

What is the Dharma? (4 of 5) Dharma as Teachings

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Warm greetings for the fourth talk on “What is the Dharma?” One meaning of Dharma is the teachings of the Buddha. These teachings are interesting to look at because there are volumes and volumes of texts that purport to be his recorded teachings. I find many of these quite inspiring. I delight in swimming in the ancient teachings.

But what specifically is the Dharma? The analogy I would like to use is that of a modern Buddhist teacher who often uses a metaphor or simile of traffic lights, where green means “go,” and red means “stop.” Then over time, people learned to recognize this metaphor in the teacher’s teachings. Maybe at some point society

changed the colors for “go” and “stop.” But people had gotten used to referring to that teacher’s colors for “go” and “stop,” so the people who are into that person’s teachings might say: “No, we believe that green means ‘go,’ and red means ‘stop.’ That’s the way it is. That’s our religion. That’s our faith. We have to believe that because that’s what our teacher said.”

But that is a misunderstanding of what the teachings were really about. Those colors were just a metaphor or an example of using something in the modern world. The teacher did not necessarily hold the metaphor as an absolute truth that had to be that way.

The Buddha taught a lot. In the same way, are all of the teachings really what he was teaching about? How much of his teachings were just using and folding in teachings, ideas, and concepts of his times? We find that people came to the Buddha to ask questions within a framework. The Buddha simply accommodated that framework, but he twisted it or transformed it into his own teachings – into what he wanted to teach, using that person’s framework. Is that framework the Dharma or is it a little bit different? It is a vehicle for the Dharma. But maybe it is not exactly his core teachings – those which are really essential to carry on from generation to generation.

To answer the question, “What are the teachings of the Buddha?”, we can look specifically at the places where the text says: “These are the teachings. This is the Dharma” – where what is being said is that specific. What we find is remarkable. Over and over again, the message has to do predominantly with some direct contact (experience) with the present moment – something right here that we can do. The text points not only to direct experience, but more importantly, to the actions that lead somewhere.

We’ve been saying that Dharma means actions, and these actions can have consequences, so we want to choose actions that have beneficial consequences. For example, in the very famous simile of the raft, the Buddha says:

So I have shown you how the dhamma (the Dharma) is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over a river, not for the purpose of grasping.

The simile is about a person who comes to the edge of a big river and has no way of getting across except by making a small raft – getting wood, reeds, and other things, and constructing a raft – then paddling the raft across to the other side. When you get to the other side, the purpose of the raft is not to carry it on your back into the forest and wherever you go next. It has served its purpose. So don’t grasp it. Leave it behind.

One of the teachings here is that the Dharma is provisional and contextual. It is useful for a particular purpose. Beyond that, we don't look at it in order to understand what color a traffic light should be. The Dharma has to do with not grasping.

The Buddha goes on to say:

When you know that the dhamma is similar to a raft, you should abandon even the teachings, how much more so things contrary to the teachings.

There is tremendous importance placed on not grasping. Don't even grasp the Dharma (the teachings of the Buddha) – let alone other teachings. Don't grasp ideas about traffic lights. Don't grasp anything. The centrality of not grasping in this little passage represents what I am trying to say. These teachings are so much about the immediacy of *now*, the imminence of now, and how we live now. People 2500 years ago could experience that just as well as we can today. These are very modern teachings, except we don't build rafts.

The heart of the Dharma has something to do with not grasping. Here is a fascinating description of the purpose of the Dharma:

The Dharma is for the elimination of all standpoints, all obsessions, all adherences, all underlying tendencies, all decisiveness around teachings. This

is the true teaching for the stilling of all reactivity, for the relinquishment of all attachments, for the ending of all craving, for cessation, for nirvāṇa.

Whatever the Dharma is, it is for this purpose, and this is a lofty purpose. It is not exactly something you experience in the moment. But it is part of the moment – part of our direct experience. There is nothing here about future lives, nothing about a fantastic, ultimate communion with the cosmos, or some deep insight into the true nature of reality. The teaching is mostly about releasing and freeing – in particular, around teachings. As I said earlier, don't even grasp the teachings. The Buddha tells us to let go of all opinions, viewpoints, and standpoints that we hold onto, thinking "this is how it should be." He teaches so we don't do that.

Somewhere else he teaches very eloquently that what he is teaching is not a view, nor a philosophy, nor a doctrine. What he teaches is the letting go of all that, and something deeper and more valuable: the stilling of all reactivity. The relaxation we did in the last meditation could be called – rather than relaxation – the stilling of all bodily, mental, and emotional reactivity. When we relax, it always means relaxing the reactivity that has built up within us.

A monk once came to the Buddha and asked, "Can you teach me the Dharma in brief so I can remember it and

go into the forest and practice on my own?” So, you know, this is kind of important – now, the Buddha is going to give the pithy, short version of what the Dharma is. In this case, he says:

You should let go of desire for anything which is impermanent, anything which is inconstant. Let go of clinging to it.

That is all the Buddha says. That is the heart. That is one of the very simple key ways he says it. We can protest; we can have our doubts about it: “Wait a minute!” But he is pointing to something very deep. The important thing I want to say here is that this teaching is pointing to action – the action of letting go. This letting go is for a particular consequence: the consequence of becoming free. This is the domain of what the Dharma is about.

Earlier I talked about not grasping. Here the teaching is about not having desire for anything impermanent. If you hold on to anything that is going to change, you will suffer, so here is an alternative way to be with it.

We find a number of examples in the suttas where someone comes to the Buddha and says, “Teach me the Dharma in brief.” Repeatedly, the answer is about something very immediate, very practical, and, in modern terms, almost psychological, which does not have any recourse to metaphysics, to the supernatural,

or to anything beyond what it is possible to experience in our direct experience.

The last thing I want to say is that when the Buddha says, “when you know the Dharma for yourself,” that is the point: he is talking about something you can know for yourself – not a teaching that you have to take on faith, but a teaching that you can experience. This is why we are practicing mindfulness: to be able to have some deep experience of this for ourselves.

Here is another pithy quote about how you know for yourself what the Dharma is:

When you know there is greed, hatred, and delusion within you, and when you know there is no greed, hatred, and delusion within you, then you know the Dharma is visible here and now, immediate, inviting to be seen for oneself, onward leading, and to be personally realized by the wise.

Maybe calling this “psychological” diminishes the teaching in some people’s minds. But I use that term as an alternative to “supernatural,” or “metaphysical,” or anything beyond our everyday experience. If you know greed, hate, and delusion in all their different forms, and you know their absence, then you know the Dharma. The Dharma is about seeing what is happening – knowing suffering, knowing the cause of suffering, and knowing the end of it.

That ending of greed, hate, and delusion can be temporary. But the Buddha says that even if it is temporary, you have had a qualitative experience of being really free of greed, hate, and delusion. Maybe it was just accidental, on a very good day, after a good sleep. Appreciate that. There is something important about that experience – you are knowing the Dharma directly: “Oh, *this* is what it’s about. *This* is the Dharma. *This* is possible. *This* is what I have a relationship with. These are the actions that I can live my life in accordance with, and that are supportive of the movement towards freedom.”

The Dharma as teachings supports, points to, and highlights what I’ve been teaching the first three days of this week about what the Dharma is. It is the relatedness that we can live in. It is the actions that have an effect on that relatedness. And it is the actions that transform that relatedness to one of freedom, goodwill, care, and compassion. This is the Dharma.

If you would like to do some homework on this, do some relaxation. Relax and open up to the present. See what is here. See if you can have some taste, some experience of non-grasping, non-clinging, and non-reactivity that gives you a feeling, “Oh, the Dharma – this is valuable.” You might have a small experience, but you can extrapolate from that. “If this becomes

complete and full, this is good Dharma.” Thank you. I look forward to the last talk on this topic.