

Qualities of the Dharma (4 of 5) Onward Leading

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Hello and welcome to this series on the qualities and characteristics of the *Dharma*. There are five of them, and today I'll do the fourth one.

The first is that whatever the *Dharma* is, it's something that's perceivable in your perceptions. You can feel it and see it. The second is that it's so, and that puts it here. It's only in the present that you can really perceive things. That's where our senses are operating, here.

The second is that it's immediate. It's not in the future. It's not in the past. In a sense, it's not tied to time. It's just the full present here. That's where it's found.

And then it calls our attention here: "Look here. Look here." Reality calls for attention—the reality inside of us, our body, hearts, and mind. If you're very sensitive, you can feel what wants attention, what wants to be cared for or attended to, or what messages need to be listened to.

And then, for today, the *Dharma*, whatever it is, is onward leading. Whatever it is that I'm suggesting this week, it's a form of intelligence. It's a deep intelligence which is not our ordinary mental intelligence that we identify as being smart, capable in a kind of conscious way. It belongs to a deeper level of our human existence, human processing, that is closer to the sensation level of experience. It's closer to the coordinated way in which all our senses operate in unison, in a sense, or in cooperation with each other, to provide a kind of deeper intelligence.

It is an intelligence deeper than the conscious mind, and one that we can't really control or claim for ourselves, or really engineer. We have to kind of tune into it and be in harmony with it. Listen to it. Go along with it.

And this is the intelligence that's onward leading. It's onward leading in two big ways. Being a human being is constantly something in process. There are developmental models of human growth that continue right up until we die. All along the whole life, we're developing and changing in all kinds of ways.

Sometimes the changes we go through are deleterious. We get caught and stuck in certain things and resentments. We get caught in certain mindsets of self-criticism, or certain mindsets of somehow being caught in a wound, a tightness, or a belief. But in and of itself, this human system is constantly changing and moving. It's impermanent.

It's changing, but it doesn't do so randomly. It's not just a random bunch of stuff that comes together. There's a directionality. There are two primary directions that this human life can move.

It can grow, grow, grow, and develop in wonderful ways. It can grow in wholesome ways, in beneficial ways. It can grow in directions that help us feel whole, complete, fulfilled. These are all words that are translations of the ancient Buddhist teachings in *Pāli*: wholesome, complete. And it's completed in entirety, *kevala*, and fulfilled, filled, suffused, *samannāgata*, I think it is.

These are common words, common ideas in the ancient texts. We can go in this direction. We can grow. The other is that which can be released, that which can be let go of, that which is not needed, that which is unwholesome, that which limits us, divides us, keeps us separate from ourselves.

This idea that it keeps us separate from parts of ourselves lends itself to the feeling that you can feel that it's work to be caught in what's unwholesome. It's work to be caught in attachments. It's work to be caught in resistance and fear. In a way, that work is like pushing Sisyphus's rock up the mountainside. It's a lot of work to be pushing it up.

What Sisyphus didn't realize is that—or maybe he realized all too well—that if you let go of the rock, it will roll down the hill. If we let go of our attachments, the attachments will dissipate, evaporate, roll back down, settle back into, and come into wholeness again. It's work to be partial. It's work to be separated from ourselves.

As we're practicing this deep sensitivity, deeper than what we can think about, deeper than what we can navigate through our ideas, there's a deep feeling in the sensations themselves, or in the meeting of awareness and sensations. This third entity, what arises when a sensation and awareness meet, right there, is an intelligence, a knowing, an understanding, a message. One of those can be: "This is wholesome. This is onward leading. This is what can grow. This is unwholesome. This is what divides, limits us, separates us from ourselves, from parts of ourselves."

And so we can feel where the onward-leading nature is: Does this lead me onward to something deleterious? Does this lead me onward to something beneficial? And not beneficial in

some kind of worldly way, but in some deep existential way, deep spiritual way, deep emotional way.

So the *Dharma* is that which guides us to what is wholesome, guides us to growth, guides us to letting go, guides us back together into the whole. There is that deep message inside that we can get: “This is here. Here is where attention wants to be. Here is where something can grow. Hold this in the light of awareness. Be with this.”

I think it’s very meaningful to call it light, light of awareness. It’s a metaphor, of course, because sunlight doesn’t have any intentionality behind it. We don’t think it’s trying to make the plants grow, or trying to make the morning fog evaporate. But the effect of it, just the fact that the sun is up and shining on it, has a beneficial effect for the plants and a beneficial effect on ourselves when the fog lifts, maybe.

Sunlight also sterilizes. Some things that are put in the sun get cleansed of certain kinds of bacteria or something. So the light of awareness can do a lot without it being intentional, without the engineering job. But it depends on where the attention is put. It makes all the difference in the world.

And so, to have this very deep sensitivity to what calls attention, what’s needed right now, where the deeper messages arise out of the sensations that have no story involved with them, that have no big plan, no big construct of me, myself, and mine, is very, very basic and simple. But basic and simple doesn’t mean it’s not profound.

The *Dharma*, the intelligence that exists between sensations and awareness that can arise there, is the *Dharma*. It is the deep, profound experience of being at home in this world, at home in this body, being on the path of liberation. It is liberation itself.

If liberation is not in your thinking mind, but something deep inside of you that’s bigger, wider, fuller than whatever your thinking mind can think about, it’s a common cliché in Buddhist circles to say enlightenment is not what you think it is. It’s a kind of profound statement. It’s not. It’s never going to be what you think it is. It’s going to be something that you experience.

Enlightenment is what you experience. There’s something deep within us that wants to move toward freedom, and that’s the onward-leading nature that we can feel and sense. Maybe the simplest, maybe reductionalistic, naturalistic way of describing this is that it’s the movement toward vitality, where tension is released.

Anytime there’s tension, contraction, resistance, tightness, that tension wants to be released. It’s like the fist doesn’t want to stay closed. The fist wants to open up in and of itself. And so,

this deep, deep movement to releasing all the fists in our mind, our hearts, and our body—that's the movement toward liberation.

And when it's so thorough and complete, and our whole being is no longer fisted in any kind of way but released, it's profound. It's remarkable that this can be done. There's a messenger inside. There's information inside that can guide us in that direction.

And that message, what I talked about yesterday and today, is that which calls attention to itself: "Here, this is where it's good. This is where attention is needed." And then, hold it in this spacious awareness. Breathe with it. Center yourself on it. Follow the instinct of where attention needs to be to allow something to unfold.

Go with what feels like, "This is the way forward. This is the way forward. This is." We're not asked to just sit here passively, without anything changing. We're not asked to be involved in making the change. We're asked to notice where the natural movement of growth and release is found within us, and shine the light of awareness there.

This is the way forward. This is the way we grow. This is the way we move toward freedom. This is the way we move toward becoming whole, the wholesome.

So, thank you, and I hope that you can kind of explore, keep exploring. Where is this in you? Find it through the day. Check in with yourself repeatedly through the day, in little pauses in the day, and ask yourself, "What's calling for attention? What is it?"

"This is something that needs to be released, relaxed. This is something that wants to grow and unfold. Where is the onward leading right now?" If, through the day, you do this by closing your eyes briefly, you might discover a lot that you're overlooking just in your regular daily life.

So thank you very much, and we'll continue one more day on these five qualities of the *Dharma*.

---KEYWORDS--- *Dharma, Pāli, kevala, samannāgata*, onward leading, liberation, awareness, wholesome, impermanence, enlightenment ---END KEYWORDS