Core Truths and Core Wishes

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 53:41

So much of our practice is around exploring this experience of dukkha, of suffering. We found the right practice because that was the Buddha's own journey from the beginning of his spiritual quest. Is it possible to find a way to be free from suffering? As he explored this question and found an understanding of suffering, he decided to teach, and he famously said, "What I teach is only suffering and its end." All of his teachings are oriented around this question: how to more fully understand suffering—not so that we can fix it, but so that understanding will free us, will liberate the mind from the ways it suffers.

This exploration, the Buddha's definition and recognition around suffering, is radically different from our usual perspective. I think a lot of us—at least I know for myself before I came to this practice—thought of suffering as something that happened to us. Kind of like I was just a leaf in the wind, buffeted around by the conditions of the world, with very little say over when I was happy and when I was unhappy. From an ordinary perspective, or maybe from a pre-Dharma perspective, we think of suffering as something that happens to us. Stuff out there makes us suffer.

And yet what the Buddha teaches us is that while there are things that happen in the world that are unpleasant, things that create unpleasant experience, things that are unjust, there's nothing inherently in what happens in the world that can make us suffer in this particular way—having the mind become constricted, frozen, unable to respond skillfully. The Buddha's teaching is that dukkha itself is not so much the unpleasant experience but rather our reaction to it: our fears, our aversions, our desires, our confusions. The wisdom that grows around understanding suffering allows us to be responsive to the world. As Rebecca said last night, we can be responsive rather than reactive. Our reactivity is based in greed, aversion, and delusion. Wisdom joins with compassion and love to support a completely different response to suffering in the world, to injustice, to unpleasant experience—a response of love, compassion, wisdom, and generosity.

We could call these the emotions of wisdom. The emotional terrain, the emotional map of the heart that has opened to wisdom is really the map of the Brahmaviharas: love, compassion, joy, and equanimity. These emotions are not passive. Love acts in this world. Compassion acts in this world.

I think we misunderstand the motivation. Sometimes we feel that if we just settle back and accept things as they are, why would we do anything? Why would we act? That perspective comes from this familiar frame of reference—we tend to be motivated by greed, aversion, and delusion. We tend to act out of those states, and from their perspective, we cannot fathom any other way to act. We envision that if we were free of greed, aversion, and delusion, we would just sit there. But that's not what happens. The heart

opens, connects, and breaks with that connection to suffering. It wants to respond, wants to act.

This dukkha that the Buddha asked us to explore is not about getting rid of injustice in the world, but about beginning to free our hearts from greed, aversion, and delusion, and beginning to act in the world from these beautiful emotions of love and wisdom. The Buddha's teaching around dukkha is that greed, aversion, and delusion in our own minds creates what we call dukkha—that there's a possibility of a different way to relate to experience.

As we begin to touch into that, we begin to really understand what dukkha is. We understand its nature. In small ways perhaps, we might see how reactivity, an aversion to physical pain for example, creates a whole complex of experience around that physical pain. And when the mind lets go of that aversion, it doesn't even feel like pain anymore. It's not what we would call pain. It's an unpleasant experience, but vastly different from when we are fighting it.

This teaching of the Buddha—that suffering results from craving and craving happens in our minds—is good news. If it were the case that we were at the whims of the world, that our suffering was just a response, like somebody pushing a button on us, we would be helpless. It sometimes feels like we have buttons and that other people have the power to push them. But we actually offer our buttons to be pushed, in some ways. With this teaching about dukkha, we begin to recognize that transformation is possible.

a whole host of what we call suffering. And not all of what we call suffering at the outset will we be free of, because at the outset we think unpleasant experience is suffering. But the mental pain and grief—that is what the Buddha said it is possible to be free of.

And so the suffering lies in our reactivity to experience, and it's possible to change our minds. This is the good news of this whole mechanism at work in our minds. We're not trapped by the conditions of the world. There's a way in which our response to those conditions can be cultivated to move in a different direction.

That different direction is not a change that makes us think injustice is okay. It's not a change that makes us think it's acceptable for unethical things to happen in the world. Quite the contrary. It is a change that allows us to fully acknowledge this is what is happening, and with a heart of compassion, to respond. Compassion naturally responds to suffering.

So this teaching of the Buddha—that dukkha is created in our minds, that it's a reaction to experience—when we feel into this, we begin to understand how aversion and wanting actually constrict the heart. We notice how it feels to be in a state of aversion, and we see the mind let go of it at times, recognizing how much more ease there is as the mind releases aversion and can actually come into alignment with what's going on, which may be a painful experience, or an uncontrollable experience, an unreliable experience.

And so we see this. We see how as the mind lets go of that aversion or that wanting, how much more ease and peace there is in the mind. And so the question comes up: why on earth does the mind keep doing this? I've seen it. I've seen it's not useful. But it keeps doing it.

I wanted to explore that question. Why do our minds keep doing this? What can we learn about this?

I think our human organism naturally wants to move in the direction of well-being, much as any creature of life wants to be in environments that support it and nourish it, and not be in environments that lead to its harm. A single-celled creature will move towards nourishment and away from a noxious environment. This is a very natural function of life—to move in this direction towards some degree of well-being.

In our human experience, we're vastly more complicated than a single-celled creature. And while we still do this same thing—we move towards the pleasant and away from the unpleasant—there's an awful lot going on in between something pleasant and the decision to act, the decision to move towards pleasant.

What we tend to do as human beings, before we start to investigate this question of what is happiness and what leads to true happiness, is that our organism tends to take the quickest route to well-being. The most immediate thing that will make us feel a little bit better in this next moment—we tend to go in that direction. Towards the pleasant, away from the unpleasant, very like the single-celled organism.

I like to think that this movement towards well-being, at a deep level, is connected to metta. It's connected to the wish that when we express metta, we say: may I have ease of well-being, may I be happy, may I be healthy, may you be happy, may you be healthy, may you be safe. This is expressing that wish for well-being, which is a very natural movement of the human being.

And so this movement towards well-being and this movement of metta, I think, have a link deep in our system.

And yet, as I said, there are all of these processes at work in the mind around trying to find well-being, and our tendency, through habit, through having seen in our lives that when I get something I want I get a moment of well-being—that happens over and over again. We get a moment of well-being, a feeling of release perhaps from the wanting that was associated with that desire. We've talked about recognizing how the wanting itself is suffering. And so we get a little bit of release there, and we begin to believe, through repeated application of that principle, that that's the only way to happiness—that's the best way.

We see that those moments of getting what we want don't last very long, but some part of us thinks, well, what I really need to do in order to have happiness in this life is just string a whole bunch of those moments together. That's what happiness would be. If I can figure out a way to navigate this life so that I can string together more and more moments of pleasant and less and less moments of unpleasant, that's as good as it's going to get. That's kind of what we think about happiness.

And so there are all kinds of ideas in our minds, and those participate in this process of moving in the

direction of getting what we want. For instance, we want perhaps somebody to think well of us. And our mind creates plans or ideas about how it's going to go about having somebody think well of us, and envisions what might happen when somebody does think well of us. All of these thoughts, all of these ideas in our mind—these plans, the idea of "I'm going to be able to have this person think well of me in the future"—all of these ideas, beliefs, opinions, in this particular case, tend to be pleasant.

We're kind of living in that world of pleasant thoughts of how great it's going to be in the future. And in this moment, as we're having those thoughts, we're experiencing pleasant right now because we've constructed a pleasant fantasy, basically.

Craving can enter in here—does enter in here. When we're not mindful, when we're not aware of this process going on, we get caught up in that fantasy and we're deceived in a way, believing that this is the direction toward happiness. We're confused, believing that this is the path.

And yet, perhaps if we could entirely live in our minds with pleasant fantasy construction, only experiencing the pleasant creations of our minds without reality actually impinging on us, that might be a good strategy. But reality does impinge on us. We don't have control over whether that person thinks well of us. We don't have control over whether what we like will continue or end.

When we meet this impermanent, unreliable, out-of-control nature of experience, we don't like it. We resist it. And we suffer. We somehow think that we've made a mistake or done something wrong because we haven't been able to make the world match our fantasy. But it's not a mistake. It's the nature of experience—to be impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable. So much of our suffering comes from this meeting and resistance to just the nature of experience.

We've been saying this a lot in the last few days: the impermanent, unreliable, out-of-control nature of experience and our resistance to that is so much of why we suffer. Resistance being that craving, that clinging, that desire to make things different—the desire to get rid of unpleasant, the desire to hold on to pleasant.

At the same time, our suffering also seems deeply connected to this inner wish for well-being. We wish to be happy and safe and at ease. And given the nature of impermanent, unreliable, out of control, those wishes seem out of reach sometimes.

When we're suffering—and I'm not ready to say always, but often, at least in my own experience—there are two threads that we can open to. When we are suffering around something, when we're angry about something, often it's because there's a deep wish for well-being underneath that has been thwarted somehow. When we're afraid, there's a deep wish for safety connected to that fear. As we open to our suffering, we start to see this connection to the wish for well-being—the natural wish, the human wish, a core wish for well-being, happiness, ease, and safety that we share as human beings.

And those wishes meet reality. The wishes of well-being and safety meet the truth of unreliable,

impermanent, out of control—and they collide.

So these two threads: the truth, which I'll call the core truths of life—impermanent, unreliable, out of control—and the core wishes for happiness, safety, health, well-being. It seems like it's not possible to have both. And the mind reacts to that. In almost equal part, it's reacting against the truth and holding on, trying to hold on to that wish.

This is, I think—you know, last night Rebecca said that her first movement with something was "No!" That's that movement. This truth, it cannot be true—because we so wish for the well-being. That movement from deep within us: we so wish for the well-being.

I've had some experiences that have really helped point me to this connection between my suffering, my reactivity, and this deep wish for well-being. Some startling recognitions.

At one point, it was September 2001. I was visiting my family during the September 11th attacks. They live in Tennessee; I live in California. I had flown to Tennessee, and then the planes were grounded. When I finally left, it was the day after the planes started flying again. They had been grounded for a couple of weeks, I think, and so there was some trepidation in getting on an airplane that day.

There was bad weather in Tennessee, and my plane was delayed. I had a connection to make in Houston, but I landed late, and the last flight to California had already left. So I needed to get a hotel. I checked into one at George Bush International Airport.

Sometime that evening, I was talking to a friend on the phone, making arrangements for my travel the next day, when the power went out. It was out for a while, and I finally decided to get up and look out the window. It was really dark—I couldn't see a thing. I resorted to using my Indiglo watch to find my way to the bathroom. And when I looked out the window, it wasn't just the hotel that had lost power. As far as I could tell, it was the city.

Power was out as far as I could see. My mind went to a terrorist attack. In my mind, George Bush International Airport was a perfect target for a terrorist attack. It just seemed like it made sense. And so my mind proliferated with fear. The fear was quite strong.

In that experience of the fear being so strong, my practice kicked in. I'm so grateful for the practice, how it seems to take care of me when suffering gets strong. The fear was arising, and the practice came in almost automatically—I started doing metta practice. *May I be happy. May I be safe.* As I expressed that wish, that one really landed. That wish, *may I be safe*, really landed. And then I expressed it outward: *May all beings be safe. May all of us be safe.* That one really, really landed. Yes, that is what I want—for all beings to be safe.

As I stayed with the metta, the fear disappeared. The feeling of connection and love and care and wish for safety for all beings was really strong. Then the mind would slip into its thoughts: *This power is still out.*

Oh my gosh, if it's a terrorist attack, what are we going to do? I created images of all the people in the hotel lining up in the hallways. And then the mind kicked back into the metta, returning to that wish for well-being and safety.

That experience really showed me just how deeply connected fear and the wish for metta were. The flip side of that fear was a very deep, profound feeling of love and connection. Then the mind would slip into its habitual ways and the fear would explode again, but I could see there was a link. The wish for safety and the fear that safety was not possible—the uncontrollability, the recognition that I didn't have control over safety—that's where the fear came from. But the wish for well-being was a valid wish.

So when these core wishes meet these core truths, that collision, the seeming irreconcilability of these two, is often where suffering is born. We meet the truth of the uncontrollable and we say, "No, no, it's wrong. It shouldn't be uncontrollable." We meet the truth of impermanence and we think, "What have I done wrong?" Reactivity is born when we resist the truth. And yet that reactivity is also connected to this wish for well-being.

Through our practice, we may begin to orient toward the teaching of impermanent, unreliable, out of control, and recognize the vulnerability of experience—the impermanence, how we respond to the uncontrollable, that vulnerable feeling. We may explore that by bringing wisdom to the situation: "Oh, this is just the way it is. Things are uncontrollable. Vulnerability—it's the way it is." This can be helpful. Bringing wisdom in can help to balance our mind.

And yet I've seen in my own mind at times, and heard as I listen to retreatants and students report what's going on in their minds—I sometimes hear that orientation toward "Okay, it's impermanent, it's unreliable" as a subtle way of almost denying that wish for safety and well-being. We're trying to convince ourselves: impermanent, unreliable, out of control—that's the way it is, so that should be okay. Almost as if we have an unseen belief that since things are impermanent, unreliable, and out of control, the wish for safety, the wish for happiness, the wish for well-being is not valid, that it's not the right wish.

We can use an intellectual understanding of this teaching of things as they are to deny and repress those deep wholesome wishes. The wish for well-being and happiness is love, is compassion. And yet our relationship to those wholesome wishes often includes a craving or a belief that if I were doing things right, those wishes would be fulfilled. This is a paradox for us in a way. Part of our mind holds the belief that the wishes are only valid if they can be fulfilled in the way I would like them to be fulfilled—as opposed to connecting to the wish itself.

I mentioned this the other night in the compassion practice, that sometimes we struggle in wishing for freedom from suffering for someone or a situation that seems impossible to change. And yet we do wish for that freedom from suffering even though it's not always possible to change the conditions. The wish is what we are connecting with. As I said the other night, if my wish for war to spontaneously cease on this planet and for peace to be spread across this planet could be fulfilled—that is what I wish.

The connection to that deep wish is not invalid simply because the wish cannot be true in this moment. And so this is an exploration we make around our wishes as well.

The hidden demand for our wishes—the wish of love, of compassion—to be fulfilled in a certain way, that hidden demand creates anxiety and fear, confusion, frustration, anger, rage when those wishes are not met. Wisdom asks us to let go of the expectation, the hope, the craving for a particular outcome around these wishes. But it doesn't ask us to let go of the wishes themselves. In fact, I think wisdom asks us to embrace those wishes.

And so this is a paradox to hold—for our heart to stretch to hold both these wishes for well-being and the truth of uncontrollable, unreliable, impermanent. Our heart can stretch to hold both. And yet the way we do that is by noticing where it's not, where it's struggling.

We've talked about our suffering offering us the lessons we need, and this is partly why. Because when we are suffering, it's a pointer back to these two very crucial things: this truth of love and this truth of truth. And so the exploration around suffering is one of honoring, because the suffering itself contains those threads—the threads of love and compassion and the thread of truth.

In some of the early days of my practice, or not even just the early days, as I explored suffering I often had this really dive-in kind of approach. It was like, "Oh, suffering!" and I would get kind of into it. And yet I still believed at some level that this suffering was like some tumor, and what I needed to do was find the perfect scalpel that would just cut this out and take it away. That was my approach. I believed that the suffering, the anger for instance, was wholly bad.

And yet it's not wholly bad. There are misunderstandings in the anger—misunderstandings, misattributions around these wishes and these truths. And so a way to explore this is to honor our suffering, to allow it to reveal the love and the truth.

It's not that we can dive in and say, "Oh, where's the love in the middle of this anger?" In my own practice around this, it really has felt much more like an embrace of whatever struggle it is—wide arms holding it as softly as I can, with as much openheartedness as I can muster in this moment, to meet that struggle and let it reveal itself.

Our struggles, our reactivity, have so many layers. Underneath anger might be confusion, might be fear, might be vulnerability, might be a wish for safety. And yet we can't just dive into the middle and say, "Okay, well there's anger here, where's the love in the middle of it?" It has to be much more organic. Much more: "Okay, struggle. I'm willing to sit with you. Show me what you are. Show me the layers. Show me the thread of wisdom. Show me the thread of love"—but not demanding how it reveals itself. Patience in this exploration. Very soft, gentle.

I kind of settle back in my approach when it's possible—when I can meet reactivity and know it without it getting stronger, without it feeling like I'm getting swamped or pulled into the rabbit hole of that difficulty.

Whenever I can meet it and hold it, that's my approach: "Okay, I get to see a little bit of this, how this thing is put together this time." And then maybe it lasts for a certain length of time and goes away and comes back later, and it's like, "Okay, I get to see a different perspective on it that time."

Over the course of one stretch of a few weeks at Shwe Oo Min, the monastery where Sayadaw U Tejaniya teaches, I was watching depression. Depression coming and going, just willing to meet it, noticing the conditions, noticing it arise, recognizing that sometimes it arose when I was really calm. That was kind of interesting. And so I just started getting interested in the pattern itself—not to get rid of it, but to understand it. Just to understand it.

Many of the tools that I've shared on working with difficulty have come from my own practice exploring. I've offered you several of the ones I used at that retreat. The exploration of, "Oh, there's depression. Okay, well, there's many other things happening. Let me just... there's depression and there's seeing and there's hearing"—broadening the container so it's not the dive-in kind of thing. Noticing when it's absent.

Recognizing, "Oh, it's not always here." Seeing when it arises. The conditions—wow, it comes out of calm. How does that happen? Just curiosity to explore it.

And then one day, as I was feeling into the depression, I was walking back to my room to do my meditation. I had been doing walking meditation, exploring a lot of this, and I went back to my room to do my sitting practice, which I was doing in the lying posture. And the heart felt—the depression felt very vast. Really big, but kind of diffuse. So it wasn't heavy-vast, but it was pretty vast.

As I sat down and began exploring the vastness of this depression, just feeling into that—I couldn't really point at it, but it was like being in a fog. And there it is. And at some point in that exploration, it just expanded. It got bigger and bigger. And at some moment it flipped and became metta.

That was not what I was expecting to find in the depression. I couldn't have really looked for it. And I feel that the power of the allowing was what gave the love the opportunity to show itself.

And then the next moment of my experience—the very next split second—as the mind was in this space... the depression had been very vast, and the metta was equally vast. This vast field of metta I was sitting in. The next moment my mind said, "This is stupid. This is sappy. This is corny." I smiled and laughed. It's like, "Ah, I see." A kind of understanding of the mind's relationship to that quality—creating a feeling of depression. There was an understanding of how the depression was put together, laid on top of this vast feeling of metta.

I tell that story to encourage a not-knowing in the exploration, a not-searching for anything, but a willingness to allow the struggle to reveal what's there. And it will reveal something.

This morning as I was reflecting on this topic, I came up with another analogy. I think I've heard it before, but I can't remember who said it, so I can't give credit, unfortunately. But it arose in my mind, so I'll share

it.

The experience of these constrictions, these struggles—it's like ice. It's hard, it's solid, it's frozen. And we feel frozen sometimes with our struggles. And the mindfulness, the allowing, creates the conditions for the ice to melt. There's no change in any of the molecules of that water. It's a different state, but they're all still water molecules. It's kind of like our craving, our clinging, is the cold temperature that solidifies things. And it's not like we have to throw the ice cube away. We throw the ice cube away, we lose the water. The melting will reveal these threads back to love and truth.

To me, this quality of allowing in practice—cultivating an allowing attitude—is so helpful. We allow the fullness of our human experience. Allowing mindfulness, loving awareness, rejects nothing.

In so many ways, I think some of our struggles in life come from really wanting to be seen. Our wanting, our reaching, our feeling of something being off or wrong is a feeling of not being seen, not belonging. And in this practice of cultivating loving awareness and allowing attention, we can see ourselves more fully than anybody else ever could. And discover in that process that that full allowing, that full loving heart towards whatever is happening, may be the very thing we were looking for from someone else.

Through this practice we can belong to ourselves. And in that process, support a community of belonging in the world.

A poem by Izumi Shikibu:

Watching the moon at dawn,
solitary, mid-sky,
I knew myself completely—
no part left out.

Let's sit for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

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