

The Dharmic Life (3 of 5) A Life of Non-Harming

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This is the third talk on living a dharmic life. Some benefits come with becoming a monastic or living in a retreat center, where one dedicates their whole life to practicing the Dharma. This week I am offering ways that may help you receive some of those benefits while living an ordinary, everyday life. This depends a lot on how much you dedicate yourself to the simple practices I am teaching. But, to call the practices simple doesn't mean they are not profound or phenomenally impactful.

Today I offer what may be the only thing you have to know about Buddhism. If you live this practice, this approach to life – well and thoroughly – all of Buddhism follows. All the insights and ways of growing spiritually and personally follow. This practice is to dedicate oneself to causing no harm.

That is it. Just keep that with you. It's as if you have a ring engraved with "no harm," so you always remember that is the heart and center of practice. All you do is live by that. You become more and more refined and subtle in how you live – causing no harm in any direction to yourself, other people, the planet, or the environment.

If that seems too difficult a challenge, maybe impossible, start at least with not causing any intentional or willful harm. I am not just making this up. An ancient teaching states that the primary characteristic of the Dharma is non-harming. The principle of not causing harm has such a strong association with the Dharma.

In the last few weeks, I gave teachings on wholesomeness and unwholesomeness, which can be understood as non-harming and harm. Unwholesome is, in some way, that which causes vexation, suffering, and stress on our system and in the world. Wholesome is that which does the opposite – does not cause harm, does not cause vexation, distress, and stress.

Even if you cannot live up to it completely, you will see the advantage of causing no harm. It becomes a reference point or gauge to see more clearly than ever before all the ways you do cause harm.

Take care not to harm yourself even more. Live and dedicate yourself to non-harming in a way that does not cause harm. It does not work to dedicate yourself to non-harming in a way that sets you up to harm even more. Instead, use the reference point of non-harming to see more clearly where you are going wrong.

Lines indicate the lanes on a freeway. They help us navigate and drive straight. Without them, we would swerve a little more than we do. The principle of non-harming is like the lines for life in our lane. It helps us notice when we are liable to swerve too far in the direction of harming. I want to underscore again: both to ourselves and others. The principle of non-harming functions partly as a mirror so that we see ourselves better.

If we see ourselves honestly – see that we are causing harm – what then? I suspect clearly seeing this naturally changes what we want to do, how we want to speak, how we want to live our lives. When we do not see ourselves clearly, we tend to go ahead and cause harm.

For example, we might know when we are using mean, critical, or angry speech with others. We might justify it as, "They deserve it." Or, "This is how I am trying to get my way." But if we remember the principle of non-harming, we can explore it. Where is the harm in the statement I am going to make to my friend? What kind of harm am I causing? Am I harming myself? Am I harming our friendship? Am I harming my friend? Is this

something I have been doing regularly? What is its impact? Is there an alternative way to take care of myself? Can I figure out some way to take care of myself without saying anything harmful or spiteful?

This kind of reflection is part of a dharmic life. It is not only about showing up and being mindful in all situations. A dharmic life is also about being reflective – contemplating, considering. Sometimes those considerations are debates within ourselves, going back and forth.

If we have the principle of non-harming as a reference point for those conversations with ourselves, in which we are questioning and wondering, we may come up with the questions: “What is the alternative to doing something harmful? Is there some way that I can benefit more? Some way that others can benefit more? What if I say this differently? What does it take to say it differently? Do I need to learn new skills, perhaps nonviolent communication techniques?”

There is a whole slew of ways of speaking without making statements about other people. One way is the simple principle of making “I” statements rather than “you” statements. Instead of saying, “I feel that you are wrong,” I can say, “When you say X, I feel hurt or afraid.”

We can find new ways of being in the world that may be more intelligent, creative, and innovative rather than the primitive, simplistic, maybe reptilian way of being aggressive or causing harm towards oneself and others. As we live by this one simple principle – not causing harm – we appreciate what begins to bubble up to the surface.

We appreciate the peace, ease, calm, and confidence that comes with not causing harm. In this way, we start feeling better about ourselves. We start appreciating the strong instinct in most people to not cause harm. It is an instinct – like pulling one’s hand off a hot stove – *if* we are quiet and mindful enough to be sensitive to where that instinct lives in us.

When the unwholesome mind is spinning, angry, frayed, desirous, or greedy – we are not so sensitive. When that gets the upper hand, we are claustrophobic with thoughts, ideas, and preoccupations. Then there is no space to feel the wonderful place inside that does not want to cause harm

Another reference point is how much we do not want to cause harm to a young child, such as a grandchild, niece, nephew, or neighbor. We are very careful not to cause any harm to the people we love.

If we have this non-harming principle for family, the idea in Buddhist practice is to begin universalizing it. To spread non-harming out to all beings that we see. Not that all beings are family, but as if they are family. We do not want to cause them harm.

An important family member in this whole enterprise is yourself. I cannot underscore enough how important it is not to cause harm to oneself.

So if someone criticizes you for anything, watch yourself carefully, see what your inner response is. See if there is some way in which you are actually causing harm to yourself. See if you are too quick to apologize, to be critical of yourself, or to diminish yourself. Or to confess, “Oh, what a terrible person I am.” If that is not done wisely and carefully, you can end up hurting yourself.

Sometimes we harm ourselves intentionally. We think if we show others that we are hurting ourselves and feeling bad, they will believe us. Or they see that they are having the intended impact on us – which is to put us in our place.

What exactly does it mean to cause harm to oneself? Is it necessary? Can there be a confession of fault instead? Can there be an admission, “Yes, I did something wrong,” where we do not diminish, belittle, or harm ourselves?

Maybe we can learn to confidently say, “Yes, I apologize,” when necessary. We can say fully and clearly, with a certain kind of strength: “I made a mistake. I will try my best not to do that again. I am so sorry. How can I make amends? What can I do for you?” But we do it from a place where we are not diminished or harming ourselves.

So, non-harm – in all directions. I will repeat what I said at the beginning because it is such an important point. If you hold on to this one principle, you do not have to believe anything else Buddhism teaches. You do not have to

learn all kinds of complicated practices. Instead, to become refined and subtle with the principle of causing no harm.

If you do that – sitting in a nice easy chair with your eyes closed – you will begin going through layers and layers of subtle, quiet movements of harm within your mind itself. You will begin releasing and releasing them – even to the point where “harm” is not quite the right word anymore.

Rather, the word may be stress. We are also learning to not add any stress. In deep meditation practice, we see that the subtle ways in which we harm ourselves are really forms of stress and tension. These ways of harming ourselves can be insignificant in ordinary life but quite significant in meditation. We see that we can let go of them, let go of them, let go of them – into a place of safety and peace, where we can live free from all tendencies to harm. Thank you.