



The Dhammapada: Gems of Wisdom (3 of 3)

Saturday, November 19, 2022

Kim Allen

So welcome to our third session. And we're continuing to explore Gil Fronsdal's translation of the Dhammapada. We started by going over the main themes of the texts. So, various contrasts- the way wisdom is used to discern between skillful and unskillful alternatives, and also these key flavors of energy and peace. Last time, we delved into the Buddha's analysis of the human condition, and the way he acknowledges right up front that it's challenging to live a human life. And we often suffer in various ways. Everybody is subject to the difficulties that come with old age, with illness, and with death. But more immediately, we suffer from our own unskillful mind states, right? Things that are going on right here right now. And he locates the root of all of these problems actually, in our own heart and mind; and in our way of reacting to the world and relating to the world. But it's not all bad news. You know, that's kind of the analysis of the challenges; the acknowledgement that there are challenges. But he also offers a vision of being able to become free from these various kinds of suffering and unsatisfactoriness, collectively called dukkha. So a possibility of liberation from what is binding the heart. And then he offers a path of practice, kind of a prescription, for getting from here to there, so that we don't feel like it's just way out of our reach. And that is the eightfold path, which includes all the different aspects of human life, it includes ethical conduct, the meditation and cultivation of wisdom, a changing of our understanding of how life works.

So the folds of the path- just as a review, or for those not familiar, are right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. And they're divided up- these eight are divided up into those three areas that I named. So the first two- view and intention- are part of wisdom, are part of our understanding. And then speech, action and livelihood- the next three- are part of ethical conduct- sila. And then effort, mindfulness and concentration are part of the cultivation of the mind. They're the three Samadhi steps of the path. So the trainings are collectively, Sila, Samadhi, and Pañña. placed into this eightfold path. So it's maybe worth mentioning that the early Buddhist teachings that are found in the Pali canon, of which the Dhammapada is one- one of those texts, they don't have as much to say about the specifics of what will happen after liberation, what we will do with our liberation essentially, we'll definitely be leading a life of non harming. But what that looks like is up to us. And so there's kind of a trust that it will be clear to the practitioner how to express freedom. And the Buddha focuses on how to get there, because that's a big enough task, in and of itself. So, recall also that I had asked you to come prepared with one verse that you found inspiring and one verse that you found was either challenging or kind of more like, stretched your understanding of what dharma practice entails or what it is, just a little reminder from the teachings for today, so you'll have a chance to do it if you haven't done it yet, but we'll get to it later.



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Okay, so in talking last time about the Buddha's analysis of the human condition, we looked at some chapters through the broad lens of the Four Noble Truths. And this time we're going to zero in on what happens as we engage with the fourth truth, the truth of the path. So, you know, what does happen when we start walking this path actually doing the practices, studying the teachings, applying ourselves to what the Buddha suggested. So one thing that happens is that there's ongoing refinement, as we begin to have an experiential understanding of practice and as we study the teachings more fully, and in particular, one ability that we gain is to have some flexibility with the language of the dharma. So when the dharma is all hypothetical or theoretical, or when we're not familiar with how these Wisdom Teachings work in our own mind and body, then we tend to read the terminology literally, and to interact only with the teachings only with our cognitive mind. And so this approach can be fine. In some cases, even useful, we do need to think about the teachings and look at terminology, you know, kind of what the what the definitions are, if you will. But I want to start us off with the first chapter for today, which was Chapter Four: Flowers. And this has some nuance because the flowers, and the whole chapter is just called "Flowers". But the flowers are used as an image for different things in different stanzas. So in many of the stanzas, the flower has a positive connotation of the beauty of the dharma. So for example, in the opening verses, I'll just read verse 45: "One in training will master this world, and the realms of Yama and the gods, one in training will select a well taught dharma teaching as a skilled person selects a flower." So we have a, not surprisingly, flowers are often used as a positive image, because they are a symbol of beauty in many cultures. And we see that versus 51 and 52, also link well spoken words to the image of a beautiful flower. But in verses 46, 7 and 8 the flowers represent sensual pleasures that one is relating to in an unskillful way. So it's a different image, right. So I'll just read verse 47: "Death sweeps away the person obsessed with gathering flowers, as a great flood sweeps away a sleeping Village." So in India, by the way, the sweeping away of villages by floodwaters is very real, you know, that was not an idle image, that people would not have any idea what it meant. They would know. And note that the verse uses the word "obsessed", and so this means that the person is really focused on the acquisition of sense pleasures, to the degree that we would consider them maybe asleep, you know, not really paying attention well to life, but just focused on gaining these pleasures. It actually happens in more subtle ways also, I used to volunteer in a hospice. And so I'd be sitting with people who were near the end of life. And I was amazed that there were people well into their 90s, who were a little bit outraged or surprised that they had to die, you know, it was their turn. And, you know, it's wasn't maybe an obsession, and in some cases, it was kind of, you know, nice to see the the life going on. But there is also a way that we can be a little bit blind to the truth of how things work. We're focused on certain other areas of life. So in verse 53, the flowers again have a positive connotation, but in this case, they represent the potential of a human life, to be used for the cultivation of various skillful actions and mind states. So verse 53: "Just as from a heap of flowers, many garlands can be made, so you with your mortal life, should do many skillful things." So they're examples of the same phenomenon, of the same image being used in different ways in other areas also.

So for example, sometimes people wonder about the term "stream entry", which is used for the first stage of awakening, it's when a person enters the stream of the dharma, which is the Noble Eightfold Path, by the way, so it does relate to our topic for today. So people hear, "Oh, stream entry, you enter the stream of the dharma," but then they hear that the dharma is against the stream, which you know, dhamma practice goes against the stream. So obviously, that would be



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a different stream. You know, that would be dharma goes against the stream of just habitual karma: greed, hatred and delusion unfolding. We also hear about floods and how the mind is trying to reach dry ground and become an Island. We had a verse about that last time. So aren't all these different water images inconsistent? Well, yes, they are. But that's okay. Because they occur in different contexts, right? So I think sometimes of child development, which I'm not an expert on, but I have observed in children that there's kind of a stage where they're trying to figure out how things work. And so they want everything to be consistent. And they can make kind of funny connections by taking things literally, and applying something from one case to another case, not understanding that it's a different context. And so it's a different situation. And then, later in our cognitive development, as we move toward adulthood, we become capable of understanding more nuance in how things work- in this case, we do it this way. In that case, we do it that way. Yes, technically, they're inconsistent, but there's, you know, it's a different context. So it's interesting to see though, that even though we're all maybe physical adults, we've grown to adulthood, we still go through this process spiritually. So we might have parts of ourselves that are spiritually immature and have this same way of applying literal thinking and demanding that everything be consistent in the spiritual realm in reading texts, for example. But as we go through the maturing process, spiritually, we become able to see that things can be different in different cases. And that helps us understand religious teachings, more maturely and more deeply.

It's interesting, by the way, that this word "fool", remember one of the contrast is between fools and sages or fools and wise people. The word fool- "bala" also means childish, childish. So when he says, foolish people, sometimes he means just spiritually immature. And so that's not a label of how we inherently are, but it's the stage we're at, and we're going to develop. So we will grow up spiritually. And that's what we do along the path. And then, in some cases, going back to chapter four about the flowers, the flowers are actually literal. So in verse 54, the scent of virtue is contrasted with the scent of actual flowers; the scent of virtue can go upwind, but not real scents from flowers. So we might find some resonance in this first kind of nuance that I'm talking about with a teaching from the Anguttara Nikaya that I'd like to read. So this is A in 224: "Monks, these two misrepresent the Tatagatha (meaning the Buddha) Which two? One who explains a discourse whose meaning requires interpretation as a discourse whose meaning is explicit. And one who explains a discourse whose meaning is explicit as a discourse whose meaning requires interpretation. These two misrepresent the Tatagatha." So that's interesting. Here's my interpretation. I interpret this to mean that sometimes the dharma teachings are literal, the Buddha is really telling something exact as it is. And sometimes it's more metaphorical. And part of our discernment, our wisdom, is to know: is this teaching literal or metaphorical? That will help a lot to know that difference.

Okay, so then another chapter that we read for today also contains a specific metaphor like flowers, and that's chapter 23: "The Elephant." So this one is actually a fairly consistent image of the elephant as representing spiritual strength. And the word is actually Naga, which some of you may have heard, "Nagas" because it has other meanings. Naga is also in Buddhist- in ancient Indian mythical understanding- it's a water serpent, kind of a mythical being. And Nagas appear in other suttas, as these large sort of water serpents, very majestic. And in addition, it represents the arahant. So arahants are sometimes called Nagas, spiritually strong, large, strong presence, etc. So an awakened person or an arhant can also be called a Naga. So you



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might find the chapter has a little bit more juice. If you pick up this resonance between elephants and arahants. You might read it a little differently. We can also notice and appreciate that this chapter contains many many images of strength and also renunciation and ends then with a long verse that's all about happiness. So again, we see the flavor of energy and heroism represented in the strength and the renunciation and the flavor of peace or Santi represented in all the images of happiness. I think I said in the first session that it's very difficult to distinguish happiness and peace in Buddhism.

Kim Allen

Okay. So let's go on to Chapter 8: "Thousands" We could just call this the chapter on numbers. So through a series of comparisons, the dharma and dharma practice, are held up as far better than various mundane alternatives. And I find in this chapter that somehow through the use of specific and somewhat hyperbolic numbers, it ends up invoking an idea of innumerable benefits of the dharma, if you will, it's sort of so much that we think, okay, it's just meant to be a lot, innumerable. So for example, verse 100, "Better than 1000 meaningless statements is one meaningful word, which having been heard, brings peace." Or verse 113: "Better than 100 years lived without seeing the arising and passing of things is one day lived, seeing the arising and passing." And the whole chapter has various references to numbers, usually to point out the power and the innumerable benefits of the dharma. Okay, I want to look a bit then at chapter 19: "The Just" which is a very interesting chapter. This chapter asks us to look beyond superficial qualities or hasty understandings of the spiritual life. It gives quite specific pointers to qualities and actions that we need to undertake, which might be a little different than expected, you know, if we weren't thinking as carefully, every verse negates something and replaces it with an explanation of what is better. I find the style interesting. And I find that the combination of the items that are pointed to sometimes makes me think more carefully about the teachings. So for example, in verse 258: "One is not wise only because one speaks a lot. One who is peaceful, without hate, and fearless is said to be wise." So what caught my attention there is the word fearless. It's not that we would expect a wise person to be fearful. But nonetheless, the Buddha is highlighting- he's picking out just three qualities of someone who is wise, and he chooses peaceful, without hate, and fearless. It's interesting. And then we go on to verse 259: "One does not uphold the dharma only because one speaks a lot. Having heard even a little, if one perceives the dharma with one's own body, and is never negligent to the dharma, then one is indeed an upholder of the dharma." So we have a contemplation there, what does it mean to perceive the dharma with one's own body? Now, is that a phrase that makes sense to you? Is that a literal phrase? Or is it a metaphorical one in this case? I don't have an answer for you there. I think I'll leave it as a contemplation because it's quite an important one to discover in our practice.

Okay, now we might think from the examples that I just gave that the Buddha is praising silence over a lot of talk, because both of those said that one shouldn't speak a lot. But there is something different in verses 268-269. So these say: "Not by silence does an ignorant fool become a sage, the wise person who, as if holding a set of scales, selects what's good and avoids what's evil, is for that reason, a sage. Whoever can weigh these two sides of the world is, for that reason, called a sage." And there's an interesting end note to this verse. It points out that there's a play on words which we miss in English, because it doesn't work in English. So the word silence- "monena" and and "one weighs"- munati- play off the word for sage which is



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"Muni" which literally means silent one, actually, that's the literal translation of Muni. It's usually translated as sage. And so in ancient times, you know, around the time of the Buddha, a Muni was someone who undertook a vow of silence as a form of religious practice. (I'm just reading all of that from the end note.) But we can see that as usual, the Buddha is not so impressed with outer practices, just with outer practices like a vow of silence, but he wants to know about the person's inner qualities as a real measure of their worth. Are they wise enough to know what's good and what's not? That matters more than taking a religious vow of silence. By the way, you may have heard the term Shakyamuni, referring to the Buddha. So that refers, that means "sage of the Sakyan clan, Shakyamuni." He didn't take a vow of silence, so he was using Muni more broadly as sage. The last verses in this chapter are particularly pointed, 271- 272. "Not with virtue or religious practice, great learning, attaining Samadhi, dwelling alone, or thinking 'I touch the happiness of renunciation unknown by ordinary people' should you, Monk, rest assured, without having destroyed the toxins." The last line being a reference to full awakening. So all of the things named are positive signposts of progress: great learning, virtue, samadhi, having insight, these are all good. But the verse warns against deciding that we're done too early, essentially. So we need to keep watching even as we walk the path. So I guess that brings us to chapter 20, the path this one contains a famous oft quoted verse, 276: "It's up to you to make strong effort, Tatagatha is merely telling you how. Following the path, those absorbed in meditation, will be freed from Māra's bonds." Remember, Māra is the forces of distraction or delusion. So in early Buddhism, there's no notion that one person can literally save another. We all do our own work. And we'll see that same idea back in chapter 12: "Ones self" that we read for the first week. And we also see this flavor of energy or heroism; it's up to us to make strong efforts, resulting in the freedom of peace in the end.

So then, the next few verses include an interesting phrase, the next few, I'll say, "one becomes disenchanted with suffering." And of course, the word there is dukkha, one becomes disenchanted with dukkha. So, first, be aware that disenchantment is a good thing on the Buddhist path. When we're enchanted, it means that we're kind of under the spell of something. We're deluded, we're not seeing it clearly. We're kind of entranced. So we've been seduced, perhaps by the pretty things of the world, or by conventional ways of seeing things maybe have fallen asleep. And so the disenchantment, "Nibbida" is to break the spell of that and to see clearly, we wake up, and we typically realize something is not as it appeared on the surface. So then we can say, well, what does it mean to become disenchanted with dukkha? We can reflect "Am I enchanted in some way with dissatisfaction-ness or suffering in life? Am I enchanted with that? So it's really interesting to contemplate what that would mean, I would say there's at least a couple different dimensions. One is that we could realize that no experience is ultimately satisfying. When we're enchanted, we think that certain pleasures are going to do it for us. If I just get this one thing, or get rid of this one thing, then I'll be happy. Really, really, then that'll be good for me. But it doesn't actually work that way. I mean, how many decades have you lived and has it worked yet? To get rid of that one thing? Or to get that one thing? It's a deeper problem actually, than that. It's that the various experiences of the world are not capable of being ultimately satisfying for us. So we have mistaken what's unsatisfactory for something that's ultimately satisfying.

And then another form of healthy disenchantment is to wake up to the various ways that we're perpetuating our own suffering through various familiar mental habits. We carry mental habits.



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Common examples are worrying, complaining, envy, seeing ourselves as a victim, various things like that. And it can be a very sobering and humbling moment when we realize that no one is actually making us perpetuate those patterns. We're simply enchanted with the notion that we need to be that way somehow. Now, that doesn't mean that it will immediately go away when we realize that- it takes some practice. But you know, the disenchantment allows us to eventually let go of dukkha, we have to be disenchanted with dukkha if we're going to eventually let go of it. That doesn't happen immediately. But we remember; back to chapter three on the mind, the Buddha locates the source of our struggle in our own heart, our own mind.

Oh, there's so much to say about the readings this week. Okay, well, chapter 21:

"Miscellaneous" includes some heterogeneous verses that may not have fit in other places. And I just want to mention two of them as these two metaphorical ones that are shocking in their literal form. So we'll look now at verses that are obviously metaphorical, but probably had some point, you know, to saying them in this way, so 294-295: "Having killed mother, father, two warrior kings, the kingdom and its subjects, the brahman undisturbed, moves on, having killed mother, father, two learned Kings and a tiger, the brahman, undisturbed moves on. So those verses are just, they appear just like that in the original text. And you might think, wow, what is that referring to? So there is some interpretation in the Dhammapada commentary, which you can read in the end note. The idea is that mother is craving, father is conceit, and this is an extended allegory of different things. The two kings are eternalism and annihilationism, and so forth. I won't read all of them since you can read the end note. But, you know, probably the Buddha was sometimes just trying to wake people up. You know, he's pointing to the, and if people would say "What?!", they're falling asleep during the dharma talk, and then you hear this and it's like, "Oh," and then you realize, "Okay, wait, it's a metaphor."

But along these lines, we could also revisit a verse that we had in the readings for the first week, which is verse 97, from chapter seven: "The arahant" I even read it during class, as an example of the goal of awakening, remember when I was reading the two different goals? So I read this one as that example. So here's the verse: "The person who has gone beyond faith, knows the Unmade, has severed the link, destroyed the potential for rebirth, and eliminated clinging, is the ultimate person." So this one kind of makes sense, as you read it like that, as pointing to the arahant- a strong example of freedom. But the endnotes point out that the all the words could be read in a different way. And it could be given a very different meaning. So it's a pun basically. So an alternative translation: "The person who is without faith and gratitude, who breaks into homes, who has destroyed opportunities, and who has vomited is an audacious person, or perhaps is the ultimate servant." So, that would have had some shock value, when reading it, if it could be read, understood in these two different ways from the same Pāli words. So the Buddha had some sense of reaching into people and waking them up.

And then, chapter 21, also includes (back to Miscellaneous chapter) also includes a verse that may help you understand all these references that we keep reading- to sensual pleasure and sensual desire as evil, harmful activities often lay people feel that there's too much heavy emphasis on that and they tend to tune it out. So it's actually the opening verse of chapter 21: "If, by giving up a lesser happiness, one could experience greater happiness, a wise person would renounce the lesser to behold the greater". That doesn't sound so bad does it? So this is another discernment between lesser and greater happiness in our lives. So sensual happiness



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goes in the lesser category. In case you weren't sure. So it's far inferior to the happiness of ethical conduct, of generosity, of kindness, of compassion, of Samadhi, of wisdom. Those things are all better than any sense pleasure you could have. And sometimes, you know, of course, then we say, well, can't I have both? And, yes, you can. In some cases, it's not always the case that we have to let go of something to get something else. But sometimes it is, sometimes we have to release our attachment or obsession or interest in something in order to get something better. It's not only cumulative on this spiritual path there is letting go. And so now for the Buddha renunciation means letting go of something not as good giving something up to get something better. And so we might have to give up some of our comforts in order to grow in dharma wisdom, and also in happiness, deeper forms of happiness. So I think verse 290 is worth contemplating quite deeply, even as lay people. Okay, so that's at least a start on what we find in the chapters for today as it gets into some of the nuance of walking the path, some of the more subtle subtleties. So why don't we stop and have a chance for some questions if anybody has any. And as usually, you can raise your zoom hand, and please leave it up while you're asking the question. Because then I can still see you. Anybody? Yeah, Eric.

Questioner

Hi. I just had a question on verse 412. And it was, what was meant by the adjective dustless?

Kim Allen

Okay, let me get to that one. Here's 412. Sorrowless, dustless and pure. Yeah, so sometimes the defilements that come into the mind, various unwholesome mind states are called Dust. So greed, hatred, and delusion, the five hindrances, things like that. And the reason for that is that they kind of obscure the mind. They're kind of along the same lines as likening the hindrances to disturbances of water where we're not able to see our reflection clearly, dust would be like this disturbance on a mirror surface or on our eyes. Sometimes it is said that when the Buddha first awakened, he just sort of despaired of teaching as he looked at the world and said, Oh, the world is going the wrong way. And God came down and said, "Don't worry, don't worry, there are some beings that have little dust in their eyes, you'll be able to teach them." And then the Buddha said, "Okay, okay, I'll start with them." So, does that makes sense, the dust image?

Questioner

Yeah. Yeah. Fantastic. Yeah. Thank you. Great.

Kim Allen

Other questions at this point? Sharon?

Questioner

Thank you. Verse 302. In the Miscellaneous. So it's referring to a traveler. And so, it's not a traveler on the path, apparently?

Kim Allen

No, no, it's referring to the wandering on in samsāra. In that case, so this is, yeah, this is a case where, so there's actually an end note about this. So this is someone who is just wandering on through the realms of existence taking rebirth again and again and again.



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Questioner

Oh, okay. Thank you.

Kim Allen

Yeah, the word samsāra actually refers to a verb that means, it literally means the wandering on. So he's using "traveler" or the English word "traveler" is used there for someone who is doing this wandering on. We'll do Carlotta and then Lila and then we'll move on. Carlota?

Questioner

Hello. So, I think I came across several verses about aloneness. And so here is one- verse 305 in page 78: "Sitting alone, resting alone, walking alone, untiring and alone." But like I said, I mean, I remember having read many other verses or many other opportunities, probably where this aloneness is stressed, is kind of given a lot of credit. Let's put it that way. Okay. -Yes, yes, it's praised- Yeah. But at the same time, I find it that, well, kind of, you know, I can relate to myself, being alone a long time. But at the same time, it doesn't give me the opportunity to grow. Because there are no challenges when you're alone, it's just you, of course, you and your mind, and your mind will act up and all that. But I think that growing many times takes place when someone pushes your buttons. I mean, if you if that doesn't happen, right? I mean, you're happy, and you're perfect. So I wonder if you can comment on that?

Kim Allen

That's a great question. Yeah. So what comes to mind is another story from the suttas where a monk comes to the Buddha and he says, I am a master of seclusion, because I live alone. And I do alms round alone. And I eat alone, and I meditate alone, I do everything alone. And so I'm the best in terms of seclusion. And the Buddha said, "Well, being alone, that's one way that you can do seclusion. But another way is that you're always independent in your mind and heart. And so even whether you're with other people or not, you have the ability to be mindful, present clear, uphold virtue, do skillful actions of body speech and mind, whether you're alone or not." And so he says a deeper, he basically tells the monk- a deeper kind of aloneness is to be able to be alone with others, where we don't fall into the social scene that's going on, but retain our awareness within it. And I think that's a distinct form of practice that you're pointing to, as you know, at some point, we have to be able to test our practice, you don't just only learn it at the retreat center, you then have to go out into work or your family or the world and apply what you've learned. So I think it's just maybe we could read this one as having both of those dimensions. Maybe there's there's room for literal aloneness, people who only can be with other people need to be alone and learn how to do that. Whereas there's also the aloneness that we can carry into situations of interaction. Does that help?

Questioner

Yep. Thank you. Thanks.

Kim Allen

Yeah. Okay, Lila.

Questioner



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A couple questions I have. One is I wonder if you could maybe, briefly describe the distinctions if there are any between an arhant and a brahman. And then I wonder if you could maybe comment on best way to approach reading the Dhammapada. And there's, the topics are not as, as you've mentioned, very linear. Or, I don't want to call it train of thought or, or what have you, but just in terms of using the Dhammapada as part of your practice and contemplations have any recommendations?

Kim Allen

Okay, great. So as to your first question. In the last chapter 26: "The brahman" The Buddha is redefining the term brahman to be an arahant actually, and in ancient Indian culture, the Brahmins were one of the social classes. They were the hereditary religious class that were doing a form of practice or religion that later became Hinduism; it wasn't fully formed at that time. And so they had a sense of themselves as being the 'main spiritual people' as make sense. But the buddho was kind of redefining them from their hereditary status, he was redefining that word to mean, the kind of the pinnacle of his spiritual discipline, which would be the arahant. So in that chapter, we can read in that case that he's always referring to when he says that person I call a Brahmin, he's always referring to someone who has done his practices fully. And then as to how to use the Dhammapada, I did mention a few things in the first class. But to recap, one way that we can use it- it is okay to just read it through linearly just with the understanding that it's not going to fulfill our linear mind when we do that. But I kind of like just skimming through and looking for a verse that catches my attention. You know, like, I have a lot of trust that when my mind is a little bit soft, and also mindful that I will see certain verses kind of pick them up and say, oh, you know, I can look through a few pages kind of scan through, nothing really catches, but then it will be like, Oh, wow: "The craving of a person who lives negligently spreads like a creeping vine." And maybe that'll catch in my mind. And I'll say, a creeping vine. Like, what does that image refer to? Do I feel like there's a way that when I want something, it kind of slowly wraps its tendrils around my mind, you know, something like that. So I wait until I, I see something and I trust that what I see has some relevance for my practice. So that's one way. Another way is to read very slowly on a given topic, so you select a Chapter, you want to you know, you want to read about happiness, for example. And then just read that chapter again and again, slowly, or maybe even just read one stanza very slowly, and let it soak in until new layers of meaning start to be revealed. You can even read right before sitting if you want. So those are some possible ideas. Does that help?

Questioner

Yes, thank you. Okay.

Kim Allen

Great, well, then, it's time to do some breakout groups and have a chance to talk with each other a little bit. If you're about to click the 'depart meeting' button, I encourage you to give it a try. And it's really not so bad. So like we did last time, I think we will...we will read to each other. So it's really good to hear these verses spoken out loud by a variety of voices. So we will do as before were round one, each person shares the verse that you picked out as inspiring. Maybe the person with the longest hair could start and you just go around and each read and then pause for a minute or so. And then go around again and read the verse that you picked out as stretching your idea of dharma practice. And then again, after that, sit for about a minute to let



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that settle in 30 seconds to a minute. (And then I'm going to put all this in the chat for you by the way.) And then there will be a discussion question of: "In what ways has reading the Dhammapada changed your practice, your understanding of the dharma, or both?" Kind of a summary question. So let me get all of this into the chat for you while Rob makes up the rows. There'll be groups of three to four. And why don't we spend 13 minutes in the groups.

Okay, welcome back. So we have time for just a couple of comments if anybody wants to share something that came up in your group. We'd all like to hear your wisdom

Questioner

So, I hope it's not a problem, but what it was, was I was using, like I had listened to Gil's translation, but I didn't have the print in front of me. So I was looking at it, a different one. And so that came up in our discussion because Sharon had mentioned, let's see, this is in chapter eight of 1000- 109. And I think in the version that I'm reading, there were two words that were different that we thought were interesting to discuss. So you have your version in front of you, but this one is what I have here. It says "To one ever eager to revere and serve the elders, these four blessings accrue long life and beauty, happiness, and power." So we were talking about the elders, and we were talking about the power meaning and I had said that I wondered whether or not by elders they also meant people like, with more experience, as well as people who are older than than one. And then there was an interesting thing about power that came up as well, because versus strength. But we were wondering if you could comment on though.

Kim Allen

Oh, that's good. There's always much to learn from different translations. As you can imagine, in this class, we couldn't focus on too many differing translations. But it's, I'm glad you brought it up, because that's one more aspect of nuance is to start being able- I mean, the texts are in Pāli, right- and so, that's the actual text. And then we have these different English renderings. So the one that the Gil uses is "worthy people" instead of "elders." And maybe that gives a different connotation, it's just meant to, I think it's implying people who are wise. So that could be somebody older than us, with a lot more experience. But it could be somebody who, you know, just has gained a lot of wisdom through their own life experience, even if they're not particularly elderly yet. And then strength and power. Maybe we can look at sort of the intersection between them, some people like, don't like the word power, because it's been given bad implications at our current time, or some people like that word better, and they think strength is kind of wimpy, I want the actual power. But remember, these are always, the Buddha always is pointing toward personal qualities. So to have strength or power in a personal sense is to be, you know, self possessed, and able to manage your mind and your actions in the world. And not to get pulled, you know, by our desires, by other people's provocations, by anything to have that strength of always having a choice about how to respond. Does that make sense?

Questioner

It does, thank you very much.

Kim Allen

Okay. Great. I'm delighted you're exploring different versions of this. Okay, Marianne, and then we'll, then we'll go on.



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Questioner

It just had a quick question about what the commentaries are. I hear a lot about them. But I don't I'm not familiar with what they are. I mean I understand the concept and the...

Kim Allen

the concept, right? Right. Yeah, so we're looking at these Buddhist texts like this one. And then there are the Nikayas and other elements of the Pali canon, let's say. And those are the kind of original versions that were said to be put together after the death of the Buddha, by people remembering his teachings, and then eventually being compiled. And then there are a whole bunch, you know, Buddhist literature doesn't end there, though, of course, there's a whole bunch of stuff after that, and, you know, long into as Buddhism was being established, and spreading around in India and other areas in Asia, there were many people more and more people were practicing it, studying it, there started being universities, and there started being people interpreting the texts and writing down their interpretations. And so there are now some official sort of commentaries that have survived on each of the Nikayas. Sometimes there's even more than one. And they're not considered technically part of the Pali canon, because they're the later literature, the interpretive literature, but in the modern Theravada tradition, they're often used, they're often understood to be important for understanding the early texts. So that's what these things refer to when we say the commentaries. We're talking again about something that was anywhere from a couple 100 up to 1000 years after under the original time of the Buddha. Yeah, and so we have some, a lot of them were done by two or three or four scholars of that early time. There's a lot to be said about this. So I'm kind of trying to find a way to say it simply but also still correctly. Those of you have who have heard of the text called the Vissudimaga, that is a famous commentary by Buddhagosa. And he also did some of the other commentaries on the Nikaya and but the Vissudhimaga, the path of purity or purification is a long text that kind of explains one way to do dharma practice. That's a famous one. But there's also a specific commentary on the Dhammapada, for example, it's kind of nice, it includes a lot of stories about how the verses came about. Does that help a bit? So this is still ancient literature, but not officially part of the Pali canon.

Questioner

Thank you, that does help.

Kim Allen

Okay, then, let's do a short meditation, again, as we've done in the other classes to learn, interact with the texts in a different way. So it will be relatively brief, but please settle in to a posture where you'll be able to sit comfortably, not moving for a little while and just bring the attention inward, closing the eyes, if that's comfortable for you. Otherwise, just having them downcast soft and maybe literally allowing your body to settle back a bit, there's a way that we lean toward a screen. So making sure you find a balance on your seat where you're not leaning forward, leaning back, not leaning to either side, where you can just be upright with relatively little effort.



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Allow the body to be at ease. So softening the eyes. Softening the jaw, letting the shoulders sink in... softening the belly releasing tension in the hands, the legs, feet and bringing mindfulness up in the mind. Awareness of the body, the mind, and just allowing attention to be present with what's here... Sensations in the body.... Maybe there's an emotion, maybe thoughts. Not focusing on any particular thing but just allowing each thing to be known. If the mind gets caught up in something that's fast through it picks up a thought or starts commenting on a body sensation. As soon as you notice, just release that and go back to being with the flow of experience. Now if you can, broadening the mind to imagine that the mind is like the sky, it's like a broad space of awareness in which objects can arise and pass, experiences can come and go and we're not so focused on the particular objects but using part of our attention to just sense this broad sky like awareness in which anything can come and go- anything from the body anything from the mind can be a restful way of meeting experience.

"Whoever here has overcome attachments for both merit and evil and who is sorrowless, dustless, and pure I call brahman. One for whom nothing exists in front, behind, and in between. Who has no clinging. Who has nothing I call a brahman."

Just letting the mind rest and release.

So, I thought it might be helpful for me to say a little bit about the teaching on rebirth. This is a topic that Western teachers often avoid in dharma groups and on retreat. And in some ways, this does a disservice. But it will have to be only a little bit that I say, because it's a large teaching, and it has a significant historical and cultural dimension that I'm not really prepared to go into detail on. So I hope that I'm not doing a greater disservice by only speaking briefly. But you know, this is a class about Buddhist texts. And they definitely include the topic of rebirth, which is intimately linked to the understanding of karma or kamma. So if you're a dharma student, as we all are, in some way, least for today, it's good to be able to hear the references to this topic, and at least have some understanding of what they're referring to. So in the early tradition, there is this idea of rebirth, which is distinct from two similar sounding ideas. So that's the first point. It's distinct from reincarnation, for example, that is an idea from the Tibetan tradition. In reincarnation, a person is so spiritually advanced, that they have some choice about their next lifetime. And they have a whole science around that.

In contrast, rebirth is a natural process that occurs for all beings, not only people, not only spiritual practitioners- animals, you know, all kinds of beings. That occurs when one set of the five aggregates, mind and body ends and another one begins. And it's subject to karmic laws. So it's conditioned and it's ethical in character. Rebirth is also distinct from what's called Transmigration, which was another philosophy of the Buddha's time. So transmigration means that there is some 'thing' that's moving from here to there. But there's no entity that goes on, there's no entity that's reborn from this life. So the Buddha rejected the idea of a soul or consciousness that continues from one life to the next. So this idea of an existing entity is one extreme. And the idea that death annihilates everything, and it just vanishes, is another extreme. And the Buddha's society included people who believed in both of these, and so does our society. There are people who believe in an immortal soul of some kind, and there are many materialists who believe that the mind comes from the body, and so everything is gone at death.



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But the Buddha taught a middle way between these extremes. And it's the teaching on dependent arising that explains how there can be a continuation without any one thing continuing. And we're not going to go into that in detail here. At a top level, to understand the Buddhist teachings, it's good to understand that the flow of experience is essentially ethical in character. There are natural laws in the universe. And we study some of them in material science, the laws of physics and chemistry, and so forth, and those apply to matter. But, you know, when you bring in the mind, then we have another set of natural laws, one of which is karma. And that governs how volitional actions lead to suffering or to happiness based on their ethical valence. To check how this works, I recommend verses one and two of the Dhammapada that we read at the very beginning. They describe that quite succinctly. So we're continuously conditioning our mind through our actions of body, speech, and thought, we're practicing something at every moment. So if you're caught up in anger for two hours, you've practiced anger for two hours- deep into that rut. So at any given moment, you know, so we're, let's see, okay, so we're practicing something every morning, every moment. And then in addition, there are things that are coming through from the past. So not everything ripens- not all karma ripens at the same rate. There's verses in the Dhammapada that say that also, there's one that says something like "like fresh milk, you will need don't immediately curdle that don't immediately ripen." So at any given moment, we receive the effects from the moment before- there is that flow. But there could always be something coming in from the past, farther in the past also. So that's why karma is not completely predictable. And then the moment of death works like that, too, it's one more moment in the flow. And there's the immediate flow of experience up to death. But there's also the possibility of something coming in from the past. So there's some kind of momentum that we have in experience if the mind is not fully liberated. And that momentum flows into a new life, completely different body and mind, in a realm of being, that's determined by the ethical quality of the mind at the moment of death. That's the idea.

So the key point, though, if you object to all of this, don't worry, if you like all of this, that's fine also. But if you want to understand Buddhist teachings, it's helpful to know that the Buddha does not locate freedom from suffering in any of the condition realms. So there's nowhere you can be reborn, that's free of suffering, anywhere we can be reborn from the lower realms up through the human realm up through the god realms, all of them are ultimately impermanent because they're just based on this flow of karma. So you get into the God Realm, that's great, you get there through merit, and it's good. And that's one of the aims of the teachings in the Dhammapada. We talked about that before. And the lifetimes there very pleasant, and they last for eons, which is wonderful. But even that karma will eventually run out, and then you'll be reborn somewhere else. So we can't remain in anything forever. Heaven is not forever, hell is not forever. This is a different idea that we have sometimes in some Western religions. So freedom is getting off the round, stopping that cycle, not doing that anymore. And how do we do that? We release greed, hatred and delusion in the mind, which are the agents of rebirth. That's what the teachings are saying. So this may help you understand some confusing language and the teachings. That's the idea behind it.

So what is this place of freedom? What happens to a Buddha or arhant at death? If they're free? Don't ask. That's one of the questions. I mean, literally, people used to ask that. And that was one of the questions that the Buddha defined as "I don't answer that" he refused to answer it, because it ties us up and distracts us. So we can say that freedom does not mean finally being



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annihilated. Nor does it mean finally living forever. But it does mean the end of greed, hatred, and delusion, and that is pretty darn good. Okay? So this is not just about stress reduction that we're doing here in the Buddha's teachings. So that brings us to the next point, and also back to the text. Inevitably, as we practice, we're going to have to shift our understanding of what's going on. If we knew what was going on from the very beginning, we'd be a lot closer to freedom than where most of us start, right? So, you know, we'll begin with some idea of our practice, why we're doing it, what it will entail, how we're going to know that we're progressing. And that inevitably is not quite right. So the path to a better life is one thing. And the path to awakening is distinct from that- they overlap for a while, but not completely. So the Buddha taught quite broadly, he was very happy to support anyone's path and anywhere that anyone was on the path. He didn't have judgment about that. But he was clearly the most interested in passing along the liberating teachings for people who were ready to awaken.

So as often as possible, he was, as we as we would borrow from the Zen tradition, he was pointing to the moon. And so the texts that we read are like the finger that points to the moon, we really want to see the moon and not the, not the finger. And so part of how we do that is when we read in the texts, things that seem paradoxical or puzzling or challenging to us, like you may have found in in the verses that you looked up for today. We just sit with that. We just sit with the idea that okay, maybe I don't get this yet. Or maybe, you know, maybe there's something more to be learned here below the surface. So for example, verses 266- 267 in "The Just", chapter 19: "Whoever sets aside both merit and evil lives the chaste life and goes through the world deliberately is called a mendicant." Setting aside both merit and evil? We also had that same language in verse 412, which there was a question about earlier. And I also read during the meditation, setting aside both merit and evil. So wait a minute, I mean, there's numerous verses in his Dhammapada collection that are about distinguishing those two, and choosing the Meritorious side. We also had a couple of verses from earlier like verse 39 in chapter three, it says that we should abandon both merit and demerit and verse 201 from chapter 15 says we should give up both victory and defeat. So we find that there's a dimension of freedom that somehow beyond these different divisions, even though to walk the path, we need to be discerning what's leading away from suffering and what's leading towards suffering, what's wholesome and what's not, we're eventually getting to some point where those distinctions fall away. So this is a matter of knowing the difference between the tools that we're using, and then finally, going beyond those. That'll happen naturally, you don't have to do it willfully. You can't do it willfully. So I hope, maybe reading chapters 25, and 26 again, for today, you saw some different things in them, maybe some greater nuance. And I think you'll keep seeing things in the Dhammapada. If you read it again in a few months, or a few years, or a few decades, you know, I think it helps to read the suttas with great humility. They contain so many layers of meaning. And we keep seeing more in them if we keep looking, they keep meeting us, no matter how deep our practice goes, I find that the texts keep meeting me there. Even if we've been practicing for decades, we can see new things in new connections, etc. So this path has so much to offer. And it just keeps unfolding. If we keep practicing, we just have to keep practicing. Bhikkhu Bodhi says there's only two things you have to do to awaken. One is to start. And the second is to continue. I think that's pretty good.

So we have time for just a couple of questions if there's anything still lingering at this point.



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Or maybe I answered all of your questions, and you completely understand, you're all awakened. Okay, oh, there's one from Fraida. Hi, Fraida. You need to unmute sorry. Yeah, great.

Questioner

I'm so sorry. I just wanted to thank you so much. This has been a delightful course. I just I really enjoyed every minute of it. I wrote in the chat, Kim, that I, you were talking about seeing things when we were in one of the verses. And I wrote in the chat to you I see a Buddha on your right shoulder.

Kim Allen

Yeah, he's got my back.

Thank you for your participation. Fraida. Thanks, Steve.

Questioner

Just to say that even though the Dhammapada is so popular, and so many people have read it, and I've read it, and I really didn't understand a ton of it. So the class has been really important in that way. Because there's so much basic stuff in there, and yet I needed some keys to understand. So thank you so much.

Kim Allen

Great. Yeah, this is a text. As I said at the beginning, it's something that very popular, a lot of people read it. But there's a lot in there. And there's sort of an assumption in some of the texts that you understand kind of the basic teachings and if we don't necessarily then it is hard to understand the verses and there's more and more to see in there. So thank you for highlighting that Steve. Okay, Winnie. You can go ahead, it looks like you're already unmuted Winnie. Okay,

Questioner

I just wanted to say that it was very inspiring. And, a good preparation for my retreat next week with you. It was like, Oh, this is, this is why I'm doing the retreat. And it's sort of like, put things together. And so hopefully, you know, I'll just kind of keep that in mind. So thank you.

Kim Allen

Great, probably good preparation. Thank you. Well, I'm going to pause here and let Rob put a link into the chat for Dana. As you know, the sati center programs are offered freely. But there's a special link, I think that you can use, if you feel so moved to offer anything.

And then we'll conclude by dedicating the merit of our time together. We have, we learned a lot about merit in this text. And one of the little rituals that we do is to just imagine that all the goodness that we've generated together, which was only possible because we all came together in this group, so every one of you was crucial in creating the exact merit that we did. We imagined that this will go forward and somehow spread outward to benefit other beings. And we wish that it does, we actively want to share the benefits from what we've learned. And it will come out naturally through our actions of body and speech and thought and understanding and



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wisdom and compassion in the world. And it will ripple out from there in ways that we can't even know or see. But we go forward with the wish that all beings might find happiness. All beings might find peace, and all beings everywhere be free. So thank you, everyone. Have a wonderful day.