

What is the dharma?

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There are many starting points in answering this question, and many things one could say about it, so like anyone else, I have to be selective.

As a very first approximation: the Sanskrit word *dharma* (Pali *dhamma*) has a number of conventional translations: the teaching of the Buddha, but more generally: truth, reality, the way things are. One can also make a *very* rough translation of it as 'Buddhism', but this is problematic since the concept and word 'Buddhism' was invented by early 19th century Europeans; it contained some misleading European projections, and remains a question-begging – if also sometimes useful – orienting device today.

For people like us, the dharma is something one practices, so we talk about dharma practice and dharma practitioners. So the dharma is closely associated with something we're doing, ie, following a path of practice that leads to liberation, and on the way, helps us to become freer, healthier people – ones progressively less anxious, obsessed, compulsive and constrained. The dharma thus carries an ethos, a morality.

The dharma can (and must ultimately) be directly accessed through mindful attention – through deeper and deeper penetration of our own immediate experience, in and out of formal sitting practice. We do this in practice communities – sanghas – like this one, where we use the discourse of dharma as a way to communicate with and inspire each other. We also access the dharma in solitude, in real intimacy with ourself and our world.

Let me acknowledge now that much of what I'm about to say now has been influenced by a fellow insight teacher, Patrick Kearney.

The dharma is a first-person discourse. It is about how each of us *experiences* and *perceives* how both the external world and things going on inside us impinges on our awareness. This experience is the raw material of our spiritual practice.

So the dharma is *not* about making truth-claims about cosmological and metaphysical things – about god, angels how the universe began and how it will end, heaven and hell, rebirth and so on. All that stuff – the usual focuses of religion and religious belief (often including this thing called Buddhism), are *third-person* discourse, and we can leave it to one side.

One might sometimes be able to compare institutionalised Buddhism with other religions, but not the dharma, because it's not a belief system or a third-person discourse. The Buddha was quite insistent on that point!

Having said that, we have to grasp the nettle of looking into the nature of our textual sources. The Christians have the Bible, the Muslims the Koran, and we have superficially similar foundational texts that many of us also refer to as 'the dharma'. So we might say we're studying the dharma, or reading the dharma.

In this particular dharmic tradition, the insight tradition, we work in the first instance with the Buddha's own teachings as reported in a large number of his *suttas* (discourses), which come down to us in Pali, having passed through the hands of many generations of blokes called monks. I'll come back to this point.

Why can't we compare these *suttas*, taken together, to the Bible, the Koran, the Talmud, etc? Because, unlike Samuel, Jesus, Mohammed etc, the Buddha did not produce third-person discourse – he didn't summon the troops and give them comprehensive lectures on how things were in heaven and hell and all the stations in between according to divine revelations about such matters.

What the Buddha did was turn up in town and answer questions put to him by particular curious or distressed individuals. Usually these questions were asked in a particular context and addressed that context, so the answer was highly situational. In his answer, the Buddha would often refer back to a particular list he'd already devised of things to look at – inquiry questions usually – or make one up on the spot.

To *study* the dharma, then, is to look at the situations in which the Buddha spoke as well as the question that was put to him on each occasion and how he replied to it. The more *suttas* we read in this way, the more we begin to 'get it' in a way we couldn't possibly do if we just memorised passages of his teaching.

To put this another way, *the suttas are performance pieces* – they were not carefully composed, designed to be collected in printed books with covers on them and sold as holy texts. The Buddha or his enlightened disciple would blow into town, have a question bowled up and respond on the spot from personal experience, inspiration or intuition.

But what is both limpidly clear and miraculous is that, when you do group these *suttas* together, a coherent and brilliant teaching emerges. There's an

unbroken golden thread – a network of concepts, an underlying structure – running through them that the smart, critical reader can discover for herself, not least in discussions with others that have been arranged for this purpose. How does that come about?

In the Buddha's time, a smart dharma practitioner was someone who, *inter alia*, knew not just the suttas and the lists they contained, but knew intimately something called the *matika* in Pali. *Matika* derives from *matar*, the Pali word for mother, cognate with Latin *mater* and English 'mother'. Even closer, *matika* evokes our English word *matrix*, meaning something that gives origin or form to something else, that is, something creative, like a womb, capable of generating new life, new understandings.

So, the Buddha or any other advanced teacher knows not only the suttas and the lists but is so intimate with them – has so digested them – that she speaks freely, creatively and spontaneously from inside the matrix, and the matrix ensures that she does so in a penetrating and above all coherent way.

To my mind, *the dharma as matrix gets to the essence of the thing*. In our personal lives and experience it makes the dharma the orienting device, the key, the decoder so we understand what our mindfulness makes available to us. If we understand the dharma in this way, we'll never fall for the hobgoblin of text-based religious life – literalism – and we'll understand book learning as just a passage to where we really want to get to, inside that creative matrix.

Coda on gender

As a little coda to this talk I want to refer back to a discussion (led by Chris) we had here last Wednesday, about women in the dharma – in particular how we relate to gendered ideas (above all the subordination of nuns to monks) and gender-exclusive language in the English translations of the Pali Canon in particular. We had a good discussion, but there were points that did not arise then that I'd like to make now, because they relate to how we read the dharma:

- We need to keep a critical distance to all textual material – it is not the matrix itself, and each item may be an imperfect expression of the dharma's underlying coherence. So I agree with the feminists: gendered concepts do not serve our purposes, so we should read them down (and out), and simply and freely replace gender-exclusive language with inclusive language. Gender exclusive language simply imports the central idea or idiom of patriarchy: the male norm.

- We should also keep our wits about us and look at the provenance of any venerable text. The Pali canon is no more pristine than the Bible, the Koran, the Talmud, etc. They have all been tampered with, gone through the hands of all sorts of translators and editors over the ages. So the Pali canon has been at the tender mercy of blokes in sheets for the last 2.5 millennia, and according to Higgins's First Law of Gendered Delusion, when blokes flock together in single-sex groupings, misogyny tends to arise. Law 1A says that this is most likely to occur in celibate male communities.

When our good friend Laurence Khantipalo was a senior monk, and an internationally recognised Pali scholar, he published an article saying that the passage about 'the eight grave conditions' was apocryphal, the work of persons who did not like women and did not like them being ordained, a view he expounds to this day. Who *knows* what the Buddha actually said on that occasion? For starters, he didn't even speak Pali, so there's been a lot of translating going on before it gets to us anyway, to say nothing of editors who add a bit and snip a bit over the millennia. What we do know was that the Buddha rejected dualistic thinking, which makes the passage in question distinctly fishy, outside the matrix and off-message.

Nor am I entirely convinced by the 'children of their time' excuse for patriarchal thinking. For one thing, the creator(s) of the *Vimalakirti Nidesha* had sound gender politics 2000 years ago, as did Padmasambhava over 1000 years ago, apparently.

- But we do need to read the dharma with historical sensitivity, in the spirit of Stephen Batchelor and Pankaj Mishra. Some knowledge of the historical circumstances in which texts arose can inform our interpretation, and Stephen in particular, in his talks on 'the life and death of Siddhattha Gotama', indicate that gender was a big issue in the Buddha's life, and that he paid a heavy price for bucking the gender order of the day by bringing women into the monastic community.