Origins: The Four Truths

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 45:43

So now we're continuing with our series on the origins of the teachings, going through the first three formal discourses and the surrounding context.

We've followed Gautama in his search for awakening. He became Buddha, and we saw the internal struggle that he had over whether or not to teach. The problem from his perspective was that he didn't know how he could communicate this to others. Finally he decides he'll zero in on his five former companions. When he arrives, after some initial resistance, he persuades them to listen. And he teaches the Dhammacakkha Pavattana Sutta, setting in motion the wheel of the Dharma. He opens this with the middle way.

Now, the middle way is the Buddha's strategy to dissolve the resistance of his audience, to persuade them to actually take him seriously and listen to him. And they do. So now he moves on to the four truths. Let's go through those.

This is the noble one's truth of dukkha. Birth is dukkha, aging is dukkha, sickness is dukkha, death is dukkha. Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are dukkha. Association with the unloved is dukkha. Separation from the loved is dukkha. Not getting what one wants is dukkha. In brief, the five aggregates associated with appropriation are dukkha.

This is the noble one's truth of the arising of dukkha. It is craving which leads to further becoming, is bound up with obsession and delight, and finds its delight now here, now there—specifically craving for sense pleasures, craving for existence, and craving for non-existence.

This is the noble one's truth of the cessation of dukkha. It is the complete cessation of this very craving, abandoning it, renouncing it, releasing it, letting it go.

This is the noble one's truth of the way leading to the cessation of dukkha: the noble eightfold path of right view, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right energy, right mindfulness and right concentration.

So these are the four truths. What they give us is the basic framework of the Buddha's teaching.

In Pali, these are the ariya saccāni, and this is a compound. Saccāni are truths. Ariya means noble or cultivated. They're usually translated as the noble truths, but it probably means the truths of the noble ones, or the cultivated ones—the Buddha and other awakened ones. At this point, there's only one ariya, and that's the Buddha. So here I translate it as the truths of the noble one.

What the truths do is show us the world from the perspective of someone who has awakened, or at least who is on the path to awakening. Broadly speaking, these are what is true for practitioners, but not necessarily true for others. And of course, we must remember that we're not speaking of a simple dichotomy of full awakening versus not awakened at all. There are levels or depths of awakening, and there are levels or depths of delusion. In general terms, a noble one, or a cultivated one, is someone who has attained to any degree of awakening, but more generally, a mature practitioner on the path—even someone on the way to this awakening. But the key point is that these are truths for some people, but for a lot of people, they're not. They don't make any sense at all.

The truths are dukkha, its arising, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation. As you can see, they all revolve around this key concept, dukkha. So let's have a look at it.

It's a compound word, derived from the word kha, meaning empty space, and the prefix du, conveying the idea of bad, unpleasant, painful, undesirable, and so on. So dukkha is a painful emptiness. It refers to the painful emptiness that we find at the center of our being. We can recognize this because we have this sense that something necessary for our well-being is missing in our lives, and we have to do something to fill that gap.

Kha also refers to the hub of a wheel. So dukkha is a badly fitting axle that results, if it's fitted to a vehicle, in the vehicle either not being able to move at all, or if it does move, it's only with difficulty and with grind. Dukkha represents a sense of grind and slog in our everyday experience, like pushing a cart uphill. Do you have the sense that this meditation practice is rather like pushing a cart uphill? If so, you've experienced dukkha.

Dukkha is classically translated as suffering, but this is quite inaccurate. Dukkha is a term for which there is no English equivalent.

The English word simply doesn't exist, because dukkha extends from the most gross form of suffering right through to the most subtle form of discontent. Even the slightest discontent is dukkha. The term covers the whole range.

So, why does the teaching begin with dukkha? Some people feel that the Buddha is an old misery bags because he starts off by banging on about dukkha. And perhaps he began with dukkha because the experience of dukkha was his starting point, his motivation. Because if we take action, if we do something, action comes from affect, from a movement of the heart. And here, for the Buddha, it was the pain of dukkha that got him started. So maybe that was why he begins with dukkha, because everybody begins with dukkha. It's the starting point of everyone.

He talks about dukkha in three aspects, and in these three aspects he's going deeper into it. The first one is what came in the tradition to be called dukkha dukkha—the dukkha inherent in pain. This is normal, everyday suffering, represented in this discourse by birth, aging, sickness, and death, accompanied by

sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. This is just the normal everyday suffering that every human being goes through.

At a deeper level, we find viparinama dukkha—the dukkha inherent in change. This is the pain that arises when experience is recognized as inherently unreliable and out of control. It's represented by "association with the unloved, separation from the loved, not getting what one wants."

Has anybody here ever been separated from what they love? Has that ever happened? What about not getting what you want—once or twice? What this is pointing to is that our circumstances are constantly changing, and we are not in charge of these changes. This is the key point. And of course this becomes more evident the deeper we go into the practice—the more obvious it is that if anybody's in charge of this process, it's certainly not me, the practitioner.

Things change. And they change not because we want them to change, but because they are the result of a network of conditions infinitely more complex than ourselves, and therefore impossible for us to control—usually impossible for us to even understand. This network of conditions has no firm, stable foundation. There is nothing upon which we can stand and say, "Here I am. I can hold on to this." So we keep groping around, looking for this foundation, but we come up with nothing. And this sense of absence at the core of existence—this is dukkha.

Finally we get sankhara dukkha. This is differently translated, but here it's translated as constructing dukkha, where the Buddha says, "In brief, the five aggregates associated with appropriation are dukkha."

We're going to look more closely at this later when we talk about anatta. The five aggregates is one of the two basic schemas the Buddha uses to analyze the human condition—the other one is the six senses. Basically, they are those aspects of our experience that we appropriate to construct an identity that we can see as permanent and hopefully satisfactory. This is the self that the Buddha talks about.

For the Buddha, self—roughly speaking, who we deeply think and feel we are—never presents as a direct, first-hand, unmediated experience. We can never note self. We take it to be real, but we can never quite bring it into awareness. And we take self to be not just real, but the center of our world. We assume that this world I'm in is all about me, and it centers on me. I am, quite literally, the center of my world. If I look around, go 360 degrees, there it is.

It's around me.

So let's say you're attending a meditation retreat and you're deeply into it. What is this retreat for? What is it about? Isn't it for me? Isn't it about me? Isn't it my retreat?

This taking as mine is upadana. Upadana is normally translated as clinging, but it's literally possession, a taking to be mine. And where there's upadana, appropriation, there's a self.

Now, from the Buddhist perspective, a self is painful because its demands can never be satisfied. So, for

example, this retreat, which is all about me—what would it take for this retreat to be fully satisfactory to me? Well, I can think of a few things: developing samadhi in every sit, unbroken mindfulness throughout the day, pleasant meditation experience followed by pleasant meditation experience, fellow practitioners who never do anything to annoy me—and the list goes on.

And of course, when we think about it, it's perfectly obvious that this is a fantasy world. It's not real. And the Buddha is saying that any attempt to construct a satisfactory self ends in failure. We see this in the fact that the construction of the self never stops. We never quite arrive. But we're always scrambling to arrive.

We're going to go more into this when we get to talking about not-self. You notice that the Buddha doesn't explicitly mention not-self here. But the framework of the truths kind of assumes not-self. It's there in the background, but not mentioned.

So this is the first truth, dukkha. And then: "This is the Noble One's truth of the arising of dukkha. It is craving, which leads to further becoming, is bound up with obsession and delight, and finds its delight now here, now there. Specifically, craving for sense pleasures, craving for existence, and craving for non-existence."

So what causes dukkha? Tanha—literally thirst, as we've spoken about before. The unquenchable thirst to possess and to become. We have to fill this emptiness that we feel at our core. And we're driven by this to construct a self, someone who's in charge.

Now the Buddha describes tanha, craving, as desire that has certain characteristics. Often people assume that the Buddha is talking about all desire—that desire causes dukkha. He isn't. He's talking about tanha. This is a specific kind of desire. And he explains; he says it has certain characteristics: it leads to further becoming, and it's bound up with obsession and delight.

So let's look at these. It leads to further becoming. And again, this is linked with self and not-self. We deeply desire to become someone—someone real and satisfactory to ourselves and to others. So we create images of ourselves to ourselves, and we try to believe these images. And we project images of ourselves to the world, and we try to act as if we really are the person that we're representing.

But this job of creating ourselves never ends. It has to be constantly renewed. And we never seem to be satisfied with who we are, with the result. So the drama never ends. And of course this is one reason why getting lost in thinking in the meditation practice

is so catastrophic—because we're lost in that world of endlessly patching up a self that maybe, just maybe, will finally work.

So craving leads to further becoming, bound up with obsession and delight. "Obsession" translates *raga*, which you sometimes see rendered as "lust"—I think that's a fairly common translation. *Raga* literally means "colour." So it's the colouring of the heart when it's trapped in desire and drivenness. And *raga*

implies the inability to see beyond something and so let it go. If I'm completely obsessed by something—I must have this, I must get rid of that—I'm so absorbed in it that I cannot see beyond it to the consequences. What will happen if I get this? What would happen if I get rid of that? Would I really be better off?

So this is obsession. And then there is delight—*nandi*. In this case, again, it has a specialised sense: the gratification that comes from satisfying desire. Without *nandi*, we wouldn't bother, because there wouldn't be any payoff. But this gratification sets up another round of desire. That was nice—I think I'll do it again. And then satisfying that desire sets up the next one, and the next one, and the next one. And so it never ends.

Just a couple of examples. In the wider world, consider consumerism and the fetish of the commodity. As a society, it's perfectly clear that we never have enough. If we ever did have enough, the economy would collapse, and the results would be catastrophic. It is our duty to be greedy, because then we're productive and the economy keeps growing. This system works because it appeals to the unquenchable thirst at the centre of each one of us.

So this is the nature of craving and the cause of our suffering.

Another example, perhaps more subtle: have you ever been obsessed by thoughts that you can't let go? Can we stop thinking when we want to? Our relationship to the stories we're constantly telling ourselves, and the satisfaction we gain from them, show us obsession and delight in action.

And then we get the third characteristic of this particular kind of desire: craving "finding delight now here, now there." This conveys the restlessness implied in the endless search for a satisfaction and a completion that never quite arrives. We attempt to satisfy our desires, and sometimes we succeed. But this success sets us up for another desire, or for the repetition of the same desire. This process is endless, and it leads to the wandering on—which is *samsara*. In our practice, we can see this in the thoughts we endlessly repeat, moving from one story to another, to another, to another. Finding delight now here, now there.

And then the Buddha gets down to specifics. He says: craving for sense pleasures, craving for existence, and craving for non-existence. Now, the first one makes perfect sense—craving for sense pleasures. But notice that out of the three categories of craving, two of them are all about identity: the craving for existence and non-existence, the desire to be someone, the desire to not be someone. For the Buddha, these are the deepest forms of desire, and often the kind of desire that drives our obsessive thoughts and emotions.

So that's the arising of *dukkha*.

The Noble One's truth of the cessation of *dukkha*: it is the complete cessation of that very craving—abandoning it, renouncing it, releasing it, letting it go. This varies from subtle to gross. Craving for

Non-existence: I'm in the dining hall getting food, and I'm acutely aware that everybody can see me. It's perfectly obvious that they're all glaring at me and judging my hopeless practice. And so I just don't want to exist. I want to disappear. So I bolt outside where no one can see me. *Don't look at me. Don't look at me. Don't look at me.* That would be a kind of mild form of the craving for non-existence.

The opposite would be *Look at me, look at me, look at me, look at me.* And often we find ourselves swinging between these two.

But of course you have depth, layer upon layer. The craving for existence at a deeper layer would be the clinging onto life regardless—desperately holding on. And the craving for non-existence would be wanting death, wanting obliteration. Drug addicts and alcoholics are often motivated by the craving for non-existence. *Get me out of here. Just for a while, just get me out of here.* That would be craving for non-existence.

I'm wondering also about people—not necessarily Buddhists, but sometimes on the spiritual path—craving to not be here, to not have a body, for example. In Theravada Buddhism, the ultimate ideal is Parinibbana, and this is often interpreted as annihilation, like ceasing to be. And people who actually genuinely feel, "God, it'd be good to get out of here," can be attracted to Theravada. In the Mahayana, the ideal is the bodhisattva, who endlessly cycles through samsara to save all beings. And people who want to keep existing forever and ever find that an attractive idea, so they become drawn to Mahayana. So it permeates everything. And it can be very subtle. And frankly, if we're not enlightened, we've got it. It's one of the things pushing us along.

So, the cessation of dukkha. This is the Noble One's truth of the cessation of dukkha: it is the complete cessation of that very craving, abandoning it, renouncing it, releasing it, letting it go.

Now the Buddha compares the cessation of dukkha to the ending of hunger. If you think about hunger, we are hungry, so we are driven to eat. And this satisfies us for a while. But then we're hungry again, so we're driven to eat again. And this satisfies us for a while. And then we're hungry again, and so on and so on. The cycle goes on. So the Buddha says, well, think about the satisfaction that would come when hunger itself ceases.

To get a sense of what the Buddha might be talking about—although I say this as a non-smoker—compare the desire to smoke another cigarette with the desire to give up smoking. When I satisfy my desire to smoke another cigarette, this sets me up for another cigarette, which sets me up for another one, another one, another one, and so on. But when I satisfy my desire to give up smoking, the desire itself is dissolved. And what's left is peace, a relative absence of disturbance.

In a mundane sense, what the Buddha is talking about here is contentment. For the Buddha, contentment is actually more important than happiness. Because happiness tends to be very transient and highly dependent on certain circumstances. But contentment is much more stable and can flow on through

changing circumstances.

So the Buddha says the third truth is the cessation of dukkha through letting go. And letting go, of course, is a very popular—if not clichéd—Buddhist term.

And it raises the obvious question: how do we let go of our drivenness?

This idea of letting go reminds me of relaxation. We can't do it, because any doing is not relaxation. So we begin with drivenness and the tension and stress associated with drivenness. We are driven to do something, to fix this problem, to chase this obsession. We may even be driven to try to let go. So we demand of ourselves: relax now, let go now. And it doesn't work—because basically, the letting go is something we've just added to our agenda. But letting go, in common with relaxation, these are not activities we add to our agenda. They are the cessation of the agenda.

So what can we do? Well, a few suggestions in the practice.

First: be intimate with the drivenness. When you find yourself caught up in it, surrender. Surrender into the drivenness. Feel it intimately. Now, this involves not getting lost in the story, the story about. When we become a character in our tragic story, we alienate ourselves from the intimate touch of the drivenness. It's like the drivenness is behind us, pushing us forward, and our attention is to the front—to what we're obsessing about, what we think is our problem, and what we think will solve our problem. But what we need to do is fall back into the drivenness and surrender into it. So intimacy, which of course is affective.

And secondly: be watchful. This brings us to what the Buddha calls equanimity, *upekkhā*, which he associates with the maturity of mindfulness. *Upekkhā* is a very important quality for the Buddha. The word itself is derived from the Sanskrit root *ikṣ*, to see, and the prefix *upa*, which denotes nearness, close touch, intimacy again. So equanimity involves seeing, witnessing, but intimately. I translate it as intimate witnessing. There is witnessing, and so some degree of detachment. But the witnessing is intimate—from very, very close by. Equanimity represents the unity or integration of the cognitive and the affective: wisdom and feeling. It allows us to experience a storm while maintaining balance throughout it.

So be intimate, be watchful. And finally: don't throw logs onto the fire. The storm rages, but it blows itself out. The fire burns, but it burns itself out. When we surrender and when we intimately witness, we allow the storm to blow itself out. We allow the fire to burn itself out.

Now, the going out of the fire—this is a very famous image the Buddha uses to represent Nibbāna. Because Nibbāna means the going out of the fire. And the point about this image: it doesn't mean we put the fire out. When I first read about this image, I imagined the meditation practice like your local fire station. There comes surging up sirens, raging, a huge hose—blast that fire with water and put it out. But that's not what it's getting at. It's not putting it out; it's allowing things to come to their own natural end.

So it's not that we're doing something to get rid of the drivenness, the fire. Rather, we are allowing the

drivenness to fade by not doing anything to feed it. We don't put the fire out—we stop throwing logs on it. And if we stop adding fuel, it will go out. It's just built in.

So we're allowing drivenness to fade by not doing anything to feed it, and then we allow nature to return to its natural balance. And of course we feed the fire every time we identify with it—this is me, this is mine. Every time we drop that identification, in that moment we're not throwing another log on the fire. And it will go out. So this is the third truth: cessation.

Then we get the fourth truth, the path. This is the Noble One's truth of the way leading to the cessation of dukkha—the eightfold path of right view, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right energy, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

We've already talked about the path as indicating a state of dynamic balance. Here let's talk about another couple of aspects. First, this image of path implies that someone else has been here before. We are not the first to do this. In fact, this particular path has been walked for over two millennia, and we are just the latest group of travellers. Others will follow us.

In other words, meditation practice, Dharma practice, is a community activity. We do it together. We owe a debt to previous generations because they're the ones who ensured that the path was available for us when we turned up. And we have a responsibility to future generations—will the path be available to the next generations? This is one of the reasons why we have that little bit of ceremonial at night when we chant in Pāli, why we follow the traditions of Theravāda Buddhism. We're reminding ourselves that we are part of a community that extends from the present into the distant past, and from the present into the deep future.

Secondly, the path involves more than just meditation—it involves a lot more than just meditation. In particular, it involves ethics. In one discourse, the Buddha was asked by a non-Buddhist what he taught, and the Buddha said, "I teach two things: ethics and understanding." It's interesting that he didn't even mention meditation. Ethics involves the choices that we make, and therefore the kind of life that we lead, while understanding is our depth of appreciation of what's really going on. The Buddha said that each one is like a hand that washes the other. You can't clean one hand; you need both. This is the relationship between ethics and understanding—like two hands washing each other, or two feet washing each other. The Buddha was barefoot, so the washing of feet would have been a daily occurrence. Meditation is the interface between the two.

So that's a brief summary of the four truths. Let's see how we can apply ethics to the meditation practice itself. Let's say I'm meditating and my mind throws up obsession, which appears as what I would call distraction. What do our obsessions show us? They show us our self-reference, our self-enclosure. We may be sorrowful for the sorrows of the world, but we are most sorrowful about our own sorrows. This is the nature of the self.

So I find myself in some kind of obsession. I recognize it, and then I'm faced with a choice. I could drop it, or I could keep going with it. This is an ethical choice. If I drop the distraction, the obsession, and step back into presence, this is a decision to step outside self-enclosure and be open to the reality of the world. Whereas the decision to keep going with the distraction is a decision to feed self-obsession, self-enclosure, and cut myself off from the world. This is ethics—the ethical choice at a very intimate level.

So these are the four truths, and the sutta goes on: "This is what the Blessed One said, and the group of five rejoiced in his words." They like it.

They were converted, you could say. And when the group of five rejoiced in his words, what did they do? "Sadhu! Sadhu!" That's where it comes from.

And as this teaching was being given, the perfect and stainless vision of Dharma arose in Venerable Kondanya. The vision of Dharma—*dhamma-cakkhum*—stream entry. And how he expressed his understanding was this: "Whatever is of the nature to arise, all that is of the nature to cease." This little verse pops up again and again throughout the discourses.

So Kondanya woke up to the dynamism of the world. He was caught in the stream of Dharma and suddenly, unexpectedly, he was swept along by it. He directly experienced the middle way that the Buddha was talking about—the absence of any fixed position. And he attained the first stage of awakening.

The discourse then continues: "When the wheel of Dharma had been set in motion by the Blessed One, the earth-dwelling devas cried out: 'At Varanasi, in the deer park at Isipatana, this unsurpassed wheel of Dharma has been set in motion by the Blessed One. It cannot be stopped by any samana or brahmana, or deva, or Mara, or Brahma, or by anyone in the world.'"

Hearing the cry of the earth-dwelling devas, the devas of the realm of the four great kings cried out. So the rejoicing goes up and then up and up—the Tavatimsa devas, the Yama devas, the Tusita devas. Tusita heaven, by the way, is where the Buddha's mother was residing, and it's where the bodhisattva will reside before being reborn on earth as the next Buddha. Then the Nimmanarati devas, the Paranimmita-vasavatti devas, the devas of Brahma's assembly—all cried out: "At Varanasi, in the deer park at Isipatana, this unsurpassed wheel of Dharma has been set in motion by the Blessed One. It cannot be stopped by any samana or brahmana, or deva, or Mara, or Brahma, or by anyone in the world."

"And so at that moment, at that instant, the cry spread as far as the Brahma world, and this ten-thousand-fold world system shook, quaked, and trembled, and an immeasurable glorious radiance appeared in the world, surpassing the divine majesty of the devas."

Now, I don't know if you really believe any of that, but the point is clear: it's important. Something happened of deep significance, even cosmic significance. The wheel of Dharma has begun to roll.

And the Buddha is affected by this. "Then the Blessed One cried out in inspiration: 'Kondanya understands! Kondanya understands!'" This is how Venerable Kondanya acquired the name Añña-Kondanya—"Kondanya who understands."

The Buddha is very happy. Basically, he leaps up, dancing for joy. "Yes! One of the five got it. He actually got it." He's just delighted. And it's the only discourse in which the Buddha behaves like this. Later in his career, when the Buddha is teaching, five hundred people become fully awakened, and the Buddha's response is essentially, "Yes, that's nice. I wonder what lunch is today." But for just one glimpse of understanding, he is delighted.

And this is the rolling of the wheel of Dharma. When the Buddha was awakened, it was the wheel of the Dharma, but it was still. Kondanya got a glimpse, and the wheel starts to move. It starts to roll. And no one and nothing can prevent it from rolling on.

In other words, the Buddha now knows he can teach. The Dharma has a future after him. This begins his career as a teacher. And of course, as a result of that wheel turning, here we are.

That's it for tonight. Any questions?

"I just love this conflicting information. On one hand, Buddhism is going to last five thousand years. On the other hand, it's going to last forever."

Exactly. I think you summed it up correctly.

"Are you going to leave me with that?"

This Buddhism will go. But another Buddhism will arise. The Dharma wheel will arise and turn again. It will stop, and later on, it will pop up and roll again. So perhaps in that cosmological sense, once you start it, you can't stop it.

But in the more existential sense, the wheel doesn't simply roll by itself. We are giving it a push along. And as long as we give it a push along, it will keep rolling.

"So us in this room, doing this practice—is it money? Is it time? Is it energy? What is it that needs to be pushing along?"

Well, basically it's commitment. And if there's commitment, then the money and the time and the energy will be found. If there's not the commitment, then it won't be found, and the whole thing will die.

This is a big challenge of lay Dharma practice. The Dharma has survived for two and a half millennia. Why? Because there's a dedicated community of monks and nuns who have been carrying it along. But can the lay people carry it along? This is what they wanted to do in that reform movement in Burma. But can it work? We don't know. This is a historical experiment.

It is more difficult for lay people to keep it going because we've got lots of other things to worry about. In the discourses, when the Buddha was teaching a lay person—let's say the lay person gets it and they have some measure of awakening—sometimes the discourse ends when the lay person says, "And now, Bhante, I must go. I am busy and have much to do." And off they go. Because they're busy. Because they're laypeople. Because they can't just hang around.

But you never have a monk or a nun say, "And now, Bhante, I must go. I am busy and have much to do." Because they're not busy. They don't have much to do. That's why they ordain. So they've got the leisure as well as the time, the opportunity to throw themselves completely into it. But we, on the other hand, have got other things to do as well. So it's more difficult for us. Not impossible, but more difficult. That's my take.

"Talking about the drivenness aspect and what we're doing here—I would argue that to do a twenty-eight-day retreat takes a certain amount of drivenness. And then the irony is, you need that drivenness to get to the point of freedom where there is no drivenness."

Basically, that's the paradox. Without the drivenness, you'll never start. Without letting go of the drivenness, you'll never arrive. And that is the paradox.

Okay. Thank you very much.

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