Understanding Dukkha

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 58:05

Tonight I want to share some thoughts about the second of the three characteristics. Last week I talked about anicca, so tonight I want to talk about dukkha—not exhaustively, but just sharing some things about it.

Dukkha, as a second characteristic, is also of course the first noble truth. It was really given a very central place in the Buddha's teachings, among the things he thought essential to address. And so, just to understand it, really.

I know many of us have been in this scene for a while and tend to use the word dukkha, even though we know "suffering" may not be the best translation. I certainly do, and I notice many other people tend to use the word dukkha as a shorthand for unpleasant things we wish weren't happening. Like if someone comes in and says, "Oh, I'm having a real dukkha day." Well, according to the first noble truth, every day is a dukkha day. But we take it to mean everything's going in a bad direction—I'm suffering, I'm unhappy, and things are bad.

When I say I want to talk about dukkha, just notice for yourself if some subtle or not-so-subtle quality of aversion pops up. "I really don't want to hear about this." Realizing the first noble truth or understanding dukkha as a characteristic has nothing to do with cultivating aversion. It's not about aversion. As soon as we think, "Oh, life is suffering, everything's suffering," as soon as we translate it as "suffering" in English, it is so easy to move into that connotation of all the bad stuff.

Remember, the first noble truth as dukkha—the Buddha said the first noble truth is to be understood. To be understood. And why? Why does it seem that he shared anything? Why do we practice? Do we understand it so that somehow we can be right, or it would be better for us, or we have to take our medicine? No. To understand it is to free our hearts and minds from the actual suffering of recognizing wrongly. Same with impermanence—not recognizing accurately, not understanding this truth of dukkha. And it's profound. I have no idea that I'm explaining it all tonight. I'm just dropping in some different ways of looking at it.

But just notice, even as we start, if the habit of your mind tends toward subtle aversion, or a little shutting down, or "Okay, I'll listen." Notice that. Notice that veil, notice that little bit of bias, because that is a good example of how we mostly meet a lot of the aspects the Buddha talks about in the first noble truth in our life. It's not about aversion.

The definition I currently like best—two ways of describing this word dukkha—comes from Bhikkhu

Bodhi, where he breaks down the actual word in the Pali. He gives a couple of examples. One is that the "du" part can mean difficulty, not quite working right. And the "kha" part means an axle hole, like the big ox carts at the time of the Buddha, with a big round wooden wheel and a hole in the middle that the axle would go through. So dukkha actually means the axle just not fitting properly in the hole. Every time the wheel turns, there's a kind of disharmony, a kind of friction—it's just not quite working right.

Another explanation he gives, a different way of parsing the word, is that "du" can mean difficulty, and "tha" is standing, so it's kind of standing badly—uneasy, uncomfortable. Or as Bhikkhu Bodhi describes it, the basic unsatisfactoriness, the basic "just not quite"—a little bit of friction running through our lives.

If you're sitting there thinking, "There's no friction running through my life," may you be happy. My mother used to say—she didn't really understand this, but once she came to visit the retreat center, and it says "Metta" up above. Somehow she knew: "Metta, that's like the opposite of dukkha, isn't it?" I don't know where she got that, but I thought it was very nice. I was trying to explain dukkha as this friction running through our lives, and she said, "Well, I don't have any dukkha." That's one of the ways delusion works, if you remember from last week—just flat-out denial.

Let me tell you a story just to cheer you up about dukkha and axle carts. This last year when I was in Burma, we were in a little village up in upcountry Burma, a couple hours out of Sagaing, visiting with our Sayadaw. We were setting up a little fund for the fifty-some-odd kids in that village who couldn't afford to go to school. The village basically made sure what we were doing every moment of the day. You can't just say, "I'll take the afternoon off and go for a walk"—forget about it. So they decided that this morning we all had to go for a ride in an ox cart—there were six of us—out through these deeply rutted pathways into a giant watermelon field.

So it was just like this ox cart, big wooden wheels, a little axle thing going through the hole. It was definitely friction, disharmony. I cannot tell you how uncomfortable it was riding in that ox cart through those ruts and bouncing, and the dust was coming up. I'm not exaggerating any of this—higher than the cart, and it's tilting down. Never mind springs. Every time it would hit a rut, we'd fly up and wham back down.

And then we got out at this watermelon field, like, so what? We don't want to see this watermelon field. It took us 45 minutes, and we had two nuns with us, Western nuns. We got there at about 20 minutes to 12, which meant that they were serving us lunch in like five minutes. And if they didn't make it back for lunch, they didn't get any food for the rest of the day. And it had taken us 45 minutes to get there in this dukkha cart. That surely was a dukkha cart.

And then they unhook the oxen, and they're off there showing us the watermelon fields. And we kind of said, okay, something isn't going to work about this. This is sankhara dukkha. It doesn't work. And we started walking really fast back, which of course freaked the guys out who were driving us, because it was their job to take care of us and we had just abandoned them. They hooked up the ox and came running

after us. But meanwhile, we figured out this is on the edge of a river, and the river was flowing, and here was the village, and we'd come this really long, complicated way. So we thought, we'll just walk back along the river.

And they got the ox and came running for us and said, "No, you must get in. You must get in. We must take care of you." We said, "No, we only have 10 minutes to lunch." So we walked back along the river. It was less than a 10-minute walk along the river. It was like one of those experiences.

So that whole experience is dukkha, but I just want to say the sense of the friction of the axle not fitting in the hole of the wheel of the ox cart is a very apt description of this—just this sense of friction running through our lives.

In the suttas, the Buddha mentions three kinds of dukkha. I'm sure you're familiar with this. I just want to mention them and then talk about how we can misunderstand.

The first one, you all know: dukkha dukkha, which is your basic unpleasant, difficult experience. This is the one that we all just kind of label everything dukkha. We think of this. And this is the classic definition I'm sure you've heard: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are suffering. I'm using "suffering" on purpose now because I would say these things are suffering. Separation from what is pleasing, union with what is displeasing, and not to get what one wants is suffering. In brief, clinging to the five aggregates is suffering. The five aggregates is nama-rupa—mind of consciousness, perception, vedana or feeling, and sankhara or mental formations, and form. You really could say, in other words, clinging.

So that basic dukkha dukkha—the problem with that, as I'll talk about it a bit more later—that's just the first one, dukkha dukkha.

The second one is called viparinama dukkha, and it's basically the fact of change, which I talked about a lot last week. It's also included under the sense of unsatisfactoriness, of things just not quite working right, basically that there's nothing we can rely on, as I said last week. And it's under this one, viparinama, that in the commentaries, this is where pleasant feeling is included. So we tend to think of dukkha as a characteristic of all phenomena, being that we can't rely on it, and our mind, as I said in the beginning, tends to go to the unpleasant, thinking of unsatisfactory as bad. But here the Buddha is saying pleasant feeling also is included within dukkha. We'll talk more about that in a minute as well.

And the third one, sankhara dukkha. Sankhara, you know, is the word that's sometimes translated as mental formations, but it's really any formation. Sankhara is anything that is formed or fashioned by conditions. Whatever comes together goes apart.

That's sankhara. In terms of the five aggregates, sankhara is used as intention, as really all of our mental formations. In terms of this sankhara as dukkha of the first noble truth, it's often talked about as the fact that whatever comes together is going to come apart. And this is constantly going on.

The way it's described in the commentaries is that when we're experiencing sankhara dukkha, it's recognizing that there's a sometimes very subtle, sometimes not, quality of being oppressed by the constant rise and fall of everything. Just this fact that there's nowhere to rest and that it often doesn't quite work. This sense of subtle disconnect, this unsatisfactoriness running through life that Bhikkhu Bodhi talks about.

And our struggle with that—there's a Tibetan phrase I've heard Guy use, so I asked him about it. I thought it was Trungpa, but he said no, he doesn't know who it's from. But I really like it. I think it describes our unawake response to sankhara dukkha: the essence of samsara—rounds of birth and death and wanting and suffering—the essence of samsara is trying to correct, trying to just make it a little bit better, this moment, this moment, this moment. To me, that's the best feeling I get of sankhara dukkha—just not quite totally settled in this moment.

So I'll talk a little bit about each of these. And you get it: this is including dukkha as the first noble truth to be understood, as a mark, an aspect, a characteristic of all phenomena. It's really a radical understanding. That's why to stop with the sense of dukkha as unpleasant, or things we don't like, or actual physical suffering—it's so limiting. We really need to open ourselves to explore, to try to understand. It's quite radical that when he's talking about all aspects of phenomenal existence being dukkha, having this thread of unsatisfactoriness in it—that's not to make us suicidal. It's to free us. But it has to be that radical to free us. Otherwise, the mind is always trying to find some kind of happiness and ease where it can't, not recognizing accurately, and that little bit is what keeps us spinning.

And so, as with everything he taught that I can understand, the understanding of dukkha, even when we have moments of understanding—it frees us. And personally, I find it really inspiring and energizing. Not at all depressing, but sort of like, "Oh, right." Instead of everyone going around with the emperor's new clothes, someone saying, "Yes, the emperor has no clothes on." That's an old moral tale.

Anyway, when I first began to hear about this, sometime after I started practicing, I didn't hear much. You just hear what we're ready to hear, right? So I'm sure it was talked about, but I didn't hear it for a while. But when I first heard this sense of this thread of unsatisfactoriness, and nothing, even the beautiful, can be relied on—I felt such a sense of relief, of wholeness, of things coming back into balance. Like, "Oh, I'm not crazy."

And I don't know, just taking very simple examples: you go somewhere with people to the movies, or you go out to dinner, and "Oh, this is going to be so great, we're going to have such a nice night." Then when it's over, people say, "Oh, that was so wonderful." You hear people the next day saying, "That was such a nice night." And my experience would have been, well, some of it was nice. The car ride there was kind of long, a little bit cold, a little bit cramped. But it was okay, we didn't have a crash. We had some nice conversation, but then the radio was too loud. And it wasn't like I was so thrilled when I got out of the car.

And you go in the restaurant. You're looking, and you're talking, and you wait, and you're sitting there,

and it's a little bit noisy. And you order some food, but it's not really what I had in mind—I was kind of more in the mood for seafood. But okay, this really tastes good. And I'm not being negative, but everyone's saying, "This is so great, this is so great." But then, well, okay, the peas are a little mushy. But this is really great, this is so good. And you have a conversation. And part of the time you're bored. And part of the time you're thinking about what if you were back home in time to see that movie on TV. Or this is good.

But oh, it's an hour's drive home. And it's so cold tonight. And I wish I would have just stayed home in the first place. Oh, no, no. This is great. You get home. And the next day, everyone goes, "It was wonderful." And I'll think, well. You know, it wasn't like it was bad, but it wasn't really wonderful either. It had moments of everything. You know what I mean?

And when I saw, oh, I don't have to—there's not something wrong with me that I'm not getting completely thrilled with all these things that everybody's saying is great. There's not something really twisted about my mind that I keep waiting for everything to be perfect, like I read about in the books, and it doesn't happen. I kept thinking something was wrong with me. But no.

That's not the same as saying everything stinks, and life is all suffering. It's not saying that. It's saying, let's look at what's really going on. What's really going on. It's not depressing at all. It's like just saying, oh yeah, that axle hole is rubbing. And if I don't need it to be different, if I'm not expecting to be driving in a Peugeot, if I know I'm driving and it's a friction axle hole, okay, that's fine. I don't get different expectations. I'm not looking for it to make my day. It's fine just as it is. We can really appreciate life.

So those same qualities, the way delusion shows up that I talked about with impermanence, are also true for understanding—or maybe not understanding—dukkha, unsatisfactoriness, this friction that's just not quite right. Or as Ruth Dennison used to say, it's just the little hole in the canoe. You know, you're paddling, everything's fine, but there's just this little hole in the canoe. It's always just leaking a little bit, or sometimes more than a little bit.

So the main one's denial, just flat-out denial, and we're all very familiar with this. And the other is the misperception, the not perceiving accurately due to the holding back and the aversion in the mind. I love exploring denial. I was talking to somebody about this, I think, because it's such an amazing quality in the mind. You can almost see the mind going, "That's not happening, and I don't see it." Or, "I'm just not going to look at that, and I'm just going to pretend everything's fine."

So denial of, first, just flat out dukkha dukkha. And this is what's amazing. The fact that old age, sickness, disease, and death happens to everybody. It's the same with impermanence. We go, yes, sure, but not me, not yet. And when something like that does happen, it's because there's not that complete understanding and acceptance that this is just the nature of whatever's compounded—is going to change, is changing right now.

It's not quite deeply seen that when something really difficult, just in the dukkha-dukkha level, happens to

us—separation from what is loved, having to be together with what is unloved. Well, how often does that happen? A lot. It's easy to turn it into either pretending that's not happening or thinking it's a mistake. It shouldn't happen. And if I would have figured things out right or done stuff differently or taken vitamin C or whatever it is, this wouldn't be happening. There's something wrong with me, or there's something wrong with you, or there's something wrong with something somewhere, because this shouldn't be happening.

Instead of just bringing this clear, calm, uncluttered attention to just notice how things are, like I described going to dinner. Without judgment, just noticing this is a pleasant moment, this is a not pleasant moment. This is pleasant, but my mind's wanting it to do more. Oh, that's the suffering, just noticing it. No problem. When we don't notice it, we don't know how to respond appropriately because we don't even know what's happening. And we get more and more confused and more suffering.

I read a book a few years ago called *Unquiet Ghost*, where the man who wrote it had gone to Russia in the 1990s after the end of the Soviet Union. And he talked to a lot of people who had been there during the era of Stalin, those years when something like twenty million people

Russian citizens were put into prison camps, into the gulags. Perhaps it was twenty million who died, and more than that who passed through them. But there were periods in the thirties and forties when so many people were arrested, often for doing nothing at all. It was immense. Those years were called the years of terror.

So this writer went to Russia after the end of the Soviet Union, when people could begin to talk about it a little—though it still wasn't talked about much. He was interviewing people he could find who had either been in the gulag and lived through it, or family members, or neighbors. It was fascinating, but there's one quotation from it that particularly struck me. It almost felt as if the book was a meditation on the power of denial in our minds and in society.

What he discovered from talking to many people was that during the periods of terror, people who tried to avoid arrest by lying low and moving from place to place—basically running—actually had a good chance of success. The KGB at that time was good at arresting people but wasn't so good at searching and finding them. However, people rarely tried this. Despite mass arrests, almost everybody believed, "It won't happen to me." Because people deny bad news since it implies worse news. If I'm about to be arrested, that would mean the whole system has gone mad. I know I've done nothing. Therefore, it can't be true that I'll be arrested. Anyone else who was arrested must have done something bad—until they come for you.

George Orwell talked about the courage of perception, the power of facing unpleasant facts. I would call understanding dukkha not only the power of facing unpleasant facts, but simply facing facts in general—which is, as you might recognize, mindfulness. It's not that we need to become negative and look for the unsatisfactory aspect of everything. It's the same as with impermanence. If we simply rest with steady moment-to-moment awareness, noticing what's presenting itself in this moment without bias,

without preference, the fact of change and the fact of unreliability—this thread of nothing really being stable, nothing really doing it for us—will be obvious. The thread that unpleasant, difficult things do happen, not only to others but to me, not only to me but to others, becomes clear.

And we start to see that the real suffering our understanding can free us from is the suffering of a mind and heart that doesn't understand and stays lost in denial, in aversion, in blame, in judgment. It's rooted in a misunderstanding. I remember reading somewhere—I forget if it was Joko Beck who said this—but the feeling is as if I can somehow hold myself separate from this unwanted experience. And in fact, if you think of it as an unwanted experience rather than just an unpleasant experience, that brings it closer to what's really the problem in the moment.

My knee's hurting. It's unpleasant, but really, it's unwanted. And the subtle, unseen—maybe not so subtle—habit of our mind, both flat-out denial and basic aversion to the unpleasant, this pulling away, is rooted in the belief that I can somehow stay separate from it. It's happening over there. If I can't stay separate from it, then there's a way I can stop it and make everything okay again.

When you can't stop it, and you can't stay separate from it, but you're still lost in aversion to it, that so often turns to even stronger aversion, whole levels of self-judgment, even despair, depression. I've seen this often for myself and with others—some kind of chronic illness or chronic pain, a knee, a back, or some chronic condition. We might in moments be with the unpleasant, but overall there's this sense that I should be able to be separate from it, or if I could figure out what I did wrong and how to fix it, I could get rid of it. And when we can't, this subtle or not-so-subtle turning of aversion back on ourselves—because of not understanding the truth of dukkha—becomes "What am I doing wrong?"

This shows up in the whole New Age thing: if I had the right thoughts, I wouldn't be ill. Do you remember years ago, there was this writer named Louise Hay who wrote all those books about proper thoughts? Certain thoughts lead to certain sicknesses. I remember that certain thoughts would give you warts on your feet. It went on and on like that. When I first developed my chronic disease, I got a little sucked into that thinking—if you have the right thoughts, you won't get sick.

And I started thinking: Ramana Maharshi died of cancer. What about Ajahn Chah, all those years, eight or nine years, where he needed complete care? What about the Karmapa who died? Wait a minute—they all died. All the most amazing people died. Even the Buddha died. There might be something that isn't quite in alignment with reality about that way of thinking.

This came up in an interview, I think today, again from the Buddha's teachings, but these are the habits of our mind when we don't understand the truth that unpleasant, difficult things happen. They simply happen. And pleasant experience isn't the source of all our happiness.

So the Buddha is talking about this in what's called the Sutta of the Two Darts. You experience something unpleasant—say a pain in the knee—and you shoot yourself with a second dart. The unpleasant sensation

is the first dart. The second dart is: *What's the matter with me? I don't like this. This should go away.* And so it's like you have an unpleasant physical feeling and an unpleasant mental feeling.

But in this paragraph, he's describing how our minds get into habits without seeing clearly: "Having been touched by that painful feeling, he resists and resents it." Does that sound habitual? Normal? What we do?

"Then, in one who resists and resents that painful feeling, an underlying tendency of resistance against painful feeling comes to underlie his mind." In other words, it gets to be a habit. And so it just seems normal, doesn't it? With an unpleasant, painful feeling, of course we have aversion to it. Of course we resist it. That's normal. I'm not saying it's bad—I'm just saying look and see. That's normal.

"Then, under the impact of that painful feeling, he proceeds to look for and enjoy sensual happiness. Why does he do so? Because an untaught worldling, oh monks, does not know of any other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sensual happiness."

That makes me—I just find that so poignant. And so true. Because when we have something painful going on, someone was saying today, "I saw it in myself—I go off into fantasy, some pleasant fantasy." Here on retreat you can't do much else, so the mind goes to find some pleasant feeling as seemingly the sensible way out of unpleasant feeling.

"And then, in him who enjoys sensual happiness, the underlying tendency to lust for pleasant feelings comes to underlie his mind." So now there's the habit of resistance to unpleasant, the habit of lusting for pleasant. "He does not know, according to facts, the arising and ending of these feelings, nor the gratification, the danger, and the escape connected with these feelings."

And then he goes on to say that the tendency for ignorance in regards to neutral becomes the next habit.

That is what I really want to talk about—the gratification, the danger, and the escape. To look and see what's really going on. Because when we don't look, when we're what he calls an untaught worldling, that's some sorrow. We spend our life just ping-ponging back and forth: unpleasant feeling, need to find a pleasant feeling, that one goes away, need to find another one. Needing another one and not finding it is unpleasant, so then we get another pleasant. Then it's neutral, and we really have no clue what to do with neutral. We either fall asleep or we make... People here have even made unpleasant fantasies. God forbid—it's better than neutral! At least I feel like me, having a suffering, unpleasant fantasy. It's better than calm. It's better than nobody home. So we're ping-ponging back and forth.

There's another phrase somewhere in the suttas: that dukkha either ripens as confusion, ripens as bewilderment, or it ripens as search, ripens as investigation. So here, with the untaught worldling he's talking about, there's unpleasant, you just run to the pleasant. And we spend our whole life doing that. That's dukkha ripening as bewilderment. Or we get really lost—we get really lost in the aversion. That's ripening as bewilderment.

But ripening as search—that, I know, is what we're all doing here at moments. You can tell the difference. Like, *Wow, what's really going on here?* Not assuming that my sense of suffering, of dissatisfaction, of something not just working—the square peg in the round hole—is because of this unpleasant feeling. We stop. We look. We explore, just with this moment-to-moment mindfulness. And it reveals itself.

So this is where we start to see that even pleasant feeling is included within dukkha. And this is the point where people say, "Why do I need to know this? Give me, please, somewhere to go to have a moment of pleasure!" But that's when you're thinking of dukkha as suffering, only suffering—when you're thinking of it with aversion.

We're thinking, even pleasant is dukkha, means even pleasant is unreliable, is unsatisfactory. Look and see, as he was saying, it just doesn't last long.

There's one sutta where Sariputta is saying this. This is actually a sutta like Sariputta's lion's roar of his attaining arhatship, of his complete enlightenment—which didn't happen after only two weeks; maybe it took him a couple of days. But he's talking about, to the Buddha, different ways he would express his understanding, his freedom. And this is one way:

"If they were to ask me this, venerable sir, I would answer thus: Friends, there are these three feelings. What three? Pleasant feeling, painful feeling, neither painful nor pleasant feeling. These three feelings, friends, are impermanent. Whatever is impermanent is dukkha. When this was understood, delight in feelings no longer remained present in me."

Then the Buddha says, "Good, Sariputta, good. This is another method of explaining in brief that same point. Whatever is felt is included within dukkha."

Whatever is felt is included within dukkha, included within unreliability, included within the sankhara—the sense of formations that come together, go apart.

And that doesn't mean that we start to hate unpleasant, I mean hate pleasant, or fear pleasant. It doesn't mean—and this is where sometimes people go with this when they start to look at it or start to hear this—they start to think... And I did this for a while myself. I thought it was very clever. "Oh, everything's dukkha. Everything's suffering. So there's no point in feeling pleasure or appreciation for anything." Just, "Oh, so it's a beautiful plant. Never mind, it's going to die." "It's a pretty day today, but so what? Tomorrow's going to freeze. It's Massachusetts in November. Don't get all excited about it." Go out to dinner and say, "Okay, it's a nice dinner, but so what? It's just going to turn into junk in my stomach, so why don't I just bolt it down and stay home and eat zwieback? What's the difference?"

And I went through a phase like this. We used to call it, years ago, the dukkha club. We'd kid around about dukkha, which we thought was very clever. I mean, for me, it's my sense of humor with the other friends too. And it would help us laugh rather than be aversive. But I can see now where it put that lens of "nothing's worth appreciating, it's all dukkha, it's all..." And you hear it goes into aversion. And that's not

wisdom. That's not paññā. That's not clear seeing.

I remember, this was on staff years ago, this couple got together, a man and a woman. They got together as a couple, and they were a very cute couple. They were walking down—I was watching them walk down the driveway hand in hand. And I forget who, but another one of our dukkha club, we turned to each other and said, "They're so happy. Give them six months. It'll break up. All meetings end in parting." And all that stuff's true. But it doesn't have to have that tinge.

Well, twenty years later—I haven't heard from them for a while—but twenty years later, they were still together, very happy. So it took longer. That is not understanding.

That's not understanding the truth of dukkha. That's moving into a kind of fear of the unpleasant, a kind of despair. It's not understanding.

The way the Buddha talked about understanding is to bring in investigation. What he said about gratification, danger, and escape is a really wonderful model to bring into all kinds of aspects of your experience when you're investigating. Because he's not saying pleasant is bad and horrible and not good. He's saying there's gratification. Of course there's gratification.

He said, "Before I was a Buddha, when I was still a bodhisatta, before my enlightenment, it occurred to me: What is the gratification in the world? What is the danger in the world? What is the escape from the world? And I saw whatever pleasure and joy there is in the world—this is the gratification of the world." And he says later, "I set out seeking the gratification in the world, and whatever gratification there is, that I have found."

So it's very sensible. It's very in touch with our experience. There is gratification. There is joy. There is appreciation, even just of sensual pleasure. There's gratification in that. But don't stop there. Keep steady with our awareness, and then we'll see what is the danger: that the world is impermanent, bound up with unsatisfactoriness, bound up with unreliability, and subject to change. This is the danger in the world. So if we're putting all our eggs in the basket of any particular moment experienced for gratification, that's the danger, and we're going to suffer.

And the removal, the abandoning of desire and lust for the world—this is the escape from the world. He's not saying the removal of the world, but the abandoning of the lust, stopping that running back and forth toward pleasant feeling every time something isn't quite pleasant arises. This is the escape from the world.

To quote Eckhart Tolle, because I like the way he says it: it doesn't mean that we no longer appreciate pleasant or beautiful things or conditions. Understanding dukkha does not mean we stop appreciating beauty, love, joy, or even the nice taste of a mango lassi—why did that come to mind? But to seek something through them that they cannot give—an identity, a sense of permanency and fulfillment—to seek that is the recipe for frustration and suffering.

So it's really just seeing the facts as they are. It may seem like everything gets all flat, like we're losing something. But we're not. That's when we're putting all our eggs in some pleasure thing, and like the emperor's new clothes, telling ourselves, "This is making me so happy," and fighting like crazy to deny all the moments when it's not like that, and wondering why we might be a little bit confused.

The other aspect of delusion is not recognizing accurately this incorrect perception. Same as with impermanence—we perceive permanence. Similarly with dukkha, with the unreliable aspect of all experience, we don't recognize it and we see it as reliable. Another way of misperception: when our perception, our consciousness, our mind is colored with aversion, colored with denial, with resistance.

This is one of the tricky places in terms of understanding this truth, this quality of dukkha in experience. Because of this deeply ingrained habit the Buddha spoke of—of pulling back, of aversion, of disconnecting from unpleasant experience, either from fear or by just pretending we're not there, or by lashing out with anger and blame—when that aversion is coloring the mind, the citta kilesa, we can't recognize accurately. It's sort of like a catch-22, a cycle that keeps going until we stop and recognize the aversion.

This is from the Buddha: "When one dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by ill will and does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen ill will, on that occasion one neither knows nor sees as it really is one's own good or the good of others or the good of both."

We just can't see straight when aversion, when dosa, when ill will is coloring our mind. And so the deep habit of our mind to meet unpleasant, unwanted experience with some form of resistance or ill will makes it just that much more tricky to recognize without that reaction—to simply acknowledge, "Oh yeah, difficult things happen. It's not my fault. It's not something wrong. It's just how it is. This is difficult."

But when there's a moment—or more than a moment—of that mindful, clear awareness, just simply meeting the difficult experience: the pain in the knee, the cramping in the joints, the fear of getting old, the sense of loss, the feeling of loneliness, the feeling of grief. Just meeting it as it is in that moment without ill will. It's still a feeling of grief or loss or cramping in the joints or growing old, but it doesn't have to lead to this sense of isolation, the sense of something wrong.

It doesn't have to spin us into this whole sense of being at odds with life as it is, believing that something bad is happening to us. Instead, we can simply meet it: "Oh yes, here it is."

Bankei, the Japanese Zen master, said at one point, "Don't set yourself into confrontation with things. Then your primary being reveals itself in its true form." Don't set yourself into confrontation with things, and then your primary being reveals itself in its true form.

So in those moments when we're not in contention with our experience—not in contention with sorrow or loss or illness or unpleasantness or anger—when the mind is fully present and willing to simply meet this as it is, then our natural being does reveal itself in its true form. That's when there are those moments of what I call "just is-ness," the times when we can recognize an intimation of the natural purity, the natural

luminosity of mind, of consciousness.

We all have those moments. There's nothing special happening—there's just this, and the mind is not in contention. You can be drinking tea. You can be walking. You could be feeling comfortable or cold or hot. You could be feeling sad. You could be feeling anxiety. You could be feeling contentment. Your body could hurt. You could be hungry. It doesn't matter what's happening. But when there's fullness of awareness and presence, and we're not in contention with experience, then there's a sense of seeing through. We're not looking to experience for reliability, for happiness, for ease. The sense of fighting with what's happening is gone. There's actually a sense of understanding the truth of dukkha in that moment.

Denial of dukkha—denial of even dukkha dukkha, of the unpleasant stuff that's happening, all the things I've mentioned: illness, loss, fear—thinking that there's something wrong, that it shouldn't arise. Have you noticed that when difficulty happens to us and we believe something is wrong, we either blame ourselves, as I did with that illness, or we try to hide it? We feel that other people don't want to know about it, or we're embarrassed, or we just feel really isolated. Have you ever had a time when you were in deep depression, or grief, or illness, or loss, and you felt really alone with your experience? In a way that's aversive, that's depressive, that is truly isolating? The sense of suffering makes us feel more and more alone, as if there's something wrong with us.

This is really not understanding the truth of dukkha. Because the reverse of it, the jewel that arises when dukkha is understood, is this: when we're not in contention with experience, that sense of wisdom, of clarity, the purity of heart and mind arises. And the other jewel is that it manifests in our heart and in our relationships as compassion.

When we're not in contention with difficulty, with unpleasantness, when we're not running to the pleasant to escape, when we're not meeting dukkha with aversion, the experience of life is not one of isolation but of recognizing our non-separation. Suffering—and now I'm really using suffering as suffering—rather than being a modality that enhances our feeling of weirdness, of isolation, of shame, of self-judgment, is actually one of many ways through which we can experience our commonality with all beings.

This is really the jewel in opening into the understanding of this characteristic of dukkha: the natural response of compassion. The Dalai Lama has said that compassion develops through deep insight into what suffering is. And this comes from being with our own experience, really being with it—not with aversion, but with lack of contention, with open-hearted presence—just to see what reveals itself.

I've seen it many times in myself and of course in other people: how our own particular experience, whether of physical pain, of not getting what we want, of being separate from what we love, of frustration, loss, illness, trauma arising—whatever it is—has the particular form of our story, our particular physical and mental memories and experience. Of course it does.

And at first, when we're still in denial, when we're wrestling with it, when we're trying to keep it away, we're personalizing it. There's so much extra suffering in that, isn't there? First the resistance, the denial, and then so often the sense of self-blame. What am I doing wrong? I shouldn't be suffering from this so much. It's shameful. Everyone else on this retreat seems like such great yogis, and here I am, stumbling through, filled with grief over something that happened twenty years ago. What's my problem?

We become isolated and alienated. But it's this personalizing and this resistance that's actually creating the sense of separation where it doesn't exist.

It's creating the sense of alienation—"This is all my story"—where it doesn't need to exist.

And in that moment, and many moments, when we suddenly stop resisting... Of course, we can't do this with willpower. We all know this, but we still try. When suddenly we just stop resisting, we stop being in contention—"Oh, grief is like this. Just like this"—totally open to it. And maybe not in that second, but it does happen, over and over, that it moves from the particular to the universal. It still can be our own particular story, but it becomes so clear that my grief is the same, in a way, as the grief of all beings in the world. Every being goes through grief. Every being goes through loss. Everyone experiences illness.

And when we stop fighting it, when we stop trying to fix and just open into it with this clarity, this wisdom, this non-contention—"Ah, it's just what it is"—and we really see it... It doesn't mean it's not grief. Grief is still grief. Grief is like this. But you couldn't—and I mean this is my experience with grief or with illness, with pain—in those moments of pure presence and non-contention, it could be enormous grief, but I couldn't say it was difficult. I couldn't even say it was particularly suffering. It's just what it is. Times I've been really sick, and there's presence and non-contention, I could say, "Yeah, I'm sick, and this and this and that." I couldn't really say it was difficult. It's just what it is.

And then there is contention, right? Experience is not difficult. Then suddenly the personalization comes in again. No judgment—it just does. There's some resistance to it: "Okay, that was great, but now it's enough already. It should be over." And that's like such a world of difference in my mind. It's going to be so subtle, but okay, but that's enough now. That's enough. Get over it. And then it's personal. It's alienating. It's suffering. There's resistance. Like they say, "The smallest amount of judgment, heaven and earth are set infinitely apart."

Exploring that, exploring that jewel of compassion in the heart of all suffering, in the heart of all dukkha.

So I just want to end with one example of that which quite inspires me. Again, remember the saying of dukkha that leads to bewilderment and dukkha that ripens as search. This is from John Lewis, who was a U.S. congressman. He was one of the original Freedom Riders in 1959, 1960, out of Nashville. A group of students from the university there, African-American students, began sit-ins and Freedom Rides. They formed the beginning of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. And he and many others—I mean, it's amazing. These were kids, nineteen-, twenty-year-old kids. The marches they experienced, lots

of violence and beatings in the Freedom Rides—unbelievable, the violence they put themselves in. And they kept going back and going back from a deep, deep commitment to nonviolent action. Everything they did was rooted in nonviolence, not as some external idea, but as a deep manifestation of transformative love, of Christian love. It's a really very profound way of self-transformation as well as social action.

I just want to read what he wrote. This is from his autobiography of a few years ago, just a little snippet where he's talking about that. He said:

"Suffering puts us and those around us in touch with our consciences. It opens and touches our hearts. It makes us feel compassion where we need to. Suffering, though, can be nothing more than a sad and sorry thing without the presence on the part of the sufferer of a graceful heart."

This is different language, but to me it says the same thing.

"Without the presence on the part of the sufferer of a graceful heart—an accepting and open heart, a heart that holds no malice towards the inflictors of his or her suffering."

This is a difficult concept to understand, and it is even more difficult to internalize, but it has everything to do with the way of nonviolence. We are talking about love here—not romantic love, not the love of one individual for another, not loving something that is lovely to you. This is a broader, deeper, more all-encompassing love. It is a love that recognizes the spark of the divine in each of us, even in those who would raise their hand against us, those we might call our enemy.

This sense of love realizes that emotions of the moment and constantly shifting circumstances can cloud that divine spark. Pain, ugliness, and fear can cover it over, turning a person toward anger and hate. It is the ability to see through those layers of ugliness, to see further into a person than perhaps that person can see into himself, that is essential to the practice of nonviolence.

I think of that as really non-contention with presence and acceptance—something that takes us past the personal, past the needing life to serve us in a certain way, and into truly, just for a moment, touching the truth of non-separation. It opens us to the luminous, non-suffering aspect that is available to us in any moment, whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, whether wanted or unwanted. It is always accessible, just now.

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