

3 Characteristics: Dukkha

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So we've been touching on the three characteristics of existence, as the Buddha described, which are three characteristics that are present in everything we experience. They're also where we seem to get caught in the midst of those, you know, and resisting those, you know. But not only are they where we get caught, but they're also the gateway to freedom. They're also the different doorways to freedom.

And so, you know, as we mentioned, *dukkha*, which is suffering and unsatisfactoriness; *anicca*, which is impermanence; and *anattā*, which is not-self. And we'll go into those in the next couple of days. So today I'll start with *dukkha*.

And I think one of the most well-known metaphors, and I'll repeat it because I think it's such a core, it's the heart of the teaching on *dukkha* in a lot of ways, is the teaching of the two arrows. And it's a very simple teaching. You know, the Buddha said, you know, if you get struck by one arrow, does it hurt? You know, and of course it hurts. But if you get struck by two arrows, does it hurt more? Of course it hurts more.

But that first arrow is unavoidable. The second arrow is everything we add to it. Like, “Oh, why did they do this to me? Why did this happen to me? It's going to ruin my day. That's my tennis arm.” So this is all the stuff we add. And that's what the practice teaches us to see: we're not going to be able to avoid the losses of life, the pains of life, but we sure can stop adding all that extra stuff.

So, you know, *dukkha* is often translated as suffering. It's probably the most common translation. But there isn't an English word that really comes close to it that we can use, because it covers such a broad range of things. I tend to refer back to *dukkha* because it's pretty hard to say, “Oh, my bra strap's a little tight today,” and call that suffering, right?

But there's a way that the mind just wrests: "Can't wait till I get home and take this off. Can't wait to," you know. There's, like, all this inner lack of being settled that we do when we're uncomfortable, and we add to it. A simple way that Gil likes to use is, he says, "Just don't make it worse." Yeah. Don't make it worse. Yeah.

So, you know, really considering all the ways that, you know, I'm sure throughout the day so far, you've all had a little bit of discomfort, if not pain. You've had a little bit of boredom, maybe, a little bit of restlessness, a little bit of sleepiness when you don't want to be sleepy. I was really sleepy before I came to give this Dharma talk. Mm-hmm. You know, it's amazing. I just sat down and it went away. Something happens here.

But all those really subtle things we have, you know, that are, like, we wouldn't call, "I really have to have some ice cream," suffering, right? You know, you're just like, "Oh, I really got to get some. I really got to get some," you know. But of course, a four-year-old that wants the same thing, they might really be suffering, right? They're having a tantrum. They're in so much agony because they didn't get their ice cream, right? You know, sometimes adults get that way, too.

And one of my favorite words for *dukkha* comes from the 1960s. Any of you who are old enough to remember this know the word "bummer." You know, bummer was, you know, people would say, "Oh, I got a splinter, bummer." You know, "Oh, my wife left me, bummer." You know, "My dog died, oh, bummer." It didn't matter what it was. If we didn't want it, it was bummer, you know.

And it was actually pretty close to *dukkha*, from my point of view. You know, the actual word *dukkha* means, from the Pāli, means thirst, right? And I don't know how much you remember being really, really thirsty. And it's like, "Oh, I just need that, just want that," that feeling of needing something to be different, needing our experience to be different than what it is right now. We might want something that we don't have, or we want to get rid of something else.

And so the mind, the untrained mind, enters into psychocompulsion. You know, you can have, like, this day of work. You go, "Okay, I'll wait till I get home from work." And then you get home, and you're looking forward to this really good dinner, but it got burned, you know, and now you're suffering. And then, so you get some takeout and, you know, "Okay, this is real good. I'm really satisfied." And then half an hour later, "Okay, what now?"

You know, "What can I do now?" And it's like nothing keeps satisfying us. And that's how we often use the word unsatisfactoriness for a lot of the very mundane unsettledness in life.

This cycle of compulsion is so much like any other addiction. You know, we just keep cycling through it throughout our days. It's kind of built into our systems, you know, to keep trying to get what we want and trying not to get what we don't want.

But when *dukkha* rises, we can go in two directions. We can either go with it, get caught in it, and keep going, or we can become mindful of it. And in that moment of mindfulness, that is not a moment of *dukkha*. It might be a moment where there's pain. It might be a moment where there's sadness, but there's nothing extra. So it's not a moment of *dukkha*.

It's just a moment of normal human pain, and we haven't made it worse. And that's a huge choice: to keep choosing mindfulness there, mindfulness. You know, we tend to think that we can just solve our way out of these things, you know. But really seeing them clearly is really the only real solution to working with *dukkha*.

One of the things that I, you know, I've always tried to remember, you know, is that any movement we make toward freedom of mind, freedom of heart, begins now, not in a better moment. You know, not in a better moment. You know, there's so much times when, you know, "Oh, well, my next sitting will be better. I'll really pay attention then."

You know, "It'll be a little cooler. They'll turn on the air conditioner." You know, whatever conditions we think are going to make things better. And we kind of wait until those conditions get better, you know. "When this neck pain goes away, then I can really meditate." Yeah.

So we have played these games in our minds of not really getting that it's right here. This is where freedom is. It's not later. It's here.

One of the main problems with working with *dukkha* is recognizing it. Much of the time, we end up getting caught in it without recognizing it. You know, like I've been having a conversation with someone, and before I know it, it's turned into an argument. Anybody have that happen?

You know, where, "Wait a second, what happened to this friendly conversation? It's an argument now." And because what happened was, I was really attached to my point of view, and they were attached to their point of view. And there's an argument. And there's this beginning of the struggle, you know, ill will, and, you know, who's going to win, and all that stuff.

So recognizing it, you know. And sometimes we recognize it after we've been caught for a really long time. One of the things I brought up at some point, you know, was, you know,

how many of you have once wondered how much longer in a sit, you know, right? And how many have wondered that in that same sit more than once? Right. Yeah.

And so what are we doing there? What are we actually doing there? You know, do we really? It's a really, you know, we're going to be sitting that time, you know, but somehow having the idea of how much longer really affects how we relate to the moment.

You know, I was sitting really restless in one talk a teacher was giving—I mean, a meditation. And the teacher at the end of the meditation says, “Okay, now for the last two minutes,” and it's like everything relaxed. Everything relaxed in me. I just stopped. “Okay, it's almost over. I don't have to worry anymore.”

As if that worry had made it better. As if that restlessness had made it better. But all that whole period was a missed opportunity of really seeing how *dukkha* works in us, of freeing ourselves, because that's where it is. It's right there, wherever we are in conflict.

You know, the way I think about it, if we're not at peace, there's *dukkha* present. And in practice, it's something we turn to. We look at it. We allow ourselves to feel it, you know, not intellectually, not figuring it out, but really, what's it like? What's it like to be bored in particular, right?

Anybody been bored today for a while? You know, what is that feeling? Is there something unpleasant to boredom? People think nothing's happening, but boredom is actually unpleasant. Nobody likes it, right? Right. I don't know anybody who likes being bored.

And so, you know, what is that like? You know, I'm trying to push that feeling away. But what if I turn toward boredom? Turning toward boredom transforms it. You know, getting interested in boredom. What is it like?

And suddenly the interest is there. You know, we can get interested in an ant if we turn to it. You know, it doesn't matter what it is. If we turn our interest to it, it becomes interest. It becomes interesting.

So the Buddha taught of three kinds of *dukkha*. And the first one is one that's kind of the most commonly considered. It's called *dukkha-dukkha*. It's the *dukkha* of pain. It refers to physical pain, emotional pain, the pain that happens from loss, mental or emotional pain, basically.

And that kind of *dukkha* addresses the unpleasant sides of life, the unpleasant aspects of life, the things we don't like. You know, the major losses. Nobody likes it, right? Nobody likes boredom. Nobody likes being criticized, rejected. Nobody likes being sick, right? Nobody

likes being injured.

It's just, you know, it's the *dukkha* of the unpleasant things that happen in life. But what makes the *dukkha-dukkha* is our aversion to it. We make it worse. You know, we take this very unpleasant thing that's happening, or partially unpleasant, and then we try to push it away. We try to chase it away. We make it worse. We add more suffering to it.

And so *dukkha-dukkha* is a resistance to pain. You know, there's a formula that Shinzen Young uses: pain times resistance equals suffering. Yeah, so that's *dukkha*, pain times resistance.

So the second type of *dukkha* is—I'm looking at the word, it's not in my brain—*vipariṇāma-dukkha*. But you don't need to know that. It's the *dukkha* of change, the *dukkha* of impermanence.

Whereas *dukkha*, the painful experience, arises from the unpleasant things in life, the *dukkha* of impermanence is what arises usually from the pleasant things, from the things we like. And, for instance, you know, one easy thing to see is that we're eating something we really like, we're enjoying something we really like, and then we're full and we want more. And that second piece of cake does not bring us satisfaction, right? You know, it usually makes us feel sick, or stuffed, or uncomfortable.

So, you know, that's part of the *dukkha* of impermanence. You know, it's like, “Oh, this is so good, I want to keep it.” It's basically trying to hold on to pleasant experience.

An example that I've used before: my mom, who was very, very attached to me and my sister growing up and leaving home, she really didn't like the fact that we somehow left home. And every, you know, when I'd come visit, and I'd be in a good mood, I'd show up at the door, and the first thing she'd say to me—first of all, her face would light up in joy—and then she'd go right to, “How long are you staying?”

You know, her fear of losing me kind of killed the moment. Killed the moment of reunion because her fear showed up that it wasn't going to last. Yeah, pleasant feelings don't last. That's impermanence, you know.

And painful feelings, you know, pain, physical pain may last a lifetime, but the way we relate to it, the things around it, that all may change. But it's the pleasant ones that we really cling to. You know, you look at a child with a new toy, and they're like, “Wow, this is so cool,” and they play with it for a while. And how soon before they're bored, right? And they want something else, something else to do. They just get bored.

And commercialism really takes advantage of this, you know. Tries to get kids hooked on

these new toys, and they've got to have it, they've got to have it. But how soon is the shininess gone, right?

You know, I remember we bought a car once, and I think it was the first time we actually bought a new car. And it was, like, a big deal. And I think it was, like, the first week somebody went by and keyed every car on the block. And I just remember they did it right outside the meditation hall.

And so I was in a pretty spacious space. I just started laughing. I think, "That's a great idea to do with new cars. Just get it over with. Just keep it." I'm going back to the '60s, revisiting my old memories here.

One of the—Keith Richards from the Rolling Stones, I don't know how many of you heard this song—he wrote a great Buddhist song. I mean, he didn't know it was Buddhist, but it was. And it was called *Satisfaction*. And the words were clear: "I can get no satisfaction, and I try and I try, but I can't."

And it became, like, one of the number one hits ever, ever. It became really, really—throughout decades later, I think even a lot of younger people have heard of it. It became so well known. It resonated with people. It just so deeply resonated in such a simple way.

The piece that a lot of people don't know about this song is that he wrote it in his sleep, and he didn't know he wrote it. He woke up in the morning and he saw that he'd made a recording right next to the bed. He had one nearby, and he played it. He was astounded because he had no idea he had done it.

And he said that as he was listening to it, he'd be saying the words. I don't know exactly what got on the recording, but then you'd hear loud snoring. Yeah. And then another piece of song, you know. So it's kind of interesting. Something really deep inside him wrote that song.

And so the third kind of *dukkha* is really interesting to me. It's a *dukkha* that comes when things are neutral. They're not pleasant or unpleasant, but neutral. Yeah.

And so when the mind isn't wanting something or pushing something away, it kind of defaults to kind of a neutral space. But what happens when the mind is sort of neutral? It's neither wanting nor not wanting. What arises tends to be the habits of mind, the mental patterns or dispositions. If our disposition is to always be critical, critical thoughts will tend to arise.

If our disposition starts becoming always being grateful a lot, that starts showing up. "How wonderful it is to be here." These kind of nice kind of feelings arise. But it's not that we need to judge those things, but to just see them. Your mind is neutral, and these things will come

up.

And that's called *saṅkhāra-dukkha*, where *saṅkhāra* refers to the mental formations, the patterns, the deep patterns we have in our psyches, our mental habits, and they're conditioned. They're not just conditioned by our practice. They're conditioned by our entire lives, by the culture we lived in, by our parents, our friends, our siblings. You know, it's deep. We're so deeply conditioned to be just the way we are right now. Just the way we are right now.

And so when we're neutral, these things, these patterns, come up. Sometimes something else happens in neutral. You know, we may have had, like, a really nice period of a lot of peace and beautiful feelings, and then suddenly it seems like out of nowhere some really painful stuff comes up. You know, something deep in the heart now feels safe enough to come up. And again, you know, so we meet all these things however they show up.

And, you know, as I mentioned, if we're not at peace, there's *dukkha*. And the practice teaches us to meet it and turn toward it when it arises, to get to know it. And some of it's really obvious. You know, we were talking about it during the posture instruction. If we have an itch, that's *dukkha*.

A lot of people, "I've got to scratch that. I need to get rid of it. I've got to do that." And we teach you instead, you know, really look at it instead. Don't just automatically scratch it. Take a look at it. See, what is it really like? What's it made of, you know?

And if you spend time with an itch, you notice it's not just this one thing. It's got all these little different sensations in there. And then there's this emotional feeling to get rid of it, and that feels very different in the body. There's all this stuff going on in just a simple relationship we have with this itch that arose, a simple itch.

And as we really just keep showing up for the whole picture, we start developing the ability to be with more and more challenging things that arise in life. There's people who do all sorts of incredible feats. You know, I'm thinking of this one guy I knew who was a competitive bodybuilder. And he worked out for hours with heavy weights and really pushed himself to be a competitive—any competitive athlete has to put in that kind of time.

And so he was able to meet that kind of effort really well because of his ideas about it. But he was terrified of getting a shot or getting his blood drawn. He was terrified of needles. And that pain, that *dukkha*, he didn't want to meet.

You know, but what is it in the mind? What idea do we have? That *dukkha*, the weights are valuable. "This is a great thing to do." That shot, you know, that's unworthy of really putting

out some effort there and seeing what it's like, seeing what's really there. So it's the way, our attitude toward it.

You know, so with the practice, we turn to whenever I find some extra yuck to it. You know, like, I remember I once accidentally stepped on a snail. You know, I know, it's a slug, one of those yellow slugs. And, you know, first of all, I felt terrible for hurting it. But then there was the yuck factor, you know, the yicky yuckiness of it.

And it's like the turning to it was, like, kind of interesting stuff. Turning to the whole piece of it: the guilt, the shame, the yuck. And what is yuck like? Until I could just hold the yuck without trying to look away or push it away somehow.

In general, *dukkha* is exhausting. It tires us. It drains us. You know, we're struggling, we're struggling, we're using a lot of mental energy. Insight into *dukkha*, you know, really paying attention, actually brings energy. It fosters energy. It fosters wholesome feelings.

Insight into *dukkha* is when there's no resistance, there's no craving, no aversion. When you're not struggling with something, it's like, "Oh, this feels good." Even if there's pain, even if there's suffering, there's something about it that feels in tune and feels right.

We're only going to get interested in *dukkha* if we respect it. When it shows up, we tend to think, "Oh, this practice isn't going well," kind of forgetting that that's the point of practice: to befriend *dukkha* in all its millions of different ways it shows up.

And one of my quotes I love from Chögyam Trungpa: he defined meditation as the continuous act of befriending ourselves. And that's befriending every part of us, every part of our experience, nothing left out. You know, it's really profound to think of nothing left out. It all deserves attention or care, you know.

The baby's shitty diapers, you know, a little yuck there. You know, it's okay. My father really wanted me to have a baby, which I didn't, you know, to his disappointment. He said, "If you have a baby, I'll take his first diaper and I'll put it on my head." Sure, that convinced me.

But, you know, really appreciating it's not easy. You know, it's not easy. There's parts of the practice that feel like, you know, we're just going along the stream, things are going really cool, things are peaceful. But when *dukkha* rises, it's not easy.

You know, it takes that willingness to meet it, that willingness to do that, and to really appreciate that it is something that requires the training of the mind. It's training that inclination to keep turning toward it. I think Gil said he was going to have a bumper sticker made that said, "I brake for suffering." I don't think too many people would get it, so.

I thought of just making it for him and just sticking it on his car, you know. But I never did it.

You know, one of the ways—there's a story about the way that they used to catch monkeys in India using a coconut. You know, many of you have heard that they would cut a little hole in the coconut and they'd nail it to a tree. And then the monkey would come along, stick their fist in, grab the sweets, and then couldn't get the fist out because it had a fist. And all it had to do to get free is stop clinging.

You know, it's a metaphor, but it's a metaphor of this moment, this moment. You know, can we? What can we let go of in a moment of *dukkha*, in a moment of contraction? Is there something we can let go of?

You know, we are so used to the idea that if we just fix this or that, we can avoid *dukkha*. You know, “If only this pain went away, then...” I spent—you know, I've had a lot of, as Matthew's talked a little bit about physical pain, that's been a huge teacher for me too.

And I've had so many sits where I would go, “Well, when this pain gets better, then I'll really get into the practice. I'll practice a lot more at home so that when I sit on retreat, I don't have to feel any of that.” You know, all sorts of ideas. “My next retreat, I'll blah, blah, blah, blah. I'll make sure I'll do this so my next retreat, I don't have to deal with this,” you know.

But, you know, it's not about fixing the unpleasant. It's not about keeping the pleasant. It's about showing up.

One of the commitments that I made myself on retreat one time, which I've mostly kept, is to not move out of suffering. If I'm going to move, it's fine. I mean, there's no problem moving if there's something going on in our bodies that really needs attention, but not to do it out of suffering, not to do it out of aversion, but to do it out of care for myself.

You know, I just wait until my attitude is wholesome. You know, that's been my practice for a long time. You know, “I'm just going to wait to move.” You know, because you can always take another moment of discomfort or pain. But just wait until my attitude would settle into something that was compassionate and caring for myself.

And since I would just go, “Oh, may I be free of suffering,” that would be enough. That would be enough, you know, to turn that for me. But to move out of, “I hate this,” reinforces this pushing away *dukkha*, pushing away pain, aversion.

You know, to actually embrace *dukkha* to be our teacher is profound. It is our teacher. It is our teacher. This is where we learn.

And, you know, we only pay attention to something we respect as being worthwhile. And this work with meeting *dukkha*, meeting these three characteristics, is the work that's liberating to the heart, that's liberating to really very deep, deep freedom, the potential of freedom we all have.

You know, *dukkha* happens at—you know, a lot of what we talk about is, like, the very gross levels of *dukkha*. But as the mind gets quieter and quieter and we get more and more still, *dukkha* rises in much subtler ways and much trickier ways. And it's even harder to notice it.

I've spent, like, on deep retreat, you know, where my mind was very, very settled, and my mind's going, "What's next? What's next?" And not seeing it, you know, just kind of this leaning forward, minute after minute of leaning forward. "What's next? Something else should happen, something else," you know, instead of noticing the clinging there for something to happen.

There's so many subtle ways that happen quietly where we're wanting something to change, something to be different. And Ayya Khema, one of the teachers that influenced me a lot, she said, "*Dukkha* can be your best teacher. It won't be persuaded by any pleading of misery to let us go."

If we say to a retreat teacher, "I don't feel well, can I go home?" And, you know, of course we'd say, "I'm sorry you're feeling ill. Of course you can go home." But if you say to *dukkha*, "I want to go home," *dukkha* says, "It's fine, but I'm coming with you." So it's her, you know, it's her best teacher. Yeah.

You know, the only way to say goodbye to *dukkha* is to let go of clinging and grasping. So maybe, you know, I'll just go back to finishing up. Any moment we're not at peace, we can say, "Hello, welcome to our teacher *dukkha*."

And so it's not just, "I'm not at peace, oh, *dukkha*," you know. No: "Welcome, teacher. Welcome, teacher." Yeah. You know, we're touching on the Third Noble Truth. You know, there is an end to *dukkha*. There is an end to this. There's an end to this constant struggle. And the end is through.

And I want to finish with a quote from the *Udāna*. Whatever happiness is found in sensual pleasures, whatever there is of heavenly bliss, these are not worth one-sixteenth part of the happiness that comes with craving's ending. It's beautiful, so let's end with a minute of silence.