

Dharmette: Insight (20) Recognizing Unsatisfactoriness

Gil Fronsdal

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Hello and welcome to this next talk in a series on insight, the deeper insights into what's usually called the three characteristics. But in the early teachings of the Buddha, these are called the three perceptions or the three recognitions. As practice deepens, we begin recognizing something that's invaluable in helping us on the path to freedom, to liberation, helping us on the path to connect to the deepest parts of well-being that we can have. The first of these recognitions is a deeper and deeper recognition, perception, a wisdom around inconstancy, impermanence, change, things becoming different. The second one, which is the topic right now, is a deep recognition, a deep wisdom, understanding about... And the word *dukkha* is usually translated as suffering, when it's translated into English.

As such, it may be a never-ending process of becoming wiser and wiser about how we suffer, how we have stress, how we make things worse for ourselves. In doing so, we come to understand something more and more about the opposite of suffering. Maybe in shorthand we call it happiness. And sometimes maybe peace. Because the primary way the Buddha talked about the positive emotions that come into play with the deepening practice, with the freedom, is happiness and peace. Or maybe the opposite is some deep feeling of contentment or satisfaction, or being at home in ourselves, in this world, in this body.

So to begin appreciating that we can have wisdom, deep understandings can arise from suffering itself. Rather than seeing suffering as only a problem, only something unwelcome, only something overwhelming, only something that we should get rid of and fix and take care of, only something that tells us that we've done something wrong or something like that, the approach here in the Dharma is to be able to be willing to see suffering as a vehicle to freedom. As something not to shy away from, but something to see directly and honestly, so we can come to a deep understanding, a deep recognition of what's happening here and the nature of suffering itself. In this regard, different people will have different translations. Each

different translation of suffering, of *dukkha*, is a valuable perspective, a window, to see it in a different way.

One of the translations that some people like to prefer is unsatisfactoriness. So the simple way of saying it is that everything is always changing. And there's something very deeply unsatisfactory about trying to stop the change, trying to hold on to things as they are. It's unsatisfactory because it doesn't work. If you're trying to stop yourself from aging, people spend a lot of money to somehow stop the signs of aging: facelifts and makeup and exercising and all kinds of ways we're trying to stay young in some way. Some of them it's valuable to do, and I'm not saying we shouldn't do some of it.

But if we're attached to it, holding on, expecting to be successful for our whole lifetime, that's going to cause a lot of suffering. We will age, and our bodies will change, our capacities will change. If we're holding on to how things were, that's an unsatisfactory effort. It's much more satisfying to find our freedom with change, to find our capacity to open up and be expansive and to be delighted and happy and peaceful with all the inevitable changes that will happen in this life. This is a tall order in all the complexities of life. But don't choose one really complicated, deep way and say that this is not right.

I have to feel like it's unsatisfactory or not right. But we can become wiser and wiser in recognizing that the activities of our mind, what we're preoccupied with, what we do with our mind, is that the craving, the holding on, the tightening of the mind, that is unsatisfactory. Maybe in some ways we can recognize it's very unsatisfactory to continue with this example, to lose our capacities as we get older, to have all kinds of things change as we get older. It's not very satisfying, of course. But what the Dharma is looking at is how it's unsatisfactory to cling to it or resist it, that what we're adding on top of it we can feel is not the best for us, making things worse. And so as we practice more and more, the sensitivity, the insight that can come, the recognition, the understanding, the perception that becomes clearer and clearer, is what activities in our minds that we do.

What sources of motivation, impulses to how live, how to speak, how to act in the world, how to think, how to understand the attitudes we have? Where there does it start feeling unsatisfactory? The beauty of this Dharma practice is that it is not a matter of analysis. It's not a matter of calculating how unsatisfactory it is, or having some policy that it's unsatisfactory. Rather, we're settling ourselves. We're quieting ourselves.

We're touching into something that's here inside of us that's deeply satisfying. It's satisfying to feel peace. It's satisfying to feel at ease with oneself. It's satisfying to be calm. It's satisfying to have some deep wellspring of happiness and well-being. There is something satisfying

way of being.

Just enough, it doesn't have to be dramatic, just enough to see that the activities of what we do with our mind, those are, and where we lose the satisfactory feeling, that those feelings are unsatisfactory. This is what many people are blind to. There's a compulsivity, there's an authority to our preoccupations, our concerns, our attachments, the ways we get stressed, the ways we get tight, the ways we feel like things have to be different, the ways that we resist, the ways that we hold on to me, myself, and mine, the ways in which we think that we have to save the world. There are so many different ways that we're convinced to give up our deeply satisfying inner peace for agitation, for stress, for suffering. We're so convinced in it, or sometimes obsessed about it, so attached to it, that we don't even know we're distracted. We don't even know the sacrifice we're making.

We're so distracted by distractions, we don't even know we're distracted. We're so involved in our stress that we don't think it can be any other way. We give so much authority to our self-talk, our ruminations, our self-criticism, self-preoccupations, those thoughts that we believe it can't be any other way. This is the truth. The way it undermines us, the way that the way we think depresses us or alarms us or distresses us or makes us feel guilty or inadequate, it just feels like it's just part and parcel of the truth. We're so involved in it, we don't think there's any other option.

This is how things are. So this way in which we lose ourselves in unsatisfactory states of mind that seem so real and so convincing and so absolute, we need powerful medicine to break through that and learn another way. *Samādhi*, settling, meditation, insight, deeper understanding can be a powerful support. One of the ways is to begin appreciating that whatever way we are now, there's some connection, some deeper way, fuller way, happier way of being, just enough that we recognize that a different way is unsatisfactory. Maybe we're already stressed. But then something else happens, and now we're even more stressed.

What the understanding is, you know, the previous stress was better. Now I'm involved in some higher stress. So it might be just a silly example. Maybe you're late for an appointment, and so it's stressful, and you're kind of involved in trying to get to the place on time, and you're worried about the consequences of being late. Then you see a window display in a store. It isn't just simply you're attracted to it, but now you're stressed because you want to have it and you want to get it at a good price and should you go to some other stores to check it out.

Now you can feel your stress level go even higher than it was before. Wisdom tells us, oh, to add this level of stress is unsatisfying. This is unsatisfactory. We have a clear insight, clear

recognition, understanding of something that's now unsatisfactory. I don't have to do this. As the stress levels go down more and more, we get a better, better reference point for how this works.

If we're already really stressed out, one more aspect of stress is we don't see the difference. It's all just a pile of stress. As we get calmer and calmer, settled and better, that insight into unsatisfactoriness becomes more and more clear. Then if we get below the stress level and start feeling a sense of well-being, that gives another different kind of vantage point for how we sacrifice well-being for something which is activity of the mind, which is unsatisfactory. Over time we get more and more wisdom about not only about what is unsatisfactory, unsatisfying, but what the mind can do. But even more important, we see we have the opportunity.

We see we can not take that road, not get involved. We can let go of that, not do it. We have a much better thing to do. We have something much more valuable to do, and that is to come back here in a deep way, because it's in here, in ourselves. We discover our best friend. We discover the deepest levels of care, love, peace, happiness, well-being.

Here is where we discover an inner beauty, where we can really value ourselves in a deeper, deeper way as our best friend. That, in turn, this deeper insight into unsatisfactoriness also allows us to see other people in better ways because we begin recognizing the unsatisfactory ways which we add projections, judgments, interpretations on them that diminishes our own happiness but also does very unfortunate things for the people that we're with. We see the unsatisfactoriness of bringing stress to other people. The unsatisfactoriness to see them in a bad light and the deep satisfaction of seeing people in their goodness, in their kindness, in their potential, in what's possible in them, and to bring love and care, respect to everyone. May insight into suffering, insight into unsatisfactoriness, support you in a wonderful process of choosing the satisfactory way of living your life, moment by moment. So thank you on this Independence Day in the United States, where we're learning how to find independence and freedom in our own hearts.

May the freedom and independence of our own hearts be the foundation for what we offer the world. So thank you.

And one announcement that maybe interests a few of you, I was just reminded kind of delightfully that on Tuesday evenings on the East Coast, it's at 7 p.m., the Insight Meditation Society has online offerings. A long time ago, I was invited to come to their book club, to talk about my translation of the *Dhammapada*, an ancient, very important ancient canonical text, poetry. I'll be doing that on Tuesday, and it's free as part of the book club. Partly I'm kind of

delighted and inspired somehow that almost 700 people have signed up for it.

So it's not like a small intimate book club, which maybe I thought it was going to be. But maybe with that number of people, I thought, wow, this is a different kind of experience. So I thought maybe I would offer you a chance to come as well. So thank you very much. And I look forward to coming back here on Monday.