Origins 2: The Middle Way

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 43:00

Last night we started to tell the story of the newly minted Buddha. We talked about his quest for awakening, which eventually ended in success. This happened on the full moon of the lunar month of Vesākha, which roughly corresponds to our May or June. The first discourse, the *Dhammacakkappavattan a Sutta*, or Rolling the Dharma Wheel, was delivered two months later on the full moon of Āsāḷha, roughly July. This is in the lunar calendar, so it doesn't quite correspond. In this first discourse, he taught the middle way and the four truths. This gets the whole ball rolling, and tonight we're going to look at the middle way—the *majjhimā paṭipadā*.

If we go back earlier in the story, the newly awakened Buddha at first does not want to teach, because he feels that the Dharma he has discovered is too deep, too subtle, too profound for anybody else to actually understand. He says, "This Dharma I have discovered is deep, difficult to understand, difficult to awaken to, peaceful, exalted, beyond reason, subtle, experienced only by the wise."

But as we know, fortunately for us, an eavesdropping deity, Brahmā Sahampati, overhears his thought, appears before him, and pleads with him to teach on the grounds that there are just a few people "with little dust" who will understand if he teaches them. But if he doesn't teach them, they will perish.

And so the Buddha decides he's going to start with his five former companions. They were with him when he was practicing asceticism, but their communities split apart when Gotama abandoned that practice. Off the Buddha goes to try it and see, but his first attempt ends in disaster. He hasn't even reached the city of Gayā yet when he meets the ascetic Upaka, who shows interest in him and in his Dharma. The Buddha responds with an *udāna*—a spontaneous, inspired poem. We give just one verse of it to offer a flavour:

I am the worthy one of the world.
I am the supreme teacher.
I alone am Sammāsambuddha.
I am cooled, extinguished.

The "cooled and extinguished," by the way, refers to Nibbāna. Upaka, as we saw, was not impressed, and he leaves.

This leaves the Buddha with a problem. How will he find a way to convey his teaching to others? And in particular, how will he convey it to his five former companions who have walked out on him and are really quite unhappy with him? Presumably, as he walked to Vārāṇasī and then from there north to Isipatana, he was thinking about this.

Eventually, two months later, he arrives where the five companions are practicing. He rolls up and basically says, "Okay lads, I've done it. I'm enlightened. Gather around and I'll tell you the story." They do not want to listen. They want nothing to do with him. They were disillusioned with him when he turned away from asceticism. They see him as a backslider, a lover of luxury—also known as lunch. From being a champion of the practice, he's now a threat. They refuse the respect they would normally offer him. They're not impressed by his declaration of awakening, and they're not impressed by his offer to teach them.

There's a bit of to-ing and fro-ing as he tries to persuade them. Finally, he says to them, "Have you ever known me to speak like this before?" They say, "No, we haven't." It reminds them—they know him. They don't particularly like him, but they do know that he would never lie. If he says he's attained awakening, then at the very least, he thinks he's attained awakening. At the very least.

So the declaration of truth moves them to the point where they are prepared to agree to listen. Now, the Buddha made a much more poetic declaration of truth to Upaka, and it didn't work. It seems that the power of truth is in part dependent upon the context. Here the context is that they know him, and they know he would not lie.

So the Buddha begins by teaching the middle way.

Now we're going to read out the discourse, but again, notice that these recorded words are not exactly what the Buddha would have actually said. These are an executive summary bundled up for chanting and memorization—rhythmic repetitions and so on.

In what we have recorded, he says: "These two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone out into homelessness." So this is someone who abandons the world and heads out to practice. What are these two extremes? "The pursuit of sensual happiness among sensual pleasures, which is inferior, normal, the way of ordinary people, lacking in refinement and useless. And, on the other hand, the pursuit of 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."

Now, Tathagata is a title that the Buddha used to refer to himself. We won't go into it deeply, but basically it means an awakened one. "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. 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 cultivated one: right view, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right energy, right mindfulness, and right concentration."

So this is the presentation, and what we need to do is unpack it. Notice that the eightfold path is the eightfold path of the cultivated one, of the noble one. Why would I translate it that way? In this world,

how many Noble Ones are there at this point? This is an Arya—a Noble One, a cultivated one, a refined one, a developed one. There's one: the guy who's talking. So basically he's saying, "This is my Noble Eightfold Path. This is my eightfold path."

He opens up with the middle way. Now the middle way is the Buddha's strategy to teach the Dharma. Context is everything. And one of the reasons why the Buddha was so respected as a teacher was that he had an uncanny ability to adapt his teaching to suit the specific characters and needs of his audience of the day—unlike me, who just rattles off abstract, learned stuff and doesn't care who's in the audience.

In the situation that the Buddha faces here, he needs to be very careful because he needs to find a way to penetrate through his listeners' defenses against hearing the truth. Why is the Dharma so hard to understand? The Buddha may have realized the difficulty of communicating the Dharma from reflecting, for example, on his first realization of dukkha when he was a young man. He suddenly saw the universality of aging, sickness, and death. In other words, he saw what everyone sees, but he was suddenly and unexpectedly stripped of the normal layers of defenses that we all have when we're faced with this.

It's these defenses, of course, that enable us to function within the world. So if we drop our armor, we could find ourselves suddenly exposed to a reality that could drive us mad. In his case, when he was very young and he suddenly had this profound and shocking realization, how could he have communicated this vision to his family? How could he have possibly done that? How could he have penetrated their defenses? Especially since at that time he had no understanding of what was happening to him. He just knew he had to do something about it. So of course he couldn't communicate it.

Now, when he arrives at Isipatina and is facing the five companions, he's dealing with people who do understand the existential problem. But what they do not understand is the way out of the existential problem. And what makes them particularly difficult as an audience is that they think they know the way out of the existential problem, when in fact they don't, because they're completely mistaken. So this audience is a really hard nut to crack.

This particular audience consists of practitioners of the path of tapas—not the Mexican food. It's a Sanskrit word, and essentially it refers to severe asceticism. The word tapas in Sanskrit means warmth, heat, fire. What it refers to is the burning away of one's past karma, and in particular doing this through voluntary suffering. Tapas is also associated with the generation of power, the power that fuels liberation, and hence its connection with shamanism.

So the Buddha's companions, his former companions, are practicing to overcome dukkha, pain. And they believe that the opposite of dukkha is sukha.

So sukha is happiness, bliss, satisfaction and so on. And they believe that sukha comes from the capacity to endure dukkha, and so transcend it. They hold this view because sukha is the opposite of dukkha. The

Buddha's job is to cut through this particular delusion and show his audience something new that had never occurred to them before. And he has the advantage that he does understand them, because he shared the same beliefs and the same practices.

When he was an ascetic, Gautama believed that what holds us back from our awakening is our attachment—in particular, our attachment to pleasure. So for him and his companions, pleasure was the enemy. Eventually he came to realize that we can be just as stuck on our pain as we are on our pleasure. The problem is not the pleasure; it's the stuckness.

This realization came out of his failure as a practitioner of the ascetic path. Which, by the way, I think is a universal lesson for the practitioner: often the best lessons emerge out of failure.

When he was practicing asceticism, he felt that a measure, a standard of his success was his capacity to endure what the texts call "painful, wracking, piercing feelings because of exertion." We quoted this when we were talking about finding right effort. The more pain, the better. And this is how, years later, he described to his students the practice he was doing when he was young and completely deluded. Again, we quoted this before: "I thought, suppose I clench my teeth and press my tongue against the roof of my mouth, and then beat down, control, and crush mind with mind. So with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, I beat down, controlled, and crushed mind with mind. While I did so, sweat ran from my armpits."

Now we looked at this before and we asked the question: why was Gautama practicing in this way? Why was he crushing mind with mind? Because he was driven by the desire to get the result that he was looking for. He was using the power of his will to take hold of the object of his desire—awakening.

What he had since come to realize was that the source of our dukkha is what he now came to call tanha. Literally this means thirst, normally translated as craving. Essentially, it's drivenness. Tanha is shorthand for the state of being driven. Gotama's practice was stuck in his drivenness, and it was this very drivenness that fueled his practice and created his dukkha. He was stuck in this loop.

What moved him forward was a spontaneous memory of the pleasure of his childhood and a question that came from it. This was after he gave up asceticism, when he must have been seriously reflecting on what went wrong. Spontaneously, a memory of his childhood popped up. And at the center of it was a question: Why am I afraid of pleasure?

This is the earliest instance we have of this very famous story: "I remember that when my father, the Shakyan, was occupied, 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 jhana, which is accompanied by applied and sustained application, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. Could this be the way to awaken?" Then, following on that memory, came the awareness: "This is the way to awaken."

What he's describing is a spontaneous concentration state that occurred as a child, sitting in the cool

shade, watching other people working in the hot sun. You can understand how that's really pleasurable. Now, the way it's expressed is by using the standard formula for the first stage of meditative absorption. But the way an oral tradition works is it takes a formula and inserts it in an appropriate place. So whether he actually thought of it in that memory, whether he actually conjured up in his mind the technical characteristics of what he later came to call the first jhana—maybe not. But maybe he just had the sense of: Yeah, I just stepped back from all the stuff that I'm normally involved in. Body was at ease. Mind was at ease. And this absorption in the present just popped up. There it was.

And then he adds: I thought, why am I afraid of pleasure that is unconnected to sensual stimulation and unwholesome states?

So here he asks the question, but in particular he's talking about a particular kind of pleasure—pleasure which is unconnected to sensual stimulation and unwholesome states.

Now, what I translate as "sensual stimulation" is *kāma*—K-A-M-A with a long A, not *karma* with an R. This word indicates pleasure that is stimulus-driven. This is its characteristic. Normally it would be translated as "sensual pleasure," but the point about it is that it's stimulus-driven, entirely dependent upon a temporary stimulus.

Such a pleasure is first of all inherently agitated because it needs the sense stimulus, and it can only be maintained by constant repetition of the stimulus. But this constant repetition ends in boredom and flatness and dullness. Sensual stimulation also involves a restless movement from one sense object to another to another, because any one of them just gets boring after a while, and it's time to move on.

All of this restlessness and stimulation indicates *taṇhā*—drivenness, thirst, craving. And so now Gautama realizes that doesn't work. That's not really all that pleasurable. Gautama is looking for pleasure, but a pleasure that is free from *taṇhā*, free from drivenness.

He came to his new understanding of pleasure through his memory of childhood, long before he had ever thought of awakening. And so this new relationship to pleasure, which he is rediscovering, has a childlike quality of spontaneity to it—a willingness to accept what the world has to offer before disillusionment, so that grasping is not only unnecessary but as yet not even conceived of.

Gautama's project becomes how to return to that relationship to pleasure in the world as an adult.

Now, this is a pleasure that is simple and already available, but it's hidden. It's obscured by our narcissistic obsessions. And in order to find it, we have to drop our self-enclosure, our self-obsession, and open up to what is already here—provided, as it were, by grace, as a gift. It's in this spirit that he worked out the Eightfold Path.

An example of this pleasure—actually, I've been enjoying it for a while—when I stepped out of the veranda into the garden and the cloud was moving in. We're in the cloud. The air is cool. The garden is

beautiful. The light is really subtle. Just walking down the steps. That's pleasurable. And the point is, it's a pleasure already available. I didn't have to do anything to look for it, to seek it. It's just here. This is the kind of pleasure that Gautama was interested in. How do I cultivate that pleasure?

Now the implication, if we're coming to the Eightfold Path, is that for the practitioner, the path itself must be pleasurable in the sense of generating contentment. If we're going to get through a month's meditation, we could do it through willpower—by leaping upon our meditation object, wrestling it to the ground, and any time it shows signs of trying to slip away, just pounding it into submission. We could do it. For some people it might even work if they've got really strong willpower. But wouldn't it be better to cultivate contentment within this context?

When we're contented, we don't have any felt need to look beyond this now. This now is actually fine. It's actually pretty good. So we're no longer concerned with a result which may or may not arise in the future. Path and destination are not radically separated. The practitioner feels that the path already contains the destination.

In contrast, when Gautama was crushing mind with mind, he must have been looking for something that would happen next as a result of his efforts. But now he's realized that a whole different relationship is necessary—one where awareness is so completely absorbed in the present that any sense of a future result can be forgotten.

In fact, it is forgotten. A quality of absorption that has no need to look to an imagined future means something is no longer missing now.

Pain feeds aversion, and aversion always fuels the need for something else to happen—for example, in the future. Pleasure cuts through aversion, but it too can be very sticky. When we feel pleasure, we want to control it. We want to extend it into the future. We don't want it to go away. And then pleasure feeds attachment. We're stuck.

So what we need, from the Buddha's perspective, is pleasure without clinging—where clinging expresses itself often as swings between aversion and attachment. Like, don't like. Like, don't like. Now where can we find this pleasure? We can find it in the middle way. This is largely the purpose of the middle way.

The Buddha says that the middle way is located between asceticism and indulgence. Notice what they both have in common: they are both driven by taṇhā. Or simply, they are both driven.

Now the five companions have already rejected the extreme of sensual happiness, so the middle way is presented here as an alternative to asceticism. What does it look like from that perspective? Nothing about pursuing pain, and everything about cultivating a sense of balance.

Let's look at the first extreme, the pleasure extreme, which for the Buddha and his companions revolves around the home life. Home life turns around the issue of sukha, the pursuit of happiness. We can see this

in our culture, exemplified in the practice of consumerism. Happiness comes from having more. It comes from being more. It's fascinating that when people speak about rich people and want to say how much money they've got, they talk about their "personal worth." Isn't that a bizarre expression? Personal worth? We won't go there, but it's very strange.

The ascetic path begins with the realization that this path—the path of the pursuit of pleasure, let's call it consumerism—does not work. In other words, the realization that the destination of the path consisting of the pursuit of pleasure is pain. That's where it ends up.

This realization is counterintuitive, and the people whose path is based upon it have to realize that they're part of a very small cultural minority. There's a certain stubbornness contained in this practice. Only the most fanatical pursue this path—the path of the pursuit of pain. Remember, this pursuit exists because it's the opposite of the path of the pursuit of pleasure.

But the problem is this path is wrong. Now it should be right. As far as the pain is concerned, this should be the right path because it is the exact opposite of the wrong path, the path of consumerism. So it should be right, because it's the opposite of the wrong. But this is what the practitioners miss: it's wrong because it's the opposite. Because this is an aspect of anta, of extreme.

When the Buddha talks about how the Tathāgata has avoided the two extremes, the word he uses is anta. One of the meanings of anta is extreme, but another meaning is opposite. The ascetics are trying to overcome pleasure by pursuing this opposite, pain. But all that meant was that instead of being driven by attraction, by desire, like everybody else, they're being driven by aversion.

But they're still driven. And therefore they're still bound to dukkha. Because it's the drivenness which is the problem.

So the fundamental problem is not pleasure and it's not pain. The problem is drivenness. Because it's drivenness that causes us to become stuck—in either what gives us pleasure, or equally in what gives us pain. And drivenness brings pain. Real pleasure comes from the absence of drivenness, the absence of stuckness.

So this new understanding of pleasure and pain lies at the heart of the four truths and the middle way. This is the middle way that the Buddha is presenting.

And if we ask, where can the middle way be found? Well, first of all, the middle way cannot be defined as an opposite of another way. Because that's just another extreme—it's not a middle.

Often the middle way is presented as moderation. So let's imagine you have a ruler. One end is one extreme, the other end is the other extreme, so the middle way must be dead set in the center. But of course, dead set in the center is just the opposite of the two ends. It's just another opposite. It's just another extreme.

The opposite of indulgence is asceticism, and that doesn't work. And the opposite of asceticism is indulgence, and that doesn't work either.

We can get a sense of this in the problem of effort. If you find yourself making effort in the meditation practice, and you find yourself in particular making too much effort—strain—well, how do you know that you're straining? A pretty good indication is the felt need to take a break. Have you ever felt the need just to take a break? Straining is an anta, an extreme. But taking a break is just another extreme—it's just the opposite. And this tends to be the pattern in our practice: strain, collapse; strain, collapse; strain, collapse. It can be very subtle, but it's there.

And of course, as we've seen, the problem of effort is very closely associated with the problem of time. We feel driven to get through what's happening now in order to make something better happen later. So this relationship also has a quality of drivenness to it. And where we find drivenness—tanha—we find the extremes, and we find pain.

So where is the middle way? The middle way can be found where there are no anta, no extremes, no opposites. In other words, where we are not stuck on anything. The middle way is found as a dynamic balance between opposites—the place characterized by no fixed position.

And this balance, this dynamic balance, can only be found in the present. In the absence of any holding to the past or striving for the future. No clinging to, no escaping from. And this absence of any fixed position is dynamic. It's never still—it's always moving.

Hence the eightfold path is characterized by dynamic complexity. You begin with eight factors. All of them are necessary. If one is missing, the whole thing jams up.

If any one of them is too weak, the whole system collapses. If any one of them is too strong, the whole system collapses. The whole system is thrown out of balance and the path does not work.

So balance is everything. And balance requires pleasure because it requires delicacy. When we are driven, we blunder. We're desperate to get away and arrive somewhere else, and we lose our sensitivity to what is happening now.

If we look at the path and its complexity, first of all, as we said, it's one system of eight aspects: right view, right aspiration, right action, right speech, right livelihood, right energy, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Each one of these factors has to be balanced with every other factor.

And these eight factors are divided into three subsystems. There's one system, the eightfold path, that consists of three subsystems: sīla, samādhi, paññā. Each one has its own internal dynamic. So each subsystem has to be balanced within itself, and each one of them has to balance with the other two.

If we look at just one of these, the one we work with most often as meditators—the meditation subsystem—we have right energy, right mindfulness, and right concentration, as we've been talking

about. Right energy is the active, doing side of meditation practice. Right concentration is the receptive, peaceful side of meditation. And right mindfulness—its job is to balance both. This is just one subsystem out of the three.

So what we have is a complex network of relationships. I'm not mathematically inclined, so I haven't worked out how many relationships are possible here, but I gather there must be a lot. And all of these relationships are dynamic, because each relationship between any two or more factors is influenced by the behavior of every individual factor and every individual subsystem.

In this complexity, there is no place to take a stand. There is no ground upon which to build a position and then cling to it. Remembering that the Buddha felt what makes this Dhamma hard to understand is that people find pleasure in their positions, are devoted to their positions, delight in their positions.

Taking a stand—"This is it. This is right. Now I've arrived. I've just got to keep doing this. I've just got to extend this experience for the rest of the month."

Now, who does this? Who finds pleasure in their positions, is devoted to their positions, delights in their positions? Well, Gautama did, before his awakening. And his five companions certainly did. And of course, we do.

So the Buddha presents the middle way, and the companions actually understand what he's talking about. They actually get it, which means they can now challenge, if not drop, their deeply held convictions about life, about their world, about their practice, about what they're doing—their positions. And so now they're ready to listen to what he's got to say.

The Buddha has found a way through their defenses, and now he can actually get started. He'll do this by teaching the four truths.

For us, every time we take a position, we lose the middle way. Because we find ourselves in an anta, an extreme—a place which is defined as the opposite of another. Self, for example, is an extreme. And that's something we're going to look at later on.

Thursday we'll have a look at the four truths and continue the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta.

Any questions?

"I don't find pleasure in sticking to some of my opinions."

Why do you stick to them then? You don't find pleasure?

I find frustration in holding to certain positions.

But why do you stick to frustration? If you're sticking to it, there must be a payoff. There's got to be something you're getting from it, otherwise you wouldn't do it. And that's the clinging to the position

itself—the satisfaction that comes from maintaining that stance. This is one of the more perverse things about human behavior: we get enormous satisfaction out of our pain. Huge satisfaction.

When I see somebody harming themselves, it sets off a reaction in me. That is the opinion arising. Why are you harming yourself? And so there's a movement of the heart, which is compassion. But it's compassion mixed with holding. How can one have that response without the holding part?

There's one discourse where the Buddha is talking about his job as a teacher. He says, essentially: I teach students, and some of them resist what I'm telling them. They don't get it, they don't understand what I'm talking about, they don't do what I advise, and they don't get the good result. What's that to me? But I have other students who do listen to what I say, who do take my advice, who do the practice, and who do get the result. What's that to me? It's the same response. And that's what enabled him to keep going for all those decades—because it didn't matter whether it worked or didn't work. Fundamentally, it didn't matter. It was his dharma to teach, so he taught. And if it didn't work, well, it didn't work. He just moved on and continued his activity.

This is one aspect of the meaning of dharma. Dharma is duty. Dharma is reality. This is what's going on. Now, given that this is what's going on, what should I do about it? What's my dharma? What should I be doing? What the Buddha is suggesting is that a deeply held sense of satisfaction comes from doing one's dharma—regardless of whether or not people think it's successful. That's got nothing to do with it. Is this my dharma? This is what I do.

Just to give a personal example: in the early years of teaching these retreats, around about the middle of each one-week retreat, I would have something of an anxiety attack. People would be meditating and things would be happening, and I'd suddenly think, "Oh my God, who do I think I am that I should be messing with the minds of these people?"

And it would really quite agitate me until the thought would eventually arise: I'm not in charge of their experience. They are in charge of their experience. My job is to teach the best I can. And that's it. The rest is up to them. And then I would calm down.

I don't know if that's at all helpful.

Thank you very much.

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