

The Dharma and the Path of Harmlessness

by Gil Fronsdal

“A wise person does not intend harm to self or to others. A wise person intends benefit for self, for others, and for the whole world.” -The Buddha

The full scope of Buddhist practice is conveyed through the word ‘Dharma.’ This word has a number of meanings that depend on the context in which it is used. Sometimes it refers to the teachings and practices of the Buddha, but its most significant meaning is the natural truths, laws and processes of the path of practice he taught. For many Buddhists the Dharma is the object of their greatest commitment and devotion. It is a source of refuge, guidance, and ultimate meaning, and, most importantly, it is what allows for the Liberation taught by the Buddha.

The Dharma is characterized by and expressed through non-harming, and the path of the Buddha is a path of harmlessness. The Dharma of the Buddha can help us discover a peace we only experience when we aren’t causing suffering to ourselves or others. This peace is called Liberation or Awakening when it includes, if even for just a short time, a full cessation of suffering.

The Dharma is not something outside of oneself; it is not an external power working through our lives. Nor is it something personal that we can claim as our own. It is not a ‘thing’ that exists by itself. Rather, it is a process that exists only when activated. Just as a fist appears only when we clench our hand, so the Dharma only emerges when we behave in certain ways. However, unlike a fist, we don’t create the Dharma directly; we create the conditions that allow it to appear.

The way the Dharma arises can be compared to floating in freshwater. When we float, we may say the water supports us, but, in fact, the water alone is not sufficient to keep us from drowning. If we don’t know how to float, and we thrash around in fear or only relax and trust, the water won’t hold us up. Floating is a learned skill that depends on our having both the intention to float and the skill. Once the skill is mastered, being supported by the water can seem almost effortless. But since floating safely does not depend only on our skill and intention, it doesn’t make sense to take complete credit for it. The dynamic interplay of the water, our bodies, intention, and skill creates the floating.

Floating is like the Dharma. As a support for our lives, the Dharma is not found in the external world nor is it some inherent essence of our human nature. It appears in the interaction of the world, aspects of our human nature, and particular skills and behaviors. The Dharma is neither separate from us nor something we are solely responsible for. Just as part of the skill of floating is relaxing and letting go of activities that interfere with floating, so too, the skill that allows the Dharma to arise and support us includes letting go of what undermines that support. But the Dharma is not found simply by letting go any more than floating safely in water simply requires relaxing. Certain skills and intentions need to be present for the Dharma to appear and to function. It is through the way we live that the Dharma can have a role in our lives.

The essence of this way of life is a devotion to non-harming. It is all too easy to harm others and ourselves with our thoughts, self-concepts and emotional reactions and quite

difficult to overcome the causes of these mental activities. For this reason, it is important to have something that helps us minimize such harm and its causes. For Buddhists this something is the Dharma.

The most important way the Buddha described the Dharma was through the Four Noble Truths. These pragmatic truths are based on a seemingly simple way of being in the world: *if you stop doing something that is causing harm, the harming ceases*. What makes this principle challenging are all the forms of self-harm which are not easy to stop. Addictions to desires, compulsions toward anger, obsessions with fear, and attachments to self can be so deeply rooted in the mind that they are hard to recognize, let alone stop.

In Buddhist shorthand, these addictions, compulsions, obsessions, and attachments are referred to as clinging or craving. When the contraction of clinging is pervasive it leads to stress, which makes us vulnerable to such human instincts as fear, aggression, and greed. When these qualities are activated it can be easy to behave in ways that lead to further harm to ourselves or others. Buddhism emphasizes that craving is a condition for further craving and that intentions to harm tend to motivate more of the same.

In contrast, letting go of clinging creates conditions for further letting go, and non-harming motivates more non-harming. Stress decreases with the lessening of clinging which then leads to relaxed states of being. Calm and relaxed states, in turn, activate our human instincts for empathy and caring and our capacities for creativity and wisdom, all of which support our practice on the Buddhist path and help bring forth the Dharma.

As for Dharma practice, it is helpful to appreciate that empathy, caring, attention, and wisdom occur not only because we consciously decide to have them occur, but also because conditions are in place to activate them. When we practice the Dharma we create the conditions for our best qualities to function. As these beneficial faculties are expressed more actively in our lives, we discover that our lives are being supported by forces independent of our self-conscious efforts and self-centered attachments. As these forces protect, guide and liberate, people often feel increasing confidence in the power of the Dharma in their lives.

The Buddhist practices of non-harming that bring forth the Dharma in our lives are encapsulated within the Eightfold Path. These eight practices include wise understanding of what causes suffering, living ethically so we don't cause harm, and developing mental capacities such as mindfulness and concentration so that we can let go of the deep mental roots of clinging. Initially, these are trainings we intentionally undertake. With practice, these become less something we undertake and more who we are. They become how we naturally act. When someone has fully matured in the Dharma it is said they become the Eightfold Path, they become the Dharma.

The more our practice reveals the Dharma the less sense it makes to take credit for the Dharma working through us, just as we don't take credit for a refreshing breeze on our palm when we open our fist. It is our task to open the fist in our heart so we can be refreshed by the Dharma, by the winds of compassion, wisdom, and freedom.