

Introduction:

The book is an autofiction, written inspired by real people and real interactions, intended for lay practitioners who are exploring the Dhamma.

The character **Teacher** is a middle-aged dhamma teacher.

The character **Student** is a dhamma seeker with a sincere aspiration for the path.

The dialogues here aim to share the Dhamma through the perspective of a lay practitioner in the 21st century.

(Author: Dat On)

DHAMMA SPEAKS

1: Precepts, Concentration, and Wisdom

Student: What is the purpose of the Buddha-Dhamma?

Teacher: To understand suffering and to end suffering.

Student: What are the essentials of the Buddha-Dhamma?

Teacher: Precepts, concentration, and wisdom.

Student: There are many precepts, from the Five Precepts up to hundreds. How can we make them easier to understand?

Teacher: It's best to understand precepts in grouped categories:

- **Purity of the Threefold Action (body, speech, mind):**
right action, right speech, right thought.

- **Moderation in desire and contentment:** living simply, being at ease with basic needs—in food, clothing, shelter, and personal belongings.
- **Proper conduct:** walking, standing, lying, sitting, and gestures; acting and speaking gently and properly.

Student: What is the purpose of meditation and concentration?

Teacher: To calm the mind and to understand.

Student: Isn't it to make the mind empty and silent?

Teacher: Even a lump of clay or a clam is more silent than us!

Student: You mean mere stillness is not enough?

Teacher: Once stillness is achieved, then comes understanding!

Student: Understanding what?

Teacher: Suffering, the causes of suffering, and the right view that leads to the end of suffering.

Student: Ah, that is Right View, the wisdom of liberation?

Teacher: Yes!

2. Monastics and Laypeople

Student: Why do some monastics break precepts?

Teacher: They are people who are still practicing.

Student: And if they are true practitioners, even without wearing the robe, they can still be considered monks?

Teacher: Wearing the robe or not is less important than whether one is practicing or not.

Student: Why didn't you ordain as a monk?

Teacher: Even at home, the mind can still be ordained.

Student: But if you ordain and wear the robe, many people will respect you.

Teacher: I am just a person who is practicing.

3. Practice and Training

Student: In the world, there are people with special spiritual abilities: healing, diagnosing bodily illnesses, sensing mental suffering, discerning karmic afflictions, identifying spiritual attacks, possessing supernatural powers, divine vision, celestial vision, telepathy, knowledge of past lives... Are they true practitioners?

Teacher: They may have training, but not necessarily practice.

Student: What do you mean?

Teacher: Diligent training over many lifetimes and years can lead to the Five Superknowledges, to supernatural powers, or extraordinary abilities.

But practice is about self-cultivation, refining the mind, and correcting one's character.

One must aim to understand suffering and the end of suffering—that is what matters most.

Student: You mean such people may still be suffering?

Teacher: Many of them do.

Student: Are there people who have both?

Teacher: If they do, that's good, but the most important thing is still the end of suffering.

Even with supernatural powers, if there is still attachment, anger, or delusion, one remains in ignorance and suffering.

4. *Clear Realization, Extinction of Ignorance*

Student: What does this sentence mean?

Teacher: *Clear realization* is right view; *ignorance* is wrong view that brings suffering. When right view arises, wrong view

disappears, and suffering ends. It is a concept, which is often experienced during insight meditation.

5. The Three Marks of Existence

Student: What are the characteristics of the Buddha-Dhamma?

Teacher: The Three Marks of Existence: Impermanence, Suffering, Non-self.

Student: But other paths also talk about impermanence, suffering, and ways to end suffering, right?

Teacher: That's correct. Therefore, the most essential characteristic of the Buddha-Dhamma is Non-self. Whoever understands it and lets go will be free from suffering.

6. Non-Self

Student: Since everything is impermanent, there is no eternal self?

Teacher: Correct.

Student: In practice we should remind ourselves of this often?

Teacher: At first, reminding self is a good approach. But deeper understanding requires seeing the structure of the self, to gradually untangle it.

Student: Please explain more about the structure of the self.

Teacher: It is made up of ideas, emotions, views, memories, and beliefs about an individual called “me.”

All of these are created by the mind. They become points of attachment and discrimination, forming the foundation of suffering.

Student: How should we practice to truly understand and let go of the self?

Teacher: When the mind is suffering, we need to recognize that it is suffering.

Suffering appears in many kinds of emotions, so we must clearly

see each type.

Each type of emotion has its own causes, often arising from mistaken thinking, which we must perceive clearly.

Each of those thoughts may relate to different forms of self, so we need to see them clearly.

Student: This sounds similar to the 4 Foundations in Insight Meditation: observing the body, observing feelings, observing the mind, observing phenomena.

Teacher: Exactly! We should apply mindfulness meditation to clearly see the connection between uncomfortable energy accumulated in the body, which are usually linked to emotions and thoughts.

Student: Can you give an example?

Teacher: For instance, you hear someone speaking badly about your countrymen. Your mind becomes upset, dissatisfied, angry, insulted.

This is unease, this is suffering, this is anger. We need to recognize and label those emotions clearly.

Deeper still, we must understand why these arise: from thoughts such as:

- “I am a member of this country.”
- “I feel pride in this nation, race, and culture.”
- “When spoken ill of, I feel hurt and angry.”
- “I must resist, clarify, and reason to achieve justice for this unfairness.”

Notice: the greater your national pride, the more intense your reactions to praise or blame, the more emotional and uneasy you feel.

This is a form of self-attachment, clinging to the concept of being

a member of a race.

Sometimes you feel proud when praised, but shaken when criticized.

The greater the pride, the easier it is to be hurt, angry, and cause harm.

We need to see that these moments easily create karma: leading to anger, disputes, conflicts, even harm or killing.

The more attached to a national self, the more zealous one becomes in judging, competing, and fighting with others.

Student: A flame of anger can burn down a forest of merit!

Teacher: Yes, all because of self-attachment.

Student: However, distinctions of race, gender, nation, language, and culture are necessary for rules, documents, welfare, responsibilities, statistics, and social interactions.

Teacher: That's correct! Discernment is normal, but clinging too tightly leads to suffering.

See clearly that all arises due to conditions. Because of conditions,

we can be born in any place, in any form, under any family or social circumstances...

Due to conditions, identities temporarily arise.

When unclear, we cling; when understood, we see they are just arising and passing conditions.

Student: So, when we cling less to self, we feel less anger and afflictions!

Teacher: Exactly.

Student (reflecting...): There are many other types of self identities like national identity. Gender identity, class, education, social status... from political beliefs to personal preferences, all can create discrimination and attachment.

Teacher: Yes. Discernment itself is fine, but we should not develop pride, superiority, or envy.

If there is pride, there will be jealousy, attachment to praise and blame, leading to suffering.

Even if we know the Dhamma, we should not be proud of

ourselves.

A true practitioner does not feel proud to be a true practitioner.

7. Wisdom of Liberation

Student: Regarding the wisdom of liberation that is supposedly gained through holding precepts and meditation. This points to the origin of the mind's suffering, and the renunciation of correlated attachments brings eradication of the restless mind?

Teacher: Exactly!

Student: Is it not the same as the knowledge of the ending of taints (Āsavakkhaya-ñāṇa) that leads to liberation from samsara?

Teacher: That too!

Student: When we see the wrong views in self-attachment and are able to untangle them, the mind is liberated from all suffering. But I still don't understand why that is equivalent to liberation from

samsara.

Teacher:

When clinging ends, and defilements and mental impurities are exhausted, freedom is complete and perfect.

If there is still liking, attachment, or desire for experiences, then the mind will continue to seek.

When you see that all 'roles' in the world are no longer attractive and contain the seeds of suffering, there is no longer liking; you let go without desire, simply resting in the present moment with what remains.

There are so many things to understand and let go of. The more you understand, the more you let go, the lighter and freer you become.

Student: So if we let go completely, there is no more rebirth?

Teacher: When liberation is complete, theoretically, there is no more rebirth.

Student: What about the saints of Stream-entry (Sotapana)? Do they still have to be reborn? Because they haven't yet reached complete liberation.

Teacher: Yes. But they have entered the stream of the holy, so they will continue to purify completely. According to the Buddha, their rebirths will not exceed seven lifetimes.

8. Roles

Student: Teacher, you used the concept of “roles”?

Teacher: Yes, self identities are like role playing:

Child, grandchild, grandparent, parent, teacher-Student, master-servant, husband-wife, extended family, friends, close and distant, race, class, social status...

All are played out over many lifetimes.

If absorbed, one plays the role deeply; if awakened, one no longer plays.

Student: I see—it's like a video game, where you can choose different characters. After dying, you are reborn to play again. When absorbed, you keep playing; when awakened, you stop playing.

Teacher: Exactly!

9. *Liberation*

Student: What about the concept of liberation? Is it liberation from samsara?

Teacher: Yes, but it's easier to understand as liberation from momentary suffering first. Like a long journey: you know the destination, but you still need to pay attention to each step.

If the mind is still suffering now, there is still something not understood.

One should not think too far ahead, but keep the mind in the present, to understand where suffering remains and where one is stuck.

10. *Psychology and Spirituality*

Student: it seems that the Buddha-Dhamma is like psychology: a discipline that helps people understand their mind and to end afflictions.

Teacher: That's correct.

Student: Recently, I've noticed many people go to psychologists.

Teacher: The theories may differ, but the goal is the same.

Student: But the Buddha-Dhamma is also a discipline of spirituality.

Teacher: Yes, but understanding dhamma as psychology is most important.

11. *The Path and the Dhamma*

Student: How are the Path (Dao) and the Dhamma different?

Teacher: The path is like a safe road to escape danger; the Dhamma is like the instructions that help you clearly see that road.

Nowadays, the word *Dao* often refers to a religion, and religion involves beliefs.

In the past, the Buddha did not establish a religion; he only taught the Dhamma.

The Buddha did not want people to have faith, worship, prostrate, or ask for blessings and protection.

The Buddha only pointed out the way through the Dhamma, which each person needs to understand to liberate themselves.

Student: So you don't consider yourself a follower of Buddhism?

Teacher: Not following a religion, but following the path the Buddha pointed out.

12. Religion

Student: There are too many religions, and even within Buddhism there are many sects.

Teacher, how can one distinguish which practice is most suitable?

Teacher: All spiritual paths exist matching various stages of one's practice.

At the beginning, one needs support, so one still venerates ancestors, deities, heavenly beings, bodhisattvas, even the godly Buddha.

Later, when understanding arises, one focuses on self-liberation: meaning, one purifies and frees oneself from suffering and ignorance.

If one does not yet know how to walk, support and guidance are needed.

Once mature, one walks on one's own.

13. Recognizing the Buddha

Zen Master: Does recognizing the Buddha—that is, seeing the Buddha—mean one is enlightened?

Teacher: Seeing the Buddha arise in the mind is not important. What matters is whether suffering has ended.

Seeing the Buddha does not mean seeing a physical form appearing, but understanding the Buddha-nature!

Zen Master: Are the Buddha's form and Buddha-nature different?

Teacher: The form is the body; Buddha-nature is the mind. Forms are many, like painted images or cast statues. But the nature of the mind is only one: it is the pure, liberated mind!

14. *Pure Land*

Pure Land Layperson: Teacher, do you believe in the Pure Land?

Teacher: I do believe it exists, but I do not aspire to go there.

Pure Land Layperson: Why is that?

Teacher: Here, there is no lack of Dhamma.

15. *Everywhere is a Temple*

Abbot: Do you want to enter the temple to practice, for tranquility?

Teacher: What kind of place is a temple?

Abbot: Of course, a place for practice.

Teacher: When should a practitioner practice?

Abbot: One should practice at all times! **Teacher:** Then, where is not a temple?

16. *The Five Essentials*

Pure Land Layperson: Nowadays, one only needs to sincerely recite the Buddha's name to be reborn in the Western Pure Land.

Teacher: That is also good.

Pure Land Layperson: If it's good, why don't you practice that way?

Teacher: You cultivate faith; I cultivate wisdom.

Pure Land Layperson: You mean the Five Essentials: Faith, Effort, Mindfulness, Concentration, Wisdom?

Teacher: Yes. You see, in the Noble Eightfold Path, there is no "Right Faith."

Pure Land Layperson: Do you mean the Pure Land practice is not the correct Dhamma?

Teacher: Faith is good, but the correct Dhamma requires all three: Precepts, Concentration, and Wisdom.

17. Meditation State

Meditation Student: Teacher, how long do you meditate each day?

Teacher: I meditate at all times.

Meditation Student: Not just while walking, standing, lying, or sitting?

Teacher: We may practice in each of those 4 postures. Once accustomed, meditation continues at all times.

Meditation Student: What is the meditation state like?

Teacher: It is a balance between concentration and insight: the mind is calm enough to easily observe and examine faults.

Meditation Student: So you often examine your faults?

Teacher: Yes.

Meditation Student: How do you know when you are at fault?

Teacher: Usually when the mind is uneasy, uncomfortable, or agitated.

18. *Why Not Worship?*

Vajrayana Student: Teacher, why don't you worship anything?

Teacher: Why must one worship?

Vajrayana Student: In practice, one needs ancestors, teachers, all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, guardian deities—only then is it safe!

Teacher: If needed, then one may worship. However, that is a matter of religious faith. The Buddha-Dhamma is fundamentally for comprehension, not for worship.

19. The Scholar and the Practitioner

Professor: I am well-versed in the scriptures, have translated many texts, and have taught Dhamma for many years.

Teacher: Then you are a *scholar*.

Professor: Do you mean I am not a practitioner?

Teacher: Even the greatest scholar Ananda had to practice diligently—how much more so for us?

20. Taking Refuge in the Triple Gem

Venerable: Have you taken refuge in the Triple Gem?

Teacher: I have taken refuge in the Dhamma.

Venerable: Why not take refuge in the Buddha or the Sangha?

Teacher: In this time, the “Buddha” has changed, and the “Sangha” has also changed.

Venerable (reflecting): The Sangha may change, but how can the Buddha change?

Teacher: Because in this era, the “Buddha” has become like God!

21. *No Gods*

Intellectual: I believe in science; I don’t believe in spirituality, deities, or karma at all.

Teacher: So you have all the answers about spiritual phenomena?

Intellectual: I simply don’t believe in them.

Teacher: But many people throughout history have had spiritual experiences, which led to the formation of religions and faiths...

Intellectual: They are all superstitious. Only science is real.

Teacher: Science helps us find the truth, but there are still many things waiting to be clearly understood.

Intellectual: So, do you believe in deities?

Teacher: I do, but I don't.

Intellectual: What do you mean?

Teacher: I believe there is a spiritual world, but I don't believe that deities can liberate me for me.

22. *God*

Christian: Do you have Dao?

Teacher: You mean, do I follow Christianity?

Christian: Yes.

Teacher: No, but I follow another path.

Christian: Ah, you mean a non-Christian path.

Teacher: Yes...

Christian: You should follow my religion! God loves you and will save you!

Teacher: I am respectful and grateful for the protection of the deities.

Christian: Not just the deities, but God Himself.

Teacher: Yes, I am grateful for their protection and for their boundless compassion.

Christian: Then why don't you follow my religion?

Teacher: Because I already understand the path.

Christian: What do you mean by “understand the path”?

Teacher: The “path of purification.”

Christian: That “path of purification” is not in the Bible; be careful, it might belong to Satan.

Teacher: No, not Satan—but a Sramana.

23. Right Livelihood

Teacher: Read the *Brahmajala Sutta*, and pay attention to the ideas of right livelihood.

Weapons Dealer: I manufacture weapons, help America fight hostile countries, bring freedom to those countries. This is righteous!

Teacher: You are using your intelligence to serve war. Can war avoid causing harm, hatred, and suffering? Did the Buddha not teach us to use a wholesome mind to prevent unwholesome deeds?

Weapons Dealer: I know, but certain things cannot be solved by doing nothing. I see what I do as right. I bring strength to justice, to righteousness.

Teacher: Even at the cost of suffering and death to others?

Weapons Dealer: My weapons are highly lethal and effective; they will protect my country's soldiers. You are also a citizen of this country—why not support a strong, prosperous nation? Why not support righteousness?

Teacher: Because I am a practitioner.

24. Sleep

Ascetic: I am training to overcome the five hindrances, to the point of not sleeping.

Teacher: You are practicing so urgently!

25. Discerning the Dhamma

Student: Why is “Dhamma comprehension” first among the seven factors of enlightenment?

Teacher: A dense forest can hide the way. You must first clearly see the path, or all effort is wasted wandering.

26. What Are the Signs of Stream-Entry?

Pali Scholar: In the time of the Buddha, when one attained the *Dhamma Eye (Dhammacakkhu)*, they clearly understood the Three Marks of Existence and saw the path (*Magga*) leading to the fruit (*Phala*) of Stream-Entry (*Sotapanna*).

What is the clearest sign that a practitioner has reached the threshold of Stream-Entry?

Teacher:

The mind continuously practices,

Like a river flowing to the sea.

The water carries everything along the current,

The water continues to cleanse the mind.

27. Great vehicle vs Small vehicle

Venerable:

An Arahant remains selfish,

Saving only oneself.

I vow for Great Wisdom,
Coming back again and again to save all sentient beings.

Teacher:

A “blind” person can’t know the way—
How can one save oneself, let alone others?
The Arahant called the Tathagata
Has already left the six realms.

28. *The “Living Buddha”*

“Living Buddha:” I am a living Buddha. I have attained realization, no longer attached to delusions, not even bound by precepts, so I am free in eating, free in male-female relations, free in handling money...

Teacher: Then, my friend, be an ordinary person like me.

“Living Buddha:” But I have attained supernatural powers, left the three realms, and established a heavenly kingdom for Devotees

with sufficient merit and affinity. Simply believing in me allows for entrance to the heavenly realm of endless bliss. One must have practiced for many lifetimes to gain enough merit to meet such a true master. Do you want to follow me?

Teacher: No!

“Living Buddha:” Then you are ignorant, with sight but no insight, clinging in delusion without awakening. Lifetime after lifetime, you will suffer, continually reborn in places like the Avici Hell.

Teacher: Then we have little affinity...

29. God of Wealth

God of Wealth: Honored one, you should worship me. I will grant you great wealth. Then you can freely do Buddhist work, freely save beings.

Teacher: Yes, but the Tathagata advises avoiding attachment to money, practicing with the three robes and one bowl, and cultivating contentment with little. While a layperson need not follow this strictly, one should also not become obsessed with wealth.

God of Wealth: There's a saying: only with sufficient physical needs can one uphold the dhamma!

Teacher: Yes, but the Buddha also taught: one day of awakening is better than a lifetime of obsession!

30. *The Psychic*

Psychic: I see that in past lives you practiced deeply. In this life, you have the ability to lead others. I will pray for blessings from above, opening your eyes, and making you a famous master.

Teacher: No, that's not necessary. All practices depend on conditions; they cannot be forced.

Psychic: You can't just leave it to conditions! One must generate intention, sowing the seeds of merit!

Teacher: Yes, but I do not seek blessings nor merit. I quietly practice and share the Dhamma serendipitously. I do not desire supernatural power nor fame.

Psychic: You must still be deluded. Ah, I see obstacles and karmic enemies nearby. Let me remove your bad karma so your eyes may open.

Teacher: No, that's unnecessary. Each person bears their own karma. The Buddha did not carry the world's karma; he only shared the Dhamma so beings may purify their own karma.

Psychic: You are so deluded it's hard to help you. Even many famous people who met me had to bow down!

Teacher: (silent)

31. *Enlightenment*

Student: Teacher, is enlightenment in Buddhism different from enlightenment in other paths?

Teacher: Yes. Each path has its own concept of enlightenment. One must study and ask them to understand what they mean.

In Buddhism, enlightenment (or attainment) can also be roughly divided into stages.

Some consider it enlightenment when they understand concepts few others comprehend.

Some consider it enlightenment when they experience certain spiritual phenomena: hearing, seeing, knowing through intuition, sixth sense, or clairvoyance.

Some consider it enlightenment when they experience the bliss of meditation.

And one attains true enlightenment when they clearly see the origin of suffering, clearly see the roots of wrong views, clearly

see the solution leading to the right view, and successfully purify all defilements and wrong views.

Student: Can followers of other paths attain all of this?

Teacher: Perhaps, but they too must learn the Dhamma, understand the Dhamma, and practice the Dhamma before attaining realization.

Buddhism is profound and cannot be understood by theory alone; to truly understand, one must study and practice diligently.

(End.)