

The Pleasure Syndrome: Understanding Dukkha Through Paṭicca Samuppāda

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Retreat Talks · 21 min read

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasah. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasah. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasah. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

So now we've managed to get through the fourth day. The first three days were bad. Blood, sweat and tears. If you think about it, how else could it have been? In one wild axe we cut through old habits and established new ones. That's always got to be painful in itself. Never mind the difficulty of the posture and so on. It's a bit like finding yourself in the army, or worse, a prison, subjected to a new regime. Here, of course, willingly so.

We all of us have particular, perhaps peculiar habits. We get up at a certain time, sleep for a certain amount, have breakfast at this time, not that, and so on. And what we find is that if our habits are disturbed in any way, there's always the pain of dislocation. If there's a good reason, we don't mind. We take it with good heart. But if there's no reason, or rather we don't see a good reason, we get irritable and bolshie.

When we come into spiritual training, we always find there's a routine to get used to. And for the most part, it's always training with other people. It's difficult also because we're stuck in our ways. To change our habits is to loosen us up a bit. So these past three days have been a sort of spiritual boot camp. From now on, I hope, you begin to feel a relaxation, an ease with the rhythm of the course, and a lessening of gross physical pain caused by the posture. But more, I hope that you've accommodated psychologically, and no longer find yourself struggling with, or at worst against, the schedule.

So now, the other great problem arises. Up till now, we've had to deal with pain in all its variegated form. From now on, I think you'll find there will arise moments of ease, even pleasure and delight. I'm not saying to expect it, but it may just come up, and here we can fall into the grave error of negligence and indulgence. Remember, the purpose of *vipassanā* on a psychological level is to take the suffering out of pain and the indulgence out of pleasure and see if there is a relationship with the world beyond all that which is actually more satisfying indeed, rewarding.

We need then to understand the pleasure syndrome and to be convinced intellectually that happiness, true contentment is not to be found there indeed, cannot be found there. *Nibbāna* has to be something other than sensual, mental or emotional worlds that can be so enjoyable.

This brings us to the psychological paradigm that the Buddha discovered known as Dependent Origination or perhaps better Interdependent Origination, the *Paṭicca Samuppāda*. Some of you will have seen the representation of this in the Tibetan picture called The Wheel of Dependent Origination. Here, I shall only be concerned with the part that relates specifically to the problem of indulgence and suffering, and I shall indicate the Pali terms for those who are familiar with this teaching.

The Buddha begins by pointing out that at root the problem is one of ignorance. It is from this position of not knowing that we presume to know, and our presumptions become our delusions. And it is according to our deluded understanding that we live out our lives, causing distressful, occasionally anguished cycles of behaviour.

The first thing about pleasure is that it brings delight. An obvious statement, no doubt, but herein lies the whole problem. Now take toast. I've yet to meet someone who doesn't like toast. Some like it hot, some cold, some soggy. Some with marmalade, others with honey. Most with anything. But up until now, I'm of the opinion that all human beings love toast.

When delicious toast falls upon the tongue, all that happens is certain chemical and electrical signals are passed on into the brain, and the first percepts are simple and basic. At this level, known as contact, *phassa*, the mind perceives only hot and cold, sweet and sour, and so on. It's not until there's been a moment of digestion in the mind itself that definitions such as toast arise, and with them all the memories of scrumptious times and warm kitchens going back all the way to childhood, the great British breakfast. All these connections go to build up, around that initial taste, a glorious euphoria. This is the level of feeling, *vedanā*, and it includes other mental attributes, such as perception and memory.

Once this glorious state has arisen, there comes the desire to get into it. Now that's the greed, that's the *taṇhā*. But what is this *taṇhā*, this greed, this craving? It is just that wanting to indulge. The judgmental mind arises, this is good, this is wonderful. How amazing that a simple piece of toast can create such a glorious interior environment. I'm so happy. This is the life.

Now I hope that during meal times you're getting into contact very clearly with this mental state. Hold for a while a tantalizing morsel just in front of your mouth and really experience that craving, that wanting to snap at it and gobble it all up.

As soon as *taṇhā* has arisen, as soon as the craving for a pleasure has arisen, the next moment is one of identification. I am this desire. I am this delight. There's no objectivity. There's no separation between the enjoying and the enjoyer. They become unified. I, me, want toast. Now this is called *upādāna*, grasping.

What follows is the action, *bhava*, a gluttonous dance, the actual indulgence, and that's the moment when this whole process has been empowered by will, *cetanā*, and in so doing *kamma* is created and the habit is reinforced. The habit not just of indulging in toast, if that isn't bad enough, but of the whole deluded understanding that happiness, true contentment is to be found in sensual pleasure.

So let's review these kernel links on the wheel of dependent origination where the Buddha points out we continue to reinforce our delusions and so cause ourselves continuous suffering. First there is the initial contact with the object. Here, although we're just talking about the sense of taste, it doesn't simply refer to the five senses but to the internal senses of the mind. It's the same syndrome when we're indulging in fantasies or daydreaming. This initial contact refers simply to the primary stimuli that come into consciousness, that we become aware of. As for the sense of taste, the five flavours as enumerated by the Chinese tradition seem to be apt: sweet and sour, salty, bitter and astringent. All, or some of these, are worked into a concept in the mind and there's a recognition. Toast.

Now this *phassa* refers only to initial contact. By the way, at times it is useful to know the Pali words. It is true of translation from any language that one cannot entirely grasp a foreign word with all its meanings and nuances in another language. That is why I would like to introduce you in this course to key words. But you don't have to learn Pali to make spiritual progress. Thank heavens for that, or I'd give up now myself.

This contact is very basic. With the eyes, it is simply colour and shape before it takes on any meaning. With hearing, it is the volume, pitch, tone, quality and movement of sound before any tune or recognisable speech. If you think it's not possible, just repeat a word to yourself like banana and keep doing it concentrating just on the sound. And I think you will find that soon enough, it really does become a nonsensical sound. Banana. Banana. Banana. Banana.

At the very base of this contact, *phassa*, are the four great elements. Earth, the qualities of hard and soft; water, the quality of cohesiveness, elasticity, stickiness; fire, the qualities of heat and cold; and finally air, the qualities of movement and stillness. It would seem the ancients, including the Greeks, thought that they were the building blocks of the universe. From a spiritual insight point of view, whether they are or not is not relevant. What we are experiencing is how we, the mind, contacts the world, and how from these initial stimuli, or impulses, we create a world.

And remember, how we contact the world is dependent not only on the stimuli coming at us such as light, but on the receptive sense, the I. What a person who is colorblind sees is not the same as someone with ordinary sight. The world we live in is of our own making. We construct it from this initial contact, from stimuli, from the sense base and from a primary cognition, a recognition of it.

Now what is important about this level of perception is that there is as yet no distortion by way of thought, past experience or emotional value. That's why the sensations of the breath are so important in our practice. They are neutral and so they don't have great historical, emotional or conceptual value. So we can easily see the simple qualities of movement. And to see movement in detail is to begin to experience radical transience. Radical impermanence. Everything really is arising and passing away. A sensation appears and then disappears completely. And to perceive transience at the profoundest level is to be liberated.

So although we've centered on toast, and I owe it to my teacher, Sayuru Janaka, to see the process of eating as a very wonderful opportunity to experience all this, we can take this investigation into every moment of our lives. When hearing a bird or a car passing, or the wind in the trees, when looking at a flower or the landscape or the shrine, when smelling the aromas of food or of the incense, when feeling the points of contact in movement, both in formal walking meditation and simple actions such as feeling the sheets before you pull them back and rise from the bed. We can say that this is our work, to get down to this level of perception. Bury yourself in the body. Once this level of perception is clarified, then all the steps to building a world begin to reveal themselves. And what is important to us is that we see clearly how we mess things up. Things can be so much better.

So that is the point of contact. And that brings me back to the piece of toast. As soon as this recognition, it is toast, occurs, all our memories, conceptual and emotional, around toast engender an emotional response. That interior atmosphere of pleasurable joy, an internal environment of delight, this is *vedanā*, feeling. It's not that we need to remember actual memories, though I dare say, if we set to it, we could write a book, *The Memoirs of a Toasterholic*.

Now *vedanā* refers to feeling, all feeling. We're lucky in English because the word feeling covers virtually all the meaning of *vedanā*. We say, I feel the wind on my cheeks, the sun on my face, and I'm not feeling well. All this refers to sensations in the body, physical feelings. But we also say, I feel sad, I feel happy, a great emotional feeling came over me. This obviously refers to our heart life. So *vedanā*, feeling, refers to everything we feel: sensations, feelings, moods and emotions. And unsurprisingly, they can be divided into pleasant, unpleasant and neutral feelings.

Returning again to our mystical toast, once this inner environment of pleasant feelings has arisen, then there is what might be called a movement within the mind, an attraction, a drawing towards, all of which has the flavour of wanting, desiring, craving, a desire to sink into it, to immerse. That's *taṇhā*, craving, the desire to indulge. Again, *taṇhā* is more than indulgence. It is how we react to what is pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Towards the pleasant, there is that reaction of wanting. Towards the unpleasant, of not wanting. And towards the neutral, of ignoring it. We ignore neutral feelings because desire seeks something stimulating. We need to be very alert to catch these reactions, and that's also very much our job.

As we shall see later, if we can hold the process to this point, we are in the best position for a dharma insight, a spiritual insight. Now once this point of feeling, *vedanā*, has arisen, then there's that sudden collapse into identification. I, the self, want that. Me, I want it. That's the grasping link, *upādāna*, on the wheel of dependent origination. This is the moment we lose objectivity. From now on we are ensnared in the desire, compulsive behaviours, addictions, and so on, and nothing can stop what happens next.

Once there is that identification with want, we become two-year-olds. The whole desire is impelled with energy. And before we know it, we empower that desire. We make a decision, often quite unintentionally,

compulsively, impulsively. Will, *cetanā*, arises to bring into fruition that desire of self. I become *bhava*, I become a toast eater. How crucial that moment is. Whenever we do something, create an action, be it of a thought, word or deed, we bring an idea, a desire, out of mere potential into the actual. This is the moment of becoming, on the dependent origination. This is the moment when we create *kamma*. This is the moment when we exercise the power of will.

The toast is eaten with blind gusto, eyes shut with little low guttural gruntings. Now surely it is obvious how the simple indulgence in a harmless piece of toast can gather such emotional commitment and physical momentum that the act turns to addiction, even to self-destruction. Such can be the path of a toast devotee. However, oh the misery of it, pleasure decreases while craving increases, and we find ourselves in a spiral of famished dissatisfaction.

We have a great party of Thanksgiving to toast. We all agree to have another, but it never lives up to the promise. There's always that desire for one more, but that second piece never lives up to the promise of the first, especially as we come close to the end of our proper physical appetite, and we begin to feel we've overeaten with all the unpleasant feelings that arise. Our greed is always greater than our need. This is the inbuilt obsolescence of pleasure. Even though we adore toast, we can have too much of a good thing.

So the saying goes, why is it that the same pleasure source can't give us the same continuous buzz? Take horror movies. Many people like the thrill of being frightened. Not really frightened, of course. Pretend fright. But you can see from the vast variety of horror movies how writers have to be ever more creative and horrifying to maintain the level of buzz. When we see those old Frankenstein movies, we can't help but chuckle. Poor old Frankenstein with that bolt through his neck. We become bored so quickly and then starts the search for variety, for distraction. Variety is the spice of life. Well, it is, isn't it? If life is the pursuit of happiness in pleasure.

Until now, we've been fairly basic in our idea of pleasure, basic sensual pleasures. But this refers to all pleasure, even the most refined, artistic, aesthetic pleasures, even the most ecstatic, elevated, exalted states of spiritual bliss. It's all worldly pleasure, as far as the Buddha's concerned. And any indulgence in it will bring about that characteristic vicious cycle of delight, satisfaction, boredom, search for variety, delight, satisfaction, boredom, search for variety, and so on. And what we find is that the more we indulge desire, the greater the attachment, the greater the addiction.

Herein lies another angle on our delusive states. It is only when our addiction is fulfilled do we feel normal. Let's consider that. Taking an obvious case of the drug addict. So long as there's craving, the addict feels out of balance, in a state of suffering, agitated, ready to commit crimes. But when they're drugged up, they feel fine. It wouldn't occur to them to commit a crime. They're happy, fulfilled.

And that's what happens to us, isn't it? We open the fridge door, and there's no milk. No milk for tea. A spat of anger. We look around for someone to blame. Then the depression. The awful thought of having to drink tea without milk. No way. Better to suffer a dash to the shops. Suddenly we're rushing down the

streets for a bottle of milk. Rushing. Why? Anger. Desire. And all to get that feeling of well-being, of happiness in pleasure, from a cup of tea.

Perhaps this syndrome can more easily be seen in the way humans behave sexually. When sexual happiness becomes just an end in itself, then again there is this underlying belief that happiness is to be found in raw physical pleasures of sex. The Kama Sutra, the Indian text that goes into all sorts of erotic postures, is yet another manifestation of how the human heart spins off into addiction, an insatiable desire for more. But like anything else, the same old routines become boring. The Kama Sutra is an expression of a very bored and occupied ruling caste. When ordinary sex becomes boring, there's a search for sex with a difference, kinky sex, fetishisms. This soon gets boring too, and kinkiness may turn to deviation, and the fall into crime is always possible.

It's not just compulsive tea drinkers and drug addicts and sexual obsessives, but anyone who is lost in the four great worldly pursuits: all the pleasures of life, fame, power and riches. What else does the self want? I wants to be famous, powerful, rich and have any pleasure it wants right there at its fingertips. Just think of all those people we give power to, the media barons, the multinational executives, the prime ministers. Just think of all those we adulate, the film stars, pop stars, sports stars, and pay out of our noses to satisfy. Just think of how we allow people to amass ridiculous fortunes, the Bill Gates of this world. Why do we, as a society, allow such grossness? We need only examine ourselves and see how much our own lives are driven by these same self-driven desires.

Sometimes if we're truthful with ourselves we shall catch ourselves in some dark fantasy and then we can see how desire unchecked that has become an addiction so easily leads to crime. When desire is unsatisfied, frustration, anger and self-righteousness arise, and then into robbery, violence, murder, and what have you, sometimes on a massive national scale. It's frightening when we look back at human history to acknowledge how destructive this essential delusion has been, this delusion that we can find happiness in pleasure. Indeed, it leads to criminal insanity. What else would you call Stalin, Hitler, Pol Pot and such like, and all their myriad cronies, but criminally mad? So much of this terrible destruction comes about because of frustration. The anger we feel when we don't get what we want. That awful little vicious circle. I want, can't, will have. How easily a seemingly harmless desire can turn into a nasty aggression.

Little children are wonderful at manifesting this one. They get angry when they can't get what they want and when they really can't get what they want, they cry. If the vicious circle of desire, desire frustrated and violence fails, then there's nothing for it but to spin off into depression and self-pity.

Worse, underneath all this, is fear. Fear of loss, fear of change. The more we treasure an object, anything we become attached to, the more we fear its loss. Hence the locked door. Hence the worry that the car might be stolen. It's not that such fears aren't legitimate, there are thieves about. But even if there weren't, there'd still be the fear of the possible loss of pleasure. Remember here, pleasure refers to anything, anything at all, that brings us delight.

Take hearing and all it means in terms of human communication and the joy of sound. What a loss that would be! As soon as we have an earache, especially if we haven't had one for ages, suddenly fear arises. Could this be serious enough to make me deaf? Can you imagine the feelings of Beethoven as he began to realize that his hearing was going? What a mortification! Not that he allowed such a catastrophe in any way to diminish his work. And that's the point. Those who have lost their hearing, once accommodated, find it does not undermine the quality of their lives. Indeed, they find other treasures.

Now this fear of the loss of treasured things is so great that a huge industry of insurance is built up around it, costing billions of pounds, trillions. Why? Because the self needs to protect itself against loss, with all the anger, grief and despair that it brings. Self has created a little island unto itself and must guard its possessions against the rest of the whole universe. It's only when you join a large community such as a monastic sangha that you realize that it need not be like that. It is through shared responsibility that so much of this emotional pain can be dissolved.

In Islam, the community is of utmost importance, the Ummah. Muhammad, after all, lived right there in the midst of community and taught people to help each other bear the unfortunate vicissitudes of life. When the Buddha established the Sangha, almost everything was to be held in community, shared. But it does mean that the self has to let go of this idea of mine and begin to move towards ours. Such behaviour leads to a lessening of that self. And remember, the less we have of self, the greater is our true happiness.

For it is happiness that we're searching for all the time. Psychologically, the whole of our life's effort is to find happiness. Think about it. Even in the most terrible circumstances, we're searching for happiness. The person in pain seeks relief. The person in prison seeks distraction, seeks release. Even if we were tied up to a chair, we'd spend our time trying to find the most comfortable position. But the whole search is a wild goose chase and we find ourselves revolving around this cycle of desire, frustration and grief. But worse, when it all gets too much, there's a downward spiral into despair and that ultimate dark desire to escape it all, suicide.

I remember the story of an Australian property tycoon not many years ago now. The bottom fell out of the property market and he committed suicide. A friend who found she was going blind began to consider suicide. I'm sure you all have similar examples. Perhaps you yourself have suffered such situations.

So the question is, is there a way out of all this? Is there something better? Well, that's the message of the Buddha. That's his good news. There is a way of relating to the world, to the world of pleasure, in a way that doesn't bring suffering, and the kernel of that understanding lies in that area of indulgence.

During this time on retreat we have an excellent opportunity to see how this whole syndrome works, how it is that indulging in pleasure brings dissatisfaction, and how it could be that without indulgence, pleasure can be enjoyed, can be appreciated, can be experienced simply as delightful. We can't live in this world as human beings without experiencing pleasure. Pleasures are a given. It's our natural heritage. It is simply how we experience some of the contact we have with our environment and our inner selves. So the

teachings of the Buddha has nothing to do with getting rid of pleasure.

He himself talks in this way to Ananda, his cousin, and a close companion for the last 20 years of his life. After going on alms round he would say, let's go to a beautiful shrine. Why? Why should he ask to go to a beautiful shrine? Why not a dung heap or a desert? Or just any old shrine? Why beautiful? And he even names a few. The Buddha obviously appreciated beauty, but did he indulge in it? Did he define the measure of his happiness by it?

How can we be with pleasure in a non-indulgent way and still enjoy it? Wouldn't that be amazing? We'd have our cake and eat it. We'd be able to enjoy pleasure and not have to suffer any of the vicious cycles of frustration, grief, fear and so on. Well, we can. And what's more, we find we can enjoy things even more fully. And it's all in the magic of *satipaṇṇā*, a level of consciousness which directly experiences and yet is not caught up in that experience. That's why it's so important to discover what that level of consciousness is and how to maintain it.

Consider, when we are governed by desire, doesn't that desire define for us what is pleasurable? A friend asks you to a meal and says they'll cook spaghetti. There in your mind right away is the thought of a plate of delicious spaghetti and perhaps all the delight of a Tuscan holiday. You look forward to it. But what's offered is a plate of Heinz 57th variety. On toast. Of course, one is polite. But it would be a hard task to cover one's disappointment. Now, actually, Heinz 57th is OK. I mean, it's edible, and if you're really hungry, it's more than palatable. But as you eat it at your friend's, there's just a mild disgust with it, and the mind's full of horror stories about additives.

Isn't it the same with anything? Desire creates expectation, and that expectation cramps the real experience, blinds one to real experience. This judgmental mind, based on the skewed appreciation of what self likes and does not like, divides the whole of experience into black and white. I saw a tree expert on TV once. He was full of the glories of trees. Then he came upon a copper beech, and this disgust started pouring out of him. Words like disgusting, filthy, ugly started to come up. How can you be passionately hateful of a tree?

To get out of this pleasure-indulgence syndrome we need to exercise precise awareness and on a course of this nature we can begin to see clearly how the self traps itself if we watch carefully what happens whenever pleasure arises. To distinguish between the pleasurable feelings and the desire for them, to really catch that moment, to feel the desire to indulge, to really feel it and then to wait till it passes. And when it's passed, to taste the food. What is the experience of tasting food without previous expectation, without craving? To taste food just as it is, not as we would like it to be.

What sort of mental state arises when we are experiencing something delightful and not indulging in it? And how do we experience that state? Is there identification with it, or is it like being with someone or another person who is happy? The difference between someone who identifies with pleasure and someone who is with their experience of pleasure, as with a good friend, is aptly put by a tale told of my

favourite author, Samuel Beckett.

Some of you may know his work, perhaps the most famous, *Waiting for Godot*. His work could be described as one long meditation on decay and death, but always with a wonderful, ironic humour. He was out walking with a friend in some beautiful countryside in France where he lived. His friend was overwhelmed and exclaimed, Oh, what beauty! and then asked, Doesn't it make you want to live? And Beckett, after a characteristic pause, replied, Well, I wouldn't want to go that far.

Now, as always, there are two processes we need to go through. The seeing is *sammādiṭṭhi* on the Eightfold Path, its correct view, right understanding. Listening to this talk, I hope you are at least partly intellectually convinced by the arguments. Later, your own thoughts about this matter may arise. But please, don't make an effort to think. That you can do after the course. But as you sit in meditation, you can begin to experience at first hand these physical and mental events. And then we realize that we can't do anything about it. To push them away would be to suppress them.

So the second process is to leave the emotions of craving alone and let them arise and pass away. This is the level of psychotherapy. If the first process of understanding and seeing is psychoanalysis, the second is psychotherapy. Both are needed. The one to clarify our understanding, and the second to allow the heart to heal itself. And it is in suffering, in bearing gladly these emotions, desire, grasping, frustration, grief, fear, that we come to realize directly for ourselves how much suffering we cause ourselves through acts of indulgence. This is the spiritual insight, the dharma insight, into the characteristic of suffering, *dukkha*.

And it's only when we suffer the consequences of our delusions and when we really see how suffering arises and passes away that we find the resolution to overcome the habitual temptations of our cravings. That's the reason spiritually for bearing with the mental distress, for developing the virtue of forbearance, of endurance. This is to allow the suffering to express itself and to remain fully conscious of it. It chisels into the understanding the consequences of unskillful behaviour, so that the fear, the dread of those consequences, outbalances the strength of any craving. There was a friend's father who said he couldn't give up smoking, that is, until he had a heart attack.

Let's pause here for a moment. So, we've looked at the process whereby we create conditionings around pleasure, the role of contact, feeling, desire and craving, grasping and identifying, and finally the act, the becoming, the creation of *kamma* of our conditioning. Now, in our meditation, we can direct our attention at the mental, emotional and physical processes within us to realize all this for ourselves. But be careful not to get caught up in thinking about it. It will take us away from the direct experience. The purpose of this talk is to convince you intellectually enough so that you really want to investigate this matter for yourself. I hope it's left you with a burning desire to maintain that moment-to-moment mindfulness. Yes, not all desire is self-based and deluded. Desires also arise out of our fundamental nature, the desire for true happiness and freedom from suffering. That sort of desire leads us to the end of wrong desires, so we should follow it. When we finally reach the end of suffering, then there will be no need for such desires.

Indeed, it is the very absence of sense desire, wrong desire, that the Buddha calls *Nibbāna*. In the Dhammapada, the Buddha says, Whoever gives up desire for sense pleasures, whoever renounces worldly ambitions, whoever abandons seeking comfort in the world, they destroy that desire for happiness in sensual pleasure and becoming. Such a one is a brahmana, a fully liberated being. I pray your incisive perceptions into the horrors of indulgence may cut asunder the delusions of craving, and that you may achieve the great liberation from all suffering, sooner rather than later.

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