

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year

Part 1: Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels

Week 7: The Dharma (1) – The Basic Analysis: Our Disease, and the Prescription for a Cure

Introduction

In the second week of this course we saw that a Buddhist is someone who ‘Goes for Refuge’ to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Since then we have explored the significance of the Buddha. But what about the Dharma? What exactly *is* the Dharma? And what does it mean to ‘Go for Refuge’ to it? These are the questions we will be exploring in this session and the next.

What is the ‘Dharma’

‘Dharma’ is a Sanskrit word that can mean many things. The most relevant meanings for this discussion are, firstly, ‘the Truth’, in the highest sense, as the nature of reality, and secondly, the teachings of Buddhism. But ‘Truth’ and ‘reality’ are large abstract concepts, and the teachings of Buddhism are vast, diverse, and can sometimes seem contradictory. How can we Go for Refuge – how can we commit ourselves to living by – anything so difficult to pin down?

Can we boil the teachings of the Buddhist tradition down to their essence? Can we sum the Dharma up in a single, logical concept or formula, that we can see is clearly true, and base our life and practice on? Surely we need to do this before we can really Go for Refuge to it? But unfortunately this is not really possible.

Beyond any one concept, practice or formula

If we think of the Dharma as the Truth, then the Buddha and the other spiritually advanced figures of the Buddhist tradition have been unanimous in stating that this ultimate nature of reality is beyond any concept that can be expressed in words. And if we think of the Dharma as the teachings of Buddhism, then different Buddhists will often emphasise different aspects according to their temperament, background, culture, and stage of development. If we try to limit the Dharma to any one concept, any one teaching, or any one practice, we diminish it to the level of our own understanding, and exclude aspects that are vitally important for some people. The Buddha made it clear that he considered whatever helps human beings to transcend their present limited state as Dharma, and people are so diverse that what we need to do this cannot be summed up in any one simple formula.

The big ideas behind the Dharma

But having said this there are some formulations of the Dharma that are so fundamental that they do give us a framework for our understanding. Until we ourselves have direct experience of the wordless Truth, we need these concepts to

keep our life and our practice aligned with the nature of reality, as it is seen by those who do have this direct experience. We need to understand and keep in mind the big ideas that underlie what Buddhists call 'Right View'. Unless we do this our lives will tend to be governed by the usually unconscious and unquestioned beliefs, values and world-views that we have been conditioned to accept by our family, education, peer group and culture, and by the particular historic period in which we happen to live. And, because these beliefs are often not aligned with reality, they will tend to lead us towards dissatisfaction, rather than towards growth and fulfilment.

So what are some of these big ideas, these fundamental concepts of the Dharma? Any short-list would probably start with the teaching of conditioned co-production and its corollary, the law of karma. It would then probably move on to include the Four Noble Truths, as well as the Three Lakṣaṇas, the marks or characteristics of conditioned phenomena. In this session we are trying to get an initial understanding of the basis of the Dharma in one brief text, and we cannot go into all of these ideas in enough depth to do them anything like justice. Conditioned Co-Production is a subtle concept with many implications, which we will explore later in this foundation course, and in more detail in subsequent years of the mitra course. The Three Lakṣaṇas are also discussed later in this course. Here we will focus on the Four Noble Truths, a teaching that has the virtue of being the Buddha's own first attempt to communicate his vision in words.

The Four Noble Truths

The teaching of the Four Noble Truths is a particularly good framework for an initial understanding of the Dharma, because it deals with the problem of human dissatisfaction. Most – perhaps all – of what we human beings do, say and think is associated with our attempt to escape from dissatisfaction or suffering, or, to put it the other way around, to find satisfaction and happiness. The teaching of the Four Noble Truths does not discount this quest for satisfaction, but it points out that the way we normally go about it has not worked so far, it gives us an analysis of why this approach has not worked, and it offers us an alternative that really does lead to lasting fulfilment.

If we see the truth of this teaching it has the potential to radically re-orientate our search for happiness – the driving force behind our lives - so that we change the way we live in a way that really does begin to create happiness, rather than taking us further from it.

The Four Noble Truths are fundamental because they tackle our basic problem - the fact that life as we normally live it does not give us the happiness we are looking for. They do this using a traditional format used for diagnosis in ancient Indian medicine: they describe the disease, the cause of the disease, the prognosis or outlook, and the cure.

As the Buddha expressed them, the Four Noble Truths are:

1. The Truth of Dukkha – which means dissatisfaction, discomfort, unease, or actual suffering
2. The Truth of the Origin of Dukkha, which is craving
3. The Truth of the Cessation of Dukkha, which is that it *can* be overcome, by going beyond craving
4. The Truth of the Path leading to the cessation of Dukkha, is the Noble Eightfold Path

The First Noble Truth

The First Truth is sometimes wrongly said to be that ‘Life is suffering’. This misinterpretation has given the opponents of Buddhism a handy stick with which to beat it as being pessimistic and life-denying. But suffering is just the most extreme meaning of the Pali word dukkha, which more commonly means something like uncomfortable, unsatisfactory, uneasy, or ill-fitting. As Sangharakshita has pointed out, Buddhism is neither pessimistic nor optimistic – it is melioristic (from the Latin *melior*, meaning better.) The Dharma takes an honest look at our situation, and then suggests ways we can make it better.

What the First Truth is saying is that life as it is normally lived does not bring real lasting satisfaction or fulfilment. This is simply to take an honest look at our situation – if life as it is normally lived did bring real satisfaction and fulfilment, then most people most of the time would be in a state of satisfaction. This we obviously are not. If people in general were in a state of satisfaction, they would not need more than they have now, and the consumer society would grind to a halt. We probably do not feel that ‘life is suffering’. We may feel that our life is in many ways a rich and happy one. But we want more. Something is missing.

Traditionally dukkha is categorised in several different ways. The Buddha often repeated the formula that ‘birth is dukkha, old age is dukkha, sickness is dukkha, death is dukkha. To get what we dislike is dukkha. To be separated from what we like is dukkha. Not to get what we want, that also is dukkha.’ Other classifications build on this to divide dukkha into:

- The inescapable suffering that we experience because we are mortal beings with an impermanent body, living in an often hostile environment (called ‘dukkha-dukkha’)
- The suffering of having to put up with what we do not like, and of not getting what we do like
- ‘The suffering of change’ – the fact that even when life is enjoyable we know that the present situation cannot last for ever, which often introduces an element of anxiety and regret even into pleasant situations
- ‘Existential suffering’ – which arises from the fact that even if our outward

life was perfect in every way, we would still not be satisfied and fulfilled as long as we are not expressing our spiritual potential

The Second Noble Truth

The Second Noble Truth tells us that the origin of the dukkha we experience is craving, or thirst in a literal translation. It tells us that the reason we find life so unsatisfactory is that the way we look for satisfaction actually causes us more suffering. There are a number of ways we can understand this.

The word craving is shorthand for an approach to life that tries to wrest happiness from the world by grabbing the things we like, pushing away the things we don't like, and generally organising the ever-changing flux of events into a pattern that suits our demands. We tend to think that we can be happy and satisfied when – and only when – we have got the world around us organised in a particular way, so that events and other people fit in with our likes and dislikes. And so we devote our energies to bringing this about.

But if we make our happiness depend on the changeable and uncertain world around us, we are doomed to be unhappy and dissatisfied a lot of the time. The reasons for this are implied by the classification of the types of dukkha we looked at in the last section.

For one thing, life contains an inescapable element of suffering – birth, sickness, old age, death, and all the pains and discomforts that come from having a fragile, temporary body. If we expect not to experience this 'dukkha-dukkha', and if we do not cultivate the personal qualities and meaningful life that allow us to put up with it philosophically, then we just add another element of psychological and emotional suffering to the inevitable physical suffering we experience. The Buddha illustrated this point with a parable about two arrows. He said that we had no choice about being wounded by the first arrow – dukkha-dukkha – but that what we usually do is make the suffering far worse, by stabbing ourselves with another arrow, more painful than the first.

As well as inevitably experiencing an element of physical suffering, we can never get *just* what we like in this world, and entirely avoid what we don't like, and the constant striving to do the impossible is a source of continual stress and disappointment. And then, even if we do succeed in getting what we like for a while, this state can never last – and deep down we know it – so that even in the midst of pleasure we feel anxiety. The ever-changing flux of events that we are a part of simply cannot be organised into any stable arrangement for long, so it simply will not stay as we want it. And then finally, even if by some miracle we *could* organise the outer world around us permanently into a state we liked – even if we could be rich and famous and praised, with the perfect partner, surrounded by sensory pleasures, living a life of complete luxury – perhaps on the most idyllic tropical island we could imagine, or in whatever dream scenario appeals to us – and even if we and our loved ones never got ill, never got old and never died – this on its own would not make us fulfilled.

True fulfilment and happiness comes from our inner being, not from our outer circumstances. If our inner world is plagued by the negative mental states that come from a narrow preoccupation with our own desires, then we will be unhappy in paradise. On the other hand if we have the rich, warm, expansive inner world of someone who is in touch with their spiritual potential, and the inner strength of someone whose life is about something greater than their own personal likes and dislikes, then we will be deeply fulfilled even in the midst of life's inevitable suffering and adversity.

Like the First Noble Truth, this Second Truth of the origin of dukkha has been widely misinterpreted. For example, it is often said that Buddhists think that desire is the cause of suffering, and that all desire is therefore undesirable. But many forms of desire are necessary and good. Our desire for the necessities of life keeps us physically healthy. Our desire for friendship, beauty, and meaningful work pushes us in the direction of a fulfilling life. Our desire to fulfil our spiritual potential pushes us in the direction of the Dharma. So it seems that the problem that the Second Truth points to has nothing to do with such healthy desires, it has to do specifically with what has been called 'craving'. So how is this craving different from healthy desire?

Craving versus healthy desire

Sangharakshita has defined what he calls neurotic craving as desire for something that cannot satisfy the need we want it to satisfy. A glass of water will satisfy our thirst, and a wholesome meal will satisfy our body's need for food. But alcohol, junk food, or a piece of consumer gadgetry will not satisfy us if what we really lack is friendship, peace of mind, or the healthy self-esteem that comes from living a meaningful life. New clothes, a new partner, a new car, a new computer, a bigger bank balance, a more prestigious job, an expensive meal, or an exotic holiday – there is nothing intrinsically wrong with any of these. But none of them will do more than distract us from the emptiness and dissatisfaction we feel if we are ignoring our spiritual potential and living below our real spiritual level. And if we base our happiness on having our wants for such things satisfied, we actually create suffering rather than satisfaction for ourselves. We put ourselves on a never-ending treadmill of unhealthy desire, chasing a carrot that cannot be caught. We put ourselves in a position of constant disappointment and frustration.

'Selfish Grasping'

When the Buddha taught the Second Truth he summed up the cause of our dissatisfaction in just one word – craving, or literally 'thirst'. But it is possible to flesh this word out with more detail. Buddhists in many traditions tend to emphasise that this craving the Buddha talked about is the result of our deluded obsession with ourselves. Tibetan Buddhists, for example, often bring this out by using a phrase like 'selfish grasping' when translating the Four Truths. This phrase underlines two aspects of unhealthy craving – that it is narrowly selfish, and that it has a tight, grasping quality.

To give an example of the way our dissatisfaction and suffering can be related to our deluded focus on ourselves, we might consider the following quote from a talk on BBC radio on the Noble Truths, given by the American translator and academic Robert Thurman:

“...[our] wrong knowing of the nature of the world puts us in an impossible situation. If I’m the most real thing in the world, that makes me the most important thing in the world. It will be universally recognized that not a single other person in the world will agree with me on that point. The material world doesn't pay that much attention to me. And time doesn't pay much attention to me as a temporary, ephemeral mind and body complex. And therefore the world is against the reality that I perceive.

So I am in conflict with the world all the time, from my basic perception of things. And being in conflict with the world, both other beings and inanimate things, I am going to lose that conflict, always. If you think you're ... the most important, and the world disagrees, you are going to lose that argument with the world. You will die, you will get sick, people will not like you, people will not do what you want, and you will be forced to do what they want. And therefore you will suffer.”

Perhaps it is also significant that Tibetan Buddhists often use the word ‘grasping’ when they translate this Truth. Our tendency to grasp tightly onto the positive things in life can crush the pleasure out of them. All too often we spoil our happiness by grasping at pleasant experiences, expecting too much of them, wanting them to last rather than enjoying them as they pass, and wanting them repeated as soon as possible, so that they become an object of craving in the future. A pleasant meal, a holiday, a relationship, time spent experiencing the beauty of nature, aesthetic enjoyment, even the delights of meditation – we can spoil all of these by thinking, ‘Is this giving me the enjoyment I expect? How long will this last? When can I have this again?’

The Third Noble Truth

The First and Second Noble Truths can come as a shock, saying, as they do, that the way we normally look for happiness actually causes us more suffering. But the Third Truth gives us the good news – if life as it is normally lived leads to dissatisfaction, a different sort of life leads to fulfilment, and a deeper sort of happiness than we can get from any number of possessions or passing pleasures. Yes, we are ill. Yes, we have been making this illness worse by our behaviour. But there is a cure, once we are willing to admit this. Until then we are like the wheezing, breathless smoker who insists that he feels fine – just a bit of indigestion when walking uphill – and that his Uncle Fred smoked a pack a day and lived to be ninety. So the Third Truth is very good news – the doctor is giving us a very good prognosis – but only if we accept the bad news first.

The Third Truth is based on the fact that our dissatisfaction is the product of conditions, and can be overcome by changing those conditions. It can be overcome

by eroding our craving, by expanding our self-centred view of life, and by loosening our grasping. We can go beyond suffering and dissatisfaction by transcending our narrow vision of life, and living in a more open, expansive way.

The Fourth Noble Truth

The Fourth Truth tells us that the way to do this – the way to expand our vision and reduce our craving – is to follow a progressive path of spiritual development that affects every aspect of how we live our lives. This is what Buddhists call the Noble Eightfold Path. In the next year of the Mitra course we will be exploring the Eightfold Path in some detail, so here we will just try to give a general picture of it, and a feeling for what it is about.

In Sangharakshita's exposition, the Eightfold Path covers:

1. Vision – the way we see the world and our role in it
2. Emotion
3. Speech
4. Action
5. Livelihood
6. Effort
7. Awareness
8. Samādhi – which could be interpreted as either meditation, or the wisdom that arises from higher states of being.

These eight aspects are like an expanded diagram of the basic Threefold Path of ethics, meditation and wisdom, showing its different components, and how they fit together. Essentially the Eightfold Path is saying that if we consistently practice the precepts more and more deeply in all areas of our life, if we cultivate mindfulness and positive emotion, if we expand our vision by exposing ourselves to the Dharma, and if we deepen our insight, then over time we will become larger beings, with a larger vision, and a more expansive approach to life. We will become the sort of beings who crave less, are less obsessed with themselves, and do not grasp so tightly at experiences. We will no longer build our quest for happiness on getting short-lived pleasures, or impermanent possessions, or the approval of others, or on status and reputation. Instead we will get a far deeper sense of happiness and fulfilment from becoming more like the sort of being we have it in us to be, no matter what the changeable, fleeting universe throws at us. To quote the Theravadin monk Ajahn Sucitto:

“Circumstances such as illness or good fortune come and go, but what lingers with us are internal conditions. If we have peace of mind, we can weather through the rough patches, but guilt, hatred or depression will cloud the brightest day. A millionaire or a king can be beset with worry and mistrust, but a property-less monk can dwell in ease and fulfillment. Suffering and the cessation of suffering live in our minds and hearts.”

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Briefly express your understanding of the Four Noble Truths in your own words – maybe a sentence for each Truth.
2. How do you respond to the idea that life as it is normally lived – chasing what we like and avoiding what we dislike – is bound to be unsatisfactory? Do you think this is true? Do you like the idea? (Notice that these are different questions!)
3. Think of some examples of the different types of dukkha in your own experience. Which is the most important source of dissatisfaction or suffering for you?
4. Does your experience support the idea that we suffer most when we are focussed on our own wants and fears, while we are happiest when we are focussed on something beyond ourselves? Do you think there are some ways of being less focussed on our own desires which are unhealthy and do not lead to spiritual growth? What distinguishes unhealthy self-sacrifice from the self-transcendence that leads towards liberation?
5. ‘If the Four Noble Truths have got it right, the approach to happiness offered by the consumer society will actually make us more unhappy’. Discuss!