

Dhamma as Refuge

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 11:40

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa — Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

So the next refuge that we take is the Dhamma. *Dhamma* itself is a word that has a root meaning in that which sustains or upholds. It's often translated, especially in the Far East, as the law, the true law. But it's also regularly translated as the teachings or the dispensation of the Buddha.

The first thing that we say about it is that it's *svākāto*, which means it's well expounded. When he begins his teaching, and he's teaching for 45 years, you can see from the early level of the scriptures that it's very spontaneous, in the sense that he knows what he's talking about, but it's not been fully formalised. It takes a few years for it to become formalised in terms of the Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Path, Five Spiritual Faculties, and then he goes on and on. The purpose for that was that it was a way of remembering things, the mnemonics. In those days, they didn't have memory sticks, they just had their heads. So they had to remember things just by these lists, and then very slowly towards the end of the scriptures, after many years, you can see the beginning of just lists, and they say that's the beginning of this later work called the Abhidhamma.

Because what you get from the scriptures are specific answers to certain questions given by individuals, it gives a feeling of immediacy about his teaching. He's not a philosopher writing in his room and publishing a book. It's like he's out on the streets and somebody comes and asks him a question. And then he gives that answer. So no particular scripture gives you the fullness of his teachings. You have to try and get it all together. That's why you get these books on what the Buddha taught. Because it's difficult. You have to read quite a few scriptures to congregate all his teachings.

But eventually you can actually reduce them to the 37 factors leading to awakening. There's a scholar, Warder, who studied the two main bodies of scriptures that still remain, ours and the other ones called the other sect, the other school, the Sarvāstivāda school, which is actually only in the Chinese. When he studied them both, he came up with this: The only thing you could say that the Buddha actually taught were these 37 factors that lead to enlightenment. The ones that you know, like the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, the Five Spiritual Faculties, and it just goes on. You get 37, and that's really the bedrock of his teaching. It's all fully explained. I mean, there are commentaries on it, of course, as usual. But eventually that's what comes through is the fullness of the teaching, both as theory and as practice. So that's why we say it's *svākāto*, it's well expounded.

The next thing is *sandiṭṭhiko*. This means it's immediate, and that's the thing about the *dhamma*. Although

it suggests a future to us in terms of development and end-game and *Nibbāna* and all that, the effects are immediate. You don't have to wait tomorrow to see effects. As soon as you meditate, the effect is there. It's not something that you do now for some future result. And that's the immediacy of the *dhamma*.

So questions about future lives and all that stuff, they sometimes lead you off the actual point of the practice, which is that the enlightenment has to be here, the awakening has to be here, or it's not here, it's immediate. If we're not in a state of wisdom at this present moment, then there's no point in doing the practice. If you're trying to achieve something, if you're doing something now to achieve something in the future, then you're missing out on the present moment. It's like when you travel somewhere and your head's exactly where you're going to arrive, so you miss the whole train journey.

So it's this bringing ourselves back into the present moment and actually seeing that the *Dhamma* is right here and now, it's to be seen right here and now, felt here and now, experienced here and now. And that's the quality of the *Dhamma*, that it's immediate.

The next quality is *akālika*, which means timeless. It's not something which belongs to the process of time. It stands outside time. It's an underlying law. Just like you might get these basic laws of our universe, they're not to do with time as such, they're to do with something which transcends time. It's right there within, you might say it subsists the process of time, so the *Dhamma* is already there. The Buddha didn't invent it, he discovered it. He said it was an ancient path he basically rediscovered or discovered what was already there.

What is already there is not, in this sense, the spiritual laws, such as the whole teaching around desire, which is a cause of suffering, is something that is just there as a substrate to the whole process of what we see around us, the creation of the world. So in that sense it's archaic, it's timeless.

The next one is *ehi-passiko*. This means to be experienced. It's actually got to be experienced. It's not something you just keep in your head. When the first monks and nuns asked to join him in the ascetic life, he simply said, "Ehi," come. *Ehi-passiko*, come and try. That was the initial ordination. Come and try. I want to join you. Come and have a go. So this *ehi-passiko* refers to the actual practice that it has to be experienced. It has to be done. And it's in doing it that one actually sees this immediacy, this business of immediacy.

There's something else involved in that. In fact, it's not a belief system. It's no good believing what the Buddha says. It's not going to get you anywhere. It's something that has to be tested.

The next one is *opanayiko*, it means that it's leading somewhere, so it's not as though we're doing the practice which is not going somewhere. Now I've just said that we don't practice for the future, but in a sense there is a future, there is this eventuality of complete awakening, the complete end of suffering. I mean that's what's being offered. But the practice is in the immediate moment, but it is leading somewhere, and it's leading somewhere in two levels. It's leading somewhere psychologically, it's

purifying the heart, so eventually we should feel better. And it's leading somewhere spiritually in the sense that it is going to an end point which we call *Nibbāna*.

Nibbāna can be described as a transcendent experience. That's what he called himself, he referred to himself as the *Tathāgata*, the transcendent one, the one who's gone beyond. So that's this *opanayiko*.

The final one is *paccattaṃ veditabbo viññūhi*, and that simply means that it's to be, it's open to those who are wise, who are open to it. So it's something that a person is drawn to at a particular level of seeking within themselves. Whatever their quest is, then they will seek it out, and at some point they'll come across this ancient path.

Remember that the ancient path, although it's well expounded by the Buddha, is not peculiar to him. I mean, it's there within most religions that you find. Whether it's taught well enough, who knows, but the point is that it's there within us. We ourselves, having made a decision, can become self-enlightened if you want to become a bodhisattva. That's a person who makes the decision to become fully self-enlightened. So it's not as though the path exists somewhere outside us, it's right there within us. And if we're wise enough, if we're driven by a desire to be liberated from our suffering, then we'll naturally seek the end of suffering. That's one of the statements of the Buddha: it's suffering itself which makes us want to seek the end of suffering. Whether we like it or not, we will achieve it. It's just one of the, it's part of the evolution, you might say, of consciousness. That's getting a bit metaphysical.

So this is what we're taking refuge in when we say, when we're actually saying I take refuge in the *Dhamma*. And this word refuge, you go there to feel safe, don't you? You're taking refuge in something. Finding it as a medicine, something that's going to help you. So that's taking refuge in the *Dhamma*.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be fully liberated sooner rather than later.

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