

What is the Dharma

By Gil Fronsdal

The Dhamma well proclaimed by me is clear,
open, evident, and free of patchwork.

—The Buddha (MN i 141)

The teachings of the Buddha are often referred to as the "Dharma." This word is closely associated with "truth"—a truth that one can know for oneself—and is sometimes treated as a synonym of the English word "nature." When he taught the essence of his Dharma, the Buddha consistently avoided metaphysical, supernatural, and speculative ideas in favor of practical teachings that serve to make available the path of liberation. In being practical, he emphasized perspectives and practices that lead to the end of suffering. In referring to his teachings, he explicitly said, "I teach suffering and the end of suffering."

The Buddha's Dharma is also empirical because it is to be experienced for oneself. He expressed this clearly by referring to the Dharma as "directly visible" and by his frequent emphasis on *knowing* and *seeing* as integral to the path he taught. *Believing*, something generally required for supernatural doctrines, does not stand out as having a significant role in the Buddha's core teachings.

When it comes to beliefs—at least those that could be called speculative views—the Buddha's primary instruction was to remove and uproot them. In a discussion where he contrasts his teaching with the speculative views others hold about the self, the world, and what happens after death, the Buddha stated:

The Buddha or a disciple of the Buddha [teaches] the Dhamma for the elimination of all speculative views, determinations, biases, adherences, and underlying tendencies, for the stilling of all mental constructs, for the relinquishing of all attachments, for the destruction of craving, for dispassion, for cessation, for Nibbāna.

Middle Length Discourse 22 (MN i 136)

Elsewhere, he claims that he does not take any position on similar speculative views because doing so

... is not beneficial, does not belong to the basics of the holy life, does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna.

Middle Length Discourse 63 (MN i 431)

This means that his teachings are pragmatically connected to a practice leading to the end of suffering and something personally accessible and verifiable by our natural senses.

While the Buddha taught the Dharma in many different ways, we can get a clear sense of his primary teachings through the various brief summaries he gave. For example, the *Dhammapada* (Dhp) contains two verses in which he encapsulates “the teachings of the Buddhas.” The first states:

Doing no evil,
Engaging in what’s skillful,
And purifying one’s mind:
This is the teaching of the Buddhas.

(Verse 183; Dhp 14)

Though it lacks details, this verse gives a general overview of the teachings regarding what “Buddhas” encourage people to do. Rather than referring to religious tenets one must learn, this verse emphasizes ethical actions one should or shouldn’t engage in. The vital role of ethics—that is, principles of conduct—is also represented by a second verse from the *Dhammapada*:

Not disparaging others, not causing injury,
Practicing restraint by the training rules,
Knowing moderation in food,
Dwelling in solitude,
And pursuing the higher states of mind,
This is the teaching of the Buddhas.

(Verse 185; Dhp 14)

Both verses end with an instruction to develop the mind. The Buddha's teachings here are more than instructions on how to live in the world; they include teachings on cultivating qualities and states of mind that are beneficial for the ending of suffering.

This focus on mental development is seen in a teaching the Buddha is said to have given to his foster mother, Mahāpajāpatī, (the woman who raised him), when she asked him to teach the Dharma in brief. The Buddha replied:

As for those qualities of which you may know, “These dharma lead to dispassion, not to passion; to being unfettered, not to being fettered; to simplifying, not to accumulating; to modesty, not to self-aggrandizement; to contentment, not to discontent; to independence, not to entanglement; to aroused persistence, not to laziness, to being unburdensome, not to being burdensome”: you may definitely hold, “This is the Dharma, this is the Discipline, this is the Teacher’s instruction.”

Numerical Discourses 8.53 (AN iv 280)

In this passage, the word "dharma" is used in two ways. In the first line, "dharma" refers to qualities of mind and practices one undertakes. The last line refers to the Buddha's teachings, which is why the word is capitalized. This means that in the original language, the word *dharma* is easily associated with "teachings" concerned with developing the mind. The Buddha's teachings to Mahāpajāpatī can thus be paraphrased as follows:

The Buddha's teaching (*dharma*) and discipline (*vinaya*) are those things that lead to dispassion, being unfettered, simplicity, modesty, contentment, independence, persistence, and not being burdensome.

While this can be seen as a form of ethical teaching, it is also a teaching about doing things that support cultivating a peaceful and liberated mind.

On another occasion, when a confrontational person wishing to debate the Buddha asked him what he "proclaims," the Buddha answered:

I assert and proclaim in such a way that one does not quarrel with anyone in the world . . . in such a way that concepts no longer underlie a person who abides free of sensual desire, perplexity, worry, and craving for any kind of identity.

Middle Length Discourses 18 (MN i 108)

In saying this, the Buddha makes it clear that he will not engage in a debate over teachings.

Instead, his teachings focus on the possibility of freedom from concepts, desire, perplexity, worry, and craving. Not finding the Buddha's statement a suitable topic for a debate, the aspiring disputant left.

The Buddha's Dharma is something available for people to see for themselves. This is expressed succinctly and powerfully in a quote that has become a standard part of Buddhist liturgy:

The Dharma is well proclaimed by the Blessed One; it is visible here and now, immediate, inviting to be seen for oneself, onward leading, and to be personally realized by the wise.

Middle Length Discourses 7 (MN i 37)

In the same discourse, the Buddha explains that the way to gain unwavering confidence in the Dharma is by first seeing in one's own mind the presence of such afflictive states as covetousness, greed, ill will, anger, contempt, envy, and arrogance, and then abandoning them. Knowing the mind that is free of these states reveals what the Dharma is. This idea is also expressed in the following teaching of the Buddha:

When you know there is greed, hatred, or delusion within you and when you know there is no greed, hatred, or delusion within you, then you know the Dharma is visible here and now, immediate, inviting to be seen for oneself, onward leading, and to be personally realized by the wise.

Numerical Discourses 6.47 (AN iii 357)

This suggests that writings about the Dharma, including this very essay, only point to the Dharma; to know the Dharma we must know our own minds. Knowing something about external realities that can be considered supernatural is never mentioned in these brief summaries of the essence of the Dharma. It is as if they are not relevant for walking the path of liberation.

Because *Nibbāna* (Nirvāṇa) is often presented as the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice, it's interesting to consider one the most naturalistic explanations of *Nibbāna* found in the suttas. These are, in the words of the Buddha's disciple Sāriputta:

The destruction of greed, hatred, and delusion: this friend, is called *Nibbāna*.

Connected Discourses 38.1 (SN iv 251)

Here, there is no claim of understanding the ultimate nature of reality or having some privileged knowledge about transcendent states of consciousness or supernatural dimensions of reality.

While the full destruction of the human tendencies of greed, hatred, and delusion may seem difficult to accomplish, any diminishment or temporary cessation of these states is something we can know for ourselves; it is the Dharma visible here and now.

That the ultimate goal of the Dharma is indeed seen in the ending of these inner forces of greed, hatred, and delusion is reinforced by the various variations the Buddha provided to the quote by Sāriputta above:

The destruction of greed, hatred, and delusion: this is called the final goal of the holy life.

Connected Discourses 45.6 (SN v 8)

The destruction of greed, hatred, and delusion: this is called the unconditioned.

Connected Discourse 43.1 (SN iv 359)

The destruction of greed, hatred, and delusion: this is called the deathless.

Connected Discourses 45.7 (SN v 8)

Here, we see that concepts such as "the unconditioned" and "the deathless" that lend themselves to mystical and even transcendental interpretations are clearly defined in psychological, perhaps naturalistic terms. There is nothing mysterious or supernatural about this Dharma.

Conclusion

In studying the teachings of the Buddha, we should keep in mind these core principles of his teaching of the Dharma. To be the Dharma, teachings must be something we can know for ourselves, accessible through our natural senses, albeit refined through concentration and mindfulness. The Dharma is realized through practices connected to the destruction of greed, hatred, and delusion and culminates in attaining peace.