Using Dukkha as a Guide

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Tonight I'd like to explore the topic of dukkha, of suffering, and how we can use this experience of suffering as a guide in our practice.

I'd like to begin by talking a little bit about this word dukkha. That's the Pali term which we usually translate as suffering. But that translation often, in our language at least, has a broad context, a large context sometimes. When we hear the word suffering, we think of catastrophe, disease, accident, tsunamis. We think of larger things. The term dukkha actually has a broader set of meanings, and I'd like to explore this broader set of meanings from a couple of different perspectives as a way to begin.

The main usage of the term dukkha in the texts is within the context of the Four Noble Truths: the truth of suffering, dukkha-sacca; the truth of the cause of suffering; the truth of the cessation of suffering; and the truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering. In this context, the understanding in the Four Noble Truths is that dukkha is something that can be transcended, overcome. We can come to the end of this dukkha.

So what is this dukkha that we can come to the end of? There are three definitions in the texts that I know of, and I'll talk about all three just briefly tonight—three different ways that the term dukkha is used.

As it's used in the Four Noble Truths, this kind of dukkha is a result of mental reactivity. The second noble truth indicates that the cause of dukkha is wanting, craving—the Pali word tanha. So this kind of dukkha of the first noble truth is a specific kind of suffering that's related to the fact that we crave things. Basically, we want things. We want to have things that we like, we want to get rid of things that we don't like. When things are pleasant, we like them, we want more of them. When things are unpleasant, we want to get rid of them, push them away. In a very simple way, a very natural way—in fact, a very human way, a very biological way almost—we react to pleasant and unpleasant. This dukkha of the First Noble Truth is really about a kind of mental reactivity to our experience, and I'll talk more about this in depth tonight.

The other two kinds of dukkha that are talked about in the texts: the first is in the context of what's talked about as feeling, vedana—the way all experience, no matter what our experience is, has a quality of this feeling tone of being either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant, which we sometimes call neutral. The term for the unpleasant feeling tone is dukkha. Just like our body feels unpleasant sensation when we cut it with a knife, or if we fall down and bruise our knee—there's unpleasant sensation that arises in our body. This physical unpleasantness is also used as the term dukkha in the texts.

The other place that the term dukkha is used is in a famous three-part phrase. The first is sabbe sankara anicca, which basically translated means something like "all conditioned things are impermanent." The second phrase is sabbe sankara dukkha—"all conditioned things are dukkha." This is often translated as suffering, but in this context, as I'll explain, "unreliable" is perhaps a better term. And the third phrase is sabbe dhamma anatta—"all experience is not self."

In this usage, sabbe sankara dukkha, any phenomenon that happens is understood to be dukkha, is understood to be essentially unreliable as a place or an experience around which true deep happiness can be found. Whatever experience we have—whether it's a pleasant experience, an unpleasant experience, a neutral experience—the very unreliability, the very impermanence of that phenomenon, indicates that it is not going to be a place where we can find lasting satisfaction. It's going to disappear. So there's no way that we can find lasting satisfaction out of that experience.

This three-part phrase is often described as the three characteristics of experience. I'm sure you've heard this: the three characteristics—all phenomena are impermanent, all phenomena are suffering, all phenomena are not self. In this understanding, it's actually all conditioned phenomena are impermanent, all conditioned phenomena are dukkha, all phenomena are not self. This is true whether or not there's any reactivity in our minds. The fact of change means that phenomena are unreliable just in their own nature. The fact of our clinging or not clinging, grasping or pushing away, holding onto those phenomena is irrelevant in terms of their having this quality or characteristic.

This, I think, is where the understanding comes from when people say, "Oh, the Buddha taught everything is suffering." Well, he did, in this sense, teach that everything is unreliable.

Everything has the flavor of, if clung to, it will produce suffering.

So these two kinds of dukkha—the dukkha of physical pain in the body, and this unreliability of phenomena—these are not kinds of dukkha that will go away with practice. Phenomena will remain unreliable whether or not we cling to them. It is not these kinds of dukkha that the Third Noble Truth is talking about transcending.

What can be transcended is our misunderstanding of experience, our misperception, our confusion around experience. This confusion leads us to be unable to accept these two kinds of dukkha. It's very hard for us to accept physical pain. It's very hard for us to accept the unreliability of experience. We want to push away physical pain. We want to hold on to experience, hoping that something—anything—will do it for us. Surely there's got to be some experience out there that will make me happy.

So it's our misunderstanding, our confusion around those two kinds of dukkha that can't change, that produces the dukkha of the First Noble Truth. Our reactivity to physical pain, our grasping onto phenomena hoping something will make us happy—this reactivity is the dukkha of the First Noble Truth. And this is the kind of dukkha that the Buddha said can come to an end.

The dukkha of the First Noble Truth has quite a broad range. It is far more than the major kinds of suffering we think of when we use that term in English. Some translators have used other terms. Thanissaro Bhikkhu uses the term "stress" to translate dukkha. There are ways that I appreciate this term, partly because stress, for us, is a mental phenomenon. When we hear the word stress, we usually think of something happening in our minds. This points to the aspect of dukkha of the First Noble Truth as being something that happens in our minds.

In fact, one definition of freedom from this kind of dukkha, the ending of dukkha—one way that the state of nibbana, of freedom, is defined—is as freedom from mental pain and grief. One can experience that state of no mental pain or grief. This really points to the fact that the dukkha of the First Noble Truth is a mental phenomenon. It happens in our minds.

Now, of course, it happens in reaction to bodily sensation. It happens in reaction to phenomena, to events in the world. It happens in response to things we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. It happens in response to things we think or feel or perceive.

So this translation of "stress" conveys this sense of mental reactivity. It also conveys the recognition, the understanding, that dukkha can be pretty subtle. We can be a little bit stressed. We can have a little bit of clenching in our stomach as we sit and wait for a practice discussion. That's dukkha. We can have a little bit of anxiety about the last egg on the table. That's dukkha.

The range of dukkha traverses from the subtlest kinds of unease to the major sufferings of our lives. It includes all of our afflictive emotional states, as well as subtler states of unease—just a subtle sense of offness, things not quite feeling right, a sense of "hmm, if only I tweaked a little bit, things would be better." Dukkha includes all of these.

Understanding that dukkha is in our minds—that it's a mental phenomenon, a mental experience, a mental process—helps us see that the dukkha of the First Noble Truth happens in our minds. And the Second Noble Truth indicates that the cause of dukkha is this wanting, this craving, essentially this reactivity: not liking things and wanting to push them away, liking things and wanting to hold on to them. Reactivity around wanting things to be pleasant, wanting to get rid of things that are unpleasant. Not being aligned with, not accepting—I talked about acceptance a little bit yesterday morning—not accepting the way things are in this moment. Endlessly feeling like we want to negotiate and fix or change or alter or shift things.

Wanting things to be other than they are—the Second Noble Truth teaches us that this wanting, this craving (tanha is the Pali term), is the cause of our distress, our suffering. This wanting is the cause of the dissatisfaction, the unease.

We can explore this as a mental exercise. Think about something you might want to have. Maybe you want a different room, or more leftovers at supper. Maybe there's something you'd like to have.

And maybe it doesn't cause you much suffering, but just thinking about something that you might want here on the retreat. Then just imagine the possibility of that wanting going away. If the wanting goes away, the dissatisfaction goes away. Any kind of struggle or stress or unease goes away.

So the suffering, the dukkha, is caused by this craving, this wanting. And there are so many different ways that we want things. I'd like to explore this a little bit with you, just exploring how we want things.

I did an exploration myself of how I want things, and there are so many different ways. I was kind of shocked when I went through them all. I mean, there are the obvious ones—wanting to have things that are pleasant, wanting to get rid of things that are unpleasant. There's wanting to fix or change something. This is one that's very common for me. Rather than wanting to get rid of something that's unpleasant, I want to fix it, I want to tweak it.

We might want to be seen or recognized. We might want to be someone. We might want to be the one who's in charge. We might want to be the one who has a good meditation practice. We might want to be the one who can attain states of concentration. We might want to be the one who is peaceful.

We might want to know what to do. Something that seems to come up for us sometimes in practice is we're in some state, and the thing that comes up in our mind is, "What's next? What am I supposed to do with this?" And that's a kind of wanting. There's a feeling of, "It's not okay just to be with this. There's something I'm supposed to do with it." So wanting to do something.

All of these kinds of wanting, these ways that we want—as we begin to explore the connection between wanting and our suffering, we really begin to get it. Not only is the suffering created in our minds, the wanting is also created in our minds. And when we explore it even more deeply, we realize that the thing that we want is actually also simply something arising in our minds. We don't actually want that spot in the hall, or we don't actually want that thing that's out there. What we want is our idea of that thing.

As we really begin to explore this wanting-suffering connection, we begin to really get it that this process of suffering is something that happens in our minds. This is really good news, because the fact that it happens in our minds—and the fortunate fact that it's not hardwired—means something important. It's not automatic. It's not biologically wired that when there's something unpleasant, we have to hate it and want to get rid of it. It's not biologically wired that when there's something pleasant, we have to gravitate towards it and hold onto it. Fortunately for us, it's not biologically wired. It is created in our minds. This fact means that it's possible to shift, change, alter our relationship to experience.

When we see that the wanting is creating the suffering, and the more we see this in our own experience, the more we actually recognize this link between wanting and suffering, the more we recognize—it's not us that actually recognizes it, in my experience. It's like the training. We sit and pay attention to dukkha.

The first noble truth, the Buddha's instruction: understand dukkha. Understanding means not thinking about, not reflecting on, but turning towards, meeting the experience of dukkha. Being mindful of body

and mind in this state. Anger is arising, a state of dukkha. Body feels like this, mind feels like this. This is understanding dukkha.

We get an education in the suffering nature of the experience—of anger in this case, of any kind of dukkha. When we're willing to sit with it, be with it, understand it in this way, the body and mind understands. We don't have to learn this. It doesn't have to be me that knows this. The organism begins to understand.

This is suffering. This is not well-being.

And as the exploration continues—as we continue to explore this dukkha, in this case anger, noticing body, noticing mind—we may begin to see the wanting that is tied up with that anger. The wanting to be right, whatever kind of wanting. There are so many different ways we can get into anger. So whatever wanting it is, whenever we see that kind of climbing towards anger, we begin to understand the wanting that's tied up with the suffering.

And then at some point, even further down the line—for me, this kind of exploration took months for this particular pattern, a dukkha pattern I was observing around anger—at one point I saw my mind inclining towards that anger. A thought arose about a person I was angry with, and I felt the mind kind of leaning in. There was this momentum of a freight train wanting to jump on that thought and think more thoughts in order to get angry.

Because the organism had spent enough mindful time in this space of understanding dukkha for what it was, the mind itself recognized that intention towards anger: that way lies suffering. And the mind itself let that intention go.

This is part of how our practice unfolds. We explore our suffering, we use our suffering to help us understand ourselves. That mindfulness of the suffering helps our mind begin to understand how the wanting contributes. And then when the mind sees that wanting, the mind understands that it doesn't want to go towards dukkha, so the mind can let it go—almost the way your body lets go of touching something hot on the stove. Before we even really feel the pain of the heat, the body is already pulling back because it knows that way lies suffering.

So this exploration of understanding dukkha begins to educate this organism, this mind-body process. What is dukkha? Dukkha does not equal well-being. It's a very simple lesson the mind and body learns.

We can use this exploration of dukkha as a guide for us. The Four Noble Truths lays out the entirety of our practice, of our path, in terms of exploring this question of dukkha: exploring understanding dukkha, exploring how we might be able to let go of the cause of dukkha, exploring the ending of dukkha, and exploring the conditions and causes that support that ending of dukkha—the path of practice, the Eightfold Path.

The Buddha pointed out that this exploration around dukkha is our practice. And so we can look at dukkha as being a guide for us. Whenever there's any kind of dukkha, small or large, it points out that there's something happening in our mind—some extra holding, craving, pushing away. The dukkha is a signpost for us: there's something here to pay attention to. Anytime there is dukkha, there's some kind of wanting. So the suffering is a pointer for us that there's something that can be let go of. We can begin to explore these different kinds of wantings.

There's a kind of New Age saying, something along the lines of "life gives us the lessons that we need." And I believe this is true, but I don't think of it quite in the way perhaps that the New Age sense of it conveys—that life is out there somehow designing situations for us so that we meet these situations. We get the lessons we need because in every moment we are meeting our own minds. We are meeting our minds and how they are craving, wanting, pushing, pulling, liking, not liking. In every moment. This is what creates our suffering. This is what creates the lessons that we need. Life does give us the lessons we need. Our mind gives us the lessons we need, if we are willing to open to this exploration of dukkha.

So we really can use our suffering as a guide for us.

The second noble truth concerns letting go of craving. The first noble truth the Buddha recommends is understanding dukkha, understanding suffering. The second noble truth, the action the Buddha suggested we explore, is to abandon the craving, abandon the wanting.

That's easier said than done. That is not often something we can choose to do, in my experience. I remember sitting on retreat at the three-month course and feeling the dukkha, feeling the craving, feeling the clinging onto whatever it was, and recognizing: I have no idea how to let go of this. The mind was so tightly latched onto that experience. There was no way for me to consciously let go.

And so this instruction around letting go of the cause of suffering—a lot of our practice has to do with our relationship to this instruction. It's not so much about actively saying, "Oh, there's clinging, be gone clinging." That just doesn't happen very often. But we can recognize—actually what I found happens is that when we really see the clinging happening, we recognize the clinging, we feel the suffering of that clinging. And so the way to letting go of that clinging is to recognize that this very clinging is suffering itself, and this suffering needs to be understood.

So can I be with the suffering of the holding itself? This is a lot of our practice. It's basically a letting be of this craving. Can we let it be? Can we allow it with mindfulness—not allow it and encourage it, not allow it and act on it. The middle path is about neither repressing nor expressing our reactivity.

So that craving, that wanting to get rid of, that wanting to hold on to—it's fine for those to come up. If they've come up, they've already come up. They've already arisen. That's what I was saying yesterday. That's the acceptance of what has already arisen. Aligning ourselves with truth. Yes, this clinging is here. Can I meet that? Can I be with that?

Very gentle being with allows that clinging to take its own course. And again, we also learn from this exploration. We're understanding the suffering of that craving itself. We begin to understand viscerally that this craving itself is not conducive to well-being. So again, the body-mind organism gets an education: this craving is not the way to happiness.

So really I'm encouraging—hopefully encouraging you—to be willing and interested to explore the dukkha, explore the suffering. The willingness to meet it, to be with it, with the understanding that this education the mind and body are getting helps the mind learn how to let go. The mind will begin to understand how to let go of this clinging. It's often not something we can consciously choose to do, but the mind can let go of it.

As I described with that situation around the anger—my mind, the mind seeing itself propelling headlong towards anger, propelling headlong towards suffering, the mind knew. No. And it wasn't any kind of aversion or resistance to going to the anger. It was the mind going, "That way lies dukkha. Let it go." To the mind: let it go.

So this is a lot of how we practice with the second noble truth. This letting go of wanting, this practice around being with, letting be the clinging—the whole exploration of letting go of wanting is actually an interesting process in our minds.

I've described a little bit about how I've seen it happen: the mind beginning to get the education around dukkha, seeing how the wanting leads to the suffering, the mind seeing the wanting arise and simply letting it go. That's part of the process of letting go around wanting.

And then there's another kind of—almost stages of letting go—that happen in our practice. Our initial levels of dukkha are the more obvious kind. We have anger, hatred, frustration, desire, confusion, boredom, the kind of pride we have, the afflictive emotions we have, these emotions that feel off to us.

As we practice—kind of like my exploration around anger—as we practice with it, our mind begins to understand the suffering of that and begins to let it go. Those afflictive emotions, a layer of them, can begin to fall away or loosen. They don't catch us quite so much anymore. And as we practice, some of the more obvious forms of suffering can begin to let go, and underneath, a subtler kind of suffering can be revealed.

So there are layers of suffering, layers of clinging, very deeply layered in our minds. And in a way, we sometimes have this recognition in our practice or some kind of exploration around wanting that begins to arise around the practice itself. I'm sure that many of you—all of you—have experienced this wanting around the practice. We have a difficult state arise and we want to practice partly to get rid of that difficult state. So there's a

kind of subtler wanting that's going on. There's the wanting that's locked in place around the difficult state—the wanting to be seen or heard or to be right. And then as we explore that, we begin to see that

kind of wanting. We may begin to understand that inside, as we're exploring with our practice, there's also a wanting around doing the practice itself.

We often recognize this pretty early, actually. I've had somebody come up to me after one of my weekly classes in Redwood City, California, and he was talking about how his wanting to engage in the practice had been really helpful because it helped him get over some really unpleasant, unfortunate circumstances. But he sees now that this is wanting. "If I don't want that," he asked, "then how do I get over these unfortunate, difficult circumstances?"

Through this kind of exploration, we begin to understand intellectually first that there is a wanting involved in our practice. We begin to recognize: the fact that I want to practice—some of it is a wholesome kind of *chanda*, the kind of desire that can fuel wholesome states, wholesome practices. And some of it is also connected with wanting to get rid of all the difficulty. So we see this kind of mixed motivation. It's an intellectual seeing of that, in a way. We recognize, "Yeah, there's wanting in my practice."

In my very first week-long retreat—my very first ten-day retreat—I felt myself create this identity: "I am going to be a good meditator." I could see that this was happening, but I could also see it was a really useful thing to be doing at that time because there was so much of that more obvious kind of suffering happening.

In a way, this staged letting go of wanting works like this: we have this obvious kind of suffering, and in order to let go of that more obvious suffering, it's helpful to take a step onto a stepping stone. Can I land on the practice for a while? And landing on the practice, landing on exploring the difficult emotions, we begin to loosen our attachments to this stepping stone. Then we begin to land more fully on the practice.

At that point, when we're more into exploring experience and some of the larger layers of suffering have fallen away, we begin to actually experience the subtler levels of suffering around the practice itself—wanting to get rid of difficult states, wanting to find or construct states of calm, peace, or joy.

In terms of this question of using suffering as a guide, we can. This person who came and talked to me was confused. "I see that I want to do the practice in order to get rid of all that difficulty," he said. "So I'm not supposed to want to do the practice, but then what do I do? I just get mired in the difficulty."

I said, "Well, how about letting go of being stuck to that difficulty?" We use the wanting of letting go of suffering to help us let go of that more obvious suffering. Usually in that place, the more obvious suffering is obscuring the suffering around the practice itself.

The suffering around the practice itself, the wanting around the practice itself—I asked this person, "Are you experiencing the suffering of wanting to practice?"

He said, "No. It feels good to want to practice. I just know there's wanting in there."

This is a kind of intellectual knowing of that wanting. It's not an actual meeting of that wanting. And my

rough guide for people in using suffering as a guide is this: when it becomes clear to you that you are suffering, that is when to begin to explore it, to begin to investigate it.

So the time to investigate that suffering around the practice, around wanting to get rid of difficult states, is when we start to feel the suffering of it. And you will, at some point, really viscerally feel the suffering of that—the suffering of wanting to construct a state we had yesterday. You will feel that. That is when to use that exploration, suffering, as a guide. Not when it's just an idea in our mind: "Oh, I want that state, I want that beautiful state, so I'm going to practice." If we're not feeling the suffering of that, that's not the time to try to let go of that wanting.

You'll feel this. Steve Armstrong has this great saying: "There's nothing like a great sitting to ruin your day." You have a sitting that's just so clear, so collected, and the next sitting isn't. And you spend the rest of your time trying to figure out what you're doing wrong. How can I get back to that? There, the wanting of that state becomes really clear. In the midst of that beautiful state of mind, there may have been some clinging. But that wasn't the time to begin to explore it.

It wasn't so obvious at the time.

In terms of working with these layers of suffering, I suggest simply meeting the outer layer—what's obvious around the suffering. Rather than trying to jump over it, or digging inside, thinking, "I know there's something deeper in there, and that's what I have to get to." That's just an idea. And generally, it's not helpful to have that leaping-over attitude or agenda in our minds, because our minds are great constructors of experience. If we're looking for something, we'll probably find it, whether or not it was actually there to begin with.

So meeting what is here now, what is obvious, what is clear, what we can touch in this moment, rather than digging and searching—this is investigation. My teacher Sayadaw U Pandita uses an analogy of investigation as being like polishing a bowl with a soft cloth. You take the bowl and you're polishing, rubbing, staying in contact with it. You're meeting the entire surface. That's investigation. Not trying to take an ice pick and pick the thing apart. Not trying to pull it open and see what's in the middle. Just meeting what's obvious.

I'd like to end by reflecting on this teaching of the Buddha around the Four Noble Truths—that the understanding of suffering, when suffering is arising, is our path. It's not something we have to get over in order to get to the real practice.

I held that delusion, that belief, for quite a long time. On one three-month course, I spent a great deal of time both being lost in and exploring, investigating with mindfulness, the arising of self-hatred. For a chunk of that retreat—the first few weeks, I don't know exactly how long—I thought, "Okay, this self-hatred is happening, but I need to get over this, I need to get past this, and that's when the practice will really begin." It was so pervasive. It was so strong. It was so much a part of everything. This was my

self-hatred retreat. It was up in spades.

And at some point I had to surrender. I thought, "Okay, I guess this is not going to be the retreat in which I get enlightened. But maybe I'll learn something about my self-hatred." So I surrendered to this. If self-hatred is what's arising, that's what I have to pay attention to.

When I finally made that shift, there was much more willingness to be with the self-hatred, to watch it as it arose. It certainly didn't make it pleasant. And there were a number of understandings, insights that unfolded over the course of weeks.

Then one evening, I saw the whole pattern of self-hatred coming up, beginning to arise. After a dharma talk, I went back to my room and thought, "I'm just going to meet this." There was a strong sense of resolve. I'm just going to meet this. The moment I saw the mind shading towards that thought—"you're no good, you're a failure"—those thoughts that would come up in my mind, the moment I saw it, I would simply recognize: that's contact, and that's an unpleasant phenomenon. Just noticing that, over and over again.

And in that process, at some moment in this exploration, I saw very clearly: this is simply a phenomenon arising in the mind. It's just an empty thought. It is nothing. It's a thought.

In that moment, the pattern of self-hatred just crumbled and was replaced by bliss within a split second. Then there was this little thought that said, "Oh, never again am I going to feel that self-hatred." And immediately I recognized: no. This insight too is impermanent.

There were a number of really profound seeings in that split second. First, there was the seeing of the emptiness, just the corelessness of that thought. Then there was a recognition of grasping onto the insight itself, the recognition that that way lies suffering, the letting go of that, the balance of mind that resulted. Very deep insight.

And in terms of that pattern of self-hatred, that particular insight was like uprooting a tree. I didn't trust it for years that it was really so largely gone. It was a couple of years before I even noticed anything like self-hatred again. Then I began to recognize little bits coming up here and there—the thought "you're no good" arising. But it was like, "Oh yes, there's a thought." There was no belief in that thought anymore. That insight into the coreless, ephemeral nature, the fact that it was just a thought, had cut the belief in that pattern.

So very deep insight into anicca, anatta, while observing self-hatred. In that moment I recognized it just doesn't matter what's going on. What matters is that I meet it. The practice can unfold right in the midst of dukkha. It doesn't have to be something that we work our way through, that we chug our way through, and then finally we come to a space where we can sit in calm and peace and clarity and maybe at some point become enlightened. No—this exploration of dukkha is completely intertwined with our freedom.

It's not a problem. It is simply something to witness, to bring mindfulness to. Mindfulness and wisdom brought together. The wisdom of understanding the helpfulness of observing. This is just a phenomenon. Can I observe this phenomenon? Mindfulness and wisdom together bring this freedom, no matter what our experience is.

Suffering is kind of the way we navigate our minds. Clinging results in suffering. Subtler forms of clinging are what get revealed as we practice. We're not going to get through this practice without experiencing suffering. And we can actually have some lightness around it too.

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