

The Dharma of Challenges (1 of 5) Dharma as Refuge

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Today I want to talk about challenges. Our lives are full of challenges. I think I'd like to discuss this topic for a while in these morning teachings. Last year, I went through the *Satipatthāna Sutta*. The year before that, I taught *ānāpānasati*. There is a way in which the teachings of the Dharma can give the impression that it is easy to do. The classic models of the path of practice that the Buddha gives do not really say anything about difficulties – you sit down and go through concentration states, and things just unfold very nicely.

But in fact, for most people – maybe everyone – this practice that we do and the life we live has lots of challenges. The Buddha has a wonderful metaphor for human suffering. He said that all the tears that you have shed in all your many lifetimes are greater than all the water in all the oceans. That is a powerful statement about the nature of our lives, and the challenges, the suffering, the losses, the griefs. So much that goes on in this life is difficult. Dharma practice was designed to meet that, to work with it, to heal it, to move through it, and to discover freedom in the midst of this difficult world.

I would like to talk about Dharma practice with regard to addressing the challenges we have. I would like to teach this as a progression, building a foundation for looking at what is most difficult in our lives and most challenging in our hearts. I think we can assume that most people are carrying in their hearts deep challenges that are sometimes buried for a long time. Sometimes they are very well known. To become really free in Dharma practice, we do not override those or push them aside. The idea is to discover freedom in all of them – to free everything within us. Maybe this is a lifetime journey. But it's a wonderful journey to be on.

Last week, I talked about five different meanings of Dharma: Dharma as relatedness, Dharma as action, Dharma as truth, Dharma as teachings, and Dharma as transformation. This week, I would like to use those same categories of the Dharma to talk more generally, in an introductory fashion, about working with challenges. Today is the topic of Dharma as relatedness. The Dharma points not so much to things, and not so much to suffering as suffering, but rather, always asks the question: what is the relationship here? How are we relating to it? How is it related to us?

The first Dharma talk I gave on an insight retreat, while I was still in training to be a teacher, was about the importance of looking at the relationship that we have to our experience. Rather than fixing experience, rather than focusing on the experience that has been the issue, to take into account how we relate to it. I have sometimes said that there are only ever two things going on: what is happening, and how we relate to what is happening.

Today, I want to say there are three things: what is happening, how we relate to it, and what supports us to relate to it. What do we go to for support so that we can relate to things in an effective, useful, healing, and beneficial way? This is the idea of relatedness – “How am I relating to this?”

If you have a challenge in your life, it is easy to get pulled into the dynamics of the challenge – the relationships, the issues, what has to happen, and your concerns. But you can also step back and see, “How am I relating to this challenge?” If you do this, you might find out that you are relating to it with fear, and the fear is different from the challenge. But if you do not see that, then the fear can become entangled with the challenge and inseparable from it. That is much more difficult to deal with because two things are going on. There is whatever the challenge is, and there is fear. And where do you put your attention – do you deal with the challenge or your fear?

To give a simple example, when you're out driving and you get a flat tire and pull over safely on the side of the road, the challenge is how to repair the tire. But if there is fear that you can't do it, and you will be stuck here, and no one will help you, then the practical question of what to do about the tire has now become entangled with fear. The fear might be reasonable to have, but those are two different things. So, ask yourself, "What relationship do I have to the flat tire?" If the relationship is fear, is that the most useful relationship to have? Would another relationship be more useful? Maybe a better relationship is taking out your phone and calling for help.

But when you answer the question, "What is my relationship to it?" – then you have a chance to consider: "Is this the relationship I want to be acting on? Is this the one that takes predominance? Or is there another relationship that might be more useful? Instead of being afraid, maybe I should be mindful. Maybe this is a time when my mindfulness practice really comes to bear – to really be mindful and present for the fear, so I stay balanced in the fear rather than losing my balance with it."

Asking the question about our relationship to challenges can reveal a lot. It can begin to tease apart the challenge and how we are experiencing it – what we are doing with it. Many times large life challenges are made much more difficult because of how we relate to them. Sometimes we relate to things wonderfully. Sometimes there's a sense of being counterphobic – we step towards the difficulties we have. We are curious: "Let's find out what is happening here. Let's look. Let's use this challenge as a place to understand myself better, learn how to be more patient, learn how to be more compassionate, or learn how to be wiser, more discerning, or less caught." Then we are bringing a relationship of Dharma practice to the challenge. We want to relate to the challenge by taking it on as practice. We trust the practice.

In Dharma practice, we talk about going for refuge. This is the third thing I mentioned earlier: what supports us to relate to the challenge. The Dharma, in a sense, is available as support. The clearest way to see this is in the practice. The practice supports us; the practice has a relationship to us. This may be a bit counterintuitive, because it can feel as if *I'm* the one who's practicing; *I'm* the one who's applying yourself. That could be true. But when you apply yourself in practice, the practice then responds. Something inside responds to the honesty, truth, presence, care, and compassion that you bring as you practice. That responsiveness will support you.

There are times in life when we can't figure out what to do for ourselves. Everything seems so difficult, so hard. That is a time when Buddhists sometimes go for refuge – towards the support of the Dharma. Going for refuge can take the shape of: "This is hard. I'm not sure I can manage this, but I trust the practice. I trust the Dharma, so I'm going to go to it for refuge. I'm going to rely on it." This does not mean that we become passive. We still offer our practice to the challenge. But we are not caught in or frozen by the feeling, "I don't know how to do it. I don't know what's supposed to happen," or "This seems impossible." We trust this larger support is holding us.

It is not always obvious what that larger Dharma support will be. It can be many different things, depending on the circumstances. For me, in my life, it is phenomenal how often I took refuge in the practice when I had challenges, where I didn't know what to do or what to say. I took refuge in mindfulness – showing up and being present. One of the greatest gifts for me in doing mindfulness practice is the phenomenal trust that I have in the practice. I trust the practice more than my own mind's ability to understand something, figure things out, or solve all the problems. I'll certainly do my best. But mindfulness means I will show up and stay present. I will stay with it and try to be honest, to feel, be present, and recognize what is happening.

Stay in the present moment with this and really take in what is happening. Don't turn away from what's happening, but also don't attack what's happening. Don't shut down, don't despair, don't collapse. The Dharma means to show up, trusting mindfulness.

Saying that relatedness is part of Dharma practice means we are in relationship. We're in relationship to ourselves, in relationship to our challenges, and to the wider world. And it is in relationship to us. In the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha (or, if you don't care for that language, mindfulness practice), there is a reciprocity where we offer ourselves to the practice, and then the practice supports us.

This is very fortunate, because if it was all up to our own abilities and our intelligence, it would probably be impossible for most of us to work with some of the huge challenges of life and death that human life brings us. The degree of loss and betrayal that we go through in this life can be huge. So, how to practice with it? What is our relationship to it? And where do we go for support?

This world of relatedness, in Dharma practice, is a protection against getting solidified or frozen in the notion that it is all up to me, it's all happening to me, it's all about me, or it's all about them and what they're doing. There is something bigger going on here that belongs to the world of relatedness that we all live in.

So, if you have a challenge today, whether it is small or large – even if it's so small that you can just bypass it and not think about it – don't overlook it. If you have some challenges today, ask yourself the question: how are you relating to it in some way that is not really part of the challenge? What is your relationship to it? Even if the challenge is internal, how are you relating to it? What are the beliefs? What are the attitudes? What desires are in play in relation to it? What are the emotions? Is there something that is relating to you that will support you?

This could be the practice of mindfulness, maybe the Dharma, maybe the Earth – something that supports you and makes it easier for you to go through it. Because you are not doing it alone. You have the support of Buddha, Dharma, Sangha.

I called upon all of this for myself today, because I felt a bit confused about making all this technology work, but I trusted the Dharma to help us find our way. Thank you.