

Anushka Fernandopulle
The Dharma of Leadership
Week One: “The Subtleties of Impermanence”
March 5, 2018



Hello, my name is Anushka Fernandopulle. Welcome to the series on leadership and dharma. This series will have four parts; we'll talk about how you can approach your life as dharma practice, how dharma relates to leadership, and how you might be a leader whether or not you think of yourself as one.

First, I'll tell you a little bit about myself. I live in San Francisco, California, and I am a teacher in the Insight Meditation tradition. Sometimes the meditation is also called *vipassana*. This is a part of the Theravada school of Buddhism, which you find in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Burma—so it's old school Buddhism.

I began my practice over 25 years ago when I was studying Buddhism at Harvard. I continued my practice in monasteries in Sri Lanka and India, and then after several years of full-time dharma study and practice I came back to the US and got a job. I worked in public health and community work, engaged in various leadership roles and positions on organization boards and ended up getting an MBA [Master's of Business Administration] because I was interested in how organizations work and how people can better achieve their goals. I worked as a consultant and currently I work in the fields of leadership development and coaching. I do consulting work with both organizations and individuals and teach meditation retreats in different parts of the world. I'm also on the teachers' council at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Marin County, California.

I'm interested in how people can bring practice into their lives, so for a lay person who has a job, a family, or who lives in the city, I ask: How can you make your practice more than just the half hour you spend with your meditation group? What's the relationship of dharma to your everyday life?

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I'm very happy to be able to share this topic with you because it brings together the different streams of activity in my life from teaching and practicing dharma and leadership coaching.

There are many different aspects we can explore in the concept of leadership in the modern world. I teach retreats about this that usually last for many days; here I will try to cover the same content in a video series in a way that's helpful for you.

Some people might consider how mindfulness has been brought down to the business world and wonder if [this series] is about using mindfulness as a tool for productivity. That's not necessarily the approach that I offer. Maybe it will make you more productive and maybe it will be more lucrative for you, but maybe it won't. What I can promise is that it will help you be more successful in what ultimately matters. It might help you let go of things that are not important. It can help you to cultivate aptitude skills that will help you in your life and as a leader, particularly qualities like compassion, integrity, wisdom, and focus. This approach to mindfulness will help you cultivate a rich, inner life and create a better world.

I first want to talk to you about how to watch this video. You might see many different kinds of videos online. Sometimes you'll see animal videos, music videos, or clips of news. But this is a dharma video, so we're actually talking about something that's different. For that reason, I recommend trying to watch this series of videos as wholeheartedly as you can, which might be different from what you're used to. Sometimes you're watching and listening while opening your mail, checking your email, or different things like that. Our condition for this video series is to try to be here wholeheartedly and present.

You might not yet be convinced that it's worth it to watch this Dharma Talk series in this way, so if you want to you can begin by watching it half-heartedly. After, if it seems good enough, decide to watch it wholeheartedly. That's fine.

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I'd like us to begin with a little bit of practice. You can do whatever your practice is if you have one. Just simply feel yourself sitting here. Feel your physical body. If you want to close your eyes, you can. If you want to keep your eyes open you can. Feel yourself having contact with your chair. If you're standing, feel your feet on the ground.

Take a deep breath in and as you exhale, just try to relax your shoulders, your face muscles, your jaw, your eyes. Then just try to be as present as possible. You can feel your body breathing. Just very gently connect to the experience of breathing in and breathing out. If you would like to do this for longer, you can pause the video here and pick it up when you feel ready. Even a few breaths can help you feel more connected and present.

Since this talk is about leadership and dharma, I'd like to start from the very beginning. What is dharma? Many different traditions might explain this in different ways; here is one way of thinking about it. Dharma often refers to the teachings of the Buddha, the historical person who lived in the sixth century BC in northern India. But these teachings were not actually some complicated, esoteric concoction that he made in the forest. They're just the truth of the way things are. The Buddha went on an existential quest to understand life and suffering and discovered through his own meditative practices some aspects about the way things are, the way things work in the world, the way things work in nature, and what's actually true about ourselves and our lives.

The good news is that his discovery is also discoverable by us now. It's not something that only happened in the sixth century BC. It's actually something that is still true even though our lives are different and we have technology, vehicles, the internet, Velcro, and all the other items that they didn't have at that time. Still, these very basic principles about the way things work are still

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accurate. They still operate. We practice in order to understand and come into alignment with these basic principles.

This coming into alignment, however, is more than just an intellectual thing. We are learning what is true a deeper level. In some ways we rewire our system so that we live in accordance with these laws. Dharma can be translated as the truth of the way things are or as natural law. It can be helpful to recognize that there are aspects of the way things work in the world that we already understand and live in accordance with. One of these, for example, is the law of gravity. You aren't born knowing about gravity, but small children do little experiments. You may have seen kids just observing how gravity works—a little kid in a high chair who drops a spoon, a fork, or keys to see it fall.

What happens if you do it on the other side? Same thing happens. Okay, what happens if you do it not with a spoon but with a fork? What if you're not looking? The same thing happens. After a while, you get the picture. You realize, “Oh, when you try to place something in midair, it seems to be inextricably drawn to the ground for some reason.” You don't even have to understand the reason or the mathematical formula. You don't have to know if somebody is running this or not, or who that is; you just have to understand and learn to live in accordance with the underlying principle.

Then, [I learn that] if I want to place a mug of water somewhere, it's better not to place it in midair because if I do it's going to fall like everything else that I've experimented with. There will be broken ceramics, splashed water, and a big mess. But if I live in accordance with the basic principle of gravity and place it here on a table, then there is less of a mess and I live with less strain, less suffering, and less difficulty.

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Even if by accident something gets knocked off the table and it falls, I already have a basic understanding of why. I’ve already seen that pattern so I can just pick it up, put it back, and I don’t need to stress about it. There’s no need when that happens for me to worry like, “Why me?” “Why now?” “Why did this happen?” I understand this is how things work and so I can just put the thing back. It doesn’t have to be a big deal, and then I move on.

There are ways in which we can learn about the way things work in the world in a more detailed way than we’re used to. I’d like to talk to you about some ways that are most helpful and how they relate to leadership in this world. In the Buddhist teachings, that which we call our life is actually the rapid succession of experiences through our six senses. We have six sense doors: the five that you learned about in kindergarten, so seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, hearing; and the sixth sense door is the mind. Life is a rapid succession of these events experienced through these sense doors.

For example, the sight of a bell triggers an experience—there’s an experience of hearing, an experience of tasting, touch, and smell. A mental experience based on our impression of things is interspersed with this. There are our thoughts about bells, our plans, our memories from the past—all that stuff is happening in this sixth sense door of the mind. What we call our life is this continuous strain of all of these experiences; everything is always changing. This principle is helpful for us to understand, and in Pali, the ancient language in which these Buddhist teachings are written down in, it’s called *anicca*.

We don’t usually perceive that things are always changing, but with train in recognizing it. You might understand this in intellectual ways, like the way that the light changes during the day from night to dawn to noon and evening. The temperature changes during the seasons, winter to fall to summer and spring—I got the order wrong with that, but you get the idea. It’s also true

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that in politics things change constantly. Through elections, people are elected. You like them; you don't like them. There's change in sports, too. Everything is changing.

But most notably, perhaps, we *ourselves* are in constant flux, yet we don't recognize it. Science agrees with this; I'll read a little bit from an article from the *New York Times* called “Your Body Is Younger Than You Think” by Nicholas Wade. It's about scientific discoveries about change in the body. Although people may think of their body as a fairly permanent structure, most of it is in a state of constant flux as old cells are discarded and new ones are generated in their place. Each kind of tissue has their own turnover time depending in part on the workload endured by its cells.

The cells lining the stomach last only five days. The red blood cells bruised and battered after traveling nearly 1,000 miles through the maze of the circulatory system last only 120 days or so on average before being displaced to their graveyard in the spleen. The epidermis, the surface of your skin, is replaced every two weeks or so. The reason for this quick replacement is this is the body's saran wrap. It can be easily damaged by scratches, salts, wear, and tear.

The liver, the detoxifier of all the natural plant poisons and drugs, lasts on average a turnover time of 300 to 500 days. Other tissues' lifetimes are measured in years, not days, but are still far from permanent. Even the bones endure a nonstop makeover. The entire human skeleton is thought to be replaced every ten years or so in adults. Even as we sit here, as you're listening and I'm speaking, the body is in constant flux. We don't perceive that level of change happening in the body but it's always happening. We're constantly drinking liquid. It's becoming part of our body. We're sweating. We're peeing. We're a part of this cycle in nature.

How does all of this have to do with leadership? We'll explore this in more depth as we go into the next videos, but the way we usually think of leadership is definitely impacted by this. That

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which we consider our world is actually constantly in flux. There's no steady place to stand and there never is going to be.

What can help us to be better leaders? What can help us to lead in harmony with the truth of the way things are? I want us to recognize that as leaders our capacity to be responsive is most helpful. This does not mean to just know the right answer all the time but instead to develop the capacity to be tuned in to this level of change. From that, a leader should have greater understanding about what is the most appropriate thing to do in any particular case.

The hypothesis that everything is changing is a theory, and for the period of time before we have our next video together, you can explore this. Investigate this in your experience. Is there anything that I can find in the experience of the mind? Any thought or emotion that seems to be stable, steady, unchanging? Is there anything in the external world that seems to be steady, stable, and unchanging? Is it accurate that everything is in flux? And what does that mean for the way that I relate to being a leader and a person?

Have fun exploring that and we'll see you next week. Thank you.