The Mirror of Dharma Part 3: Dukkha

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 50:57

Tonight we're going to talk about everybody's favourite topic: dukkha.

Tonight and next Wednesday, we're going to look at dukkha and anatta, although you can't really separate them because they're intertwined with each other.

Our basic text is from the Anguttara Nikaya: "These things play a part in realisation: the perception of impermanence, the perception of pain in impermanence, the perception of not-self in pain."

There we have the three universal characteristics—anicca, dukkha, and anatta—always listed in that order, as we'll see later on. At the centre is dukkha. Of course, dukkha is the central concept of the four truths, which provide the basic framework for the teaching. We have dukkha, its arising, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation. Everything revolves around dukkha.

As when we were looking at the Anattalakkhana Sutta, we saw how the Buddha analyses this term very carefully. The word itself has no exact English equivalent. Classically it is translated as "suffering," but that's not particularly accurate. There's no English equivalent because it covers the complete range of dissatisfaction, from the most subtle to the most gross, and everything in between.

It comes from the word *kha*, which indicates an empty space, and the prefix *du*, which indicates bad, unpleasant, awful, and so on. So a bad emptiness, or a painful emptiness. *Kha* also refers to the hub of a wheel. So dukkha is a badly fitting axle at the centre of a wheel, which means that the vehicle, if it can move at all, moves only with great grind and difficulty.

The Buddha analyses dukkha into three levels. The first is normal everyday pain that we find in any human life. The next level is pain inherent in change. What this refers to, as we've seen, is that our circumstances are constantly changing, from micro to macro. The micro changes we get to study very carefully in the meditation practice, and we are not in charge of these changes. It's not change per se which is painful; it's the fact that we can't control it. That is what creates the pain.

This leads us to the deepest layer of pain, what the Buddha calls sankhara dukkha—we could translate this as "constructed pain." He identifies this as the five aggregates associated with appropriation, which we looked at when going through the Anattalakkhana Sutta. The five aggregates are those aspects of our experience that are the raw materials for creating a sense of self and identity. The construction mechanism is based on appropriating—appropriating an experience as mine. "This is my experience. It refers to me." This is appropriation: upadana, usually translated as "clinging." But this is what the Buddha gets at when he's talking about clinging. This is the context.

If we go back to the quote that we started with: "These things play a part in realisation: the perception of impermanence, the perception of pain in impermanence." We begin by studying impermanence—in other words, change. These three perceptions are always listed in this order: change, pain, not-self. They're listed from gross to subtle, from what is generally clearest to what is generally most obscure.

Change is clear; it's pretty obvious. If somebody said, "Well, what's Buddhism all about?" and you said, "Well, things change," they'd think, "And? So?" It's pretty obvious.

Any system of insight meditation—meditation for the purpose of generating insight—is designed to make us intimate with the fact of change. In the Goenka method, for example, scanning the body reveals different sensations: change, change, change, change. In this practice, one thing which is emphasised is seeing change in distraction. We learn to see change in the ups and downs of the practice. We learn to see change in the movements of the body. We learn to see change in the movements of the mind. As we become sensitive to change, we begin to intuit that change is universal. Nothing stays still—at least nothing we can find.

Nothing remains the same.

And this leads to the perception of pain—the perception of pain in impermanence, as the Buddha says.

So if we ask the simple question: has your experience changed today? Presumably the answer is yes. Next question: were you in command of these changes? And generally the answer for that one is, not really. So did these changes just happen to you?

As the practice deepens, we begin to realize that change is built into the fabric of the universe—of the experienced universe. And again we keep coming back to this basic point: the Buddha is teaching the nature of experience. When we say change is built into the fabric of the universe, we're talking about the fabric of the universe as we experience it. The experienced universe.

And so, as beings within this universe, we are caught up in the patterns and tides of change that we cannot control. This absence of control, when we start to recognize it, provokes anxiety. In fact, you could say that unless we're anxious about change, we haven't really seen it. The Buddha calls this viparinama dukkha—the pain inherent in change.

We begin to recognize that our experience is inherently unreliable and out of our control. Our circumstances change and we are not in charge of these changes. The mind begins to recognize—and often it begins at a deeper than conscious level; I think usually it begins at a deeper than conscious level—the mind begins to recognize we have no firm, stable foundation. There's nothing on which we can stand and say, "Here I am." There's nothing we can grab onto and say, "I can hold on to this while everything else changes around me." We keep groping to find a foundation, but we come up with nothing.

This sense of absence at the core of existence—this is what opens the way to the perception of the

universal characteristic of dukkha.

If we begin to get a sense of this, what can we do about it? In the Four Truths, the Buddha talks about fully understanding dukkha. And this brings us to what the later Theravāda tradition calls dukkha ñāṇa—the understanding of dukkha, or the insight knowledge of dukkha. You might see it translated as dukkha as insight knowledge.

The key point here is that this involves a movement from the experience of pain to the experience of insight into pain. And this is essentially a movement from the personal to the universal.

When we first experience pain—let's say we experience pain naively—then we experience it personally. "I am in pain." But insight into pain is a movement from the personal to the universal. All beings are in pain.

It's a movement away from possession to release. A movement from "this is my pain, it's all about me, it's the tragedy of my life" to release, to letting go. Pain is an inherent aspect of sentient existence, and so it's not about me, and it's not about my story.

It's in this movement that insight arises.

And this makes clear the central point for our practice, especially when we're working with dukkha, with pain: when pain arises, we do not take it personally. The reason is that when we understand the nature of pain, we recognize that, like change, pain is an inherent part of nature. It's got nothing to do with me. And it's got nothing to do with the details of my personal story. Once we realize this, once we stop taking pain personally, then we can let it go.

When I talk about this, I'm always reminded of John Hale, who was one of my main teachers. He died of motor neuron disease. It took him seven years to die. The disease was concentrated in the upper chest, shoulders—this area, this part of the body. With motor neuron disease, he lost movement. And when muscles don't move, they waste away. So he had basically bone rubbing against bone.

And so it became very painful. During this period, he taught a long retreat south of Sydney, and one day the retreat was visited by a psychologist from Sydney who was a practicing Buddhist and worked with chronic pain. He was really intrigued about what was happening to John. Basically what he wanted to learn was: what's your technique to deal with chronic pain? How do you do it?

And John's answer was simply, "I just don't take it personally." That was it. That's what he said. And the thing is, he meant it. That really was how he dealt with it. He never had pain relief. He never had any kind of drug at all. He just didn't take it personally. It's quite powerful. Simple to say, but very powerful when we start to do it.

So there's a movement here. The practice begins with understanding the individual—this is what the Buddha calls dhammañāṇa—understanding the particular experience here and now. This understanding comes directly from the boot camp of the practice of being aware of whatever is happening now, or as

Mahasi Sayadaw would say, noting something, whatever is happening now. Aware of this, and then aware of this, and then aware of this.

And the practice matures into insight, which is understanding the universal, anvayañāṇa—recognizing the universal patterns of experience as they play out over time. In other words, insight is always generalized. The movement from dukkha, from pain, to insight into dukkha is a movement from the particular to the universal.

When we're caught up in the particularity of pain, we take it personally. This particular pain is about me, and it's about my life. And when pain is personal, then we have reason to feel that while this situation is painful, maybe that one isn't. An escape from the pain seems possible. Has anybody contemplated escaping from this meditation center? Going over the wall? I have to confess, I have. Not so long ago—in fact yesterday, I think.

It appears, in other words, that an escape from pain, from dukkha, appears to be possible within the realm of the impermanent—within the realm of the normal. We feel that there may be an alternative that could work, so we have reasons to pursue it. And it might be as simple as, "I'll just get out of this hall and head up to the veranda and have a nice cuppa."

One thing that quite intrigues me is that sometimes when we're doing intensive practice—and maybe this is just me—we find ourselves sometimes living alternative lives. Have you ever done that? It's very entertaining. "If only I had done this in the past instead of that, my life would have been satisfactory." Or we imagine an alternative future: "When I get out of here, things are going to be very different." Or we even imagine an alternative present: "Right now I'll take a break and then things will be better."

These fantasies seem real and they have power because our understanding of dukkha, of pain, is still particular rather than universal. We imagine that if we just rearrange the board, then we can play a blinder. In other words, one indication of insight into dukkha—the universality of dukkha—is the realization that there is nothing we can do to solve our problem. Absolutely nothing.

And why is this? Well, firstly, the very need to resolve the problem is part of the dukkha. What we're doing is rearranging our dukkha in order to end our dukkha.

Think of rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic.

But the other thing is that any solution we find does not last. It has to be replaced by something else. This is impermanence. And I remember that generally the understanding of dukkha emerges when the understanding of change is reasonably well established.

So any solution we find has to be replaced by something else, which has to be replaced by something else, and so on and so forth. Whatever solution we find to our problem, the situation we're in has to be renegotiated. And then that situation has to be renegotiated. And then that situation has to be

renegotiated. Have you ever come to a point in your practice where you thought, "Okay, I've done it, from now on I can just cruise"?

Now notice the point here. We can do nothing to resolve our problem. This is because, from the Buddha's perspective, fundamentally *we* and *our* is the problem. But when we give up on us and our problem, then there's a possibility that something else might happen.

The first time I came across this—well, at least I'm reminded of it—was way back when I was a student of Robert Aitken Roshi. He was a Zen teacher, and the meditation practice they do is zazen. One time he told us, and I always remembered it, because here I am talking about it decades later, he said: "Do not use zazen to solve your problems. If you commit yourself to zazen, your problems will be resolved. But do not use zazen to solve your problems."

I think that's very good advice. Despite the marketing, mindfulness is not about solving problems. Mindfulness is about revealing the problems, because that's the way through.

So if we look at how this relates to our meditation practice: as we mentioned, when the Buddha talks about the three universal characteristics, and when he talks about insight—that's what he talks about—he always lists them in the order of anicca, dukkha, anatta: change, pain, not-self. In other words, he lists them in order of subtlety.

Anicca, change, is the easiest characteristic to notice. And it's also possible, in a sense, to "do" change. We can structure our attention via the meditation method to bring change to our notice, to practice impermanence, in a sense. What we've been doing in this retreat is approaching this by becoming interested in distraction. I'm with my meditation object, all is well, and then suddenly—I'm not. Change. The experience of distraction teaches us a great deal about impermanence. This is why one should never dismiss one's distraction. Distraction is our teacher.

When we take distraction personally, we think, "Well, I can't meditate because I'm distracted." We don't realize that distraction *is* the meditation. That's the meditation object. And it's a very good one.

This is one way—the way that I think Mahasi Sayadaw, in particular, brings people's attention to the fact of change. In the lineage, we talk about it in terms of primary object, secondary object. You move from one to the other. Change, change, change, change.

So anicca, change, is the easiest to notice. Dukkha is more subtle, and it's harder to see—at least the universality of dukkha is harder to see. Because in order to see it, we have to recognize that it's not personal. There's a sense in which we can "do" change; we can do anicca. We cannot do dukkha.

Sometimes you see people trying to do it by making part of their meditation project the endurance of pain. "If I'm sitting after half an hour, it starts to hurt. So I'll sit for two or three hours. That'll really hurt. And that'll get me into dukkha." But if it develops anything, it's more likely to develop endurance rather than

insight. And it's more likely to result in taking both the pain and any relief we feel from the cessation of pain personally.

"I did that. That was a great sitting. It really hurt, but it was great." Come to think of it, I don't really like sitting meditation. I think I might go away for a while. And when we take it personally, then we're stuck. So we can't actually do dukkha in terms of the characteristic. It's something which emerges, or doesn't, as the case may be.

Anattā, not-self, is the most subtle characteristic and the most difficult to see. This is in part because it's so counterintuitive. What do you mean, not-self? No self? You're saying it, and you're a self, and I'm hearing it, and I'm a self. So what are you talking about? It's very counterintuitive. But in part, it's difficult to see because it's fundamentally an absence. Something is missing rather than something is present. We assume a self is present, lurking in the background. And it can take a while before we notice that actually it isn't. It's harder to notice something which is absent than something which is present.

I don't know how many of you are Sherlock Holmes fans, but if you remember "The Adventure of Silver Blaze," it took Sherlock Holmes to ask what became the obvious question: why didn't the dog bark last night? He noticed the absence. But nobody else did. And of course, finally, we certainly cannot do not-self. There's nothing we can do. Because if there's someone doing it, then we have a self in charge of a project—the project of recognising not-self. What we don't have is the universal characteristic of not-self.

So these are listed in order of subtlety. However, again, when one arises, all three arise. All three are already happening, because this is just the way nature works. It's a question of whether we notice it.

And what brings order into this system, to some degree at least, is samādhi. Classically translated as concentration, but we could translate it as unification, integration, immersion. I noticed Bhikkhu Sujato translates it as immersion, which is very interesting. Samādhi is what we're cultivating as we practice. And as samādhi develops, our view of experience gradually deepens over time. What we see is necessarily influenced by the depth from which we see. The deeper we go, we see a different aspect of the landscape. The quality of our awareness affects the object of awareness. The deeper we go, the more subtle the view, and the more likely we are to recognise what is really going on.

But again, it's important to remember that the three characteristics arise as a single package. Where there is one, there's all of them. And for practical purposes, this means—one implication of this—that a student's experience may not follow a tidy progression through these characteristics in due order. Sometimes it happens, but sometimes it doesn't. Some students stumble into experiences that they have no business being in at all. And this can cause difficulty. So it's important not to cling to the descriptions we find in the texts and expect that we're going to march through them in an orderly way. For some people it happens, but for others it's much more chaotic.

Now, when this perception of dukkha becomes predominant in our practice, we tend to be discouraged

and even confused. This comes about in part from our cultural conditioning. We are conditioned to believe that pain is bad. We have expressions like labelling an experience positive or negative, where positive is clearly good and negative is definitely bad. But when we actually look at these words, positive simply means pleasurable, and negative simply means painful in most cases. So when we undergo negative experiences in our practice, we assume that things are going wrong.

When in fact, these experiences could be a sign that things are going right. Again, it's counterintuitive. It's one of the things that makes meditation for insight so difficult to grasp.

So let's look at how the segue from the perception of change to the perception of pain may be experienced. When we say that things are impermanent, or experiences are impermanent, we're saying that they begin, they endure, and then they end. Our view of impermanence depends on the perspective the mind takes when aware of change, and there are all sorts of different experiences that can indicate the perception of change.

But when the perception of change or impermanence matures, the mind sees predominantly the endings of things, the cessation of events, of whatever we experience. In a weak aspect, this understanding can take the form of the practitioner apparently losing their ability to focus on anything. The attention keeps sliding off. Whenever they move towards a meditation object, it's like the awareness just slides off it. It's like trying to grasp something that slips out of your hand the moment you take hold of it. That's one possible experience.

In a strong aspect, practitioners might have an alarming sense of the groundlessness of experience. They feel like they're on the edge of an abyss, or even falling into it. And when they look to see what's going on, there's nothing. They feel like they might be sucked into that nothing and disappear into it.

Now the result of these kinds of experiences—and there's a whole range of them that can take place—is the emergence of fear or anxiety. In a weak form, this can be just a sense of existential unease, a sense of things not going right, or a generalized sense of anxiety. In a strong form, this can manifest as panic. There may be a felt sense that I am not in control of my life. There may even be a sense that there is nothing I can do to improve my situation. And as the practice matures, this sense of the impossibility of improving the situation can become stronger. It becomes clear that there's no refuge from this groundlessness. There's nowhere to escape to. There's nothing we can do to resolve the situation we find ourselves in.

Of course, we generate fantasies of escape. But when we do that, we recognize that the fantasy of escape is exactly that—a fantasy. What I would like to believe in, but at this point, I can't.

This kind of experience shows us that at a deep level, the heart-mind is intuiting the universality of dukkha. Hence the sense that no escape is possible. But as the understanding of dukkha develops—and again this is accompanied by deepening samādhi, deepening immersion or concentration—so too does our understanding of not-self. At first we haven't noticed it. It's like an underground stream. But it may begin

to be noticed in the clear perception that what one is experiencing is not personal. For example, the practitioner may realize that things are coming and going according to natural conditions and are not under anyone's control. It's not about me. It's not that I can't control my experience. It's just the fact that experiences come and go according to nature, according to natural conditions. They just move according to nature. In other words, this absence of control is not about the practitioner and her life. It's just nature. That's all.

It's rather like if you're driving a car, enjoying the scenery, and then suddenly you realize that you're in the front passenger seat. Somehow you've teleported from the driver's seat to the passenger seat. And you think, this is a bit odd. You have a look, and you realize there's no one in the driver's seat. Now at this point, one is tempted to panic. But then you realize that there never was a driver. Yet the journey has worked out reasonably well up to now. So why not relax and settle back and enjoy the view?

This is a kind of image for the segue from dukkha into not-self, into anattā. And there's a strange realization that while the fear that grips me is real, it too is not personal.

So there's danger, apparently, but there's no one who is in danger. It could be compared to watching a scary movie. Fear arises, but even as the fear is present, there's also the understanding that the situation inspiring the fear is not real. And so fundamentally, the fear itself has no ground. There's no need to fear it.

The essence of the perception of dukkha is the sense of groundlessness—that there's no solid foundation to our experience, and therefore we feel that we can be swallowed up at any moment. But not-self emerges here as the perception that this groundlessness is also groundless. And our fear is equally groundless. And the pain that we're going through is equally groundless. And so fundamentally, it's not a problem.

I remember one time I was describing an experience, which was quite alarming, to Christopher Titmuss. I said it was like free fall. And he immediately responded, "What would it be like if you removed the fall from the free?" It's free. Why do we have a sense of fall? Because we assume somewhere down there, there really is a ground, and I'm going to hit it—splat. But once I realize there isn't one, then from free fall to free. This is the segue into the perception of not-self.

And the turning point, as the Buddha says in the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, is disenchantment—nibbidā.

So we're continuing the practice, and at some point we hit pain, dukkha. And as the perception of not-self develops, we begin to see that our identification with the pain is weakening. As this happens, we no longer feel so threatened by it. After all, what do we let go of? We let go of what we no longer want, what we have given up on. In other words, once we've had enough, we stop. Once we've had enough of the dukkha, we stop. Because that's enough.

So this is surrender, where we let go of the struggle to construct an experience that is free from dukkha.

We've had enough of trying to make things right. And we stop. And when we stop, the clinging stops, and the dukkha stops.

All this occurs because at a deeper than conscious level, the practitioner—using the classical terms—has become fed up with the endless rat race of saṃsāra. And as this is happening, the flip side of this fed-upness emerges, and this is a yearning for deliverance—a deliverance from the whole saṃsāra, from the whole mess.

So this is not an escape from this or that unpleasant situation. It's an escape from the entire rat race. And in classical Buddhist terms, this means the practitioner yearns for nibbāna, the cessation of dukkha. And she does this even if she has never heard of nibbāna. This movement in the heart occurs anyway.

And again, to encourage the arising of disenchantment with dukkha, with pain—never take it personally. Again and again we come back to this. Keep reminding yourself: this is not personal. And of course this is built into the practice of what Mahasi Sayadaw calls noting. This event is just this event. Even when it's painful, even when it's threatening, this event is just this event. It's not me, it's not my event, it's just this event.

So never take it personally, and be interested in the flow of events. These dukkha-flavored events may be painful and discouraging. They may even make the practice impossible. But you don't have to practice. That's not required. What's required is simply to be interested in what makes your practice impossible. Just be aware—which is what we're doing anyway.

Sometimes we can only be aware from a distance. We have to back off, give it space. Sometimes we can only be aware by distracting ourselves from the pain—by going for a walk, perhaps, or whatever works. But throughout all of this, we remain interested in the flow of events.

Now notice that in understanding dukkha, what is central is affect, which we've been talking about before. What is it that moves the heart? We're moved by what the Buddha calls sukha or dukkha—by pleasure or pain. And here we are moved by dukkha, we're moved by pain. The realm of affect is expressed in our desires and our aversions: what we want, what we really want, and what we are desperate to escape from.

From the Buddhist perspective, the fundamental question is whether or not we desire the sankhata, the constructed, that which brings us pain—or do we desire the asankhata, the unconstructed, that which brings us the cessation of pain.

Our habit is to desire the constructed. This is the world that we are familiar with. This is the world we take as normal. This is "the real world" that people on meditation retreats sometimes talk about in contrast to what's going on in the retreat. Our habit is to desire the constructed, and this is quite reasonable because we don't know anything about the unconstructed. We might not have even heard of it. So how can we desire it?

But when we become disenchanted with the constructed, because we've learned to understand it thoroughly, then we learn to desire something else. At first, this something else may be entirely mysterious. We may characterize it entirely negatively: what I want is not all of this. Even when "this" is what I've always experienced and what I imagine I will always experience into the future, I just know I don't want this. Perhaps this is the form in which it first emerges.

But still, what is it that I desire? This creates a genuine problem for the practitioner. If I'm in a practice tradition, then I may have a theoretical sense of what this might be, even if it's only rather vague. I can feel encouraged in my disillusionment because I understand, at least intellectually, that there is something—however mysterious—that is better than this. There is some alternative. In other words, I have a sense of direction, although it's defined negatively: not this.

And of course, if I have teachers, if I have senior practitioners that I can look up to—what the Buddha calls the kalyanamitta, the good friends—then I may have a lived sense of what lies beyond the familiar. I see these people, I meet them, I mix with them. In my case, I was very lucky to know and become friends with and practice as a companion with John Hale. He showed me what enlightenment looks like in a human being, which is very powerful.

But let's say I'm living in an entirely secular context. Let's say in this world, mindfulness is practiced for self-improvement or for a more comfortable life. If that's the purpose of the practice, then I might be tempted to despair and give up, walk away from the whole project. This is one reason why the tradition is so central to this practice—because it holds us when things get rough. And sometimes things getting rough means we're going deeper. We're doing well.

I remember at one time I was in Burma at Chami Ayikta, the men's meditation hall. It was dominated at the front by a kind of stage, like a theatre, and at the back was this enormous statue of the Buddha teaching the first discourse. They had images of the five companions, with deer in the background, forest, and so on. On the stage is where the monks sat, because they're higher up in the hierarchy, and meditators sat on the floor of the theatre, as it were.

One of the meditators was this old fellow who would come in and plonk himself down and sit for goodly periods of time, completely still. As I watched him, it became clear that he was a pretty good practitioner. The thing is, he would plonk himself on the floor right up in front of that enormous Buddha. Bang! Eyeball to eyeball. And he always chose that spot.

I was there meditating, full of anguish and pain and misery and all these good things. Every now and again I'd have a look at him. And I'd think: this guy does not have a problem. It doesn't matter what happens to him. He doesn't have a problem.

Because he knows he's being looked after. He just knows it. And I really envied him because I didn't know it. And it made the whole thing much more difficult.

So this heart connection with the tradition is really important. Because again, dukkha is affective—it's of the heart, it moves the heart. So to be able to go through it and come out the other side, it's via the heart.

Let's go back to where we began. These things play a part in realisation: the perception of impermanence, the perception of pain in impermanence, the perception of not-self in pain. As we move through the experience of dukkha, there's a growing understanding of anattā, of not-self, and this is matched in the heart by growing equanimity, which is essentially balance. The heart becomes wide and it becomes balanced. And this develops throughout the exploration of dukkha, provided we can maintain mindfulness. This is the key point. We remain interested in the experience, not necessarily doing any special meditative things—sometimes we can't—but simply being interested in what's going on and reminding ourselves that whatever it is that's going on, it's not personal.

When equanimity matures, we enter into what the Theravāda calls saṅkhārupekkhāñāṇa—the understanding of equanimity regarding all constructions. In other words, all experience. At this stage, the practitioner is pretty clear about the nature of not-self, and her heart is dominated by mindfulness and equanimity. In this balance, there is no problem because there's no clinging to a problem. And so there is no one who has a problem.

The heart is so wide, so stable, so balanced that nothing can upset it for long, because whatever is experienced is already changing into something else—so why get upset with it? Whatever is experienced is unsatisfactory—so why waste energy struggling against it? Whatever is experienced is not-self—so it's not my problem. It's no one's problem. It's just nature.

And this transforms our relationship with dukkha, with pain. We recognise it as an inherent part of the human condition. And there's even a beauty within it to be appreciated. It's like recognising that part of the beauty of youth is its inevitable transitoriness, the fact that it will disappear.

So, to wrap up, we've seen that in the first truth, the Buddha is quite clear that the practitioner's job is not to solve their dukkha, but to understand it. And when we fully understand our dukkha, our pain, we realise there is no "we" involved. As the Buddha explains to Venerable Kaccānagotta, who was a mature practitioner, the Buddha says a mature practitioner, quote, "has no perplexity or doubt that what arises is only dukkha arising. What ceases is only dukkha ceasing."

Notice what he's saying—only dukkha, not someone who suffers from dukkha. Once we give up the "me and my problem," my problem is not solved. It is dissolved. And this is not just Dharma marketing. The Buddha means this, and in practice it actually works.

So we could say—we want to end optimistically—that the Dharma teaches us we are never going to find the right story that will turn us into a person with no problems. Or, as one verse maker put it: What's One More once created what he called a "spiritual theatre," and it was full of exhibits and paintings on the walls. There was one small painting I quite liked, and every time I visited I would gaze at it. It showed a

very fat Chinese-style monk doing a qigong stretch with a big smile on his face, and underneath it, in Thai with an English translation, was this little verse: "Oh boundless joy! Now I see there is no happiness in this world."

And this is the paradox of the full understanding of dukkha.

I think that's enough for tonight. Any questions?

And yes, it's called functional myopia. So I went and had the surgery. Everything was fine. I went for the second one. Everything was fine. And off I went. It did what it was supposed to do. One of the side effects is it brought my ocular pressure down, so I never have to worry about that again. All is well.

So off I go. And then yesterday, I'm standing out on the deck, looking down at the parking lot, and I thought, "Hey, that tree doesn't look right"—because of the distance between it and the next tree. And then I started looking around, and everything all of a sudden changed. It was like going from a regular movie to one of those 3D films where you have to wear the glasses—it was that much of a change. Now the reality is, and by the way, I've been looking at everything because now everything is different—the reality is that the lens was put in to make that change four months ago. But I didn't see the effects of it until yesterday. So it took four months for my brain to catch up with the change.

And how many other times does that happen during practice and all that we do? You make a change, but you do not see the results for months.

This can definitely happen—something can shift in the practice, something is different, but we don't notice it. We don't notice it. And it can be days, weeks, months, years, until something clicks and we realize, "Oh, it's different. It's different now." And we can recognize that the change actually started way back when. It does happen. Perception can take a while to catch up.

Any questions from Zoom? Ah, Serena.

If there's no self, then who or what is awakened?

The question is: if there's no self, who or what is awakened? The Buddha doesn't actually say "no self"—he says "not self." So he says we can't actually pin it down. But what's awakened, I suppose, is nature itself. This is not something that in the Theravāda you hear discussed much. There are certain streams of Mahāyāna that will talk about this. But the world itself awakens. That's one way of looking at it.

Okay, thank you very much.

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