The Four Noble Truths: *Dukkha* (5 of 5) The Clinging of Suffering

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This is the last of the five talks on suffering, or *dukkha*. This is part of a series of talks on the Four Noble Truths. The first noble truth is the topic for this week. In its full formulation, it is called “the noble truth of suffering.”

In the earliest formulation of this truth, it was an insight described as: "One understands *this* is suffering.” The word “this*”* is very important because it is always specific. When something is an insight, it is not a generalized view, theory, or principle about life. This is suffering. This is unease, dis-ease, stress, or pain. However we want to translate the word “*dukkha*,” then that is *dukkha*.

The meaning of *dukkha* is grounded in something specific, as opposed to a generalization that life is suffering. That is a principle or a generalization. When there is *dukkha* in our moment-to-moment experience, we know that *this* is *dukkha*. We recognize it. It can be a drag to pay attention to our suffering, pain, or stress. It is painful – painful things are painful.

There is a way in which paying careful attention to suffering and learning to attend to it wisely, and with ease, and mindfulness can be a path to being free from suffering, to the end of it. This is not possible if we simply try to escape from it or ignore it. That leaves us more on the surface of life. There is an art, a way in which practice takes us deep into our life. It takes us deep to the other side of our dis-ease, our unease, our "*dukkha*."

Yesterday, I mentioned that the Buddha said, "Whatever is impermanent, inconstant, and changing is suffering, is *dukkha*." It is painful, but is it painful in and of itself, or is it a place where we can see or experience pain?

In the most famous explanation of The Four Noble Truths, the Buddha lays out that this is the noble truth of suffering. He then asks the question, "What is suffering? What is painful? What is *dukkha*?" I hear this question as really asking, "Where do we find *dukkha*? What is the

experience? What thing causes *dukkha*? When there is *dukkha*, where is it? Where is it found?“

The answer is rather elaborate, and I will elaborate more fully as we go through these weeks. It no longer becomes a direct insight into the immediacy of *dukkha.* The full elaboration is a larger explanation. It is an overview or a generalization of sorts. We need to be very careful not to get lost in generalization if we are trying to practice with the specificity or the details of our life.

I will use the Pali word *dukkha* rather than translating it every time. As I have said it can mean suffering, stress, or unsatisfactoriness. Literally, it means “painful.” Birth, aging, illness, and death are *dukkha*. Sorrow, grief, sadness, pain, distress, and despair are *dukkha*. Association with what is unloved, or the unbeloved, is *dukkha*. Separation from the loved is *dukkha*. Not getting what is wanted is *dukkha*.

In short, the Five Aggregates of Clinging are *dukkha*. This is a powerful statement about how widespread and total the experience of *dukkha* can be in human life. It has to do with these things called the five aggregates. “Aggregate” is a funny word in English.

“Aggregate” is often treated as having a technical meaning, but at heart, these words are playing on

metaphors. The Buddha often used metaphors to teach. Metaphors have a very different role in our lives than technical explanations, which define things in technical terms. Metaphors are evocative. They touch into our imagination, and even into our emotional life. They give us a visceral sense, experience, or association with what is being taught. They offer a much wider participatory experience of the teachings than just memorizing a technical definition can.

One of the central metaphors that Buddha talks about is that of fire. D*ukkha*, whatever it might be, is sometimes seen as a fire that is burning us. We are burning, and the world is burning. It is burning with the fire of *dukkha*. Three primary fires are burning; the fire of greed, hatred, and delusion (confusion, or bewilderment). These fires hurt. These fires are singeing people. Sometimes it is a little singe. Sometimes it is a full-blown forest fire, and we are consumed by the volcano that we experience within. It can be quite strong.

The fire of suffering, or *dukkha* can create deep scars in our hearts and our minds. If you look around, the world is on fire. There is so much suffering. There is so much pain, distress, and stress that people live under. Here in the United States, they say that one in five children are now living in hunger. Before the COVID-19 era, it was something like one in ten. This is astronomically high.

So many people have lost their work now. There is the fire of hungry bellies and hungry children. It is so painful that this should be the case.

The Buddha talked about the fires that come from greed, hatred, and delusion. This is primarily what the Buddha focused on. When the Buddha used the word suffering again and again, it was closely associated with these powerful mental attitudes or motivations of greed, hatred, and delusion. When these mental states are very compulsive and strong, they are like fires that will destroy lives. The metaphor for suffering is fire.

In the time of the Buddha, fires such as household fires, or fires for keeping people warm were dependent on firewood − a bundle, or a cord of wood. The word for a cord or bundle of wood, a branch, or a stick, like a trunk of a tree is "*khandha*." That is the word that somehow ended up translated into Buddhist English as "aggregate." It sometimes just means a bundle or collection of something. Specifically, it also means a piece of wood or a bundle of wood. That is the fuel or the basis upon which the fire grows.

The next part of this metaphor is the word *upādāna*, which can mean "clinging." This refers to the five aggregates of clinging. *Upādāna* also means "fuel." These bundles of wood or *khandas* are fuel. The gasoline we put on the wood so it burns

is fuel. There is a combination of the firewood and the fuel, then the fire that comes from it.

We are using the same word to mean “clinging” and “fuel” for the fire. This means that clinging is the fuel for the fire. Clinging is what fans the flames of our suffering. Clinging is what keeps it going. Whenever there is reactivity that has to do with some kind of clinging, then that is adding more fuel to the fire.

Clinging requires something that we cling to. What do we cling to? We cling to these *khandhas*, these bundles of stuff, or this mass of wood. There is always something that we are clinging to. We are clinging to these five aggregates, these five bundles, or five cords of wood.

To summarize, the Buddha says, “What is this suffering? It is these five bundles of clinging.” It is these five bunches of wood that are the fuel for the fire. That is where the fire is. The fire is in the clinging. It is important to understand that the suffering, stress, or painfulness he is talking about is the pain or the suffering that comes from clinging (*upādāna).*

This is a bit of a tautology. What is the suffering that the Buddha is talking about? It does not include everything we might call painful or suffering. It is suffering that arises from clinging. Whenever there is clinging, or craving, there will be suffering. Every time we say we are suffering does not necessarily involve clinging. The Buddha is addressing the suffering that arises with clinging.

Clinging hurts. If you clench your fist for a long time, it will hurt. The release of that clenching is freedom for the fist. We should understand that the world of suffering or impermanence is the world we cling to. If we cling to what is impermanent, inconstant, or flowing, then we will suffer.

If we are standing in a river, and we try to stop the river, it is not going to work. If we try to take a fistful of water and hold it in our hand, it is not going to work. If we try to move the river by pushing against the bank and making it flow in a different direction, it is not going to work. Fighting, resisting, or clinging to the river doesn't really work.

Imagine we take a bucketful of river water, go back to town, and say, "Look, I have the river in this bucket."
That is silly. We have water in the bucket, we don't have the river. Clinging to the river of life that is changing is guaranteed to be a source of stress, or pain. The alternative is to see and relate to this world of impermanence, change, and inconstancy in a new way. The changing world becomes the medicine for our life, not the illness, the poison, or the fire.

The five aggregates, or the five bundles of who we are – our body, our feelings, our perceptions, our mental formations, and our consciousness – are constantly changing. They are unfolding phenomena. If we cling to them, we will suffer. If we allow the psychosomatic ways in which we experience and see ourselves to just flow and move, then we can find our ease. We can find our freedom.

These are some of the tasks of the second noble truth, which we will start on Monday. The second noble truth goes deeper

into this world of suffering − how it arises and how to find freedom.

Question and Responses

Q1: When one comes to the end of suffering, are the outward causes of suffering still present, but one's relationship to them has changed? Does it end if clinging ends?

Response: To understand the Buddha's teachings, it is useful to make a distinction between causes and conditions. The conditions for suffering are in the world. If, as practitioners, we are walking this path to try to end suffering – and I want to emphasize the words "*as practitioners"* – the primary cause that we're interested in at that time, in that context, in those circumstances is the contribution we make to our suffering. The direction of our attention is not to the conditions outside, but rather to the contribution we make to our suffering.

This is a very mature, strong, courageous thing to do. In conventional language, there are causes for suffering in the external world. We don't want to deny that. We don't want to stop taking care of that in the proper way. If we want to set our heart at ease in the deep, liberated way that the Buddha emphasized, at that time we turn around, look, and ask, "What is my contribution to this suffering?" We could say that the conditions for suffering are external. The cause for it is in our own hearts, in our clinging.

As the person says here, yes – it is our relationship that changes. We are no longer relating with clinging. We are relating to the suffering with openness and ease, and perhaps

with wisdom. If clinging ends, the suffering that we contribute − our contribution to our pain, our difficulty − ends as well. Some of the deepest existential suffering we have arises from clinging, or with clinging. It is phenomenal to go through this process of coming to the end of clinging.

Q2: Even when I can connect with deep ease, there is some part of me that is on guard, like a sentinel. It can't seem to let go. How do I practice with this?

Response: It is important to befriend the sentinel. Sit down next to your sentinel, next to that guard. Accompany and listen to them. Feel them and get to know them. Spend time with them. Don't be in a hurry to stop being on guard. Bring easeful, kind, loving attention to them, and get to know them. Listen to them. Hear what it is really afraid of. Maybe the fear that underlies the sentinel needs your love.

Q3: What is the difference between ease and complacency?

Response: If we are mindful, attentive, and sensitive to complacency, then we can feel and tune into what it is like. It will have some kind of stress, dis-ease, pain, or suffering as part of it. It doesn't feel good to be complacent. There is a kind of resistance, a shutting down, or a narrowing or constriction in it. Ease is the opposite. Ease has a sense of openness or possibility. It has a sense of no resistance to what is going on. Ease can come with a lot of care and attention. Complacency is like, “So what?” It doesn't seem to matter. Ease means that our care does matter, and ease is done peacefully.

Comment: “Ease made it much easier to be with hindrances”

Q4: I have stopped reading, and watching all news because my perceptions and mental formations get activated. Must I continue to be without these current events to maintain some kind of serenity?

Response: It may be a good idea for the time being. Maybe eventually, you won't. There is good reason to lose your serenity and to be agitated by the news because a lot of it is written in order to arouse emotions and get people excited.

It is a genre of writing that is trying to get us to buy newspapers. It wants to get us excited and believe what is being said. It is good to have some sense of what is happening in the world, but there are places you can read the news that have less of an emotional charge than some of the major news outlets.

All the major news is found in Wikipedia. I don’t know whether Wikipedia is less or more accurate than some of the newspapers, I tend to think it is more balanced because that is what they are trying to do. There is very little emotional charge in Wikipedia. You might try Wikipedia.

Most news is old. Things haven't changed so much in the millennia, really, at the heart of it all. It is not necessary to know the news when it is new. It is useful to be well-informed, but you don't have to be up to date by the minute or even by the day. Sometimes, I have found it very useful to read the news a day or two late. I saw that my relationship with the

news changed when I knew it wasn't cutting edge and up to date. You might just kind of follow behind the news for a day or two and maybe you will have a whole different experience. Perhaps it won't take away your serenity so much.

Q5: It is meaningful for me to know that aggregates are translated from a bundle of wood. I feel I can understand more clearly about The Five Aggregates now.

Response: Great, I am happy to hear that. At the risk of complicating things a bit more, I might mention that there is a strong tendency in many teachers and scholars when teaching about The Five Aggregates, to say, "The Buddha says there is no self, but the self is these five processes or five activities called The Five Aggregates. That is what defines the human being." That is a very common statement.

However, if you go back and read the teachings of the Buddha, he never says it that way. He only says that people get attached to these five bundles when they cling. He doesn't claim that these five aggregates make up the human being as a total. He never wants to define the human being in its totality. He just wants people to be free. The focus is that these are the things people tend to cling to, these concepts, ideas, and this particular way of dividing up the human being.

There are other ways that he divides up the human being that he doesn't see as a source of suffering, or what we cling to. Oddly enough, he uses the word *citta* for the mind and *kaya* for the body. If you look into how he talks about the mind and the body, *citta* and *kaya* are not what the person is. Rather,

citta and *kaya* are how the mind constructs its experience of the body and mind.

There is a way in which that is constructed that is not a problem. *Citta* is never seen to be suffering, in the way that The Five Aggregates of Clinging are. If we generalize and see The Five Aggregates of Clinging, the five bundles, to be everything we are as human beings, this lends itself to all kinds of complicated questions. In particular, if the aggregates drop away, or we don't cling to them, who are we? The Five Aggregates are a particular thing. They define what we cling to, not who we are.

Thank you for this week and thank you for our time together. I look forward to next week when we go through the Second Noble Truth. Thank you.