Be, See, Free, We (8 of 10) Insight Into Suffering and the Painful

July 18, 2020

SUMMARY KEYWORDS *dukkha, sukkha,* bliss of blamelessness, ethical, cultivate, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Bhikkhu Bodhi, Analayo, stress, unsatisfactory, unreliable, bias, Dalai Lama, compassion, birth, death, sickness,
confidence, contentment, ease, well-being, happiness, Five Faculties, worldly winds, upright, stability, wisdom, independent, wishless, release, liberation, peace, stillness, door, problem-solving, strength, undermining, hopelessness, helplessness, empowered presence, snake skin, non-clinging, grasping

Gil Fronsdal

The topic is *dukkha*, often translated into English as “suffering.” But that might not be the best translation, so I'll talk a little bit about the meaning or meanings of this word.

One reason why I'm a little bit hesitant to use the word “suffering” is that when some English speakers hear the word “suffering,” they think of big suffering – suffering is

a big deal – such as major catastrophes, death, major illnesses, and major challenges. For some people, those major challenges don't occur that often, so it is hard to see the relationship to our activities in daily life.

So “suffering” might not be the best translation of *dukkha*. In Pali, the opposite of suffering is *sukkha.* “Du” is usually a prefix meaning “bad,” “wrong,” or somehow off. “Su” means “good” or “happy.” The cultivation of *sukkha,* well-being, is the foundation for being able to penetrate, see, and have liberating insight into *dukkha.*

This morning we talked about this foundation of well-being and happiness as something we cultivate. To some people, the idea that you can actually cultivate and develop happiness seems strange. One of the things I emphasize is that you can begin this cultivation by simply looking more wisely into the present moment for what is good, what is pleasant, or what’s inspiring.

Often people have a selective bias to orient around what's difficult. They orient around where the suffering, the distress, and the difficulties are, and around what is wrong. But often there is plenty of stuff that is right. So some degree of happiness can come just by appreciating what's already here and being content with what one has.

But it's also possible to cultivate happiness in the way that the Buddhist tradition emphasizes. This begins with cultivating an ethical life. There is something important about living an ethical life, at least for the Buddha. He thought that if you did that you'd have a certain kind of happiness that in English is usually translated as “the bliss of blamelessness.” At least in that part of your life, you can be happy that you didn't kill anybody today. You can be happy you didn't steal from anyone today, you didn't hurt anyone with your sexuality today, you didn't lie intentionally today, and you didn't get intoxicated.

The idea is that you can be happy you didn't do these things. For most of us listening to this, it probably didn't occur to us today that we don't go around killing people regularly or at all. So it doesn’t seem to us as if being happy that we don't do something that's not part of our life should be a source of happiness. When you read the newspaper and hear what goes on around the world, it is a gift to be safe for others in this dramatic way of not killing, not stealing, and not hurting people.

For the Buddha, it's okay and appropriate to feel happy that in these gross kinds of ethical transgressions, you're not one of those people. For many of us in the modern world, the kinds of things that we often criticize and berate ourselves for are not gross ethical lapses, but often smaller things like feelings of inadequacy or unworthiness.

But it's possible to improve one's ethics and live a more ethical life – a life that causes less and less harm in the world. This is said to be a source of happiness and contentment. It's possible to learn how to be content with what one has if one has basic living needs. Instead of feeling that we always have to have the latest and the greatest, and have as much as someone else, we can have a kind of profound contentment and ease with what we have. We can use it without feeling like we need to do something else. That contentment can be cultivated.

There are a variety of kinds of happiness that can be cultivated. One of them is the cultivation of compassion. When compassion is at its most natural – when compassion occurs by itself without a lot of extra baggage and extra difficulties, compassion in the presence of suffering has a feeling of satisfaction or ease. The Dalai Lama says if you want to be happy, have compassion and care for others. The cultivation of compassion – opening the heart and caring for others – is a source of happiness. Being as concerned with the welfare of others as you are with your own welfare can be a source of happiness. So it's possible to create a foundation by cultivating compassion.

For the path to liberation, one of the purposes of cultivating compassion is so that we can have insight

into *dukkha*. Now the literal meaning of the word "*dukkha"* in Pali is "pain," or "painful." It's really an adjective, so it means "painful." The First Noble Truth is often described in English as "Birth is suffering, old age is suffering, death is suffering, sickness is suffering, being separated from what you love is suffering, and being with what you don't like is suffering." But a more literal translation of that is, "Birth is painful, old age is painful, death is painful, and sickness is painful.

You get a very different feeling when you use the adjective "painful" rather than the word "suffering" in relation to all these things. For many people, it's more understandable: yes, of course, birth is painful, death is often painful, and sickness is painful. It is easier to understand that painfulness is not the whole picture. It is not a categorical judgment about how bad these things are. It just means, yeah, it's painful and there are also other things. Birth can be inspiring and a source of great happiness. Sickness is not only painful, it can be other things as well. Some of them are kind of nice.

So the literal meaning of the word *dukkha* is "painful." It is sometimes used in the Buddha's teaching as a metaphor. The idea of pain is used to represent other forms of challenges we have. We do that in English too, for example, saying that today, technology was painful for Gil Fronsdal. It was a pain today because there were all these buttons to push. I wouldn't call it "suffering," but

saying it was a pain means that it was irritating or maybe just a challenge. Calling technology “a pain” doesn't elevate it to the heavy idea that I'm suffering because of all this. It was just a minor irritant. (Not really. I just hope it wasn’t for you all.)

The idea is that there's pain in the world and different things are painful. The task of practice is to have insight into pain. There are a lot of different things to discover about the kinds of insight and understanding we can have as we investigate what is metaphorically painful, difficult, distressing, or challenging, and brings suffering to us.

.

The way that English translators translate the word “*dukkha*” into English has a lot to do with their philosophy of life, what they think Buddhism is about, or what they think the central purpose of practice is. English translations are not philosophically or dharmically neutral. Different Dharma teachings almost depend on the translation you use.

The most common translation is “suffering,” Another one that one translator uses is “stress.” Other translators use “unsatisfactory” or “unreliable.” The three wonderful and significant translators of our Pali texts into English in our scene, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Bhikkhu Bodhi, and Analayo, each use different translations and different ways of understanding the word “*dukkha*.” I think each

of them has a different angle, philosophy, or approach that they take.

I say this so you don't take Buddhist teachings around the topic of *dukkha* as definitive and categorical. It is important not to do that (it's painful to do that, for sure) because the idea is to have the freedom and the flexibility to begin looking at your own experience without making it fit into the lens of some presentation of what Buddhism is.

Mindfulness is a very important part of this because mindfulness puts us in the middle of our own experience. It begins to shine a light of awareness, knowing, and understanding onto what's actually happening here. Rather than trying to shoehorn ourselves into having the Buddhist experience, if anything, we're trying to wake up to what this experience is, and how Buddhist teachings help us understand our own experience. Buddhism is like a reference point or spotlight that helps us to see, rather than something we're supposed to be or align ourselves to, or that is supposed to explain everything about who we are.
We practice mindfulness to see what's here. What we see is a little different if we can see with a foundation of confidence, a certain kind of contentment, a certain kind of ease, well-being, and happiness. That foundation

tends to create a different lens than if we're using a lens of distress, irritation, anger, frustration, discouragement, and seeing everything that's wrong about ourselves or the world around us.

Chances are that with some modicum of well-being and a settled sense of ease, hopefully, we can see more objectively. We can see with fewer filters across the lens. We can see more clearly, “Well, that's what's going on.”

If what's going on is painful, we learn to see that and come to terms with that. If what we see is easeful or happy, we learn to see and recognize that for what it is. In this process, something very interesting begins to happen.
With the ability to be stable, confident, metaphorically upright, and to look at what's painful, difficult, challenging, suffering, or at what is pleasant, happy, and joyful, the *way* we look at it becomes more and more important.

It is almost as if there's freedom to be found in how we gaze: be still and gaze upon everything kindly. Be still and gaze upon everything with freedom, with ease.

I think for many people this is a very different approach than the usual one of solving our problems, accumulating more pleasure and happiness, holding

onto things, or trying to push things away. In the usual approach, life is only measured and understood by how things relate to us; our suffering is completely a product of the people who do things to us, or how events affect us, and so we have to fix the events of the world. Happiness only comes because we've won the lottery or things in the world are just right, so we can be happy.

When the problem is always out there so we're trying to become happy or trying to avoid suffering, we're a little bit at the mercy of what is happening in the world around us. In the language of ancient Buddhism, we're victims of the winds of the world, meaning when the weather changes, we get pushed around by the wind in new ways.

In Dharma practice one of the things we're doing is cultivating a stronger mind. We cultivate inner strength. To be able to be present in a confident, engaged, mindful, and focused way that allows the development of further wisdom is a kind of power. Each of the Five Faculties becomes strong as we do this practice. When we have developed some strength, we can hold our own in the face of the winds of the world, and in the face of the winds of our own mind.

Today I read in the *suttas* a little saying that goes something like this – a practitioner has mastered their mind. I think it works a little better this way in English –

a practitioner controls their mind; they're not controlled by their mind. There is a way of becoming stable, strong, and confident. Then no matter what thoughts, feelings, and motivations we have, a place of wisdom and stability exists where we can see and respect them, but we don't have to give in to them. We don't have to pick them up or react to them.

As practice gets stronger, our ability to see clearly what's happening becomes stronger and stronger. At some point, there's a shift where our ability to observe (or to see, to be aware, or to be present with) experience becomes its own thing. Awareness is felt to be independent from the circumstances we're in. Because of the strength of this kind of mindfulness, we are no longer tied to or defined by circumstances.

What is important about this is that it's possible to have *dukkha* – things can be painful – without needing to do anything about it. This is because we live in the freedom of awareness, the freedom to observe. The freedom of awareness is not pushed around by or constricted by the circumstances we're in, so we don’t need to fix our suffering, get rid of our suffering, or solve our suffering. It is wise sometimes to be involved in that, but it's not the only thing that we can do.

As vipassana or mindfulness practice goes deeper and deeper, and as the ability to be mindful becomes

stronger, solving our suffering and solving the things that are difficult and painful become less and less important, especially in the context of meditation. It becomes more and more important to see suffering more and more clearly.

That ability to see clearly without having to solve, fix, or dissolve our suffering is supported by having developed confidence in the practice, confidence in ourselves, and confidence in mindfulness. This confidence is that it's worthwhile and appropriate to stay upright and present for what's difficult without either giving in to it, running away from it, or fixing it. I think this is a radically different way than how most people relate to what's difficult.

It opens up a different kind of door. In terms of the teachings I gave earlier this week, cultivating and developing the capacity to be present for suffering while being wishless – having a satisfying, empowered presence with no wishes in relation to that suffering, no desires for or against – brings the mind to a very still and peaceful place. This is the door to liberation. This opens something up in the mind and the heart where there can be a profound release.

It is quite a revelation to discover that there can be a letting go and release of something deep inside. Our problems in the world don't have to be solved in the

conventional ways that people often try to solve them. Instead, we can become free (for a certain moment of time, not forever) in a very deep way through this door where there's a wishless, desireless state of peace and stillness that lets things go.

As vipassana practice deepens, it's important to understand that we begin to leave behind the problem-solving mind – the mind is trying to understand and penetrate into the cause of suffering. That's not necessary anymore.
As we go deeper and begin having the strength of presence to be able to see and be mindful of experience, that opens the door for us to look at suffering, painfulness, distress, and discouragement in a clearer way.

Sometimes continuing to just look, and find freedom that way, is not the appropriate thing to do. Sometimes what's called for is to go inside and understand the conditions and the causes of the suffering. There are many ways we can study this. Sometimes it's important to become aware of the social conditions around us that are contributing to the suffering that we and others are experiencing – the distress, oppression, and difficulties we live in.

Our ability to hold ourselves in this upright, clear, powerful way allows us to look at and study what's

going on in the world without succumbing to distress, discouragement, and anger, or giving up. All those things are not really useful.

It is useful to see as undermining some of the more unnecessary, undermining ways in which we react to the terrible things that are happening in our world. This could include giving in to a feeling of hopelessness or helplessness or giving in to a feeling of hostility, blame, or frustration. From a Buddhist practice point of view, you can actually feel how these stances and approaches are not helpful. It is probably more helpful to hold your place, take your stance, look directly at the difficulty, and see what's going on.

There's an expression that comes out of Christianity about turning the other cheek. If someone hits you, I guess you're supposed to offer them the other cheek. There's no such idea in Buddhism. I don't mean that's a bad teaching, but it's a whole different context than Buddhism. In contrast, in Buddhism, rather than giving someone the other cheek, we turn towards them, look them right in the eye, and say, “You can't do that,” or “Stop.” We really confront what's there. The ability to turn and look – *that* is what's important.

As some of you might have seen in the stupas in Nepal and India, they have big Buddha eyes. The ability to see – to be able to look deeply – is kind of the hallmark of

Buddhism. If the suffering is out there, we study things in the world. We look from a place that doesn't undermine our ability to see clearly and bring forth what's best in us in relation to suffering.

It is the same way when we look within ourselves. If there are a lot of challenges and suffering, we ask what is it inside ourselves that calls on us to look at suffering. What inside us wants our attention? What needs something from us? What is it inside of us that needs to be loved, cared for, and tended to when we have distress and despair, and when life is painful for us? The ability to be still and to look, observe, and be present is such a wonderful, compassionate, kind, supportive thing to do.

We ask ourselves, when we are struggling in our lives, what is it inside that needs my care and my attention? What needs to be held in the embrace of mindfulness and attention? Is it my fear? Is it the way I feel hurt? Is it my anger? Is it my loneliness? What is it that could really use my attention?

Here too, sometimes it's very powerful not to be in the fix-it mode, not to try to solve and fix anything. The Dharma, this natural process of healing, resolution, and maturation, can often take care of many, many things if we hold our experience and make breathing room for what's going on. We make breathing room for our fear,

our sadness, and our anger. Sometimes it needs a lot of breathing room and a lot of time. The ability to be still, observe, and be present for our suffering without being for or against is a phenomenal gift.

In my years as a Buddhist teacher, one of the greatest sufferings and challenges I've seen in people is when, as a child, they were not really seen by their parents. Not being seen is pretty much the same thing as not being loved. There's something about really being seen for who you are and how you are that, as a child grows up, is such an important part of their development. It is an important part of feeling that they belong, they're part of this world, they're worthy, and they're cared for and loved.

With mindfulness, when we see ourselves and see what's difficult inside of ourselves, that is a kind of love, if we can learn how to see without trying to push away or always be fixing or getting rid of things. Instead, we just hold it and are present in a kind, supportive way.

In many ways, the path of mindfulness is not a path of fixing. It's not even necessarily a path of understanding the causes of our own suffering. It is a path of going in deeper to see what really needs attention here. Where do we need to hold our awareness? What do we have to hold openly and kindly? Then we just allow it to unfold and show itself. What do we need to listen to

inside so deeply and so well, with a quiet mind, a mind that doesn't have all the chatter and ideas, but just listens and listens? What's in here? It is a silent listening to the depth of who we are.

Along the way, we might discover something that many Buddhists have discovered, which is that one of the primary contributors to suffering has to do with how we cling, grab, grasp, and get attached to things. This can be the same thing as pushing things away. We can learn this through the somatic experiences of clinging and grasping. We learn what it does to the eyes – and the eyes kind of get squinted sometimes We notice what it does to the forehead, which gets bunched up or tight. Or we notice what it does in the brain. Sometimes clinging and attachment can be felt between the temples, as a tightening and constricting, or in the chest, or the belly, or shoulders. These are all places where clinging exists somatically. Or we may see how being attached and clinging and grasping is felt in the field of awareness. When there's a lot of clinging, there is sometimes a feeling in the mind where the scope of attention gets very narrow and kind of obscure and unclear.

The value of this ability to sense and feel and get to know experience – to be still, and just keep looking and seeing – is partly that we get a really clear feeling for what clinging feels like in us. Then we can recognize

when it's there, and we can recognize it when it's coming. It can make life a lot simpler if we recognize the clinging and relax.

Every time we cling to something, we think we have to analyze what we're clinging to, have an argument with it, and discuss whether we should or shouldn't be clinging (is this important to hold on to, what's really going on here, and why am I clinging, and what happened yesterday that I'm clinging today?). Those kinds of reflections are useful at times, but it's as simple as recognizing whether the hand is held clenched or open, and learning to trust non-clinging, not resisting, and not grasping.

That in turn supports the ability to have clear, empowered mindfulness – a clear sense of empowered presence and attention to what is – so that wisdom can operate and so we know how to take care of ourselves. We know what we need to do and how to do it, hopefully without needing to cling to anything. It's possible to look someone in the eye without any clinging whatsoever and say, “No, we're not going to do that. I'm not going to do that.”

It is possible, without any clinging whatsoever, to have an upwelling of love, compassion, and generosity, and to act with tremendous energy in a way that might look passionate to other people. It is possible to go out and

really support and help this world. We don't need to cling. We don't need to grasp. In fact, the Buddha said that nothing whatsoever is worth clinging to.

Learning to have confidence in an empowered life without clinging is one of the great things we can develop through this practice. Willingness to have well-being, happiness, and confidence gives strength to non-clinging and to the relaxed, easeful, empowered mindfulness that's possible for us.

One of the themes of the talk that I gave today is a point that I don't know how often you've heard from a Buddhist teacher – it is not always necessary to solve all the psychological or personal places of distress and pain that go on in our Dharma practice. There are other ways. Sometimes it is really important to try to solve, fix, resolve, and understand in a psychological way. But if that's the only way we have, we will miss a whole rich, valuable approach to freedom. This approach is not to solve anything, but to have the presence of mind, the mindfulness to allow things to dissolve, and allow something powerful to evolve within us. Sometimes this process is a little bit like a snake that gets big and strong and sheds its old skin.

I hope and I'm confident that each of you can mature, evolve, and develop. There are powerful forces within us, which I call Dharma forces, that are capable of

evolving, growing, and maturing. We don't have to live a life of suffering. We can allow ourselves to become strong and grow. Make room for the strength that you are capable of. Let it grow so that you have a taste and experience of awareness that can be aware of anything at all, and at the same time is independent of what it's aware of. Independence means not being entangled or caught with things.

To have insight into what is painful – in all the different painful ways that life presents itself. To learn how to be free in the midst of this painful world. I hope it wasn't too painful to listen to that.

Thank you.
.