

Getting It *by Vidyadevi*

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Introduction

So I've just come back from America, and while I was there one of the things that I did was a study retreat. It was a pretty intensive study, I have to tell you, and 'getting it' became rather a theme. People would say, "Well, I kind of get it, but I just don't get it" [Laughter]. So given that my brief is to talk about study as a way to wisdom, I thought, well, what we need to do is to think about how to move from 'getting it' to 'getting it' [Laughter]. 'Getting it,' right. So I want to talk about this in terms of the Middle Way, particularly because the Middle Way happens to be something I'm keen on at the moment. So I want to give a talk about it. The Middle Way is about transcending opposites. It's not just about finding a middle point between opposites, it's about transcending them. So I just wanted to have a look at various ways in which we can relate to Dharma study; various ways in which we can go between extremes maybe and something about how to find that Middle Way with study.

I think something that's very important to be aware of with Dharma study is that we go about it in very different ways, and there are very many, quite legitimate, ways to think about Dharma study. I went on an event, a sort of seminar at Madhyamaloka in March, which was a collection of scholars of various persuasions from around the Movement and we had a question and answer session with Sangharakshita, with Bhante. And I was very struck by how, in answer to a number of questions, he started off by saying, "Well people are very different in that respect". That phrase has resonated with me a lot, and I thought, "Well it's true of study". People relate to study very, very differently, because we are temperamentally very different and I think that's the first thing I want to say, don't feel that there's just one way to do Dharma study - there are many ways. I want to run through a few pairs of opposites, if you like. I don't have very long to speak, so they will be kind of headlines, really, just things to think about, I guess.

Theory and Practice

So the first one I want to consider is theory and practice. I notice doing study that quite often there can be two schools here. There can be people who can be very comfortable with and enjoy abstract thinking and feel that it's very important, and then there are other people who feel that the very important thing is to talk about our own lives and what is really going on, and that, in a way, all this abstract stuff is a bit besides the point or even being in one's head and out of touch. Whereas the abstract thinker can, with justice, I suppose sometimes, feel that the person who insists on relating everything to our own experience is, in a sense being, well, I would use the word reductionist. What I mean is reducing, if you like, Dayanandi's vast sky to this particular star. I suppose I wanted to want to suggest that we might try to see if we can find a Middle Way between these two positions.

Some of us are going to be very much more at home in the world of the abstract so to speak and some of us are going to be very much more at home in something more down to earth. Somehow,

whichever part of that spectrum we are on, it seems to me that we are going to need to find a balance somehow, because ultimately it's going to be about integrating both perspectives. We're trying to, in relating to the Dharma, relate to something that is actually beyond or outside our current experience and at the same time we are trying to relate it to ourselves, we're trying to ground it in ourselves. So we have to have that kind of play going on.

I think it relates to a number of other things: the play between the Ideal and the Real and the play between the Conceptual and the Non-Conceptual. I think Kulaprabha did a good job last night of arguing for the value of clear thinking and that just because wisdom is beyond the reach of thought doesn't mean that we don't have to think about things. The 'beyond' part means we think, and then it's 'beyond' that and we can't just duck underneath it, at least that's the way I take it. But again, Dharma study involves quite a lot of grappling with concepts, but also we get a lot of opportunity to do very non-conceptual things. We can dwell in the world of images; we can dwell in the world of stories. Again it's probably useful for us to experiment with both, if you like. There's going to be one where we are probably more at home, but it's good to get a balance there. I wanted to read you a little bit from Vessantara's new book, *Tales of Freedom*. It got a great tiger on the front, and he says something interesting about conceptualizing. I've been thinking a bit about this following on from a retreat I did last year where we were talking about refining our conceptualizing. Sometimes our concepts are rather blunt instruments, you could say. Actually, what we need to do is to keep refining the way we think about things and I like the way that Vessantara puts it here:

“Clearly in order to describe the world to ourselves we need to use language. Ideally there should be a spiraling dialogue between our experience and our description of it. Experiencing life as deeply as we can, we should hone our language into as wieldy a tool as possible for describing it. This refinement of our conceptual description will then allow us to dive more deeply into our experience. The continuing effort to explore experience and refine our picture of it will free us from false and inadequate ideas about the nature of life and how we exist and enable us to experience ever more fully.”

So you get the picture, ideally a kind of play, if you like, between concepts and language on the one hand and experience, which language can never quite capture, on the other. We've got to play between those things. I think the play between meditation and study is interesting here too.

Literalism and Metaphor

Another pair of opposites is taking things literally and taking things metaphorically. Bhante once said that at least half the questions he's asked he's asked because people are taking things too literally. So I think that's very interesting. On the other hand, I think that's the trouble with describing the Middle Way, it can all sound rather tricky. There is a bit of a catch to taking things metaphorically also. Sometimes we can be a bit too quick to take things metaphorically. We can think, “Oh that's mythical, that's metaphorical and somehow that doesn't have something to do with me, in some way that's outside of me”. Again I think there's something of a play to happen here. We can take things too literally sure. We can sometimes afford to take things more literally too, I feel. Plus there's the added twist that we can take our metaphors literally, which is that you can come up with a really brilliant image for something, an idea that really seems to capture just exactly your experience and then you can get rather fond of it, so that you almost come to feel that that image or whatever it is -

the cave, the piece of toast, the mountain, whatever it is - somehow it *is* your experience. You know, it's not just evoking it for you in a helpful way. You've reified it. It's become literal. So, rather a lot to think about in the whole area of literalism and metaphor. I'll try to not talk about that anymore either, I'm rather fond of metaphors.

Objective and Subjective

The third area is objective and subjective. When we are studying the Dharma, what we are trying to do is to take on a different way of seeing things. We are trying, if you like, to set those topsy-turvy views upright, we're trying to get to grips with a world view which is not the world view we currently have. In a way the Dharma gives us a very good objective framework to do that from. On the other hand, there is a certain value, of course, in having a subjective attitude to Dharma study. A couple of years ago I was on retreat here and I'd more or less had it with Dharma study I have to tell you. It was a study retreat, but I'd just finished editing a rather complicated book, and I wouldn't walk across the room to meet a concept at that time [Laughter]. I'd sort of had it, but during the course of that retreat I realized that that was because it had just become a whole bunch of words, a whole bunch of concepts, and you know a 100,000 words is a lot in a book and to have all of that wandering around in your mind is a lot. And I realized that, to keep my own interest in the Dharma alive, I really absolutely had to bring myself into the picture, which is not the kind of advice one always feels like one wants to take, but I thought, well, "yes that's true". I regrouped around what I, myself, was interested in and I felt I learned something, actually, because I thought that unless we really go with what interests us, what grabs us, and actually organize our Dharma study around that, well we are separate from the Dharma. It's just as important that it has its subjective dimension as its objective dimension, that's what I've ended up thinking.

And we can relate this to the personal and the impersonal as well I think. Let me invoke method and doctrine for you here at this point. There are many truths in the Dharma which are about universal truths. In a way they are impersonal, you know they are not about you, me or anybody in particular, they just refer to life in general and we can fill in the blank there. There are other kinds of teachings, which in a sense are personal. This is what is meant by method and doctrine. There are certain things which are just doctrinal; they are true according to Buddhism. There are other things which are methodological, they are a teaching which is intended in a particular circumstance. So for example, if I'm falling asleep in meditation, well you might advise me to find more awareness, find more energy, brighten up and all of that, and that would be good advice. But if the person next to me is wired high as a kite, anxious and whatever, and you say well just keep on brightening up and you have to develop more alertness and awareness well that's not going to work. What they need to do is relax, calm down; you know the opposite of me. That's a very simple and obvious example, but I think there are very many cases in the Dharma where it is not that obvious, but actually what we are talking about is method. When we say Buddhism says this, you'll say, "Well, does it say universally or does it say in *this* case, and may it say the *opposite* in some other case?" It's very interesting, I think, to think about that.

Another thing on this same area is authority as against one's own experience. This is another related area, I think. Kulaprabha was talking about the *Kalama Sutra* last night. The *Kalama Sutra* says "don't go on the consideration 'the monk is our teacher' or don't go on tradition, don't go on hearsay. So you're looking at what authority to base yourself on. There's a lot to be said here but I just wanted

to mention something that came out of this same question and answer session with Bhante. We said something like, “Well, do you feel that your words should be taken as an authority? Do you feel that when we read you or listen to your talks, we say ‘Bhante said that so that’s it?’” And he suggested that we might consider words in that way to be an authority in the same way we might quote a poet, say, or a philosopher. And I found that very helpful, because I find when if I want to quote Sangharakshita which I often do, I find that the reason why is because I want to make a point myself and then I want to substantiate that point with something else that gives it some weight, and I think is well expressed. I would very typically quote a poet or perhaps a philosopher and I’ve found it useful to think of quoting my own teacher in that same way. Do you see what I mean, it’s an authority in the sense of something being well expressed that you feel to be true rather than simply “he said it so it has to be true”. There’s rather a difference there. I’ve found it very useful to reflect on. Okay a few more pairs of opposites.

Simplicity and Complexity

Simplicity and complexity. I don’t want to say much about this. A friend of mine said he felt that the world was divided into two kinds of people: people who are likely to say, “But it’s all so simple”, and people who say, “Well it’s a lot more complicated” [Laughter]. And furthermore he said that those two kinds of people find it very difficult to talk to each other and I thought this was a very good point. Especially if we are studying together, it’s a useful one to watch for. It’s possible that the simplicity may become simplistic and it’s possible that the complexity just becomes way too complicated. So if we can find ways of talking to each other, there are ways we can help each other out here as well. Viewed in one way the Dharma is very complex, viewed another way it’s all very simple and somehow we have to find a Middle Way between those two things.

Lightness and Seriousness

Okay, lightness and seriousness. I like, and I think Bhante must like this too because he quotes it’s often - Yeats says “*wisdom is a butterfly and not a gloomy bird of prey*”. I think we can afford, in fact we have to have, a sense of lightness when we are studying the Dharma. In fact, we can play. We can play with ideas, we can play with concepts. – we’re not going to break anything. We can really experiment, we can enjoy it and also, as we will know from our Dharma study, it’s very important to hold our concepts lightly. They’re provisional, our understandings are provisional. A light holding of them is really what we need to do. At the same time, and I noticed Kulaprabha using the word ‘sobering’ more than once last night, well there’s a seriousness about Dharma study, about Dharma practice. If we allow the Dharma to have its impact, it does have quite an impact. You know, we could say it’s a very serious matter. So again, we’ve got that sort of play, you know, “Is it light is it something to be taken very seriously?” With all of these things what I am trying to get at is it’s a matter of judgment. We have to be taking study as practice and noticing what’s going on. Noticing which extreme we are likely to be going to, all that sort of thing. In this same area, I think there is a tendency to, I notice in myself, either to place too much weight on something or too little, to get things out of proportion in a way. I don’t have to mention the issue of women and Buddhism in this context, so I won’t, but I will say one thing though [Laughter]. Sarah and I are putting together a book on Buddhism and gender next year and we are hoping to explore the whole issue in more depth, and one of the things I like about that idea for a book is the diversity of perspectives that I hope it will allow for. I think to remember that it’s possible to have very many different ways of seeing things

and also to not let ourselves be overbalanced. It makes me feel so sad actually, especially in the context of our own Movement, to feel that one issue, if you like, and not necessarily that one, can be the thing that makes all the difference in some way, and one is getting things out of proportion, one really is. I do think it's rather a tendency and I notice it in myself, you know, I'll pick up a book we've published, which is lovely and perfect in most details and turn to the one page where there is a misprint and think, "Oh dear". That's a trivial example but I do somehow sense that this is something that I do; we all do, quite a lot. It's easy to seize on something and then stay seized on it and at that point, that's our time for holding things lightly. You know, keep an open mind. You don't like the sound of it? All right. You want to discuss it? Fine. Remember lightness at that time, that's all I would say.

I guess related to this, erm, how to put this, "What do I think the Dharma is?" Sometimes we can think about it quite strictly and at other times we can afford to think about it quite loosely. So loosely, for example, I don't usually say this to many people, so I don't know why I'm about to say it to all of you [Laughter]. Well, something that seems to be a guiding principle in my life is the pop songs that wander through my head [Laughter]. Particularly, the songs of Paul Simon. I don't why he's always got to me, I've always thought he's a good poet, but I don't ever have to listen to them on a CD anymore because they go through my mind. For the last couple of years the one that's been through my mind is the one with the line [singing] "I've got nothing to do today but smile", which has been so untrue usually [Laughter]. In a sense, that's what's given me a sense of perspective again, right? It doesn't matter how little like smiling I feel, it doesn't matter how much I've got to do, I've got nothing to do today but smile, right? So, in a sense that's a truth teaching, and I do think that such a broad approach can be useful.

However, it's also the case that sometimes we also just need to be very clear about distinctions, distinctions between the Dharma and other things. I guess that's one of the purposes of Dharma study, to really figure out what the Dharma's saying and also what it's not saying. And I think the 'what its not' part is the rather more difficult part for us to get hold of. Because of cultural factors at the moment, that's not the way we think, we think inclusive. It's quite a challenge intellectually and emotionally just sometimes to think, "How clear can I be about what's being said and what's not being said?" There's a possibility for clarity of definition there. So, just a couple more juxtapositions for you to think about.

Poetic-Inspirational and Philosophical-Deconstructive

The poetic or inspirational, as against the philosophical or the deconstructive. Poetry and prose have been something that I have thought about a lot. I am passionately fond of poetry; I've spent a lot of my life floundering around in prose it seems to me. I really appreciate the value of explanatory prose. I really love the way poems point beyond words, just a little way. They show you something. They don't explain it to you, they just show you. I love that tension, if you like, between those two things, and that's only talking about words, of course. Those aren't our only way into the Dharma. The point I wanted to make here is maybe about Right View and Wrong View. We're contemplating Right View when we are contemplating something that's inspirational or something that's maybe poetic. Or, if you like, we can deconstruct our experience, we can root out and combat Wrong View. Both are legitimate ways into Dharma study, and again I think a balance is going to be good for us. If we look at the history of Buddhism we can see that that's been important all the way through in a sense,

getting that balance right so that we've got something that's not pessimistic or optimistic, but somehow beyond those things. Again there's a lot more I could say here. In a way our whole approach to the Dharma is likely to be in here somewhere. It's not that we can necessarily choose actually. I mean if we have a very critical deconstructing kind of mind, we can't just say, "Oh, I think I'd rather be poetic." And if we have a very poetic responsive attitude to things we can't say, "Right, philosophy!" We can learn to balance things, but I think one of the ways we do this is actually studying through each other. We may find temperamentally we just are one or the other and we can balance it out but, yes, we can learn a lot from each other in that respect.

Knowing and Not Knowing

So my last point really, knowing and not knowing. What can we know, what do we not know? In what way is it useful to think of ourselves as learning and knowing? In what way is it just useful to think of our realizing more and more that we don't know, continuing to question? I do think that questioning is a crucial aspect of being a Dharma practitioner, I must say. But how do we balance faith and questioning? How do we spot it when our questioning is just becoming skeptical doubt? How do we spot it when our faith is becoming dependence on rules and rituals as ends in themselves? That's a traditional balance, but that's something else we've got to strike. In relation to which I can't do a talk without reading a poem, so here's today's poem.

This is a poem I came across when I was still at school, but I hadn't seen it for years until it occurred to me that I could get it off the Internet, which I did. It's called *In Broken Images* and it's by Robert Graves, who is an English poet from the mid-20th century:

*He is quick thinking in clear images
I am slow thinking in broken images
He becomes dull, trusting to his clear images
I become sharp, mistrusting my broken images
Trusting his images he assumes their relevance
Mistrusting my images I question their relevance
Assuming their relevance he assumes the fact
Questioning their relevance I question the fact
When the fact fails him he questions his senses
When the fact fails me I approve my senses
He continues quick and dull in his clear images
I continue slow and clear in my broken images
He in a new confusion of his understanding
I in a new understanding of my confusion*

I suppose we could think of our Dharma study as coming to an understanding of our confusion in a sense. Also, I like to reflect on that idea of broken images because I think I'm amassing little bits and pieces about the Dharma and making something of them somehow. It feels a little that way.

Conclusion

So, just to conclude, I want to convey that, in my opinion Dharma study is a path for us, for all of us, whatever our temperament, whatever our interest, we can find a way into it. I think it's really important that we develop awareness of ourselves in terms of what our tendencies are when it comes to study. I've given a few ideas of things I think we can look for. I think we can approach it all with imagination, lightness and honesty. Those are the main things. We can learn from each other, I think that's the real value of studying together – that we do get just very, very different perspectives on things and we are very different in this respect. I was in Ladakh last year briefly amongst other places, and I met a nun who is doing a really good job of initiating Dharma study for Ladakhi women, Ladakhi nuns and also laywomen. Molly was there too, right. One of the things that really struck me was that there were nuns who are now on study retreats who had been nuns since they were little girls and who were now in their 60s or 70s who were in tears because for the first time they understood the Dharma. So they had been going through Dharma practice, if you like, for years and years, but Dharma teaching for women in Ladakh had not been attended to, if I can put it like that – there's quite a long story there. So they just hadn't had access to it and to feel the gratitude they felt just to have those explanations was really very moving and chastening really. Makes one understand the value of what we have perhaps a little more.

Utility and Beauty

A final pair of things to think about: utility and beauty. I think it's really good to use what we know. As Kulaprabha was saying, bringing our Dharma study into our life all the time is what is going to make it real for us. At the same time, in a way, as well as 'getting it' we have to know that we are 'not getting it'. We can't 'grasp it'. We can't 'have it'. There's something very beautiful, wonderful and even terrible sometimes, mysterious, about the Dharma and Dharma study, and that is something we have to really get in there. This is something that is included in *vidya*. It's a word that can refer to intellectual knowledge, intellectual understanding and it goes right the way through aesthetic appreciation to some kind of intuitive wisdom or intuitive knowledge it seems. It has many connotations, but for me the word itself seems to encompass this kind of journey, this step. These steps between 'getting it' and 'getting it'.

I don't seem to have quoted the Dharma at all in my talk, here's one very brief quote and it's my absolute favorite so far. It's from the White Lotus Sutra, and somebody says in that Sutra:

“When one hears the Buddha's teaching one's heart is as peaceful as the sea.”

And it's my favorite, I suppose, because it's paradoxical. I mean, what could, in a way, be less peaceful than the sea, but I have a sense that underneath all the waves, storms and general hecticness of the sea you have the deep rhythm, which is so peaceful, of the ocean. And I think that's, in a way, what we can contact when we are really engaged, immersed, in Dharma study.