

2015-06-14 Suffering Dukkha

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SPEAKERS

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So today I want to continue a three part series of talks on the three characteristics. And this, this particular teaching on the three characteristics is a foundational teaching for the Theravada Buddhism that we come out of Buddhism of Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka. And it's particularly important for the people doing insight meditation, mindfulness meditation, because the insight of insight meditation points to insight into these three characteristics. And the three are impermanence, the way in which there's some way in which all experiences can be characterized by being impermanent. The second is usually translated to English as suffering. The word is dukkha. And so, all all experiences can somehow be characterized as having some quality dukkha suffering perhaps. And then the third is that all things can be characterized as not self. And that's that'll be a topic for next week.

Last week we talked about impermanence. Today the topic is this suffering. When I was practicing in Thailand we were given little what's called cooties, little cabins, little, very small, like, I don't know 12 by 12 or 12 by eight foot little huts in the woods to meditate and, and there was usually kind of creatures sharing with you. And there was these little geckos and there would be in the ceiling and around and, and in my ears, the geckos were always saying to God, reminding us how important this particular insight is. So do you guys, kind of at the heart of the Buddhist teaching, there is one place where he says, I teach suffering and the end of suffering. I only teach suffering under suffering, everything else is supposed to fit underneath that statement suffering and the end of suffering. And what the Buddha has in common and emphasizing suffering is he has a common approach for kind of philosophies or world religions, which don't have a theistic foundation. If you many of the theistic kind of approaches have some other kind of standard by which they're measuring human life or what's important, but when you don't have like a transcendent other as a reference point as an authority as the one who's bestowing the you know, the scriptures or something What do you what what basis do you use for reliable guidance in your life and what to do. And so whether it's Epicurus and some of the other Greek philosophers, some of the important British philosophers who were the kind of origins for empiricism and, and pragmatic pragmatism or Freud, the emphasis was to really understand the sensuality of suffering, and the possibility of ending suffering. And the idea I think, I think part of the idea is that suffering is something you can experience, something you can experience and the freedom from it, you can experience and it becomes supposedly a reliable reference point, to find our way towards the end of suffering to the relief of suffering. Some of the more religiously ultimate statements about reality that you can make, or even such things like that there is a God For example, You know, not everyone agrees with that. And you have to how do you prove it? How do you figure it out, you know that it becomes a kind of a complex issue for some people to try to use that as a, as a foundation for a philosophy or way of life. But, you know, if you're suffering, you don't exactly argue with it. You know, that's just there, you know, it's there. And that question is, how do you find your way out of that? And so the other place you see this in tality of their focus on suffering or do whatever that might mean in

Buddhism is in the Four Noble Truths. And the first noble truth is the noble truth, of suffering or of painfulness, depending how you translate it, and remember one Buddhist teacher, Buddhist monk came to spirit rock many years ago and, and he was laughing, and saying, oh, suffering, you know, we don't want to suffer but we want to have noble suffering.

And it wasn't, it wasn't glorifying suffering, like he's just like, just look for suffering. But what he was saying is if you're going to suffer anyway, have noble suffering. And what he meant by that was address your suffering as a path to the freedom of suffering. And if you have that kind of dignity or that kind of courage or that kind of confidence, that you have a path to address it, to move beyond it, then that's noble suffering. And so, and some people find that a great relief to be in a teaching in a practice that emphasizes that the idea of being honest about our distress or suffering or pains that we have, so they address them rather than maybe avoiding them pretending they're not here. Making pastorally really beautiful pictures of this world's kind to cover over what's actually happening.

And in Buddhism, I think the emphasis is to have very honest willingness to stop look at, to address to be with suffering, and not pretend otherwise when it's there. And so part of the function of mindfulness practice in Buddhist practice is in fact to have a deep insight into suffering into dukkha. However, each of these three characteristics has an opposite. And the opposite of dukkha is, well being is sukha. To sukha. And, in sukha means happiness or well being. I like the word well being because it's a umbrella term that can cover many different things within it, or as you say, happy or joy. Then it's kind of narrows it and maybe a little bit difficult sometimes to find ourselves in that kind of language, but well being and nature of Buddhist practice. Is that what we are cultivating is well being, so that we can have the insight into ill being we can have. So you don't want to emphasize, you know, when you first come to practice, well just sit down and really kind of get into your suffering just to, you know, address it directly right away. Sometimes that's useful, but sometimes that just kind of when we're a person down, that you want to create a condition that allows you an optimal way to really be present and see deeply into the nature of suffering. And so the way to do that is to cultivate some modicum of well being. And then with that modicum of well being is a foundation then we look at the suffering, so much so that it's useful to think of the three characteristics as insights that are revealed when the foundation is in place, when practice gets strong, so we're not Looking for suffering? it'll find you. But, you know, you're not to go looking for it so much, but when it but what we want to try to do is to cultivate well being. And so there are, you know, so variety of ways Maybe you're doing that. One, I think maybe the most useful thing to say is for you to consider what bring what do you know already brings you some modicum of well being? What are some of the things that you do? What are some of the things that you can do that can do that? And what's a reliable kind of well being, not the kind of well being that comes from getting pleasure that distracts you from things you know, there's a kind of a well being maybe from drinking a lot of alcohol, that that pleasure is temporary. I don't watch hardly any TV. Remember once many years ago watching some TV and it was kind of pleasant enough to watch when I watched it, when when was over Felt drained. You know, like, wow, what was that about? You know, what, what, how did that happen? And, you know, just didn't I didn't feel, you know, enlivened by it. And so what is it that kind of helps you to thrive helped you feel nourished helps you feel supported helps you kind of have a sense of uplifting well being in your life. And it's a good thing to reflect on. Because if you have some ways that you have available to yourself, then the question is, do you avail yourself of that? Do you give yourself a chance to do those things? If you're just simply going for a walk around your neighborhood or simply, you know, going to the park and, and sitting there, you know, and looking at, you know, the birds you know, what is it this morning at my house?

We had, I guess it's time of year because all our kind of windows are open. We had this cacophony of birds spurt songs. It was, it was that the light that you know, it's early in the morning, this starts a little

bit and then it builds built this orchestra that happens is quite quite loud in our environment we live and you know, I was delighted by this. So I could have just gone back to doing whatever I was doing on my computer and then reading the news or something or I could have just had their quiet they took it in which I did for a little bit you know, so look at that nice and it brought me a sense of delight and well being to hear all those bird sounds. So it doesn't mean we're not talking about you know, some big things that make you happy. But what are some of the small ways that brings a smile to your face or brings you some kind of joy or happiness that you can do that you're you're too busy doing important things to do. And are the things that you some of the things that you feel are so important that you fill your life with? Are they really in the bigger equation of Things are they really the right thing to be doing? I know that for myself, it's sometimes in the moment something can seem important to take care of. But the accumulation of being involved in busy projects and taking care of things, and avoiding for having doing things which bring a sense of well being has its toll. And I think we need to, we need to be fed by something, what, what feeds what feeds you, I like the word nourishes what nourishes you in an important way, in psychological way and what nourishes your heart. So I keep asking you, what do you would wait, what do you have? What's your way? Do you have a way and then you give yourself time for that? So that somebody can settle and relax and somehow settle and relax or inform kind of your cells, you know, kind of, somehow their sense of well being penetrates deep inside into the marrow of your bones even, rather than just kind of staying at the surface. So that takes time to have that kind of effect from well being, we're kind of penetrates and informs you and kind of, lets go of some of the fear we hold on to or some of the lack of safety we feel or some of the anger we have whatever it might be. It's very inefficient. It's one of the one of the unfortunate things how unfortunate how inefficient spiritualities you know, you know, it'd be much better if it was you know, fast. You know, five minute meditation max lets you do it, right. Just get on to the important things. But you need we need to give ourselves time. That's why I think some cultures have sat that's a really wise thing to have a Sabbath. to slow down take time. Let something else kind of unfold and open up and happen. The Buddhist tradition offers a variety of suggestions. For well being. And most often the most common one is live a life of integrity, ethical integrity, you difficult to be happy if you go around killing people or animals. It's difficult to be happy if you go on stealing, it's difficult to be happy if you are lying. It's difficult to be happy if you're harming other people with your sexuality. And it's difficult to be happy if you're abusing intoxicants. So if you want to be happy, somehow you have to shift that and move towards what the opposite of that doing those things Buddhism would call a life of ethical integrity. The other thing that Buddhism emphasizes is the tremendous value of generosity, generosity. That means over and over and over again Buddhism says that doing acts of generosity begins to shift the heart shift the mind. And one of the reasons to practice generosity is not just for supporting someone else and doing something Nice for other people, but rather for also for the benefits you get from it. It conditions you it's nourishing thing for the hardest meant to be to make ethics, ethical integrity, and generosity, food for your well being does require considering how you do it, how you relate to it. It's not just automatic. Some people are really kind of uptight around their ethics and kind of fear based around it.

And so they're very ethical, but they're not being nourished by it. They're not helping them relaxed by it, they're kind of like, holding it in a fragile way. Some people same thing, with generosity feel like it's such an important duty. You know, I have to in order to be a good successful person to be adequate person. I, you know, I need to be generous, I have to do these things. And a sense of duty is so strong, that there's no relaxing into it. There's no taking time to appreciate it and to Allow the appreciation allow the appreciating oneself for it to be there. The Buddhist tradition does emphasize this thing of take time to appreciate the good things you've done. So there's the bliss, of blamelessness. So if you're, for the time that you've been from the time that you've been ethical, so, you know, maybe we just from getting up this morning, that's, you know, appreciate the bliss of that lifelessness you know, appreciate that to be nourished by that. From the top, you know, if you've done something generous, feel the bliss of

generosity, the joy of generosity, be nourished by it. And then there's the joy of meditation practice. It's not always going to be joyful. It's always going to be easy, but it's kind of good to keep in mind that that's kind of the direction where we want to be looking or headed, to kind of look in that direction. You know, if You want to go south and you're looking north, so you can get south, but it's a long way around the globe. But, so it's possible but, but, so, it took me a long time to realize that it was okay and reasonable. You know, it's completely, like the ordinary human thing to be open to the possibility of having meditative joy. When and what happens, you know, in my early years of Zen practice, it was so like Zen for me was so this direct pointing to ultimate reality, and you had to kind of be there or not, you know, and then when I was in Japan, the monks would often reprimand me and they would say things Gil, do things with Zen North Chikara with Zen powers and strength, and the idea of kind of smiling was, I developed a very good upside down smile when I was a student. And it was because it was came from a kind of seriousness. I love zen, it's a tremendous value. And I brought actually brought me a lot of joy in the end. But there was a seriousness to it, that the way I interpreted that was to not really avail myself with joy, I think space will not be open to when it arose. So meditative joy, you know, to be open to it, to learn how to tune into it and learn how to practice in such a way that that sense of well being and happiness can come with it. And one of the ways to do that is to be very honest about what what, what undermines it very honest and to know what kind of thinking we have, what kind of emotions we have that we get pulled into, that begins to drain us and bring in kind of, you know, distress rather than joy. One of the you know, a few Things, voices that I had in my head that undermine my well being was the voice that whatever is happening to me, doesn't count. So I would have variety of experiences that were somewhat good. Like I would have some joy. And of course, it was happening to me, it wasn't the joy. This doesn't really count, you know, other people are having, you know, better joy. You know, or it's not, you know, there's not what the texts talk about. So if it's happening to me, it's not the right thing. That was one kind of voice. You know, it's kind of like, I don't know where I learned that particular voice, but it was a common voice. And other one was related to it, I guess was the grass was greener somewhere else somewhere else. Someone else was having it. Someone else was doing it. And now I've gone at me. So that kind of undermined me when I had those kinds of voices. So to understand what voice You have what beliefs you have that undermined you that get in the way of experiencing the joy of a beautiful day? You know, are you preoccupied with your thoughts so preoccupied, you don't notice that the birds are singing? What goes on with you? So part of mindfulness practice to understand those things, and to learn how to be present in a way that we can notice what's nice.

And in fact, I think there's much more appreciation, much more of which my guess would be that for most people, most people do not appreciate as much as there is to appreciate in their lives. There's much more to appreciate than most people realize. Very occasionally I meet people who appreciate too much and I feel uncomfortable being around them.

Another one, so strange voices, but But, you know, sometimes it can be overdone. And so that's kind of a denial kind of sugaring over what's going on. But I think for most people, there's lots of room for just take time to appreciate things more, a lot to appreciate. Appreciate people. I think it's a beautiful thing. Everyone can be appreciated. There's probably something if you take your time, you can learn to appreciate something about everyone. This is a lovely little side. Little aside, if I met my doula side, I came down with the intention I'm going to give us straight to the point talk and just kind of not very, but here I am. Going off. I went for a walk yesterday around my neighborhood with my wife. And we walked by this group of people kind of in a driveway, and they looked like they were kind of either having a party or having an argument I couldn't quite tell and they were a beer bottle. in their hands and so we kept walking and we could no longer see back what was going on. Screaming happened Wi Fi stopped like, Oh no, there's something terrible happening. Someone yelling and then this lady woman drove by. She drove by and saw what's going to drive when she stopped for us and said, There seem to be

fighting back there. And then she drove off. And so I walked I walked back to talk to them. And my wife asked me for my cell phone. She didn't have hers. So anyway, so I walked back. And, and, look, look, it wasn't like fighting then but it looked kind of bad what I was seeing. The main first thing I saw was a woman who had her hand over her face, both hands over her face, kind of bent over and she her hands were not leaving her face, but kind of, like, didn't know what's going on. And the other guys were kind of like just agitated and Ella yelling and stuff and, and so I kind of tried to get their attention. I said, you know, anything I can do here to help? And it's a no no. And then I said, Oh yeah, you know, you know, maybe I can help in some way. No, it's just a family affair. It's in the family. And then I said, and this was a great thing I thought the privilege I have, you know, sometimes it's nice to take on an identity. And so I said what I almost never do, I said, I'm a minister. Can I help and that calm things down and so then they've kind of stopped and then the seemingly the main guy who was involved in all this, he kind of came over then to talk to me and he wanted to shake my hand. And so I kind of held his end of his fingers kind of likely, because the rest of the hand had blood on it. And, but he really wanted to shake my hand. Well, So I thought, okay, you know, I think I'm here to make peace and this is what it takes. So I gave him my whole hand. And so then. So then, and this is all about appreciating people somehow, so it's not quite. And so then at some point in there, I asked the woman Are you are you okay? Can I do something? And she said, Oh, it's okay. And she seems like genuinely to kind of feel like she didn't need help. And she didn't she didn't look hurt. It was no blood on her face. I don't know why he had bloody hand, but she seems okay. And it turned out they were his brothers and sisters. And so then the brother, one of the first things he wanted to tell me said, you know, my father died when I was eight. And then we had a stepfather who joined the family and I was 13. And it's been really hard ever since my family dynamics. I said, How old is your sister? Three years younger? Oh, so she was eight to five when the father died? Oh, yeah. And so then I had this information about them. That in him, that my whole feeling for them began to shift. I mean, before I was just kind of concerned. And now I started to feel care for them.

And not exactly appreciation, maybe it's not the right word. But I had a whole different perspective of what was going on there and what was happening there and, and I could feel my care rising up in my compassion and feeling their hard life and what that was like to lose a father at a young age. And how probably the dynamic was playing out now they were 18 and 21. And so to take the time to find out what's going on with people, and there's so you know, leads to appreciation or care a whole different thing. What do you find out what you discover? So, well being. So as we develop well being a sense of purpose, a sense of happiness and joy, that creates a container or a foundation or a way of being able to see suffering, and there is no shortage of suffering in this world. And there's no shortage of suffering and you there's layers and layers of suffering and part of the tremendous powerful insight that comes with deepening a mindfulness practice is to begin to appreciate the depth of suffering within ourselves. Test the different layers of different aspects. One of the ones that the tradition emphasizes a lot is not the psychological suffering, but rather the unreliability of holding on to anything as providing lasting happiness. The unreliability of anything it provides kind of really is going to guaranteed sealed sense of happiness, safety, security, ultimate value or something. You can't hold on to anything. There was a monk in Thailand who lived in a cave for many, many years and then died. And then they went to his cave to see and there was cartoon graffiti in a cave he had drawn on the wall of the cave. And there was a drawing of a monk who was very happy jumping up in the air, kicking his feet kind of just clearly kind of just really happy. And then the caption above his head said Oh, What boundless joy to know. There is no true happiness.

So there's one, you know, it seems kind of like what it's got, you know, first if you just said there's no true happiness we'd all give up. But what boundless joy mean? That's great, right? So I think what he was pointing to is that we want to hold on to something as being the true permanent happiness, we're

going to suffer. And, but if we kind of don't hold on, there's a kind of a ease or joy or delight that comes from not holding on kind of just kind of being in the, you know, it's like if you go surfing on a rip in a wave, you don't want to hold on to the wave. It doesn't really work. If you have to not hold on and then you can ride it kind of as much power as you can. And that's the kind of light so one of the, one of the form one of the reasons why one of the insights into dukkha that's very important, is beginning to appreciate that things are unreliable, as providing some lasting security lasting well being. And that there is an alternative, rather than wanting that and holding on to that. There's relaxing, letting go the clinging, letting go that drive, to require that something provide us with lasting well being, whether it's a relationship or a job or a, you know, bank account or, you know, the right politician in Washington, you know, you know, we don't rely on those things. And we rather rely on kind of smokers not a thing, which is the kind of the open heartedness that that happens when we let go, we don't cling I get contracted. So one of the translations for dukkha is unreliability to understand that there's certain common certain kind of way things The world are unreliable for ultimate happiness ultimate well being. But in order to see that, it's easier if you already have access and know about a certain kind of well being, you already feel good. You have a confidence in feeling good. And then it's easier to to face this kind of unreliability of all these things. And then the other is that some people translate as stress. And because some of the translators who do this say, because some things we don't conventionally call suffering are stressful. The I once read that, you know, the, among the five most stressful things in a person's life is getting married. And usually we don't think you know, marriage is you know, getting a marriage ceremony, all that stuff as suffering. You know, you don't say I feel so sorry for your suffering. What can I do when I'm getting getting But it's a you can, we can understand that it's stressful. And so and so certain things that are conventionally good, can still be stressful on the system. And so some people, it's more universal idea of stress. And when in fact, this is why one of the reasons why some transfers like this word stress, is it that in very deep meditation practice, when conventionally there's a tremendous well being very still and quiet and peaceful, a lot of peace. One of the things that's very important, very useful to tune into, even in a deep state of peace, there's a very subtle kind of stress that's there, you wouldn't call it suffering, but there's a kind of subtle stress or tension that's there. And that's also called dukkha. And in order to kind of be able to move beyond that, to, it's helpful to, to see that or to recognize that because that helps you to move them beyond that, that deep level of stress. And then there's a kind of dukkha or our stress of just kind of the constant machinations of thinking mind. Some people are exhausted lifetime of thinking and figuring and wanting and doing and it's like my story when I was 21 or 22 or something. I used to love going into bookstores. And then I would leave the bookstores exhausted. And I wondered why. So next time I went to the bookstore, I tried to figure out why I was exhausted. And it was because I wanted most of the titles and it was the incessant one, I want that I want that I had no money. So what this I want that I want that in with that really was draining to want, want want want. So when there's a constant kind of an automatic pilot movement of thinking or moving of being worried and being afraid or anxious or wanting or hate are trying to have conversations or planning. Some of those things is reasonable, but they have it, they can have a toll if it's done incessantly.

And some people have patterns of thinking, patterns of intense thinking that they think is just they don't even know they're doing is just part of the like a fish doesn't see the air, they swim and we don't see the, the, you know, the patterns of our incessant thinking, and even more, so we don't see how exhausting it is. And some people it's only when they go and retreat meditation during the Silent Retreat. That's it catches up to them. And some people will spend a lot of time on retreat sleeping. They conventionally there. You know, they've gotten all the sleep they think they need, but they're recovering from decades of deeper deeper weariness within. So there's suffering of kind of the mental activities that go on and kind of in a intense way. And so, learning to calm down well being has partly to do with having them be calmer, so that the incessant kind of churning of the mind is not operating because that interferes with happiness. That's another function of meditation practice. So, we develop we call try to

cultivate well being, and with some modicum of well being, that mindfulness practice sooner or later opens up to becoming wiser and deeper understanding about the nature of our dukkha with nature of things being unreliable, with stressful the machinations of our mind, kind of big understanding the causes of our suffering and then the role of desire and craving, in our suffering. And that wisdom around that takes requires taking a willingness to study and investigate to and this is part of that very mature aspect of this practice is a willingness to learn about it to study it, not to bypass it quickly. Take your time with your suffering. Don't be in a hurry. Don't look for the quick fix. Take your time so you can learn. So then the tradition says that if you really kind of are developing yourself developing your spiritual life, in a meditative life in a strong way, then at some point, it's possible that for some people, the experience of liberation experience of awakening that can happen happens. Because some people have really deep insight into suffering. That's their door. That's their way that's their path. Some people their path is impermanence. Some people path is not self. But some people it's really kind of an unfortunately, you can't choose which of your paths you're going to do. Some people just happens to be the suffering guy. That's what they kind of get wiser and wiser about the CD plan to and when people have that path then At some point it opened it say it opens a door. And the door it opens is the door of the wish list. The door of, of not having wishes that having desires and may not know desires whatsoever. But, but there's something about understanding and accepting and relaxing around suffering and not to always wanting something else. Because a lot of suffering has to do the wanting and expecting and to let go of wanting and to let go of wanting so deeply that the mind does a flip the mind drops away the mind sees a whole different way of being. The mind sees that it can be at peace without having to get what it wants. So that the door of the wish list is considered very important. Now so there's the, what we call what we cultivate. There is what we have insight into, there's a doorway go through. And then there's the gift that each of these opens, brings, brings brings. So for, there's a door of well being, there's the insight that into suffering. There's the door of the wishlist. And the gift for this kind of complex is the gift of aspiration. It's a word I like a lot. aspiration means the word I like aspiration is kind of a desire we have but it's a desire that's more than just a desire. It's kind of like a heartfelt wish. It's a heartfelt inspiration. without expectation, without insistence I have an aspiration for world peace I've aspiration to do something and you know and Dharma willing the world willing, you know, I mean, we're moving that direction is my aspiration, but I don't know if I'll ever attain it.

But aspiration also is kind of like a big dream, I think of the word aspiration don't aspire to, you know, going out and getting ice cream at the potluck. You know, but you might aspire to be a nice community setting with, you know, or contribute to the community at the potluck or something. So aspiration, it also the word aspiration is connected to the word breathing, like respiration. And I, you know, I just I think the breath is deeply connected to some depth within us. So what arises from the depth within us, as opposed to our thinking mind or wanting mind or, you know, what's that? What's your heart's deepest wish? So the gift in going through this process around dukkha is we come out to the place where we can begin living our life, from a deep heartfelt wish the hearts deepest wish, and that's one of the great resources when it beautiful about human being is to have discovered that and to live that. So cultivate well being, have insight into suffering dukkha. Go through the door of the wish list, the will being willing to discover yourself without any desires whatsoever, put them all down. And then from that, putting them all down, there's room in the heart for the hearts desperation to come for it. And then hopefully you have the confidence to follow your heart's aspiration to live live from it. From a free heart. So thank you. Next week. We'll do next Sunday we'll do not self and you'll discover what that door that'll inceptive and they give the gift of that. Thank you all.