Four Noble Truths: *Dukkha* (2 of 5) Understanding of Suffering

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We continue with the second of five talks on the first noble truth, the noble truth of suffering. The task of the first noble truth, as mentioned by the Buddha, is to understand it fully. This is a different relationship than many people have with suffering. The idea that we should stop and get to know it better – to study it, investigate it, really understand it – is maybe counterintuitive. We want to get rid of suffering. We want to turn it off. We want to escape it. We want to attack it. We want to do something.

Of course, the purpose of Buddhism is to not suffer. So – yes – it's okay to have a wish for the end of suffering and to not suffer. But one wise way of doing this is to be

able to turn toward suffering. Maybe from a ledge of peace, some ease, and equanimity, we can be with suffering in a way that helps us understand it deeply.

The wording of the first noble truth in its simplest form is: “This is suffering.” But the full sentence often is: “One understands – or one knows – this is suffering.” Here, the word is more “know” than “understand” because understanding can suggest something more complicated. To understand suggests that one understands the whole ecology of suffering – where it comes from, all the elements of it, and the consequences. Knowing implies something very particular – to just recognize, “Oh, this is suffering.”

That’s a clue to the Buddhist approach to this thing called suffering. We are learning how to be present for it, to see it in an equanimous way. Or, to see in a way that we are not adding more suffering to it. We are not reacting to it, attacking it, attacking ourselves, being angry, or collapsing into despair. To be able to sit upright – metaphorically at least – to sit somehow without collapsing or pulling away. To just see suffering right in the eyes: “Suffering, I see you. This is suffering.”

That is a difficult task, but it is the task of what Buddhist practice is. Slowly, we build a practice – we build our capacity to be grounded, centered, and rooted in ourselves. We find our ledge, our nest, our sea legs. We

begin to be able to find a place to breathe quietly, be relaxed in a certain way, and look honestly at our suffering – at what is going on.

Some people find huge relief in hearing that this is the task of Buddhism because they grew up in a society or family where it was all about avoiding suffering, pretending it was not there, or denying it. Or they interpreted suffering in ways that kind of prettied it up and made it different from what it was.

To actually get the message, “Yes, this is suffering,” and: “Yes, let’s talk about it. Let’s be with it. Let’s look at it.” But not so we suffer better – that’s not the point of Buddhism. Understand, be with your suffering – but don’t suffer better. Well, maybe we suffer better in the sense that we suffer without all the extra. We don’t suffer more. We suffer without all the extra waves of reactivity that we have.

So the task is to understand suffering. Maybe it is interesting to say that the Pali word for suffering is *dukkha*. *Dukkha* is translated into English in a variety of ways. It is nice to have different translations because each translation points to a different angle, aspect, or perspective on this thing we call suffering.

We might be able to take *dukkha* and the English translation “suffering” as broad umbrella terms that

encompass the many different parts or aspects of the human experience of suffering. Some suffering is very mild, and some suffering is very big. But there are all these aspects of it. The various translations give us different perspectives on it.

Some of you might feel, “Well, that’s nice, but isn’t there just one meaning for what the Four Noble Truths are?” Some teachers in some books will give one explanation of the Four Noble Truths. But, through the centuries, there have been many explanations for what they are. If you go to the *sutta*s – his teachings – the Buddha did not have just one explanation. In my count, he has five. Some are very similar, but others are quite different from each other. And the ones that are taught as the Four Noble Truths of the Buddha are just one of those five. Some of them are never really referred to in teachings.

So there are many different perspectives on the Four Noble Truths. Over these next weeks, I will offer different perspectives on it. For now, I want to give some of the common English translations.

First, it is important to understand that the word *dukkha* is an adjective, not a noun. As an adjective, the literal meaning of *dukkha* is “painful.” Then, by usage, *dukkha* comes to have other meanings and associations. Maybe the core meaning is “pain” or “painfulness.” This

pain is almost like a metaphor for all the forms of suffering human beings can have. Whatever *dukkha* is in our psychological, emotional, experiential, and physical world, it is a big “ouch.” It is something that maybe we contract around – something that hurts us.

We get a very different understanding of the Buddha’s teachings if we translate *dukkha* as “painful.” So, for example, there is a very common teaching that things like birth, old age, sickness, and death are *dukkha*. Sometimes people translate it as: “Birth is suffering; sickness is suffering; old age is suffering; death is suffering.” In this context, the word “suffering” is a noun, so one noun is the other noun. There is an equivalence, which leads to all kinds of philosophical challenges.

If we translate *dukkha* as “painful,” we have: “Birth is painful. Old age is painful. Sickness is painful. Death is painful.” Now, we are talking about something many people can identify with – that birth is other things besides painful, but it is also painful. Old age is other things besides painful, but it is also painful. Sickness is also painful, and death and dying can be quite painful.

For the Buddha to say this – I am deeply touched and a little in awe. My appreciation for this ancient teaching goes up much more when I consider they had no anesthetics in the time of the Buddha. There was no aspirin, novocaine, or anesthesia. There was no

palliative care to help provide relief from pain. Now we have a lot of medicines that can help us be more comfortable while we die.

The idea of pain was very acute in the ancient world. People had to learn to live with and be with their pain. So when they say birth is painful, they mean it! Old age is painful; sickness is painful; death is painful. Grief, mourning, distress, and anguish are painful.

Sometimes a translation of *dukkha* into English is "stress." So, birth is stressful; old age is stressful; sickness is stressful; death is stressful. Mourning, grief, pain, distress, and anguish are stressful. This is a raw experiential association for the word *dukkha*. This translation has the advantage of being more physical without any evaluation of whether that is right or wrong, good or bad, appropriate or not appropriate. It's just stressful.

One person who translates *dukkha* as "stress" told me that one of the most stressful events in a person's life is getting married. Hopefully, a marriage ceremony is one of the happiest days of a person's life, but there can also be a lot of stress. So even with happy events, there can be stress, and people can be exhausted at the end.

The idea is that stress can follow us around in all kinds of ways. Stress can even occur with things we look

forward to and love doing. So to understand the wide extent to which stress is part of our lives goes beyond what many people think of as suffering. In fact, it also applies to very deep meditation practice. As meditation goes deeper and becomes more concentrated, we experience some of the happiest, most blissful experiences possible for a human being.

Paradoxically, the more concentrated, still, and wonderful the meditation is, the more heightened our sensitivity is to stress. In fact, in the depths of the quietest, most peaceful, and nicest meditation one can imagine, some teachers will say: “Now look for where the stress is. Look for where there’s a little tension, a little bit of pressure.” You know, the degree of stress there is ridiculously light. In ordinary daily life, one would never associate the subtlety of stress, but that’s kind of what’s left. It’s the last remnants of stress in a mind that is otherwise very peaceful. And that is a very useful instruction: to see that also as *dukkha*. So even in those states, we continue the process of letting go.

I don’t know how it is for you, but when we translate *dukkha* as “suffering,” that has a very strong emotional association. “Suffering” feels almost like an emotionally heavy word. “I’m suffering” – feels holistically emotional and existential, like that is almost the totality of who I am. Whereas, the word “stress” – we can have stress. Sometimes, if I’m spending too much time on the

computer, my eyes feel stressed, although the rest of me is happy. But “suffering” has an emotional totality to it. It’s sometimes a little difficult for people to get their minds around the word “suffering” because it sounds big.

Another translation of *dukkha* is “unsatisfactory.” This translation can be quite popular. It has, in my mind, a more intellectual or philosophical association. Or, to say it more precisely, it is evaluative. It has to do with making an evaluation – constructing a philosophical or intellectual understanding that’s a little removed from direct experience. Whereas, pain can be about direct experience. Stress can also be about direct experience. Suffering – exactly how much is direct experience or how much is evaluative or conceptual is part of the discovery process of mindfulness.

How that translation is evaluative or intellectual is that you then have to explain in what ways it is unsatisfactory. With the translation “pain,” you don’t have to explain in what way it is pain; you know it’s painful. “Stress” may be the same way. “Suffering” might be a little more complicated. But “unsatisfactory” is clearly more complicated because it requires some explanation or understanding beyond just feeling or sensing something is unsatisfactory. It begs the question: in what way is it unsatisfactory? And the usual explanation of people who choose this translation of

dukkha is something like: “If we’re searching for lasting, reliable happiness and peace, we won’t find it in the particular experiences, objects, and things of the world, including the objects and experiences we can have within ourselves. Nothing that can be directly experienced as a particular concept, idea, or experience can provide lasting happiness because it is impermanent; it is inconstant; it comes and goes, appears and disappears.”

I clearly remember a very nice summer when I was about twenty years old. I was kind of ecstatic by the end of the summer. I was very, very happy. I remember thinking, “I’ll never be unhappy again.” Then a month or two later, I was more depressed than I had ever been in my life. So much for the idea that I would always be this way!

People come to understand in deep meditation and ordinary life that what they were holding onto or expecting would make them happy and satisfied – is fleeting. It is not lasting. It does not live up to its full promise – and so many people are disappointed. What once made them happy at one point in their lives is no longer something that makes them happy later. And because it is fleeting, people who are always looking for something outside of themselves – some experience that will really do it – will then search for another experience and another.

The Dharma is not about finding some *thing*, some experience, or some idea that is *it* – that brings happiness. The Dharma is more about discovering some absence of a thing. To discover the freedom, peace, and happiness that comes from the absence of clinging – the absence of thirsting, being compulsive, grabbing, holding on, and attachment – which includes very strong resistance to things. The absence of resistance, clinging, grasping, attachment – *that* is reliable if we can let go fully.

So the purpose of really getting to know suffering – to see it clearly and understand it – is part of the project of coming to the absence of suffering, to let go of clinging in a very deep way. This is what we'll discuss over the next days and weeks that we look at the Four Noble Truths more deeply.

I hope this explanation is nice for you and lays the groundwork for what is to come. Thank you for being part of this, and I look forward to our time tomorrow.