

Anushka Fernandopulle  
The Dharma of Leadership  
Week Two: “Refuge beyond Condition”  
March 12, 2018



Welcome back. This is the second video in the series on dharma and leadership. To recap, last week we talked about dharma as natural law, as something we can learn about and live in accordance with. We talked about how gaining insight into this can help us live lives of greater ease, well-being, and contentment without unnecessary strain, stress, or difficulty. We talked about how we recognize impermanence, one aspect of dharma, within our experiences of the senses and that which we call our life. Really, there's nowhere to actually stand. Everything is always changing. Maybe you did some exploration of that this past week. We'll now reflect more on other aspects of the dharma that can help us and talk about how they relate to leadership.

Again, I'd like to invite you to set yourself up for watching this video. Consider doing a little bit of grounding. If you haven't done this already, you can just feel yourself sitting here. Feel the connection to the ground, to your chair, to your cushion. Just feel your body breathing. You can close your eyes, take a deep breath in, and as you exhale, try to relax the shoulders and the muscles in your face. You can pause the video and continue this for a little while until you're ready. Even taking a few breaths with awareness can be helpful.

I'd like to start today talking about what we just did, which is a practice of mindfulness—mindfulness of the body. Mindfulness is a very helpful tool both for leads and for all of us in our paths of development.

Mindfulness is cultivating a different way of knowing. This different capacity for knowing will help us see the erroneous ways we perceive the world. As it is when we learn anything new, we can learn to exercise this faculty of mindfulness with practice. We can learn to recognize our direct experience just as it is and gain clarity about what's happening in our senses. Benefits of mindfulness can include being more grounded in each given moment. It can help us not be hijacked by reactive emotions or habitual patterns so we have more freedom and space to act.

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As we learn to see more clearly, we can have the deepest insights into the truth of life, allowing us to fully awaken. Mindfulness gives us benefits all the way up and down. We already discussed impermanence, just one aspect of the natural law of dharma. According to which, everything is in flux and there's no lasting stability in this experiential world, and that includes our bodies, buildings, organizations, politics, elections, and financial systems. All of these are complex systems. They're changing in ways that we can't necessarily predict.

But there's something lawful about the way things change and the way things work. Systems are complex, but they're often connected and patterns can emerge. Sometimes people describe these patterns as fractals. The universe is full of systems that build upon each other and constantly adapt to the surrounding environment. Examples of these patterned systems can also be found in nature with trees, are also in nature with trees, natural systems of life, the economy itself, and societies.

The constant change in this world includes the ways that we work with people and our finances, for example, and it's helpful to be able to tune in to what's happening right now—to be able to discern systemic patterns in order to help us recognize the most appropriate response.

Mindfulness can help us to develop the capacity to see what's happening in any given set of circumstances and respond creatively. We're cultivating the capacity to be fully awake, responsive, and courageous. This is a training in listening to our environment, to discern the best response, and to see certain actions work and then to adapt.

As we deepen our understanding that things are changing and that we don't always know how they're going to change, we also might realize that it's stressful to not know what's going to happen. It's stressful to not know what's going to happen to my body. It's stressful to not know what's going to happen to the economy, politics, or in society. It's very difficult to live in this

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world of uncertainty. With mindfulness, we can increase our capacity to be present with all of this uncertainty. Becoming comfortable with not knowing is a very helpful skill to develop for leadership as well.

One of the implications of the world's impermanence is that there's no such thing as a thing or a person. These are concepts that we use. They're helpful to describe how to relate to something, but it's also very helpful to be able to see through them, to see that they are only temporary.

To give an example of the selflessness, or non-solidity, of objects, things, and experiences, here I have a wooden spoon. This is a nice spoon. A friend of mine actually carved it for me. This spoon comes from, at one point, a piece of wood that was a part of a tree. If you want to tell the story of this spoon going back in time, there was actually a tree somewhere at some point, and even before that the tree was a seed, an acorn. The tree grew. At some point, it was cut down. Then it was cut into different pieces of wood. That wood was transported somewhere, purchased, and then my friend was at a particular retreat where they learned how to carve spoons. Now I use it for cooking. I have to oil it, but I can already see it's wearing down a little bit. There are small chips in it and splinters and I don't want to boil it because it gets dry.

After a while, the spoon will be too chipped and it'll be of no use, and eventually it will get tossed out. When it gets tossed out in the trash it'll start to decay more and become a pulp. Eventually it'll become sawdust and return to the ground. That is the story of our friend the spoon. You can actually tell a story exactly like that in some ways about everything. You can tell that story about your body, including your genetic background and the food you eat, and how all of the different ingredients have caused that which has lawfully arisen as this body.

You can tell this story about the building. This building I'm sitting in has walls made out of brick, which were once minerals in the ground, pulled up, baked, and placed together in the wall.

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And for the moment, yes, this is a [sturdy] building, but eventually even buildings decay if you don't fix them up. Everything is in constant flux. It's useful to be able to temporarily call things this or that, but nothing is actually stable in that way.

You could also think about what you had for lunch or breakfast, or whatever your last meal was. Let's say for example that you had a bowl of soup. We could call this bowl of stuff “soup,” but if you think about it, what really is this? “Soup” is a temporary designation for what's there. At some point recently it was water, onions, maybe some peppers, and spices—and all of that stuff came from different locations. Through the sun, the rain, and the soil, all the vegetable and plant ingredients grew, someone picked them, and they were transported to the store where you bought it. But now, where is it? It's gone; there's no more soup. The soup is in you or you are the soup. That which is called “soup” is gone. It's become part of this body and eventually it will come out the other side as energy that returns to nature. In this way, there's a process in everything, and that which we call this or that is just the lawful arising of conditions.

The most vivid example of this that can help us hold these concepts more lightly is the idea of a rainbow. You've probably seen a rainbow somewhere. If you live in a place like Hawaii, you see rainbows often. They're very beautiful. You can take pictures of them, but you can't actually *get* them—you can't actually have it. Even if you wanted it, you couldn't get it. The rainbow is the manifestation of moisture in the air from rain that's just fallen combined with sunlight hitting the sky in a certain way. But the rainbow itself is not a thing, right? It's not something that you can have, hold on to, or own. When the conditions dissolve, so too does the rainbow. This lack of solidity, impermanence, and selflessness is true of everything—and the understanding of such helps us when we find ourselves in positions of leadership.

A further part of this teaching on impermanence focuses on how all that we know in this experiential world is unreliable. There's no place to rest. There's no final resting in anything, any

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place, or anyone because they're all always in flux. If we seek a permanent place of refuge or rest, then we are going to suffer. It's lawful and understandable. It's like trying to live in a sandcastle or trying to own a smoke ring; it's not going to work for us.

By practicing mindfulness, awareness, and dharma, we can become more aligned with these truths on a visceral level, helping us in the way that we relate to the world and to being a leader. It can lead to less friction, strain, stress, and suffering. Some of you might recognize that I've been talking about what's called the three characteristics or three marks of existence [impermanence, dissatisfactory nature, and emptiness of self].

You can look at the ways in which you aren't living in alignment with these teachings, whether in your life as a leader or just in general. When do you expect something to deliver that which it is inherently impossible to deliver? When do you seek happiness and satisfaction, expecting permanence or reliability from that which is inherently unreliable? That could include expecting an organization to stay the same, or a sports team to perform in a particular way.

It can be very helpful to reflect on what your strategy is for well-being as both a person and a leader. Ask yourself: “How do I expect happiness to show up in my life?” For most of us, we have a strategy in which we rate aspects of our life on a scale from one to ten. We want everything to be a ten, the best—work, family, love, your creative life, finances, cars, pets, etc. You can add on more and more to that list.

[The idea is that] I'm going to be happy when everything gets to ten and I can hold my life there for the rest of eternity. As I say that, it sounds like a bad strategy, right? It's doomed because you know, if you have paid attention to your life, that maybe for a while things are good in one area of life. Maybe things are working well for work, but then they're not working well in another. Or sometimes there are trade offs—because you've been spending a lot of time engaged with your

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job, you've neglected your health or your creative life.

All of these aspects of your life are dancing around, all constantly changing, but you still hope for a state of happiness that can only be found when everything gets to ten and stays there. It's just a doomed strategy. It's not going to work. If for one blessed moment everything gets to ten you can breathe a sigh of relief, but then some part of you will just start dancing around again.

This leads us to a fundamental question in this path of development: Where can we find true refuge—true well-being? The path promises a happiness that's beyond changing circumstances.

Over the course of the next week, you can extend this session by asking yourself: Where do I go for refuge—in my general role as a person and in my role as a leader of a specific group? That group might be your family, your community, your government, etc. What do you expect to stay the same, or what do you rely upon that may not actually be reliable?