

Teaching the Dhamma

It is not easy to teach dhamma to others. Concerning the teaching of dhamma to others, only after five things have been internally established is dhamma to be taught to others. What five?

1. "I shall speak a graduated discourse..."
2. "I shall speak a discourse that is insightfully-arranged..."
3. "I shall speak a discourse grounded upon caring..."
4. "I shall speak a discourse without motivation for personal gain..."
5. "I shall speak a discourse without disparaging myself or others..."

...thus is dhamma to be taught to others.

Anguttara Nikāya 5:159

Confusing the True Dhamma

These five things, monks, incline toward the confusion and the disappearance of the true dhamma. What five?

When the monks:

1. do not carefully hear the dhamma,
2. do not carefully learn the dhamma,
3. do not carefully retain the dhamma,
4. do not carefully investigate the significance of the retained dhamma, and
5. do not carefully know what is significant and practice the dhamma according to dhamma.

Anguttara Nikāya 5:154

This brief anthology of excerpts from the Pali texts on the subject of teaching the dhamma are offered as a modest contribution to the contemporary debate on how the teachings of the Buddha are transmitted.

As we can see, the word "dhamma" in these passages seems to refer to a very carefully crafted curriculum of teachings, and that there was a great concern that this body of material be accurately and precisely communicated from teacher to student.

The realization in personal experience and the integrity of intention also seem to be areas of particular concern in the ancient context, as they are today.

Translations by Andrew Olendzki

These five things, monks, incline toward the confusion and the disappearance of the true dhamma. What five?

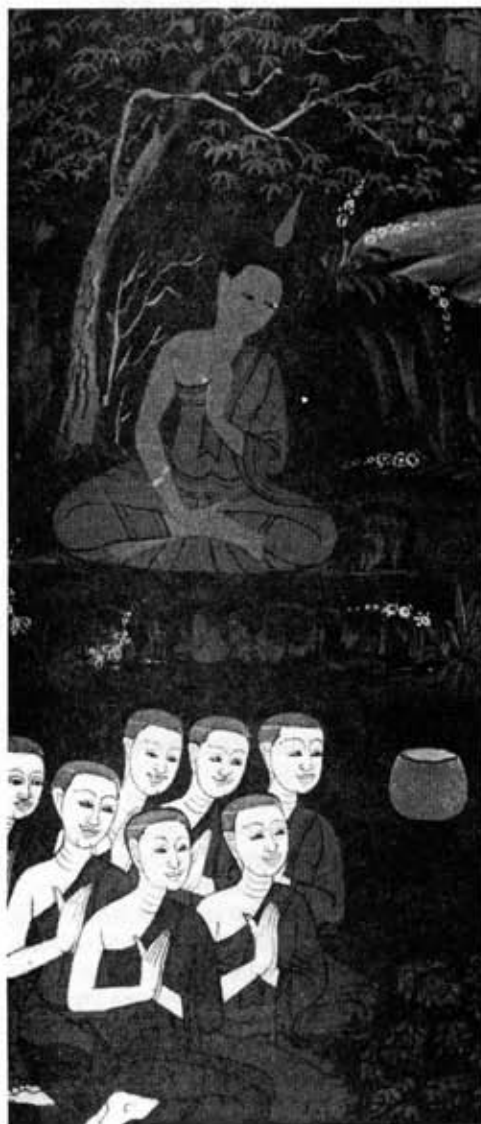
When the monks:

1. do not learn the dhamma: [i.e., the] discourses, poems, refrains, verses, utterances, stories, birth-tales, marvels, expositions;
2. do not teach to others in detail the dhamma as they have heard it and as they have understood it;
3. do not make others speak in detail the dhamma as they have heard it and as they have understood it;
4. do not recite together in detail the dhamma as they have heard it and as they have understood it;
5. do not mentally think about and ponder upon, do not consider with the mind, the dhamma as they have heard it and as they have understood it.

Anguttara Nikāya 5:155

These five things, monks, incline toward the confusion and the disappearance of the true dhamma. What five?

1. When monks mis-understand the discourses they have learned, mis-arranging the words and letters, and then misconstrue the meaning of the mis-arranged words and letters.
2. When monks mis-speak, do things that constitute mis-behavior, are endowed with a lack of patience/forbearance, and possess little talent for grasping the teaching.
3. When the monks who have learned much, who have received what has been passed down, who have retained the dhamma, the vinaya and the manuals, —they do not make others carefully speak the discourses; and because of their lapse the discourses become something with its roots severed, without a refuge.
4. When the senior monks live in luxury, take the lead in falling into laxity, lay aside the responsibility of dwelling in seclusion, and no longer put forth effort: to attain what has not yet been attained, to achieve what has not yet been achieved, to experience what has not yet been experienced.
5. When the community is divided. When the community is divided, then there is shouting at one another, there is blaming one another, there is closing in on one another, there is giving up on one another. Those who are not clear do not get clear there, and the few who are clear become otherwise. *Anguttara Nikāya 5:156*



Cutting the Stream

The Shorter Discourse on the Cowherd
Majjhima 34



ayaṃ loko paraloko
jānatā suppakāsito,
yañ-ca Mārena sampattaṃ
appattaṃ yañ-ca Maccunā.

sabbaṃ lokaṃ abhiññāya
sambuddhena pajānatā
vivaṭaṃ amatadvāraṃ
khemaṃ nibbānapattiyā.

chinnam pāpimato sotaṃ
viddhastaṃ vinaḷikataṃ,
pāmujjabahulā hotha,
khemaṃ patt' attha bhikkhavo ti.

Both this world and the world beyond
Have been revealed by him who knows:
What's within the reach of Māra,
And also what's beyond his reach.

Fully knowing all of the world,
The wise one, by awakening,
Has opened the door to non-death,
Which safely reaches nibbāna.

Māra's stream is penetrated!
Disrupted, and cleared of its weeds.
Be greatly joyful therefore, monks,
—For safety is within your reach.

This verse comes at the end of the Shorter Discourse on the Cowherd (Majjhima Nikāya 34), where the Buddha develops the simile of a herd of cows getting safely across the ford of a raging river.

The strong old bulls plunge straight in and show the way to the others—these are likened to the arahants who make their way across the flood of death to the safety of the further shore. The other members of the herd also make their way across according to their capabilities, from the heifers and young oxen to the youngsters and the newborn calves, just as the various groups of Buddhist followers attain the goal in due course by different methods.

The Buddha, of course, is the one who has first "cut" (chinna) the current of the river with his wisdom to show the way to the safety of nibbāna. It is hard to know how best to translate this word in this context. Its meaning is clear enough, being simply a form of the verb "to cut." But how does one cut a stream? We immediately think of "cutting off" the flow of water, but this is not what happens when a river is forded.

Bhikkhus Ñanamoli and Bodhi throughout their translation of this discourse speak of the stream as being "breasted." This term expresses well the sense in which one boldly stands up to the current as it swirls around one's body during the crossing. I have settled upon the word "penetrated," although it may sound odd at first, because it communicates the basic sense of cutting or parting. In other contexts, such as in the Simile of the Raft, the emphasis is upon "crossing the flood," but the image is different in this verse.

Māra is the embodiment of the lower reaches of our human nature—those parts of ourselves rooted in greed, hatred and delusion that prompt us to act selfishly and without care. His stream can be taken as representing samsāra, the "on-flowing" of unwholesome states, unskillful intentions and unfortunate karma constructions. We can follow the current of this stream willfully, self-gratification being the path of least resistance; or despite our best efforts we can get swept away in the mighty flood of suffering that causes us to be reborn in other afflicted states after each painful and tragic death.

We can imagine the force of this imagery in the dead-flat plains of Northern India, which are chisled with innumerable rushing streams and mighty rivers. The monks went on retreat for three months during the rainy season because the rivers were uncrossable, as much as for any other reason.

The safety (khema: literally a protected pasture) of the other shore is within reach of the monks because the Buddha has shown that the crossing is possible. He has disrupted the current by his passage, holding firm against the current with every step, and has removed many of the obstacles and hindrances in doing so. But his followers still need to put forth their own effort to get across.

The newborn calf in the Discourse of the Cowherd is not carried across the flood on someone's back, but is "urged across by its mother's lowing." So in addition to the intrepidity of his leading example, the Buddha also plays the role of the lowing mother, helping even the weakest member of the herd across the danger with the compassionate encouragement of his teaching.

--Andrew Olendzki