

Dharmette: The Dharma Rains on All of Us

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on October 5, 2011

It's raining today. I want to offer one of my favorite stories or similes from the Buddhist tradition that has to do with the rain. It's from the Mahayana Buddhist Sutra called the "Lotus Sutra." It talks about how when it rains in the forest, it rains on the big trees, the small trees, the bushes, and the little plants in the ground. Each according to its need takes up the water it needs to grow and thrive on. The big trees soak up a lot of rain, and the plants take up a little bit, each according to its need. It is the same with the Dharma. The Dharma is raining on us all the time. Each of us takes up what we need. Some of us are big trees; some of us are little trees; and some of us are bushes. Each of us is different. Perhaps I shouldn't use the idea of big and small, but each of us is unique and has our own way. So the Dharma is really vast, and each of us takes in what we need – what's appropriate given our circumstance and life.

One of the reasons I like this story is because there's no sense of obligation. It isn't like we have to rush out now

and gather all the possible rainwater – the Dharma – and get it and hoard it. The Dharma – the teachings, the practices, the nature of reality – is available to each of us according to our own need. No one is requiring us to drink any of it, but it's there. First we're soaking it in, and we take up what we need. In different circumstances, different times and different days, we might need different things. Sometimes we need a big dose of the Dharma, and sometimes we just need a little bit to provide the support to keep us going. When we hear teachings, we take in something, and maybe a week later, we remember those teachings and take in something else.

In the Buddhist tradition, there's many ways of listening to a Dharma talk. One interesting way is to sit and meditate. You don't think about what you're hearing. But just let it come through, like the wind coming through an open door, trusting that whatever you need to hear will stay. Otherwise, you just let it go right through. The Dharma comes like rain, and you take what you need.

We need different things at different junctions of our life, because we're addressing different issues. Sometimes the issue we're attached to is food. At other times we're dealing with work, grief or strong emotions. Maybe there is a tremendous clinging to self, and we're trying to understand the nature of this self-attachment. The issue might be fear of death. It might be difficulties in

relationships, or that life is not providing us with what we want – because it usually doesn't. Maybe you have some kind of limitation due to an accident. Now you can't do what you're used to doing, and possibly you can't do it for the rest of your life. At different times, we're up against different issues that we have to face, and the Dharma comes along like a huge rain.

The Dharma is really vast – so, given the different challenges that we're involved with at any given time, what part of the Dharma do we find useful and pick up? Sometimes it's the teachings on loving-kindness, compassion or forgiveness that have the most value. Sometimes it's the practice of discipline, forbearance and just keeping at it that's most useful. Sometimes it's the teachings on acceptance and equanimity that are helpful. Sometimes it's particular teachings of Buddhist psychology that help us to question or to look more deeply at our own psychology and how we work. For example, we may understand something about the nature of self-identity: how it works, the activity of the mind that creates identity, and how we wrap up around it. Sometimes it's deep inquiry into the nature of clinging or the nature of fear.

Depending on where we are in our life, there are many different things that dealing with. The idea is that the Dharma is raining on all of us, and we take in what we need. That's true, but it really helps if we're like a dry

sponge. If we're already completely sopping wet, then maybe we won't take much in. I'm changing analogies. Can you do that in the middle of a Dharma talk – to go from plants to sponges? [Laughter] Maybe it helps to be like lichen or moss that absorb water when they're dry. So if we're filled with our own ideas, preoccupations and concerns, maybe we won't take it in.

A very important part of mindfulness practice is to make ourselves a receptacle to receive the Dharma and the teachings, and to engage in the inquiry and the questioning. To some degree, it helps to let go, to settle down and get calm. Part of the value of meditation practice is a time where we try to empty and relax our mind. We try to relax the tension that we're carrying. As we do that, we're less preoccupied, and then we become more receptive to what the Dharma and reality has to offer. We're also more receptive to learn from it all.

When I say the Dharma rains on all of us and we take up what we need, I don't mean Buddhism and Buddhist teachings. The Dharma is usually seen as being the part of reality that supports us. A big part of that is our own capacity for inquiry, questioning and opening up to love and compassion. So as we become beautifully empty like a sponge to receive what's there, part of what we receive comes from within us and part of it comes from without. But, each of us gets exactly what

we need, especially if we've prepared ourselves. I think mindfulness, meditation and concentration practices help us to let go of our preoccupations and make us more able to receive the benefits of the Dharma in our lives. It's amazing the goodness that will come in and fill it, if you make yourself a good receptacle – a good sponge.

May all of us be sponges on this rainy day. The Dharma rains on all of us.