

Dukkha — Basic Premise of the Buddhadhamma

Bhante Bodhidhamma · YouTube Talks · 15:02

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa (repeated three times) — Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble and fully Self-Awakened One.

This evening I thought we'd get back to basics a little bit and just look at this word *dukkha*. The first thing is to catch a little bit of the etymology of it. Supposedly according to Winthrop Sargeant:

"The ancient Aryans who brought the Sanskrit language to India were a nomadic horse- and cattle-breeding people who travelled in horse- and ox-drawn vehicles. Su- and du- are prefixes indicating good and bad. The word ka- in later Sanskrit comes to mean sky, ether or space, but was originally just a hole, particularly of an axle."

And so *sukha* meant having a good axle hole and *dukkha* meant having a poor one. So that gives you some indication as to its roots.

Before we go into *dukkha* and its crucial place in the Buddhist teachings, just as a general understanding about isms, about religions: all the Abrahamic religions have a god, a supernatural being who punishes you if you do something wrong and gives you lots of ice cream if you do something right. This god, as you know, has created enormous problems for the Western civilisation depending on which side god was on.

The east is different. There's no such personal god in Hinduism, and all that around good and bad moral behaviour is taken care of by the law of *kamma*, as it is in Buddhism and Jainism. But Hinduism came to teach more of Brahman, who was an impersonal god. But in terms of the other main religions, Taoism, Jainism and Buddhism, they are simply no God. They are non-theistic.

So the Buddha then, like these other two religions, Jainism and Taoism, it all depends on the individual human being. We create our own worlds. We have to get out of the mess. And once we're out of the mess, we are in a state of purity and happiness.

Now, that word *dukkha* has such a wide meaning that no one English word can do it. It was originally translated as suffering, but that's far too heavy, you might say. Unsatisfactoriness and then even stress, for those of you who know the work of Ajahn Thanissaro.

Now, just as these religions have a grounding in supernatural being, which cannot be proven, although they say it can be, you'll also find that in the humanistic religions or the secular religions of liberalism,

communism, national socialism in its worst form, Nazism, and now a tweaked form of liberalism as neoliberalism, all of these have a premise. We know for instance in neoliberalism everything is to be controlled and guided by the market. The governments and unions all have to get out of the way — the market knows best, and we all know where that's taken us.

So once a premise is proven to be untrue or leading to disaster, then the whole fabric, the whole architecture of that belief disappears. Now the Buddha grounds himself on something which simply cannot be denied: *dukkha*.

The first discourse is around this word *dukkha*. And this is what he says at the beginning of it: "There are two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth into homelessness." We can take homelessness to mean anybody on the spiritual path. "What two? The pursuit of sensual happiness in sensual pleasures, which is low, vulgar, the way of worldlings, ignoble, unbeneficial. And the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, unbeneficial. Without veering towards either of these two extremes, the *Tathāgata*" — that's what he called himself, it translates badly as "such gone," it's basically the transcendent one — "has awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision, gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to *Nibbāna*."

So the first one is about indulgence, which is that desire and attachment. And the second one is really blaming the body for all the desires we have. So if I didn't have a tongue, if I didn't have the sense of taste, I'd have no problem with food. That's a mistake that perhaps was made by the Jains, who felt that the body itself, the material of the body, was the karmic result of bad actions.

Now in that discourse he delineates the truth. He first of all states clearly that there is the truth of *dukkha*, and we'll come to exactly how he defines that later. Then he points to the second, which is the cause of *dukkha*, which of course lies in that craving. And the third is the cessation of *dukkha* — *dukkha* is completely overcome by letting go of that craving and attachment. And then there's a path, of course, leading to the cessation of suffering, a cessation of *dukkha* — the eightfold path.

And then he goes on to say what we should do about this *dukkha*. So this is the noble truth of *dukkha*: the noble truth of *dukkha* is to be fully understood. The noble truth of *dukkha* has been fully understood — so he's talking about himself now. Then he talks about the origin of *dukkha*: the noble truth of the origin of *dukkha* is to be abandoned. That cause of *dukkha* is eventually to be abandoned. And then he states of himself, the origin of *dukkha* has been abandoned.

In the third one he says there is a noble truth of the cessation, the complete eradication of *dukkha*. The noble truth of the cessation of *dukkha* is to be realised — so this is something that is to be personally experienced, that's the liberation from suffering — and the noble truth of *dukkha* has been realised by himself.

This discourse was given to his five companions. Remember, he'd left them. He had then gone on his own

and finally found the enlightenment, or became, should we say, awakened. And when he came back, this is the talk that he gave to them. And this is of course a formalised talk, but it gives us some idea of what that original conversation was about.

"This is what the Blessed One said, and being pleased, the group of five delighted in the Blessed One's statement. And while this discourse is being spoken, there arose in the Venerable Kondañña the dust-free, stainless vision of the Dhamma: 'Whatever is subject to arising is all subject to ceasing.'" Then the Buddha expressed this heartfelt sentiment: "Kondañña has really understood! Kondañña has really understood!" And that's how Venerable Kondañña became known as Kondañña who understands, or *Aññā-Kondañña*.

So that's the first definition of *dukkha*. *Dukkha* later on becomes slightly more refined in the sense of being one of the three characteristics of existence, and these are what we're investigating in our *vipassanā*. So it's *anicca*, the quality of impermanence. Knowing impermanence, seeing impermanence, begins to understand why holding on to anything pleasant leads to suffering, because everything, of course, disappears. Impermanence also leads us to understand *anattā*, not-self, because the self is supposed to be eternal, immortal.

So now we come to the core aspects of *dukkha*, and this is the most general explanation that he gives. First of all, there's ordinary suffering — so the *dukkha-dukkha*. So that first *dukkha* refers to all the natural suffering and displeasure that we get in life. And the *dukkha* that he's referring to, which we get rid of, is of course the relationship we have of wanting and not wanting, reactivity. So all our reactions based upon the idea of a self seeking to make this world a pleasant place for itself, always manipulating the world to make a pleasant place for itself, wanting, not wanting — that's the first form of *dukkha*.

The next form is caused by, as we just mentioned, *vipariṇāma-dukkha*, change. So even pleasant experiences are to be looked upon as impermanent, and very foolish to hang on to them. So when we have a party, we always want another one just like it. And of course, it never turns out the way we want it.

And finally, there's the suffering due to conditionality, *saṅkhāra-dukkha*. So *saṅkhāra* is conditionality, but it's also to do with compoundedness. Everything is made up of bits and pieces that constitute an object, or rather that the human being sees as an object. So we ourselves, we experience ourselves as whole, complete, entire, and yet when we actually investigate ourselves, you know, we're just a mass of cells, or a mass — bodily speaking — a mass of cells, or just chemicals, or just subatomic energy. And the mind is just this constant flow of thinking, imagining, emotionals.

So that means that this body, this self doesn't have a permanent essence. That's the important thing. And not seeing that leads us into this delusion, which is the fundamental cause of our suffering.

Finally, he sums it all up in a sense. So this is his definition of *dukkha*: "Birth is *dukkha*, aging is *dukkha*, illness is *dukkha*, and death is *dukkha*. Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are *dukkha*. Association with the unloved is *dukkha*. Separation from the loved is *dukkha*. Not getting what one wants

is *dukkha*. In conclusion, the five clinging aggregates, the *khandhas*, are *dukkha*."

So that final sentence — the clinging aggregates. Remember that those are the body itself, all our feelings, physical and emotional, in the body, all our perceptions, and then these *sāṅkhāras*. So this is where we come in, because through an act of will we've created these volitional conditionings, habits, which are conditioned and conditioning. And our job as meditators is to perceive this whole process of how we create suffering, and it is perceiving the process that is the process of liberation. The final *khandha* was consciousness, by the way.

So I can only hope that this little talk on *dukkha* will be of some benefit, and that you will by your personal and complete devotion to the practice liberate yourself from all suffering, sooner rather than later.

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