

Implied Dharma: Breathing Life into the Suttas

by Rodney Smith

I am struck by the way many of us hold the dharma to a strict interpretation of the suttas, as if Buddhism could only hold one possible translation and intention. When we have questions many of us look to the Pali scholars for the derivation of a phrase or word seeking its exact meaning, and we often confine our own practice to that explicit definition even if the suggested wording runs counter to our insights. I feel we must be careful not to know too much or interpret too precisely what the Buddha meant, because that intellectual knowing may distract us from the realization of his message and leave little room to probe the depth of his teaching in personally meaningful ways. If we look upon the suttas with a little more ease and access, the foundation of his teaching clearly emerges and the mystery of his message invites our own exploration.

After twenty-five hundred years, including five hundred years of oral tradition, the suttas have been distilled down to the bare essentials to facilitate communication and deliverance. Much must be missing from the actual teaching delivered so long ago and, perhaps more importantly, embellished and distorted along the way. I believe we can rejuvenate the suttas and infuse them with renewed life through our own insights and modern metaphors. When we look at what is *implied* rather than what is strictly written, a plethora of meanings and purposes emerges. It is a little like downloading condensed data from the Internet and applying Stuffit Expander to the file—the sutta suddenly radiates out in breadth and extends itself into the farthest reaches of our lives. But at this point a call of restraint must be voiced. Unless our implied translations are contained by our insights and held within the fundamental framework the Buddha presented, we could quickly cast an unintentional level of ignorance upon the basic teaching of the Four Noble Truths.

Undisputed is the essential understanding that the Buddha's teaching moves us from a contracted, isolated entity called "me" to the freedom and interdependence of our empty and selfless nature, free of suffering. We could say the Buddha's teaching moves along the continuum from suffering to the end of suffering or from belief in self to the certainty of emptiness. The reason we suffer is because we imagine that reality holds options that it does not (Second Noble Truth), and then infuse energy into those mental choices (attachment),

ultimately resisting what is and creating dissatisfaction as a result (First Noble Truth). All this is done within our thoughts as the thinking mind embellishes the images of our fantasies and creates alternative stories and possibilities (papanca).

Knowing this and taking into account the resolution of suffering, which is to abide fully with things as they are (Third Noble Truth), we could then say that Buddhism moves us from the trance of thought (desire) to stillness (end of desire), and that the sacred is that which is not contained by thought and therefore unconditioned (Nibbana). Our practice then should resolve the compulsion to think and ultimately lead us into deeper quietude. Notice this is a different explanation of the original continuum from suffering to the end of suffering, but is still very much aligned with the Buddha's teaching. There are any number of continuums that establish a clear and wise view and direction for the dharma and fully support the Buddha's message. The important point is that whatever continuum we choose, it must be consistent with the framework of the teaching and uniformly applied throughout our training. Now that we have imposed some limits on our "implied dharma," for brevity, let us have some fun and take a single paragraph from the Satipatthana Sutta to demonstrate how we can expand the meaning and intention of this Sutta while staying within the Buddha's orientation and direction.

[3] "Furthermore, when going forward and returning, he makes himself fully alert; when looking toward and looking away... when bending and extending his limbs... when carrying his outer cloak, his upper robe and his bowl... when eating, drinking, chewing, and savoring... when urinating and defecating... when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and remaining silent, he makes himself fully alert." – MN 10.8

As most Buddhists know, the Satipatthana Sutta is held in high esteem as the application of the foundations of mindfulness meditation. I selected this paragraph because the Buddha seems to be encouraging us to move our mindfulness into a full embrace of life, and although there is always a risk in taking a stanza out of context from an entire sutta, this paragraph is easily understandable on its own. In this passage the Buddha seems to imply that we should open the practice to the "full catastrophe" of life without any spiritual protection. By reference he does not leave any behavior out of being "fully alert," and therefore does not leave any of life behind. We could infer that the Buddha is not drawing any distinction between the spiritual and secular worlds. In fact the distinction between the spiritual and the secular is created by thought—and because the continuum we have set for ourselves is to move from thought to stillness (suffering to the end of suffering) this distinction must be removed if we are to become quieter and move forward within that continuum.

This passage further implies that we can recover the sacred in the most remote areas of our lives, in the midst of difficulty and dissatisfaction, loneliness and despair. The Buddha seems to be encouraging us to embody our entire life of work, family, and relationship without spiritually prioritizing any activity, and, by inference, teaching that awakening is immediately accessible within these activities. Spiritual growth becomes abundantly available and is no longer associated exclusively with any particular presentation or form. We are to harbor no defense, seek no shelter, and avoid no conflict for the resolution of our freedom. It is here in the middle of our total involvement that this alchemy of spirit can best be engaged, and we find everything we need immediately before us within the circumstances and conditions we long begrudged.

No longer leaning toward one form of life (attachment) and away from another (aversion) allows psychic energy to flow from our imagination into reality and transforms our ordinary existence into the sacred. Suddenly the Buddha is found not only in special environments or practices, but within all activities, reactions, thoughts, and emotional responses, right where we are. Nothing is outside of the present moment because no boundary is drawn to separate the present from the past. The message of the Buddha is equally relevant in all locations and in all times. If we move to escape this environment for a better spiritual setting, we will be attempting to think our way out of the place we are in, and we will continue to suffer. With increased sensitivity to all areas of our suffering, we immediately feel the contraction of self when it arises and release the accompanying narrative to remain aligned within the continuum toward stillness.

“He makes himself fully alert”

For me, the Sutta’s phrase, “he makes himself fully alert,” stands out as needing our consideration. Here I would suggest that our insights trump translations when there is incompatibility between the two. From my practice I know the limitations of trying to make myself “fully alert.” In this selected paragraph of the Satipatthana Sutta the Buddha unfurls an overwhelming barrage of activities for our mindfulness. Try maintaining mindfulness given his implied admonition to be fully awake to all experiences equally. If we define mindfulness as selectively pairing an experience with our attention, this simply cannot be done. However, if the sense-of-self is stilled for a moment, “fully alert” means something quite different than self-engaged mindfulness. In the absence of a watcher, awareness emerges fully and easily handles the task of inclusiveness. The key understanding is that the sense-of-self did not “make this happen,” and therefore “I” cannot make myself “fully alert.”

I would suggest the implication of this passage is to guide the practitioner away from mindfulness toward awareness. Through much of the early training of Insight Meditation, to “be mindful” is the instruction of choice. Most of our spiritual effort goes into trying to remember to be mindful throughout the day. A constant theme of remembering and forgetting plays forth through most of the early years of practice, and here the image of a pump comes to mind. The effort needed to be mindful is like the burden of pumping water; when the effort of pumping stops, so does the water. A strong sense of despondency can accompany this effort because it is impossible for us to continuously remember anything. Though this may be a difficult insight, it is actually an important discovery if we intend to step out of the “doing” of practice and partake in the freedom within awareness.

The constant inquiry among meditators is how to maintain awareness, but the question is being considered from the wrong end of the suffering continuum. The anxiety associated with the continuation of awareness is suffering, and becoming more worried about how we practice does not move us in a wise direction. We can begin to see how our personal struggle to be mindful is misplaced when we observe the sense-of-self arising within our effort to maintain mindfulness. The harder we try in this, the more forgetful we become. Since the sense-of-self is the embodiment of the absence of awareness, forgetting to observe is inevitable as we try harder to be aware. The problem of how to be mindful is actually resolved not through strenuous effort but by relaxing, allowing, and observing what is already here. Within the framework of relaxation the sense-of-self has a diminishing power center, making space for awareness to be revealed.

If we place an emphasis on “me” entering the here and now, the here and now becomes a project, when actually the “me” is the real project. The “I” state is the unnatural component, but from the sense-of-self’s twisted logic the moment becomes the problem and needs “my” effort to enter it. This inherent contradiction of trying to enter something that already is limits access to the here and now and takes away what is naturally here already. An authentic spiritual practice begins to reverse this perception by abiding with the natural and dismissing the artificial.

If we think of ourselves as outside the moment needing to get in, this is working our practice from the wrong view, intention, and effort. If we want to move from thinking to stillness, we have to relax and see what was there *before* we created the story-based assumption we were outside anything. It dawns on us that we are powerless to make freedom happen because our efforts only disconnect us from our intended goal. We exist as a thought believed, and it is not within the power of a thought to control awareness. When this is realized, we stop trying to

be mindful and relax into the awareness that existed before thought instead of the mindfulness driven by thought. One is temporal, the other eternal.

We give up the “doing” of mindfulness to fully participate in what mindfulness was attempting to do—that is, to allow a full abiding presence. Mindfulness has a way of both advancing and receding that cause. It can maintain the observer and the observed and straddle the fence between these two. Mindfulness tries to have it both ways by proclaiming full participation in the moment even as it applies a fail-safe plan to

pull out if the experience gets a little frightening. The observer or watcher is the part of our mind that likes to know what it is getting into, the contained and controlled part that maintains an escape route “just in case.” At a certain level of understanding of practice, this is all fine, but we soon tire of holding ourselves in reserve. The observer and the observed must eventually merge into a single abiding presence if there is to be spiritual fulfillment.

Releasing our need to control

Since this passage of the Sutta unleashes the full onslaught of experiences, it is implied that within this framework we should not attempt to control what is arising. Any attempt to control our experience leads to a distortion of that very occurrence, and selectively misses the “full alertness” suggested. The more control we try to have, the tighter and tenser we become, and the noisier and more resistant our minds. Again, knowing the Buddha’s overall aim is to lessen mental discord and move toward stillness, we reject control as a mechanism for growth. There are times, of course, when preferentially focusing on an experience is the appropriate response within a situation, but the Buddha’s repeated emphases on being “fully alert” in this paragraph might well imply that he is pointing beyond focused concentration toward the release of all tension by abiding in awareness.

This may seem like a minor point until we realize that we cannot be fully alert and force our agenda upon a situation in the same moment. Full alertness suggests a receptive stance free of any form of manipulation. We are not leaning toward or away from any experience, desiring or expecting anything, but simply abiding within what is. This is perhaps the central reason why many of us feel so inept at carrying awareness forward into the next moment. Abiding in awareness is not our primary concern, establishing our preference is. As long as our primary intention is to control our place within the moment, the sense-of-self will remain in charge and awareness will be obscured.

To abide in awareness without asserting our need to control what is arising suggests a complete restructuring of our view and intention. The eighth-century Indian Buddhist scholar Shantideva said, “We are not here to change the world, the world is here to change us.” This is the level of reorganization necessary for moving a self-based paradigm into abiding awareness. When we attempt to force or influence reality we are refusing to be affected by it. We have opted out of changing ourselves, investing our energy in the course of our desire. The sense-of-self remains fully empowered when it decides how the world must change to fit its needs, and nothing can get through to modify the mind because it is externally focused. Suddenly the paradigm shifts when the mind starts accommodating reality and is modified by the facts.

This switch to a new paradigm throws into question the meaning and purpose of our old conditioning. The sense-of-self thrives on feelings of accomplishment and uses standards of productivity for its scale of worth and value. I have heard many new students over the years ask whether meditation is really a selfish pursuit. It is hard for them to reconcile “doing nothing” with the generally perceived value of affecting change in the world. In this view, as long as we are doing something and can see what we have produced then the day has been well served. Idleness is not valued because we are not living up to our work ethic.

In this short stanza the Buddha seems to be saying that engaging in activity and being affected by activity are simultaneous. He does not seem to be implying that we should simply sit and physically do nothing, but rather that doing nothing can coexist within the activity itself, that everything we need to do can get done *and* we can be spiritually transformed at the same moment. Action is usually possession oriented and focuses on the product of what “I” want from the action. In doing so we miss the life inherent within activity. When “I” reach for the glass, my thoughts are with the glass, and the life within the reaching is missed, but this Sutta passage suggests that the means are equally as important as the ends.

“When going forward and returning”

One way to offset this goal-oriented tendency is to allow awareness within each activity. Instead of being consumed by the destination, make the traveling the purpose of the activity. In moving toward a goal, deliberately look at the surroundings, hear the sounds, and allow life in. This embodied action leaves neither the process nor the product behind, and is therefore simultaneously qualitative and quantitative, which means we concurrently live within the activity of the movement even as the goal is reached. The self’s agenda now becomes secondary to the lived experience of awareness, and the mind joins the body when

the goal is not more important than the activity. When the goal is not the single focus, there is an immediate change of direction when something unexpected occurs, and a new action can manifest spontaneously from the unfolding situation. The reason we thought we were there turns out not to be the reason we were there at all. "Oh," we say. "This is why I came."

We have temporarily freed this passage from the repetitive and sometimes stylized translations that frequently accompany it. Infusing the teaching with new words and ideas may feel like turning our back on a worn but reliable pair of shoes. The comfort and ease of the old shoes are not easily relinquished. I realize many practitioners love the ancient language of the commentaries and their accompanying translations. They do offer agreed upon texts for teaching and support an established and well-honored tradition, but for some the words and phrases seem so antiquated they may no longer serve their intended purpose. Again, refreshing the dharma with our insights should not threaten anyone as long as the basic principles of the teaching are maintained.

A more important point is that when we look at the same passage from similar translations over many years, our perception can become fixed about what these words mean experientially. We can become frozen within a cognitive map of the dharma. Over the years it has been very helpful for many of us to hear a variety of contemporary viewpoints, each evoking a slightly different perspective through meaning and interpretation. These implied perspectives allow us to renew our interest as we inquire into different possibilities. For example the word "defilement" (and its other variations, including "taints," "cankers," "fetters," "kilesas," "poisons," and "torments") has a connotation of repugnancy. That word can be problematic for many westerners because we already find ourselves aversive enough to the "defilements" when they arise without adding an additional undertone of disgust to the definition. It is important to remember we are practicing to understand the entire mind, and the "defilements" are no exception. The "defilements" must be accepted, understood, and ultimately disarmed if their empty nature is to be seen.

From this short passage within the Satipathanna Sutta a fully embodied practice can be implied. We have expanded the literal meaning of the paragraph from a simple set of instructions for being mindful during activity to the broader truth of abiding in awareness. We have seen the limitation of our volition and willpower in making this happen and have switched paradigms so that life is influencing us by offering continuous feedback on the play of our consciousness. All of this is working well within the continuum we established by moving us through the constant noise of our narrative to the stillness of emptiness, and once aligned within that continuum we suffer less. We did

this by merging the Sutta with the wisdom of our practice, and the Sutta emerges stronger and more resolute from its implied message. This passage now feeds our spirit and gives momentum and interest toward reading further into the Sutta applying our understanding as we proceed.