Untangle the Tangle

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 54:18

So much of our practice and our journey looking at our minds and beginning to understand what's going on in there is around recognizing and understanding dukkha.

Dukkha is the Pali term usually translated as suffering, but the English word suffering doesn't really capture the depth and breadth of dukkha. Dukkha can be quite obvious, and often that's where we really start to know it—in the obvious realms of our minds fighting with themselves or fighting with the world. And yet dukkha is really quite deep, extending to the very subtle level where we simply don't like things the way they are.

There's another translation of the word dukkha, another framing or perspective. Sometimes in the texts dukkha refers to what we would call suffering, and sometimes it refers to the nature of experience itself. There are phrases in the suttas that say all conditioned experiences, all conditioned phenomena, are impermanent; all conditioned phenomena are dukkha.

It's not true that all of our conditioned phenomena are felt as suffering. Joy isn't experienced as suffering. And yet all of what arises in our body-mind is impermanent. Because it's impermanent, it's not a reliable place to land for lasting happiness. This is another meaning of the word dukkha—that there's no experience arising in our mind and body that is a reliable place where we can say, "Yep, that's going to do it for me. I can hold on to that or be there forever," because it will pass. So this is another meaning of the word: unreliable.

I'm sure many of you have heard of what are often called the three characteristics of experience: impermanent, unreliable, not-self—anicca, dukkha, anatta. This framing of the nature of experience as anicca, dukkha, anatta points to the unreliable nature of experience. We can't count on anything to last, so it's unreliable. And everything is conditioned, not me, not who I am, uncontrollable in a way—we don't have ultimate control over what is happening in experience.

These three are the nature of everything that arises in our experience. This is one of the key wisdom teachings of the Buddha: all conditioned experience is impermanent, all conditioned experience is unreliable, all experience is not-self. I won't go into the distinction there right now; that's not where the talk is headed. We'll leave that for another day, another talk.

This is understood to be some core wisdom of the Buddha—this understanding that what arises has the nature to pass away. Clinging to what arises, which will pass away, creates suffering. There's stress. There's an image I heard a long time ago, and I believe the teacher said it came from some yogi. So who

knows where this image came from? But it's very apt.

The sense of suffering when we're clinging to something impermanent, something going to pass, is like rope burn. When a rope is slipping through your hand, if you're trying to hold on to it, it's going to burn. That's what clinging does. When we're trying to hold on to something that is slipping through, it burns—it's suffering.

So the Buddha's teachings on dukkha come from both the perspective of the unreliable nature and the perspective of that rope burn. What is that clinging? What is the mechanism at work in our minds by which we end up trying to cling?

So much of our journey is around this exploration. We meet dukkha as we sit and walk and look at our hearts and minds. This is really right in line with what the Buddha taught. He pointed to, in the Four Noble Truths, that there is dukkha—both the unreliability of experience and this experience of struggle, stress, suffering, clinging. And he said of this noble truth: dukkha should be understood.

And he didn't mean think about it to figure it out. He meant really investigate. Know the experience of dukkha. Know what is happening there.

So this is where we've been when pointing to this investigation of experience. I would say Mia's talk last night was wholly about this topic of understanding dukkha and those hindrances—understanding them, opening to them, familiarizing ourselves with the experience of them. That's the understanding that the Buddha was pointing to. Not that we could think it through.

From an ordinary perspective, we often think of suffering as something that happens to us. Something that's out there, happening to us, and we're just being blown around like leaves in the wind. We think stuff out there is what's making us suffer. In Mia's talk, she really pointed to this. Especially with greed and aversion, we think that the problem is with what we're averse to, or with what we want and not having it—that's the problem. But the Buddha's pointing to something different: notice the experience of the wanting, of the aversion. That's where the dukkha is. It's not the not having that's really the dukkha; it's the aversion to not having. It's the aversion to being in association with something that we don't want, or not having something that we want.

So one way to look at dukkha—in terms of that experience we call suffering or stress or unsatisfactoriness, that sense of things not feeling right—is that this kind of dukkha is not about the world not meeting our wishes. It is really about our relationship to that. The states of mind experienced as suffering are rooted in greed, in aversion, in delusion. These are the states of mind we've been talking about, like feeling contracted. When we feel them, we know the suffering of them. But so often we're so focused on the object—like with greed, as Mia described last night—we're so focused on the thing we want that we miss the suffering of the wanting. The idea, the fantasy of getting that thing takes prominence in our mind. We experience the pleasantness of the fantasy while missing entirely that there's a feeling of lack, a feeling of

suffering around the wanting itself.

Our struggle, our stress, is not inherent in what's happening in the world—whether we get something or don't get something we want, or are associated with something we don't want. The suffering isn't really about that. It's really about our relationship to it.

And this is actually good news. Because if it were because of the world that we suffer, it would not be possible to be free from suffering. But because those qualities of mind—the aversion, the greed—are really where the suffering is experienced, freedom becomes possible. You can see this even in small moments when you notice greed fall away. When we feel that wanting fall away, as Mia pointed to last night, we feel the release of that. We feel that we didn't need to get what we want to feel okay, to feel content. When we experience that, when we touch into that, when we see the aversion fall away or the greed fall away and the world hasn't changed—it's our minds that have changed—this is huge for our understanding of what the Buddha was talking about.

It's possible to change our minds. It's possible to change our minds.

Now, I will say there are situations in the world, situations of injustice, of people behaving unethically, that we may feel like the only rational response is to be angry about. But we can explore, and can actually experience, what it might mean to essentially align ourselves with: well, this is what's happening. Injustice is happening in the world. People behaving unethically in the world. This is happening. And recognizing that without hatred—it is possible. It's challenging, but it's possible. We feel a different relationship with the world, one of compassion, one of care, wanting to alleviate suffering as opposed to annihilating those who are perpetuating what we don't like. Or what is objectively unjust, treating other beings cruelly. And yet there is the possibility of responding from a heart that is not constricted. It is possible.

There's a beautiful quote that I love around this topic. Because essentially what this is about is aligning with, recognizing: this is the truth. This is what's happening in the world. In that recognition, not fighting it, but also not saying, "Yes, things as they are"—that's not what equanimity really is.

Here's the quote: "To accept means to receive what is offered. Circumstances of life give rise to conditions, and our acceptance of these conditions is just the acceptance of things as they are. What is not meant by the idea of acceptance is any agreement or disagreement with the way things are. Acceptance is about basing ourselves in reality, not about making judgments of liking or disliking or of agreeing and disagreeing."

To accept the situation is to be grounded in the actual state of things without getting lost in ideals or fantasies of how we would like it to be. We then have a good basis from which to see what action may be called for. Acceptance does not imply inertia. On the contrary, to be grounded in reality gives rise to a true response—a response from the heart, a response from compassion, rather than a response from hatred, from greed, from aversion.

When our mind is caught in aversion, it will tell us there's no other rational response to this situation. It cannot understand. The mind that is averse can't understand that there might be another way to meet the situation. And so it takes a little bit of a leap of trust, of faith, to explore that possibility—recognizing, okay, there's this situation and there's injustice and there's aversion to it. Just even that, recognizing there's aversion to it rather than blindly following the aversion, will be more skillful.

I would sometimes, in a situation like this, recognize, "Yep, I don't like this," and then kind of broaden, opening to whether I can find an attitude of compassion—connecting to the suffering of the situation to act rather than connecting to my anger about the situation.

In our minds here on retreat, suffering arises and over and over again we see the habits and patterns unfold. We see it many times. For myself, self-hatred was a big thing—anger at the world and hatred of myself, a lot of that arising. And I could see it over and over again. I could see the suffering of it. I could feel the suffering of it. There were times when it would be like, "This feels really painful. I would let go of this if I knew how to let go of it." Sometimes our minds are caught, and sometimes it would release—and then three minutes later it would come back. There were times when I would see something released like that, anger released or self-hatred released, and think, "Oh, phew, okay, done with that." No. Not quite.

We see how much suffering these patterns create, and it might make us wonder: why on earth do our minds do this? Even after we've seen it, it comes back again and again. Why do our minds do this?

I've thought about this a lot, and I'd like to offer a perspective on why our minds do this. I think as human beings, our human system wants to move in the direction of well-being, wants to have ease and peace, wants to be happy and healthy and safe. And yet there's something in our human minds, in our human system—we are fundamentally confused about what well-being actually is.

All living organisms have this kind of movement towards the pleasant, towards nourishment, towards safety, and away from noxious environments. Even a single-celled organism will do that. This movement towards the pleasant, away from the unpleasant, is natural. And I think at some level it's based in this movement towards well-being—essentially the wish of metta, wishing to be happy, healthy, safe, at ease. This is deep. I call these core wishes. At a very deep level, this is what our system actually wants.

But our minds are pretty complex things, and it seems like at times our moving towards what we think of as well-being is taking the shortest route towards getting something pleasant, without recognizing the suffering in the wanting itself. We move towards that—"get that thing, get that thing." Even if we know at some level that getting those things is impermanent, even if we know at a reflective or experiential level that, yeah, this happiness will be here for a while, we think that well-being would consist of stringing moments of happiness together—getting what I want, getting rid of what I don't want, creating and constructing my environment to be the way I want it to be. If I can just keep doing that over and over again, that's as good as it gets.

This is our orientation towards happiness and well-being before we meet the Dharma. We think that happiness would be arranging our environment to get what we want. And yet, seeing the way things actually are, coming back to the nature of experience—experience is impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable, not self. I can't be in ultimate control of orienting and arranging the world. That project of stringing together moments of happiness is doomed to fail. And we start to see that. Things are impermanent. Things are unreliable.

Things pass. What we love, we lose. Sometimes we have to be in proximity with things that are challenging and unpleasant. It's just the nature of life.

So it's not a mistake when we're in association with things that we don't like, or when things that we love, we lose. It's not a mistake. It's the nature of life. And so a lot of our suffering, I think, results from fighting with this nature—resisting the impermanent nature, wanting to hold on to things that we want. That rope burn. We get that rope burn. Losing things that we love is not a mistake. It's not. And yet we suffer around it. We resist the truth, we resist the nature of impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable experience.

So that's one side of the suffering—that we're resisting the truth. And what the quote pointed to really was taking in what reality is. This is the way things are.

At the same time, some of our suffering also feels like it's connected to these deep wishes for well-being—the deep wishes to be happy, safe, healthy, and at ease. And these collide with the nature of experience being impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable. It's like our minds don't understand how these coexist.

I think of these as the nature of experience—impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable—being kind of the core truths of life. And the deep wishes for our well-being, those metta wishes essentially, are basically the core wishes of us as human beings. The suffering that we experience often comes when these two get tangled up.

I can think of these as threads—the threads of impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable, and the threads of wanting to be healthy, happy, and safe. These come together, and our minds don't understand how they can coexist. I want to be safe, and it's unreliable. There's vulnerability. I'm not safe. And so the reactivity is born here. We get tangled. There's a tangle between these different threads of our experience. The tangle of these core truths and these core wishes.

This image of the tangle is in the suttas: "A tangle within, a tangle without." I think we can relate to that—the tangle inside. It sometimes does feel like a tangle. How do I navigate this? A tangle within, a tangle without. And the world seems tangled. The world seems a confused mess. "A tangle within, a tangle without. This generation is entangled in a tangle. I ask you this, O Gotama, who can untangle the tangle?"

So that's a piece of the exploration. I want to explore the tangle a little bit and understand what's going on there.

There's reactivity, there can be reactivity born around the impermanent, unreliable nature of experience. It just doesn't seem right sometimes, right? The way things are, that loss happens. There's just this kind of "no" that comes up inside. No, it shouldn't be like this. And so there's a resistance to that side of the truth.

We often do resist that. And then, you know, on the side of the wishes—that we want to be happy and healthy and safe—there's the sense that these two don't jive. It's kind of like, well, either the truths can't be right, or our minds would say it's either/or. Either things are impermanent and unreliable, *or* I should be able to be happy, healthy, and safe. But feeling that these could work together just doesn't seem possible.

And so sometimes something can happen where we may recognize, okay, yes, things are unreliable, there's vulnerability. And we may have the sense that, seeing that things are vulnerable and unreliable, I shouldn't *want* to be safe. I've had people say this to me in practice discussions: "I know things are unreliable, so I shouldn't want to be safe." But that wish for safety is valid. That wish for safety is completely valid. What happens is that we *cling* to the wish for safety. We demand that things be a certain way, that safety look the way we want it to look. And that's where some of the suffering comes from.

It's a kind of misunderstanding about the wishes themselves—and this is what we're exploring in the metta practice. The wish: May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I be safe. May I live with ease. Those wishes are valid all the time. Even if there's something going on, like... sometimes people struggle with wishing well-being for someone who is terminally ill, for instance. It's like, wishing them to be healthy? That's delusion. I shouldn't wish them to be healthy. But the wish—the wish itself—*is* the metta.

I sometimes play with this notion or this idea: if I could wave a wand and say all beings would be healthy, would I do it? Yeah, I would do that. And so that's the wish. The wish is valid. And we have to acknowledge the truths—the truths of impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable.

So this notion of, well, okay, being human is vulnerable, so I shouldn't want that, shouldn't have that wish—this can become a kind of spiritual bludgeoning. Using wisdom to say you shouldn't want, you shouldn't wish for well-being or happiness. But the wish is valid.

The meeting of these two—I mean, it's like the tangle, right? The impermanent, unreliable, running up against wanting health, happiness, safety. It gets tangled. Fear, confusion arise. And for a while in my own practice, when I ran up against knots—and they feel like knots sometimes, they feel like tangles, they feel like knotted messes of stuff—I thought, especially around things like self-hatred, that the whole complex of messy, yucky feeling, that tangle, was wholly bad. That I needed to get the scalpel and excise it, cut it out.

But think about having a knot like this, a tangle in threads. If you take scissors and cut out the knot, you end up with a hole in the cloth. The knot, the tangle, is composed of the threads of the truths and the wishes. The tangle, the fear, the confusion, the anxiety—it's just a confusion of those truths and those wishes intertwined.

Sometimes I talk about or think about what we do with mindfulness practice as taking that knot and, instead of taking a scalpel to it or scissors to it, we put it into a lubricated warm bath. We honor the tangle. We meet the experience of the suffering, and that meeting begins to untangle the tangle. We can't actually do the pulling apart of all the threads ourselves, but wisdom and mindfulness do the untangling. It is the honoring of that tangle—I think of it as the honoring of the suffering—meeting it, opening to it. It begins to reveal the truths and the wishes for well-being.

Within any state of suffering, I think it's like that. The willingness to meet it is a direct opening to wisdom on the one hand and our heart opening into love on the other. Whatever tangle there is, that tangle has these threads—threads of recognition that, yes, impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable, this is the truth. And the threads of our wishes for well-being and happiness and ease.

I'm not quite ready to say that every suffering has this composition, but I'm getting close. You know, that self-hatred—there was some part of that that thought it was helping me out somehow. The anger definitely thought it was helping me out. And so the wish for well-being was pretty buried in the self-hatred. But it was in there. Wanting to be loved and feeling like I was unlovable.

So if we honor our suffering, opening to the tangle with wisdom, with mindfulness, it begins to reveal these threads. We start to see, and begin to have the trust, that these truths and these wishes can coexist in a weave. It's not intuitively obvious how that works. And so there's the exploration.

I've had some experiences where this kind of investigation has really pointed me to this connection between the suffering and, in particular, the metta wishes.

At one point in September of 2001, I had flown back to visit my family. While I was there, the attacks on the World Trade Center happened, and so my flight home was delayed—I had ten days or something. When I got on the plane, there was some trepidation. There was bad weather where my parents lived, so the plane was delayed leaving. I had a layover in the Houston area to get back to California, and I missed my flight. There were no further flights to California that evening, so I had to get a hotel.

I was in the hotel that evening and the power went out. This was at George Bush International Airport, and George Bush was the President of the United States at the time. Initially I thought, oh, it's just a power outage, but it went on for a long time. It was really dark—I had to use my Indiglo watch to navigate to the bathroom. It was so dark in there. I went to the window and looked out, and it wasn't just the hotel. As far as I could see, the power was out.

In that kind of experience, in seeing that, I thought: terrorist attack. That's where my mind went. George Bush International Airport, named after the President of the United States. What a symbolic gesture. So the mind was doing some proliferation, obviously. But there was a lot of fear from this, obviously from what had happened a few weeks before. The conditions were there supporting that.

So I was feeling into the fear. And the suffering of that—there had been enough practice. I had started

practice probably four years before that. The suffering kind of kicked the practice in, and I started just being with the fear.

Then what happened was that metta started up. I began with the phrases, and when I got to "may I be safe," it's like, yeah, that one really landed. May I be safe? Yes, that's what I want. There was just this feeling of really landing with that wish for safety.

I also noticed that as I was connecting to these metta wishes, the fear was not there. And then I landed with the wish, "may all beings be safe." That one was even stronger. Yes, that's the wish. That's what the heart really is opening towards. May all beings be safe.

Then the mind would slip into a little bit of thinking, papañca, and the fear would resurge. The fear was very strong, but equally so was the metta, the wish. And the disappearance of the fear was quite interesting when the metta was strong.

And that really gave me the understanding that the fear was composed of those threads of the wish for well-being. The medicine was really connecting with the wish. It was quite something.

So wisdom and love, the truths, the core wishes—they kind of work together. Wisdom asks us to let go of the expectations, the hopes, the craving for a particular outcome around the wishes. And the wishes connect us. I don't think that wisdom asks us to let go of the wishes. I think wisdom asks us to embrace those wishes—to embrace the movement towards connection and care and love and compassion. Wisdom is asking us to stretch, for our hearts to hold both the truths and the wishes, finding that weave instead of the tangle.

The tangle is untangled not by pulling things apart, but really through honoring: wow, this is what it's like. And that's what happened for me with the fear. It's like, oh, this is the fear. This is what the fear is like. And then in the midst of that opening to the fear, the mettā wishes arose. They were right there—really pointing to the deep connection between how we kind of misinterpret or misunderstand. The fear, the reaction to either the truths or the wishes, is a fundamental misunderstanding.

The Buddha responded to the question: "A tangle within, a tangle without. This generation is entangled in a tangle. I ask you this, O Gotama, who can untangle the tangle?" And he said, "One established in virtue, wise, developing the mind and wisdom, a practitioner ardent and discreet—this one can untangle the tangle."

I feel like really it should say the wisdom and the ardency untangle the tangle. It's not us that do it.

And then it goes further: "Those for whom lust, hatred, and ignorance have faded away, for them the tangle is untangled." The fading away of greed, aversion, and delusion happens through that engagement, through the honoring of the tangle. Coming back to the First Noble Truth—understanding dukkha. This whole talk has really been pointing to that: understanding dukkha. Not resisting the suffering. The

suffering is going to show us the way. The tangle, the suffering, will show us the way to love and wisdom. Right in the midst of that suffering are the threads that can allow us to see the truth—impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable—and connect deeply to those wishes for well-being, for ourselves, for all beings.

Thank you for your practice. It's so wonderful to be participating in a community where this exploration around looking at our minds and transforming our own minds is what we do—because it will affect the world. So thank you for doing this. It's not easy; I know that.

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