The First Noble Truth — Dukkha

Bhante Bodhidhamma · A Foundation Course in Buddhism · 21:37

Foundation course in Buddhism, talk one. The first noble truth of suffering, *dukkha*.

Dukkha literally means hard to bear or difficult to endure. So *dukkha* is variously translated as pain, suffering, misery, discontent, discomfort, unhappiness, frustration, unsatisfactoriness and such like. It is a very difficult word to translate into English, since it has so many shades of meaning, much as our word love has. But we need to know these meanings because *dukkha* is a central concept of the Buddha's teachings. In fact, it's the starting point of his whole doctrine.

The first noble truth states that life itself is suffering, is unsatisfactory. Because of this bold statement, Buddhism is accused of being life-negating, of being negative and pessimistic. And it would be so, were it not for the third noble truth, which states in equally bold fashion that there is an end to suffering. The Buddha summed up his whole teaching saying that he only taught two things – the truth of suffering and the end of suffering.

It was his experience of life as unsatisfactory that led the Buddha to leave home and follow the hard ascetic life. The Buddha was born into the Kshatriya caste, who were the rulers, governors, landed gentry, you might say, of those times. The other castes were, and still are in Hinduism, the Brahmins, the highest caste, who were the priests of the society. Beneath them the Kshatriya, then the Vaishya, who were the merchants and tradesmen, and finally the Sudra, who were the artisans and workers. All other peoples, such as the slaves, were outside the caste system. They were the pariahs.

The Buddha's father was a leader of a small group of Kshatriya families known as the Sakyas, their clan name, who ruled in an area of North India on the border of present-day Nepal. Life for the young Siddhartha Gautama was, we can believe, easy and pleasant, and may even have been luxurious. It seems, however, that his courtly life upbringing did not hide from him the suffering inherent in life, and a legend tells how he came to face this. While out riding and hunting on various days, he first saw a sick man, then a dying man, and finally a corpse.

Here is a passage from one of the discourses where the Buddha explains his experience. First he tells us how luxurious his life was. "I was delicate, most delicate, extremely delicate. Lily pools were made at my father's house solely for my benefit. Blue lilies flowered one, white lilies another, red lilies a third. I used no sandalwood that was not of Benares. My turban, tunic, lower garments and cloak were all made of Benares cloth. A white sunshade was held over me day and night, so no cold, or heat, or dust, or grit, or dew might inconvenience me."

So now we have an idea of his courtly lifestyle. "Whilst I had such power and good fortune, yet I thought: When an ordinary untaught man who is subject to ageing, not safe from ageing, sees another who has aged, he is shocked, humiliated and disgusted, for he had forgotten that he himself is no exception. But I too am subject to ageing, not safe from ageing, and so it cannot be right for me to be shocked, humiliated and disgusted when I see another who has aged. When I considered this, the vanity of my youth completely left me."

"I thought, when an ordinary untaught man, who is subject to sickness, not safe from sickness, sees another who is sick, he is shocked, humiliated and disgusted, for he had forgotten that he himself is no exception. But I too am subject to sickness, not safe from sickness, and so it cannot be right for me to be shocked, humiliated and disgusted when I see another who is sick. When I considered this, the vanity of health completely left me."

"I thought, when an ordinary untaught man, who is subject to death, not safe from death, sees another who is dead, he is shocked, humiliated and disgusted, for he had forgotten that he himself is no exception. But I too am subject to death, not safe from death, so it cannot be right for me to be shocked, humiliated and disgusted when I see another who is dead. When I considered this, the vanity of life itself completely left me."

Given the additions of an ordered tradition, for the scriptures were not actually written down for 500 years after the Buddha's death, what we can accept as fact is that the whole problem of suffering had become a major concern for the young nobleman. The last straw, it seems, was when he woke up in the early morning after a night of revelry, and saw about him bodies lying about in ungainly and disgusting positions, the air foul with the smell of alcohol and vomit. His sense of disgust, coupled with the growing weariness of trying to find any substantial or meaningful happiness in a life geared to sensual pleasure, finally caused him to leave.

That early morning, he left on his favourite horse, Kanthaka, and with his faithful servant, Channa, rode beyond three kingdoms and crossed the river Anoma. He cut off his hair as a sign of renouncing the life devoted to sensual pleasure. He then gave his ornaments and jewellery to Channa and went in search of a teacher. It is said that such was the distress of his horse Kanthaka that he died of a heart attack.

In another discourse, reasons of a more philosophical nature are given by the Buddha to explain how he came to this momentous decision, known as the Great Renunciation. "At this time, before I was enlightened, because I was subject to birth, I wanted to find out the nature of birth. So I thought to myself, since I am subject to birth, what if I were to find out what birth really is and discover the unsatisfactoriness of the nature of birth? So I set out to discover the unborn, the supreme of *Nibbāna*." And he says the same of sickness, old age and death.

In other words, he left the court confident there was an end to suffering, which, by the way, was not annihilation. So what constitutes this *dukkha*, suffering or unsatisfactoriness, is divided into three

categories. The first is called ordinary suffering. The second is called the suffering caused by the changing nature of life. And the third is that caused by our conditioning or conditioned states.

Here we shall concern ourselves with the first category, ordinary suffering. This is how the Buddha expresses it in his first ever discourse after his enlightenment in which he expounds the basic teachings of the four noble truths and the eightfold noble path. It is called the discourse on the turning of the wheel of the law. "This is the first noble truth of suffering. Birth is suffering. Decay is suffering. Death is suffering. Sorrow, grief, lamentation, physical and mental pain, despair are all suffering. To be with what we dislike is suffering. To be separated from what we like is suffering."

Here it is important to grasp that the Buddha is talking about those things people normally associate with suffering and pain, the whole birth process, teething, acne, hormonal changes, middle age crises, the aches and pains of growing old and the final agony of death. He also means the emotional pains of frustration, anxiety, depression, despair and so on. He is also saying that this is part and parcel of life itself. We are subject to this suffering. It's the package we receive when we're born.

When we really contemplate this, really think about it, it's depressing. Yes, it's true. The only thing I can say with absolute certainty about my life is that it will end. I will die, whether I like it or not. But it is only when we find the courage to face this hard fact, rather than avoid it, that there can be any possibility of discovering if there is anything beyond this cycle of birth and death. That is what the Buddha did as a young man. He decided to face the facts, and it led him to discover that which is beyond birth and death, *Nibbāna*.

Generally speaking, much of our suffering lies in the fact that we find it hard to face this sort of reality. It is a good exercise to look over the past and see how we have approached and tackled problems, upsets, catastrophes and traumas. One way we approach the painful is to avoid it, to shun it, to try and escape from it. We prefer to do anything but feel the pain, physical or mental. On a physical level, as soon as even a small ache is felt in the head, we reach for the bottle of pills. Sometimes, if we get a slight pain in the body, we'll ignore it. We'll pretend it's nothing, but underneath the apparent easy-going attitude is the fear we don't face that it may be a cancer or a dangerous illness.

On the emotional level, if we feel depressed, we'll try and drown it out with a drink. If we feel bored, we'll try and escape by turning on the TV. If we feel lonely or anxious, we'll phone a friend. Anything not to feel the boredom, the depression, the anxiety, the loneliness and so on. We don't want to feel them. Why should we?

If these escape routes are blocked, if we can't use our usual means of pushing these negative feelings away, we'll talk about them. We'll spend hours groaning, complaining, whinging and whining to family, friends, colleagues, doctors, anyone who'll listen. Even the cat gets an earful.

For instance, very few people will face up to the fact of death. You can joke about it, but you can't talk

about it seriously. That can get too close to the feelings of terror and horror it arouses. Some will have long conversations about death. What is death? What is it to die? To be or not to be? Wonderful questions, but all intellectualisations, all rationalisations. It makes you feel good to talk about and around death, but it's still escapism. It's just a mental exercise. It separates us from the real feelings we have about death.

If we really want to know what it is to die, we should visit mortuaries and look upon actual corpses. Not for ghoulish fancies, but to arouse our subconscious fears. This is what the monks in the Buddha's time used to do. They would visit the charnel grounds and gaze upon dead bodies in different states of decay. Some do it even to this day, I believe. By such an exercise, we come to know not what death is, but rather how we relate to it. We can never know death as it really is till we actually die. So what's the point of talking about it? It's just another way of escaping our painful feelings, our suffering.

The peculiar thing is that this sort of attitude, constantly turning away from what is painful, blocking it, rationalising it, always escaping, causes the mind to dwell on the good side of life, the pleasures, the excitement, the bright future. It produces an unreal optimism. Things always turn out all right. Life's great. I'm happy. Eat, drink and be merry, for we die tomorrow. Not now. Anyway, it won't happen to me. Not in the foreseeable future. So what's all this talk about life is suffering? I'm happy. Life's great.

This sort of optimism is obviously false, leading to false beliefs and false hopes. And beneath it all sits a lot of repressed fears and anxieties. Such a person is not prepared for the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. When the Buddha states that life is unsatisfactory, he is asking us to see life as it really is, and not to shy away from its inbuilt suffering.

The opposite of this approach to life is when we submit passively to suffering and misfortune. Life's hard, and then you die. A helplessness, a loss of reason for living. What's the point? It's all work, work, work. Why bother? We're all going to die. At first sight, compared to the optimist, this might seem a little more realistic. At least, the pessimist is accepting totally the one fact of life of which we can be certain. Indeed, in the face of overwhelming evidence that life does end, what is the point of effort, of success? Death mocks all our ambitions and achievements.

The logical conclusion of such an understanding is despair and suicide, or a brave stoicism, where life just has to be suffered and you may as well make the best of a bad job. For such people, living can take on a certain desperation and sometimes, quite paradoxically, a compulsiveness to achieve, to win, to somehow fly in the face of despair.

No doubt we've all faced certain events in our lives in these two ways to some degree or another, but is there another way of seeing life which neither leads us down the garden path of foolish hopes, nor drags us into tunnels of despair, despondency and gloom? The Buddha would have us investigate life impartially, to see it as it really is, accepting the situation totally. Within that clarity of view, it is easier for us to act. That is what he called the middle path. And it is often the name given to his teachings.

His teachings were very clear on this point. Suffering is caused by seeking happiness in the pleasures of the senses because such things don't last. The person who concentrates his life on the next exciting thing to do is doing exactly this, forever seeking enjoyment, distraction and pleasure. Such persons are blind to the suffering that surrounds them. On the other hand, people who try to deny all pleasure and happiness and are overcome by the sufferings of life have become blinded to the possibility of the real peace and joy to be found in living. What is worse is that both are blinded to the higher reality that transcends both the pleasures and the tribulations of life.

The Buddha asked us to take a realistic approach, not to pin our hopes on the transient pleasures of life, nor to be overcome by suffering and death, but to accept this dual situation totally, work within it, and try to discover what lies beyond it.

This realistic approach can be experienced at first hand in our meditation. What is it we are doing but facing and accepting all the negativity that arises, observing all the pleasurable and joyful feelings and thoughts, and seeing all of this for what it really is, just passing phenomena, momentary mental objects. Realising the passing nature of things undercuts false hopes. Seeing the arising of things, the birth of every moment, undercuts despair.

Let us take the threat of nuclear war. Some people feel this threat of a nuclear holocaust as an ever-present reality. They are fearful and anxious, angry and frustrated, depressed and despairing. Others don't seem to see the danger at all. They feel secure under the nuclear umbrella, the deterrent. Anyway, they say, a nuclear war is unthinkable. What's the point of fighting it? No one would win. Humans wouldn't be so mad.

Here, we have two opposite reactions to a given situation, the pessimistic and the falsely optimistic. Contemplating the possibility of a nuclear holocaust, even if it were to happen by mistake, might awaken those never-will-happen believers to the potential harm and motivate them to support disarmament. Accepting the possibility of nuclear holocaust with all that that means, especially to ourselves personally, for a lot of our fear of nuclear war is a fear of our own death, both fear and anxiety may be lessened. Once they are, we are much more capable of positive action.

Anxiety and fear drain our energy, bring about panic and confusion. With a clearer mind, a more firm direction can be found. But we can only do what we can do. For some it may mean joining a march, for others influencing heads of state. We have to accept our limitations. If we don't, we will suffer from anger, frustration, depression and despair.

This polarity of pessimism and false optimism needs to be steadied towards a calm grasp of reality, seeing the situation just as it is. We need to be very much aware of how our emotions colour a situation. Here lies the importance of meditation practice, insight *vipassanā* meditation.

This was the Buddha's great discovery in his enlightenment. He discovered that by just developing

awareness we are able to heal all our negativities and slowly purify the heart. When we sit, this is an opportunity to observe, really experience our moods and emotions, our states of mind. But investigate here does not mean to analyse, to ask questions, to wonder about the causes. It means simply to experience, to feel the emotions and mood as they really are.

Equally important is to observe also our feelings about them, our reactions to them. When I feel depressed, how do I feel about it? Do I get angry? Do I get fearful and anxious? Do I get depressed about being depressed? The first step in the meditation is to begin to lose our fears and aversions towards states of mind. This is the first step in purifying the mind, having established some concentration on the breath. We observe any state of mind that arises, any mood or emotion that comes to our attention. Observe them as bodily feelings. There may be feelings of heaviness from depression, heat from anger, wobbliness from fear and tightness from anxiety.

These feelings manifest in different parts of the body, sometimes in the chest or stomach or abdomen, for instance. We just watch it all calmly, noticing, observing. We see that everything is changing, everything is arising and passing away.

What is it we are achieving here? By this simple observation, we are losing our fears of and aversions to negative states of mind as they arise. By not repressing these negative states of mind, they display themselves and to our amazement pass away. We are healing our hearts, we are purifying our minds.

We must also be equally aware of pleasant feelings, observing them just as keenly, but this time observing how the mind grasps for them, longs to indulge in them. Of course, they pass away too. Observing the passing of pleasant states of mind stops us becoming falsely optimistic. Observing the passing of painful states of mind stops us becoming pessimistic. Seeing both as passing phenomena leads to a realistic view of life.

When the mind is realistic, knowing things as they really are, it is equanimous and peaceful. To win a million or to lose a million does not ruffle this inner calm. This is the joy of the middle path. This is what the Buddha wanted us to do. To know ourselves as we really are.

Meditation helps us to realize this, but it shouldn't stop there. We should keep this frame of mind, this understanding, throughout the day, every day.

I hope you found this talk interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain the nirvanic peace within.

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