

The Dhamma is a Quality of the Heart

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Most of us first encounter the Dhamma through words—words we've read; words we've heard—which means that we often miss the fact Dhamma is not a quality of words. It's a quality of the heart. The Buddha discovered the Dhamma in his heart and then he put it into words to communicate it. But the actual quality of the Dhamma—the fact of the Dhamma, the actuality of the Dhamma—is something you find in the heart. And so we have to remember that all the words are there to point to something in the heart. They're part of the Buddha's strategy for teaching us and they're part of our strategy for practicing, to help direct the practice.

But not everything is nailed down in the words. In fact, the basic concepts the Buddha taught are not nailed down at all. Here we are, training the mind to find true happiness, but happiness is not a word that he defined. Mind is not a word that he defined, probably because as you go through the practice, your appreciation of happiness is going to change. Your appreciation of the mind is going to change. So it's good not to have them nailed down too tightly. Even dukkha: He defines dukkha as the five clinging aggregates. But your understanding of what that word covers is going to change as you practice. It's going to get more refined. Things that you regard as pleasure right now: Ultimately you'll see that they have their stress. They can entail dukkha. But for the time being, as long as they seem pleasant, you stick with them because the practice is strategic. It's trying to develop a quality of truthfulness in the heart, and it does it step by step.

Truth is something that exists on many levels in the Buddha's teachings. There is the truth of statements. There is the truth of perceptions. And there's the truth of actualities. We start out with the perceptions, in other words, the labels we have in our minds. And we use true perceptions as we speak, because otherwise, what would we have to direct our practice?

We're already fabricating our experience through our perceptions, so the Buddha's giving us new perceptions to use. But notice, they're there to be used. We're not trying to arrive at a true perception. The Buddha makes this point many times in the Sutta Nipata. There are cases, he says, where you go beyond truth. In other words, you go beyond the truth of perceptions because you've arrived at the truth of an actuality: a quality of truth in the heart. And that's something that doesn't have to do with words. Now, Buddhist scholars can lie to

us, in fact it happens again and again. They can take the words of the texts and can twist them into almost anything. But the question is, is there truthfulness in doing that?

I was reading a passage by Ajaan Funn today, talking about his early years as a monk. He'd sit up all night. He said if he was going to fall asleep, he'd fall asleep while he was sitting. If he got tired of sitting, he'd walk. Got tired of walking, he'd go back and sit. Because, as he said, if he wasn't going to gain awakening in this lifetime, he didn't want it to be through his laziness. There's a story in the Canon that's a cautionary tale about a member of the Sakyan clan. When he died, the Buddha said that if he had gone forth and started practicing early in life, he would have become an arahant. If he'd gone forth in the middle of his life, he would have become a non-returner, a stream enterer. In other words, he could have guaranteed that he wouldn't have to fall to lower realms. But he never got around to practicing, out of laziness or whatever. So his opportunity was wasted. He had the potential, but he wasted it. And Ajaan Funn said he didn't want that to be true of him. So he really gave himself to the practice. And because he was true, he got true results.

So the truth of the Dhamma is not something that's defined in words. The words are there as aids in the practice, to help you to get to ask the right questions and to observe things you might not have observed otherwise. Some of the vocabulary is like the vocabulary for tasters, or those who work with very refined differences in odors. They have to develop a very specific, very precise vocabulary. The more precise the vocabulary, the more subtle things they notice. But the truth of the smells and flavors isn't in the words. It's in the sensitivity to actual smells and flavors. The concepts are there to help you notice things you might have missed otherwise, to help you look in areas you might have overlooked and to ask questions that might not have occurred to you before.

But we're not here to arrive at a description of the world, or a description of the mind, or a description of anything. We're not arriving at a description. We're arriving at the actuality, what the Buddha gave many different names to. This is a point that Ajaan Maha Boowa makes often. He says it doesn't really matter what name you give to nibbana. What's important is you get the actuality. The Buddha described certain aspects about it: that it was a kind of consciousness, for instance, a consciousness without surface, outside of space and time. But he never explained how that consciousness was related to the consciousness in the aggregates. It's definitely something different.

Consciousness in the aggregates has to do with consciousness that is near or far; past, present or future. In other words, it's in time and space. Consciousness

without surface is something else. But he never clarified the relationship between the two. There was a time when a monk was talking about how this consciousness is what goes from one life to the next. And the Buddha called him in and said, “Which consciousness are you talking about?” And the monk replied, “The consciousness that we have at the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind.” It would have been interesting if he had said consciousness without surface, how the Buddha would have dealt with that. But consciousness at the senses, as the Buddha said, is dependently-arisen consciousness. It’s something that arises and falls away because it depends on conditions. So the monk was wrong about the consciousness he was describing, but the question of consciousness without surface never got explained in that dialogue.

There are a lot of things the Buddha doesn’t explain about nibbana, because, after all, it ultimately lies beyond explanation. As the Buddha said, it lies beyond the limits of description. A proper description of what it is, is not what gets you there. But he does explain *how* to get there, and that’s the important thing. And getting there is something you do inside. It involves qualities you have inside the heart and mind. The problem lies inside, but the solution lies inside as well: qualities that can be immediately present to your awareness. We’re not dealing in abstractions. We’re not dealing in anything far away.

When my father went to Thailand the very first time, I tried to get him to meditate. His first question was for Ajaan Fuang was: He was a Christian. Was that going to be an obstacle to the meditation? Ajaan Fuang said, “No. We’re going to talk about the breath. The breath doesn’t belong to anybody. It’s not Buddhist. It’s not Christian. It doesn’t belong to anybody in particular. It’s common property throughout the world. We talk about the breath so that we can use the breath to catch the mind. And then we can talk about the mind: in other words, your awareness right here.” Whether you’re Christian or Buddhist doesn’t have to get involved, because the things that are happening in your awareness right now are the things that cause suffering, regardless of your background. But you can also develop qualities right here in your awareness that will put an end to suffering.

And the process of developing the good qualities and abandoning the unskillful qualities: What’s that going to do to your awareness? It’s going to do something you can’t anticipate. The Buddha simply reassures you that we’re not committing spiritual suicide here. We’re not blanking out. There is a kind of awareness that knows the goal.

But there’s a lot that he doesn’t explain. Just the simple fact that we have freedom of choice in the present moment, he never explains that: the fact that we

have a range of choices. Sometimes that range is limited—it's not that we're totally without any restrictions—but there are areas where we do have freedom of choice. He says to take advantage of that. Again, he doesn't explain it. But he doesn't have to. He's basically saying that if you want to put an end to suffering, this is what you can do.

He's interested in finding the people who see that as a really great opportunity, who look at the suffering they've had in their lives—whatever it is and however they might define it—and they've decided they've had enough. Those are the people the Buddha's talking to, the people who have the honesty to realize, "Okay I'm suffering because of something I'm doing. But I can change the way I do things. Even if it's hard, I can do it." I don't know how many people complain, "Well, it's easy to say, but it's hard to do." Well, yeah. It's hard to do sometimes, but it's doable. Don't let it be an obstacle that it may be hard.

This is where truthfulness of your character comes in. As Ajaan Lee says, "If you're true, you'll find the truth." If you're not true, then no matter how much you may know—no matter how many of the texts you may have read, all the languages you may have studied, the ability to define this term and that term—you're not going to arrive at the truth because truthfulness is a quality of heart. The Dhamma's a quality of the heart. Nibbana, which is the ending of all dhammas, is touched at the heart. So focus your attention here, at the heart. That's where all the work is going to be done, and where the solution to the problem is going to be found.