

What is the Dharma? (5 of 5) Dharma as Transformation

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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This is the last talk on “What is the Dharma?” There is a long history of Buddhists, down through the centuries in different countries, having a celebratory attitude towards the Dharma. Sometimes when you spend a lot of time with Buddhist monastics, you don’t get that sense of celebration, because they are kind of required to have a decorum of being calm, quiet, and not so expressive. But many Buddhists will celebrate, sing, and chant, and have quite a celebratory feeling because they feel so fortunate. The word “Dharma” represents something huge for them.

Ajahn Buddhādāsa was a very famous and somewhat naturalistic Buddhist teacher in Thailand. He was a

great intellectual. He reformed much of Thai Buddhism from its superstitious background of earlier times. He was involved in inter-religious dialogue. He was quite content to equate the Christian and the Muslim idea of God with Dharma. It isn't clear exactly what he meant by that and how it worked. But the word Dharma kind of has a similar place. This concept, this reality of Dharma has a huge place in the life of Buddhists, which they celebrate. They're delighted and inspired by it, and they go to it for protection. It is something that keeps them safe. So it's a powerful and wonderful topic.

I think that as Dharma practice – Buddhist practice – deepens, fills out, and grows, there can be a wonderful sense of support and protection. There is this inspiration, this growth, this tremendous value, that comes from the Dharma, that almost treats it as something that has its own existence. However, the Dharma that we're talking about is inseparable from the people who practice the Dharma. It is something that exists within us as a natural process that is available if we make room for it, if we allow for it, if we practice.

It's a little bit like someone who lives a very stressful life – very busy, always running, and doing. And their health suffers dramatically. The doctors say, "You're not going to live much longer unless you change." Sure enough, the person changes radically. Maybe they retire or go on a long vacation. They slow down; they meditate; they go

on retreats. Mostly they stop doing. And in that not doing, there's a whole settling and opening and healing process that can unfold. This happens not because they did the healing, but it is a natural process. So much of de-stressing brings with it a movement towards health that the body can allow for to some degree, even if it's not physical health.

Some people feel that they were healed while they were dying. To some people, that sounds counter-intuitive or it doesn't quite work. They weren't cured, but there was a deep psychological, spiritual healing that happened in the process of dying. That also didn't necessarily seem to be of their own doing, but it was available in this letting go, this opening up, this allowing something to unfold and flower and come to fruit.

On Monday, I said that there are three primary meanings of Dharma. All of them are kind of verbs. It is important to understand them as involvement and engagement. When we talk about the Dharma, it is not something abstract or removed. It is easy to see the Dharma as the teachings of the Buddha: "I'll get a book out to read about it." But the real Dharma comes from engagement.

The first meaning of Dharma is that the Dharma is the process of learning those teachings. Not just learning by memorizing, but engaging with the teachings – arguing

with them, exploring them, discovering how they work for us. The second meaning is that the Dharma is the practice that we do. In some ways, that probably is the most important. I put a tremendous value in practice; I love it.

The last meaning of Dharma, which I want to talk about today, is attainment, the higher arrival, coming into a new way of being. Sometimes it is called “penetration” – to penetrate for oneself, to know for oneself, the heart of the Dharma, but not by just the knowing of it, rather the transformation of it. The Dharma is the attainments that transform us. Maybe we can call Dharma transformation – in the realm of freedom, in the realm of all the good that the Dharma represents – including compassion, care, love, freedom, wisdom, joy, happiness, and honesty, a lot of things that come.

This attainment, the last meaning of Dharma, is itself divided into three categories. The first two are wonderful terms: path and fruit. We practice and that puts us on a path. The Dharma is onward leading. There’s a road, a conveyor belt, a stream, that we enter into. Entering into the stream or path is a phenomenal, wonderful thing that doesn’t usually happen in an instant. For people who practice, usually at some point, it dawns on them: “Wait a minute, something is growing, developing, unfolding here, that is supporting me. I’m really in the stream; I’m in this current; I’m on the conveyor belt.

There's not really any getting off it anymore." It is a powerful momentum for health and freedom. So that's the path.

When we enter into it, the path comes to fruition. It's called "fruit." It is also beautiful, a kind of organic metaphor for something that naturally grows and ripens. After winter, there aren't even any leaves on the trees. Then the leaves grow and flowers appear. The flowers get pollinated. The fruit begins to grow slowly, and by the end of the season, the fruit is ripe.

A wonderful example of the fruition of practice is that, if you leave the fruit alone – like an apple on a tree – at some point, the connection of the stem of the apple to the branch breaks, and the apple falls. In the same way, at some point in this practice, we ripen. Then the most natural process of it all is that when the ripening is full (we can't know exactly when), something releases – something lets go in a deep, full, complete way. And we don't put the apple back up on the tree – put tape on, and try to reattach it to the tree. It's an irreversible process once the apple falls off. In the same way, fruition is an irreversible change – a transformation.

The third category of attainment is nirvana, *nibbāna*. This is the experience, the knowing, of the absence of clinging. It is the release and knowing that freedom of

no longer clinging, resisting, craving, wanting, holding on tight to ideas, to anything.

This idea of path, fruit, and release (freedom) is available in hints and small ways at the very beginning of a person's practice. At some point as we practice, it is really helpful to get a feel, a sense, or an intuition for the momentum – “Oh, something's opening here.” There is a feeling, a sense, that comes to fruition, a fullness – the possibility of really being free here. And then there's a feeling, a sense, of what that freedom, that release, is like.

These can be found right there in mindfulness of breathing. Really trust the coming and going, the arising and passing of the inhales, of the exhales. There can be little hints of: “Oh, this is what it's about. Here it is; it's unfolding. From the beginning to the end of the meditation, something unfolded. I was in the stream; I was on this onward leading path. I'm more settled, more open. I have a little more sense of being released and not caught.” Take these into account. Know these, appreciate these, so they can grow.

When it doesn't go in some nice linear fashion that way, the conveyor belt of practice sometimes brings us to places in our life where we have difficulty. We may encounter the unresolved issues of our life. And then perhaps, we can maybe appreciate that. “Oh, I don't

want to look at this. I don't want to deal with this. This is painful, but the Dharma knows best. The Dharma knows it is time for me to practice with this too. So it's going to be a little bit more difficult – maybe quite a bit more difficult – for a while. But this is good. In the context of doing this practice, this has arisen. And now I get to face this and work with it.”

This experience adds to the freedom that we can live with – the freedom of being willing to be with the difficulties of our life, to practice with those as well. If the freedom that we're finding in this practice doesn't include a certain kind of freedom and willingness to practice also with our difficulties, then I think this Dharma doesn't have a chance to grow into its fullness. Then it's not a real thing that has to do with our life.

Dharma is the foundation. Hopefully, the understanding that I offer this week will offer a foundation for what we'll do in the upcoming months in these morning teachings. Thank you very much.