Untangling the Tangle

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 53:03

The Buddha said famously at one point, "What I teach is just suffering and the end of suffering." Probably more than one of us has said this already. And so pretty much all of what he taught was collected around the theme of suffering and the end of suffering.

One of the pointings that the Buddha offered us around suffering comes in his first discourse—what is said to have been his first discourse—the discourse setting the wheel of the Dhamma in motion. In that discourse he described the Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths. And with each truth he offered an action, something we need to undertake with respect to that truth. The truth of suffering, he said, should be understood.

This may sound like a simple thing, just to understand suffering, but what he's pointing to, the kind of understanding he came to around suffering, is so radically different than what we habitually or more commonly think of as suffering. When he points us to understand suffering, he's actually pointing to a radically different perspective.

Our usual perspective around suffering often is that it's something that happens to us. We feel kind of like leaves in the wind, just being buffeted around by conditions. Stuff out there makes us suffer, makes us angry, makes us frustrated. And in order to be happy, stuff out there has to change. That's our more habitual way of relating to suffering.

The Buddha pointed to something different. What we call suffering isn't something that's done to us, but lies in our relationship to the world. The Buddha defined this dukkha, this suffering, as the result of a relationship to what's happening in the world—when that relationship is one of greed, aversion, or delusion. Suffering is reactive emotions rooted in greed, aversion, and delusion. People or situations or conditions in the world don't actually have the power to make us angry or to make us afraid, to make us reactive. We essentially give that power to the world through this reactivity. Struggle, suffering, reactivity isn't inherent in what's happening in the world.

And that's actually really good news. Because if it were inherent in what's happening in the world, there would be no hope for us to become free. The conditions of the world are what they are—impermanent, unreliable, largely uncontrollable. And yet it is possible for us to change our minds. This opening to the reactivity, opening to the greed, aversion, and delusion, is one of the conditions that supports our minds to begin to let go of the greed, aversion, and delusion. Our minds can change. Our minds don't have to react with these habitual relationships.

Yet this changing of our minds doesn't mean that our minds somehow also change to think or believe that injustice or unethical behavior happening in the world is somehow okay. This takes a bit of turning our minds around what's being taught here. When we open to what is actually happening, what we are exploring meeting is what is already here, what's already arisen. We're aligning ourselves with the truth of what's already happening. What's already here is already here, and a reaction or a holding on or a pushing away or a confusion about what's already here simply confuses and obscures the situation.

As the mind shifts to releasing greed, aversion, and delusion, it doesn't mean that we don't act in the world. This can be hard for us to understand, especially early on in our practice, because greed and aversion have been so much the motivating forces of our actions. When greed and aversion are at work in our minds, telling us we need to act to get that thing or get rid of that thing, fix that problem, change that—when our minds are caught in that view, that view of greed, of aversion, which is essentially a delusional view—the mind cannot fathom that there would be any other motivation or reason to act.

And so it takes a little bit of a leap of faith and trust to begin to let go of our habitual ways of acting in the world, of responding to injustice, of responding to unethical behavior, and to explore what it might mean if greed or aversion weren't here. When greed and aversion are not clouding the heart and the heart sees suffering, that heart wants to act—not from confusion or anger or hatred or craving, but from compassion for the suffering.

So we begin to be more curious about the suffering that is arising in our minds. We begin to really see how much of what we call suffering is essentially our own mind's creation. As we begin to see this, a question sometimes comes up. It certainly came up for me. As I saw my mind heading towards anger, yet knowing anger was painful, seeing it charging towards anger—I could tell the mind was clinging to something that was going to cause it suffering. Why does the mind do this? What possibly can the mind be thinking?

So essentially, I think our minds are really confused. I would say that our human organism has a kind of orientation at some level that wants us to be happy, that wants us to experience well-being. And so there's a pull in the direction of well-being.

And yet the way our system is structured—I mean, it's kind of as simple in some ways as a single-celled organism moving towards nourishment and away from noxious chemicals. That natural pull towards pleasant, away from unpleasant. A very natural movement in a living organism. And yet the way our organism is structured, there's a lot happening between that pleasant experience and our pull towards it.

I think I mentioned in the talk on vedana, on feeling tone, how much of our pull towards pleasant and away from unpleasant is motivated by views and beliefs. And so a lot of our mind, our patterns, our habits—there's this movement, we want to move towards happiness and well-being, and then there's this way that our system has learned based on how it's gotten pleasure in the past. It goes for the quickest route to happiness. And that's often getting what I want or getting rid of what I don't want.

Time and time again we have done that. Time and time again we have gotten what we want, gotten rid of what we don't want, and had a little bit of happiness that comes from that. And so we've learned that there is a little bit of happiness that comes from that. Our mind is not really looking very deeply into what's going on. And so it's kind of like our minds think that's as good as it gets. That's the best kind of happiness that's possible. Getting what I want. Getting rid of what I don't want.

And what we're not seeing, what the mind is not seeing—it's clouded by confusion. The mind is fundamentally confused about what leads towards well-being. And so in that situation, the mind is caught by greed or caught by aversion, believing, "Get that thing, then I'll be happy."

What's going on there is that the mind is basically creating a scenario about having that thing—having that pleasant experience, having somebody look at me the way I'd like them to look at me. Our mind creates this image or projection or fantasy of a future moment in which I'll have that thing. And that feels good, that idea of having that. And so that's where the mind heads.

But what it's missing in that moment is: what's the actual present moment experience? What's actually going on right now? Because what's going on in the present moment is the wanting. The feeling of needing something that's not here. And already in that experience, if we were to actually look at the present moment experience, there's already suffering there. And that is obscured because our mind has taken up residence in this thought.

So essentially, greed is willing to forego, willing to completely ignore that it's suffering now for the possibility of some happiness in the future. This is a confusion that, when we start to investigate what's going on under the surface, we start to see—the suffering that's happening in the greed itself, in the aversion itself. And that begins to give the mind a new education, a new understanding about this movement to well-being.

Our minds are confused because they're caught by habits of mind with which we have been trained. We have been trained to do this. So we're living often in these thoughts and views rather than actually meeting what's happening here and now.

And if it were possible to only live in our thoughts and views, that might be a good strategy. But reality seems to have its way of intervening, coming in and pointing out to us that things are impermanent, unreliable, largely uncontrollable. And so the happiness that we get in that situation is fleeting. It doesn't last that long.

I'd say most, if not all, of our suffering really comes about through a struggle with this impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable nature of experience. It's not a mistake that things are impermanent, uncontrollable, and unreliable. It's the way things are. It's not that we've failed, that things are unreliable. It's the way things are.

So this is a big part of our confusion—that we have misunderstandings about this basic nature of reality.

At very fundamental levels, we think things are permanent, or should be.

When we want things to be permanent, we think they should be. We think they should be reliable. Certainly they should be controllable. If something isn't controllable, I've failed in some way.

At the same time, there's another thread woven into our suffering. Our suffering seems to be connected not only to a misunderstanding about the inherent nature of reality, but also to a deep inner wish to be happy—an inner wish to be safe and at ease, to have well-being. And often suffering arises when these wishes seem out of reach.

This exploration around these threads—the truth of the way life is and these deep wishes that we have—has been central to my own practice. So much of my inquiry into suffering has been seeing the interplay between these two: the deep wishes we could call core wishes for our own happiness, for the well-being and safety of ourselves and our loved ones, this metta wish, and the truths of impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable.

This wish for well-being is a beautiful wish. It's a wholesome wish. It's the wish of metta. And a lot of our suffering happens when that wish gets tangled up with the truth. Our suffering is this tangle—this knotted confusion between impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable and our deep wish to be safe and happy and peaceful.

We find ourselves in this tangle, caught in strategies that try to deal with the seemingly irreconcilable nature of these wishes and these truths. We have a deep wish for safety, well-being, happiness, and we start to see the vulnerability, uncertainty, impermanence in the world. Fear is born. Anxiety is born. Confusion is born. Anger and rage can be born when these two get tangled up.

This meeting of truths and wishes is where craving arises. Craving is essentially a misunderstanding that has interplay with both sides. We meet the truth of impermanent, uncontrollable, and craving says something like, "No, that's just wrong. It should not be that way." In the meeting of those truths with craving, we may either blame ourselves for the impermanent, uncontrollable, unreliable nature of our experience—somehow feeling like we're wrong or we've failed—or we may blame the world, put it out there as if the world is somehow targeting us with these events. Or we blame somebody else for that impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable nature of experience. There's a distortion there, not really taking in the truth. This is truth.

Deeply tied up with craving is often this wish, the wish for our own well-being, our happiness, the wish for the well-being and happiness of our families and friends. These two collide and get tangled because it feels like if I want to be happy and healthy and safe, then there's something wrong if I can't control things. The uncontrollability and the wish for safety become so knotted up, so tangled, because we cannot see—our minds just cannot understand—how these two might coexist: the wish for our safety and the truth of uncontrollability. The mind has trouble holding that both of those are valid.

As we begin to touch in through our meditation practice to this truth of impermanent, unreliable vulnerability, we might begin to experience the feeling of vulnerability that comes with this wish for safety and tell ourselves, "Well, things are impermanent. Things are uncontrollable. Vulnerability, okay, that's just the way it is." But it may be that this movement is almost a denial of that wish for safety.

Sometimes we can fall into what Bhante was talking about this morning—spiritual bypassing—where we use the Dharma as a way to ignore or deny what we may be experiencing, something like anger or aversion. "No, I'm a good Buddhist. I don't experience those things." We find ourselves in that spiritual bypassing mode.

There's also something that I'm going to call spiritual bludgeoning—when we sometimes beat ourselves up with the Dharma. It sounds like, "Yep, things are impermanent. That wish for safety? That's just not a valid wish." We may try to beat our wishes for well-being and happiness and safety with this kind of understanding: "Well, things are impermanent, and so this vulnerability—okay, that's just the way it is. This wish for safety is not a valid wish." We may think that.

And yet, that wish for safety is a wholesome movement of the heart. What happens as it meets that truth of uncontrollability is that the clinging, the craving around that wish for safety is demanding safety in a certain way—demanding a particular result, as Bhante talked about this morning.

So the exploration here is beginning to be curious about this knot between these two, between these truths and these wishes. The craving around a particular way to be safe is what creates this tangle when our experience is impermanent and uncertain.

Wisdom asks us to let go of the expectations around the wishes. Wisdom asks us to let go of the craving for particular outcomes around these wishes, around this movement of well-being and love. It asks us to let go of particular expectations. It doesn't ask us to let go of the wishes. Wisdom actually wants us to embrace those wishes. Wisdom is wanting us to simultaneously recognize these two threads. The threads of truth and the threads of love can coexist—not tangled, but interwoven. The weave of our lives can be this weave of love and wisdom, not in conflict.

One of the things I've learned is that whenever there's suffering, whenever I'm experiencing suffering, there's a tangle going on. Think of the way threads get tangled—the knot is composed of these knotted threads of love and wisdom. The tangle exists because of the confusion, because of the craving. And so anytime there is suffering, it's an opportunity. The suffering is pointing right out to us where we are resisting the truth and where we are confused about love. It's an opportunity for us to see right into love and wisdom when we meet suffering.

Certainly in my years of practice, when I saw suffering, I often did a couple different things. One was this sense of it feeling like a tumor, some really bad thing—this anger or whatever it was—and I felt like I needed to take a scalpel and cut it out of my system, to excise it, throw it away. But if we look at the tangle,

if we take scissors and cut the tangle out, we are left with a hole in our fabric.

Actually, my experience is that when we're trying to get rid of something in that way, thinking that this is bad, wholly bad, approaching our dukkha as something that is bad and has to be gotten rid of—what that suffering is composed of is not going to just let itself be cut out. Because again, these threads of love and wisdom are there waiting to be revealed in the tangle.

So how can we do this? How can we let the tangle untangle?

Another strategy that I often employed was when I saw something challenging, I would think, "Okay, there it is. I am going to figure it out." Put it under the microscope, find all the pieces, pull it apart, figure out what's in there. A form of greed, essentially—greed combined with aversion, both of them together. I learned a lot doing that, but I also reinforced a lot of greed and aversion in doing that.

What I have learned is really helpful in this seeing of the tangle is to honor it. I've started using this word *honoring*. Honor the tangle. Respect that suffering. It's there to show us love and wisdom. Can we hold it in that way? Willingness to honor this tangle will—it's a slow process, I'd say, a slow unwinding sometimes. And what is often helpful there is a gentle meeting, just of the most obvious piece of whatever's here in that tangle.

And so we might, in the way that I had described, have put it under the microscope, kind of like, "Yep, I've seen anger before, there's usually fear in there, I'll find the fear." And yes, I would find fear when I was looking for it. Or maybe there's something that we think is going on there, and so we may try to dive inside of the pattern to find out what's happening. A lot of the time, if we're looking for something, we will find it. We'll construct it even.

So in my own experience, it can be really helpful to just settle back and explore meeting that pattern of the tangle. Think of it as a kind of warm bath of mindfulness and wisdom that lubricates the tangle, lets it loosen gently. And as it loosens, little pieces of it are seen. Just be with what's most obvious about these tangles. Let the tangle reveal itself to you.

This takes patience and trust, deep trust. And also it takes recognizing when that's possible. You've been practicing here for nearly three weeks, and this is possible at least some of the time. In your meetings you've been reporting this possibility of just holding suffering—that the mindfulness is strong enough for all of you at times to hold suffering and learn from it in this way.

For me, realizing that suffering is this beautiful, beautiful pointing to love and wisdom has given me so much patience around it—that what can be revealed there is beauty and truth, love and truth, as we can hold it with mindfulness. It takes knowing when we can do that, because there are times when we try to meet a particularly tangled knot and what happens, instead of the mindfulness being a lubricant letting the tangle loosen and weaken and point out the love and wisdom that's kind of in there, is that it just gets more and more knotted up. If that's happening, if it feels like it's getting tighter and tighter, if it feels like

we're going down the rabbit hole of the pattern, that is not the time to try to sit with it. Then it's time to redirect the attention, work with something else, set it aside. There are lots of different ways we've talked about doing that. And yet there's a lot of capacity that you've developed over these weeks with which to meet dukkha.

My microscope kind of way of meeting dukkha was like if I wanted to figure something out about this cup, I'd be taking an ice pick to it, trying to pry it apart and figure out what's inside of it and what it's made of, what's underneath that glaze. I could smash it even. That's a pretty violent way to go about meeting suffering.

The kind of investigation or meeting—being with, actually, it's more being with—one of my teachers at one point, I think it was Sayadaw U Pandita, brought a cloth up and said, "This is how we meet experience." Rubbing it with a soft cloth, staying in contact with it, that kind of gentleness. There's a different set of things that are learned in this way. That's a being with experience. One of you in the interviews talked about accompanying ourselves. That's the quality.

If you notice that there are ideas or views about what might be underneath, hold those views lightly. So many times when I have been investigating some kind of suffering, I thought I knew something. I thought I had some idea about what it was about—some connection to my childhood trauma on the playground, or some relationship issue. I thought I knew. My analytical mind would come up with very reasonable ideas about what this suffering was about. But many, many times I saw that when I actually just set those aside, when I actually allowed it, held it in this way I'm talking about—this gentle holding, letting it reveal itself to me—so many times I was completely surprised by what was revealed.

One of the most surprising experiences I had along these lines was when I was practicing in Burma with Sayadaw U Tejaniya at Shwe Oo Min Monastery. I was experiencing quite a bit of low-grade depression over several weeks. I could see some of how it arose and actually tied it to this notion of being excluded on the playground. There was a particular time in the day when talking was allowed at this monastery, and people would get together and walk and talk—there would be these walk and talks happening up and down the middle road of the monastery. I often saw this depression coming up there, and it got strengthened as I saw two people together talking. This idea arose: "Oh, this is connected to being excluded on the playground."

Fortunately, I just put that aside and said, "Okay, well, what's here? What's happening?" I investigated this in many different ways over the course of a couple of weeks, just seeing when it was coming into being, what happened. I actually at one point noticed it came into being out of calm. My mind was really calm, and suddenly it was sinking into depression.

Well, that's interesting, huh? I wonder what that's about. So again, just noticing.

At times when the depression was kind of strong and I needed to not be so focused on it, I would expand

my awareness: "Okay, well yeah, that depression's there, and there's thousands of other things happening in the present moment." So okay, there's seeing happening, hearing's happening, walking's happening, oh there's the depression, okay, there's seeing, there's walking, there's the depression. Just letting myself take a bigger container. There's just so many different ways of working with this.

And then at one point, as I was walking back to my room, I felt the depression really get strong. But at this point the mind was pretty at ease with working with it. As I went to my room and did my lying meditation—because I was doing primarily lying meditation—I felt the depression just expand. It felt like it was growing really big. I was like, "Wow, I haven't felt it get that big before." But this is what was happening. It was just expanding, expanding. Okay, can I be with it while it expands? I could. I could be with it. It's a little scary, but I could be with it.

And then at some point, while I was sitting with that expanding depression, it felt like the entire thing flipped inside out and it became expansive mettā.

The next thing my mind did was have a kind of smashing thought: "Oh, that's sappy, that's stupid." And I was like, wow. Seeing that as the mind entered into this vast, beautiful mettā experience, there was this relationship to it—"that's sappy, that's stupid." Seeing that the mind wanted to repress the mettā. That was the depression—this kind of subtle holding down of this mettā. That was not what I had expected.

Many, many times in investigating some kind of suffering, I have seen love in there, with some kind of weird or contorted relationship to it. And connected also to these truths of impermanent, unreliable—that relationship around that mettā was something like, "Well, that mettā, that's not reliable." Something like that.

And so the tangle—honoring the tangle, allowing it to reveal the love and the wisdom. It's a very beautiful process that we're engaged in. This transformation happens.

I think Bhante used the analogy around ice and water. In a way this is similar, because the ice is like when love and wisdom are all frozen up together. But that ice, every single molecule of that ice is water. It's H_2O. And yet it's frozen, it's stuck. The transformation, the melting, just changes state to a fluid, malleable state. Very similar to this.

The tangle—the tangle is the threads of love and wisdom. And our practice helps us to hold and meet that, so that we see into these truths. Our heart begins to stretch through this exploration to understand actually that our hearts can hold both: these wishes, these pure wishes of well-being, of love, of connection, of care, of compassion—and these truths. They are not in conflict. They're only in conflict when viewed from the perspective of greed and aversion and delusion.

And so honoring what's arising. Because it is pointing the way for us. Our suffering points the way for us to more deeply understand. Honoring our pain, honoring our confusion.

It reminds me of a phrase from a poem I mentioned at the beginning of the retreat, a poem by Izumi Shikibu: "Watching the moon at dawn, solitary mid-sky, I knew myself completely, no part left out."

No part left out. The pain, the confusion, the anger, the frustration, the craving—all asking to be seen, and in a way waiting to reveal love and wisdom.

Let's just sit for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

This concludes the talk.

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