Dukkha Explained

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:07:43

Dukkha is a Pali word, a compound made up of the prefix *du* and the word *kha*. *Kha* means space, empty space, while the prefix *du* conveys the idea of bad, painful, unpleasant, undesirable, and so on. So *dukkha* is basically a painful space.

It's looked at in different ways. David Loy calls it a sense of lack—the painful emptiness that we find at the centre of our being. Another way that the tradition looks at it is as a badly fitting axle of a wheel. If you think about *kha*, the empty space, this can also refer to the empty space at the hub of a wheel. Of course, the wheel is the basic symbol of Buddhism. Imagine a wheel where the axle goes through and the vehicle moves. But if the axle fits badly in the hub, the vehicle moves only with difficulty and grind. So *dukkha* is that sense of difficulty and grind in experience. It's characterized by drivenness, a sense of urgent necessity—the urgent sense that I've got to do this, I've got to get that, I've got to get rid of this other thing.

The Buddha teaches *dukkha* and the cessation of *dukkha*. The cessation of *dukkha*, of course, is *nibbana*. 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, have to eat, absolutely must eat. The eating satisfies us for a while, but inevitably we become hungry again. So we have to eat again, and again, and again, and again. This sense of again and again and again characterizes *dukkha* when the Buddha talks about it.

In contrast, consider the satisfaction that comes when hunger itself ceases. What would that satisfaction be? It's not the same satisfaction as satisfying one's hunger. It's different, and we could speculate that it would be characterized by a peace that cannot be found through ordinary desire. This is *nibbana*, the peace of *nibbana*. And of course *nibbana* is the cessation of *dukkha*. So *dukkha* and the cessation of *dukkha*—this is central to the Buddhist teaching.

We were talking about impermanence last time. The Buddha talks about *dukkha* in the context of *anicca* on one side, *anatta* on the other—impermanence on one side, not-self on the other. There are always these three, what are called the three characteristics: *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anatta*, always in that order. And *dukkha* sits right in the middle.

Impermanence is really central for the Buddha and central for the arising of insight. If we want insight, understanding, then impermanence, *anicca*, is central. It's so important that the Buddha says to his son Rahula, "Cultivate the perception of impermanence. For when you cultivate the perception of impermanence, the conceit 'I am' will be abandoned." Abandoning the conceit "I am" is code for full enlightenment. In other words, if we cultivate the perception of impermanence, it will take us to full enlightenment.

Anicca is closely related to *dukkha*, and the reason for this is again found if you look at the word itself. *Ani cca* is usually translated as "impermanent." "Impermanent" is a kind of very abstract term, and it doesn't sound like there's anything wrong with it. Sounds okay. But when we look at the word itself and the way the word is used in the Buddha's time, first of all, *anicca* is a negative term—*a* means "not," so not *nicca*, or in Sanskrit, not *nitya*. To be *nicca* is to be permanent. In more everyday usage, it means stable, constant, reliable. So in everyday Pali, *nicca* refers to what can be relied upon and therefore what can be taken for granted.

To be anitya, impermanent, means to be unstable, inconstant, discontinuous, and therefore unreliable—not to be trusted. When we rely on something or someone unreliable, sooner or later we're disappointed. And this is bound to happen. So this is the link between anicca and dukkha.

Dukkha has certain characteristics. The Buddha introduces the concept in his first formal teaching, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta—Turning the Dharma Wheel—when he talks about the four truths. Dukkha is the first truth, and then you have the arising of dukkha, the cessation of dukkha, and the path leading to the cessation of dukkha.

When he's talking about the first truth, he describes dukkha in three layers. The first is normal everyday pain found in any human life. And by the way, sometimes you hear people say the Buddha said life is suffering. He never said that. What he said is dukkha is a fact. Pain is a fact. If we go through a human life, at some point it will hurt. So this is the most surface level of dukkha—just ordinary everyday pain.

The next layer is the pain inherent in change. Here we see the connection with impermanence. This refers to the fact that our circumstances are in a state of continuous fluctuation and change, all the way from the micro to the macro. If you think about your meditation experience, from the beginning of a session to the end, does it change? Yes. If you think about your life, from the beginning to today, does it change? Yes. But what the Buddha points out is that it changes inevitably, and we are not in charge of these changes. That's the crucial point. We're not in control. The changes are inevitable, but we're not in charge of them.

We can look at two instances. Take physical pain. As meditators, have you noticed that we are never still for any period of time? We move constantly. And why do we move? We move because we want to get comfortable. And if we're doing that, it means we are chronically uncomfortable. Even in our sleep, we move. Of course, if you practice meditation, you come across this very soon when you realize what a difficult project it is to remain still over a period of time. Very few people find it easy. Most people find it difficult because in that stillness, the ordinary pain of the body—which is built into it—emerges.

Then there's psychological pain. Our body craves movement; our mind craves a flow of concept and stimulus. In today's world, for example, when we're separated from our devices, the mind becomes restless and uncomfortable. How often when you go into a café and sit down, realizing there's nothing happening right now, do you reach for the phone? There must be something happening. Where's the next stimulus? When we practice meditation, we can see the mind searching for the sustenance of stories,

searching for some kind of conceptual stimulus. It's got to have it. And it's very difficult to persuade the mind to just sit still and relax.

So this lack of control over the changes in our lives is painful. And it becomes clear that it's painful when we allow ourselves to notice it. Of course, we spend most of our lives deliberately not noticing it. That's one of the reasons why meditation practice is difficult—because we tend to notice it when we practice.

Then we come to the deepest layer of pain. This is what the Buddha calls the pain of constructions, and this is essentially the same as the second layer but recognized at the deepest level as being inherent to human experience. In other words, there's nothing we can do about it. We're endlessly moving from one activity or sense impression to another with no chance of finding a stable point where the heart might find lasting satisfaction and so rest. In brief, this deepest level can be seen as the absence of rest in samsara, in ordinary experience.

So what can we do about dukkha? Where does it fit in our practice, especially if we are practicing for insight or doing insight meditation?

In his Four Truths, the Buddha says what we should do about dukkha is fully understand it. This is pariñña, full understanding—not trying to get rid of it, not identifying with it, but really deeply understanding it. In the later Theravada tradition, this becomes what they call dukkha ñāṇa, the understanding of dukkha, or dukkha as insight. Here dukkha is understood as the second universal characteristic: anicca, dukkha, anattā. This involves a movement from the experience of pain to that of insight into pain. And of course, you can see they're quite different.

In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the root text for mindfulness practice, this is how the Buddha introduces this subject. In this discourse he gives a whole series of practices—mindfulness of breathing, mindfulness of posture, and so on. These are all aspects of mindfulness of body, mindfulness of feelings, mind, and the rest. Now, at the end of each section, he has a chorus, a little section which is repeated after every verse. It's exactly the same, except there's a slight change because each appearance of this chorus refers back to the immediately preceding verse.

For example, the Buddha is talking about tracking body, being mindful of body. Then he gets to insight and describes the practitioner in this way: "She lives tracking the nature of arising as body. Or she lives tracking the nature of ceasing as body. Or she lives tracking both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body."

Notice the change of language. The Buddha is moving from tracking body as meditation object and noticing that it changes—that shifts into tracking change itself and noticing that these changes are happening in the body. In other words, there's been a movement from the particular to the universal. This breath is changing; all physical experience changes. And this is the movement into insight.

When we're practicing for insight, it always begins with understanding the individual, the particular

experience here and now. The Buddha calls this dhamma ñāṇa, understanding of phenomena, understanding into events. Then it matures into understanding of the universal. The Buddha calls this anvaya ñāṇa, which is essentially understanding through inference. This involves recognizing the universal patterns of experience as they play out over time. In other words, insight is always generalized.

So the movement from dukkha to insight into dukkha is a movement from the particular to the universal.

If you think about ordinary, everyday dukkha—has anybody here ever had a painful experience? This is ordinary, everyday dukkha. This is not yet the characteristic of dukkha because its universality is not perceived, only its particularity. This situation is dukkha. This situation hurts. But not that one. So an escape from dukkha is possible within the realm of the impermanent, within the realm of the normal. Yes, I'm suffering pain, but I feel there could be an alternative that would work, and I have reason to pursue that alternative. It makes sense to do this.

So that situation is not dukkha jnana. It's not insight into dukkha. It's not understanding of dukkha.

Now, when we have that relationship to dukkha, there's all sorts of things that can happen. For example, I think among meditators, one thing that happens is that we find ourselves living alternative lives. Has anybody ever done that? Especially on meditation retreats?

We find ourselves reimagining the past. "If only I had done this instead of that, my life would have been more satisfactory. Everything would have been okay." And we imagine an alternative future. "When I get out of here, things will be different." Have you ever had that feeling on a meditation retreat? Or we even imagine an alternative present. "Right now I'll take a break and then things will be better."

These fantasies seem real. They have power over us because our understanding of dukkha is still particular rather than universal. Does that make sense?

This is basically the entry into insight, the entry into insight into dukkha, which is really crucial. So let's go there.

How do we know that we're developing insight into dukkha? One indication of it—and this can sound very gloomy—is the realization that there is nothing we can do to solve our problem. Nothing.

And why is this? Number one, the very need to resolve this problem is an aspect of dukkha. And number two, any solution we find will have to at some point be replaced by something else. This is impermanence. And then it will have to be replaced by something else. And then that will have to be replaced by something else, and so on indefinitely.

So we stay trapped in the rat race, in the hamster's wheel, because anything we do to get out of dukkha is just another aspect of the experience of being stuck in it. It's like we're just running around and around and around. And it's the running around itself which is dukkha.

In other words, it's catch-22. This is the cheerful news of the Buddha. And when we recognize it's catch-22, that's where insight into dukkha really begins.

Shall we stop there, because it's all so cheerful? We can chew on that for a few days.

So let's look at this business of insight, or the word we're looking at is jnana, because this is the word in particular that the Theravada tradition uses. Basically, when our understanding of impermanence changes, matures, what we find is we are directly aware in change itself. And that's when the understanding of dukkha emerges.

So again, the movement from the particular to the universal. It's not that this changes and then this changes and then this changes. Rather, I realize actually what I'm seeing is the fact of change itself. It's like a foreground-background shift.

In the early stages, let's say I'm meditating and I've got a meditation object and I'm following it. And in the background, I'm noticing, "Oh yes, this meditation object changes." So I've got foreground—the particular—and background—"yes, it changes." At some point, there's a shift, and I realize actually my meditation object is the fact of change itself. And oh yes, it's happening in this particular phenomenon.

Now, this is very subtle.

It's so subtle that it can actually happen and people don't even notice it. It can take some time before a practitioner realizes, "Oh yes, that's what's different these days," because it is very subtle. And this is the entry into insight regarding impermanence.

Now, insight regarding dukkha—how does that emerge? In the Theravada tradition, centuries after the Buddha, the teachers mapped the movement all the way through from our understanding of anicca, of change, of impermanence, through to our understanding of dukkha, pain, unsatisfactoriness, through to our understanding of anatta, not-self. So this movement through the three characteristics.

Now, these are always listed in this order, probably because they're listed in order of subtlety. Anicca, change, is the easiest characteristic to notice. And in terms of practice, it's possible to structure one's attention to bring impermanence to our notice. In other words, it's possible to practice impermanence.

In the Mahasi lineage that I teach in, the way this is done is by drawing the student's attention to the fact of distraction. I'm following my meditation object, suddenly I'm caught up in thinking, then I come back to the meditation object. So the awareness is here, then it's there, then it's back here. In other words, change. Change. Change, change, change, change, change. Awareness moves and we start tracking the movements. So there's a sense in which it's possible to do impermanence. You can structure a meditation technique to get you to see it.

Those of you who have practiced the Goenka method—when he's doing insight, what does he do? Track all the different sensations throughout the body. Change, change, change, change, change, change, change,

going through the body. All insight meditation techniques have this characteristic. So there's a sense in which we can get started with impermanence, with change. It's obvious to begin with, and we can actually, in a sense, do it.

Dukkha, pain, is more subtle and it's harder to see. Or at least dukkha ñana, insight into dukkha, is harder to see. Some teachers, traditional teachers, are delighted when their students report pain because they say, "Oh, very good, now you can experience dukkha." But that's very superficial. And the thing is, we cannot do dukkha. We cannot try to make it happen. Or rather, if we do try to make it happen, the result is much more likely to be aversion than insight. So it doesn't work.

Then we get anatta, not-self. That's the most subtle characteristic and the most difficult to see. And in part, this is because it's so counterintuitive. When people hear about not-self, the first response is often, "What are you talking about? I'm here. You're saying I don't exist?" So it's counterintuitive.

And also, not-self is fundamentally an absence. It's not a something. It's an absence. Something is missing rather than present. And it's always harder to see an absence than to see something that is present. Let's say you go to a party. You look around to see who of your friends are there. That's easy. But to recognize who of your friends are not there—that's a bit harder.

So in the case of not-self, we assume that a self is present, that it's lurking in the background. And it can take a while to notice that actually it isn't. This makes not-self difficult to get, to see. And of course, we certainly cannot do not-self. We cannot do anatta, because if there's someone doing it, then we have a self in charge of a project rather than not-self.

So we have these three characteristics, always listed in this order.

And one way of looking at it is listed from gross to subtle. What brings this order into the system is samādhi. Samādhi is usually translated as concentration. It could be translated as unification—the heart and the mind are unified. Integration would be another possibility. Ajahn Sujato, these days, apparently translates it as immersion, which is very good. I like that.

As samādhi develops, we go deeper into experience, and our view of what's happening is necessarily influenced by that. The deeper we go into experience, the more likely we are to pick up these characteristics. So that's a kind of linear way of looking at the three characteristics: first anicca, then dukkha, then anattā.

But it's very important to remember that the three characteristics are always a single package. In other words, where there's anicca, there is dukkha and anattā. Where there's anattā, there's anicca and dukkha. And where there's dukkha, there's anicca and anattā. All three are already present.

For practical purposes, this means that a meditation student's experience may not follow a tidy progression through these characteristics in order. Some students stumble into experiences that they have

absolutely no business being in at all, and this can create problems for teachers.

But let's look at dukkha ñāṇa as mapped by the later Theravāda, just to get a sense of how the tradition speaks about it.

So, as I said, we start with impermanence. We see change. We start to see what's going on with change—things are changing. Now, if we say things are changing, they're impermanent, we're saying that they begin, they endure for some time, and then they end. There's a beginning, somewhere in the middle, and an end. Our view of impermanence changes depending on the perspective of this process that we have when we are aware of change.

When our perception of impermanence matures, what the mind sees predominantly is the ending of things, the cessation of things, the time when things fall away. This can result in some pretty weird experiences for meditators. Sometimes, for example, in a strong experience of this, meditators might say it's like they're on the edge of a bottomless canyon, or even that they're falling into a bottomless abyss. They have a sense that there really is no ground to experience at all. If they ask themselves the question "What lies beneath?" the answer is nothing—or not even nothing.

This experience opens up into an existential anxiety, or in a strong sense, even dread. If there's nothing at all, then who am I? And what is this all about?

When this understanding is relatively weak, this can take the form of the meditator apparently losing the concentration that he had before and being unable to focus on anything. The meditator might be in a retreat—typically this would happen in a retreat. The meditation is developing. The samādhi is getting stronger and stronger. The meditator is able to stay on the meditation object for longer. And then suddenly he can't do it anymore. His attention, his awareness keeps sliding off whatever he tries to attend to. He aims his awareness on a meditation object and it's like the awareness just slides off. He can't get hold of anything. It's like trying to grasp something that slips out of your hand the moment you touch it—it's gone.

In a stronger aspect, it can be like falling into a black hole. Wherever you look, there's nothing, just blackness. Practitioners may also report the disappearance of the form of the body. Before, the meditator might have seen physical experiences break up into very specific and discrete aspects.

But there was always the background sense that these movements belonged together as different aspects of the same thing—like "me breathing."

But at this point, movement is just movement. Pressure is just pressure. Tension is just tension. There's no sense of what part of the body these sensations belong to. The sense of the whole body disappears, and all that's left is a series of apparently disconnected individual sensations. There's no body as such.

This indicates the maturing of the perception of impermanence and the entry into the perception of

dukkha.

Now, when this momentum builds, the result can be the emergence of fear. And fear is very important in insight practice. In my experience as a teacher, many people report experiencing fear. And it's a good sign—it's a sign of progress.

In its strong form, this can manifest as panic. In its weak form, it can be just a sense of existential unease, a sense of nothing going right, a sense of helplessness. In other words, a sense of loss of control—the realization "I am not in control of my life."

This is an aspect of seeing dukkha. But one of the things about it, and this is where things really get strange, is that this fear is not personal. When we actually start to pay attention to it, when it first arises, the practitioner might not examine it, might not see it as a meditation object, might simply identify with it. "Oh my God, this is terrible. I've got to get out of here."

But when the practitioner remains mindful, she realizes that although there's danger here, there's no one who is in danger. It's rather like watching a scary movie—fear arises, yet even as the fear is present, there's also the understanding that the situation is not real, and so fundamentally the fear is not grounded. In other words, there's no need to fear the fear.

And again, this is an aspect of groundlessness, which is central to the understanding of dukkha. We realize that our fear of groundlessness is groundless. This indicates that underneath this sense of dukkha, underneath this sense of dis-ease and dissatisfaction, there's a developing sense of anattā. Even though dukkha is occupying the foreground of experience, in the background, when we look, we realize—ah, there's not-self there.

Then, if the practice continues to mature, the practitioner realizes the impossibility of her situation, which we touched on earlier. There's no refuge anywhere from this abyss. There is nowhere to escape to. Any fantasy of escape is seen to be just that—a fantasy that I would like to believe in, but I can't.

This sometimes arises during meditation retreats. The desire to leave becomes very strong. Then, if the practitioner thinks, "Okay, if I get out of here because I can't stand this anymore, where would I go? I could go back home"—would home be any better? No. And that becomes quite clear. Any fantasy of escape is seen as just a fantasy.

This is part of the universality of dukkha, of seeing its universality. There's nothing to hold on to, nowhere to escape to.

Now, if the practitioner persists—and of course, by this time you probably realize that sometimes it's a rough ride—but if the practitioner persists, there comes a turning point. This is disenchantment, what the Buddha calls nibbidā.

Throughout this whole process, the perception of anattā, of not-self, is growing underneath. And as this

grows, it means that the practitioner's identification with the dukkha she is going through is weakening. The anattā, the sense of not-self, is increasing.

The sense of identification with the pain is going down, which means that she's not stuck in it.

Now, disenchantment is a phase where the practitioner genuinely lets go of her search for satisfaction within her normally experienced world. It's as if it becomes obvious that even if she were to abandon the practice and attain her most heartfelt desire, this too would be unsatisfactory. There's no situation she can imagine which is satisfactory. All her desires and fantasies are like ashes in her mouth. Nothing works. Nothing will work. What is the point of struggling? Instead, she simply surrenders. She gives up. And this is the crucial turning point.

It's at this point that we get what the later tradition calls the desire for deliverance. The practitioner is fed up with the endless rat race of samsara and yearns for deliverance from it. In other words, she yearns for nibbana, the cessation of dukkha. And this yearning becomes very strong.

It can be characterized by strange symptoms that may pop up at this point. For example, some people will go through a great deal of physical pain and restlessness. The meditator may be unable to hold any posture of the body for any period of time—any posture is painful. Sometimes meditators retreat to bed to sleep for as long as they can, just to escape the unpleasantness involved in being conscious. This is the crescendo of the understanding of dukkha.

And you notice how in this aspect of insight, affect is central. This is different from, or to some degree different from, impermanence. Impermanence is more cognitive—oh yes, everything's changing. But change itself isn't really all that challenging. This goes into the heart. This is the realm of affect, of feeling. This is why it's so challenging.

What is it that moves us? What moves the heart? We are moved by sukha or dukkha, to use the Buddha's language. We are moved by the pleasant or the unpleasant. And in the case of this understanding, we are moved by dukkha, the unpleasant. This realm of affect is expressed in our desires and our aversions—what we desire and what we are desperate to escape from. All of this comes up in the understanding of dukkha.

From the Buddha's perspective, the fundamental question is whether we desire what he calls the sankhata, the constructed, that which brings us pain, or whether we desire the asankhata, the unconstructed, that which brings us the cessation of pain.

Now, our deeply rooted habit is to desire the constructed, that which brings us pain. This is the world we are familiar with. This is the world we take as being normal. This is what meditators on retreats, when they're feeling irritable and upset, will call "the real world." Yes, this is all very nice and spiritual and Buddhist-y, but what about the real world? What about that? This is the world of the constructed. This is the world that creates our pain, which we're deeply familiar with.

In contrast, we don't know anything about the unconstructed, what brings the cessation of pain. So if we don't know anything about it, how can we desire it? But when we become disenchanted by the constructed, because we've learned to understand it thoroughly, then we learn to desire something else.

At first, this something else may be characterized entirely negatively. What I want is not all this. It's not what I've always experienced. I don't want this, and I don't want what I can imagine that I would experience into the future. But then what is it that I do want? What is that? This can be a real dilemma for practitioners at this point.

If I'm working within a practice tradition, it's easier. First of all, I might have a theoretical sense of what this might be. I've heard people speak about enlightenment and nirvana and so on. So I can feel encouraged in my disillusionment because I do understand, at least intellectually, that there is something, however mysterious, that's better than this. I have a sense of direction, even if this sense of direction is defined negatively: I don't want to keep doing this. I want something else.

Also, if we're in a practice tradition, if we have teachers and senior practitioners that we can look up to—what the Buddha calls good friends, kalyanamittas—then we might have a lived sense of what lies beyond the familiar, beyond "the real world." In my case, one of my main teachers, John Hale, who was also a close friend, did this for me. If I wanted to know, what is this practice all about? I'd just look at him. Ah, that's what it is. And I'd calm down.

But if I'm living in an entirely secular world, then I might be tempted to despair. Nothing works, nothing ever did work, and nothing ever will work. There's no meaning or purpose that satisfies, so what can I do?

You can see that this insight can be a rough one—it can be a very rough ride. Though not necessarily. Some people seem to glide through this stage. "Oh, yes, there's a bit of dukkha. That's okay." But other people really get stuck there, get bogged down in it, and go through it very strongly. It varies greatly from person to person.

What gets us through is a growing understanding of anattā, of not-self. This is cognitive—this is what we're seeing, of course. And this is matched in the heart, in the realm of affect, by a growing equanimity. All the way through this exploration of dukkha, equanimity develops. If we maintain the mindfulness, equanimity develops. And equanimity is essentially balance—the heart is strong and balanced.

When equanimity matures, we enter into what the Theravāda calls sankhārupekkhā ñāṇa, the understanding of equanimity regarding all constructions—all of them. At this point, what the practitioner sees is not-self. Dukkha has dropped away; it's out of the foreground. What is clear is not-self. And what dominates the heart is mindfulness and equanimity. At this stage, there's absolutely no problem, for the simple reason that there's no clinging to a problem, and therefore no one who has a problem.

Now, I'm going to ask a bold question: does anybody have the slightest idea what I'm talking about? Any questions or comments?

Question from the audience: I have a question about choice. Because when insight comes, there is a moment where choice comes in too. When you view impermanence, or the self, or even pain—you mentioned there's a cognitive element, an acceptance element—there is a choice to think, to accept. I'm grappling with this question of choice.

What you raise is very important, because there's choice all the way through. In the most summary form, there's the choice: will I continue with this, or stop? Will I continue being mindful of whatever is arising? That choice—we're always in the situation where we're called upon to make it. In a sense: what do I do about this? I'm in this situation; what do I do about it?

This is, for the Buddha, the fundamental choice that we have all the time. When he talks about karma, this is what he's talking about—the choice that we have. This is the situation I'm in; what do I do about it? We're constantly making choices, and this process, in that sense, is no different. But sometimes the choices are much more sharp, as it were, because of the situation we're in.

Question from the audience: I've attended Buddhist discourse in the Tibetan tradition where I've heard non-self described as where the self does not have inherent existence from its own side—that's a very common description in the Mahāyāna tradition. But that's not how I've heard it described from your tradition tonight. I was curious to get a better understanding of what you mean by non-self.

The absence of inherent existence, that definition, comes out of centuries of philosophy. So you have the Buddha's teaching, and then he dies, and then you get people talking about it, analysing it, arranging it, trying to work it out—what does he mean?—applying it to new historical circumstances. And this process goes on and on and on, and it's going on today.

So in the Mahayana you have this development of a genuine philosophical tradition where philosophers argue and debate and come up with these different ways of intellectualising anattā, not-self. You do get very different expressions of it, and this is only to be expected. Really, from the practitioner's point of view, the question is: what makes sense to you? As someone in the pews, on the bench, what can I make sense of? What's meaningful to me?

So if I'm hearing something from a well-established Mahayana tradition, I can pretty much trust it. These people know what they're talking about. But they're coming at it from a particular angle—very philosophical, very intellectual. The Buddha himself was not a philosopher. He didn't do philosophy, essentially because for him the arguments weren't so important. He engaged in philosophy in the sense that he debated with people, but he was much more interested in directing people's attention to their actual experience.

What he would talk about is: look, this particular experience—do you own it? Is it you? Because if you own it and it just moved, what happened to your possession? If it's you and it just changed into something else, what happened to you? So he was more interested in not-self as a kind of project. Can you find

something which could reasonably be labelled self? And in a sense he's saying, my bet is that you won't—but feel free to try. He's much more interested in the actual practice and talking about what happens.

Now, we've been talking about the later Theravada. This, again, you have a philosophical tradition that heads off in a certain direction. But here they're talking about basically analysing the experience of what practitioners go through when they practice, and the sorts of things that they understand as they go through it. So the basic understanding of not-self is the same throughout the different traditions, but there are different ways of talking about it, essentially. The question is: what makes sense for you?

The question continues: in the context of tonight's teachings where you are talking about that linear connection between anicca, dukkha, and non-self, how does the non-self fit into that progression?

We haven't, of course, talked about not-self as our main focus. It's kind of out there on the far horizon—we're going to get to it eventually. For the Buddha, when he talks about not-self, I would translate anattā as "not-self" rather than "non-self." Because the way the Buddha talks about it, I think basically what he's saying is: look at this experience. Is it self, or is it not-self?

Now, for him, self is a project. It's a construction project. We are constructing ourselves. So right now I'm sitting in front of this little screen, answering difficult and learned questions, and I'm supposed to be the teacher. I'm constructing a self: I'm the teacher and I've got the answers. And so I'm going blah, blah, blah, hoping that I'll convince you that that's true. This is constructing self.

So the Buddha is saying: look, we think the self is already given—it's what you expressed as "has inherent existence on its own side." We think there's a self there. But look at what you're doing. You're creating it all the time. If you have to create it all the time, how can it be there? And what would happen if you stopped creating it? Would you feel better?

So what we're talking about in dukkha is very largely the resistance to letting go into not-self. And it's interesting that the Buddha does link dukkha very closely with anattā.

In other words—and this comes up in what the Buddha says about not-self in his next discourse, which eventually we're going to get to—when he introduces not-self, he actually introduces it as bad news. It's painful. And the entry into not-self often is quite painful, because to enter into not-self, I have to give up self. In other words, I have to let go of everything that's familiar to me and everything that I'm hanging on to. And that's really painful.

So dukkha in a sense represents the resistance to going into not-self. Some people have very little resistance—it's like, "Oh, this is great!" and in they go. Other people have a huge amount of resistance and they'll fight it every inch of the way. And you get a whole series of responses. So we're coming at it from a slightly different angle.

Question: I'm not sure if I've got this clearly because I haven't heard a lot of this before, but am I understanding right that when we have insight into specific change, it leads us to more awareness of the concept of universal change? And then the fear that can arise from that, and the uncomfortableness that arises from that. That tension builds until we reach a state where we can just release, and—I think it's not submit—surrender. We surrender to that. And by doing that, we can then release ourselves from the attachment to self, and that's more what the Buddha talks about as being enlightenment. Is that the kind of progress?

That's a pretty good executive summary. I think you're doing quite well there. It's quite esoteric and quite difficult to wrap your head around, so you don't need to understand the whole thing tonight—just get a sense that this is where the territory is. But yes, I think that's a good executive summary.

Shall we move on? We've just got a little bit more. And this is where I want to enter into the world of controversy.

If one is practicing for insight—what the tradition calls vipassanā bhāvanā—particularly insight regarding dukkha, which we're talking about tonight, we've been looking at it in terms of dukkha as pain, suffering, unsatisfactoriness, and dukkha ñāṇa, insight into dukkha, understanding of dukkha.

Very broadly, very roughly, we could see this in terms of the distinction between psychology and Dharma. Speaking again very roughly—and I say this as a non-psychologist; I know nothing about psychology, and this will perhaps be evident as I open my mouth here—we could say that psychology deals with people and their problems. But Dharma does not. And that's a major difference between these two discourses.

Dharma is all about anattā, not-self; suññatā, emptiness. It's not about people and it's not about their problems. Now, one implication of this is that Dharma practice cannot solve anyone's problems. What the practice can do is show us that we and our problems are empty. And that's all. The rest is up to the Dharma.

In other words, anyone who comes to a meditation retreat in order to solve their problems is coming to the wrong place. The Buddha makes this clear in his First Truth. He makes it clear that the practitioner's job is not to solve their dukkha, but to understand it.

When we understand our dukkha in the way the Buddha's talking about, we realize there is no "we" involved. The Buddha says to Venerable Kaccānagotta—or rather, he describes a mature practitioner to Venerable Kaccānagotta. He says the mature practitioner, quote, "has no perplexity or doubt that what arises is only dukkha arising; what ceases is only dukkha ceasing."

In other words, it's just the dukkha coming and going. It's not me. I'm not part of this picture. Once we give up on the "me and my problem, my suffering, my dukkha"—my problem is not solved; it is dissolved.

And the dissolution of the problem—this is not dharma marketing. The Buddha means this. And in

practice, it actually works.

So these are two quite different discourses: psychology and dharma. Now, the fact that they're not the same does not mean that they inhabit separate but parallel universes. They intersect. They interconnect.

From our dharma practice, we can learn something about our psychological makeup, and this, in turn, can help us with both our therapy and our practice. We learn from our story. We get from our personal story both a meaning, a new variation of the story, and we learn how to regulate our attention.

For example, from our personal story we might learn where it would be most useful to aim our awareness, or what we should be using as the meditation object, or what conditional relationships are most worth exploring to shed light on how we feed what the Buddha calls the roots of the unwholesome.

But at a fundamental level, we learn we are never going to find the right story.

When I talk about this, I like to sum it up with a brief verse that I came across at Wat Suan Mok in southern Thailand many years ago, painted on the wall in Thai with an English translation underneath. It's got a picture of a fat Chinese monk doing a qigong stretch with a big grin on his face. And the verse says:

Oh, boundless joy! Now I see there is no happiness in this world.

This paradox sums up rukkhanyana.

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