First Noble Truth: There is Dukkha - read by Finola O'Siochru

Noirin Sheahan · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Noirin Sheahan · 45:05

The talks for the rest of the week will centre on the Four Noble Truths, which was the first teaching the Buddha gave after his enlightenment. He described these as his own insights into the nature of suffering and the process by which it is eliminated. When he gave this teaching, he added an injunction with each truth. These bring the teaching alive for us. We can live the Four Noble Truths.

So what are these truths the Buddha wants us to live by? The first is that life involves dukkha. The injunction here is to fully understand dukkha. The second truth states that desire is the cause of dukkha. The Buddha asks us to let go of desire. The third truth is the good news: that there is an end to dukkha. The injunction is to realize the end of dukkha. Finally, we have more good news—that there is a way to the end of dukkha, namely the Noble Eightfold Path. The injunction is to follow this path.

Let's start with the first noble truth, the truth of dukkha. For people with only a superficial interest in Buddhism, this can be off-putting. It's easy to deride Buddhists as pessimists because of the focus on suffering. Our culture more often encourages us to ignore the unsavoury aspects of life. We don't like to discuss death, for example.

Just this morning, I was listening to a radio interview with four people who had lost their spouses. One man who had obviously had a very close relationship with his wife said his only regret was that they never discussed her death. They both knew she was dying but couldn't acknowledge it openly. He sensed her growing distant from him in her last weeks because of this gap between them. When asked why he didn't broach the subject, he said it was because he didn't know how. They had both tried so hard to be optimistic and positive, and he didn't know how to break through that pattern.

I think this is a good illustration of our cultural difficulty around opening to death and other unwelcome aspects of life. We just don't know how to open. We build up habits of optimism and cheerfulness to try to buoy ourselves up, but then get stuck in these habits and lose touch with our deeper reality. His regrets around not having spoken to his wife about her impending death also shows the trap of our focus on the positive. It prevents the development and expression of a love which transcends our wishes for how life should be.

It is ironic that the path to happiness starts with an understanding of unhappiness, but this was the Buddha's great insight. Once he fully understood the nature of suffering, he became completely free from suffering. He was untroubled, quiet, at ease and content throughout all the vicissitudes of life, and even as

he died a painful death from food poisoning. He was open and unsentimental about the fact that he was dying, and not a bit impressed with his cousin Ananda for weeping at the news. With characteristic pragmatism, he reminded Ananda that all worldly pleasures fade away. He was willing and able to teach right up to the moment of death, leaving his followers with the words: "All conditioned things have the nature to decay. Strive diligently for your liberation."

He described dukkha as coming in three flavours. Firstly, there is dukkha dukkha, which is what we normally recognize as suffering: illness, pain, death, redundancy, financial ruin, old age, bereavement and so on. Then there is anicca dukkha, resulting from the transient nature of life. And finally there is anatta dukkha, the existential angst we can feel because we don't have any meaningful degree of control over our lives.

Dukkha dukkha is the most difficult for us to deal with. We go through shock, anger, grief and so on before coming to terms with major life challenges. Dukkha dukkha is inescapable. Even if we live a charmed life, we will someday have to die. And if we're lucky enough to have a long life, we'll have to negotiate our way through the various humiliations of old age along the way. For many people, this dukkha dukkha is their only encounter with the limitations of life, and they can be really thrown off course by the death of a loved one, for example. The incidence of depression increases with age, and the risk of suicide is highest in the elderly.

As a way of preparing ourselves for the inevitable, we can practice on the milder forms of dukkha relating to anicca and anatta. Let's look at anicca dukkha first—the dissatisfaction we feel because of the transitory nature of life. We have loads of examples of this in our daily life. Take a holiday, for example. We can get quite excited at the prospect, looking through the brochures, checking out the hotels, booking time off work. Then we're on holiday. It can take a day or two to settle and relax. If we're lucky, we'll enjoy ourselves and appreciate our stay. But how quickly that final day comes round when we have to pack and go home again.

And there's still the hotel bill to be paid. Sometimes we're energised and refreshed by the holiday, chatting to our colleagues and friends about what we've seen. But eventually the gloss wears off and we're back to our daily routine again.

That's the essence of anicca dukkha—the dissatisfaction we feel because the good times just don't last forever. It can be quite subtle, and we might not feel it as a major problem. "Just part of life," we say philosophically. But the Buddha's advice is not to dismiss the problem so readily. Take an interest in the ending and aftermath of the holiday as much as the exciting and relaxing times before and during it. We often find ways to ignore the slight downer at the end—planning the next holiday, for example.

The problem with ignoring the endings of all our happy times is that we get addicted to activity, or other forms of escapism, as a means of keeping our spirits up. We look to the future, to the next exciting thing in life, to keep our mind off the fact that something we cared for has just ended. If we persist in

this—keeping ourselves buoyed up and cheerful at all costs—then we will have no resources to deal with the inevitable dukkha dukkha when it comes.

I first noticed anicca dukkha as I was reading a book. I was always a great reader and would never go anywhere without a book for company—at the hairdresser's, on the bus, during coffee. So long as I had a book, I was happy. I was pretty well addicted to reading, you could say.

And then one day, I suddenly became aware that the number of pages on the right, the unread pages, was less than the number of pages on the left. I felt quite depressed by this. From then on, I began to dread turning each page. When I finished the book, I felt a real downer and also a sense of shame. I was suddenly aware that the pleasure from reading was transitory, that it ended with the book, and therefore couldn't satisfy me at any depth. I was ashamed of having devoted so much of my life to this false god. This was quite a shock for me, and it was years before I would read a book again.

If we look closely, we see everything is in transit. It arises, shows itself for a moment, before passing away again. Take any meal—lunch, for example. It can be hard work getting this started. We may have to do some shopping and then the cooking. At least we're buoyed up through this by the prospect of lunch. Then comes the nice bit: eating. And if there are others with us, this can be a lovely part of the day, a time to relax and chat. But how quickly it ends! And there's still the washing up to be done.

Although we prefer to fudge around endings, distracting ourselves with whatever is next on the horizon, the wiser approach is to use this opportunity to get to know dukkha. So how do you experience the ending of lunch? See how you feel before lunch and how eager you are for the first bite. Does your mood lift as your stomach fills? And then the ending. Are you still so enthusiastic when the plate shows those last messy smears of food? Or do you just feel you have to get the job done? Can you rest with whatever emotions might surface as you swallow the last bite?

I remember on the final day of a retreat at Gaia House how much I was looking forward to the evening bowl of soup—and it was delicious. But as the bowl emptied, my world actually seemed to fall apart. I wanted that soup to last forever. It seemed to hold all the goodness of life for me. How could I let it go? What would there be left in the world? A big gap yawned open inside me. For a moment I was very frightened, and then grief surfaced. The grief was actually a relief, and I began to acknowledge other losses in life. This was a good illustration of anicca dukkha for me, and how opening to it mindfully helps us work with the inescapable dukkha of life and death.

Each breath and footstep teaches us about anicca. Which do you prefer—the in-breath or the out-breath? Do you like to hold your breath? When I am anxious, I tend to gasp at the start of the in-breath, and my confidence grows as I inhale. But then comes the moment when I have to let it all go again. I do my best to ignore the out-breath as I look forward to that moment when I can snatch another ray of hope that comes with the in-breath. This is anicca dukkha. Anxiety is prompting me to hold on to what I enjoy—the sense of possibility and hope that comes with each in-breath. But anxiety will not let me relax with the

out-breath.

Let go of hope? No way!

Nowadays when anxiety strikes, I can usually let myself feel the fear of letting go and find a thin thread of trust that pulls me through. This comes from moments during previous out-breaths when I saw that letting go of hope does not mean the end of all hope. It simply releases hope to do its proper job of reassuring us deep down that all is well. In the words of Julian of Norwich: "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."

What about the footstep? Do you prefer the lifting, the moving, or the placing?

At first I could only sense the lifting. It thrilled me. I had a sense of soaring with the angels. I didn't notice anything about the rest of the step, so intent was I on looking forward to the next time I could lift my foot. As time went on, I also became fascinated by the moving. This was more wonderment than the soaring of angels. Could I feel anything? What was I feeling? How did I know my foot was moving?

But the ending of the footstep was another matter entirely. I felt uncertain, unsteady as the foot came downwards, searching for the floor. And when the toe touched down, the lightness of that touch seemed totally unsatisfactory. Even with my full weight on the floor, I felt unhappy until that lovely moment of the heel rising, the foot peeling off the floor, when all my woes would end for another few moments.

What all this shows me is how addicted I am to new beginnings and how I prefer to ignore the uncertainty that comes with endings. I can see this at other levels of life. I love springtime but find it hard to appreciate the lovely colours of the fall because they represent the end of summer. I'm a morning person. I love the purity of dawn, whereas I easily get agitated in the evenings. I can be good at getting projects going, exploring new territory, but find it hard to see them through to the end.

I used to do quite a lot of hill walking, and to my surprise one day, I found I preferred the uphill climb to the downhill stroll. Going upwards, I had a sense of hope, a promise of some reward to come. Coming down, on the other hand, was literally that—a comedown. There was nothing to anticipate.

The years of meditation practice have smoothed me out a bit. Just last year I noticed to my surprise that I was enjoying the ending of the footstep. It felt satisfying to put my foot down on the floor and let it take all my weight. A little bit of progress at last.

The study of anicca has also shown me how much delusion I can have about new beginnings. The sense of anticipation, hope, and expectancy can rocket me into a new venture, all excited and thrilled and knowing this is going to be wonderful and that I'll be well able for the challenge. But when I eventually hit the ground, I'm looking around wondering how I got here and what I'm supposed to be doing. Nowadays I'm better at noticing all those exciting feelings of expectancy and anticipation—I steady myself on the launch pad, wait a bit to try to get some bearings before take-off.

I've noticed that there can be a lot of fear around new beginnings. Each one is a venture into the unknown. And I sense how my eagerness to start is a reaction to that fear, wanting to get rid of that scary unknown by filling it with activity.

Endings too can frighten us with a sense of the unknown. Take my life-and-death bowl of soup after the retreat, for example. That ending scared me so. Again, it was fear of the unknown. The soup was known. How could it just end? Can what we know actually disappear, become unknown?

Working with the unknown is such a big part of our meditation practice. As we are drawn into the present moment, we lose touch with the certainties sewn into our stories and sense the shifting sands beneath. What do we really know? Just sensations and feelings, really, and these are shifting and changing so fast it's hard to claim any real knowledge of them.

While my body contacts the sensations, my mind is drawn towards a mental image I am making in my efforts to make sense of the experience. I imagine a big space in which the sensations are manifesting. It puzzles me, this space. Sensations seem to twinkle like stars in its vast emptiness.

Now, what can we say about that emptiness, that space where sensations appear and into which they disappear? Not a lot. Nothing, perhaps. It can still frighten me to sense myself so close to such a vast unknown.

Fear projects all kinds of monsters into it. But despite my best efforts at suspicion, fear, and even panic, all I can say really is it has never lived up to my expectations. It has never, ever threatened me in any way. I am more and more willing to trust that it is truly and deeply non-harming.

In ordinary life, the unknown appears in our minds when we think about the future, the next moment. It's behind the door before we open it. Thoughts also connect us with the unknown. I think of a friend and wish them well. But where are they right now? I might have a nice image of them sitting in a garden, but ultimately I have to admit I don't know. How are they feeling? I haven't a clue.

The amount we don't know far outweighs what we do know—where and how our friends and family are, what's going to happen tomorrow, next year, in twenty years. So we have to get used to the unknown if we're going to have any peace. Anicca, with its beginnings and endings, provides the perfect opportunity.

I've been describing the difficulties we experience due to anicca, but the truth of anicca can also be experienced as joyous. The flow of sensations as the foot peels off the floor can be exhilarating. The slight sways of the body as we walk can be fascinating. The smooth ripple of breath can be relaxing. We can watch and wonder as sensations and feelings stream through consciousness like water through a sieve. We can feel truly alive in the shifting flux.

And when I work through my latest bout of fear and anxiety to make peace with the unknown, then it is delightful to let myself relax and let the breath come and go of its own accord, let emotions emerge and

develop and fade away. The transience is thrilling. It's perfectly okay not to know what will happen next.

Intertwined with anicca is the experience of anatta, usually translated as not-self. This is a difficult truth to come to terms with. Our minds are deeply conditioned to think in terms of me and you and him and her, and we find this shift in perspective—to not-me, not-I, not-self—quite perplexing. The negativity that can come with being perplexed—frustration, confusion, anxiety—is one manifestation of anatta dukkha.

To my mind, the kernel of fear that forms anicca dukkha is fear of the unknown. By comparison, I think much of the dukkha associated with anatta revolves around fear of not understanding. That can make us feel like small children at school, feeling stupid and ashamed because we don't understand our lessons, frightened the teacher and the other children will jeer at us.

So look out for these kinds of emotions when you're exploring anatta—even now as you listen to this talk, for example. If they surface, see if you can model the kind of teacher children love: patient, encouraging, prepared to stop the lessons to have some fun. Especially notice and resist any tendency to put yourself down, hate yourself because of how slowly this teaching is sinking in, or judge yourself as stupid. If that happens, it's definitely time to stop the anatta lesson and focus instead on those jeering children or teachers that have popped up in your imagination to taunt you.

Back to the anatta lesson now. What do we mean when we say "I am"? It easily trots off our lips. I am happy. I am cold. I am an engineer. I am meditating. A step closer to the truth of anatta would be to say there is a being who is happy, cold, and so on, and by some magic this being's experience and life story are known. It's so tempting to add "by me"—to say this being's experience and life story are known by me.

Let's try to bring this closer to the truth of anatta. There is a concept of me, myself, I, who knows this being. Our concepts are mental constructions derived from our perceptions of the world. That's essentially what the self is, according to the Buddha: a mental construction.

Perceptions are the mind's attempts to make sense of all the data it receives. We see a certain pattern of yellow colours and perceive a buttercup. We hear a jangling sound and perceive a doorbell. One teacher likens perception to a mental filing cabinet. Each bit of sensory information is put into its correct file. The ability to perceive helps us simplify the vast amount of data bombarding our senses each moment. If we didn't have our filing cabinet, the paper would be strewn all over the room. It would be total confusion. We couldn't function. Babies haven't yet learned to categorise experience in this way, and so have endless fun exploring their little world. Everything is new.

As adults, we learn to ignore much of our sense input, as it's so quickly stowed away into its correct file, and we gladly believe that much of it can be labelled as unimportant.

The ability to perceive is wonderful. We couldn't negotiate our way through the world without this simplification. But it's important to remember that it's a mental classification, a form of data processing that we do. Our perceptions are not inherent to the world but a construction in our minds.

Our perceptions can be wrong. We've probably all had the experience of mistaking a stranger for a friend because of some trick of the light. For a brief moment we see our friend. We may even stop to say hello. Then the scene changes and a stranger's face comes into view. The incoming data went into the wrong file. We can get quite a shock.

Sometimes the opposite happens. Recently I was waiting at a station when my eyes were for some reason attracted towards a strange woman's face and I found myself staring at her. She stared back. It took a second to recognise a friend. We both started giggling. We hadn't been expecting to see one another there and the raw data got misclassified as the perception "stranger."

I had a very striking example of this one time on retreat here at Satipanya when I came into the meditation room. It was the original room before the extension, and some of you may remember that Bhante kept the prayer plant on its tall table just beside the side door. The pair are now in the dining room, so look out for this misperception if you stray into the dining room at night. The table is draped with a red cloth. There was no one in the shrine room and I crossed over in the semi-darkness and switched on the light by the shrine. As I turned back, eyes downcast, I glimpsed the red cloth brushing the floor and in an instant my mind built up a life-size image of Bhante standing beside the door. In my mind I saw Bhante, gave a startled jump as I hadn't heard him come in, felt embarrassed at my jumpiness, and was about to apologise before I realised I was about to address a pot plant.

Our perceptions are our best attempt to make sense of the world. They're influenced by our memories and expectations. They can be wrong. So it is with the perception of self. It can be wrong.

At times it's an appropriate perception. It helps make sense of the world. This is true in much of our daily lives. This being I call "me" is staying in the library, so needs to get herself there at times. If I didn't have an ability to perceive myself as different to others, who knows where I would end up. But this perception is not the ultimate truth, according to the Buddha. There are times where a perception of not-self is more helpful.

Take those times when we are avidly watching the flow of sensations and feelings. Then things start to feel sticky. We tighten around pleasant feelings, trying to hold on to them. The flow gets choked up. If we can relax and let go, sensations and feelings flow more easily again. If you look carefully, you will also notice that a sense of self arises when things get sticky and is released when sensations are flowing.

This is a teaching on the truth of anattā—that the self arises depending on conditions. The particular condition needed to generate a sense of self is a pleasant or unpleasant feeling we cling to. We try to hold, amplify and prolong the pleasant; we try to get rid of the unpleasant.

If you look closely, the perception of self is associated with the pleasant feeling of control. We love to feel in control. It means we can do what we want. We're the boss. We especially want to feel in control of ourselves—our bodies, emotions, thoughts. We want to be in good humour when we're on holiday. We

want to think positive when we're going for an interview. We want our bodies to be able to move and function normally. When we can't meet these expectations, we can feel quite threatened.

Our language actually contains a hint of anattā when we describe these times as "I'm not myself today," or "She wasn't like herself at all," or "He was beside himself with rage."

What's actually happening here? When we look closely we see that when things are going well for us, there is a pleasant feeling which we perceive as "me" and believe to be the control centre for our body, mind and life.

When things go badly, unpleasant feelings are generated which we push away, thinking "this isn't me." We're frightened by the fact that things are going against our wishes, and especially when we notice the unpleasant sensations and associated feelings are also manifesting in our bodies. Where is our precious control centre now? If you look carefully, you will find it's boxed into the opposition to the way things are. Even though the whole world can look black and scary, there is still a tiny, pleasant feeling of holding onto control. So long as I can say no to what I don't want, I can persuade myself I'm still in control.

In general, the feeling of self accompanies any sense of effort. Any time you feel relatively peaceful in meditation, see whether there is a strong sense of self. Compare that to the times you feel yourself struggling. The hindrances come with a strong sense of self. When I'm struggling with physical pain, I feel my body straining away from the painful area, as if it's trying to divide itself in two—the painful part, sensed as "not me," and the part which pulls away, sensed as "me." As I make peace with the pain, that sense of division subsides. Thus, physical pain provides one way for us to explore the truth of anatta.

All this can be very bewildering. Am I here? Am I not here? Do I exist? It can be quite frightening. Our sense of self is very precious, and we can feel threatened by thoughts of not-self. We imagine we will be annihilated. The Buddha refused to answer questions of the type: Do I exist? Do I not exist? Will I exist after death? Patiently, he repeated his insight that the sense of self emerges to fulfil our desires.

I think of the sense of self as a psychophysical mechanism that energises and sculpts my mind and body to help me get what I want and get rid of what I don't want. But when we are resting, when there isn't any enticing food to be found or any threats to cope with, we don't need central coordination. All the cells and organs work away themselves, just as they do in sleep. Unless we experience desire or aversion, no sense of self is formed. At these times, we often have no interest in the question "Do I exist?" It seems irrelevant. Then something disturbs our peaceful flow, and suddenly we're all hyped up, very sure of our existence.

One reason why we don't easily make peace with anatta is because we don't notice the absence of our sense of self during those peaceful times when there are no strong desires driving us. So we don't take those chances to explore and learn to appreciate the experience and perception of not-self.

Why don't we notice the experience of not-self? Although the thought of anatta is perplexing and we find it hard to imagine the possibility of existing without a sense of self, ironically the experience of anatta is

quite mundane and doesn't attract our attention. The absence of self is not a particularly interesting experience. Our world doesn't fall apart. Our bodies and minds function just fine. One teacher says that the mind state of not-self is far more prevalent than the mind state of self. It's just that it's so unobtrusive, so ordinary, that we don't notice it. I find it comforting to reflect on that. It helps to alleviate the fear we often feel during the investigation of anatta.

We can also investigate anatta as it shows up in our relationship with others. Normally we locate ourselves within our bodies and other people outside. But these perceptions can dissolve when we take another into our hearts in the practice of metta. Again, we don't usually notice this, as the experience does not trouble us. Only trouble calls attention. But it can be interesting to explore this when you feel a friendship. Is there a clear sense of separation between you and the other?

By contrast, the boundary between self and other gets amplified by enmity and hatred. When these surface, my face will often be tightening, my jaws locked. A strong sense of "me" fuels the tension, clenches my jaws. A mental image of the other person is projected around my head. As I let go of angry thoughts, their image blurs and I'm left with a vague but threatening sense of otherness beyond the borders of my body. The world seems to be divided into me, barricaded into my jaws and face, fiercely opposed to the other occupying the space around.

Nowadays, I use the note "not me" to describe that sense of otherness. This stills my mind and increases curiosity. What is this entity I'm battling with? My mind pushes against the boundary, demanding to know what is out there.

But nothing clarifies, and my attention reverts to my body, the breath rising and falling. In time my face and jaws relax, and the boundary between me and not me blurs. The space around me, once so threatening, seeps inwards, dissolving the sense of enmity. The image of the other person re-emerges, and I begin to see the situation from their point of view. A sense of understanding grows.

Exploring our relationship with others in this way helps us come to terms with the truth of anattā. Perceptions of self and not-self emerge and dissolve in line with feelings of enmity and friendship. Whenever we start thinking about anattā, we will often be stimulating a sense of self, as the desire to know and understand the truth is operating. Ironically, this desire leads to a sense of self who needs to understand this truth. So it's quite a challenge to combine reflection on the teaching with experiential investigation. We need patience. We can also bring those emotional reactions into the field of investigation whenever they are stimulated. We might sense anattā in our lack of control over those emotions.

Beware also of judging the sense of self as somehow inferior to the sense of not-self. Time and again the Buddha asks us to look after ourselves wisely, to treasure our human life with its opportunity to free ourselves from suffering. There are many wise desires we should fulfil in order to look after ourselves and practice meditation. The desire to learn the Dhamma would be one, and then the multitude of desires

involved in putting this into practice—the desire to come on retreat, the desire to get the bus in order to come on retreat, the desire to get out of bed in order to get the bus, and so on. Many of these desires will need some effort to fulfil, and a sense of self is conjured up to channel our energies into that effort. That's fine. That's the way the human organism accomplishes things. So a sense of self is nothing to be ashamed of.

Ajahn Thanissaro, in his very helpful book on anattā entitled *Selves and Not-Self*, says that sometimes the perception of self is the wiser one, and sometimes the perception of not-self is the wiser one. He adds that as our practice deepens, we get better at discerning which perception is more appropriate for each situation. To marshal ourselves for actions we deem worthy, the sense of self should be encouraged and nourished. We can search for any good feelings associated with thoughts like "I can," "I will," and take delight in these as a little treasure trove to help us enjoy work and get us through any challenges.

When we've accomplished our task or feel the need for a rest along the way, we can sit back and invite any dukkha stirred up by the activity to manifest. Sometimes, as the struggle with dukkha wanes, we can let the perception of "not me, not mine" sink in to remind us that we don't always have to be acting and accomplishing, that the world can survive quite well without us—that even we ourselves can survive quite well without anyone at the helm.

I want to finish tonight by recapping the first noble truth: that life involves dukkha. The Buddha asks us to fully understand dukkha. We can explore it in three forms. Dukkha-dukkha involves the major suffering of our lives, which we cannot escape. To prepare ourselves for this, we can study dukkha's milder forms. Anicca-dukkha manifests especially at beginnings and endings, and is even contained within the minutiae. Every breath, footstep, and meal present us with a lesson on transience. Anattā-dukkha shows up at the limits to our control, at the boundary of me and other, and even within ourselves as we struggle with sensations and feelings we would prefer not to own.

The exploration of dukkha involves finding our way through the hindrances that block our view of truth. As we make our peace with each hindrance, we also come to terms with the limits to our knowledge and understanding. We feel more at ease in a world which is continually slipping through our fingers, beyond our tiny radius of control.

May we and all beings come to understand dukkha and thereby be liberated from all suffering.

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