

Dharmette: Peaceful Mind

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsda1 on October 5, 2016

This morning I'd like to read the first two verses from the *Dhammapada*, and then discuss them a little bit. In the ancient anthologies of the early Buddhist teachings, sometimes the first teaching in that collection is particularly important. It's kind of the entry-way into the rest of it, or is the foundational perspective from which everything else follows. So here are the first two verses:

*All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind.
Speak or act with a corrupt mind and suffering follows as the wagon wheel follows the hoof of an ox.*

*All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind.
Speak or act with a peaceful mind and happiness follows like a never departing shadow.*

So, it gives priority to the mind. In the ancient world, the word here is *citta*, which some people prefer to translate as 'heart.' It focuses here on our inner life, wherever we feel it resides, and the quality of that inner life, the landscape of our inner life, the attitudes that we carry with us have an impact. Here it [the *Dhammapada*] makes it so important that our experience of the world is very much shaped, it says, by the mind itself.

The word 'experience' is a very important word to understand. It's the way that we register, the way that we interpret. We don't experience things innocently, as if we were just a passive recipient of the way things are. A big part of how we interpret the world or relate to the world has a lot to do with what our mind does, the attitudes we have, the interpretations we have, the beliefs we have, and the motivations we have.

In Buddhism, there is a priority given to understanding what our contribution is. What are we doing? What are we doing to contribute to our experience that we are having at any given moment? So the idea of taking responsibility for oneself is hugely an important part of Buddhist practice.

The *Dhammapada* goes on to say: *speak or act with a corrupted mind, suffering follows*. So with certain attitudes, certain motivations that we live with – we don't get off, or get a free pass. There are consequences to how we live our lives and the choices we make. It is a very evocative word 'corrupted mind.' Some people maybe prefer other words. I think it is kind of an umbrella term for any kind of movement of the mind where harm is being caused: harm to ourselves or harm to others. So if you intend to cause harm – even unintentionally – if the mind is somehow grappling with movements like anger, resistance, self-righteousness, fear, or something that could cause harm, that would be called 'corrupted mind' in this ancient language. If we act on that unskillfully, then it brings along suffering.

But if we act from a peaceful mind, and the word 'peaceful mind' is also an umbrella term for all kinds of ways of living in the world that don't cause harm, that bring benefit and well-being. A peaceful mind is kind of a light mind – the mind is not heavy, forceful or aggressive. Then happiness follows.

The similes that are used for each of these are telling. *Speak or act with a corrupted mind and suffering follows as the wagon wheel follows the hoof of an ox*. An ox pulling a wagon heavily weighed down is an image of a lot of work. Like being kind of shackled, being yoked, a heavy, heavy burden you are carrying along with you. And this poor ox sweating and working hard to get the wagon to go. So there is this feeling of being weighed down – it's a hard trek to make.

The image that goes along with "speak or act with a peaceful mind and happiness follows like a never departing shadow" is of a shadow that has no weight. And a shadow provides no resistance, no obstacles for the person who is walking along. Your shadow isn't going to cause you any problems, as far as I know. You can go for a walk or long trip and most people don't even think about their shadow. It has no weight; it's light and causes no obstacles. It doesn't interfere with our path as we walk. So, I think these two images give a very different feeling of the effect on us.

The idea that we can speak and act with a peaceful mind, that the happiness we can get, has a light feeling to it.

It's not an obstacle; it's relaxed; it hangs onto us the way our shadow hangs onto us. We are not clinging to it. But if we suffer, there is something about what Buddhism calls suffering or *dukkha* that tends to be sticky. It tends to cling to us or we cling to it. It creates a burden, a heaviness. It slows us down. It makes life less free to walk through it. So the difference between living a life of freedom and living a life of bondage – here the image would be living the life of something that is as light as a shadow or something as heavy as a big wagon that you have to be an ox to pull.

So all experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind. So what is your mind like? Or what is your attitude like? What attitudes do you bring with you as you go into the world? Are they attitudes, qualities of mind, motivations of mind, that feel like they support you, that help free you, that bring happiness? Or are they attitudes, motivations, thoughts or beliefs that tend to weigh you down, and tend to create obstacles for you as you find your way through the world?

So to have this inner reflection, to understand ourselves through these guidelines, through these perspectives – not just to be present for life as it is, but to be able to be present so that we can see the differences or the consequences of our inner landscape, of what we do in here. To not just be a victim of what the mind dreams up, but to be able to have some ability to work through that, and find a way to live and act from a peaceful mind – from a free mind as opposed to a 'corrupted mind' or a mind that's caught in bondage, that's not free.

I think this is one of the core aspects, or core opportunities that the practice of mindfulness can offer us. So... that is what was on my mind this morning. Do you have any questions or comments on that, that you'd like to make?

Practitioner #1: Thank you Gil, I think it is a really important point that I remember some years ago hearing about just noticing, just noticing, just noticing... and there's a lot of value in that... but if I'm noticing for an hour how crazy my mind is, then want to do an intervention like how I can bring some calm and peace to the mind, whether it's saying some *mettā* phrases and what-not. It took me a while to hear that sometimes you don't let the mind be in its corrupted state. It's skillful to do some interventions, so I'm really glad you brought that up. It's maybe not often talked about or if it's talked about, at least I know when I was new, I didn't hear that point. I heard a lot about noticing and being aware.

GF: Great, thank you.

Practitioner #2: So, as I become more and more mindful, I notice that there are triggers in the external world that will elicit a certain kind of emotion that is pre-verbal, that goes back a very long way, and it doesn't feel like it is 'mind' to me. It's not a thought. Certainly there can be thoughts that can arise afterwards. But to me it felt like there is something else that precedes thought.

GF: So now that you know that part of you, that knowledge and that awareness that is operating, how does that change things for you?

Practitioner #2: Now that I'm aware of the thoughts....?

GF: Yeah, that happens, that dynamic happens.

Practitioner #2: I guess I more and more meet that with compassion, realizing that I'm not – it's not volitional; it's unintentional, and so what I choose to do, or how I choose to react, or respond to that and what thoughts arise of that, are definitely within my ability to make a choice about.

GF: Great. So that's acting and speaking with a peaceful mind in relationship to it. Because to do the opposite, to act and speak to it with a corrupted mind, what would it look like for you?

Practitioner #2: I would just feed into... you know whatever... usually fear.

GF: The reason I asked you to answer the question that way is that we can only be responsible for what we can do. So if we see a place, how to shift or respond, and respond in a more useful, productive, valuable way, that's where the Dharma, the practice is found. That which arises that we have no choice over, that just happens by itself, then that's the way it's working for the time being, and then our job is when we see that, is to figure out

how to be as most responsible to it as we can. How do we respond?

Over time, I think what happens is that – well hopefully what happens – is that the mind works through the layers and layers of the mind. We start seeing more and more places of choice, more and more places where we can make a difference, and we respond in different ways.

Things which can initially seem unconscious, that it's not us doing it, it's just bubbling up from some deep place that is a mystery to us. Maybe after a while, it stops being a mystery – maybe not everything, but we start seeing more and more how the mind works. We start opening up and seeing a wider range of choice. If we don't see the choice, there is no choice. But mindfulness kind of creates more choice, by showing us a wider range of what's going on.

Practitioner #2: It just seems like the term 'mind' – not quite sure that always kind of fits. Never mind. [Collective laughing with the sangha community on the pun].

GF: Great. Well thank you both and all of you. And I think that one of the implications, or one of the implicit ideas behind all of this is how important your mind is, and by extension, you are – that you are important, that you are valuable, that it's worthwhile caring for yourself, caring for your mind. It's a wonderful tool we have that can serve us, to bring out the best in us. So I hope that the best in you is something you can share with the world.