The First Noble Truth

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2010) · 1:01:31

I'd like to continue the discussion from last week of the Buddha's first discourse—the turning of the wheel of the Dharma in motion.

If you remember, he began this first teaching by laying out the broad framework of the middle way: not overindulgence in sense pleasures, and not being devoted to self-mortification. We spoke of it particularly with regard to psychological self-mortification, which seems to be more what we engage in.

After laying out this opening framework of the middle way, the Buddha goes on in the discourse to provide an amazing conceptual framework, a conceptual structure for understanding everything that is necessary for liberation. These are very powerful teachings. It is said that just as the footprints of all animals can fit into the footprint of an elephant, so too whatever wholesome states there are, all of them are embraced in the Four Noble Truths. Despite the many differences among the different Buddhist traditions, all of them are in agreement that these Four Noble Truths are the foundation of realization and understanding. We call them the very heart of the Buddhist teachings of awakening.

Tonight we'll explore both the meaning and the relevance of the first of these truths.

The Buddha continues the discourse after his description of the middle way. He says: "This, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of dukkha. Birth is dukkha. Aging is dukkha. Sickness is dukkha. Death is dukkha. Association with the unpleasant is dukkha. Dissociation from the pleasant is dukkha. Not to receive what one desires is dukkha. In short, the five aggregates subject to grasping are dukkha."

It's pretty amazing that the Buddha, in just these few lines—three or four lines of teaching—points us very directly to what he means by the experience of dukkha. He points to it in our own lives, both in the very ordinary experiences: birth, sickness, old age, death, being with what we don't like, being separated from what we do like. These are not esoteric examples. This is just the nitty gritty of our lives. And then in his concluding line, on a deeper and more comprehensive level, in summarizing the essence of dukkha, he says, "In short, the five aggregates subject to clinging, subject to grasping."

But even with those aspects that are part of the ordinary flow of life—ones that don't need any particular meditative insight to grasp, just those aspects of dukkha that are part of everybody's life—how often in our lives do we stop and look at them directly and reflect on them deeply?

I think the first challenge for us as we learn to apply these teachings is clarifying our understanding of what the Pali word dukkha means, because it's often mistranslated. In many ways, this term dukkha defines the entire spiritual path, so it's a tremendously rich word that we need to understand. When the

Buddha was questioned repeatedly about what exactly he teaches, he would often say he teaches just one thing: dukkha and its end. It's all in that term, and we need to understand it in a very comprehensive way.

The problem is that there is no one English word that fully captures its range of meaning. As you know, dukkha is often translated into English as "suffering." That's where Buddhism has kind of gotten its gloomy reputation. But this translation of the Pali term is very misleading, because although in some specific instances the translation of dukkha as suffering might be appropriate, in very many cases it's not at all an apt translation of what the Buddha was talking about.

Just a few examples. In one teaching, the Buddha said, "Everything that is felt is dukkha." That's quite a broad statement—everything that is felt is dukkha. But as we know, some feelings that we experience are pleasant. They're enjoyable. We don't experience them as suffering. To say these pleasant feelings are suffering doesn't resonate; it doesn't quite make sense. Or to say that things are suffering because they're continually changing—this also doesn't correspond to our experience. When painful feelings change to pleasant ones, we're usually relieved and delighted. We don't experience that change as suffering. We're glad for that change.

So what did the Buddha mean when he said everything that is felt is dukkha? We need to open up our understanding of the term. A helpful way to do that is to look at the etymology of that Pali word. It's comprised of the prefix *du* and the root *kha*—dukkha.

Du means difficult, it means bad, hard, hard to bear. All of that is contained in the prefix *du*. The word *kha* means empty. Empty here refers to several things—some quite specific, others more general.

There was a very interesting analysis of this term in Venerable Anālayo's book on Satipaṭṭhāna, *The Direct Path to Realization*. He said that *kha*, or empty, in one of its specific meanings refers to the empty axle hole of a wheel. There's a wheel, and then there's a hole in the middle where the axle goes in. So if the axle fits badly into the hole, if it's not a good fit, what happens? That's *dukkha*—empty hole, bad fit. It's a very bumpy ride. And this is a great analogy for a ride through saṃsāra. It's pretty bumpy.

The first time I was in Burma, I was with a group of friends, and we were traveling around. We went upcountry to visit the home monastery of Mahāsi Sayādaw, who was like the grandfather of one of the great lineages of our practice. *Mahāsi* actually means "big drum." The monastery was named that way because it had this huge drum in it, so he was known as Mahāsi Sayādaw, the Sayādaw of the big drum.

To get to this monastery, it was way out in the boondocks of Upper Burma. We flew to Mandalay, then took a bus someplace, and then for some period of time we had to ride in an ox cart. Have you ever ridden in an ox cart? It's a very visceral experience of *dukkha.* The axle didn't fit that well into the axle hole.

In more generalized terms, empty means devoid of permanence, empty of permanence. It also means empty of self—empty of a self that can control or govern experience. Empty here means the understanding that all things follow their own laws. They're not following our wishes. And you've

probably had some experience of this over these last weeks.

So getting back to *dukkha*, if we understand this etymology—the emptiness of permanence, the emptiness of self that can control things, the difficulty of those characteristics—then we begin to understand *dukkha* more inclusively. Not in its rather limited application of suffering, but more inclusively, in words like unsatisfying, unreliable, uneaseful, stressful.

There's a very important point here that I want to highlight. Venerable Anālayo highlights it very clearly, so I'll just read what he says. It's understanding the difference between suffering and unsatisfactoriness, and the implications of that difference. This gets to the key of liberation.

He says: "Thus suffering, unlike unsatisfactoriness, is not inherent in the phenomena of the world." Unsatisfactoriness is inherent—it's the nature of things because of the impermanent, empty characteristic. "Suffering, unlike unsatisfactoriness, is not inherent in the phenomena of the world, only in the way in which the unawakened mind experiences them. This is indeed the underlying theme of the Four Noble Truths as a whole. The suffering caused by attachment and craving"—that is, the unenlightened way of relating to phenomena—"can be overcome by awakening. For an arahant, the unsatisfactory nature of all conditioned phenomena is no longer capable of causing suffering."

Let this just sit with you. This distinction is really critical to our understanding of the path. Here we can begin to integrate the understanding that all conditioned phenomena—everything that arises—is *dukkha*. That is, unsatisfying, unreliable, incapable of giving lasting satisfaction, precisely because nothing is lasting. We can integrate this understanding that yes, all conditioned phenomena are *dukkha* in the sense of unreliable and unsatisfying, with the understanding that we can indeed bring the suffering of our minds to an end.

Do you see the difference here? When we open to the first noble truth of *dukkha*, it implies freedom from suffering.

What's important to remember as we hear these teachings is that the Buddha was not interested in simply constructing some elegant philosophical description of the world. We can hear this, and the danger might be that we take it in intellectually and conceptually—either appreciate it or don't—but we're relating to it as a philosophic construct. And that's to miss the point completely. Rather, all of the teachings are an exhortation to us to look directly, to see immediately, and to investigate for ourselves how we actually experience our lives in the world. It's not about believing any of this.

Everything is an exhortation to look, to look carefully and systematically so we can come to understand how things are.

So how do we see for ourselves the unsatisfying, unreliable nature of things? How can we verify that for ourselves? Is it true? The Buddha pointed out three arenas in which we can look and find out for ourselves.

First, he talked about the dukkha of things that were painful, clearly painful in themselves. And he gave this the very apt name of dukkha dukkha. In this field, it's not just that things are unsatisfying—they're clearly painful. Here's where the translation of dukkha as suffering would be most appropriate. This includes all the suffering that we're familiar with in the world: suffering caused by war, by violence, by famine, by natural disaster, by political and social oppression and injustice. These are very real situations for hundreds of millions of people who are genuinely suffering in painful circumstances due to this wide variety of conditions.

Especially now, with the media being as immediate as it is, in times of natural disaster we get such vivid images of the destruction of earthquakes or hurricanes—very powerful. The images from 9/11, so many examples. They bring home, if we can open to them, if we can take them in, so vividly the essential vulnerability of our bodies and the inherent uncertainty of our lives. Because we are just like all the people in those situations. Our bodies are subject to the same things. And as we know, even if we're fortunate enough not to be in some natural disaster or manmade disaster, there's just the inevitable pain of the body—subject to injury, sickness, getting older, dying. This is common to us all. This is not reserved for some people and not for others.

And in one way, even more painful, more a source of suffering than this inevitable dukkha of the body, there's all the optional but deeply felt suffering of the mind: feelings of fear, of jealousy, of anger, of hatred, of envy, of pride, of guilt, of anxiety, of grief, of frustration, of loneliness. The list of afflictive emotions is long. You probably have your own individual catalog of them by now. And they're painful. These are not pleasant experiences. It's dukkha. And this is dukkha dukkha—things that are suffering in themselves, painful in themselves.

Many times in reporting these kinds of experiences, whether of the body or the mind, to Sayadaw U Pandita, going through the whole litany of this kind of dukkha, he would say, "Oh, very good practice. Now you are experiencing the truth of dukkha." It was a very good remark, actually. I didn't always appreciate it in the moment. But that perspective just helps us—instead of drowning in the story, or maybe feeling sorry for ourselves because of all the dukkha—we can reframe these painful experiences, experiences painful in themselves, as a deepening understanding of the first noble truth.

The problem is that we'd all like to have the full realization of dukkha without ever having experienced dukkha. But it just doesn't work like that. So this reframe is very helpful. When we're going through those experiences: yes, this is the nature of the body, this is the nature of the mind, this is what the Buddha was talking about in this particular aspect of dukkha, which is obvious suffering.

The discourse, the first discourse, goes on to say about this first noble truth: "This is the noble truth of suffering which should be fully understood." That's a great challenge to us. Are we willing to fully understand this first noble truth?

The second way we experience dukkha is not so much in the arena of things that are painful in themselves

or obviously suffering, but more in the arena of how all conditioned things are inherently unsatisfying, unreliable. And we experience this through an increasingly refined perception of change.

There's a line from the text which I'll mention now. But just as a little preface: people have heard this line and gotten enlightened. So get ready. This is your chance. The thing is, it's so obvious that people just gloss over it. Often in the texts, in response to people, the Buddha will say, "Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away." Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

What has the nature to arise?

Everything we experience. Everything we experience has the nature to arise and therefore has the nature to pass away. It's just that this statement is so obvious, so glaringly obvious, that we often overlook or ignore its very deep implications.

Although we don't necessarily feel this flow of incessant change as suffering—so suffering might not be the right word here to describe the dukkha of it—it's not necessarily suffering. But because of the truth of incessant change, that whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away inevitably, inexorably, we can begin to more deeply understand the unreliable, unsatisfying nature of phenomena, even pleasant phenomena. It's not that it's suffering; it's just not to be relied on. It can't possibly give us lasting satisfaction because it doesn't last.

So can we take this in? Do we orient our lives around this understanding? Or do we gloss over it? Do we know it intellectually—yes, everything changes, whatever arises passes—and then merrily go about our lives, clinging and grasping and attached, suffering because of it?

When we apply this teaching to our lives, we see that the truth of change, that everything that arises will pass away, will change in some way—this process will inevitably, at times, bring us into association with what we don't want, with what we don't like. It has to happen. And it does happen. And there will inevitably be separation from what we do like. This isn't a mistake. This is simply the law of nature. Because things change all the time, sometimes we're with agreeable experiences, and that changes. Then we're with disagreeable experiences.

But to an untutored mind, as the texts say, to the uninstructed worldling, these situations—coming into contact with what we don't like, with what we don't want, being separated from what we do like and what we do want—usually condition resistance to the unpleasant and attachment and grasping at the pleasant. "Stay away, stay out, I don't want this." Or, "Oh, I like this, please stay, let me hold onto it." Our life bounces back and forth between these two conditioned responses, simply creating more suffering because we're not in alignment with the truth of things. We're in our fantasy world of how we would like things to be, but not with how things actually are.

There are countless examples of this, very ordinary ones, just the ordinary situations of our lives. For those of you who are really attached to warm weather, you're going to suffer as the cold north winds start

to blow. It changes. It's just the nature of things. Or maybe we're feeling really good in our bodies and then we injure ourselves, going from feeling good to feeling pain. Or we've been very healthy and all of a sudden we fall ill.

Sometimes even little examples, and one might even say trivial examples, can highlight the depth of our conditioned response. I had one—of course many experiences of this—but one which stands out in my mind. Quite a few years ago, I was teaching in Russia, and it was still under Soviet rule, still under Brezhnev, and conditions were very poor. The retreat site—they had to really work and struggle just to get enough food for the yogis who came on retreat. But it was basically okay, and it was working well. Then one morning I came down to breakfast, and all that they served was this little plate of coleslaw. I sat down and looked at it, and in my mind: "Coleslaw? For breakfast?" It was just unpleasant, unwanted.

Of course, it didn't take too long until I noticed the reaction in my mind, remembered the circumstances, and realized lots of people would be glad for that plate of coleslaw. I reframed the experience. But it was interesting just to watch the initial reaction: this is undesirable, not wanted, don't like. In just so many ways, in simple things and big things, this is the conditioning at work.

On the conceptual level, we all know that things change. Does anybody here think that things don't change? Not only here—you go out to anybody in the street, ask them, "Do things change?" Of course things change. Everybody knows it conceptually. But we haven't translated it very well, integrated it very well into how we live our lives. How often are we looking forward and anticipating the next hit of pleasant experience? We live our lives like that. It's always the next meal or the next vacation or the next pleasant sit or the next relationship or the next whatever.

We all know and have the experience, I think, of when we look back on our lives, look back on all the pleasant experiences that we've already had. And we've all had almost an infinite number of pleasant experiences already in our lives—pleasant sights and sounds and good food and nice sensations in the body. But where are all those pleasant experiences now? When we look back, we see, we understand so deeply their ephemeral nature. They're dreamlike. They were nice in the moment, and they're gone.

So why do we think that the next hit of pleasant experience is somehow going to do it for us? As if, oh, if I only get that, then that will bring some satisfaction or fulfillment. So we need to reflect and deeply consider what we already know. We need to wake up really to our own wisdom.

These are powerful reflections and reminders, because as we all know, it's easy just to fall asleep. The inertia of our lives—we just get caught up in the patterns of our conditioning, and our whole culture and society is working to keep us asleep. So we need to develop some tools for staying awake to this very obvious truth.

A few reflections might help if you bring them to mind frequently. One is that all times of being together with anyone—with friends, with loved ones, with acquaintances, with strangers—all times of being

together will inevitably end in separation. That is just the nature of change. Maybe quickly, maybe over a period of time, but in the end, all meetings end in separation.

This simple but very profound truth points to the critical but often unexamined distinction between love and attachment. I think for many people in their lives, love and attachment have gotten so intertwined that we think they're aspects of the same thing. And for people very close to us, it's very often hard to imagine what love would be like without attachment. They're so inextricably interwoven, and we don't often take time to really investigate that and see what is going on.

When we do, it's very revealing, because we see that the feeling of love is a generosity of the heart. It's a giving. It's an energy of wanting the other to be happy. What is the energy of attachment? It's not giving—it's a holding. It's a wanting. The two are completely, diametrically opposed energies. One is giving, one is holding.

There's a beautiful description of this quality of love, this quality of generosity, of truly wanting the other person's happiness, by the French essayist Montaigne. I read this in an article about his life, and they quoted this particular passage from him. He was talking about a friendship that he had with a very dear friend. He wrote: "In a truly loving relationship, which I have experienced, rather than drawing the one I love to me, I give myself to him. Not merely do I prefer to do him good than to have him do good to me. I would even prefer that he did good to himself rather than to me. It is when he does good to himself that he does most good to me. If his absence is either pleasant or useful to him, then it delights me far more than his presence."

It's pretty amazing. That to me just so expresses the feeling of love and mettā. Love is about the other person's happiness. And attachment is when we're holding on, when we're grasping, when we're trying to keep something for ourselves. It's very different.

It's also very interesting to see that love can be enhanced by the understanding or awareness of change. Attachment in the face of change only leads to suffering. If we're trying to hold on to a relationship, to a person who's going through changes, if we try to fix them in place, there's going to be suffering. Whereas in that change, love can be greatly enhanced.

It's very helpful to remember—and I would really suggest that you look at this in your life, because it could be so much the source of happiness and ease—to really see, in your experience, not because anybody says it, but to explore this: that attachment doesn't add anything to love. It only detracts. So it might be worth looking at this.

You can also reflect that all accumulation—all of these are reflections on the truth of change, so that we don't fall into the patterns of conditioning that cause suffering—you can reflect that all accumulation ends in dispersion.

So everything we accumulate in our lives is going to end up, at one time or another, being scattered. All

life ends in death.

Now, in our culture, to speak about this, often people think, "That's morbid. Why do you want to be thinking about death, and all life ends in death, and our lives are just getting shorter and shorter and shorter?" But it's really not morbid at all. It's just a statement of what is true. It's simply seeing clearly how things are happening. And this brings a great clarity to the mind. We're not confused, we're not befuddled. It brings a much greater sense of freedom and clarity of vision.

Alan Watts called this "the wisdom of insecurity." People are so afraid of insecurity and the fact that things are insecure, but actually there's a great wisdom in acknowledging insecurity, because then we dance with it. We see what needs to be done in the moment, we can respond appropriately, but we're not trying desperately to hold on to something which in its nature is in flux.

It's really a great relief to be out of the grip of enchantment. It's as if we live our lives under this magic spell: "Oh, get this, you'll be happy. Do this, you'll be happy. Hold on to this, you'll be happy." We're just leading our lives like that. And the power and the beauty of a retreat like this is that we give ourselves the opportunity to be silent, to be aware, and to connect with the truth of things. Again, not what somebody says—the truth of your own experience. How are things actually happening? The more we align ourselves with what is true, the happier and more peaceful we are.

So there's the dukkha of things painful in themselves—dukkha dukkha. That's suffering. There's the dukkha of the unreliability of phenomena because of the universal law of change, that whatever arises will also pass away. And then there's a third kind of dukkha. This the Buddha called sankhara dukkha, or the dukkha of conditioned states.

We can experience this in a variety of ways. One is in a very mundane way, when we consider just all the effort that's needed to sustain our lives—simply to fulfill the basic needs of life, to have enough food and water and shelter and medicines. And just to do that, the work we have to do. There are very few people in this world who can take care of themselves without putting forth any effort to do so. Even people who have great resources still have to take care of the body, they have to bathe themselves, they have to feed themselves. It's work to keep this whole system going. And for many people, of course, even fulfilling these basic needs is not so easy, where it's really a tremendous struggle to have enough water, to have enough food.

In the silence of the retreat, we do get very sensitive, and I think much more aware, and often gratitude starts to spring up quite spontaneously. The place where I often feel gratitude arising is just in the simplicity of turning on a tap and having hot and cold water come out. It's kind of a miracle. And this comes with the reflection that this is not true for perhaps billions of people. So we become aware of everything that goes into sustaining our lives, the effort that is required.

And then there's the effort that is hardwired into this instinctual desire to reproduce. Some of you may

have seen the BBC documentaries on planet Earth—it's a wonderful series. I was watching it, and there was one section showing the extraordinary effort that some male birds made to attract a mate. They showed these vigorous mating dances where these birds were going crazy. It was amazing. And the feather displays to attract the mate. Some birds had nest building contests of which male could build the best nest. All this effort—huge effort—these little birds going through, just to propagate the genes. It was hardwired in the system. That's what they did. And it was really quite sad to see that many times the nests didn't quite measure up. The elaborate mating dances didn't make the grade.

And then the females just wandered off looking for somebody else. It was really touching. Sankhara dukkha—it's just everything we need to do to sustain life.

The deepest and most comprehensive meaning of dukkha finds expression in the Buddha's own summing up of this first noble truth. So this really gets to the depth of it. He says, "In short, dukkha is the five aggregates subject to clinging." We can take all these mundane examples, but we can bring it right down to the foundation. In short, dukkha is the five aggregates subject to clinging. The whole of samsara conditioning is contained in that phrase. It is pregnant with meaning.

We've spoken of this template of the five aggregates—the material elements and feelings and perceptions and the mental formations and consciousness—of being the components of each moment's experience. Now, perhaps like you, but for myself, I've been reading about the five aggregates in the texts for forty years. It's on almost every page of the suttas. But for many years, my eyes would really glaze over. Every time there was this list of the aggregates—material elements, form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, consciousness—and then it would be repeated fifteen times. I could understand it philosophically, I kind of understood conceptually what the Buddha was talking about, but it just felt very philosophic and abstract. It didn't connect very much in my practice.

But at a certain point—and this wasn't that long ago, sad to say—I thought, "You know, the Buddha talked about this so often, maybe I should try to see what he's talking about in terms of applying it to my experience, not just having it as a kind of philosophic notion. Maybe he was speaking directly to me about my practice." So I began to see: how can I apply this teaching? Because everything is contained in it. In short, dukkha is the five aggregates subject to clinging. It's all in there.

So how do we apply it? As you know, the physical elements are just the physical sensations we feel—hardness, coldness, warmth, pressure. Feelings are the taste of the experience being pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. Perception is the recognition. Formations are all the different mental states and attitudes. Consciousness is the knowing. We've gone over this quite a bit.

But even though it seems very simple and straightforward, what's interesting is that there is very often an unnoticed conceptual overlay on how we experience things. I'll give you two examples of this. Both came out of interviews with Sayadaw U Pandita.

At one time, I was sitting—I had been in Burma for a while. My body was very open, a flow of energy. Things felt pleasant, except for this one knot in my neck. So I go into the interview. I'm describing this great open flow of energy, but there's this knot in the neck. I said, "Everything's very open, but there's a block, an energy block." He got on my case for calling it a block. And I realized, after he pointed it out, that just that concept—"block"—already contains desire and aversion. That was an interpretation. I thought I was describing it objectively. You know, everything's open and there's a block. It wasn't objective at all. It was a conceptual overlay. What I was feeling was tightness and hardness. That's what the experience was. To call it a block already contains desire to get rid of it, aversion to the fact that it's there. This is subtle. We do this a lot. Coming back to the five aggregates begins to free us from this conceptual overlay.

Another time, I was sitting and experiencing a lot of lightness in my body and floating. I mean, it felt wonderful.

It felt like I was really floating in the air. And I went in and reported—and I definitely should have known better. This was a big mistake. I said, "Oh, Sayadaw, it feels like I'm flying on a magic carpet!" He just looked at me. Basically shook his head and said, "Have you ever been on a magic carpet?" He rang the bell. That was the end of that interview.

So one way we can begin to apply these teachings—and I did this on my last retreat, and it was so illuminating—is to ask: How can I apply these teachings of the aggregates directly? They are all present in every moment. It's not that they arise sequentially; all five are there in every moment. But in different moments, one or another may be predominant.

I decided to take a period of time—maybe ten or fifteen minutes—where I would try to identify in each moment which of the aggregates stood out. This was in winter, so I was doing some walking meditation outside. It was very cold, really an icy wind, which in some ways is very good for practice. It's a real wake-up.

What's going on here? It became pretty clear—the icy cold material elements. When my mind was tuning into the intense cold, it was easier to recognize: that's the first aggregate. It was unpleasant, very unpleasant. When my mind was highlighting the unpleasantness, I recognized it as the second aggregate of feeling. Then maybe I'd go back to just the cold, then back to unpleasant. Then a car went by. When I heard the sound, I recognized it as "car"—that was perception. So I just noted, "Oh, that's the perception aggregate." Maybe back to the cold, back to the unpleasantness, then I would notice different reactions in my mind. "I don't like this." Or maybe there was equanimity. I was just watching the different reactions—that's the fourth aggregate of mental formations. Sometimes I would be just resting in the awareness, just knowing, and when that knowing was predominant, that was the fifth aggregate.

Moment after moment, I was simply noticing: that was the first, that's perception, that's feeling, that's formations, that's consciousness. It was very revealing.

A few things really stood out from doing this. First, there was a sense of awe that the Buddha could describe the totality of our experience in terms of this very simple template. There was nothing I experienced that fell outside these five aggregates. Just imagine if somebody came up to you, not knowing anything about this, and said, "Describe the world in five sentences." We'd be completely confused. And here the Buddha—his understanding was so brilliant and incisive. The whole world is contained in these five aggregates. To really see that was very inspiring.

And then it became so clear, as I was noticing each one becoming predominant, how evident their changing nature was. It was just: this is feeling, this is sensation, this is perception, this is formation, back to feeling, back to sensation, consciousness—one after the other, moment after moment. It was this dance, this momentary dance of the different aggregates arising and passing. It became so clear both that this was all there was, and that there was no "me" to whom they were happening.

All that there was was this play of aggregates, and seeing their impermanent, unreliable nature, I understood again on a deeper level the burdensomeness of relying on any of these aggregates for lasting satisfaction or peace. And again, this was not, at this point, a conceptual thing. It was being right in the experience. This is what the Buddha was pointing us to.

You might experiment a little with this. If you feel you're resonating with this teaching, explore it in your practice.

The Buddha offered this image: "Suppose, bhikkhus, a dog tied up on a leash was bound to a strong post or pillar. It would just keep on running and revolving around that same post or pillar. So too, uninstructed worldlings regard form as self, feeling as self, perception, volitional formations, consciousness as self. They just keep running and revolving around form, feelings, perception, formations, and consciousness. As they keep on running and revolving around them, they are not freed from them. They are not freed from birth, aging, and death, not freed from sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair, not freed from suffering.

"But the instructed noble disciples"—and that's us—"do not regard form as self, feeling, perception, volitional formations, consciousness as self. They no longer keep running and revolving around them. As they no longer keep running around them, they are freed from them, freed from birth, aging, and death, freed from sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair, free from suffering."

This teaching is the very heart. It's the description of the first noble truth and the third noble truth. In short, dukkha is the five aggregates subject to clinging. When we free ourselves from that clinging, we free ourselves from suffering.

I'd like to close with one teaching from a wonderful Tibetan master named Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche. He says: "The potential for realization is universal and present for all of us. True benefit will come from your own efforts and realization. For your efforts to bring benefit, you must take your life into your own hands

and examine your mind and experience. From this point of view, nobody could be kinder to you than yourself. Nobody could have a greater effect on you or actually do more for you than yourself. The Buddha said, 'I have shown you the path of liberation. Now liberation depends on you.' This is really true. If you don't take your life into your own hands, not even the Buddhas can make a difference. It's up to you."

That's tremendously empowering—to remember that it's up to us, and we can do this.

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