

Dukkha: Unsatisfactoriness and Sīla: Morality and Ethics

Bhante Bodhidhamma · YouTube Talks · 25:24

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa

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Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

So on this full moon, by the way, I hope you saw the blood moon. It wasn't actually the full moon, but it was very red against the clear sky. I don't know whether you all caught that. It was very lovely.

So the topic I've chosen for this one is *dukkha* and *sīla*. These are words that I'm sure you're familiar with, but it's good to have a little reminder. *Dukkha* translated as unsatisfactoriness, as suffering, simply means hard to bear. But why does it manifest? It manifests because of three basic roots, these unwholesome roots: the delusion which forks off into some form of acquisitiveness and some form of aversion, and the aversion spikes off into hatred and fear. So these are our basic attitudes that arise out of this deep delusion.

In order to go backwards to the original delusion, we have to work through the moral laws and ethical guidance. The moral laws, I'm just using these words to mean two different things. The moral laws are basically things like not to kill. But the ethical guidance is really about relationships, about changing our relationship not only to people, animals, plants, but even to material things. For instance, at Eiheiji Monastery, the founding monastery of Zen, I'm told that when they take water from a well, they will use the water but always leave a little bit to put back into the well. It's an offering, an acknowledgement of the preciousness of water.

Now the thing about this suffering is that we cause it to ourselves. And what's difficult for us to really accept is that we actually are doing it since we were born. In fact, we're probably doing it in the womb. You have to make this distinction between the pressures coming upon us, even as babies, which are usually not meant to be harmful—such as the process of birth, feeling hungry and mummy's not there—and acts against us which can be harmful. Whatever happens to us is the original pain. How we react to it through aversion is our suffering.

We have to recognize that if that were not so, it would be impossible to become fully liberated unless we got rid of the actual cause of our suffering. If we believe other people are the cause of our suffering, then

basically we've got to get rid of other people and then we can be liberated. But it's the very fact that we cause our own suffering that we can become fully liberated from it.

I want to remind you of things, but I really want to centre upon what they're known as the defilements and the latent tendencies, but we'll come to that in a minute.

The five basic laws are places that I'm sure none of us go there, but it's good to know that there are things that we don't do anymore, like kill people. We don't kill anybody if we can, and we don't steal. We don't tell lies. We don't abuse our sexual powers. The last one's a bit difficult: not to take drugs and drink and all that which make the mind fuzzy. We do live in an alcohol culture, but it's up to the individual. If one brings to mind that alcohol, no matter how little it is, is actual pure poison to the body, probably worse than any of the drugs, then that might go for non-alcoholic wines and beers, which I can tell you now are very good.

When we take those precepts, obviously we move towards the opposite. So we don't kill anybody, but we move naturally towards protecting them. It's just a natural movement towards that. Sometimes that first precept is translated as no harm, but it's not. It's actually killing. So it's actually a refinement if you're not harming any living being.

Not to steal—when we give that up we know that leads to a harmonious society and eventually generosity. Sexual powers—the use of those is out of respect and within a loving relationship.

When it comes to lying, right speech splits into four different types. There are great big whoppers that we don't want to tell anymore, but slandering is a bit more difficult. We will let words slip, find ourselves saying things about people. Then there's abusive language, and just wasted talk—talking for talking's sake. What we're moving towards is kindly speech, truthful, beneficial, and most important, to say things at a suitable time, because often we're saying what we want to say, but it's not quite the right time to say it.

We have this other category of hindrances where all these things come up as hindrances to our meditation when we're sitting. It's just another list which allows us to see where these defilements within us are and how to deal with them. Each category has a way of dealing with them. I'm sure you remember.

The first one being all to do with sensual desires, avarice, greed, and all that. The next one is all the hatreds, the grudges, the vendettas. And then there's this sloth and torpor, which comes about through our habit of using sleep to escape, to get rid of ourselves for a little while. I think somebody called it the duvet dive. When you do that, you're developing an energy which is pulling you down. It's like a whirlpool. These things have to be overcome, have to be allowed to drain themselves.

Then there's that whole area of restlessness caused by just inner turbulence. But that also contains guilt, remorse and shame, which are secondary effects of doing something harmful.

Finally, skeptical doubt, which is quite a problem if you have it badly because you can't make a decision.

You keep making lists for and against. If you have a relationship where you might, yes, you are attracted—could it work? Could it not work? Before you know it, the person's left you. It's the same with a job. Shall I go for it? Shall I not go for it? And it's gone. So it often comes from fear of failure or a lack of self-esteem.

Just moving on to the *kilesa*. This is often translated as the ten defilements. In the early scriptures, the word *kilesa* is used as a general way of pointing to that within us which is unwholesome. But later on, the early scriptures and the Abhidhamma couldn't resist making lists, so they've given us a list of ten of these defilements. None of them will come as a shock—you know they're there. But the reason for looking at this is for self-reflection. When we see thoughts coming up, when we see our actions coming up, then it categorizes it and gives us some idea of how to deal with it.

The first one obviously is to do with sensual desire, basic sensual desire—the greed, the lust, the avarice and so on. The next one is to do with hatred, with hate—unforgiveness and things like that, holding grudges. The next one is delusion. This is always around this fundamental problem of identity. It's always about this feeling of being a self, a person, something that doesn't change within us. This gives us, moving from this self which is actually only seeking happiness—it's only seeking happiness—then it gives us some purpose for life to seek this happiness. But unfortunately, as we know, human life doesn't eventually satisfy us. It's not somewhere where we're ever going to feel completely satisfied.

This also manifests as conceit. Conceit has three manifestations. The obvious one is "I am better than you," and then you get the opposite: "I'm not as good as." And then you get a more subtle one where you feel "This is okay. I'm equal to this person." So there doesn't seem to be any conceit of I'm better or worse. That seems to be a good place to be, wholesome, but unfortunately, you are creating a group of people who all think that they are equal. Once you've done that, there are other groups which are not equal and they are actually worse or better. So it's a subtle one that.

The next one is wrong views. This really goes back again to the self. It's about believing that something of our personhood is eternal. We all know the body will die, but the heart-mind, the mental body continues to live, never changes. The soul—often people will talk about their souls as being this unchanging person, basically, but without a physical body. That is not the Buddha's teaching. The subtle body, the body that seeks rebirth, is just as impermanent as this one. It is just a more finer energy.

When I say that, sometimes you can experience that. When you're there with an emotion, something loud, like you might be feeling irritated—or anxious is a bit difficult. Irritation or anger, that's a good one. And you're in the body and you can feel it. By centring in on it very clearly, by holding your attention right there, it might just separate for you and then you'll see that the mind's anger isn't that bad, but that when it touches the physical base of the body it's like a sounding box—it comes back as very loud, as very burning.

Little experiences like that prove to the meditator that these two things, the body and mind, are actually

two different forms of energy. But neither of them are permanent. They're arising and passing away.

The opposite of eternalism is annihilationism—the idea that when you die, well, you're dead and that's it. In the Buddha's time there were materialists, people who believed that there wasn't a soul, there wasn't anything—you were just this body and when you died you died. These days we would have scientific materialists who would take that position.

Definitely the Buddha was against both. He tended to be accused of being an annihilationist, not an eternalist, because of his teaching of not-self. It became very confusing, this not-self business. The Jains said, "We believe, ourselves and the Brahmins, we believe that there is an eternal soul. And the materialists believe that there isn't. But the Buddhists haven't made their mind up." That was how confused people were with this doctrine of not-self. There are occasions in the scriptures which are quite funny, actually. We'll do that some other time.

Then we've got this skeptical doubt, which we've talked about, and torpor, again, which we've talked about, and restlessness. So those are your ten *kilesa*: sensual desire, hatred, delusion, conceit, wrong view, skeptical doubt, torpor and restlessness. What I'm going to do is just put these lists onto a PDF if you want to have a look. There's lots of stuff on the websites if you want to go into it a bit more deeply.

But the next bit is particularly interesting, I think, for us as Westerners: this idea of *anusaya*, which are latent tendencies. This tells you that within us there are these habits, *saṅkhāra*. *Saṅkhāra* is often translated as volitional conditioning, which is really confusing. But if we think about habits, it's just what we habitually do. All that—the way we think, the way we speak, our thought patterns—these are all habits. And the compendium of habits is what we would call our personality, character.

It's understood that these are lying underneath everything we're doing. Given an opportunity, given some sort of catalyst, some sort of stimulus, there will arise out of this *saṅkhāra* a response. For instance, all of us have some amount of anger within us, and if somebody stands on your foot, then that's a little stimulus, and this anger will want to reply to it. And it's lying there dormant. It's lying there dormant.

What the Buddha is saying is that these are actually underneath our obvious consciousness, but that they're always ready and they're always, in many ways, affecting the present moment. So it's translated as bent, bias, proclivity. They're exactly the same. The list is much the same as the defilements, with one extra one, or one different one, which is the tendency of the desire to become. In other words, that will to live. And its opposite, the will not to live.

This will to live will lead us to beliefs of eternalism and the desire not to live will lead us to beliefs about annihilationism. Obviously, if you have that desire to live, then you'll do everything to keep alive and you will substantiate your life. You'll try to make it safer and safer with more money, more friends, and so on. It causes us to be acquisitive. If you are on the other side, where there's a feeling of okay with annihilation, with the fact that death is the end of it and all that, then you'll find such people often taking

refuge in sleep, the duvet dive. As soon as something's too much, well, you just lie down and go to sleep. But on its worst level, it's suicide, just wanting to get rid of yourself. Unfortunately, in Buddhist understanding, that doesn't work. It will re-arise. So it's not a good solution.

That tendency there is put in as an underlying tendency which is making us grasp everything which proves to us that we're alive. That means trying to make ourselves happy, defending what makes ourselves happy from any enemies. So there's your aversion. And if the enemy is too big, well, you run for it. So we're constantly trying to manipulate our lives in order to establish this constant state of living happily.

Now the last thing that I just want to mention is that it's translated as tendencies. Obviously these days we're very much aware of our prejudices and there are two words that people are using. The commentators use the word prejudice which is a hard word. There's almost an activity there. If you're racially prejudiced or sexually prejudiced and somebody calls you that, there's a feeling of you being actively so. The other word that's being used is bias, which is slightly softer on a person.

But I think that if we use these two words in the sense of the defilements and the latent tendencies, then it allows us to accept that all these prejudices are within us. It's part of the baggage that we get when we are born into a culture. I've got a list here of well-known prejudices: racism obviously and tribalism which is a lesser form, sexism, ageism—I'm very much against that—classism, homophobia, nationalism, religious prejudice and xenophobia. And that's only a short list. There's lots and lots of other prejudices.

It's being kind to ourselves. It's recognizing that we will have these prejudices within us. They can manifest and sometimes it can be embarrassing for us. But how do we overcome these prejudices? Well, obviously, on the obvious side, you don't indulge them. But the other thing that the Buddha often talks about is this *yoniso manasikāra*, this wise attention, this being really awake, that in any situation you are aware of unwholesome thoughts as they arise, not after they've arisen and done something, but as they arise. When we are awake enough to actually catch these little unwholesome thoughts coming up, they very quickly dissipate. In that way, these prejudices, these biases begin to be exhausted of their energy and they lose that power to take us by surprise.

I think one of the difficulties is that it's very difficult for us to say to ourselves, "Well, I am racially prejudiced." To say that and to mean it as an active thing wouldn't be correct. But to say that there is in me that *saṅkhāra*, that conditioning—

and to be aware should it ever arise and not to indulge it — I think that's a more truthful way of being with these conditionings within us. And it's also, I think, how should we say, comforting to know that every person in the world will have these prejudices. It doesn't matter what ethnic group you come from, what race you belong to, whatever. These are just basic prejudices that are completely universal, doesn't matter where you live.

So that allows us, I think, to be more open about ourselves, at least to ourselves anyway. And that means that we will be aware of these things when they arise, and they don't sneak out as Freudian slips, which can be very embarrassing.

So what we've done this evening is just revise these moral precepts and begun to look at much more this idea of relationship. And we've looked at the more negative side. At another time, we'll be looking at the more positive side, the virtues. But it's just ways in which we can reflect upon these things whenever the occasion arises and allows us to find a way to heal the heart of these things. So that's the purpose of bringing these things to mind.

And as I say, you can, if you want to go deeper into it, there's lots of stuff on the websites, lots of talks on Dharma Seed and things like that.

Very good. I think I've done my bit there. So I hope my words have been of some assistance, that they have not caused confusion, and that you will, by your constant effort, release yourselves from all suffering and achieve the peace of *Nibbāna*.

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