how our actions impact that relatedness and spill over. This is the domain or the area of attention that moves us

forward along the path of freedom. An excessive focus on self, without looking at how things within relate to each other, can block the path of freedom. The relatedness eases some of the sense of self-appropriation.

If you would like an assignment to carry this forward and explore it for yourself – as you go about your day, pay attention to the inanimate world, the living world, and the human world around you. As you interact with them, give attention to the impact and the consequences of what you say, what you do, and what you think. What you say and what you do might be impactful for others. What you think might be impactful for you. See the truth of that impact. See the truth and the value of finding your way to non-harming and beneficial actions.

So, dharma – I am hoping you are beginning to appreciate this powerful, multivalent, and rich word that opens up the world in such a wonderful way. Thank you