

Five Qualities of the Dharma

Hybrid Insight Retreat for Experienced Students

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Gil Fronsdal

It's probably the case that the central subject of what we're here about, what we're practicing, what these teachings are about, is the Dharma. At the end of his life, the Buddha gave a teaching to take the Dharma as your core refuge. But he also gave a teaching that seemingly meant the same thing – to take yourself as your own refuge or make yourself your own refuge. There's a big difference between “taking” and “making.” In that same period when the Buddha was getting close to death, he said that he had made himself a refuge. In how we live our lives, how we practice, and how we show up in the world, we become a refuge. We are the refuge.

One thing that is sometimes asked is what is the refuge protecting you from? What's the refuge from? It is protecting you from yourself. This is a profound statement – that the core protection that the Dharma gives you is from yourself. In a sense, sooner or later it protects you from second arrows. It doesn't necessarily protect you from the first arrow, but if you shoot the second arrow, then you're more likely to receive a third arrow, sometimes from yourself, but sometimes from the world around you. If you respond with a second arrow of hate, the world usually doesn't respond so well to people who are filled with hate.

If you don't shoot that second arrow, but instead meet whatever the first arrow is with wisdom, generosity, compassion, and non-reactivity, then maybe the other people in the conversation won't shoot the third arrow. But we can't guarantee that. What we can have some guarantee of is that we have the capacity to monitor ourselves, be present for ourselves, and recognize how we harm ourselves with the second arrows. We can see how we harm ourselves with our attachments, our clinging, our aversions, our judgments and judgmentalism, and our biases and prejudices of all kinds.

The idea is that the Dharma is a refuge and we are a refuge for ourselves, and that it also protects us from ourselves. Some of us know that we can be our own worst enemies and we can also become our own best friends. We can become our own wise person. For me, in this juxtaposition of self as refuge and Dharma as refuge there is a suggestion that the Dharma is not quite personal. The Dharma is not quite me, myself, and mine. If you were only told to make yourself your own refuge, it's way too easy for that to give the impression

that we should be selfish, or that it's all about me, myself, and mine. That would reinforce the attachment to me, myself, and mine.

Because the statement about refuge is immediately clarified as being the *Dhamma* (the Dharma), the Dharma is not me, myself, and mine. The Dharma is that which frees us from any attachment to self, any clinging to self, and any reactivity or hostility to self.

So on one hand, we ourselves are honored and respected deeply in that we can be our own refuge. What a great thing. At the same time, when the Dharma is the refuge, it is a protection against the arrows of me, myself, and mine, and the arrows of conceit of all kinds. This could be the conceit that you're better than others, or that you're worse than others, or the conceit that you must definitely be the worst meditator here at IRC – no one has ever been as bad a meditator as you, right?

So the *Dhamma* is a refuge, it's a protection. The *Dhamma* is radically simple and very profound at the same time. The *Dhamma* is challenging and inspiring. The *Dhamma* is something that inspires letting go. It also inspires action, doing, and engaging. The *Dhamma* is something that is clarifying and liberating. So the *Dhamma* is something very special for us in our world, for organizing our lives, for our practice, for understanding who we are, and for understanding our place in the universe.

For Buddhists, “*Dhamma*” is a central word. Some people have said that the word “*Dhamma*” is the equivalent of what God is in other religions. Not that they're equated, but they are similar in their centrality, as the central organizing principle or reality. They call forth the same kind of reverence and care and love: we love the *Dhamma*. If the *Dhamma* is you, could that also mean loving yourself? The *Dhamma* supports you to love yourself and to be your own best friend.

One of the central liturgical chants in Theravada Buddhism is a chant that, when translated into English, goes something like this:

*The Dhamma of the Buddha is well-spoken.
It's visible. It's immediate.
It invites us to come and see for ourselves.
It is onward leading.
And it's something that the wise know for themselves.*

It is something we know for ourselves. So the *Dhamma* is not found in books, but rather, it's found in something we get to discover here in ourselves. And it's visible. I love the word “*sanditthiko*” (visible). Sometimes it's translated as “visible here and now.” Sometimes it's translated as “visible in this world here,” meaning not in future lives. But it's visible. It's a wonderful metaphor because when you physically see something, you see something that's in front of you. It's obvious – you see it. So this is something we can see for ourselves.

And it is immediate. Sometimes the word “*akaliko*” is translated as “timeless.” But I think the danger of translating it as timeless is that it lends itself to a kind of transcendent idea – that the *Dhamma* is a thing that somehow transcends time. There is a current of Theravada Buddhism that does point to transcendence and transcendent reality – something that is timeless, beyond time, or transcending time. This idea also suggests that this transcendent reality goes on continuously as a thing.

But if you translate *akaliko* as “immediate,” (a- kaliko) – not of time, not belonging to time because it's immediate, it's in the present – then you're again back in the world of what is clearly visible here and now. It's immediate. Translating it as “immediate” is a great challenge. I love the challenge that brings, because it suggests that you don't have to wait for it. You don't have to engineer something perfectly so that it's here. You don't trap it in the present, but it's always here. It is immediate. So what is it that's immediate? What is it that is visible?

Then there's *ehipassiko*. The word “*ehi*” means something like an “invitation.” It means “Come. Come here. Hey you, come. Over here. Come.” “*Passiko*” means “to see, come to see, come see.” But it is kind of awkward to translate it that way in English – “Visible, immediate, come see.” So we say it much more politely: “inviting inspection.” That's kind of nice – inviting inspection. Actually, in Pali, it's much simpler. It's an ordinary kind of term, like “come see. Come see for yourself.”

I love this term because I get the sense that there's something in reality, something about reality that's calling us – come see. Come look here. Come here. One Chinese Buddhist writer in the sixth or seventh century wrote a big fat comprehensive book about Buddhism. In the middle of the book, he wrote the nugget that kind of captures it all – “liberation beckons us within everything.” Liberation beckons us and invites us within everything. Maybe that was his way of saying, *ehipassiko* – come and see. You're invited to come. Invited for what purpose? For freedom, for liberation. To see the *Dhamma* here and now.

Then the *Dhamma* is onward leading (*opanayiko*). I don't know what associations you have with “onward leading.” Maybe it's unfortunate that I have an association with a conveyor belt – if you put yourself on that conveyor belt, it'll take you; it's onward leading. They didn't have conveyor belts in the time of the Buddha, but they had streams, they had rivers. The idea was that in Dharma practice, you figure out a way to put yourself into the Dharma current that's in the river. The word “*sota*” means “current” more than it means “river” or “stream.” So we put ourselves in the current of the river.

This was a great kind of “aha!” for me because in the ancient texts there are all these metaphors. My poor little mind tried to reconcile them. There is crossing the stream and there is entering the stream. Do we enter the stream so we can cross? I think those two metaphors shouldn't be put side by side. Just leave them alone, each in their own world, with their own purpose. When I realized that the word “*sota*” doesn't mean the stream, it

means the current, because then you're on the conveyor belt – you're on the current that's carrying you along – then I understood that's what is onward leading.

There's something about the *Dhamma* that when we touch the *Dhamma*, experience the *Dhamma*, or see the *Dhamma*, it doesn't leave us static, doesn't leave us with the status quo. It does something that changes us and moves us along on the path of liberation. This does not mean that *you* are moving along. The *Dhamma* is onward leading. The movement is in the *Dhamma*. Since the *Dhamma* is also us, there is a part of who we are, something available within us, that can change, that can be onward moving. But we are not the mover. We have a wonderful feeling that there's something moving here, but it's not me – I'm not moving it. We learn how to get out of the way to allow the movement, and we learn how to rest in this movement and let it evolve and develop.

I'm sure all of you here today have had some glimmers of how this works. Maybe in the course of the day as you sat here, some tension you were holding in your body let go and relaxed. Maybe you didn't see it, but when you came back after a walking period or lunch – “Oh, look at that, the tension in my shoulders, in my cheeks, in my eyes, my belly, is not there anymore. Wow.” Or, you weren't trying to engineer your busy mind to quiet down, but when you were just sitting here practicing, it got a little bit quieter in there.

That's part of onward moving, onward leading. It leads someplace. That's what “leading” implies. You're being led someplace. You're being led to a really great place. You're being led to freedom from the attachments, the cravings, the clinging, the unhealthy movements of the mind, and you're being led to health. You're being led to a healthy mind, a healthy heart. This is another way of talking about liberation. We are becoming liberated from all the unhealthy psychological forces in our hearts and minds.

It is a remarkable ideal in Buddhism that it is possible to have a thoroughgoing cleansing of the unhealthy psychological forces within us. I don't know if it's possible for all of us to do this. I don't know if it's possible for me to do it completely, but I'm just so happy to be in this process that is on that stream, on that road, going in that direction. Wow, how did I get so lucky? I've seen enough of this to see how it works, and it's fantastic. So I'm just happy to be on it and to keep moving along. I trust the stream. I trust the onward leading quality of it.

The final and fifth of the five characteristics of the *Dhamma* is “personally known by the wise.” “Personally” can mean “individually,” or “separately by yourself,” depending on how you translate *paccattam*. I guess “known by the wise” means we're supposed to become wise. This is the most difficult part of the chant. (“Yeah, known by the wise. Oh well, it was good until then. But you know, I don't know if I can qualify to be wise.”)

Absolutely, you are. No doubt about it. You do not need to study a lot of books. You don't need to get advanced degrees in Buddhist studies. You don't need complicated analysis to be wise in the Dharma. You have to become skilled in seeing what is already here and see it in the immediate present. You have to feel, hear, or recognize that there is a kind of calling here: “This is good. Come closer. Look more deeply. Be more connected. Be more intimate. Be more open to this experience. Come here. Trust this.”

It is onward leading. So allow that to happen. Give yourself the benefit of the doubt that you don't have to do all the doing in this practice. But you do have to make it possible for yourself to float in the stream. You have to swim. You have to stay. You have to do something, but you also have to allow something to move through you. If you spend too much time in practice huffing and puffing, trying to be the one in charge, trying to make something happen, trying too much to be in the present moment – now, now, now, now, now – it's possible that you won't leave any room, any space for onward moving, opening, and being carried along. The art of this practice is to do the practice – we have to do our work – but don't just be the one who's doing the work. Allow yourself to be worked by the Dharma. Do the practice and allow the practice to do you.

There's a certain kind of attitude that's needed that supports this process. There is a trust, or an allowing, or an opening to something that's not you. Maybe it is found in you, but it's not what you identify as yourself. Something else begins to unfold. I don't know if this is the best example, but I like it: maybe you're really tense, really scared about or angry at something, and both your hands are clenched tight. You're not going to give up for anything. And you don't know how. You're just so desperate. Then a friend comes along and picks up your fist and just holds it. They lift it up so you don't have to hold it up yourself. In the soft warm hand of your friend something in your hand begins to let go and relax. You didn't make it relax. Your friend didn't exactly make it relax either, but somehow in the trust, in the letting go, in the relaxing, somewhere in the heart, the hand relaxes too.

So the Dharma is that friend that's here holding you, protecting you. The Dharma is like your best friend. And you have to allow your friend to hold your hand. You have to allow the Dharma to hold whatever challenges and difficulties you have – sorrow, pain, despair, discouragement, anger, and resentment. The Buddha gave a list of 17 things like this. I didn't memorize the list, but it includes envy, covetousness, resentment, anger, greed, and lust, and it goes on and on.

But the Dharma holds these challenges for us. It's very, very important to learn how to stop and look and be wise with the very things that are most challenging for us – our suffering. This practice is not about avoiding our suffering. At the same time, it's not about being a victim of our suffering. We allow the Dharma to hold the challenges and suffering. We allow our hearts to hold it. We allow our awareness to hold it because it's in seeing what's visible and immediate that we see the *Dhamma*.

So what's visible? Our suffering. Maybe it's not visible, but it's perceivable – we can feel it. At some point, we'll discover – we'll see and feel and recognize – there's a release from that suffering. This doesn't have to be dramatic. There might be a little bit of relaxing. There might be a little bit of not identifying so strongly with the suffering: “Oh, yeah, there's sadness. But now I can just hold it as sadness. Before, it was my sadness. It was so much about me, and I was embarrassed about being sad and angry that I was sad. But now it's just sadness. And it's not about me. It's just sadness.” There's freedom there. There's a release there. Or maybe the sadness at some point just fades away for a while.

The Buddha said that if we can see the 17 different kinds of challenging mind states we can have, and see some kind of release in relation to them, then we're seeing the Dharma. This is extremely meaningful to see. The proposal I make to you is that this is not super sophisticated. It's not as if in order to really understand the Dharma, we have to understand the 54 kinds of emptiness, or we really need to understand not just the 12-fold dependent origination, but the three different ways each of the different 12 steps work – now we're up to 36. And what about the 54 meanings of emptiness and the 56 meanings of *Dhamma*? We better get to work here.

Rather, the *Dhamma* is something immediate that we can see in ourselves. “Oh, look at that. I had pain. I suffered. And there's a movement away from that. There's a release from it. There's a lightening up. There's a loosening of the strong identification I have with it.” That is seeing the *Dhamma*. In this particular sutra I'm thinking about, for the Buddha this was enough to give people unshakable confidence in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. “Oh, *this* is what it's about.”

I know if you go to downtown Santa Cruz and tell someone, “Hey, if you get angry or you're full of resentment, it's going to hurt you. But if you pay attention, it might go away, and that's really important,” I don't know how many people in Santa Cruz are going to have patience with you saying that on the sidewalk. It doesn't sound so great or sophisticated or deep – “You mean, all this Buddhism and I don't get the 54 kinds of emptiness? I just get resentment at the end of it? I don't know if this is worthwhile. This is pretty expensive.”

There was a monk in the time of the Buddha who complained that the Buddha wasn't doing enough miracles, or any miracles, so he threatened to leave the monkhood. He disrobed and went to town, and he was criticizing the Buddha. He was going around town saying, “All the Buddha teaches is suffering and the end of suffering.” When the Buddha heard about this, he said, “Oh, that foolish man, he thinks he's criticizing the Dharma or me, but actually he's praising it.”

So the Dharma is immediate and visible because it has to do with what we're doing in our own hearts and minds. It is what you can see here and now. You don't have to go digging. Don't dig for trouble. Don't dig around for suffering; just do your practice. If suffering finds you, be a little bit inspired. I'd recommend it. If you end up suffering, be a little bit happy, a little bit inspired because now you're going to have a chance to see the *Dhamma*.

Oh, yes, the suffering is immediate. It's perceivable. It's visible. Is it onward leading? Is it inviting me to see it? Maybe at first you won't see that it's inviting you to really come and see. But once you start getting a taste, a little sense of the release, the letting go, the loosening up, the lightening up that's possible, and the non-identification that's possible, that little vision, that little feeling, that sense is onward leading. “Oh, there's a possibility of freedom here. I can sense it. I can feel it. It's not really here right now, but I know enough about how it is. Yes.”

That is what is onward leading. That's what's calling us. That vision is what gives us the invitation: come. Enlightenment or liberation beckons us within everything. We get a sense that freedom is here, just around the corner. Just by lightening up, or relaxing, or not taking it so seriously, not being so heavy around it. Liberation doesn't have to be all or nothing. There's a lightening up that happens. It can provide that vision that says, "Oh, yeah, there's an invitation. Come in this direction."

This is the guide. The word "*opanayiko*" (onward leading) is related to the word for something that guides us or leads us. This is where the guide is. This is where the traffic sign is. Come here, in this direction. Do this. So there's a sensitivity we develop through practice. We not only stop and pay attention to our suffering and appreciate its value for Dharma practice, but more importantly, as we get attuned and sensitive to how we suffer, we can start getting a sense, a vision, and a feeling of where the freedom is. We're being invited. Come look. Come see, here. Come see. You're invited to see the freedom that's here.

It turns out that if you heed the call, meaning you choose to take a look here – where's the freedom?— there's freedom in just doing that, in just heeding the call. Freedom is in the very fact that you step forward. "Okay. It's hard, but now I'm going to take a deeper look here." That's an exercise of freedom right there. Okay. Here.

To not be caught in it, not be reactive to it, not pulling away, or closing down, or attacking it, but rather, in this Dharma way, mindful way, to turn toward it: "Okay. Let's know this better. Let's see it. Let's open to it. Let's breathe with it. Let me look and see. What am I doing? What second or third arrows am I adding to this? Yes, it's difficult to be sad, but let me take a good look at what's going on here. Well, actually, it's not the sadness that's so difficult. It's my embarrassment that I'm sad, or it's my resentment that I'm sad one more time, or it's my fear of what it's going to mean in the future. That's what's difficult. Or it's the sense of self that gets so small and tight around, 'I'm the sad one.' That's what makes it difficult."

So we investigate; we step forward – "oh, what's this?" Or we ask the question, "How do I hold this sadness so I might have a vision of freedom? How might I hold this sadness so there is some feeling of peace, some feeling of equanimity, some sense of freedom in relation to it?"

All those kinds of options are an expression of freedom. Rather than looking for freedom in the future, we enact freedom by being mindful. In this way, we make ourselves a refuge, by practicing the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. We bring mindfulness to our experience. And in the mindfulness, there is freedom.

Or we ask ourselves, "In being aware of this, where is it that I can find freedom?" To discover this, it helps if the mindfulness is really simple. Maybe we shouldn't even call it "mindfulness." I prefer the word "awareness" for *sati*. Because for some of us (and for me at times), mindfulness can be associated a lot with the doing mind – I have to *do* the mindfulness. The extreme version of this for some people is getting really into mental noting. There are people who do machine gun noting – the faster, the better.

But awareness is not like a bullet or a dart. Awareness is more than a momentary act of knowing and recognition. Awareness is immediate, but it also has duration. It's here, but there are no boundaries to it. To be aware with no boundaries. To be aware in the simplest forms of knowing. Maybe awareness is knowing that is pre-verbal or non-verbal. If it's verbal, it is the kind of knowing that is not a willed knowing. It's not as if you're trying to know something and then you know it as an act of will. Rather, before any act of will, before any choice is made, there is some kind of knowing that operates. What is the knowing that's so simple that it comes before you've made a decision to know?

A lot of this goes on in our life, where we know things without the knowing rising up into the conscious, willful place of knowing. Some of you have opened the door to your room many times without coming to your door and knowing, "That's a door. Yep, that's a door and that's a handle." Something in you knows it, but it hasn't gotten to the surface. You just open the door. You know the difference between a door and the wall so you can find your way, but you don't have to think in order to act. When you're reading words on a page, you don't look at every letter, but something in you knows each letter and how they come together. Sometimes you can see whole phrases or sentences all at once, maybe.

Something knows, but it's not necessarily the most conscious willful part of the mind that's operating. So there's a whole layer of awareness, of knowing, of recognition that operates. It is not willful, but it is very helpful. Maybe there you can start getting a sense of the invitation: come here, with each thing, with each act of knowing, with each thing we're aware of. In there, there's a sense of the possibility of freedom.

Come, open, trust, come along, feel. Don't add second arrows. Don't trust the archer. Trust the knowing. It is "to be known personally by the wise." That's the *Dhamma*. What is to be known by the wise? That which is a refuge, that which is a protection, that which is freedom, here and now.

I'll talk more about this in the morning instructions. But one of the first things that the Buddha says about the instructions he gives for practicing mindfulness is to relax. Be aware of your breathing. Know that you're breathing. As you're breathing mindfully, become aware of your body. And then as you're aware of your body, relax. Right there, in that relaxing, are traces of what I've been talking about today. Right there in that relaxing, in the knowing, the feeling, the relaxing, you can have a vision of freedom, a vision of, "Come here."

There is a possibility of the *Dhamma* being your refuge, of you being your own refuge, in something as simple as relaxing, something as immediate as relaxing, something that's as visible as an act of relaxing. Right there is the *Dhamma*. It doesn't have to be more sophisticated than that. But attuning yourself to and seeing that, "Ah, this is the *Dhamma*. This is valuable" helps it to be onward leading.

Thank you.