Exploring Dukkha

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 43:16

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa — Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

The Buddha's teaching is a mandala. It doesn't matter at which point you enter it. You end up touching all parts of its petals, and somewhere along the line you touch the base. It's one whole teaching. It makes sense in the whole. Just occasionally I allow myself to wander around and see where it takes me.

So my entrance point is this little word which is central to the Buddha's teaching: *dukkha*. This word *dukk ha* has various etymologies put to it, the roots where it comes from. One of the strangest ones, I think — because in those days the early commentators were creative in their etymology; if a word sounded like something else, it must have its root there — is an axle and the rod which goes into the bracket doesn't fit properly. You get that? It's not... you get that crunch. But the one that's most obvious is just a hard space or a hard place.

So what the Buddha is saying is that this life is a hard place. If he had left it at that, we'd have been stuck in the existential horror of just being in a hard place and not being able to make much sense of it. But through his own investigations, he discovered at least the psychological cause for it — the deeper causes, but at least the psychological cause — which we translate slightly badly as desire. And then, of course, the announcement that there is an end to it. There is an end to *dukkha*. It is possible to come to an end to *dukk ha*, which is not annihilation, by the way.

So what does he mean by *dukkha*, this word of a hard place? Well, the first one is rather comically called dukkha-dukkha, which means just the suffering of ordinary suffering. I don't think I have to go into that too deeply. That's just the pains in the body, the emotional states we come across. Even these pains in the body are not, strictly speaking, what he's referring to as *dukkha*, although they are unpleasant.

These emotional states that we get into, these mental states, have their root cause in some sort of wrong view. We aren't seeing things properly. We don't have a right perspective. And this perspective causes us to form wrong relationships. That wrong relationship includes within it a whole set of emotional responses which we end up as conditioning. These emotional responses, because we can't find our way out of them, reinforce the original wrong view. So we get caught up in this cycle.

This cycle of going round and round — that's the root meaning of the word kamma. That's what we mean in Buddhism by kamma. It's not, strictly speaking, what happens to you on the outside. You can also call that kamma. But in terms of what we're trying to do, which is come to the end of suffering, this kamma

that the Buddha is referring to is these cycles within our own head. These cycles within our own head, of course, are then projected onto the world and we keep recreating similar situations. And through our dullness, we blame the other. It's got to be my parents. I would never have ended up like this were it not for my mother. Comes in for a lot of stick, poor mother. And then there's society, education, educators. Oh my goodness. Everybody has caused me this dreadful suffering.

So this sense of ordinary *dukkha*, this sense of ordinary suffering, has its root cause in some sort of wrong view. We're not seeing things properly. We'll come to that in time. Our meditation is concerned with undermining that whole process. That's what we're doing when we practice vipassanā. Vipassanā is not simply a correction of view — that's its actual main point. But fortunately, as one of the gifts of vipassanā, the purification of the heart takes place of its own. You don't have to do anything to purify the heart. In fact, if you try to purify your heart, then it's a bit like the blind leading the blind. It's the very deluded part of ourselves which is trying to do something about the effects of its own delusion. And you just end up being in a mess.

So when we're sitting here and this *dukkha*, these mental states arise, what possibilities have you got? What can you do about them? One side, of course, is to suppress it, to turn away from it, turn your attention somewhere else. If you feel lonely, turn the TV on. Easy enough. But it's there, you see. It's a conditioning within the mind. That hasn't been dealt with. So we know that from our own Western psychology. And it sits there, just bubbling away, boiling away, burning, burning. This is the Buddha's old expression of burning.

The only other side is to indulge it. If you indulge loneliness, you get into self-pity. Why me? And that self-pity simply fuels that sense of loneliness more and more. Eventually you end up on Westminster Bridge on Prozac.

So here we are, we're stuck with a feeling of me wanting to do something about myself. As soon as I want to do something about myself, as soon as I want to change myself, I have to engage in this state of mind. This engagement leaves me with two options. I can either suppress it, try to destroy it, kill it, turn away from it, ignore it — or try and do something about it and get involved in it. Both sides, we begin to realize, are actually going to cause more suffering. More suffering.

Through vipassanā, we discover this third position. If you imagine a triangle, and the base is this suppression-indulgence, suppression-indulgence, suppression-indulgence, creating this vicious circle. And at the top of the triangle, or the cone perhaps, the circle of the cone — that's good, I never thought of that. Yeah, that's good. The vicious circle at the base of the cone. That's a good one. And as you climb up the cone, as you lift yourself out of that involvement with what the heart is presenting you, you're discovering a transcendental position. It's transcendent of this game, of this play. It's transcendent.

Because now you're able to discover a place where you're looking at something. You're no longer involved in it. When you shift your consciousness to that point, when you lift yourself up to become the onlooker,

the experiencer of what is going on inside you, you've discovered a different level of consciousness. It's not the same as a consciousness which considers itself to be emotional: "I am happy. I am sad." It's not the same as a thought consciousness: "I think, therefore I am." And it's not the same as a body consciousness: "I am this body." It's something which is, shall we say, transcendent of all that.

Discovering a position where it objectifies, it turns into an object, everything that previously in our lives we've experienced as a subject: "This is me." As soon as we do that, you see, we have, as it were, discovered the understanding of *anattā*, this very difficult doctrine of not-self.

Now, when the Buddha talks about not-self, that's not a philosophical or metaphysical position. He's not saying there is no self. If he were in his day to say there is no self, then he would have been in this constant argument with people who said that there were. He didn't have to argue. The *anattā* doctrine, the doctrine of not-self, is just a skillful tool with which whatever you experience — whatever you experience, within yourself or without yourself — can be looked at and you can say, "Well, this is not me. This is not me." Which doesn't deny the fact that there may be something. We'll come to that in a bit. It's just a very skillful tool in which we can say, "Well, this is not me."

That's the purpose of accessing that level of consciousness. Because every time you experience something — a pain in the knee — you can look at it, you can feel it, you can sense it, and because of that distance you've created, because you haven't fallen into the error of suppressing it, turning away from it — "I don't want to feel this" — or indulging it — "Oh, my knee" — all that stuff. Because you're there, just feeling, sensing, experiencing the pain, you see, it's an object. You're looking at it. If it's an object, it can't be the subject. It's as simple as that.

Even though I say it's as simple as that, when the pain gets too heavy, of course, if you feel that your knee is just about to explode, all that lovely doctrine disappears. This not-self business takes us so far, but when it comes to the hard point, then we immediately collapse into the old level of consciousness of being a human being.

Level of consciousness here, not to be confused with a state of mind. What I'm referring — the word in the Pali, for some of you who know, is *citta*. So, a state of mind is, you know, whether you're happy, whether you're sad, the thoughts that go around that, the physical feelings that arise with that. All that, you can say, is a state, a state of mind, you can say.

A level of consciousness is concerned with how we understand things. So one of the obvious leaps of consciousness that happens to the vast majority of human beings happens to us around about the age of seven. Two important things happen to us around about the age of seven. First of all, we shift from a universe which has no basic moral laws to one in which suddenly there is right and wrong. So this is the truth within the myth of the Garden of Eden. The other thing, of course, is that we stop believing in our imagination as being real. It has to be reality-tested.

That's why now we are in this pitiful situation of being unable to believe that Father Christmas will come down that chimney and present us a present. Which is sad, isn't it? I mean, those magic days, they've all gone, they've disappeared. We now live in this rather terrible reality. So that shift, you see, is a change in the way that young consciousness understands and sees the world.

When the Buddha's talking about the process of awakening, in our language, in our terminology, it is a movement within consciousness itself. Because the root problem lies in consciousness itself. It's consciousness itself that knows which doesn't know properly. That's why it's so difficult for us to awaken. Because that which is trying to awaken is that which is deluded. And the whole definition of delusion is that you don't know where the delusion is. If you knew where the delusion was, then you wouldn't be deluded.

So here's the Buddha with his very clever teaching saying, "Listen, don't worry about who you are. You don't get involved in that question of who you are, but who you are not." If you can find who you are not, eventually you should end up finding out who you are. So the doctrine of *anattā*, the doctrine of not-self, is a teaching tool. It's not a philosophical statement.

In our meditation, through the process of distancing from what we experience, that little distance which objectifies what we're looking at is taking us backwards. So we're not the body, we're not the emotion, we're not thought. And then we're stuck with this: "I must be the thinker, the knower, the witness," you see. So now we make that final mistake of thinking that we are that consciousness itself.

The mistake there is one of, shall we say, a mirror. When you look at your face in the mirror, generally speaking you believe that's how people see you. Big mistake! Because they see your face the other way around. It's only when you use two mirrors do you realize how big your ears are. I was very upset with my sister. I was surprised at the size of my ears when I cut my hair off. It can hurt, you know. So it's coming to recognize that what we see in the mirror isn't actually what people see.

Now, when this knowing, this awareness — I'm just using the word consciousness — just, you know, awareness, there's many words for it: sense of being, sense of presence, the now. There's all sorts of ways that writers try to explain this level because it doesn't happen in our language. We don't have an actual word for it, in a sense. The closest we get to it is intuitive intelligence and intuition.

When we're at that level, you see, this consciousness feels its presence within the mind. A good example of that is when you're watching TV and you can see yourself in the screen watching TV. Now you can decide: are you going to watch TV or watch yourself watching TV? But as you're watching TV, you're aware of that thing. So there's a slippage. There's moments of consciousness which are absorbed in the TV program, but also switching over to this image that you see of yourself in the television screen. So it's oscillating like that.

That's what's happening when we are very much self-aware of being the onlooker, the witness, the feeler,

the experiencer of what it is we're actually experiencing — whether it's a pain, an emotion, a sound, something we're looking at. That's why in meditation there's always this accent of bringing ourselves back into the present moment. The immediate present moment which isn't any longer than a millisecond, if that. And that's what we mean by this concentration.

Now whenever you say to somebody "concentration," you always get this tension. "You've got to concentrate." Knitted forehead. I remember as a kid getting a clout on the back of the head because you weren't concentrating. This idea of force. But actually concentration comes about mainly through interest. Did you have any problem with concentration when you were interested in something? It doesn't arise, does it? If you're interested, there's an immediate giving of oneself to what you're actually doing.

So, in our meditation, again, there is this wanting to know. I mean, that's the essence of this Buddha mind within us. It wants to know. And that wanting to know, if you join into it, will draw you into the investigation of things that are arising and passing away. And that in itself is strong enough to actually make us focus in and in to a single point.

But when that single point appears — very occasionally, virtually impossible on a weekend retreat, I'm sorry to say, although I know that you are good enough probably to get there — there is that single point where there isn't time for that reflection. And those are the moments of pure vipassanā. Those are the moments when this consciousness is experiencing itself in its purity. And at that point, to confuse matters, the object-subject relationship collapses. There's no object and there's no subject. There's just that direct experience.

We get it occasionally in our lives as adults. It's very difficult for us to get that. It's like you'll get it, for instance, just for a moment when you trap your finger in the door. There's just a single moment there of pure pain, and there's nobody experiencing it. It's only the moment afterwards that you say, "Oh, my thumb." Just that moment of absolute pure stillness within the present moment.

So when you're meditating, you see, and you're watching the rising and falling of the breath and you're looking at its quality of transience, you're looking at the quality of its process, what you're trying to do is to see it more and more closely so that you begin to break up the idea that somebody's breathing, that there is anything called a breath. That's only a mental idea.

All there are are minute moments of sensations arising into consciousness. It's from these minute moments of sensations that the mind is able to build up a concept whereby you can hold a certain length of time within which you call it the in-breath or the out-breath. And that's all mentation. That's all done in the mind. The only thing that's actually happening in terms of input are these little sparky moments of sensations.

To get down at that level is to deconstruct the way we construct the world around us. It's to begin to see that everything that we experience is being totally, completely manufactured by the mind. Everything.

Even this room — you wouldn't doubt the objective existence of this room in the sense that if we all left, the room would disappear. The room has, in a sense, its own being, using that word very loosely. But when we walk into this room, there aren't as many rooms as there are people here. Because each of us experience the room in our own way. So in this sense, you see, we're living in a world which is completely mind-made.

This *dukkha* that we're looking at, one of the ways that the Buddha talks about it is loke dukkha, dukkha nirodha. It's in this world that there is this suffering, this unpleasantness, whatever, and there is an end to it in this world. And when he defines "in this world," he defines it as this body, mind and heart. In his terms, it would have been, for those of you who know, the five aggregates.

So this whole world that we're living in which has no doubt an objective existence outside us is recreated by us and we have to live in it, we have to live within that creation. Now what we do of course is to project all our ways of looking onto the world we're living in, and if that projection is wrong, if that projection is unwholesome, unskillful, then it's not surprising that the world should mirror that back to us.

So, for instance, if I have an angry disposition, I shouldn't be surprised that people should get angry with me. Because I'm exciting in them. There's a resonance between us, isn't there? Even though there's no direct contact within our emotions, there's a resonance. So we can feel another person's emotions against our own hearts. So if I go into a situation angry, that resonates. So everybody comes back at me angry. Or fearful, or run away, which is preferred.

So this unwholesome place that we found ourselves in, is slowly being manufactured by us. The first of it is to do with this wrong view, this me, this mind. That's where its root is.

Now, if you really think that this body is what you are, taking it at that absolute basic level, if you think this body is what you are, then two things, isn't there? First of all, it has to be protected at all costs. That's the first basic thing, isn't it? That's what we want from our government. We want safety first. Prosperity next, but you definitely want safety first. So we try to make the world safe. Safe at all levels.

That safety, of course, overreaches itself. And we feel far more safe with a million pounds in the bank than 10,000. Or than none, definitely. So there's that accumulation, that greed. And that greed steps into other people's territory. You can see how the world, especially at the moment, through our economic system, is just constantly trying to fill this gap, this lack, this feeling of any minute now something terrible could happen. So I have to surround myself with security.

Consider, consider the amount of money spent on insurance, all through fear. And silly things like, you know, that council that wanted all those flowers taken away from lampposts in case they fell on somebody's head, which they hadn't done for 1,500 years. Now, of course, it may happen, who knows? And it would have meant some sort of compensation, the fear.

So this self that we have, this idea of self in the body, seeking safety means that subconsciously it lives in a

state of fear. So the root emotion of the self is fear. And we touch that when death approaches us. We touch that fear when death approaches us.

Now, once we have the understanding that the more I accumulate, the safer I feel, then of course anything which approaches that safety from a negative point of view is seen as an enemy. You get your aversion, you get your pushing away. And of course if you can't, if what you're pushing away is too big, then you run for it. So that fight-flight syndrome is the other side of the self, presuming always that this is what I am.

Through the process of our insight, as we disengage from that, as we deconstruct all that sort of wrong understanding, the fear lessens. You begin to live in a more benign world. Now there comes a point through the process of awakening when a person knows quite distinctly that they're not this body. So the fully liberated person has no doubt whatsoever, they know they're not the body. So you can see if you now are absolutely certain within yourself through your personal experience that you are not the body, what can frighten you? And that's really why we say that the liberated person doesn't have any fear, can't have fear. There's nothing there to be fearful about.

Now, how do we begin to undermine that sense of self, you see? First of all, it's to use that technique of distancing within our meditation where noting something is like pointing at it. So when you've got a pain in the knee, if you say, "pain, pain," you're already distancing from it. You have to be careful with that technique because it might be a way of pushing it away. You know, "pain, pain." It's more like an acknowledgement, a clear acknowledgement. And once you've steadied yourself to go towards it, to plunge into the experience of it.

Same with our emotions, no matter how painful they are. To distance for a moment and say, this is an emotional state, whatever it might be. Despair, all that sort of stuff. And then once you've gained that equanimity, once you've gained that position of courage to go into the emotion and to stay there and just watch it as feeling, just as sensations.

If we can stay at that level, you see, it loses its name. Despair is just an awful sickly feeling. Fear is just an awful sickly feeling. And you can stay there with it. And all the time, you're just allowing this state, what is it? An energy. That's all it is, a turbulence. To express itself. All these emotional states, remember, all they're saying is, you know, listen to me, I'm very afraid. Help. They only want to tell you how they feel. That's all. And to allow that to happen is the process of liberating ourselves through understanding dukkha, through understanding suffering.

So, the distancing allows us to understand that this is not me, not mine, undermining that fundamental position that we have, that this is me, I am a human being. I am in a sense of continuous, continual am in a sense of forever. There's this feeling that you're never actually going to die. Everybody else does but it might happen tomorrow. So it's that case of undermining that and then of going into what you're being presented with to actually see how we create the suffering. So how do we create these mental states?

So that's when we begin to discover this split of indulging and suppressing, indulging and suppressing, indulging and suppressing. That process of psychology which is called in Buddhism the wheel of dependent origination, sometimes they call it interdependent origination, is the psychological teaching of the Buddha. And as far as I've read from people who should know better than me, it was completely new within Indian literature. There was nothing like that sort of psychology until the Buddha came.

And the Buddha begins with this lovely word, *avijja*, which means not knowing. So this consciousness that we've been talking about begins from a position of not knowing. Sometimes it's translated as ignorance, but that gives it a sort of pejorative, heavy, you know, like you're stupid. But it's not that, you just don't know. And from this not knowing, it begins to build up a world. So this world is built up around the middle part, where we experience the world as pleasant or unpleasant, and then we try to that accumulation.

Now that process of accumulation, that process of attachment, that process of holding on to things, grasping on to things, that's what's meant by this word desire. And unfortunately that word desire covers also desires that we ought to have. Desires such as wanting to meditate continuously. So you have to be careful with that word desire. Sometimes it's translated as craving, which is over the top. It's desires which arise from a wrong view of self.

And what we build up, the picture of the world that we build up and live in, in this uncomfortable way, you see, when you hit the root, when you hit the root of this not-self, when you begin to see it's not me, not mine, you're actually taking away the foundation. So the whole pack of cars just falls. It's not a case of having to go back step by step. It's as soon as you see something, the whole delusion collapses.

So for instance, if somebody were to come up on the street and give you a kick in the butt, and then you turn around and they ran off, you might go away thinking, you know, that's the worst thing that's ever happened to me in my life. You know, how could anybody do that? And you'd be angry and furious. And then you read in the evening news that it was somebody who'd lost their bottle and was going around kicking people in the butt. And they suddenly think, oh, well, the guy was a lunatic. Suddenly, everything's forgiven. He's just gone off his rocker. There's a sudden forgiveness, all because of a change of understanding, a change of view. So that's all we're doing. We're trying to undercut the original view we had. And in so doing, this whole pack of cards just begins to crumble.

The third view, so the first is that seeing of not-self. The second is trying to understand how we create this suffering through attachment, through grasping, through aversion, through suppression. The third view is to see the transience of things. To see that everything that we're experiencing is only here for this millisecond and it disappears.

And that's where we get, that's you can see that most in the breath. That's why we always begin with the breath as a certain position. First of all, it's always there, or you've got problems. And secondly, because of its movement, especially in the belly, especially in the abdomen, it's rising and falling. And just to stay

with that flow, just to stay with that wave of rising and falling, and if you can, to feel how delicious it is. They're very subtle, gentle sensations.

We always live on this high point of wanting sensation, our sensational life to be sensational. We're always living at that point where we ought to be in a state of gross happiness, jumping up and down. And the point is that there's a much deeper and a much more subtle and a much more gratifying happiness to be found in peace. And that peace is measured or is found in the body in these neutral sensations. Just a state of contentment with just a simple, neutral feeling. And as you get into that, you'll see there's a lovely loveliness there.

Now, you can go down to the river here, you see. Now, that river isn't exciting. It's probably one of the most boring rivers. It just flows and it's flat. There's no ripples, I mean, on this little corner here. There's no ripples, there's nothing, it's just this glass plate which continually changes just slightly catching the shades of light. And if you watch, if you keep your mind on that and just keep watching it, you'll catch its peace. And it's trying to use nature like that or just the starkness of the trees, just the blueness of the sky which never changes in a sense. And just to see that there's a real deeper sense of contentment and happiness in stillness, in quiet, in silence. In fact, one of the epithets of Nibbāna is the noble silence.

Now, when we watch the breath and we're beginning to see actually that that's just a concept. You can't see the belly, you can't see the air. All you have is sensations. And from these little building blocks of little sensations, the mind builds up a concept. The stomachs are rising and falling or the air is coming in and out of your nose. And there's an image there, you can see your nose, or you can see somewhere in your mind, your belly. But behind that, there are just these sensations.

And it's cutting through that, through this process of just looking, just focusing, drawn by interest, that we begin to experience that in fact life is extraordinarily momentary. Now what's the effect on our psychology when we realize that everything is extraordinarily momentary? Well, there's nothing worth holding on to. There's an immediate release. There's an immediate stopping of trying to grasp things, keep things as they are. It's a relief. And one of the things that the Buddha says, which we read out in our little opening ceremony, the taste of Nibbāna is the taste of freedom. It's the liberation from, it's the relief. Every time you get that little sense of relief, of letting go, of just letting be, in all these little pat phrases that you get, these are little touches of Nibbāna.

Tomorrow, I hope I remind you, I probably will forget, as usual, but when you're eating, you see, there's a distinction to be made, these are just my own distinctions of words, between satisfaction and contentment. So if you want satisfaction, you keep eating until you feel satisfied, until you feel completely full, bloated, and you think that's enough, and then you go and have a sleep.

Now, if you practice your meditation when you're eating, and you can feel that draw of greed just for that extra toast. We're promised toast tomorrow. Just for that extra piece of toast and marmalade. And you wait and you know that this is not necessary. This is overeating. Bad for the body. Producing early death.

Toast can be lethal. Taken in vast quantities. Once you see that, now hold on, this is greed. And you just hold on in there. And you let the greed come. This wolf. Marmalade after all. And you just wait for the wolf to die. To die, you see. There will come a point where there's no desire in the mind. That's contentment. That is a taste of nirvana.

So it's not as though nibbāna or this awakened state is something which is totally transcendent from what we actually can experience here and now. It's something that we can get little bites of. But you have to acknowledge it because this consciousness does not know that this is actually a better place than satisfaction. It's driven by everything in this society. The whole of our industry, the whole of our advertising is driven to satisfaction. And it's only when you begin to realize that that place actually produces more desire, more greed, a non-end to it, a churning of it, that you begin to realize there must be a better place than this. And that's it. Now, you can't get there without enduring happily, joyously, the suffering. That suffering is not the suffering of hell. That's not going to get worse. That's the suffering of purgatory. That's the suffering of purging.

I was brought up a Catholic and we had these three distinctive realms. Hell, purgatory and heaven. Hell, you were stuck. You couldn't get out of that one. Couldn't even get a drop of water from heaven. Purgatory was a transient state where you went through these sufferings in order to attain the final glory of heaven. Now, in terms of whether these actually exist or not is not a particular consequence to us here and now. But in terms of mental states, definitely. Those mental states that we enter where we see no end to it, the despairs, the sudden impossibility of life, all that, that's hell. Purgatory are those states of mind where we're quite happy to suffer because we know there's an end to it.

So our meditation is 99.999% purgatory. I hold out no great hope for sudden or swift liberation. And neither did the Buddha. He said it was a gradual path and I shall leave you with this quote. Somebody comes to him and says, listen, this training you've got to be doing, very hard, very painful, very awful. And the Buddha said, well, yes, it is. But, you know, you just keep going and you'll attain Nibbāna. And the reply was, Nibbāna, so what? And he says, well, when you get to Nibbāna, you are contented and with it happy. And he's describing his own state of mind, contented and with it happy.

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