

Multi-Dimensional Dhamma

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We live in a culture that likes to reduce things to soundbites, catchwords, buzzwords, quick and easy ways of boiling things down. As a result, when we come to the Dhamma, there's soundbite Dhamma, catchword and buzzword Dhamma. We're told that Buddhism boils down to one particular practice, like noting, mindfulness, or spreading thoughts of lovingkindness. Sometimes we're told that it teaches just a handful of basic principles: letting go, equanimity, emptiness, contentment, compassion. If that's all we know of the Dhamma, we miss the fact that it has many dimensions. It does contain all of these things, but it also contains more. It can't be reduced to just one principle.

When you approach the practice, you have to realize that it has many dimensions: not only how you deal with your own mind, but also how dealing with your own mind affects your relationships to other people and to the things you depend on for life. When you want to gauge the practice and events in your mind, and to gain a sense of which teachings really are useful when applied in a particular way, you have to look at things from several angles. Just as the Buddha was said to have an "all-around eye," you have to look at your practice from all sides.

The Buddha taught his stepmother, Mahapajapati, this multiple perspective, giving her a list of eight tests for what counts and what doesn't count as Dhamma and Vinaya. "Dhamma," here, means teachings, actions, and qualities that arise in the mind. "Vinaya" means the healthy, effective way of disciplining those actions and qualities. You want to make sure that your actions pass all eight tests if your practice is going to stay on the path.

The list falls into three parts. It starts with two principles focusing primarily on the goal: being dispassionate and unfettered. It also includes two principles concerning inner attitudes that help you reach the goal—persistence and contentment—as well as four principles governing the way you interact with other people: being modest, shedding your pride, finding seclusion, and being unburdensome. When you gauge any teaching, action, or quality that arises in the mind, you have to look at it from all three of these angles if you want to know whether it's true Dhamma or not.

The qualities of the goal—dispassion and being unfettered—are first in the list to show where all the others are focused. This is what the practice is all about: learning dispassion, learning to free the mind from the ways in which it fetters

itself. These two qualities are closely connected. The passion that we feel for the objects of the senses, including objects of the mind, is the fetter that keeps us tied down. The objects themselves don't tie us down. We're the ones who latch on to them, and our clinging is what keeps us trapped.

This fact is reflected in the image the Buddha uses to talk about passion, the way we cling. The word for clinging—*upadana*—applies not only to holding on, but also to taking sustenance, the way a fire takes sustenance from its fuel. In feeding on the fuel, the fire has to cling to it; in clinging, it's trapped. Only when the fire lets go is it released.

The same with the mind: When we learn how to let go of our passion for sensual obsessions, and then on a deeper level our passion for experiences of forms or formless phenomena in strong concentration, only then are we truly free.

In following this program, the way you practice will have an impact on other people. You've got to take that into consideration, along with your responsibility for the material things you depend on. This is why the Buddha includes other tests in his list as well.

In terms of relationships, the Buddha says that true Dhamma teaches you to be modest, to shed your pride, to find seclusion as much as you can, to be unburdensome. These principles are mutually reinforcing. If you learn to be modest, it helps with seclusion. In other words, you're working on good qualities of the mind to cure yourself. You're not trying to show off. You're not trying to impress people. You're practicing because the mind is like a sick person. It needs medicine to cure its illnesses. Practice is like going to the doctor and taking the medicine he prescribes. You're not doing it to impress anybody. You go because you've got an illness and you've got to treat it.

These principles tie in with the remaining two, which deal directly with inner attitudes. The first of the two is persistence: putting right effort into practice, the effort of developing skillful qualities that foster the health of the mind and abandoning the unskillful ones that keep it diseased. This effort, in addition to leading to dispassion, also needs to make use of whatever dispassion you can muster. That's because we all tend to view our unskillful qualities as our friends—we like our greed, aversion, and delusion—and only by developing dispassion for them can we see through that supposed friendship.

The second inner attitude is contentment with the physical conditions surrounding you. Contentment fits in with being unburdensome and finding seclusion. You learn to be content with the food you eat, the clothes and the robes you wear, the shelter you have. You realize that whatever you get is enough for practice. And when you're content, there's less need to be a burden on other

people—and less need to be involved with them as well. If you're constantly wanting something, you're going to be looking for someone to provide it. If you learn to be content with what you've got, it's easier to stay in seclusion.

So these eight principles reinforce one another. They also balance out possible imbalances that could occur if you pursued one principle on its own. For instance, being dispassionate and being content could be interpreted as letting things be as they are without trying to change anything. But simply lying around like that accomplishes nothing. Persistence, though, balances this. The Buddha made a clear distinction between physical contentment and contentment with the state of your mind. Physical contentment is a good thing; contentment with your practice can lead to complacency. One of the primary factors that led to his awakening, he said, was that he didn't allow himself to be content with the level of skillfulness he had attained until he reached the ultimate.

That's why he used the image of the person whose head is on fire to illustrate the proper attitude toward your unskillful qualities. You rouse all your mindfulness and ardency to put the fire out immediately. You can't just watch with dispassion or contentment when your hair is in flames. If there are problems in the mind, you've got to deal with them as quickly as you can.

There's also the relationship between contentment and being unburdensome. The discourse on the traditions of the noble ones lists four qualities, starting with contentment with food, clothing, and shelter. Knowing that there are four requisites, you'd expect that contentment with medicine would be the fourth quality. But it's not. The fourth quality is taking delight in developing, taking delight in abandoning. What happened to medicine? Looking after your health is a part of being unburdensome. There are many rules in the Canon about which medicines and treatments are allowed to the monks—so many that when Buddhism moved from India to other cultures, it carried Indian medicine along with it. Monks are expected to know how to care for one another when they're ill, to treat one another's diseases. If the body gets diseased, it becomes a burden to other people, especially now that medicine and treatments are so expensive. One of our responsibilities as practitioners is to make sure that we stay healthy, although we have to fight the tendency to get passionate about perfecting the body and being totally fit. That's one way you have to look for a balance so that contentment and being unburdensome follow the middle way of moderation.

Another set of balancing qualities are contentment on the one hand, and shedding pride and being modest on the other. Some people like to make a show of how frugal they are. This, the Buddha said, is the danger of developing contentment for the wrong motive. You have to develop modesty and work at

shedding any pride around your contentment. Again, the reason for contentment is not to show off. It's a medicine for the mind's diseases. Look at these qualities from many angles.

There are lots of stories from the forest tradition about teachers making sure that their students look at things from many sides, or in Ajaan Lee's words, "don't look with just one eye." There's the story of Ajaan Maha Boowa taking on the ascetic practice of not accepting any food after his alms round. He was very strict with himself about that. He couldn't help noticing, though, that other monks who had taken the same vow at the beginning of the rains retreat were, one by one, beginning to give in to pressure from lay people who would come late and say, "Please accept our food." This monk gave in, that monk gave in, but Ajaan Maha Boowa didn't give in—and he was very proud of the fact. He was going to stick to his vow no matter what. Two or three times during the rains retreat, though, while he sat waiting for the meal to begin, his bowl in order, his eyes closed, Ajaan Mun would appear out of nowhere with food in his hand to place in the bowl: food that had been brought by late-coming donors. He didn't do it too often—just enough to warn Ajaan Maha Boowa to watch out for pride.

Another story deals with Ajaan Chah going around the monastery after a storm, discovering that one of the huts had half its roof blown off by the wind while a monk was sitting meditating in the hut. He asked the monk living in the hut, "Why aren't you fixing the roof?" The monk replied, "I'm practicing equanimity, learning how to sleep in the half of the hut that's still sheltered." Ajaan Chah said, "That's the equanimity of a water buffalo. Fix the roof."

So when you're looking at the practice, you have to look at many sides. In Ajaan Chah's case, he was pointing out the need to care for the things that you've been given. People have been generous enough to provide food, clothing, and shelter for you. You've got to look after these things. You have to be responsible. You can't let your contentment make you lazy, or your desire to be unfettered make you irresponsible. Taking good care of things is part of being unburdensome.

As a living human being, there are many dimensions to what you're doing. Your actions have an impact on your own mind, on other people, and on your physical environment. You have responsibilities in all these areas. Learn how to keep them in balance.

One common misunderstanding is that the Buddha instituted rules to please lay people, so that whatever lay people want, the monks should oblige. That was not always the case. There were many cases where people wanted the monks to behave in a particular way, and the Buddha said No. When monks went out of

their way to be smiley, friendly, and helpful to the lay people in ways the Buddha felt were inappropriate, he called it “corrupting families.” In other words, you corrupt them by giving them all the wrong ideas about the role of monks. So in spite of what the lay people wanted, the Buddha instituted rules against that sort of thing.

Ajaan Fuang talks about being a young boy living in a village temple back in the days when village monks were expected to be doctors—even though there are rules against monks being doctors for lay people. Ajaan Fuang lost count of how many times someone in the village would fall sick at night, and the abbot had to go look after that person’s illness. Ajaan Fuang was the temple boy who had to tag along to carry the medicines. People got used to that kind of service from the monks, and the monks ended up with no time to practice. The forest traditions are really strict about this. The monks are here primarily to cleanse their minds, to put forth the effort to get rid of passion and to unfetter their minds. We don’t want to tie them down with responsibilities that get in the way and prevent that.

This is why the Buddha didn’t institute meditation retreat centers. He instituted communities that would live together, look after their surroundings, have relationships to lay people and, at the very least, be dependent on them for food to provide an environment in which both the lay people and the monastics could become sensitive to all these different dimensions. This way, what might look good from a one-dimensional point of view gets put into a multidimensional perspective, and from this all-around perspective you can see when there’s a defilement lurking somewhere in the shadows, like the pride that can come in being overly modest or content, or the laziness that can hide behind being content or dispassionate.

So, remember that the Buddha didn’t teach in soundbites. He taught a full training, an all-around training. We benefit when we keep all these dimensions in mind.