On Dukkha & Dukkha Ñāṇa

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:25:18

Tonight, by special request, we explore dukkha. We'll trace a journey from dukkha to dukkhañāṇa—the understanding of dukkha as understood in insight meditation—because it's centrally important, most difficult, and can be misunderstood. It's very easy to get stuck there, so let's survey the whole territory.

We've encountered dukkha before in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, the first discourse. The Buddha begins with the middle way and goes straight into the four truths, which revolve around dukkha: dukkha itself, its arising, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation. Notice that what's central is the dynamism of dukkha—it arises and ceases.

This occurs within the background of dependent arising: if something arises, it arises because of something else. If it ceases, it ceases because of something else. The practice is all about relationship. In the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha points out that if you're concerned with dukkha, you must examine the relationship to drivenness—what he calls craving, literally thirst.

Dukkha is a compound word based on the root *kha*, meaning empty space, while the prefix *du* conveys the idea of bad, painful, unpleasant, or undesirable. We could understand dukkha as meaning the painful emptiness we find at the center of our being—what David Loy calls the sense of lack, something missing. The tradition also sees it as the empty space that is the hub of a wheel where the axle doesn't fit properly, so the vehicle moves slowly with great grinding, if it moves at all, or becomes completely bogged down.

Have you ever felt that your practice or your life has been completely bogged down and you can't get it to move? This is dukkha. It's always characterized by drivenness—this is craving—and you could say it's the gap between what is happening and what we want to be happening. As long as there's that gap, there's dukkha. The cessation of dukkha represents bodhi, awakening, or nibbāna—the going out and cooling of the fire.

Beyond dukkha as a key technical term—for which there's no English equivalent, making any translation necessarily inadequate—dukkha is treated by the later tradition as a universal characteristic, a sāmañña lakkhaṇa. This is one of the three characteristics: anicca, dukkha, anattā—impermanence or change, dukkha itself, and not-self.

These three characteristics are what insight meditation focuses on. Strictly speaking, insight meditation begins when the object of awareness is one or more of the three characteristics. Until then, we're doing preliminary serenity practice to reach that point.

We discussed this in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. Remember when the Buddha talks about the nature of arising

and ceasing? The practitioner lives observing body as body, but then he switches: the practitioner lives observing the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing. There's a shift where what's actually being observed is change itself—impermanence itself—rather than something which is changing.

Impermanence is always mentioned first, then comes dukkha, then not-self. Impermanence is extremely important. The Buddha told his son Rāhula: "Develop meditation on the perception of impermanence, for when you develop meditation on the perception of impermanence, the conceit 'I am' will be abandoned." Abandoning the conceit "I am" is code for full awakening. We've discussed asmimāna, the conceit "I am," in terms of not-self.

The word translated as impermanence is *anicca*. *A* is the negative prefix meaning "not," and *nicca* means stable, constant, permanent—*nitya* in Sanskrit, *nicca* in Pali. In ordinary, everyday usage, *nicca* refers to what can be relied upon. In Pali you get the expression *niccadāna*—a perpetual gift. If some wealthy person makes suitable provision in their will and a meditation center receives a perpetual gift of thousands of dollars per annum, suddenly the committee is very happy and can make long-term plans confidently.

because they have a reliable source of income. So this is nicca. Nicca bhakta is a reliable food supply. And so on.

So to be anicca—impermanent—means to be unstable, inconstant, discontinuous, and therefore unreliable, not to be trusted. And if we rely on something which is unreliable, then sooner or later we are disappointed. It will happen. It's just built into the relationship.

So that which is anicca, impermanent, is also dukkha. Does that make sense? It's the unreliability inherent in change that means that which is anicca, impermanent, is also dukkha. But if you say it in English—that which is impermanent is painful—it's like scratching your head. Why? It doesn't make any particular sense, or at least it didn't to me when I first read it.

In the Buddha's time, the idea of the nicca, or the nitya in Sanskrit—the permanent—was very important because this is the ground of things. This is what gives everything its stability. So for example, in the Upanishads, the nitya, the permanent, the constant, is the Atman. This is the self—in English usually written with a big S—the Self that underlies everything.

In other traditions the nitya might be God. So the creation swells about, full of suffering, we are a pilgrimage people, but underneath all this is God, and that is permanent, and it holds everything together and it gives all this floating impermanence meaning and purpose because this is the ground.

But the Buddha is saying there is no such ground. It just doesn't exist. There's nothing that underlies and stabilizes what we experience as the world. And perceiving this fact—at least for him it's a fact—perceiving this creates anxiety.

So if we're tracking impermanence and change and we haven't yet felt anxious because of it, we haven't really perceived impermanence. If we really see it, then we're horrified. It's extremely anxiety-inducing.

It reminds me of the classic story—I looked it up in Wikipedia. There's some doubt whether it actually comes from Hinduism, but let's call it Hindu. The story goes about a learned Brahmin who had a bright young son, and the son was asking him about cosmology. Remember we said in ancient India that cosmology was you had the four great continents, Mount Meru in the center, surrounded by the great ocean, all held together by the great wind.

And the boy was very inquiring. He was told about this model. He was very impressed. And he said, "But what supports the great wind?" And his father says, "Oh, that's a very good question, my lad. I'm glad you're alert and paying attention. There are four enormous tigers—north, south, east and west. And the whole edifice sits on them."

So the boy thinks about it and he says, "What's underneath the tigers? What supports the tigers?" And the father is very impressed. He says, "That's an excellent question. Under each tiger there's a huge elephant. So everything's completely stable."

And the boy thinks about this and he says, "But what's underneath the elephants?" And the father says, "This is a superb question. You've got a very sharp and inquiring mind. Under each elephant there's a giant turtle."

And the boy thinks about this and he says, "But what's underneath the turtle?" And the father is really pleased because he says, "Not many people inquire this far, but the esoteric teaching is under each of these giant turtles is an even bigger turtle."

And the boy is really impressed. And he says, "So what's underneath that turtle?"

And at this point, his father gets a bit anxious and he says, "My boy, it's turtles all the way down."

This is pure Nietzsche. It's turtles all the way down. Fundamentally, there's nothing there. And to actually see this, to intuit it in some way, is to provoke anxiety.

Now, regarding the three characteristics, there's one famous text in which the Buddha presents what he thinks these are about. He says: "Whether Tathagatas appear or do not appear, this reality is constant—the stability of Dharma, the natural order. All constructions are impermanent. This is what a Tathagata awakens to, this is what he realizes. After awakening to and realizing it, he explains, teaches, declares, lays it out, reveals, analyzes and clarifies it, saying: 'Look!'"

Whether Tathagatas appear or do not appear—a Tathagata is an awakened one, so the Buddha is a Tathagata—whether Buddhas appear or do not appear, this reality is constant, the stability of Dharma, the natural order. In other words, this is simply the way things are. Whether or not I'm here to tell you about it, it's just the way things are.

And he goes on to say: all constructions are dukkha, all phenomena are not-self. After awakening to and realizing—this is what a Tathagata awakens to, this is what he realizes. What is the content of a Buddha's awakening? It's this fact: all constructions are impermanent, all constructions are dukkha, and all phenomena are not-self. And this is what any Buddha teaches when he teaches.

What he's saying is that these characteristics—impermanence, dukkha, not-self—they are simply part of nature. They're what we might call the laws of nature. They're simply what is going on. We might know about it, we might not know about it, we might care about it, we might not care about it, but the fact is this is what's going on. Full stop. End of story.

So let's just briefly look at this teaching. You notice how the Buddha changes the language: all constructions are impermanent and dukkha, but all phenomena are not-self. Why does he change?

We talked about constructions before. Sankhara comes from the verb karoti—to build, to make, to produce, to act, to perform, to do. From karoti we also get karma. It's the same root. And karma, of course, is action. So karoti is the verb, and the prefix sam- means "with" or "together." So the verb sankharoti means to put together, to construct. A construction, a sankhara, is anything that is put together, constructed, made up out of parts.

This building is a sankhara, this body is a sankhara, this retreat is a sankhara. It's put together, constructed, made up out of parts. But further, sankhara means anything that in turn puts together, constructs, creates. So it's also active.

This hall is constructed, but it in turn constructs. It provides a suitable environment for meditation practice. There are people out there busily paying the bills for the heating and so on. There are people who clean it up so it doesn't get too dusty. And as a result, we can sit here for a month and develop a meditation practice, and this practice is constructed in part by this hall.

So anything that constructs, anything that is constructed, this is sankhata. And what is not constructed is the asankhata, otherwise known as the not-born, not-become, not-made. And this is the realm that we enter into with bodhi, awakening, and nibbana, the cooling of the fire.

And of course, we've touched on this before: what is it that we find in this realm of the not-constructed, the unconstructed? Sometimes people call it the unconditioned. I think it's more accurate to call it the unconstructed.

If we ask what we find in this realm, we discover nothing that can be adequately spoken about. And why not? Because speaking itself is a construction. Speaking is just another construction. And thinking about it—thinking too is just another construction. So there's nothing that can actually be said about it, because whatever we say is a construction and therefore is not the unconstructed. Does that make sense?

So all constructions are impermanent, all constructions are dukkha, and all phenomena are not-self. The

term here is in Pali, dhamma—so all dhammas are not-self, or in Sanskrit and in English, dharmas. We've talked about dharmas already.

Again this comes back to dependent arising. The Buddha sees the world in terms of process rather than solid, independently existing things. So for the Buddha, reality is all about process and relationship, not things. And when we examine process, we don't find things that are hard, that are solid, that last unchanged over time. What we find are events. Something arises—bang. And again, it's the language the Buddha uses. He says something arises and then it ceases. The language is very dynamic. He's not talking about a solid something that's there and that lasts a certain period of time. He's talking about an event which arises and ceases.

So dharmas are these events, but in particular they are experienced events. This comes back to what we were talking about before—the Buddha as radical empiricist. The only thing he's interested in is the nature of human experience. In a sense, this makes him very secular because he doesn't make ontological commitments. He doesn't create fanciful belief structures about a transcendent God or whatever, or transcendent Atman, self, or Brahman, or whatever. He just doesn't go there. He's interested only in the nature of human experience. Anything beyond that, he just doesn't want to talk about it—complete waste of his time and everybody else's time.

He believes in devas, he believes in heavens and hells, but he believes in them on the basis of his own experience. He's experienced them. Now, it's difficult to argue with that. One might say, "Well, I haven't experienced it." Fine. But in saying what I've experienced, I'm not saying anything at all about what you have experienced. Or one might start getting aggro about it, and one might say to him, "Buddha, mate, you know, with the greatest respect, if you have experienced heavens and hells, then you are a lunatic and you really need some help. I mean, you're a nice guy, you've said some really interesting things, but you are in serious need of professional assistance." Fine, one might have that opinion, but the thing is, again, it doesn't tell you anything about his experience. It tells you about your own experience and your own opinions, and the kind of cultural conditioning that results in having these opinions.

So the Buddha is only interested in the nature of experience. And what we find when we look closely are events that come and go. These are experienced events, and these are the dharmas, the phenomena.

So all constructions are impermanent, all constructions are dukkha, and all phenomena are not-self. Now phenomena include all of the constructions—all of the above—but it also includes the not-constructed. Because even though there's nothing we can say about the not-constructed, we cannot speak about it, we can experience it. And therefore it's a dharma. Does that make sense?

So these three—anicca, dukkha, anatta—these are universal. They cover the whole range of human experience. So these are the universal characteristics. And you notice that for the Buddha, this is not a doctrine that has been revealed from above. It's not a question of "the scripture says so." It's simply that if you look deeply enough at the nature of human experience, this is what happens. Whether there are

people who wake up to it or not, this is what happens. So this is purely naturalistic teaching.

Anyway, this brings us to dukkha-nyana. Nyana essentially means understanding.

It's a word based on the root ñā, to know, to understand. With the addition of the action suffix ṇa, we get ñāṇa—the root plus ṇa. In Sanskrit and Pali, this creates what's called action nouns. So a ñāṇa is a knowing or an understanding.

This term appears often in the Buddha's teaching. For example, he frequently uses the compound ñāṇa-dassana—understanding and seeing, or knowing and seeing. In English you often see it the other way around: seeing and understanding, or seeing and knowing. I'm sure you've come across this compound before. It's very common. "Knowing and seeing in this way, would you go back to the past? Would you run forward to the future?" We talked about that before in a previous talk. And the same root gives us paññā—wisdom.

So ñāṇa is an understanding. But the Buddha's teaching is kind of all over the place in terms of the way that the suttas are laid out. Now, this is an oral tradition, but they're classified and grouped together in collections called nikāyas, and there are five of these nikāyas. They're collected in a way which has caused great anguish and frustration to modern scholars because it seems to be just completely all over the place. If you line up the nikāyas on a bookshelf and start reading from page one and go through, you might be tempted to wonder what the hell is going on because it's just all over the place. This is typical of an oral tradition because these were never written.

But the way I like to look at it is if you imagine the Dhamma—both the way things are and the teaching of the way things are—as like an enormous relational database. Does anybody not know what a relational database is?

Many years ago when I was working temporary jobs in the public service, I got offered a job in the then Public Service Commission. This is in Canberra. I had done these really basic computer courses, including database. I was taken into this office by this senior executive, and she's interviewing me and looking at my documents. She seems to be pleased. She looks up at me and says, "We need someone to work on a relational database. Do you know what a relational database is?"

Now I had never heard of one. So my mind went into overdrive and I said, "Yes, a relational database is a database that relates one thing to another." And she smiled and accepted this answer. So I knew that she didn't know what a relational database was either.

But it all seemed to be going well, except that then we crossed to the other side of the office—the whole floor—and went to the big boss's office. It was a bit embarrassing because he was younger than I was. He studies my documents and looks at me and says, "Do you know what a relational database is?" And I looked at him and thought, "I'm not going to bluff him." And I said, "No." But he hired me anyway. It was a very good job—a great job. I quite enjoyed it.

A database is like a table. So you have a list of things. You might have several columns in the list. So you know what that is—a table with columns. Let's say you might have three columns: first name, middle name, last name. Then you get another table with several columns, and one of those columns is the same as one of the columns in the first table, which means you can relate that table to this table. And then you have another table with several columns, and one of the columns in the second table is the same as one of the columns in the third table, so you can relate this one to this one, which means you can relate this one to this one to this one. Is this beginning to make sense?

So you can have multiple tables, and each one of them is connected in some way with at least one other table. And the whole thing is the database. Imagine the Dhamma to be this huge relational database.

Now if you work with a database—which is what I was doing at the Public Service Commission—you put all the data in and then you ask a question of the database. You go do-do-do-do-do and then hit the button, and it churns out a report. And the report gives you

particular information about certain relationships among all this data. You've asked it a question, and you've got this report.

Now, having proudly produced this report on a sheet of paper, are you holding in your hand the database? No. You're holding one report from the database, particularly if it's a complex database. Let's say you work away at this job for a year or two, and you end up with this pile of reports that you've generated. If you pick up the whole pile, is this pile of reports the database? No.

If you look at the suttas, the Buddha or someone turns up, and some event takes place—an event which comes and goes according to conditions. Some particular person asks a particular question in a particular circumstance. Remember Dandapani, stick in hand, meets the Buddha. A particular person, arrogant, interested in Dharma, has potential. That event takes place. The Buddha wraps him with an answer. That answer, and in fact the whole sutta, is a report from the database.

Does that make sense? Is that sutta the Dharma? No. It's one report. The whole five collections of suttas, pile them on top of each other. Is this the Dharma? No. It's simply a whole series of reports generated from the Dharma.

If we're looking for the Dharma, where would we find it in the Buddha's time? We're talking about a computer database—you look for it in the server. Where do you find it in the Buddha's time? The entire community who have memorized all this and who have practiced it and realized it. It's like in Australian indigenous culture, the law. There's no one person who knows the law. It's the community who knows it. It can't be confined to one person. It doesn't matter if you can list all the songs. That's not the law. It's some of the law.

So the Dharma exists in the minds of the community, the Sangha, based on what they know intellectually and what they have realized intuitively. So this is the Dharma, and from this the different reports come

up. The Buddha's teaching appears from our perspective—from the perspective of a literate society—to be completely disorganized, but it is organized, just in a very different way.

Now the early tradition decided they needed to organize jñāna understanding. It's quite clear that it's based on this essential framework: anicca, dukkha, anattā. That's the framework. It's quite clear that the job of the practitioner is to go from here at the beginning all the way to there, to awakening, and that this journey takes you through these three characteristics.

So, after the Buddha, presumably after the Buddha, comes the job of developing some kind of systematic way where you can organize all the teachings—the relevant ones for the purposes of the path—in a systematic, linear way that takes you from there to there. And the first attempt—what they did—was they developed a system of vipassanā jñānas. These are sometimes translated as insight knowledges or understandings of insight, which would be another way of translating it.

Now this is the heritage that frames what we are doing here. The first attempt to create a system of jñānas, of how this whole process of seeing and understanding actually unfolds, begins with a book called the Paṭisambhidāmagga, The Path of Discrimination. This is a very early text. It appears in Khuddaka Nikāya. Remember I said there are collections of the suttas? There are five of these collections, and the last one is Khuddaka. Khuddaka means miscellaneous. This is the glad bag. This is where everything's chucked in that didn't fit in the first four. And it's very miscellaneous. It includes stuff which, according to modern scholars, some stuff is very early, and there's some stuff which is very late.

And in here you get this book, The Path of Discrimination, and it's late. It's in the Sutta Pitaka, the basket of suttas, but in terms of its genre, it's an Abhidharma text. And Abhidharma came later. Abhidharma is the systematic philosophy and psychology, and it comes later—people trying to systematize all these reports from the database.

It probably dates from the third to second centuries BCE. It's so early, it's still oral. So it wasn't written down; it was chanted. But even the tradition says this does not come from the Buddha. It was attributed to Sariputta. Of course, Sariputta is foremost in wisdom. So even the tradition said, no, this isn't Buddha. This is after Buddha.

And this is a text found only in the Theravada. No other tradition of Buddhism has it. So this is a point where this particular stream is heading in its own direction and starting to form what we call the Theravada.

So Paṭisambhidāmagga, Path of Discrimination, is the first major path manual, the first attempt to systematize the teachings of the Buddha on the subject of liberation and bring them together into one orderly system. And it produces a system of eight vipassana ñāṇas, eight stages of insight understanding.

Those of you who are familiar with the ñāṇas—I'll just go through them quickly. These are comprehension, sammasana ñāṇa; arising and passing away, udayabbaya ñāṇa; dissolution, bhaṅga;

fearfulness, bhaya, or bhayatupaṭṭhāna; misery, ādīnava; disgust, nibbidā; desire for deliverance, muñcitukamyatā; re-observation, paṭisaṅkhā; equanimity regarding constructions, saṅkhārupekkhā; adaptation, anuloma; change of lineage, gotra; path, magga; fruition, phala.

Centuries later, in Sri Lanka, a scholarly monk called Buddhaghosa wrote a bigger tome called Visuddhimagga, Path of Purification. He based it on the Path of Discrimination, which has eight vipassana ñāṇas, but he subdivided some and he ended up with sixteen. And it's this system of sixteen that Mahāsi Sayādaw inherited, and his system of meditation is based on these sixteen ñāṇas.

Any questions about that? Is that clear? The historical bit?

But you see, the basic point is this is an attempt to impose order on the process of liberation. And the first thing that strikes us about this system is its linear nature. You've got sixteen ñāṇas. Count them: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16. And the practitioner starts at ñāṇa one, and then when they graduate they get a little tick, they get a gold star, they move to ñāṇa two, and when they've done that, another little gold star, ñāṇa three, four—tick, tick—five... sixteen. Bing! Jackpot! Then start again.

Why do some people go round systematically and some don't? This is exactly the question that we're going to look at, because it's a very interesting problem. Some people go round and round and round forever and ever. Oh, you don't go forever and ever—you go round once. You're not going to go round forever and ever. Seven lifetimes max. John Howell said it was more like snakes than ladders.

I used to refer to it as Buddha's greasy pole. You're either climbing up or you're sliding down. You can't stand still.

Patrick: Is there any mention of the... I know when I studied with Tom Wallace we talked about the stages of...

No, they're different. Let's get to this because first of all—we'll definitely get back to this, and remind me if I slide away from it.

First of all, this emphasis on a linear development over time is typical of the Theravada. Theravada is very much concerned with process over time. Other traditions, not so much. So in the Mahayana, for example, you get this debate that's been going on for centuries: sudden awakening versus gradual awakening. You see in the Tibetan system, where by and large gradual awakening won, but there's still sudden awakening streams. In Zen, by and large sudden awakening won, but there are still gradual aspects to it.

So there are Buddhists who have never been convinced by this business of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, whatever it is. And they say, no, you either cut through or you don't cut through. And when you cut through, you cut through now. It's got nothing to do with any kind of linear movement over time. And you find teachings in the Buddha's teachings which would support both sides.

In terms of the order, how can you get a linear system? It's based on the order of the three universal

characteristics. When they are mentioned by the Buddha, they are always mentioned in the same sequence: anicca first, dukkha second, anatta third. Always in that order. Why is this order important?

First of all, they're listed in order of subtlety. Anicca is the easiest characteristic to notice. Have you noticed over the past month that your experience has changed? Of course. It's easy. It's obvious. Anicca is the most accessible to observe. To go deep into it is another matter entirely. When we go deep into impermanence, as I said, it provokes anxiety.

Dukkha is more subtle and harder to see. That is to say, the universal characteristic of dukkha is harder to perceive than its obvious manifestations. You can easily see dukkha in its gross forms. Could I have a volunteer? *Bash!* Dukkha. Or, in a meditation context, you could generate it artificially—sit there for two hours, do not move. Then after two hours, ask: what did you experience? "It hurt!" Ah, very good. Dukkha.

So sure, dukkha is easy to experience in its obvious forms. But the universal characteristic of dukkha is very subtle. To actually find it, you've got to go quite deep.

Anatta is the most subtle characteristic and the most difficult to see, partly because it's so counter-intuitive. "Of course I exist, so what are you talking about—not self or no self or non-self? Philosophical claptrap!" So it's counter-intuitive, but it's also the most subtle because it's not a something—it's the absence of something. The absence of what we assume is here: the self. It's not a something in itself; it's the absence of something.

The factor that brings some order into this system is, I think, samadhi, or more broadly, the serenity aspect of the practice.

Nal, your question was about the linear path of jhana and the linear path of jnana, and what's the connection between them? When the Buddha talks about the meditation process, in some texts he'll track what happens in the citta as we develop the practice. He tracks out a linear path of development: first this happens, then this, then this, then this. This linear path of development comprises the four jhanas, the four absorptions.

For example, first you're sending your awareness again and again to the meditation object. This is initial application, vitakka. Then once you develop some momentum, it starts going bang, bang, bang, bang—sustained application, vicara. Later on, these two drop away and it feels like you're not doing it; the awareness is sustained with the object effortlessly. There's some excitement initially, and then later on that excitement drops away, and so on and so forth.

So he has this linear development of the changes that take place in the citta as we go deeper and deeper into samadhi. You always have the citta that's doing the practice, and then what it is that this citta knows and sees—jnana-dasana. What that citta will know and see will depend largely on how much samadhi there is.

For example, how much do you see and recognize of the nature of your own experience when the mind is roiling with the five hindrances, versus when the mind has no hindrances? Do you get a different view? Yes. It's very different.

So what brings order into this is the degree of concentration. The Buddha will lay out a system: this is what happens in the citta as the practice develops—this is serenity. This is what the citta will know and see as the practice develops—this is vipassana, this is insight. This first one has to do with the citta, the heart.

This other approach encompasses the whole world, including the heart. Does that make sense?

Regarding the status of the jhanas—I think there are nine stages, though I can't remember precisely which ones—but they are perhaps more well-known than the vipassana jhanas, aren't they? Yes, I think so overall. It's easier to find in the texts. There's not too much reference to the vipassana jhanas, but there's abundant reference to the samatha jhanas.

Certainly this system of vipassana jhanas seems to be peculiar to the Theravada tradition. Perhaps they don't even have it in Tibetan Buddhism—I'm not sure. But everybody recognizes the samatha jhanas. This particular system of vipassana jhanas appears to be a distinctly Theravadan way of understanding how the whole process unfolds.

So it's the samadhi side that is citta-specific—the concentration practices that work directly with the heart. And this brings some order into the practice.

As the mind, as the citta becomes stronger and more refined, there's meant to be a progression: first, "Ah yes, definitely anicca!"—going deep with impermanence. Then, "Ah, there's some dukkha underneath the anicca." And finally, "Ah, underneath that there's anatta." So you get this linear progression depending on how deeply you go with the samadhi.

I wonder about that framework, though, because it's not always the case. It's definitely not always the case. Some people have a different temperament and pick up dukkha more readily than anicca. Others have a temperament that's naturally attuned to anatta, even though it's considered the most subtle characteristic.

So there's some degree of order, but it never captures the reality completely. It's always untidy.

For a start, if you truly perceive any of these three characteristics—anicca, dukkha, anatta—you have all three. They come as a package. You can't have one without the other two. They're always present together.

All three are already there, plus individual students have vastly different sensitivities. Some people are naturally sensitive to one aspect but not to the others. We've discussed how some people are very sensitive to dukkha, while others are quite attuned to change, and still others are naturally sensitive to anatta. People have completely different ranges and degrees of sensitivity to these different patterns.

As a result, any given student's experience may not follow a tidy progression through the vipassana jhanas. If you ever teach meditation, you'll find students suddenly appearing in jhanas they have absolutely no business being in according to theory. You might want to tell them, "Just stop it, get out, go back to the beginning"—but it doesn't work that way.

Any given student could stumble into one of these jhanas when, according to any kind of linear system, they shouldn't be there. But they are there.

So this system is an attempt to impose order, but it's not entirely successful. For some people, they progress bang, bang, bang, bang—just like a textbook. But for others, it's all over the shop, and you get a whole range of responses.

This is one reason why in the Mahasi method, if you go to Burma and work with a sayadaw, they will usually insist—absolutely insist—that when you sit, you follow the rising and falling of the abdomen, and when you walk, you follow the lifting, pushing, dropping of the foot. They insist on these two particular meditation objects.

If you say, "Look, I really don't like this," they'll reply, "Your likes and dislikes are irrelevant—just note them." If you say, "It's not really working for me," they'll respond, "Make more effort, be more persistent, just do it."

The reason for this rigidity is that they have learned to read the experiences that arise dependent upon those particular meditation objects. With those specific objects, they can place you in the jhanas and track your progress. But if you have another meditation object—if you walk into an interview and say, "My mind itself is my meditation object"—then all bets are off in terms of trying to pinpoint what's actually happening.

So it's partly a control mechanism, but it's also a blueprint, isn't it? Though you need people who can actually read the blueprint—otherwise, why bother?

And you've got to have people doing that particular thing in order for the blueprint to be available. If you want to work with this person, they can't read you unless you do this. So you do this.

This shapes how you actually report your experience. It becomes standardized curricula, really. The great masters themselves—if you went to see Mahasi himself, he probably would be able to cope with a range of meditation objects because he's great enough to have that sort of flexibility. But his students aren't necessarily so flexible.

In Malaysia, there's been a lot of Mahasi teaching, and when I started teaching there, I had the feeling that the standard of Mahasi teaching most students had been exposed to was not very high. I actually spoke to Bhante Aggacita, who's the abbot and an old student of Sayadaw U Pandita. He confirmed this, saying that a number of people feel the standard of teaching is declining over time. The lineage is already in decline

for that reason.

So you have this system of ñanas. There are the early ñanas—three of them. Just briefly, these are: discerning mind and body (nama-rupa-pariccheda-ñana), understanding conditionality, and finally, comprehension or mastery. These three ñanas basically constitute a general introduction to the three characteristics. They're like the beginner's introduction to anicca, dukkha, anatta.

They culminate in a deeper understanding, a perception of impermanence. So you get this spiral thing—a kind of introductory level of the three characteristics, and then you get a deeper level of impermanence. We go back to one characteristic.

The fourth ñana, udayabbaya-ñana, arising and ceasing, is all about impermanence. That's where the understanding of impermanence becomes predominant and the mind is very settled and stable. You need a certain amount of samadhi to be able to get there.

So the first three ñanas basically give a quick tour of the three characteristics. Subsequent ñanas deepen and extend that insight, opening it up wider, applying it to more realms of experience and going deeper with it. It's like a spreading out to every situation and a deepening down all the way to the unconstructed.

You have the first three as the introduction, and then from number four onwards, spreading out and going down. The fourth one is udayabbaya, understanding of arising and passing away, where impermanence is predominant. After that comes dukkha. This is what we're focusing on tonight.

Before we get into that, first of all, an essential aspect of ñana is its universality. Ñana is always universal. Insight is always generalized. What's the difference between dukkha and dukkha-ñana? It's the difference between the particular and the universal.

Ordinary, everyday dukkha is particular. This situation that I'm in right now—this is dukkha. I don't like this. But perhaps not that situation over there. So an escape from dukkha seems possible within the realm of the impermanent. This retreat is getting incredibly tedious, but an escape from this dukkha is possible because it's over soon. I can hang out, it'll be over, then no more dukkha. I'll go home and lead a civilized life.

Within this understanding we feel that there could be an alternative which could work. This is what we find when we're doing the practice. Has this ever happened to you, that you find yourselves living alternate lives? You find yourself, for example, reimagining the past. "If only I had done that instead of this, my life would have turned out much better." Have you ever done that? Has it ever seemed convincing at the time?

So here there's a recognition of dukkha, but not its universality. We imagine that just a slight change in circumstances could make everything completely different—then we would be okay.

You can also imagine an alternative future: "When I get out of here, things will be different. It will be

much better when I get out of here." Or we can imagine an alternative present: "Right now I'll take a break and then things will be better."

All these fantasies seem real. All of them have power over us because our understanding of dukkha is still particular, not universal. We believe that if we could just change these circumstances, there would be no more dukkha. In that situation we have dukkha, but we do not have dukkha ñāṇa.

So let's get into the dukkha ñāṇas. The first one is bhaṅga, dissolution. This is also the maturity of the perception of impermanence. If something is impermanent, that means it has a beginning, it has an end, and it has something in between. The Buddha says there's an arising, there's ceasing, and in the middle there is change while enduring. So something endures, but it changes.

You find different views of impermanence depending on which angle you look at. Sayadaw Vivekananda gave the example: imagine you live in an apartment building overlooking a freeway or raised highway, and the traffic moves from your left to your right. If you look straight out the window, you have cars come and go—come, they're there, they go. They arise, they're there, they cease. Arise, they cease. Arise, they cease.

If you turn to the left, you have cars come, come, come, come—arise, arise, arise, arise. Turn to the right, you have cars go, go, go, go—disappear, cease, cease, cease, cease. So you get different views of impermanence depending on which angle the mind looks at it.

The maturity of impermanence is when the mind sees the cessation aspect. Every time it looks, it sees things disappear. This is dissolution, bhaṅga. It's still part of impermanence, but it's the border into dukkha. Because when we perceive the dissolution, this is where we perceive the groundlessness, the bottomlessness of experience. Everything's disappearing. There's no ground. If we ask what lies beneath, nothing at all. Just everything disappearing.

What determines the boundaries between the events? Each event could be broken up into smaller events. It depends on how strong your mindfulness is and how strong your samādhi is and what angle the mind is looking at. These are not absolutes. They're always appearances. They vary depending on circumstances.

In a weak aspect, sometimes this can take the form of a meditator apparently losing concentration and being unable to focus on anything at all. Things were going really well. Everything was clear. The mind was completely focused. Now you try to focus on an object and you can't find it. Sometimes it's like trying to hold onto something that slips out of your hand. As soon as you grab it, it slips away. You can't focus. The whole practice seems to have collapsed.

In its strong form it can be like falling into a black hole, this abyss, bottomless abyss. What the mind is intuiting at this point is the bottomlessness, the turtles all the way down. And this is horrifying. The groundless nature of experience is being exposed.

And so the next ñāṇa is bhaya ñāṇa, fear. Bhaya is fear. The understanding of fear or terror in a weak form, this might be just a sense of existential unease. I feel uneasy, I don't know why. I just feel very uneasy. Nothing's going right. I feel helpless. In a strong form, it could manifest as panic. But it always has this quality of a loss of control. I'm not in charge.

"Patrick, what kind of time frames are we talking about with these things?"

Anything from a nanosecond to a year, to ten years, to a lifetime. Time is completely irrelevant here. People can slip through these very quickly or they can come, rest into one ñāṇa and just be there for months, years at a time. Apparently stuck. Just, not necessarily stuck, just appreciated. Yes, when experiencing it.

In the Visuddhimagga, Buddhaghosa doesn't call it bhaya ñāṇa, he calls it bhayatupatthāna ñāṇa, which is understanding of appearance as fear. So not understanding fear, but appearance as fear. And he asks the question: Does the knowledge of appearance as fear itself fear, or does it not fear? In other words, what's the relationship between the appearance of fear and fear?

He gives a couple of similes. There's just one I want to mention. Imagine a person who sees three great charcoal pits burning. Now, the three indicate the three times: past, future, and present. Anybody who steps into any of those pits would suffer an excruciating death. So they generate fear. Now the person looking at the charcoal pits burning away does not personally feel afraid of them because she's not about to walk into them. But she understands that anyone who does fall into them would suffer enormous pain.

So this is Buddhaghosa's attempt to explain the difference between fear and appearance as fear. And this simile suggests detachment. So the universe is fearful and there's no hope in it at all. But if the mindfulness is strong and the concentration is strong, this prevents the practitioner from being emotionally entangled in it. So in other words, fear—real fear—suggests taking danger personally. I am in danger. But the ñāṇa, when it's mature, indicates there is danger, but there's no one who is in danger.

It could be roughly compared to watching a scary movie. So fear arises, but even as the fear is present, there's the understanding that the situation isn't real, and so the fear itself is not grounded. So this suggests, as Buddha goes through saying, there's a detachment here involved. If we're in a world of appearances only, there's no need for actual fear. So this is a way of distinguishing between fear and fear as ñāṇa, as understanding, which always implies some degree of not-self.

"What if you had experiences like this one about fear, but you didn't have a clue what it was about, so it wouldn't actually be understanding?"

Then you'd be in trouble. And people can be in trouble. People can end up in the mental health system as a result of going through insight into the three characteristics. This is serious stuff. Either one. We'll talk about this a bit more at the end of this.

What Buddhaghosa's understanding presupposes is that there is a strong grounding of anattā and concentration in the meditator. But what if the practitioner does not have such a grounding? This is the question that's being raised here. If Yasa hadn't run into the Buddha...

He could have been in serious trouble.

So people can have psychological breakdowns as a result of either meditating or having an insight that a meditator would recognize as being on the curriculum. If it's personal, if it's about me, then you could go crazy.

Alternatively, fear could be turned into insight if the identification can be abandoned. So you might have someone in serious trouble recognizing the groundlessness of experience and the futility of life, but then be turned around if they can be persuaded this is not personal—it's about nature, not you.

This is the delicate balance, particularly important in Dukkha ñāṇa. Absolute centrality: do not take it personally. It's rule number one in this game. Do not take anything personally, because it is not personal. But if we take it personally, it can be dangerous, and it is dangerous, and people have serious problems.

This is the great risk of the commercial commodification of mindfulness. People are talking about mindfulness as if it's a way of developing a better self, as if it's all happy-clappy. And what happens is people start to develop insight into not-self—or maybe not even insight into not-self, but without any insight into not-self—and they're going crazy.

It happens to some people and it passes because everything passes, and they recover from it. But they're shaky. Maybe they'll just never go anywhere near this meditation spirituality again and stick to nice safe materialism. But there'll always be an edge. There'll always be at the bottom this fear, because there'll always be the intuition that really there isn't anything down there. And it'll come out at the very latest—it'll come out at death. And they could well have a very terrifying death experience.

And then comes ādīnava ñāṇa. This is understanding of danger or disadvantage. This is essentially the recognition of the impossibility of the situation. There's no refuge. There's nowhere to escape. Any fantasy of escape is seen to be just that—a fantasy. It's just nonsense.

Then comes nibbidā ñāṇa. This is disenchantment. And disenchantment, of course—remember we talked about that in anattalakkhaṇa sutta. That's the turning point in anattalakkhaṇa sutta. And that anattalakkhaṇa sutta goes through impermanence, dukkha, not-self in a very compact way.

In nibbidā ñāṇa, disenchantment, the practitioner abandons the search for satisfaction. It's like, nothing's going to work. I can get out of this meditation center, I can go home—that's not going to work. I can quit my job, collect my accumulated savings and head off to a tropical paradise—that's not going to work. I can buy a nice new car—that's not going to work. So why not just give up? Why not just stop struggling and surrender?

The Buddha points out that these three ñāṇas—fear, danger or disadvantage, and disenchantment—are essentially the same. Rather, they're different stages of maturity in the same understanding. So in Paṭisambhidāmagga it doesn't differentiate between these three. But Buddhaghosa separates them out.

And there we get muñcitukamyatā ñāṇa—the desire for deliverance. This is also known as the "get me out of here" ñāṇa. And sometimes people do escape the meditation center at this point.

These could be the people who go rushing off into the night never to be seen again. You get different symptoms here—sometimes intense physical pain and restlessness, sometimes people who disappear into their room to sleep most of the day. "Get me out of here." It's just unbearable. "I can't stand this anymore." The mind's desperate to escape.

Notice how in these ñāṇas, affect is central. *Vedanā*—it's all heart stuff. What moves the heart is *sukha* or *dukkha*, pleasure or pain, and it's all about desire. So in this ñāṇa, desire for deliverance, the question of desire really comes down to it: What is it we want?

For the Buddha, the fundamental question is: Do we desire the constructed or the unconstructed? Our habit is to desire the constructed. This is the world we are familiar with—the real world, the world of normality. All our desires go into that world. In contrast, we don't know anything about the unconstructed. We can't, because anything we know about it is just more of the constructed. So we actually cannot know anything about it.

If we don't know about it, how can we desire it? We're caught in this catch-22. But if we become thoroughly disenchanted by the constructed—because we've learned to fully understand it—then we learn to desire something else. There must be something better than this. I don't know what it is, but there must be something better. This is the desire for deliverance.

But still, what is it that I desire?

This again brings up the question of secular mindfulness or mindfulness in the psychotherapeutic tradition. If I am in a particular practice tradition—let's say I'm working within the Theravada or some other established tradition—then I may have at least a theoretical sense of what it is that I'm desiring. What's the alternative to this construction? I can have at least some kind of theoretical understanding.

And so I can feel encouraged, even if whatever it is is completely mysterious, even if it can barely be perceived as an image in art—a thangka, a statue of the Buddha, a temple. But there's something that tells me there's something else that's better than the so-called real world. Then that desire for deliverance can have a direction, a target.

Also, if I have teachers or senior practitioners I can look up to as embodying some kind of understanding, then I can have a lived sense of what this might be. This is one of the things that John Hale gave to me as a teacher. I would look at him and I could see, "Oh, this is what the practice is about." He gave me a lived

sense of what it is that I'm aiming for. And that's incredibly grounding and encouraging.

But if I'm living in an entirely secular context, then at this point I might be tempted to despair. I don't want all of this, which is familiar, which is normal, which is the real world. But what's the alternative? And I could be stuck.

So again, the dukkha ñāṇa brings up the dangers inherent in doing this practice. This practice is dangerous. We're messing with the mind.

What gets the practitioner through all this is basically *anattā*—a growing understanding of not-self, which is the understanding side, the *vipassanā* side. On the *citta* side, this is matched by a developing mindfulness and equanimity. As the mindfulness gets stronger, the equanimity gets stronger.

And of course, you've also got the concentration, so the heart is getting stronger, clearer and more settled and more balanced. So it can go through experiences which before would have completely flipped me out, but I can go through them now because the understanding of not-self is getting stronger and the heart is getting more balanced, more equanimous.

When the equanimity really starts to take off, then we move into *paṭisaṅkhā ñāṇa* or *paṭisaṅkhānupassanā ñāṇa*—review. In practice, these ñāṇas have all sorts of experiences that characterize them, but often what will happen is that the meditator will start going through all the previous experiences they've had of dukkha.

It's like marching. I remember when I went through this, one of the weirdest things was I'd sit there and it was like I was in the stands of a military parade ground, and marching in front of me was all the dukkha that I'd gone through.

Kind of marching past and saluting me as they went by. It was really weird.

But review also reviews the other characteristics as well. So it's like all the characteristics can be swimming in front at this point. But it can be like a guided tour of the nature of human suffering, but it's becoming increasingly refined. And the sense of not-self is getting stronger and stronger. So the sense of any personal threat is just fading away. And it becomes really interesting. "Wow, look at that. That's really weird. That bit of dukkha. Why is it so painful? Not enough anatta. Not enough equanimity." It gets very refined and very interesting.

I remember one time I was doing walking meditation and I suddenly realized, "Wow, even awareness hurts." That is really weird. That's fascinating.

And this ñana is rather similar to sammasana, the third ñana, except much deeper, much more refined. But again, mindfulness is developing. And mindfulness develops because it doesn't matter what it is—just be with it. Just be with it. Just be with it. Just note it. Look at it. Sometimes you can't note. It's impossible. But just be with it. Just accept it. Just face to face. This is what it is. Don't avoid it. If we're avoiding, face to

face with the fact that I'm avoiding. Just face to face with it.

The mindfulness gets stronger and stronger. With the mindfulness comes the equanimity. This allows the concentration to develop. And this allows this very subtle sense of not-self to gradually come into prominence. And again, not-self is the most subtle because it's not a something. It's the absence of a something.

But when anatta becomes predominant, then the dukkha ñanas end and we move into sankharupekkha ñana—equanimity regarding all constructions. And at this point the mindfulness and equanimity dominate the heart. What's apparent is not-self, and everything's a lot smoother. And then this is where anatta is now predominant, and this is the one that just keeps rolling along.

The question of the distinction between dukkha and dukkha ñana—we could say more broadly, the distinction between psychology and Dharma. This is relevant for our culture.

Just very briefly, you could say that psychology deals with people and their problems. I would say, as a non-psychologist: Dharma does not. Dharma does not deal with people and their problems. Dharma practice cannot solve anyone's problems. If anybody comes to the Dharma to solve their problems, they're wasting their time.

What the practice can do is show us that we and our problems are empty and without self. That's Dharma's job.

In the First Truth, the Buddha is clear that the practitioner's job is not to solve their dukkha, but to understand it.

In the Four Noble Truths, the duty attached to the first truth, dukkha, is to understand—to fully understand dukkha—not to solve it, not to get rid of it. And when we understand our dukkha, we realize there is no "we" involved. That's what the Dharma offers.

As the Buddha says to Venerable Kaccāna Gotta, a mature practitioner "has no perplexity or doubt that what arises is only dukkha arising, what ceases is only dukkha ceasing." So Dharma allows us to give up on the "me" and "my problem." And when that happens, my problem is not solved—it's dissolved. It's a whole different thing.

So Dharma and psychology are two different projects. But they are not in parallel universes that never intersect. Of course they intersect. For example, we can, from our practice, learn something about our psychological makeup. And this, in turn, can help us with our practice. They can help each other.

We learn from our story. When I do the practice, I learn from my story and I create a variation of the story. My story gets a new meaning, and this meaning can be very useful because meaning is powerful. It may even give me a different mode of attention. What I'm working with when I meditate is attention. We may learn from our story—which belongs to the realm of psychology—where the best place is to aim our

attention, which is in the realm of practice. What are the conditional relationships most worth exploring to shed light on our situation?

So these two are separate, but they intersect. They're not completely cut off from each other. One can help the other. But they are two distinct projects—they're not the same project.

At a fundamental level, we learn we are never going to find the right story. It's just not going to happen. All stories are unsatisfactory.

At Wat Suan Mokkh in southern Thailand, Ajahn Buddhadāsa built what he called a spiritual theater and put all sorts of exhibits inside it. He had these little paintings along the wall, and one of them showed this fat Chinese monk doing the stretch that we do in the morning where we push the ceiling up with our hands. He's got this big belly and this big grin on his face. There's a verse underneath in Thai with an English translation, and the English translation goes: "O boundless joy, now I see there is no happiness in this world."

This is the essence of the dukkha ñāṇa—the joy that comes out of it. And it's boundless, because there's no one there. There's no self involved.

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