

# Understanding Dukkha: From Reactivity to Freedom

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Thank you, everybody. This sitting together—we so underestimate the value of it. Even on Zoom, which is not in sync with our neurology. Just knowing that we are all doing this, and seeing that we are all doing this, here and now, together, from wherever we are, is very touching. It's very supportive. We're all sitting very still, meditating. Could you have done that at home by yourself? I find it hard sometimes. I'm sitting there and my cushion is like, "Oh, I have to..." or, "I want to..." or, "Why? This isn't good enough." Whatever comes through the mind gets us off our cushion. But here we are together, so we stay with it, all of us. And it's hard to do that because the mind is what it is. It jumps around. It reacts. It causes conditions.

I want to share a few reflections about the mind, carrying on from last time, when I was talking about hope and how greed and aversion can hide in subtle ways. I want to continue in that same vein, starting with the Three Characteristics, because reactivity comes from a habitual response to one of those three. There is some sense object. We either find it pleasant or unpleasant. If it's pleasant, we see that it changes. Or we hang on to it, and then it changes. If it's unpleasant, we want it to go away. We hope it will go away. Or maybe we just zone out because it's too much. This is what we call dukkha. And dukkha, as you know, is one of the three universal characteristics of all phenomena. So Buddhism gets a really bad reputation because everybody says, "Oh, it's just about suffering." No, no, no, no, no. Yes, it's about suffering. It's about dukkha, which is not only suffering. It can be about suffering. But, as you know, and as I want to remind all of us today, myself included, dukkha that manifests as suffering is a response of the mind to dukkha that is actually simply unreliability, instability, unpredictability. And that latter part is very neutral. That's just the nature of phenomena. They change all the time. We can't control them. Oh, wouldn't we like to? But that's the source of dukkha.

Dukkha, unlike the other two characteristics, when it manifests as suffering—as discomfort, as disease in the mind and heart—is subjective. It is being created internally. It's not inherent in that object. So, this bell... *Bell rings*. Here's the sound. You might find it pleasant. If you have a migraine, that sound might be exquisitely unpleasant. And we can react to that. That's the suffering part of dukkha. But the pleasantness or unpleasantness is not inherent in this thing or in that sound. It's not an objective part of the sound. The sound is just sound, just happening, doing what it does. And it's unstable. It's unpredictable. That is dukkha. It can also become suffering. That's the created part. And this is basic. You all know this. We all know it in our heads.

I'm laughing because then what happens? Gianni and I were laughing yesterday because there's a retreat going on. He was saying, "Oh, soon I have to start making more wood chips for the winter. But I have to wait until the end of the retreat." And I said, "No, no, no, no, no. Do it now. Start up that wood chipper now." He's worried that the yogis are reacting. He laughed. He's very considerate. He doesn't want to create any unnecessary reactivity in people. But he's not creating the reactivity. That's where I'm coming from. The reactivity is coming from each person who might—or might not—be bothered by that sound. Likewise, in the summertime here, or in the springtime when there's rain, Gianni says, "I need to mow the lawn, and I'll wait until after your retreat is finished." I said, "No, no, no, no, no. Please go out and do that right now." And I always sit sometimes in the hall, and I hear the lawn mower... *laughs* ...and I smile.

So dukkha, unlike impermanence, unlike not having a core that is a stable self or owned by anyone, experience is dukkha because of those other two things. And experience, with something added on top of it, can become suffering as a subjective experience. By the time we are reactive, a lot has already happened. There is the pleasantness or unpleasantness. Maybe the pleasantness went away, or the unpleasantness came. We don't like it. There is the unpleasant feeling in it, which wasn't noticed, which turned into greed or aversion—not noticed. And then suddenly we realise the mind is just as tight as can be because there is a sound and it's driving me crazy. Or there is that sensation in my knee. Or, "Why does my mind keep wandering? I'm so crazy." We start reacting to external phenomena, and even more pointedly to internal phenomena, not because those phenomena are suffering in and of themselves, but because we don't like what's happening. We hope it will be different. Or we hope it will change, and it doesn't. It's the nature of phenomena to be potentially distressing because they change all the time, and we can't control them. But the distress is created. I'm talking in circles here because this needs repetition. It's on purpose.

Reminding you of the first and second verses of the Dhammapada, which I'm absolutely sure you've all heard before: "Mind is the forerunner of all things. Act and speak with a pure mind, and happiness follows like a shadow that never leaves. Mind is the forerunner of all things. Act and speak with an impure mind, and suffering follows like the wheel follows the hoof of the ox." "Pure" and "impure" here refer to the presence of greed, aversion and delusion—not to being ethically pure or impure. And it's not personal. So we think, "Oh, my mind's impure." Please don't do that. Or, if you're doing it, just notice. That's also extra. When the mind, or mental states, are associated with greed, aversion and delusion, this is a natural phenomenon. We get this objective reactivity. All of our experience is only six things. It's very simple: seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, tangible phenomena, and mental phenomena—the mind. These six sense doors. Stuff comes in. Things happen. Now, of course, where it gets complicated is all the feedback loops between all that. And that's what we're talking about. But it's highly impersonal and conditioned. And while we might know all of this intellectually, in our heads, the heart has habits. That's the impersonal part. So don't go judging yourself for habits. Train the mind. That's all.

We train the mind to receive without any kind of overlay. Just rest back in natural awareness. What is happening right now? That's a training. There's no overlay of dukkha in that. When there is interest and curiosity, that mettā attitude, it's just: "Unpleasant, unpleasant... coming, going." That's a training. And we can trust this training so much. That's how we get from always being reactive, always dwelling in that subjective experience of dukkha and wallowing in it, to the balance of equanimity and non-attachment: the mind of a Buddha. We train the mind, moment to moment, coming back moment to moment to just, "Oh, what is this?" and noticing when greed, aversion and delusion are getting in there and creating trouble, adding layers onto basic experience.

This is what we see in the practice so many times. You know it for yourself very well. You see it. "It's always..." or "I'm always..." Or maybe we say, "Oh, this mind is always with aversion." That's an extra layer. Dislike, depression, hopelessness, anxiety. "It's always this way. I'm always doing this. I can't. I'm not good enough." Oh, that's self-judgment. That's a story that we create on top of things because we don't like the experience of not being able to control things. The mind is one of these six things. It's so poignant. It's actually very touching.

Or the hope that I was talking about last time: "Oh, I don't like this. I hope it changes. I hope that pain goes away. Or I hope tomorrow's meditation is better than today. Or I hope, I hope, I hope, whatever. Or I wish. I wish it weren't this way. I don't like this. It's boring. I wish this were a more interesting practice." Do you ever have that experience? It's like, "Oh God, practice is so boring." Oh, yeah, yeah. That's great. We want to be entertained by something. No, it might not be entertaining. Whatever we want.

And you all know for yourselves probably the subtlety of this. This is where it gets really, really interesting to watch, when greed, aversion and delusion get in there and take over the mind-stream

in a subtle way. The more you practise, the more subtle it gets. It can manifest as, “Hmm, I really, really, really want to just go sit for a year to cultivate the mind, to attain Nibbāna.” Now, that can be totally wholesome. Or it can be total aversion to just life, in its busyness, in its turbulence, in its lack of quietude. We just want to go live in a cave because it’s too much. And we think, “Oh, this is dhamma-chanda. I want to go...” That can be a subtle form of turning simple experience into dukkha. Or something arises in the practice. It seems difficult, problematic, unwholesome, and we don’t like it. We don’t notice that moment of not liking it. This is a critical piece. We just think, “Oh, there’s that. I have to fix this, change this, figure this out.” No, no, no, no, no. We just need to be with it.

Some people go into thinking: psychological thinking, philosophical thinking, thinking about anicca, dukkha and anattā, and going into long discourses in the mind about it, while not connecting with any of that experientially. This is a subtle form of moha, delusion. So greed, aversion and delusion can manifest in these subtle ways. They get between our bare experience of simple impermanence, simple uncontrollability. The thing to remember about dukkha, either the objective type—the nature of all phenomena not to be permanently reliable—or the subjective type, which is the suffering that can result, is that dukkha is the First Noble Truth. Of course, that’s very important. It’s the whole of the practice. But please, please remember: dukkha is meant to be understood. I’ll say that again. Dukkha is meant to be understood. That is our basic task around dukkha. Not to wallow in it, or feel it over and over and over again without understanding it.

This is a subtle thing that people can get caught in. I’ve gotten caught there myself many, many, many times, and for long periods of time. For years I’ve gotten caught in experiencing dukkha over and over again, and then reacting to the dukkha. “It’s so... it’s so groundless... it’s so impermanent...” and getting very dramatic about it internally. This is a tendency some of us have. I notice that now when it begins to happen as wallowing. This is feeling the dukkha with no understanding, just getting lost in the negativity of it, the heaviness of it, the pain of it, the difficulty of it, and getting sucked into that over and over and over again. “It’s so... it’s so... it’s so...” Now, that’s not understanding dukkha. That’s getting lost in it. And believe me, you don’t want to do that. You probably know this for yourself too, how painful that can be. But the Buddha didn’t say, “Experience dukkha over and over again.” He said, “Understand dukkha over and over again.” The real understanding of dukkha comes from acceptance and balance, and knowing that all phenomena are not there to make us happy. So if there is unpleasantness, this is natural. But it’s not necessarily suffering. That extra piece, that subjective piece, is the part that’s being understood. This is the very root of understanding dukkha: that difference between subjective and objective. Wallowing in the experience of dukkha, subjectively getting lost in it; objectively: “Oh, it is the nature of all things to be unsatisfying.” But they’re not in themselves suffering. That suffering is being created. And seeing that process is the understanding. And when we see that process over and over again, when we see the mind going, “Oh...” or “Ugh...”, when we see the creation of that over and over again, we realise it’s being created. That’s the understanding. “Oh, that’s extra.”

That’s the hook that I just bit. In the texts it’s called Māra’s hook. And it’s such a vivid image. Don’t bite the hook. Notice: “Oh! I liked that, and it went away.” Mind is the creator of all things. Now this takes space: the space of mettā, the space of awareness, the space of interest, the space of curiosity, total acceptance. Things are coming and going. That’s just what they do. Now what?

The Buddha’s teaching... I’m searching for a word here. The Buddha’s teaching is such a... it’s tough love, we say in English. It’s not a parent saying to a child who’s crying, “There, there. It’ll all be okay.” It’s the parent saying to the child, “Well.. life’s like this. Now what? ”

Mind is the creator of all things. Act and speak, internally and externally. Internal speech, thought, movement of the mind is action. So internal action. Act and speak by following greed, aversion and delusion, and you’ve bitten the hook. That’s a habit. And I think it’s so interesting. Many of you are referring to the mouth. I do this too. It’s like... *laughs* ...I don’t like hooks and mouths. It’s very confronting because it puts the responsibility for our own freedom in our own hands. I can’t give you

Nibbāna. I can't even give myself Nibbāna. The understanding of that just happens by itself. The mind can't be controlled, but it can be trained. And that's our responsibility. So noticing, with that same mettā quality that you bring to a neutral, interesting object in the practice, noticing the mind in that same way. Noticing the creation of suffering in the same way. The creation of that subjective discomfort. "What just happened there?" That's interesting. Or maybe you don't think so in the moment, but actually it really is.

It can be so interesting to see how all of this is constructed, because we construct it—not just suffering, but every other experience. The mind is the maker of all things. But we create our sense of reality. Pain is subjective. Physical pain—not just emotional, experiential dukkha. This is such an interesting thing, this subjectivity of physical pain. And it can be so interesting to speak with friends, or Dhamma friends, about your experience of pain. Some people have a very high pain threshold. Others... the least little thing, and the mind tightens around it, and it's unbearable. And then we see, when we share these experiences, it's like, "Oh, that was the same phenomenon." We experience it really differently. That points to how we create the suffering part of dukkha. It is extra.

And it doesn't mean we're weak or flawed. Please, please, please don't go there. Or you might eventually go there, depending on how you relate to yourself and the judgment. But I remember thinking, "Oh, I've just got this fatal flaw. Everybody else can be free from suffering, but I will never." No, it's not true. None of us have that. But there is habit. And habit can be a stubborn thing, as you know, as we've all seen. So get curious. Get interested about the creation of that subjective experience of dukkha, and how the mind might eventually go there. What happens if you don't? What happens if you pause in that moment and go, "I'm not going to believe that?"

This also gets very interesting, because when we face layers of identity, we might see how we like cultivating pain because it gives the ego somewhere to stand. That's not a personal flaw either. That's just the ego. Seeing that can be very freeing, actually. It's like, "Oh, I see what's been happening here. I like being a victim." I was speaking to somebody yesterday in the village. This person is known to always be complaining about something. And sure enough, they were. They're very unhappy. Of course. Because that's the habit of the mind. That's how they've trained their mind. So that added-on part that we all do, in some way or another, becomes the place—the very place—of our practice.

And it's a long journey from getting lost in that habit, and stuck there for long periods of time, to being free. So watching the mind is the critical piece here. And I think it's so interesting right now. I mean, I don't go to movies, but I read the news. I read the headlines, and the headlines are all about all sorts of stuff. And one of the headlines I keep seeing is, "Oh, there's this movie out about Odysseus." And I find that very old story to be very alluring. I remember reading it in school, reading Homer, and thinking, "Wow, this guy was thousands of years ago, but it really spoke to me because I understood from my own experience that same wandering, getting lost for seven years at a time..." And that's what we do. That's a metaphor for our internal journey. We think we're going to go from A to B, and it takes us twenty years to get there. And we start in the middle of the process, and it's like, "Oh God..." You know, the story is not linear. So even if you don't watch movies, go and read Homer. Because it's mythological, it's very impersonal, but this is what's happening for all of us. We're wandering from dukkha—that subjective dukkha that comes from not understanding—to the understanding that it is being created just as a process. Not a personal process, but just as a process of habit. And that we have a choice.

That's what I've spent the whole last half hour saying in those three sentences. And that choice is cultivated. Trained. We don't have a switch, sadly. We can't just jump from point A to point B. I remember first reading Homer and thinking, "You idiot, don't do that! Don't listen to that. Don't, don't, don't, don't." Sure enough... lost for another seven years. Stuck. This is going to happen. Now what? So not adding to the subjective dukkha of the process by more frustration about the fact that we

can't turn that switch. Not adding by then falling into wallowing about, "Oh, it's so old." Yes, it is. Now what?

The Buddha's teaching can be summarised. I need those two words: Now what? Now what? Now what do we want to create here? Hmm... Okay. Not judging. Not adding. Just training. I always come back to patience and mettā, because this is what they're for. This is what they are for: this long journey, this odyssey that we call the practice, from subjective dukkha, to dukkha understood, to freedom. And we see these moments of release again and again and again and again. We notice that added-on process again and again and again and again and again. That's what it takes. That's natural. We're not machines. We're human beings. The Buddha wasn't a machine. He was a human being. It took him lifetimes. So we can't be in a hurry. But resetting our direction again and again and again, away from that subjective suffering, using that subjective suffering as the doorway into understanding rather than getting lost in it—that's the key.

All strength for the way, everybody. It's a long journey. And gradual practice... sudden release. You never know—and this is the last thing I want to leave you with, because it's the more upbeat part—you never, ever, ever know when that moment of understanding will come. Those small moments. Those big moments. We think they're far away. We think we'll never get there. We think, "Oh, it's a long journey. Oh God..." No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. I'm laughing at myself here, not at any of you, because the number of times I've thought that... countless. Lost track a long time ago. But always remember: you don't know when the next moment will bring a moment of understanding, and release, and letting go. It's like, "Oh, yeah. I see what happened there." We turn to Māra and we say, "I see what you just did." And we rest back, and smile, and understand. So I want to stop talking... so that you can talk.