The Middle Way

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:03:49

We've been exploring sati and satipaṭṭhāna—mindfulness and the applications of mindfulness—in considerable detail over the previous days. Having exhausted that topic, we're going to move on and do something different.

We're going to go back to the beginning. We'll do a series of talks on the invention of Buddhism—how it all came about—and we'll do this by looking in particular at the first three teachings of the Buddha: Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, setting in motion the wheel of the dharma; Anattalakkhana, the not-self characteristic; and Āditta, burning. And we'll weave the Buddha's story into that.

So this will be partly esoteric Buddhist philosophy and partly bedtime story. The bedtime story you can regard as historical fiction, because I'm creating a character—the Buddha—and of course we have absolutely no idea about really what happened. We have the ancient texts that tell us a particular story, but there are different ways to interpret it. Usually it's interpreted with maximum reverence. I'm going to provide a reading which has less reverence and which may or may not be more useful. Just keep in mind that this is my own reading and I'm not necessarily saying that it's the truth. Actually, the first time I gave these talks in Malaysia, apparently they created a bit of a stir among the faithful. And one of the meditators in the interviews was talking about this and she said, "But we know you don't really mean it." Well, what a relief.

The Buddha attained awakening on the full moon of Vesākha, which roughly corresponds to May. This, of course, is the lunar calendar, so it doesn't quite fit our solar calendar. And the first teaching was delivered two months later on the full moon of Āsāḷha in July. This was Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, Turning the Dharma Wheel—or more accurately, setting the dharma wheel in motion, beginning to turn the dharma wheel, getting the dharma wheel started. In that discourse he taught the middle way and the four truths. Tonight we're going to have a look at the middle way in particular.

The Buddha wakes up, sitting under the tree, and becomes the Buddha. Until then, he was not the Buddha. Buddha is a title, not a name. It means awakened—someone who has woken up. His name that's given to us in the early teachings is Gotama, and Gotama was his family name. So in the suttas, there's no mention of his first name. Later tradition says it's Siddhattha—Siddhattha, one who has accomplished, or Siddha, one who is successful in his purpose. So one who has accomplished what he set out to accomplish. Now this may or may not have been his name. Maybe it was just given to him by the tradition as a way of historical boosting. But we'll take it as genuine, and we'll just call him Sid. It's kind of more friendly.

But we won't meet Sid first. We'll start with him as the Buddha. He's thirty-five years old. He's just woken

up. He's decided to teach, and there's a whole story there.

When the Buddha woke up, he had no notion that he was going to become a great teacher. He just had a problem—dukkha—and he wanted to solve it. And he did. Then he spent six weeks under and around the Bodhi tree in what is now Bodh Gaya, enjoying the bliss of his awakening and basically probably just recovering. I mean, he must have had an enormous case of spiritual vertigo—this blast of awakening. Getting used to it must have been quite something. He had sitting periods that would last a week, just recovering, blissing out and coming back to planet Earth, as it were.

In the course of this period, the thought arose in his mind: maybe I should teach this. And this was quickly followed by another thought, which was: no. Because no one is going to understand this. There is no way I can ever communicate this.

Now fortunately for us, someone was eavesdropping, and this was Brahmā Sahampati, who was and indeed on good authority still is a god up in one of the Brahma realms. He actually was an old mate of Sid before he woke up—and this is a long, long time ago during the teaching of a previous Buddha when he and Sid were both students. So Brahmā Sahampati has been keeping an eye on Sid and he's been tracking this whole thing. He hears this thought and of course he's horrified. Because, I mean, the whole plan is Buddha, teaching, Buddhism. And suddenly it's all about to go belly up.

So Sahampati heads down to earth, appears before the Buddha and pleads with him to change his mind. The argument he gives is profound: "Look, there are just a few people who have only a little dust in their eyes. If you teach them, they will awaken. But if you don't, they will perish. You've got to do it."

So the Buddha says, "Okay, I'll do it. I'll take it on." But notice how, at the very beginning, the way the project is defined: just a few people. Clearly, the Buddha has no notion that he's going to create a world religion. That's not in his thinking. He might find a few people who might just possibly understand what just happened.

So he first thinks of his two previous meditation teachers. He had two meditation teachers when he was still Siddhartha, still a Bodhisattva, but they had both died—one a week before, the other the night before. Because they had accomplished serenity to a very great extent, they were reborn in a very exalted and subtle heaven where they are today. By the time the results of their good karma run out and they get reborn on earth, Buddhism will have been long since finished and they'll just have to wait for the next Buddha and start the whole thing all over again.

Imagine how you would feel if you missed it by one night. How pissed off would you be? But that's karma. The point of the story is, of course, that the opportunity to actually encounter the Dharma and benefit from it is extremely rare. So don't waste it. You don't know how long in one's wanderings in samsara one might go before one gets another opportunity.

So they're off the list, and then the Buddha thinks of his five former companions. We're going to look at

them later on, but basically in his spiritual career he had tried first meditation, developing very deep absorption states. Having decided that was a dead end, he then tried ascetic practices, which he did without a teacher, but he attracted five equally fanatical men who were also committed to the practice of asceticism. They were very impressed by what he was doing and they decided to hang around and wait until he got enlightened.

But there was a bit of a kerfuffle, a bit of an argument, and the five companions set off in one direction and Siddhartha headed off in the other, so they hadn't seen each other for some time. The Buddha thinks of them: maybe they might possibly, conceivably, understand.

So he uses his psychic powers and discovers that they're staying at a place called Isipatana, north of Varanasi—or what is sometimes pronounced Benares. So he heads off.

As he's going down the road, he meets someone called Upaka, who is an Ajivaka. The Ajivakas were an early ascetic order. Upaka is coming one way, Buddha is going the other way, and they meet. Upaka is really impressed by this guy. The Buddha apparently was, by all reports, extremely good looking. Plus he is radiating the glow of his awakening.

So Upaka, very impressed, says, "Friend, your faculties are clear, your complexion is pure and bright. Under whom have you gone forth? Who is your teacher? Whose dharma do you follow?"

So Upaka is clearly impressed. This guy has obviously realized something. So where does he belong? Where does he fit? Who is his teacher? What tradition does he belong to?

Now this is the first opportunity that the Buddha has to actually teach Dharma. He's spoken to people before now, but he has not spoken of his realization. He's spoken more in terms of faith, saddha, the heart connection. Here's someone who might possibly get it, and he actually wants to know. So the Buddha decides to just give him the full blast, and he bursts into spontaneous verse.

The Buddha says, "I am the one who has overcome everything, who understands everything, unstained among all phenomena, abandoning everything, freed by the exhausting of craving, having understood directly by myself—to whom should I point? For me there is no teacher, and one like me is unknown. In the world, with all its devas, there is no one equal to me. I am the Worthy One of the world. I am the supreme teacher."

Alone I am Sammasambuddha. I am cooled, extinguished. To set turning the wheel of Dharma, I am going to the city of Kasi. In a world gone blind, I go to beat the drum of the deathless.

So that's what he says. And clearly this is not a man with any sense of lack of self-worth. It's a complete confidence and just, as I said, full blast. This is what's called in the tradition a declaration of truth. It's just—okay, he wants to know, I'll hammer him with what's actually going on.

Upaka points out that this is a claim to enlightenment. And the Buddha says, that's correct. I think you

understand what's going on. And Upaka shakes his head and says, which could be roughly translated in contemporary English as, "Yeah, whatever." And he leaves. It's more like, "Yeah, friend, maybe. Yeah, possibly. So you say. That's nice. I hope you enjoy it. Bye." And he continues on his journey, completely unimpressed. Totally not impressed.

So as he leaves, perhaps the Buddha was thinking to himself, "Well, that went well. Not." And it brings out the problem that he's got. The reason why he didn't want to teach in the first place is because it's impossible to communicate this. How is he going to do it? When he's marching off down the road, he has no idea how he's going to do it. It's not that he's got a plan. All he's got is possible contenders, possible students. He tries out Upaka because he thinks, "Okay, this guy's interested." And he says basically the first thing that comes to his mind, and it's a complete bust. So all he knows is that that's not going to work. So at least he's eliminated one wrong track. And off he goes, and he must be wondering, "So how am I going to do this? How many false starts can I go through before I realize I was right the first time? And it can't be taught."

Anyway, he continues his journey. He arrives at Isipatana. And the five companions don't want to listen. They see him coming and they kind of nudge each other and say, "There's Sid, bastard." And they say, "Just ignore him. He will go away." But he's coming straight for them.

And the thing is, he's radiating this awakening and they just cannot, despite themselves, they cannot ignore it. So they kind of grumpily stand aside and they prepare a seat, which probably just means a cloth thrown on the ground. "Okay, you can sit down."

So they're sitting down and there's this uneasy silence because they're wondering what the hell is he doing here. And he explains that what he's doing here is that he's enlightened. He says, "I'm the Buddha. I did it. You were hanging around waiting for me to do it. Well, I've done it."

And they are even less impressed than Upaka. And they just completely dismiss the whole thing. "We're not interested. Basically, go away." And so he tells them again, "Yes, I've done it."

I'm awakened. And I can teach you. And they're just not interested. Go away.

Now this is getting into dangerous territory because remember we talked about the significance of the number three. If you ask a question three times, it means you're serious, so the person has to respond. But equally, if you're offering a teaching and it's refused three times, that means it's serious—the teaching is rejected, go away.

Now he's come all this way because he thinks these five have the potential to awaken. And they will not listen to him. They've already knocked him back twice. He's got one more shot just to get them to listen. There's no guarantee that they're going to accept what he says, but even to get them to listen—one more shot. So everything is hanging by a thread.

Finally, he says to them, "Have you ever known me to speak like this before? Have I ever claimed any enlightenment whatsoever before?" And this gets them looking at each other and thinking, and they remember. They realize, well in fact he never has. They were very impressed by him back in the day and they thought, oh maybe he's enlightened, but he quickly hit that idea on the head. And they wanted to be students, but he hit that on the head too. "I'm not enlightened, I'm not a teacher. I'm just here doing my ascetic practices. Please don't take up that bit of nails. It's mine. Get out of my way." And they said, "Well, can we at least hang around? We'll do our own practices in your vicinity. Is that all right?" "Yeah, okay, you can do that."

So he's never made any claim like this before. And he's reminding them: have I ever done this before? And they say, well, no, you never have. And he says, "Well, I'm making it now." And this stops them. And they look at each other and they decide, well, we've known Sid for a while. We don't like him, which is why we left. But we know that he's not a liar. If he says something is so, then he believes that it is so. If he says he's enlightened, then he certainly believes that he's enlightened. Something must have happened.

So they say, "Okay, we'll listen to you." So the stage is set. The Buddha can start teaching.

It's interesting that again, the Buddha begins with a declaration of truth: I've done it. I'm awakened. The first time it didn't work. The second time it almost didn't work. But finally it does work.

And if we ask what's the difference between the two occasions, the difference is the social context. On the second occasion he was talking to people who knew him. Upaka didn't know him. He could have been looking like he's enlightened, but actually a refugee from the loony bin down the road. Well, they probably didn't have loony bins, but this was the Gaya area. And Gaya at the time, and today, was notorious for being a highly charged, psychically highly charged area full of ghosts and spirits. And so he may well have been possessed. It's quite possible.

But the five companions—they know him. And so the declaration of truth has more power depending on the social context. When people know you and trust you, they're prepared to take what you say to be true.

So the first discourse begins, and the version which is handed down—again, the suttas are kind of executive summaries.

They're designed to be put into the memory banks and chanted. So they're not actually word for word what was said. They're a kind of summary of the key points.

And this is how the discourse begins:

"This is how I heard it. Once the Blessed One was living at Benares in the deer park at Isipatana. There he addressed the group of five bhikkhus."

Now you can see that this is artificially forced into a template from the very beginning, because in fact there were no bhikkhus. These were ascetics—they hadn't been ordained, they were not bhikkhus. But

they're called bhikkhus because that's the standard form, even though this is before the Sangha existed.

The Buddha says: "These two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone out into homelessness. What two? The pursuit of sensual happiness among sensual pleasures, which is inferior, normal, the way of ordinary people, lacking in refinement and useless, and the practice of self-exhaustion, which is painful, lacking in refinement and useless. Avoiding both these extremes, the Tathagata has awakened to the middle way that gives rise to seeing and understanding and leads to calming, direct knowledge, full awakening, nibbana. And what is the middle way that gives rise to seeing and understanding and leads to calming, direct knowledge, full awakening, nibbana? This eightfold path of the noble ones, the cultivated ones: right view, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right energy, right mindfulness and right concentration. This is the middle way."

Notice what this is—it's a strategy. How is the Buddha going to present his awakening? He tried the full blast and that didn't work. So now he's coming at it indirectly, and he begins by introducing this notion of the middle way.

In the discourses there are different presentations of the middle way. The most common way is the middle way between existence and non-existence, between being and non-being, and between eternalism and annihilationism, sassatavada and ucchedavada. Here, it's taught as the middle way between the extremes of sensual happiness and the practice of self-exhaustion. This presentation of the middle way is actually, as far as I know, unique to this particular discourse. In every other discourse, it's presented differently—basically between existence, non-existence, eternalism, annihilationism. This presentation is unique.

In other words, the middle way is a general principle and it can be applied to different circumstances where it has a different appearance. Context is everything. The Buddha needs to get through to this particular group of people. It's no good giving them some general universally true principle if it just goes right over their heads. He's got to figure out a way to get through their defenses to get them to really open up to what he wants to tell them. Because there are defenses against hearing the Dharma. We all have layers of armor to prevent us from actually hearing the Dharma.

The Buddha may have reflected on the difficulty of communicating Dharma from his experience when he was a young man still at home and he had his first realization. It's been summarized as he suddenly saw immediately and directly aging, sickness and death and the universality of them. Plus in the stories he also saw a samana, someone who was practicing to overcome this pain.

At this time Siddhartha was a young man living a privileged life as an upper class lad in the Shakya Republic. We don't know how old he was. If the tradition is correct, he would have been probably mid-twenties. But I think this is more like something which would have happened to a teenager, personally. But basically, he suddenly realized that he's going to get old, get sick and die. And it's not just him, it's everyone. For some reason or other, one day he was open, he was vulnerable. Bang! It hits him,

and he is profoundly shocked.

All his normal layers of defenses against understanding this for some mysterious reason dropped away and he just got hit with it. Now all of us have layers of defenses against this understanding because that's what enables us to live normally within the world. Otherwise we'd go crazy. To drop our armor could expose us to a reality that could send us mad. And it could have sent Siddhartha mad. Instead it catapulted him out of home, off onto the quest for enlightenment.

Not only is this realization profound and moving—which of course the companions know, his audience knows this—but what characterizes this is a complete inability to actually communicate it to anybody else. So he comes back home, sweating, shaking, in a state of shock. His parents say, "What happened, what's the matter?" And he says, "We're all going to die."

At first his father is worried. His father is president for life of the Shakya Republic.

He's already reaching for his sword and he says, "Which way did you see the army coming?"

And Sid says, "No, no, no, no, no, there's no invasion. I'm just saying, we're all going to die."

His father looks at him oddly, his attitude: "And?" Like, duh.

"No, you don't understand," Sid insists. "We're all going to get old, and we're all going to get sick, and then we're all going to die."

His parents look at each other and say, "Yeah, maybe you should wash up before dinner."

"No, you don't understand."

So he's seen something that, in a sense, everybody knows. Everyone has come to terms with it in their own way. But his understanding is so deep and so fresh, he cannot come to terms with it. From his parents' point of view, basically the kid's gone crazy. "Calm down. Cool it. You'll recover. Take a holiday for a while. Life isn't so bad."

But of course he can't hear any of this. And they can't hear what he's saying.

To have some kind of penetrating understanding is to put you in a very isolated position. Where can you go for anybody to actually get what you're talking about? He had to leave home. There was no one who could understand.

So he knows from his own experience, when he's faced with these five companions, how deep the layers of defenses go. He's got to find a way first of all to open up those defenses, expose the problem, and show the way out. That's his challenge.

To return to his audience—these are practitioners of the path of severe asceticism. What they were doing

is very close to following Jain principles, and this tradition was quite strong in the Gaya area. When Sid left home, he was up in Nepal and would have gotten onto the main highway heading southeast. He would have crossed into what is now northern Bihar, where he practiced meditation—apparently an area very strong in yoga practice. Dissatisfied with the results of meditation practices, he kept traveling south of the Ganga and ended up in the Gaya area, where shamanic powers were very strong, hauntings and spirits were very common—a very dangerous area where the most fanatical ascetics would come. This is where he started this practice, and where he meets these other ascetics.

Now, what everybody wants is sukha—pleasure, happiness, bliss, peace. This is what all practitioners are heading for. But how to get it?

The ascetics believe that the way to sukha is through dukkha. You face your pain directly and go straight through it to the other side. When you get there—bang—sukha, awakening, enlightenment. If you've trained in classical Mahasi, this is a tradition you're all very familiar with. If you say, "My body hurts intensely when I sit," you'd be told, "Just note it until it goes away. Endure. Sit through pain." You get the same flavors of practice. It's not just the specific ascetic tradition—this kind of attitude can permeate many different traditions.

The Buddha understands these five companions because he shared the same beliefs, practices, attitudes. Siddhartha believed that what holds us back from awakening is our attachment to pleasure. We're so attached to pleasure, to having a good time, that we can't unstick ourselves in order to proceed to awakening. So pleasure was the enemy.

What changed for him—and now we're backtracking to when he was an ascetic—he practiced this way of asceticism, and being a completely fanatical, macho young man, he practiced it close to the point of dying. One of the practices he specialized in was self-starvation. Many years later, he explained to his students that he was so skinny he could poke his finger into his belly and feel his backbone. This Sid was just totally macho, fanatical, a bulldozer kind of fellow. What he was bulldozing through was his attachment to pleasure.

But he came to realize that this asceticism wasn't the way.

He was closer to death and still no closer to awakening. And so he came to a crisis.

Later on he describes his practice, the kind of meditation he did at this point. Years later, he's explaining to his students what he was doing as an ascetic:

"I thought, suppose, with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, I beat down, constrain and crush mind with mind. So, with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, I beat down, constrained and crushed mind with mind. While I did so, sweat ran from my armpits."

It's pretty impressive. Think about it. If you're sitting there and sweat is not running from your armpits, are you really making enough effort? And is there a tightness in your jaw?

"Just as a strong man might seize a weaker man by the head or shoulders and beat him down, constrain and crush him, so too with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth I beat down, constrained and crushed mind with mind and sweat ran from my armpits. But although tireless energy was aroused in me and unforgotten mindfulness was established, my body was overwrought and agitated because I was exhausted by the painful striving."

So that's the practice he tried that did not work. He had tireless energy and unforgotten mindfulness. Sounds pretty good to me. But there was an immense strain in all of this. "My body was overwrought and agitated because I was exhausted by the painful striving." Notice the role of the body in all of this.

So then he reflects: "Whatever painful, wracking, piercing feelings due to exertion samanas or brahmanas have experienced in the past, this is the utmost. There is none beyond this. And whatever painful, wracking, piercing feelings due to exertion samanas or brahmanas will experience in the future, this is the utmost. There is none beyond this. And whatever painful, wracking, piercing feelings due to exertion samanas or brahmanas experience in the present, this is the utmost. There is none beyond this."

Whatever is humanly possible to do in terms of making heroic effort and just driving yourself, bulldozing your way to enlightenment—whatever anybody could have done in the past, whatever anybody could do in the future, what anybody is doing in the present—I've done it. It's like he's won the race, but no one's applauded him because it's completely useless. It's not working. All it's doing is killing you.

And he concludes: "But I have not attained any states surpassing the human by this racking practice of austerities, any distinction in understanding and seeing worthy of cultivated ones." It's been a complete failure.

Now this is a man who walked out of a marriage, walked out from his family, including his newborn son, walked out from his career as a leader of his people. As I said, he had two teachers that we know about, meditation teachers: Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta. With both teachers, he was a naturally gifted meditator. He mastered their meditation system. He's very bright. He learned the theoretical dharma that they taught. In both cases, he graduated. His first teacher says, "You've done it. Whatever I know, you know. The dharma needs teachers. There are people in this assembly. We can use your help. Could you teach?"

And Siddhartha looks at him with a glance of withering contempt and says, "And this is all there is to it? I'm out of here." And he walks off.

So he hasn't just abandoned his family, he's abandoned his dharma community. Goes to another teacher, the same thing happens, walks out on them. This is a serial walker-outer. He gets to the point where he's doing the austerities and he's completely alone. I mean, he's alienated everybody by this point, just this

fanatic determination not to compromise until he's satisfied, regardless of the cost anybody else is paying for his lifestyle. And at the end it doesn't work, because basically he's wasted his life and it looks like he's going to die soon. And so the thought arises: could there be another way to awakening?

He's desperately trying to think of something. And suddenly, up pops a spontaneous memory from his childhood:

"I remember that when my father, the Shakyan, was working, while I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose apple tree, withdrawn from sensual pleasures and unwholesome states, I attained and lived in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion."

"Could this be the way to awakening?" Then, following on that memory came the awareness: "This is the way to awakening."

So he has a spontaneous memory of an equally spontaneous experience that happened in childhood. This story gets increasingly elaborated over the centuries, but this is the earliest version. It's very simple. He's young—we don't know how old. It's hot. He's sitting under the cool shade of a rose apple tree, watching his father work in the hot sun.

Now, I don't know about you, but sitting in the cool shade, preferably with a nice drink, watching other people work in the hot sun—this sort of thing gives me great pleasure and makes me feel particularly relaxed. So there he is, sitting, relaxed, not a care in the world, and he just slides into this spontaneous concentration state, which is characterized by pleasure.

And so he asks himself the thought: "Why am I afraid of pleasure?" I find this question fascinating. He's at a complete dead end. He's desperate to find out: what have I done wrong? And what he zeroes in on is the question: why am I afraid of pleasure? The full statement is: why am I afraid of pleasure that is unconnected to sensual stimulation and unwholesome states?

What he's talking about is non-addictive pleasure. The basic principle that he's been following at this point is: we're all stuck on pleasure, so we've got to get away from this. What he recognizes here is that there are different kinds of pleasure. There's what in the suttas is called sensual pleasure, and this is essentially pleasure that comes from and is dependent upon a sense stimulus. I get a certain stimulus—ooh, that feels good. And that pleasure is temporary. It arises only because of the stimulus. When the stimulus fades, the pleasure fades. And if I want more, I've got to renew the stimulus. In other words, it's what we would call addictive pleasure—pleasure which is based on a relationship of addictive return to the source of the pleasure.

In a broader sense, it's the pleasure of consumerism, what we're familiar with as consumerism. I shouldn't tell you this because this would disturb your meditations, but while you've been cloistered here, there's been some very significant news on a global scale: Apple have released a new iPhone! And it's got really

interesting little gadgety things that the old iPhones don't have anymore. All over the planet, people are lining up, desperate, camping out. They've got to get these new iPhones. I mean, how can you live without another iPhone, the new one? And the old iPhone? I mean, bleh. How could I have thought that this is great? It's terrible. I've got to get another one.

This is the kind of pleasure that in the suttas is called sensual pleasure. Now that kind of pleasure—the pleasure often called the pleasure of the household life—is sticky. And at this point, Siddhartha realizes: okay, that's right, but what I need is pleasure, but I need a different kind of pleasure, a pleasure which is not sticky, which is not addictive.

And remember how he came across this—there was a memory from childhood. In other words, a pleasure that has a childlike quality of spontaneity to it. A pleasure that comes from a time when we are willing to accept whatever the world offers before disillusionment. So a pleasure in which not only is that grasping, addictive grasping unnecessary, but it's not even yet conceived of.

So he discovers the spontaneous pleasure that characterizes childhood—when it's a happy childhood, presumably. And his project becomes: how can I return to this pleasure today as an adult? I already had it when I was a child, but somewhere I lost it, and I didn't even notice that I lost it. Now I realize I've got to find it because this is the way I can unstick myself. This is the way to awaken.

And so, hence the displeasure of the companions, because the companions are having a normal day at the office—flogging themselves, starving themselves, beating themselves up. And they notice that Sid has disappeared. He's not in his usual part of the forest.

And then they see him walking towards them—there's a little smile on his face they haven't seen before, and he's also rubbing his stomach in a very contented way. They ask what happened, what changed, and he says, "I just had this fantastic lunch that was really good, and I think I'll have a nap now."

They're just horrified. Who does this guy think he is? A complete backslider, a total betrayer, a backstabber. They're so disgusted that they march off. Or alternatively, maybe he marched off from them. "What a bunch of killjoys. Why should I waste my time with them?"

In any event, that's when they split. Siddhartha goes off to generate pleasure. The principle that he discovers is that the path itself must be pleasurable. The path to sukha has to be sukha—pleasure in the sense of what we might call contentment.

When we're contented, we don't have any felt need to look further than what is happening now. We're not anxiously thinking about the future. We're no longer concerned with any result that may arise in the future. You might have had a sitting that's going quite well, but underlying it is this sense of anxiety and agitation: "Oh, this is going well so that then I can get what I want. I hope this keeps going for the rest of the retreat."

This mind state comes from a sense of anxiety and insecurity—I want something in the future. This pleasure now is useful to me insofar as it will get something for me in the future. That's not contentment.

In a state of contentment, I'm not even thinking of the result. It doesn't occur to me to think of a future result. What I've got is fine. Thank you very much.

When Siddhartha was practicing asceticism, he was crushing mind with mind. With that kind of practice, he must have been looking for a result. He must have been looking for what would happen next that would justify this effort he was making now.

But here he begins looking for a relationship to the practice in which nothing more needs to be grasped—in which the attention is so completely absorbed in what's happening in the present that any sense of a future result can be completely forgotten. A quality of absorption where there's no need to look to an imagined future to get something that's missing now.

This is where he's coming from when he teaches the middle way.

Is it possible that his sojourn with the two teachers of absorption could have been after his ascetic period?

Not according to the tradition. Just a curiosity.

I don't know where it... I've always read that he left home at the age of 29 and was awakened at 35. But I haven't seen that in the suttas. I can't recall a sutta where it actually gives his age. The problem we have is there's the legend in layers, and we get the completed legend and it's hard to sort out the earliest.

In the suttas it only talks about the ascetic period and the period with the teachers. It actually doesn't give any order to them. I think it's the order in which they're spoken of, but I have to check that. It would be interesting to see. I know the tradition puts them... Yeah, the tradition puts them that way.

But considering Hugh's question, you know, he comes out of the ascetic period thinking, "Well, maybe that pleasure of absorption is a useful path to follow." It would follow that he would then go and train in that. Yeah, could be. I have to look it up—that's an interesting point.

Now, so this is where his practice turned around and then it ended up with awakening. Now he's talking to the ascetics and he knows exactly where they're coming from because he was there. There's a sense in which he knows how tough his first audience is, because in a sense he's talking to his pre-enlightened self. "I was exactly like that." And he knows, he can remember what a tough nut he was to crack. How he wouldn't listen to anyone. So how can he get through to them?

And where he goes is this whole business about the relationship to pleasure and pain.

Most people think the way to happiness is through what we call consumerism. The vast majority of people believe that firmly. The ascetics belong to a tiny little minority who have decided that is a complete crock, that it's complete rubbish, it doesn't work, it's never going to work, we have to do something different. And

so they practice asceticism. Now to do that you have to be particularly stubborn and fanatical, just even to begin to do this, much less to stick with it. So this is a hard audience to crack.

And the logic of the ascetics is that: "I pursued this path heading in this direction, which is the path of grabbing pleasure. It doesn't work. So the path this way is the wrong path in the wrong direction. What would be the path in the right direction? Where should I go?" Thinks. "Ah, got it, that way. The opposite way. If this way is the wrong way, then the opposite way must be the right way."

And that's the essential logic behind it. What the practitioners miss, what the Buddha has realized, is that the opposite way is also the wrong way, precisely because it's the opposite. That is what makes it the wrong way.

And he expresses this in terms of the anta, the extremes. An anta is a point beyond which you cannot go further. So the peak of a mountain is an anta. You can go that far, you can't go any further. So you can push in one direction, go as far as you can in the pursuit of pleasure—doesn't work. But if you then head with the same determination in the opposite direction, you just hit another anta. It doesn't work.

What characterizes the pursuit of pleasure in the ordinary consumerist addictive sense is obsession, drivenness, or what the Buddha came to call tanhā, literally thirst. The ascetics can see that and they've renounced it. What they haven't noticed is that what drives their practice is obsession, drivenness, tanhā. They think they're not in the same boat as all these tacky laypeople. They're in exactly the same boat. They're just heading in the opposite direction. But they are equally as driven as the laypeople.

The laypeople are stuck on pleasure, but they are stuck on pain. The point is not the pleasure or the pain. The point is the stuckness. That's what causes the problem.

And so the pleasure that the Buddha is talking about, real pleasure, the pleasure that he stumbled into under the rose apple tree is the pleasure that comes from the absence of drivenness. It's when drivenness, obsession, drops away that real pleasure emerges.

The Buddha is pointing out to them, you think you're heading in the right direction because it's the opposite way of the wrong direction, but you're wrong because it's the opposite. And it is equally driven. It's the drivenness which is the problem. And this is the middle way.

The middle way cannot be defined as the opposite of another way. Because that would just be another extreme. Sometimes you see the middle way, often you see the middle way presented as the middle way of moderation. So don't be extreme. Try the middle way. And if you think about that, what is it really saying? It's saying, OK, here is one extreme. Here's another extreme. Get out a ruler, measure it precisely. Dead in the middle, there's the middle way. But what's that? That's the opposite of the two ends. It's just another extreme.

The middle way can only be found where there are no extremes. In other words, where we are not stuck

on anything at all.

So the middle way is a dynamic balance between opposites. It's characterized by no fixed position. As soon as we land somewhere and say, this is it, this is it, then that, its opposite, is not it, and we're in the extremes. As soon as we land anywhere and hold on, we're caught up in extremes.

The middle way can only be found where there is no fixed position and this dynamic balance can only be found in the present. Because any notion of past and future involves grasping and it involves opposite extremes. I'm doing this for that. I'm caught up in the extremes again.

And the Buddha then gives the example of the middle way as the eightfold path and you notice that this illustrates this basic principle. So you have the eightfold path. It's one thing, except it's not a thing, it's a complex system made up of eight parts. Right view, right aspiration, right action, right speech, right livelihood, right energy, right mindfulness and right concentration.

So you have eight factors, each of which has to be balanced with the other. But to make it more complicated, it's divided into three subsystems. The wisdom group, the ethics group, and the meditation group.

So the wisdom group consists of right view, right aspiration. Both of these have to balance each other. Then you get the ethics group: right action, speech and livelihood. Each one of these has to balance each other. Then you get the meditation group: right effort or energy, mindfulness, concentration. These have to balance each other.

Each one of these in each group has to balance each other so that this particular group is balanced. Each one of the groups has to balance with each other. And every one of the eight factors has to be balanced with every other of the factors. If I was mathematically inclined I could work out how many possible relationships that would add up to. I've never attempted it because my mathematics is pathetic but I'm pretty sure it would be a large number.

So it's this enormously complex network of relationships all of which are dynamic. Because every aspect is influenced by the state of every other aspect, which is true of all of them, and they're all moving. So there is no place to stand still.

There is no ground upon which to fix a position. And this is the middle way.

You've noticed this in your own practice. Have you ever had the thought, after much struggle: "I've figured it out. This is it. This is what I do. It works perfectly"? Have you ever come to that position where you've thought, "Okay, that's it. It's been a while, but now I've got it down. All I've got to do is just do this"?

If you've had that experience, you know how disappointed you are the next time you apply this principle—because it doesn't work, because the whole thing has already changed. In other words, you've landed smack in the middle of an anta, of an extreme. And the first thing we have to do is unstick

ourselves from that and re-enter the middle way, which is just dancing all the time. And there's nowhere that we can pin it down.

This is why, after forty years of meditation, you think to yourself, "I think I'm beginning to get the hang of it." Actually, I was talking recently to an old mate of mine, a long-time meditator, and he says, "Look, with meditation practice, you practice hard for twenty-five years, and then you begin to understand what you're doing." But you only begin to understand. It's an inherently dynamic and complex process.

This is what the Buddha was trying to communicate to the five ascetics. Basically, he was trying to unstick them from their fixed views about what was right and what was wrong and what you should do and what you shouldn't do. First, you have to open them up to recognize that they've been on the wrong path all this time—that's the bad news. The good news: they can do something about it. And they can do something about it now, because the only time that we can do something about it is now.

And so the five companions get it and suddenly they're open, and the Buddha can begin to convey what he's talking about. But we'll explore that tomorrow night, because I think we've gone for a long time already.

Thank you very much. Thank you for listening.

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