

Taking the Dharma Into Our Heart

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An important aspect of Buddhist practice is to recognize that we are not fully seeing reality. There is a Sufi saying that normal worldly beings see the world “with eyes clouded with longing”. Our vision of the world is seen through the distorting lense of our desires and fears. If we want to see our delusion, it is very simple and accessible. Just pay attention to what is going on in our own mind, what are we saying to ourselves. Sometimes I hear myself dreaming of something wonderful happening. Sometimes I am dreaming but it is a bad dream, a nightmare, my mind caught up in some dark possibility, in some unwanted future. If I pay attention to my mental dialogue, I can often hear myself complaining, criticizing, worrying, desiring, fearing. I can find myself energetically pursuing some empty distraction. I can be doing a needed and useful task and at the same time, lose perspective and make my work much too important. My deluded view will reveal itself when I become impatient or frustrated.

Until I came into Buddhist training, being caught up and absorbed in my activities and in my life was the only way I knew how to live. Buddhism pointed me to a different way of relating to my life. Instead of deriving the meaning of my life through my dreams and desires, I can take the Dharma into my heart and find my life’s meaning through following the Path of the Buddhas. The Dharma does not help us because we blindly believe in its teaching. The Dharma helps us because it provides an accurate description of reality and gives us the tools to find harmony with the world and real happiness. The Dharma helps us awaken to our deepest longing. By following this fundamental longing, profound meaning is given to all aspects of our life.

What does it mean to take the Dharma into our hearts. One way is to tell ourselves the Dharma when we hear our mind expressing deluded thoughts or find ourselves caught up in deluded feelings like anger or envy. The following is a famous Buddhist

contemplation that is used by many Buddhist traditions.

I am of the nature to decay. I have not gotten beyond decay.

I am of the nature to be diseased. I have not gotten beyond disease.

I am of the nature to die. I have not gotten beyond death.

All that is mine, all that I find dear and delightful, will change and vanish.

I am born of my karma.

I am the owner of my karma.

I am the heir to my karma.

Whatever karma I may do, whether good or evil, I shall inherit.

Taking the Dharma into our hearts is to use the teachings of the Dharma as a guide to a better way of seeing the world and our life. I have used the above contemplation as a topic for Dharma talks many times and it is not unusual that someone finds it to be a difficult teaching. I remember someone who had been practicing many years telling me that this teaching is an example of why he can find Buddhism depressing. Yet when you look at this contemplation, all of its teachings are clearly describing the world we experience. However, it is a very basic and common human trait to ignore old age, disease, death, karmic consequence and to dwell in a daily life in which we are entranced and absorbed in the ephemeral drama of our life.

These contemplations direct us to see that everything we encounter is subject to aging, falling apart and passing away. There is nothing solid to which we can cling and yet somehow our mind finds a way to keep generating a sense of solidarity and permanence. Instead of making the daily drama of our life so important, this contemplation is pointing us to see the real nature of existence. When we study our

daily life and world, the more we see that karma is real and we can see in detail how it works. Whenever we inflict suffering on another, it will come back to us. When we are selfish, we are ignoring the prompting of our heart, ignoring our fundamental connection to others and deepening our feelings of separation. When we are full of despair, the sense of alienation and loneliness is the karmic consequence of losing touch with real goodness in our true heart. If we stop being absorbed in the flow of karma, in this fascinating drama of our life, and can put our efforts into bringing forth the heart and mind of meditation, the good heart underlying reality reveals itself. The stillness and openness of meditation allows us to view whatever is unfolding in our lives and the world with compassionate acceptance, and then the real meaning and significance of our life will be revealed. Whenever we encounter suffering and do not accept what is happening, we create confusion and life stops making sense. When we are selfish, it is impossible for the world to make sense because reality keeps treating us as insignificant. Whenever we accept suffering as just the arising of karma, we can start understanding the patterns in our life and the many ways we choose to look away from the Truth and create suffering.

We can hear the Dharma and in our hearts know it makes sense but still find that our lives are following old and deluded habits. The reason it is hard to change is that it is not enough to know that following the Dharma is the best way. We must make the Dharma come alive in our hearts so that it becomes more real than our normal desires. One basic Dharma teaching is to let go of our desires. Yet everyone finds it very hard to let go of what we want. Much of the happiness in our life has come from getting what we desire, whether it is careers, relationships, sensual pleasures, or anything else that provides deep enjoyment. For anyone's life to be meaningful, they need to have something they care deeply about. People can find meaning of their life in their work, in their family, in their pleasures, in doing good for others. Someone's heart can be nourished by art, find sustenance in literature, in movies, in music. It is vital for our heart to find something to deeply care about or otherwise our life is empty of meaning. Yet when we look at what we feed our heart, we can sense that there is an emptiness at the core of much what we are

feeding our heart. Buddhist training is based on weaning us away from our normal ways of nurturing our heart and in learning to nourish our hearts with the food of the Dharma. We apply this contemplation to our usual desires so that the reality of their emptiness can be perceived. We can cultivate our Buddhist practice so that we can touch the boundless riches we can find in a peaceful and open heart. The Buddhist path is a gradual and difficult process because due to karma, we have deeply entrenched habitual ways of looking the wrong way for happiness.

Faith is the ground of Buddhist training because we need to work at letting go of our desires before we experience the rewards of following the Dharma. It would be easy if we could just exchange worldly pleasures for spiritual pleasures but unfortunately it does not work that way. The daily practice in Buddhism can be seen as an ongoing process of offering the food of the Dharma to our hearts instead of just feeding our hearts with our desires. One way of understanding what we are doing in meditation is that instead of clinging to what we want, we are just opening our hearts and minds with acceptance to whatever is unfolding. This openness is an expression of faith; faith that that the Buddha can be found at all times, in all things, in all places, and in all situations. This looking at the world with the eye of the Dharma is pointing us to seeing everything without fear; everything without rejection.

Much of Buddhist training can be seen as the hard work of skillfully responding to our mind when it generates its habitual delusions. This means applying the Dharma to whatever happens and not our selfish habits. Whatever is happening to you and whatever is happening in the world is the unfolding of karma. See everything as part of the path, part of the practice. See impermanence and see and trust that everything washes away. Be aware of how we cling, how we fear, how we burn with desire. Our opinion of ourselves, the world, what we can do, who we are, is often hard and set and is not in harmony with the Dharma. To let go, we must recognize both the reality of all the karma and the emptiness and purity of all the karma. The problem always lies in what we are perceiving, seeing the world through the eye of desire rather than seeing the world with the eye of

the Dharma. Buddhist training is often hard work, yet it is wonderful that all we are doing in Buddhism is just trying to see what is real and to live from that boundless place. It is difficult then to see why we would wish to keep dreaming.