# The First Noble Truth - Impermanence and Unsatisfactoriness

Noirin Sheahan · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Noirin Sheahan · 18:31

This morning I'd like to talk about the Four Noble Truths, which was the way the Buddha explained his understanding the first time he gave a talk after his enlightenment.

The four truths are, first of all, the truth of dukkha—you could say unsatisfactoriness, the unsatisfactory nature of life. The second truth is the cause of this unsatisfactoriness in our lives. The third is the cessation—the good news, the fact that this unhappiness, this sense that life doesn't satisfy our needs, can all cease. And the fourth truth is the path leading to that cessation.

The first truth, dukkha, is often called the truth of suffering. But suffering is really too strong a word because it sounds very extreme. In the Buddha's understanding, even minor little irritations that we would think we could cope with would be included in dukkha. And even happy states would be included. The reason for that is because the happiness doesn't last forever. He would consider them unsatisfactory as well because they don't last forever. So a better translation for dukkha is unsatisfactoriness.

Joseph Goldstein traced out the Pali for the word and found that *du* means bad or badly made, and *kha* is the hole into which an axle fits in a wheel. If you can think of that—a badly made axle hole—it ends up in a very bumpy ride. So life is a bumpy ride, basically, is what this first noble truth is saying.

Each of the four truths comes with some injunction, some instruction for us. And the first one is to really understand the truth of dukkha. We're asked to look at our life and see what is unsatisfactory. Is life unsatisfying for us? There are obvious areas of difficulty like pain, illness, loss of those we love, various disappointments, aging, death. There are many aspects of life which are very obviously unsatisfying for us.

But then there are other aspects to life—there's sunshine, there's birdsong, there's friendship, there's art. There are very beautiful aspects to life. In what sense can these also be called unsatisfying? They do make us happy. Lovely sunshine and birdsong definitely cheer us up, give us a great lift. But the question is, can they make us happy forever? Can we base our life on them? Can we stake our life on them?

Even, for example, if you're in a very loving relationship—a really loving relationship where you feel yourself completely cherished. Somebody recognizes you for who you are and really feels genuine warmth and love for you. That's a very beautiful relationship for any of us to experience. But the awful possibility is that ten years later, the other person can just tire of you and go off with somebody else. That

happens all the time, unfortunately.

Where does that leave us? Probably incredibly hurt and angry and let down and shocked and bewildered, life in disarray, really not knowing where to start again or what to do with ourselves. Maybe a lot of shame as well, a sense of failure, bewilderment—how could this happen? It can lead to huge upset when whatever we based our happiness on suddenly disappears for one reason or another.

That's the sense in which even the most beautiful aspects of life can't be totally relied upon—they fade away. If the other person doesn't go away out of unfaithfulness, eventually they might get sick and die. So again, we're left without that person cherishing us, looking after us, helping us feel worthwhile. The whole bereavement process brings us to the same sort of place.

If we base our life on any of the worldly happinesses—a loving marriage, success in our career, a skill we have—all of these do fall apart, will fall apart, either before our old age and death or at that time. Everything falls apart in this life, and that's the truth of this aspect of dukkha, *anicca dukkha*, anicca meaning transience. Because things are changing, they can't be relied upon for happiness.

The Buddha himself came to realize this in what was for him his late 20s—what would have been thought of as midlife in those days. He had had a very privileged upbringing. He was a prince, very respected, very skilled and talented, very beloved. He had been protected from the truths of life. And he became very painfully and suddenly aware of the fact that people get sick. He recognized that it could happen to him. Other people get sick; it could happen to me. He realized that people age, and just as other people age, he was going to age. And people die, and just like everyone else was going to die, he was also going to die.

In a kind of shocked bewilderment, realizing that all his happiness, all his pleasure, all his skill, his place in society—it was all going to disintegrate with the inevitable coming of sickness, old age, and death—he could no longer invest in his position, could no longer take any interest in it or take any happiness out of it. In those terms, life just wasn't worth living.

The angst and anxiety posed by that caused him to leave his palaces—an incredibly courageous decision—and join the wandering ascetics of those days, people who would really wander with no money, no home, just living a homeless life, wandering through the woods, through the countryside, living off alms, and searching for truth. There was a real spiritual quest going on in those days, and he joined the spiritual seekers.

And luckily for us, he found a way to the end of suffering.

Now, it takes an awful lot of courage for us to truly see those three. They're called devadutas—sickness, old age, and death—the messengers of the gods, the reality of this life. But it takes so much courage for us to actually see that this is coming our way. We shun it in all kinds of ways. We shun that truth and avoid it.

But we can learn this truth of anicca, of transience, in less threatening ways, I think. And certainly that's the way I've been gradually, gradually taking it all in.

My first taste of it—that happiness can't be relied upon forever—came through the whole experience of what for me was a great happiness: the pleasure of reading. I always loved books. I was an avid reader as a child, always in bookshops, always getting new books. If I had to wait anywhere, it was no problem so long as I had a book. If I had to meet someone and they were an hour late, it didn't matter so long as I had a book. I almost had my own escape from dukkha—nothing mattered so long as I had a book to read. I could be happy. It was a genuine pleasure for me and really protected me from an awful lot of unhappiness in life.

But then, as I started meditation, it just all began to fall apart. And really it fell apart with the insight that I was escaping from life, that this was an escape. This happiness was not genuine. It was an attempt to escape the realities of life.

How it actually materialised was that I became better able to acknowledge the emotions around the ending of each book. I remember one particular book where I was so sad when it ended that I kept making up stories about the characters. It was as if I was trying to compose the next book. I couldn't let those characters go.

Then I remember another book after that where I was turning the pages somewhere around the middle and I just became horribly aware that the pages on one side were fewer than the pages on the other. The whole truth of transience was manifesting, you could say, in the turn of every page. Each page turn was a torture because it was bringing me closer and closer to the end. A real anxiety emerged with that particular book.

And when that book did come to an end, I just had to come to the dread realisation that yes, this attempt of mine to bury myself in the written word was just screening out life. I was not facing up to the reality of life. So it wasn't an escape from dukkha in any genuine sense. It was an escape from life.

It also made me very ashamed. I realised I was ashamed at having taken what I could see as a cowardly way out, not really facing life, just escaping from it. There was a lot of shame involved there.

In retrospect, it's very strange that I'd never noticed that before. I had been reading for probably forty years at that stage, and I had really never noticed the sadness around endings. It is amazing how we can gloss over this at all kinds of endings. Even when we're saying goodbye to someone, we're nearly always saying, "Well, I'll see you," and we're working out when we'll see them again. We're not acknowledging the fact that this is a parting.

We escape from endings usually by thinking of the next new beginning. In my case, it might be that I would immediately think of a new book, or phone a friend, or do something. We shield ourselves from the truth of dukkha. And one very strong way we do it is to brush over endings, to really pretend they're not

happening.

So how can it help us to look at life in this honest way? Well, like the Buddha—but maybe not quite so dramatically—it forced me to look deeper into my life. What I found was that so much had lost its fascination for me. Career, for example, even relationships. I realised that none of them had lived up to whatever expectations I'd had, that I was living under false expectations.

But when I looked at it, the only thing that hadn't disappointed me in this way was meditation practice. I could see that this was the one area I had cultivated in life which still held a promise of a genuine, deep possibility of happiness.

Now, I didn't, like the Buddha, cut off my hair and go wandering in a homeless way. But I did take a three-day week and step down from a lot of responsibilities, and I took a conscious decision to give up on the endless search for a happy relationship and put all my effort into the spiritual life. It was a great relief to take that decision. It really was a relief to be able to genuinely say for myself: so much hasn't worked out.

It sounds very sad, but in actual fact it was a relief. And when I look back on it, it was a real turning point in life for me. Things started getting better from there. So that genuine look at life, caused by opening to this truth of anicca and dukkha, really did start making my life more genuinely happy.

I began then with the spiritual journey and meditation practice to see more deeply into this truth of anicca, in the way I've been describing. At the start of things, there's great hope and promise. For me, the start is very uplifting, very invigorating. There's a lot of gladness and energy for me around the start of things. But what does the ending mean? This is always just a question for me. And the ending—the footsteps, symbolically—it's like an absence. It leaves me bewildered, wondering what was all that about?

So basically I saw that I was expecting the world to deliver happiness to me. Whatever way I had interpreted the cultural messages we receive, I was doing my share. I was putting a lot of energy into life, putting all my resources into things and giving to life in that sense. But there was the expectation that life should then deliver happiness. And just the realisation that life wasn't doing its share of the bargain—I was doing mine, but it wasn't doing its. So anyway, it just showed me the false promise we have in our culture: if I work hard, I'll be happy. It's one that went very, very deep into me.

So really this truth of anicca, transience, is telling us that because everything is slipping away and changing, nothing in this world can actually deliver permanent happiness. It's beyond its capability. Career, relationships, everything—they're all changing and slipping away so that we can't rely on them.

But as we were talking about the other day, there is also unworldly happiness. Mettā, for example—genuine friendship, wishing each other well, care for one another, compassion. These are sources of genuine happiness for us. On this we can rely and we can actually build. This is a genuine source of happiness for us. We can develop all of these qualities.

And we do it here by attending to each moment without an expectation of return. We're giving our attention to the breath, the footstep, without any agenda. It's a giving without an expectation. We're training ourselves to give just really for the sake of giving, which is generosity—and which is one of the unworldly happinesses we can rely on.

And what we're giving is attention, which is a lot. Attention is huge. We all crave attention. We crave attention from one another. And most deeply, I think we crave it from ourselves. So here we're learning to give attention generously. We are giving to ourselves in a very deep way here.

Our deepest need is for understanding of the world. And that understanding is born of immersing ourselves in the actuality of life, moment after moment, letting the truth seep into us. We are giving to ourselves in a very profound way.

This is our escape, really, from the fact that the world doesn't deliver to us—to give to what we know of the world: sensations, feelings, our full attention to them. And in that giving, coming to what we really need to understand: the truth of life.

---

*Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.*