

Udayi Sutta (2 of 5) Speaking Practically

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Hello and welcome to this second talk based on the Udayi Sutta. This is a sutta where the Buddha talks about what qualities or characteristics should be established in someone who wants to teach the Dharma. For the last two weeks, I talked about the core teachings. But as important as what the teachings are is how we teach. I certainly aspire to teach in the way the Buddha encouraged us to.

So I'll read the five qualities described in the Sutta again:

It's not easy, Ananda, to teach the Dhamma to others. The Dhamma should be taught to others when five qualities are established within oneself. Which five? The Dhamma should be taught to others thinking, I will speak step by step. I will teach progressively (a gradual path). The Dhamma should be taught to others thinking, I will speak for practical reasons. I will speak providing instructions on how to become free of suffering. The Dhamma should be taught to others thinking, I will speak grounded in kindness. The Dhamma should be taught to others thinking, I will not speak for material reward. The Dhamma should be taught to others thinking, I will speak without wounding myself or others.

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When I introduced these yesterday, I said that these five qualities are equally valuable as guidelines for how we speak with others, even if we're not teaching them. I'll talk mostly about the teaching side of it, but I'm hoping that those of you who are not going to be teaching will consider these as invaluable ways of looking at your acts of speech and how you speak. Today, I'll talk about the second one: The Dharma should be taught to others thinking, I will speak for practical reasons.

Some translators will translate this as to speak based on explaining causes and conditions. The word that's being used here can also mean instructions. I like that because rather than teaching people truths, like abstract things to believe in, the emphasis is always on instructions of what we can do and what we can practice. This goes along with what I talked about last week as the second core teaching principle that I have: that of no views; not relying on beliefs; not relying on dogmatic ideas, but rather relying on what's practical and what we can do ourselves; what we can see and the causes and conditions.

Some people might say, "Wait a minute, we have to believe in things". For example, someone might come up with the idea that in order to get water out of the faucet, we have to believe that turning the handle of the faucet will be necessary for that. This is pushing this idea of belief to an extreme; while this is a kind of belief, it's a belief that we can immediately see whether it works or not. The proof is right there. It's practical. The condition for the water coming out is turning the handle. Perhaps it's not exactly a belief but rather there's confidence that it'll work because the whole plumbing system is in order.

It's that kind of practical way. There's a cause and condition for water coming out; there's a cause and condition for developing this practice; there's a cause and condition for our suffering; and there's a cause and condition for the end of suffering. So, when we teach we're constantly using that as an orientation: Teach practically. Teach what's useful. Teach the cause and condition so we can really see what's going on.

There's a wonderful teaching of the Buddha that's called the preservation of the truth. This is where the Buddha says that if you declare that you have a belief, you should explain to people the basis of that belief. For example, if you believe something because you have faith in it - thus, there's no proof and there's no directly seeing why this is the case - then you say, I believe this because of faith. You don't say, this is true. You say I believe this is true because I have faith it is so. If you say it that way, you're preserving the truth. Because you're stating, I base this on faith. Then people know you're not making an absolute claim, but you're making a claim for yourself and they know the assumption underneath it; people know the basis underneath it. This way they can be in conversation with you. As opposed to if you just say something is true dogmatically, or declaratively, people don't know how to find out for themselves. They either have to believe it or not.

They can't participate in the conversation in a robust way. But if we preserve this truth by saying the basis of our belief, they can go back and check with the source of the belief. Is that source a useful source? Do they want to rely on that source too? But if you just make a declarative statement, which then becomes a view, then people can't really participate or engage in the conversation in a more realistic way to find out what's really going on here. In addition to faith, he goes on to say that we can base our belief on what we've heard from our teachers; or we can say what I believe is based on what's popularly believed by the society around me; or I believe it because it's in my sacred books; or I believe it because I thought about it logically, and my logic or rationality led me to believe what this is.

With regards to this idea of speaking based on practical reasons, one of the great questions is to ask yourself why do I want to say what I want to say? Why do I want to do what I want to do? This is not to look for metaphysical answers, but rather to determine what am I trying to accomplish in this moment? What is the practical reason for why I want to say what I want to say?

The first time I clearly saw the value of asking myself this was when, many years ago, just before I was going to give a Dharma talk, an old friend showed up and we had a little chat. Before giving a talk, I usually went into the meditation hall to sit down and meditate and then gave the talk. Just before I went to sit down, I told my old friend that I hadn't prepared for this talk. Because I sat down to meditate right after saying that, I asked myself why did I say that? I realized the reason was I was trying to protect myself from my friend judging me in case I gave a bad talk. If I had asked myself the question "Why do I want to say that I didn't prepare the talk today?" before I said it, I would have seen the reason I did it. Then I probably would have done something different.

So, understand the reasons - the practical cause and effect relationship and conditions - underlying what we do. Buddhism emphasizes that this is the alternative to having beliefs, fixed views, dogmatic views, and metaphysical views. We don't have to believe in anything we don't see for ourselves. The emphasis in the Dharma is come and see for yourself: It's visible here and now. Because of that, you can count on the teachings as being intended to provide practical instructions; they're meant to be reasoned out. There are reasons for why we say things; they are based on conditions and cause and effect and how they influence the way things are.

In teaching the Dharma, I interpret this particular phrase "I will speak for practical reasons" as explaining the conditions for what we're teaching: what are the reasons? What are the rationalities? How can we see this for ourselves? What's the basis for what we're saying? So, what I just did now was a bit of an example of this: I said, I'm going to interpret this text this way and that's preserving the truth; I'm saying it's an interpretation and I'm giving you the background for why I'm interpreting it this way. And then I use this interpretation and the reason for it is I would like the teachings I give to guide people away from fixed beliefs, dogmatic beliefs, declarative statements, to what they can know and experience for themselves and verify for themselves: "Oh, this is true. I see that this works". It's as true as a turn of the handle on the faucet causing water to flow out. What we can do is that practical and immediate.

So in meditation, I don't want to just make a declarative statement that mindfulness is always useful. What I'd like to say is that mindfulness is useful in many circumstances and we can discover that by paying attention to the effect that being mindful has on us. If we bring clear awareness to our experience, that condition can change the ecosystem of our experience of what's going on. If you really pay attention to what happens when you bring clear, simple, relaxed attention then you'll see that this is useful. And the place to look, to see where the evidence is, is primarily in yourself. Sometimes clear awareness that translates into listening carefully to others, and seeing them clearly, also changes the environment we're in and the situations we're in somehow. We can

see that change in how other people relax and feel cared for, understood, and feel respected. You can see that changes the circumstances. So, cultivating clear awareness is a condition that can have a beneficial effect.

So that's speaking for practical reasons. The reason to be mindful is to benefit self and others. That's something you can see for yourself as we learn to do this practice. In fact, we're supposed to see it for ourselves. I believe, based on how I read the ancient texts, that everything in the Dharma should be verified. The core Dharma of the Buddha should be verified in our own experience, through our own practice. So may that be true for you.

As you go through the day today, you may ask yourself the question: why do I want to say what I'm going to say now? Or why do I want to do what I want to do now? And see if that brings forth a better understanding of the conditions that influence your life.

Thank you.