

What is the Dharma? (2 of 5) Dharma as Action

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Today I will continue with the theme “What is the Dharma?”

Dharma is a powerful word in Buddhism. It has many meanings. When I study the teachings of the Buddha, I see that one of the primary ways Dharma is referenced – not its literal meaning – is as action or something dynamic. It does not refer to things that are static, especially when the word dharma is used in the plural. In the singular, it often means teachings – the Buddha’s teachings, for example. When he refers to the plural form of dharma, it refers to action – something active and dynamic.

This goes along with what I taught yesterday. One of the meanings of Dharma or what it refers to is the relatedness of all things. All things exist in relationship to other things. They come about in relationship to each other. This relatedness occurs because there is a dynamic relationship between things. There are ways in which the functioning of one thing impacts and affects other things that go on. Things live in relationship to each other because they are dynamic. But they are more activities than things. There are more verbs than nouns in how Buddhism focuses on the Dharma.

One of the places that inspired me to see this is near the end of the Buddha's life. He gave the instructions:

Take the Dharma as your refuge, as your only refuge, as your island, as your support, as your refuge.

He went on to say:

Take yourself as your refuge, as your only refuge.

Saying that one after the other ("Take the Dharma as your refuge, take yourself as a refuge") implies a kind of equivalence between the two. They seemingly refer to the same thing, especially when he says, "and no other refuge." This only works if the two are the same – Dharma and yourself. How could that be?

The Buddha goes on to say:

And how do we do this? We practice the Four Foundations of Mindfulness: mindfulness of the

body, mindfulness of feelings, mindfulness of mind states, and mindfulness of dharmas.

The fourth foundation, mindfulness of dharmas, refers to things that are dynamic, that are active.

Many of these are mental actions, mental activities that we are doing. The hindrances, for example, are all actions of the mind, activities of the mind. The Seven Factors of Awakening are dharmas – mindfulness, investigation, effort, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. These are all functionings of the mind; they are dynamic.

Generally, when Dharma refers to an activity, it is referring to good, healthy activity or good conduct. It is things we actually do – conduct that we engage in. If it is activities of the mind, we wouldn't necessarily call them actions since actions are limited to something a person does. They are functionings of the mind.

There is an emphasis in Buddhism that all things are changing, inconstant, and impermanent. Of course, that is what we are pointing to when we point to the inconstancy of things. It is not that they necessarily come to an end, which certainly is part of it, but rather, they are dynamic. They appear and disappear, like waves that come and go and come and go. These activities are not fixed or static. They are not stuck.

This idea that Dharma, in the teachings of the Buddha, repeatedly refers to something dynamic and active, an activity – is actually the good news of Buddhism. It means that nothing is frozen in place. It's kind of like there is no hardware operating here; it is all software. And we can change the software. Its conditions can change. The choices we make can change.

All the actions we do relate to each other. This means that certain kinds of activities that are unwholesome and unhealthy relate to what follows in an unhealthy way. Greed and hatred have a negative impact. Generosity and love have a very different impact.

Even though just being aware doesn't feel like a doing, mindfulness is an activity of the mind. It feels so restful to not do and just be aware, as if we are resting in awareness. Even so, awareness is the firing of certain nerves in the brain. There is a certain activity that is going on, but it is not something that the self feels like it is doing. It is a relief to feel this beautiful thing flowing and to know we are not the ones doing it.

When we practice mindfulness, we are bringing in the conditions that allow things to settle. We are bringing in the conditions that allow us to see clearly what is happening. We are bringing in the conditions that allow us to differentiate between the different kinds of mental activities that are going on. Then we do the ones that

are healthiest for us, the ones that are right effort (from last week's teachings).

Another place the Buddha emphasized the idea of Dharma being activities is in the teachings of the Seven Factors of Awakening. The English translation of the second factor is "investigation." The ancient Pali word has the word *dhamma* or dharma in it. It is *dhammavicaya*. *Vicaya* means to distinguish or differentiate. It is the differentiation of *dhamma*.

When the Buddha explains what is being differentiated, it is mental activities: the Seven Factors of Awakening, Eightfold Path, Four Noble Truths, Five Faculties, Four Right Efforts. The mind is able to distinguish between what is healthy and not healthy. It can differentiate activities of the mind that are wholesome and not wholesome. This is the ability to clearly see in the mind the activities of the mind. Seeing clearly what is happening in the mind is part of the gift of being very settled, present, and quiet, almost like we are not doing anything.

We start seeing more clearly what is happening in the activities of the mind. "Oh, my mind is going down that old, well-dug canal of wanting and desiring. I've seen it does not take me in a good direction. I don't have to do that anymore. I could take the vitality of my mental energy, of awareness, and let it flow someplace else. I

can recognize what is happening and not get caught in it. I could focus on something else – on contentment. That feels healthy. When I focus on contentment, I settle more.”

There is a gentle action that goes on in this practice. I refer back to last week’s teachings on right effort – right effort is an action. We are learning how to act, how to do, so it borders on almost feeling like we are not doing. It is so peaceful. It is so relaxed and flowing. Maybe it is like water flowing. We don’t see that it is flowing because it is so clear. There is an activity that is onward leading, a flow to what is awakening through this practice.

Dharma means activity, dynamism, action. It means engaging. This can be a paradigm shift for some people. Focusing on relatedness is a paradigm shift. As opposed to focusing on me and you, we are focusing on relationships. In the same way, rather than focusing on nouns where things are fixed (“This is how it is, I will always be this way, the situation will always be this way”), we start attuning to where the activity is, where the flow is, where the dynamism is, where the change is happening. It is always happening anyway. Be attuned to that, surf with it, flow in it, and participate with it.

If we are flowing in a river, and the current is taking us against dangerous rapids, then we learn how to swim to

the other side of the river where the water is flowing peacefully. We learn the terrain. We learn the route. We learn how to use the flow of change, and it is always changing.

If you are interested in an assignment for today, try to become more aware of how you freeze, how you stop in the river of change, the river of time. Pay attention to how you get preoccupied with things or become fixated. Flowing does not mean you don't have to focus on things. We focus on them with a flow, with the mind itself shifting, changing, and flowing. The mind doesn't freeze; the mind doesn't get caught. It is involved in a flowing, gentle way.

We are like the Japanese word *unsui*. We are like clouds on water that flow with the flow of life, the flow of time, the flow of the movements and activities of the mind, choosing what is heavenly.

The *dhamma*, the Dharma – a very important distinction, though perhaps not the literal meaning, is it is often pointing to action, activity, and dynamism. The Dharma is found more in dynamism, activity, and action – rather than assuming that it is only in stillness, peace, or some quiet, fixed state. Nothing is fixed. It is always changing, always flowing. So I hope you can see the difference between being stopped or stuck, and gently flowing along with all things. Even if you are sitting

quietly in meditation and your body is not moving,
everything is still flowing.

Thank you very much, and we'll continue this tomorrow.