

What is the Dharma? (1 of 5) The Dharma is Relationship

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pariyatti, teaching, learning, *paṭipada*, practice, *adhigama*, obtain, attain, reach, activity, relatedness, dependent arising, condition, dynamic, perception, relate

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Welcome to the first talk of the year and the beginning of a five-part series. I would like this week to answer the question, what is the Dharma? I'm hoping this series will create a nice foundation for what will follow. I haven't completely decided what that will be, but I would like to build on it.

Dharma is a very important, central word in Buddhism. It is sometimes synonymous with the word "Buddhism." The word Buddhism is a modern Western invention. It didn't exist in Asia as an ism. Even the word "religion" didn't quite exist. When people in some Asian countries had contact with Western culture, they had to somehow invent a word for religion to translate it into their

language. So the word Dharma sometimes holds all of that.

Dharma also has more specific meanings. Even in ancient times, there were different meanings. I think one list of three things that Dharma means is very evocative. It is from the ancient commentaries. All the words are built on verbs – dynamic activities. The first is *pariyatti*, which usually means teachings. It's based on a root word that has to do with obtaining, receiving. Sometimes *pariyatti* is understood to be the act of learning. Learning is an activity. The second is the verb *paṭipada*, which means to practice. The last one is *adhigama*, which is to obtain, to attain, to reach something. So here, the Dharma is three different activities. There is something dynamic, not something static that is being emphasized.

I would like to encapsulate this dynamism of what Dharma means as relatedness. The ancient way of saying it, in the time of the Buddha, was through a little slogan:

Whoever sees the Dharma, sees dependent arising.

Whoever sees dependent arising, sees the Dharma.

That is a powerful statement.

Dependent arising means that things occur in dependence on other things. Things are not independent; they do not self-exist. They do not simply materialize from thin air for no reason, no cause, or no

conditions at all. They are always there because of some preceding condition, event, or occurrence, which is then the possibility for the next thing to occur. So clearly, human life itself is dependent on many factors, in the present moment and down through the ages, which had to occur for there to be this physical and psychological mental life that we embody and experience.

In some ways, who we are as human beings can be said to be 100% dependent on something else existing. We have to have oxygen and water to live. There has to be water on this planet. How did that happen? How did the oxygen happen? Conditions had to build over billions and billions of years for things to be just right for human life, and those have to persist. So our lives in the present moment depend on layers and layers of things.

Our inner, psychological life is dependent on all kinds of things as well. Some might be hormones; our biology affects our psychology significantly. The moods of some people are completely attached, connected, or wedded to things in the world: what they are doing, what other people are doing. How they feel can be very dependent on substances: having coffee, drugs, alcohol, or not having it. So our mood and how we feel can be dependent on many things – exercise, for example. This dependency I'm talking about is not like the term “codependent” (from psychology), but rather, things occur in relationship to other things occurring as well.

Today, the way I would like to present this idea of dependent arising is that it has to do with relatedness. Dharma is the relationship, the relatedness, between things that can be called things. But, I think it's fair to say that there are no things in Buddhism. There are only dynamic processes, dynamic occurrences and events that are moving in action and process – or at least that's what Buddhism focuses on.

Much of Buddhism focuses on the dynamic aspect of life. Our psychological, spiritual, mental, and physical life is very involved in the dynamic world of relatedness partly because everything that happens occurs through the direct, dynamic activity of perception.

A mountain might not seem so dynamic. It might seem like a real thing that's there. It is changing slowly over time, but maybe not much in my lifetime. But the perception of the mountain is a dynamic activity. Everything that we experience in the world goes through our perception. And deeper than our perception, it goes through our liking and not liking, or our sense of pleasant or unpleasant, partly because of our evaluation of things. Everything goes through the way that we know it. Do we know it with contraction and tightness, assertiveness and greed – or generosity or without generosity?

This whole dynamic world of things that happen in relationship to other things being there – that is the Dharma. Dharma is found there. And, then caring for it, because that is also where bondage, attachment, tightness, and suffering occur. There is no inherent suffering that just pops up in the universe, out of the blue. Suffering occurs in relationship to something else. It's a way of relating – it's a relatedness. And, freedom is a shift in that relationship.

I believe this idea that the Dharma is relatedness is a paradigm shift in how many people live their lives. People live more focused on me, myself, and mine; what's happening to me; my ideas; what's happening out there, who those people are; what they're doing. There can be a paradigm shift of appreciating what is happening *between* people, or between us and the world, nature, and everything. What is that relatedness?

Also, what is the relatedness within ourselves? How do we relate to our inner experience? How are we relating to our outer experience? That is where the Dharma begins to be discovered. It has to do with things that are fluid and dynamic, and because of that, they can be changed – maybe not easily. But that is Dharma practice, the practice of relatedness. This practice of working with the notion of things arising dependent on other things is that we can shift and change the relatedness, the dependencies, the dynamic quality of it,

so that what supports our hearts, minds, and freedom is more present than what supports attachment, clinging, and suffering.

So it's a paradigm shift. You might try stretching your mind today to look at the invisible world between another person and you. What is the relationship that is being formed? Perhaps, this would be easiest to try if you meet a stranger. How is the relationship before you get to know them? Are you afraid or cautious? Are you eager or curious? That is a way of being in relationship.

As you talk with a stranger, do you feel more closed down and pulled back? Or do you feel more open and interested? Is there kindness? Is their friendship going back and forth, or the opposite? What is happening in that invisible world you don't necessarily see but might feel and sense? If the relatedness between the two of you was music, would it be beautiful music or not so beautiful? If it was color, would it be a beautiful array of colors or an unharmonious display of colors? How is the relatedness?

I would encourage you today to look at how you are in relationship to all things, including yourself. What is the nature of that relationship as it shifts and changes through the day? What kind of relating, what kind of meeting, do things outside of you have towards you? How are things relating to you? How is the air that you

breathe relating to you? You could say that the air is not relating at all, but it does have a relationship to you. How does it impact you? What is your relationship to the food that you eat?

Maybe there's a way to do this paradigm shift here, that you are stretching yourself to be in the world from a very radically different perspective – the perspective of what is the relatedness that is going on right here. And how do you want to relate? What is the beautiful way of relating?

So the Dharma is what arises in relationship. If you can see how things arise in a related way, then you are seeing the Dharma. You see the Dharma if you see how things arise in a related way. Thank you, and we'll continue this topic of what is the Dharma tomorrow.