# Dukkha (Unsatisfactoriness) and Sīla (Morality and Ethics)

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 25:20

Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

On this full moon—I hope you saw the blood moon. It wasn't actually the full moon itself, but it was very red against the clear sky. Very lovely.

The topic I've chosen for this evening is dukkha and sīla. These are words I'm sure you're familiar with, but it's good to have a little reminder. Dukkha, translated as unsatisfactoriness or suffering, simply means "hard to bear." But why does it manifest? It manifests because of three basic roots—the unwholesome roots. There is delusion, which forks off into some form of acquisitiveness and some form of aversion. And aversion spikes off into hatred and fear. These are our basic attitudes that arise out of this deep delusion.

In order to go backwards to the original delusion, we have to work through the moral laws and ethical guidance. I'm using these words to mean two different things. The moral laws are basically things like not to kill. But ethical guidance is really about relationships—about changing our relationship not only to people, animals, and plants, but even to material things.

For instance, at Eiheiji Monastery, the founding monastery of Zen, I'm told that when they take water from a well, they will use the water but always leave a little bit to put back into the well. It's a sort of offering, an acknowledgement of the preciousness of water.

Now, the thing about this suffering is that we cause it to ourselves. What's difficult for us to really accept is that we've actually been doing it since we were born—in fact, probably in the womb. We have to make a distinction between the pressures coming upon us, even as babies, which are usually not meant to be harmful—such as the process of birth, or feeling hungry when mummy's not there—and acts against us which can be harmful. But whatever happens to us is, shall we say, the original pain. How we react to it through aversion and so forth is our suffering.

We have to recognize that if this were not so, it would be impossible to become fully liberated. Unless we got rid of the actual cause of our suffering—if we believe other people are the cause of our suffering—then basically we've got to get rid of other people, and then we can be liberated. But it's the very fact that we cause our own suffering that makes it possible to become fully liberated from it.

I want to center upon what are known as the defilements and the latent tendencies, but we'll come to that in a minute. First, the five basic precepts—these are places I'm sure none of us go anymore. But it's good to

know that there are things we don't do, like kill people. We don't kill anybody if we can help it. We don't steal. We don't tell lies. We don't abuse our sexual powers. The last one's a bit difficult: not to take drugs and drink and such things which make the mind fuzzy.

We do live in an alcohol culture, but it's up to the individual. If one brings to mind that alcohol, no matter how little, is actual pure poison to the body—probably worse than any of the drugs—then that might encourage moving toward non-alcoholic wine and beers, which I can tell you now are very good.

What happens when we take those precepts is that we move towards the opposite. We don't kill any being or anything, and we naturally move towards protecting them. It's just a natural movement. Sometimes that first precept is translated as "no harm," but it's not—it's actually about killing. To not harm any living being is a refinement.

Not to steal, when we give that up—we know that leads to a harmonious society and eventually to generosity. The use of sexual powers is, of course, out of respect and within a loving relationship.

When it comes to lying, right speech splits into four different types. There are great big whoppers that we don't want to tell anymore. But slandering is a bit more difficult—we let words slip and find ourselves saying things about people. Then there's abusive language, of course, and just wasted talk, talking for talking's sake. What we're moving towards is kindly speech: truthful, beneficial, and—of most importance—to say things at a suitable time, because often we're saying what we want to say, but it's not quite the right time to say it.

We also have this other category of hindrances, where all these things come up as obstacles to our meditation when we're sitting. It's another list which allows us to see where these defilements within us arise.

and how to deal with them. Each category has a way of dealing with them, and I'm sure you remember.

So the first one concerns sensual desires—avarice, greed, and all of that. The next one encompasses the hatreds, the grudges, the vendettas. And then there's sloth and torpor, which comes about through our habit of using sleep to escape, to get rid of ourselves for a little while. I think somebody called it "the duvet dive." When you do that, of course, you're developing an energy that pulls you down, like a whirlpool. These things have to be overcome, have to be allowed to drain themselves.

Then there's that whole area of restlessness caused by inner turbulence. But that also contains guilt, remorse, and shame, which are secondary effects of doing something harmful. And finally, skeptical doubt, which is quite a problem if you have it badly because you can't make a decision. You keep making lists for and against. If you have a relationship where you're attracted to someone—could it work? Could it not work?—before you know it, the person's left you. It's the same with a job. Shall I go for it? Shall I not go for it? And it's gone. This often comes from fear of failure or a lack of self-esteem.

Anyway, moving on to the kilesas. This is often translated as the ten defilements. In the early scriptures, the word kilesa is used as a general way of pointing to that within us which is unwholesome. But of course, the early scriptures couldn't resist—and the Abhidhamma couldn't resist—making lists. So they've given us a list of ten of these defilements, and none of them will come as a shock. You know they're there. But the reason for looking at this is for self-reflection, so that when we see thoughts coming up, when we see our actions arising, it categorizes them and gives us some idea of how to deal with them.

The first one, obviously, concerns sensual desire—basic sensual desire, the greed, the lust, the avarice, and so on. The next one concerns hate: unforgivingness and things like that, holding grudges. The next one is delusion. And this is always around this fundamental problem of identity. It's always about this feeling of being a self, a person, something that doesn't change within us. This then gives us—moving from the self, which is actually only seeking happiness, only seeking happiness—some sort of purpose for life, to seek this happiness. But unfortunately, as we know, human life doesn't eventually satisfy us. It's not somewhere we are going to feel completely satisfied.

This also manifests as conceit. Conceit has three manifestations. The obvious one is "I am better than"—I'm better than you, and so forth. Then you get the opposite: "I'm not as good as." And then you get a more subtle one where you feel, "This is okay, I'm equal to this person." That doesn't seem to contain any conceit of being better or worse; it seems to be a good place to be, sort of wholesome. But unfortunately, you are creating a group of people who all think they are equal. Once you've done that, there are other groups who are not equal—who are actually worse or better. So it's a subtle one.

The next one is wrong views. This goes back again to the self. It's about believing that something of our personhood is eternal. We all know the body will die, but we believe the heart-mind, the mental body, continues to live, never changes. The soul—often people will talk about their souls as being this unchanging person, basically, but without a physical body. And that, of course, is not the Buddha's teaching. The subtle body, the body that seeks rebirth, is just as impermanent as this one. It is just another, finer energy.

When I say that, sometimes you can experience it. When you're there with an emotion, something loud—like you might be feeling irritated, or anxious is a bit difficult to work with, but irritation or anger, that's a good one.

And you're in the body and you can feel it, you can feel it. You might be able, by centering in on it very clearly, by holding your attention right there—it might just separate for you. And then you'll see that the mind's anger isn't that bad, but that when it touches the physical base of the body, it's like a sounding box. It comes back as very loud, as very burning.

Little experiences like that prove to the meditator that these two things, the body and mind, are actually two different forms of energy. But neither of them are permanent. They're arising and passing away.

And the opposite of eternalism, of course, is annihilationism—the idea that when you die, well, you're dead and that's it, so you should be happy with that. In the Buddha's time, there were materialists, people who believed that there wasn't a soul, there wasn't anything. You were just this body, and when you died, you died. These days we would have scientific materialists who take that position.

Definitely the Buddha was against both, and he tended to be accused of being an annihilationist, not an eternalist, because of his teaching of not-self. It became very confusing, this not-self business. The Jains said, "We believe, ourselves and the Brahmins, that there is an eternal soul. And the materialists believe that there isn't. But the Buddhists haven't made their mind up." That was how confused people were with this doctrine of not-self. There are occasions in the scriptures which are quite funny, actually. We'll explore those some other time.

Then we've got skeptical doubt, which we've talked about, and torpor, which we've talked about, and restlessness. So those are your ten kilesa: sensual desire, hatred, delusion, conceit, wrong view, skeptical doubt, torpor, and restlessness. I'm going to put these lists onto a PDF if you want to have a look, and there's lots of material on the websites if you want to go into it more deeply.

But the next bit is particularly interesting, I think, for us as Westerners—this idea of anusaya, the latent tendencies. This tells you that within us there are these habits, sankhara. Sankhara is often translated as "volitional conditioning," which is really confusing. But if we think about habits, it's simply what we habitually do—the way we think, the way we speak, our thought patterns. These are all habits. And the compendium of habits is what we would call our personality, our character.

It's understood that these are lying underneath everything we're doing. Given an opportunity, given some sort of catalyst, some sort of stimulus, there will arise out of this sankhara a response. For instance, all of us have some amount of anger within us. If somebody stands on your foot, that's a little stimulus, and this anger will want to reply to it. It's lying there dormant, ready. What the Buddha is saying is that these are actually underneath our obvious consciousness, but they're always ready, always in many ways affecting the present moment.

The term anusaya is translated as bent, bias, proclivity—all those sorts of words. The list is much the same as the defilements, of course, with one extra element, which is the tendency toward the desire to become. In other words, the will to live and its opposite, the will not to live.

This will to live leads us to beliefs of eternalism, while the desire not to live leads us to beliefs about annihilationism. If you have that desire to live, you'll do everything to keep alive and you will substantiate your life. You'll try to make it safer and safer with more money, more friends, and so on. It causes us to be acquisitive.

If you are on the other side, where there's a feeling of being okay with annihilation, with the idea that death is the end and that's all—then you'll often find such people taking refuge in sleep, the duvet dive. As

soon as something's too much, you just lie down and go to sleep. But of course, at its worst level, it's suicide.

Just wanting to get rid of yourself. Unfortunately, in Buddhist understanding, that doesn't work. It will re-arise. So it's not a good solution.

This tendency is included as an underlying tendency which makes us grasp at everything that proves to us we're alive. And that means trying to make ourselves happy, defending what makes us happy from any enemies—so there's your aversion. And if the enemy is too big, well, you run for it. We're constantly trying to manipulate our lives in order to establish this constant state of living happily.

Now, the last thing I want to mention is that these are translated as tendencies. These days we're very much aware of our prejudices, and there are two words people use. The commentators use the word prejudice, which is a hard sort of word—there's almost an activity there. If you're racially prejudiced or sexually prejudiced and somebody calls you that, there's a feeling of you being actively so. The other word being used is bias, which is slightly softer on a person.

If we use these two words in the sense of the defilements and the latent tendencies, it allows us to accept that all these things, these prejudices, are within us. It's part of the baggage we receive when we're born into a culture. There's racism, obviously, and tribalism which is a lesser form, sexism, ageism—I'm very much against that one—classism, homophobia, nationalism, religious prejudice, and xenophobia. And that's only a short list. There are lots and lots of other prejudices.

So it's being kind to ourselves. It's recognizing that we will have these prejudices within us, and they can manifest—sometimes embarrassingly so. But how do we overcome these prejudices? Well, obviously, on the obvious side, you don't indulge them. But the other thing the Buddha often talks about is this *yoniso manasikāra*, this wise attention, this being really awake—that in any situation you are aware of unwholesome thoughts as they arise, not after they've arisen and done something, but as they arise. When we are awake enough to actually catch these little unwholesome thoughts coming up, they very quickly dissipate. In that way, these prejudices, these biases, begin to be exhausted of their energy and lose their power to take us by surprise.

I think one of the difficulties is that it's very hard for us to say to ourselves, "Well, I am racially prejudiced." To say that and mean it as an active thing, of course, wouldn't be correct. But to say that there is in me that *sankhāra*, that conditioning, and to be aware should it ever arise and not to indulge it—I think that's a more truthful way of being with these conditionings within us.

It's also, I think, comforting to know that every person in the world will have these prejudices. It doesn't matter what ethnic group you come from, what race you belong to—these are just basic prejudices that are completely universal, regardless of where you live. This allows us to be more open about ourselves, at least to ourselves anyway. And that means we will be aware of these things when they arise, and they

don't sneak out as Freudian slips, which can be very embarrassing.

So what we've done this evening is revise these moral precepts and begun to look much more at this idea of relationship. We've looked at the more negative side. At another time, we'll be looking at the more positive side, the virtues. But these are just ways in which we can reflect upon these things whenever the occasion arises, and they allow us to find a way to heal the heart of these things. That's the purpose of bringing these matters to mind. And as I say, if you want to go deeper into it, there's lots of material on the websites, lots of talks on Dharma Seed and things like that.

I hope my words have been of some assistance, that they have not caused confusion, and that you will, by your constant effort, release yourselves from all suffering and achieve the peace of Nibbāna.

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