

The Dharma (4 of 5) Onward Leading

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opaneyyiko, ouch, ahh, onward leading

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So, my friends, we continue with the five characteristics of the Dharma. This little statement is often chanted as part of the daily liturgy of Theravadan monastics:

The Dharma is well-spoken by the Buddha. It is visible here. It is immediate now. It invites us to see. It is onward leading, to be experienced personally by the wise.

Today the topic is onward leading. This is a beautiful and wonderful quality of the Dharma, of this practice we do – it is onward leading. It leads to what is really good. It leads to freedom. It leads to peace, to dharmic happiness.

How it leads there is quite fascinating. We certainly have our role in going on the path of practice, but there is also a way in which we end up doing this practice in the current that carries us in the direction of what is good and healthy. There is something that we discover

that leads us to greater peace and happiness. In this way, the Dharma is onward leading, carries us on. How does this work? What is this?

Some of it has to do with this “ouch” and “ahh” that I talked about in the meditation today. It is simplistic to just orient ourselves to feel and sense things from the point of view of ouch and ahh, but the benefit is that is so simple. The ouches don’t have to be understood in all their complicated ways. Whether it is some irritation at having a too-hard meditation cushion or having some major world of difficulty happen for us, we just see ouch – no stories, no complicated things, no trying to understand why.

The same thing for ahh. We can get sensitive to what feels good, feels right, and move in that direction without making it complicated for us, without appropriating it for self-identity, for me, myself, and mine. Not making it a big engineering project, understanding why we’re doing it and questioning what is this all for, or am I doing the right thing?

There is a way of making it so simple that comes from a sensitivity and ability to be really here and present. This is not thinking about things. It is closer to feeling things – sensing or experiencing the ouch and ahh. That is the other advantage of these words. They’re more experiential than they are concepts and ideas.

As we're able to stay here in our direct experience, as we're able to stay in our direct experience now – this extended, maybe even timeless, now – really stay here. Time for time. Relaxed, not rushing and being ahead of ourselves. Here. We respond to the call to see more carefully: “What is here? What is this experience? What's going on here?” To simply see, “Oh, that's ouch and that's ahh.” If I'm breathing in a way that feels a little bit shallow and uncomfortable, then I might have a thought: “Wow, I ate too much breakfast. I'm always eating too much breakfast. I'm a lousy breakfast eater, and now I can't be a good meditator.”

All those sentences, all those attitudes have an ouch to them. If you're in the thoughts, if you become the thoughts, then they drive the show and we almost don't even see the ouch in them. But if we're quiet, peaceful, and calm enough, we can say: “Oh, that's an ouch. There's another ouch. I do a lot of ouches.”

These are the second arrows that we talk about in Buddhism. How we pile. We might have something uncomfortable, some suffering, and then we add suffering on top of it and on top of it. There will be layers and layers of self-criticism, blame on the world, anger, despair – all kinds of extra things. This simplicity is, “Oh, that's an ouch.” Have time for that. Not in a hurry, not

pushing it away, not judging it. Just: “Oh, look at that. That’s certainly an ouch.”

Because of that time, lots of time to be here, then we can also feel and sense there is a direction that opens up in the direction of an ahh. There is a way of being that is onward leading. There is another way. The simple fact that I’m giving time and space to feel the ouch, that is an ahh. That is good. The ability to step back and see it, to be curious, not entangled in it, but to see it from a place of some modicum of calm, that is an ahh. Trust that. Use that as a guide. That is onward leading.

Stay close to the uncomplicated ahh. If there is an ahh that you understand as appropriate – “This is really good; I should really indulge in it, relish it; this is my chance” – and do, in fact, give yourself time to feel what is going on, really see it, then you’ll see the stress in those attitudes. You’ll see the ouch in it. The onward leading way is the way in which mindfulness is self-correcting or corrects us.

Mindfulness gives us information about what is ouch and what is ahh. As the practice deepens, as we get calmer and the ahh opens up to more time or space, more present moment attention, more sensitivity, mindfulness works beautifully to help us not get caught in the ouches and to move towards a more and more

valuable ahh, a more and more valuable way of moving towards greater peace or greater freedom.

The word for “onward leading” in Pali is *opaneyyiko*. The *opa* is a prefix that can mean “upward,” and the *neyyiko* is “to lead.” *Opa* can be “upwards, leading upwards,” which is kind of a metaphor for moving towards freedom. *Opa*, as a prefix, also means “near,” “leading close to.” This leads closer to freedom. This leads closer to peace. This leads closer to what really feels right here, full, present.

Sometimes we follow that path towards what is onward leading, upward leading, bringing us closer. Sometimes what you can feel is that we’re being brought there – the Dharma is leading us, guiding us. We’re in the current that flows in that direction.

A lot of what the practice becomes is just continuing to open and let go of anything that gets in the way of that process. It’s letting go of all the ouches, all the self-centered efforts we might make. Part of the practice is to know when to let go, when to trust that process. That takes a very deep sensitivity that comes from being present in an almost timeless way, to really feel and sense what is here. We can sense and feel when it is best for us, most healthy for us, most ahh for us to come back, to apply ourselves, to let go of something, and be more actively involved because the alternative is

worse. When the best alternative is not to do so much, just let go, let go. That letting go feels like being carried and moved along.

One of the great aspects of the Dharma is that the Dharma is not external to us. It is found inside of us in this onward leading way in which our psychophysical system moves towards freedom given a chance. It has the capacity to move towards the greater ahh, greater ease, less stress to the absence of stress, strain, and the absence of inner oppression that we can often live under.

Try today to go through parts of the day or the whole day and see how simple you can make this understanding, this observation, of suffering and happiness in your life. Make it so simple – there is an ouch and there is an ahh. See in that simplicity whether there's a little more freedom around the ouches and a reminder to stay calm and mindful. A greater awareness of the ahh, the possibility that you don't have to sacrifice, that maybe you don't want to ignore, that you want to make space for this ahh because it's onward leading. It creates a good environment.

It also creates a more onward leading, healthy direction for our social relationships. That is part of the value of this dharma. It supports our communities, our relationships to move in a healthy direction. Try today to

keep it simple: ouch and ahh. If you can have enough time to really feel that, maybe you can feel the onward leading nature, the door that opens up from the ahh that can take you further in the direction of ahh.

Enjoy, and I look forward to giving the last talk on this series tomorrow. Thank you.