

Core Teachings (2 of 5) No Views

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The theme for this week is to share with you some of the building blocks and foundations for my particular orientation for teaching the Dharma. From causes and conditions, life experiences, personality, and for all kinds of reasons, teachers have their own take and orientation. I thought it might be useful to try to provide you with mine, which is behind how I teach, but maybe is not always so evident.

Yesterday I emphasized that I feel that the rock-bottom foundation for what motivates me and guides me in the Dharma is sensitivity to suffering and its ending – the possibility of both a radical end of suffering and a lessening of suffering for myself and others. There are times in my life when I thought that was a rather simplistic orientation for the center of the Buddhism that I practice and teach. But I've come to appreciate that it's actually quite a profound orientation. It's philosophically and doctrinally profound. Suffering is a thread that goes through all aspects of our lives. It touches everything. Similarly, the end of suffering touches everything we do and everything we are in a deep, deep way. So it's a profound thing. And for me, it's enough for what the Dharma is about.

To take this theme one step further, I have an orientation – maybe partly from my Zen practice, maybe based on my background – to not settle, not center on any view, any philosophy, or any point of view (even though I just provided one: suffering and the end of suffering). My orientation is not to center, rest there, nor hold onto that as being “it.” If anything, the idea of having no view is the view that I like. Rather than relying on a particular understanding, I like to rely on awareness, on letting go, and on showing up fresh for the next moment, not bringing anything with me.

As a teacher, I listen to people as they talk to me about their practice and their lives. One of the things I'm listening for is whether they have a view that they're holding onto. Do they have an orientation that might be useful, but they're a little bit too attached to it? Orientations and views are useful. They have their place in practice and life, but they also have their limitations. In Buddhist practice, sooner or later we see the limitation of all views and the possibility of living without views and being without views, even if it's just temporarily in deep meditation.

Along with the idea of no views is not having an idea of anything ultimate – a view that something is the best, the most wonderful, the ultimate experience, the ultimate reality, the ultimate teaching, and better than anything else. This is an orientation that we see in the earliest Buddhist text, a text that in English would be called the *Book of Eights*, the *Aṭṭhakavagga*. I have a published translation of it called *The Buddha Before Buddhism*. The reason for that title is that the orientation in it undercuts all views and lends itself to the idea that there's nothing ultimate.

To have any idea of being ultimate is a view. It sets up a contrast between what is and is not ultimate and with other people's religion. The earliest teachings of Buddhism kind of pulled the rug out from underneath any attempt to make Buddhism into a religion with an ultimate value and purpose. Some people might find this idea offensive, difficult, or unappealing. I find it liberating and delightful to be able to live without holding onto any view at all.

Related to this idea, in later Mahayana Buddhism there are two contrasting philosophical traditions. One is called “the middle tradition,” or “the middleness tradition,” and the other is called “the mind-only tradition,” or “*yogachara*,” which means “the practitioners of yoga.” The *Madhyamaka*, the emptiness people, believe that there is nothing that is not empty. Everything is insubstantial, impermanent, shifting, and changing; everything is conditional and contingent. There's no place to land with attention, to take a stand, and nowhere to hold on to

anything. There is freedom to allow everything to move through us; we are part of the river and of life. We find our way and navigate in the river but there is no place to stand.

The *yogachara* school, the *Chittamatra*, or mind-only school, believed the same thing – that everything is empty except for the mind, or except for consciousness. Even in the modern world, we find a divide between those teachers who want to emphasize that everything is empty, but there's also consciousness, a form of mind that is ultimate and transcendent, and those who are more *Madhyamaka*, the middle-ness people, who believe in the emptiness of all things, and nothing has ultimacy; nothing has any permanence.

I am more in the *Madhyamaka* orientation, which doesn't see anything as ultimate, or permanent, or as "the thing." Everything is in the process of flow. Everything is in the river of life. Taking a stand anywhere – in a view, in a position, in the idea that anything is ultimate – makes the situation worse. It adds a little bit of stress, a little bit of holding on. So that's my orientation. I have some reluctance to be this explicit about it because I don't want to be dismissive or disrespectful toward people who have different orientations. There are teachers who are phenomenal practitioners and have come to their understanding from a very, very deep practice.

Sometimes the way to harmonize these two orientations is to view them as the difference in light between a particle and a wave. They say it's neither particle or wave, or it's both particle and wave. Is there something ultimate, or is there nothing ultimate? Is there both ultimacy and not-ultimacy? Is there a kind of view that we can hold on to or have that is both a view and not a view? Or are they two sides of the same coin, two sides of the same hand? Depending on which way we look at it, we come to a different conclusion.

You don't have to take what I'm offering, the view of no view, the view of nothing ultimate. It is not very interesting to make them into views and hold on to them. There are ways of just letting them go too, not being so focused on them, and not making them ultimate.

So, in this way, I'm closer to the emptiness school of Mahayana Buddhism. I think that in early Buddhism, they didn't have these schools. They didn't articulate philosophies as much. In the earliest tradition, it was about practicing non-clinging and understanding the value of not holding on to anything at all. Freedom from suffering was seen as freedom from not fixating on anything, including religion, philosophical views, and doctrines – any idea that something is the ultimate thing.

It is kind of as if focusing on the suffering and the end of suffering is ultimate or foundational for me. But even that's not something to hold on to. There's nothing there to hold on to. Freedom from suffering is as if the fist has finally opened up and it's just an open hand. The hand itself is not holding on to anything. But if I love that open hand, and want to make it into something, and grab it, then I've lost the open hand, and now I have a fist again. You don't want to make the end of suffering the thing and then hold on to that. There is nothing to hold on to, and how profound that is.

So, suffering and its end, no views, and no ultimacy are part of my dharma, at least for now. I say, "at least for now," so that also is not taken as being the ultimate truth. I'll end with a little story; I'm not sure where it comes from. There's a story of Mara, who is the Buddhist personification of all the temptations and hindrances that keep us in the world of sensual desires and prevent us from becoming awakened and free. Mara is a kind of supernatural being who goes around and tries to stop people from practicing and getting enlightened.

Mara is out wandering around with his attendant, and they come across a meditator who's doing walking meditation. The meditator has some deep realization and insight, and exclaims happily, "I see the truth. I see the truth." Mara just continues without being concerned, and the attendant says to Mara, "Aren't you concerned? This person has discovered the truth, and is probably on the brink of awakening, or is making progress along the way," And Mara says, "No, no, I'm not concerned. Soon enough, the person will turn it into a belief." We can see things that are powerfully true, but then we make them into a belief, and we're back in Mara's hands. Thank you, and I'll continue with this tomorrow.