

Dhamma Is What Dhamma Does

THE BUDDHA AS STRATEGIST

You may know the story. The Buddha was once staying in a simsapa forest with a group of monks. He picked up a few simsapa leaves—which are like miniature aspen leaves—and asked the monks which was greater: the number of leaves in his hand or the number of leaves in the forest. The monks replied that, of course, there were far more leaves in the forest than in his hand.

The Buddha went on to say that, in the same way, the things he had known through direct knowledge but had not taught were like the leaves in the forest. The things he *had* taught based on his direct knowledge were like the leaves in his hand. Why had he taught so little? Because, in his words, the things he had not taught “were not connected with the goal, do not relate to the rudiments of the holy life, and do not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding.”

And what had he taught? The four noble truths: “This is stress ... This is the origination of stress ... This is the cessation of stress ... This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress.” And why had he taught that? Because these truths *were* connected with the goal, *did* relate to the rudiments of the holy life, and *did* lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding (SN 56:31).

This incident makes an important statement about how to read and understand the Buddha’s Dhamma. He wasn’t interested in stating truths simply because they were true. He taught truths that served a purpose: When his listeners acted on those truths, those actions would have a desired impact on their minds.

It’s good to take a close look at how he expresses the nature of that impact. He starts by using the word “goal.” In Pali, the word is *attha*, which means not only goal, but also “meaning,” “benefit,” “purpose,” “profit.” This word rarely appears in Western discussions of the Dhamma, but it’s frequently paired with the word “Dhamma” in Asia: Useful truths are said to be both *attha* and Dhamma. In fact, the whole point of the Dhamma is that it has an *attha*. The four noble truths are a special kind of Dhamma in that they cover everything needed to serve that *attha*, beginning with the “rudiments of the holy life”—this is a

short-hand reference to the virtues of the five precepts—as well as the attha itself: the attainment of total unbinding, an unconditioned dimension that’s the highest possible happiness (SN 43; Dhp 203).

In some cases, the attha of a Dhamma teaching is its meaning as expressed in words that are easier to understand. But in the Buddha’s remarks in the Simsapa forest, the word *attha* obviously means something more than words: a direct experience of the goal, the reality of the freedom and liberation that the teaching is supposed to lead to. These two aspects of attha are closely related. We could even say that you don’t fully know the meaning of the words of the Dhamma until you’ve directly experienced the goal to which they point and which is their whole purpose for being.

The Buddha was wise in emphasizing this purposeful aspect of the Dhamma, because the mind—as he accurately saw—is purposeful as well. It doesn’t simply gaze at views about the truth in rapt admiration. In its quest to eliminate pain or suffering, it constructs views about the truth and acts on them to serve its aims. To evaluate the worth of a truth, you have to look into the mind-state that inspires you to assemble it, the purposes it inspires you to aim at, and the actions it inspires you to take.

This was precisely the Buddha’s approach. He saw that if you adopt a particular view or line of questioning, it would bend the mind in the direction of the mind-state that created it. If you acted on the view, those actions would have a further impact on the mind, leading to experiences of pleasure or pain, depending on whether those actions were skillful or not.

This is why the Buddha regarded views about truth as a type of kamma, or action. In turn, he viewed those actions as part of a causal process, judging them by where that process ultimately led. If they led to an inferior goal, he would reject them (DN 1). As for the views he himself taught, he chose them because they would inspire the kind of actions that would lead to total freedom from suffering.

This active role of the Dhamma is explicitly clear in the case of the four noble truths: Each truth carries a duty. It’s a guide to action. You should *comprehend* stress, *abandon* its origination or cause within the mind, *realize* its cessation, all by *developing* the path to its cessation. The Buddha didn’t impose these four duties on anyone. He simply pointed out that if you want to put an end to suffering and stress, this is what you have to do.

At the same time, it’s worth noting not only that the four noble truths contain the fourth noble truth—which is a guide to action—but also that they themselves

are contained in the fourth truth: the factor of right view in the noble eightfold path. As a container for that path, the four truths explain why the path is a beneficial one to follow. As a factor in the path, they show that views are actions, to be adopted both because they're true and because they act as a guide to beneficial action, in the form of the other factors of the path, leading to a goal that lies beyond them. This is why, when the Buddha gave metaphors for the path—including right view—he chose modes of transport, like rafts and chariots: means to a destination. When you reach the destination, the mode of transport can be put aside (MN 22; MN 24; SN 45:4).

In fact, he made it a general rule: For him to say something, it had to be not only true but also beneficial in leading to skillful action. Further, he had to be sensitive to his audience, knowing when to say beneficial truths that were pleasing and when to say beneficial truths that were not. He gave the analogy of a baby child with a sharp object in its mouth: Sometimes you have to be willing to draw blood if that's what's required to get the object out before the child swallows it and suffers greater harm (MN 58).

So the Buddha had to be strategic in how he taught the Dhamma. Unlike other teachers of his time, he didn't have a canned Dhamma that he rattled off to all his listeners (DN 2). This may be why his followers presented their memory of his teachings in the form of dialogues, to show how the Buddha presented different aspects of the Dhamma to different listeners, in line with the situation and their specific needs: sometimes truths that pleased them, sometimes truths that didn't, but always truths that were beneficial.

It's important to note, though, that in the Buddha's analysis of the possible varieties of speech, the idea that a falsehood could be beneficial was never even entertained as a possibility. The concept of "useful fictions" was, as far as he was concerned, out of the question.

A STRATEGIC DISTINCTION

The Buddha's strategic approach to teaching is also shown by the distinction he made between teachings whose attha had to be drawn out into further explanations, and those whose attha was already drawn out and should not be drawn out any further (AN 2:24). This distinction was so important that he said you were slandering him if you got it mixed up: trying to infer a further meaning of a teaching whose meaning was already drawn out, or claiming that there was no need for any further interpretation of a teaching that actually needed it.

Unfortunately, he didn't give examples for these two categories of teachings, but when we remember that the Dhamma is meant as a guide to action, one way of interpreting the distinction seems clear—and it's supported by watching the Buddha in action as he teaches.

Some teachings don't give clear instructions for action. Instead, they describe the reality of a situation. In this case, the meaning has to be drawn out: What are the practical implications of that situation? An example would be the Buddha's descriptions of how the universe evolves, which portray events in far-distant reaches of the past and the future, without giving explicit instructions as to how you should act. At the very end of the descriptions, though, the Buddha himself draws out the meaning: The changes in the universe come from the actions of living beings, so if you want to avoid the miseries that can be found in the universe, take care to act skillfully (DN 26–27).

As for teachings whose meaning shouldn't be drawn out any further, two prime examples are the Buddha's teachings on self and not-self. Nowhere in the Canon does the Buddha say either that there is a self or that there is no self. Questions of "Who am I?" "Do I exist?" "Do I not exist?" he says, are not worthy of attention. In fact, he goes on to say that views that attempt to answer these questions—such as "I have a self" or "I have no self"—are a fetter bound by which you're not freed from suffering and stress (MN 2). So, to stay on the path, you should try to avoid paying attention to such questions. And it's not the case that they'll get answered at awakening. As SN 12:20 points out, once you've attained even the first level of awakening, these questions no longer hold any meaning or interest for you.

Still, for the purpose of arriving at awakening, the Buddha does analyze how the assumption of "self" comes about, pointing out how some assumptions of self are not skillful, while other assumptions of self, in certain circumstances, are. You can make use of the things that you identify as you or yours—such as perceptions and thought fabrications—as means to the goal (AN 9:36). In addition, assumptions that you have to depend on yourself, that you're capable of the practice, and that you will benefit from it all play a necessary role in pursuing the path (Dhp 160; AN 4:159; AN 3:40). The Buddha calls this approach "using the self as a governing principle." So even though he refuses to say that there is a self, he makes use of "self" as a strategy on the path.

At the same time, he points out how "not-self" is a useful perception at many stages in the path, and particularly in the last ones, as a tool for comprehending stress and abandoning its cause. Because ideas of self contain an element of

clinging, which the first noble truth equates with suffering (SN 56:11), the perception of not-self is a useful tool for bringing that clinging to an end. This perception is even useful, at a very high level of the practice, for overcoming any attachment to the path or the goal, so that the mind—freed from all attachments, including any attachments to the perception “not-self”—can reach total liberation (AN 10:93). So here again, even though the Buddha refuses to say that there is no self, he uses “not-self” as a Dhamma teaching leading to a higher attha.

This point is illustrated most clearly in MN 109. There, a monk—listening to the Buddha teaching that the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness are not-self—draws out what he thinks is a logical implication of the teaching:

“So—form is not-self, feeling is not-self, perception is not-self, fabrications are not-self, consciousness is not-self. Then what self will be touched by the actions done by what is not-self?”

In other words, the monk reasons that because the aggregates are all not-self, there must be no self, so no actions will be able to touch—i.e., give karmic results to—what is not-self. This line of reasoning would serve a very unskillful attha, giving license to all kinds of unskillful behavior. That’s why the Buddha, on reading the monk’s mind, rebukes him sharply, saying that he’s senseless, immersed in ignorance, and overcome with craving. The Buddha then goes on to show the proper strategic use of the teaching on not-self, questioning the other monks listening to the talk about their assumptions of self around the aggregates so that they’ll perceive the aggregates as not-self, to develop dispassion for them and to gain release: the attha both of the perception of not-self and of the Dhamma as a whole.

So even though the Buddha found useful roles at certain stages in the path both for the assumption of a self and for the perception of not-self, those teaching strategies have their meaning fully drawn out. In neither case should you infer

from them that there is or is not a self, for those views, as the Buddha pointed out, would induce actions leading away from the goal.

TESTS FOR THE TRUE DHAMMA

The relationship between the Dhamma and its attha is so direct that the Buddha made it a criterion for testing what was true Dhamma and what was not: If you followed a Dhamma teaching and it led you to the attha he taught, an experience of unbinding, then you knew that it was the genuine article. He framed this test in different terms, from the most basic to the most refined, depending on his audience.

For the Kālāmas, a group of skeptical laypeople, he outlined a very basic test. If, when you act on a teaching, it leads to long-term welfare and happiness, then you should keep following that teaching (AN 3:66).

For his stepmother, Mahāpajāpati Gotamī, he framed a more extensive test. True Dhamma can be recognized by what it leads to in three areas: In terms of the ultimate goal, it should lead to dispassion and being unfettered; in terms of the means to that goal, to shedding, contentment, and aroused persistence; in terms of the relationships it fosters toward others, it should lead to modesty, reclusiveness, and being unburdensome (AN 8:53).

For Ven. Upāli, one of his foremost monk students, the Buddha formulated a test echoing his comments to the monks in the simsapa forest: True Dhamma, when put into practice, leads to utter disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding (AN 7:80).

The Buddha saw the need for this sort of test in his own lifetime, as there are reported instances of monks distorting the teachings even to his face (MN 22; MN 38). He dealt with them severely, to show how seriously he meant for his Dhamma not to be changed. He also stated that those who attributed sayings to him that he didn't say, or denied his saying things that he actually did say, were slandering him (AN 2:23).

He also foresaw that the tendency to distort the Dhamma would increase after his passing, saying that the true Dhamma would disappear in 500 years (AN 8:51). For those of us living more than 2,500 years after his passing, it's a forecast that brings us up short—Is there no true Dhamma left anymore?—but SN 16:13 gives an analogy to explain what he meant: The true Dhamma “disappears” when counterfeit Dhamma appears, in the same way that genuine money disappears when counterfeit money begins to circulate in the market. In other words, genuine money is still there, but people begin to lose their

confidence as to what's genuine and what's not. In the same way, true Dhamma can still exist, but it's surrounded by so much counterfeit Dhamma that even the concept of true Dhamma, as opposed to false, gets called into question.

When counterfeit Dhamma actually came into circulation, and what it taught, is a matter of historical conjecture. A prime candidate is the teaching on the non-arising of phenomena, which appeared about 500 years after the Buddha's passing and claims that nothing really arises or passes away, and that everything is a timeless oneness. If this were true, then the four noble truths would not be true, for they speak of suffering arising and passing away. But again, whether this is the teaching that the Buddha had in mind when he foresaw counterfeit Dhamma is just a matter of conjecture.

What's undeniable, though, is that the Buddha's definition of the disappearance of the true Dhamma describes the situation that prevails now, with so many contradictory versions of the Dhamma at large in the world. Some people even laugh at the idea that any version of the Dhamma has any right to claim to be right and others wrong. They make a comparison with maps: Just as every map distorts reality, so that no single map can claim to be a totally accurate description of the truth, in the same way, every version of the Dhamma distorts reality, and so no version can qualify as exclusively right.

But this is a misreading of the map analogy. Neither maps nor the Dhamma are meant to be contemplated in and of themselves. They serve a purpose, an *attha*, and their accuracy can be tested by seeing if they actually serve the purpose intended for them. The fact that a map distorts some aspects of reality is no problem as long as it provides accurate directions for arriving at the goal for which it was drawn. If you're drawing a treasure map, for instance, you'll have to leave out some information. In fact, if you clutter the map with too many extraneous details, it becomes confusing and counterproductive. All that matters is that the route to the treasure is portrayed clearly enough to be followed, and that the route actually leads to the treasure.

In the same way, the Dhamma is expressed in words, and the nature of words is that they provide only a sketch of the reality they describe. But even then, they can still serve a good *attha* if the lines of the sketch act as a reliable guide to take you to that *attha*. Just as a map shouldn't be cluttered with extraneous information, the Buddha found it advisable to avoid most of the philosophical debates about the nature of the world and the self extant in his day so that his Dhamma could focus on being accurate in the basics: what's needed to get to the treasure of unbinding.

We like to think that the contradictions among available Dhamma maps are immaterial, that they simply point out alternative routes to the same goal. But the fact of the matter is that they describe not only different routes, but also different locations for the treasure. They even describe the treasure in different terms. So they can't all be right—as we noted in the case of the four noble truths and the teaching of the non-arising of phenomena—which means that we have to choose among them.

Given that the Dhamma is not always pleasing, we can't let our likes and dislikes determine our choice. In fact, even when a Dhamma seems reasonable and fits in with what we already believe, that doesn't mean that it's true (AN 3:66). Our only hope of finding the true Dhamma is to test it: to choose a Dhamma that seems promising and put it into practice, to see where it leads.

This test entails more than reading and reasoning about texts. It requires high levels of commitment and honesty, and keen powers of observation of your own actions and their results: character traits that the Buddha looked for in all his students (MN 80; SN 3:24). It's only through being true yourself that you can know if the Dhamma is true.

But then, the Dhamma promises a lot of truth in return: not just a theory about happiness, but a direct, unchanging experience of the highest happiness possible. This is its *attha*. The potential reality of that *attha* is what keeps the Dhamma a living tradition. Without that *attha*, it would be nothing more than an historical curiosity—some theories about the mind and the world that far-away people believed in the far-distant past. It's because the four noble truths are designed to be strategic, leading to a living experience that lies beyond the words, that even now, after all these centuries, we still care about the Buddha's handful of leaves.

—*Thanissaro Bhikkhu*