

The Dharma, Part 2 (4 of 5) Stay Close

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Today we come to the fourth characteristic of the Dhamma: *opaneyyiko*. Most commonly, it is understood as onward leading. I like this translation of the word. There are other meanings for it. In the ancient commentaries, they discussed some of the different meanings it can have. These days, Bhikkhu Bodhi, the great translator of our suttas, translates it as “applicable.” The Dhamma is something that you can immediately apply, you can use – it is usable. This is also a very nice idea. You can immediately use it.

Another meaning is that the Dhamma is immediate, now, and approachable. It is something to approach, something that’s nearby, something to stay close to. We’re guided close to it. So there are these different meanings.

I’m very fond of the idea of onward leading. When we

practice, it's not a static thing that we sit and practice, and nothing changes. We set in motion a change when we practice. How do we understand that change? How is it onward leading?

In my vocabulary, I think of onward leading as something that has almost a natural quality to it. It moves along without my effort. For instance, if I float on top of a current in a river, it's onward leading. It carries me along. If I stand on a conveyor belt, a walking sidewalk that they have at the airport, I stand there and it carries me along. I don't have to do the walking. So there is this idea of being carried along by the Dharma.

It's not a mystical or strange thing. I like to understand it very simply that the Dharma is to see the Dharma. It's visible here and now. To really see it, to take a good look at it, what's happening here now.

One of the things we start seeing is the tensions we hold, the holding patterns in the body and the mind. We start seeing the strain and the stresses we carry with us. Showing up and being really present for tension, for stress, for holding, something begins to release. Sooner or later, it's hard for the psychophysical system to hold on, to keep being tense, under the gaze of mindfulness, of awareness. It's like we can't do two things at once. We can't be fully present *and* fully tense, holding on, clinging. As we devote ourselves to being present, to

being aware, there's less energy available to be tense, to hold on, to cling. So it begins to relax and soften.

Sometimes when we see what we're holding on to, we let go of it and something relaxes. This relaxation of the system – mind, heart, body – is onward leading because it heightens the sensitivity to recognize more clinging, to recognize the next layer of tension or strain that we have. It heightens our attention to notice that when we bring in more strain again, we get tense again. You can see that in meditation sometimes very clearly when we're pretty relaxed and at ease, and then we have a certain thought or memory, and we feel a tightening up someplace, maybe the whole body. Or we brace ourselves in some way. We can see we're getting involved in an idea or a story, and we see the effect it has.

Sometimes in seeing it so clearly, it's possible to let go of it: "I don't need to be involved in that story. I can let go of those thoughts." Letting go, the body relaxes a little.

So sometimes it's a practice that we do because of this heightened sensitivity that we get more and more aware of it. As we relax, we're more sensitive. As we relax, there's a momentum towards greater ease, towards greater letting go, not clinging. Our whole body begins shifting.

They say that when we're under a lot of stress, our biochemical makeup changes. There are more cortisol (stress hormone) and other things, and they're not good for us. But as we have ease and de-stress, our system moves, more or less, towards homeostasis of health and well-being. There's this onward leading towards health – spiritual health, psychological health, and to some degree, physical health that can happen through this.

At some point, this movement towards letting go begins to feel like it's happening on its own. It feels like we're on a gentle slide or in a current that all we have to do is stay out of the way, don't interfere with it, and our whole system moves towards greater and greater ease, relaxing, letting go, and opening up.

It's remarkable to feel this. It's almost impersonal. It has almost a natural quality to it. It's inspiring to feel the not-selfhood of this process of the Dharma unfolding within us. We have our role, for sure, but we cannot engineer it. We kind of enable it, allow it, and stay close to it. This Dharma that we stay close to is one of the meanings of *opaneyyiko*.

I love the idea that we stay close to the Dharma. Keep it close in, stay close, remember it. It's the most important thing for our life because it's more important than

anything. Not because other things are unimportant, but because they sit at the center of a healthy way of being with things that are important in our life. The important things in our life, if they're worthwhile, stay important. But with the Dharma being the most important, we actually have more to offer the other important things we have in our life.

With the Dharma being most important, there's a quality of freedom that comes in how we connect with people. People we love, we can still love them fully, maybe even more so, but there's a quality of freedom, of non-expectation, of non-demanding, maybe a non-neediness that goes along with it.

Bhikkhu Bodhi, as I said, translated *opaneyyiko* as "applicable." So as we see the tension, the holding, that we have, we see it clearly. That shows us what we can do – what is useful. We see what we can let go of. Sometimes we cannot let go of the tension, the holding itself, but we might let go of our self-criticism: "Oh, I'm such a terrible person. I'm a bad Buddhist because I'm clinging." Maybe that can be let go of. We're still holding on to something, but we're more at ease with being tense, more at ease with our attachment.

It doesn't mean that we're condoning, celebrating, or participating wholeheartedly in our attachments, but it does mean that we're not adding more suffering on top

of it. This is a beautiful quality, I think, of dhamma practice, of this kind of acceptance, this kind of non-movement towards not being troubled by our challenges and faults. A few of us have some inner personal faults. I like to think that every human has them. They are not even personal. They come with being human. So to not be troubled by them.

At the same time, to see it and to know it, and not to cause any harm because of it. As long as we don't cause harm, it's fine to be who you are. No harm to ourselves, no harm to others. This is profound because it's an alternative to how much harm is being caused in the world. The amount of harm that goes on is phenomenal. Even in the most subtle ways, even among people who love each other, there's harming going on. It would be a radically different world if we stop that. Even for one person to come to that place of not harming is an amazing thing. Stay close to that.

Opaneyyiko, this onward leading quality of the Dharma. It also means that the Dharma is applicable. It's something we can apply ourselves to. We can apply ourselves to the stream that carries us to greater and greater freedom.

It's something to stay close to. Stay close to the stream, stay close to this practice – this thing that can be visible right here, that is now. This is good to take a deep look

at it. Yes, look at it deeply. Stay close to that so you can experience what the wise experience. To be experienced by the wise. And that will be the topic for tomorrow.

Today, stay close to non-harming. And if that means you're seeing clearly the way that you harm, try not to be troubled by it. Don't participate in it. See it clearly. Don't add problems on top of it. But let's explore this world of harming and non-harming.

Stay close to that, and you'll find that you'll see the Dharma there. That's where the Dharma can be found. Thank you very much.