

# ***Dukkha is a very profound teaching***

***Talk on the 30th of October 2009***

The teachings of the Lord Buddha are utterly profound. It's hard for us to grasp just how profound they are. When we come across them, we hear only what we know and understand based on our experiences in the worldly realm. Take the first noble truth — that *dukkha* exists. It's such a simple statement that we think we understand it, but the truth of *dukkha* is far more profound than we imagine.

What does it mean to say that *dukkha* exists? It means that there is restlessness, dis-ease, uncomfortable feelings, pain and suffering in our lives. The people who tell me that they don't have *dukkha* are thinking in terms of outright suffering and pain, but *dukkha* encompasses all kinds of discomfort and dis-ease, and all of us experience it. If we could just understand, at a deep level, the first and second noble truths — the existence of *dukkha* and its origin — there would be nothing blocking our path to the attainment of Sotāpanna. The reason that we don't progress in practice is that we don't want to see *dukkha* and its origin. Instead, we try to eliminate *dukkha* from our lives, to hide it out of sight. We spend our lives running after pleasant things, not realising that we are trying to get away from the *dukkha* that is present every moment. In an ordinary day, everything we do is because of *dukkha*; if we were truly content, there would be no need to change things, no need to do anything. We don't recognise this because it has become natural for us to be driven by *dukkha* — we think it's how things should be. Hunger is *dukkha* and we try to eliminate it by eating to create a feeling of fullness, and an itch is *dukkha* and we scratch because of it. We don't usually think of these things as *dukkha*, but they are *dukkha* all the same. If we really, deeply understood *dukkha* and its origin, we would understand the teachings of the Lord Buddha completely.

The origin of *dukkha* is *taṇhā*, sometimes translated as wanting or desire. It's the desire to be or not to be, to become or not to become, to have or not to have. When we experience *dukkha*, we find things to do to evade it — eat food, drink alcohol, commit suicide, scratch or fall asleep. These are all ways of avoiding *dukkha*. Every movement of the body, every action we take, every thought we think and every memory we bring up is caused by the *dukkha* that pervades our lives. Can you sense how profound this teaching is? People spend their lives running after soap bubbles that they call *sukha* or pleasant feelings, the opposite of *dukkha*. But the moment they come close, the bubble bursts, and they go running after another and another, like excited children running from one soap bubble to the next. People don't even realise that they are running because of *dukkha*. They only think of how much fun it is to run from one soap bubble to the next. This is because, inherently, they don't want to see *dukkha*; they want to evade it or eliminate it, even to the extent of becoming addicted to alcohol or heroin.

In a sense, *samādhi* meditation can be seen as a way of avoiding *dukkha*. In *upacāra samādhi*, when there is calm and the *kilesas* are gone for a while, there is no *dukkha*. And as long as we are in *samādhi* we do not create any bad *kamma*. However, just being in *upacāra samādhi* does not remove *kamma*, for it is just waiting to hit us when we come out. This is why people want to go back into *upacāra samādhi* again and again. In the West, the teaching of Buddhist meditation focuses on *samādhi* practice, but this can be just another way of fleeing from *dukkha*. I'm not saying that it is not worth doing — finding calm and developing

concentration are necessary first steps on the path — but *samādhi* practice doesn't remove the *kilesas* or lead us to the understanding of *dukkha*.

The way to get free from *dukkha* is to face it, but this is difficult for most people as *dukkha* is much more than just pain and suffering; it's the experience that drives us to do everything. We change posture because of discomfort, which is an unpleasant state of mind; we fall asleep because of drowsiness, which is an unpleasant state of mind; we eat and drink because hunger and thirst are unpleasant states of mind, and so on. The body doesn't care if it's hungry or thirsty — it doesn't even know. A car doesn't know that it has run out of petrol, does it? It's the driver who knows, because he has looked at the meter. From the moment of birth, we have eaten things when we are hungry, without realising that the process is driven by *dukkha*. So, the path of practice is to look *dukkha* in the face and investigate it, to completely understand the profound teaching that *dukkha* exists and that it has a cause — craving or *taṇhā*, the desire to be or not to be, to have or not to have, to obtain *sukha* or get rid of *dukkha*. We want the world and the people in it to be other than they are, and this is the kind of wanting that creates *dukkha*. By running away from *dukkha* we create new *dukkha* — it's a vicious circle, and we really have to do something to stop it, otherwise we will continue to be reborn again and again to face more *dukkha*. Think about this: each of us has a mountain of *kamma* to experience. How many aeons of rain would it take to wash away this mountain? If we don't want to see the mountain, or don't care about it, will we ever find the way out of *dukkha*? No, because *avijjā* doesn't want us to see, and doesn't want us to care. So, we have to face *dukkha*, and that means being aware of everything that happens to us, from the moment we open our eyes to the moment we close them again, to see the *dukkha* constantly arising. You have to investigate what is driving you to act, to scratch, to move or to eat, and whether a feeling, thought, emotion or memory is involved.

Looking carefully at ourselves, we can see that we are running programs like a computer. We think that someone or something has programmed them into us — our parents, our biology or a divine creator. But actually the programmer is right in front of our eyes — it's us. We have programmed our reactions, and once the programs are working nicely we don't even question them; we just scratch, move, eat and sleep unthinkingly. We will follow the program automatically unless we stop and ask what is going on. In meditation practice, we have to look carefully at everything happening inside ourselves. If we stop and look, we will notice that one of the five *khandhas* — *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *sankhāra* or *viññāṇa* — is activated at every mind-moment. Each sense contact that arises has a feeling attached to it, and this feeling produces another thought or memory which itself has another feeling attached, and so on. This is the way that a feeling builds up, and in a flash it can turn into a very strong emotion. When we see someone we dislike, hate comes up — as if out of nowhere! If we hear a crash of thunder, fear comes up — bop! We think these reactions are natural, but they are not natural at all. What is natural is the five *khandhas* and their interaction. For instance, *viññāṇa* is simply aware of a sense contact; it doesn't label the sense data coming in from sight, sound, smell, taste or touch. Memory labels the sense contact, and tells us what it is. Think how fast this process happens — it seems to be instantaneous but it's not. There is a process — memory has to find the association, for example — but because our *sati* is not fast enough, we can't see the workings involved. Under normal circumstances, our *sati* is too slow to catch every mind-moment, but if it were super-sharp we would see how a feeling triggers a memory, and the memory with another feeling attached then triggers a thought, which triggers another memory, until the feeling grows and grows and grows and

becomes an avalanche. When this happens, we blame someone or something else for creating the avalanche, not understanding that we have created it ourselves.

If we understand the truth of *dukkha* and its origin, we can go a long way in our practice. *Dukkha* is not something we should evade; it's happening all the time and it should be investigated: What am I doing? Why am I doing it? What results does it have? Once you put effort into recognising it, it's so obvious. All you have to do is open your eyes and see: as the Lord Buddha says, the *Dhamma* is *sanditṭhiko* (self-evident and visible here and now), *akāliko* (timeless) and *opanayiko* (found by looking inwards). If you don't want to see or don't care to look, that is just blindness, an example of *avijjā* pulling the blinds down over your eyes. A skilled practitioner is aware of everything that's happening. The moment he is aware of an unpleasant feeling, he notices the tendency of his mind to run away but remains determined to face it and experience it. He has to experience it again and again and again until, after perhaps after a million times, he understands the truth and doesn't need to flee from it any more. Pleasant feelings are harder to investigate for they are easier to get lost in, but these too have to be faced and experienced. When we fully understand, there is no more desire to change feelings, to evade the unpleasant and embrace the pleasant.

If we constantly run away, how can we ever see the truth? If the *kilesas* constantly lead us astray by fooling us with soap bubbles, we will never understand the truth. The strange thing is that most people look back on a day spent running after soap bubbles and think it was all great fun. They don't see the monotony of it all; if they'd spent the day running around in a soap bubble-free zone, they'd feel exhausted, wouldn't they? And that's what happens after a couple of hours of meditation practice — they feel exhausted and say they are tormented by pain! But where does the pain come from? It's not because of practice but because *dukkha* is there all the time; it's just that for two hours we've had no soap bubbles to run after. When we sit in an aeroplane for 12 or 14 hours, we don't complain about the pain, yet in meditation we become aware of the pain very quickly. Actually, pain is there all the time, but we don't see it for running after soap bubbles — memories, thoughts, sights and sounds — and ignoring what is happening in our hearts. The moment we force our mind to stay with one object, we see it all. So, let's investigate *dukkha*.

The first thing we have to do is stay with *dukkha*, not wishing it to go away or be other than it is, because to do that would be desire, and desire creates more *dukkha*. Just be with it completely naturally and observe it with your inner eye. You don't have to think about it or where it has come from or why it has arisen; that's just the same kind of rationalisation we've been doing all our lives. People think that if they sit for a long time their back or legs will be damaged, but these are just thoughts that pop up, and we believe them. See how stupid we are? Even if our leg seems to go to sleep, it's a natural if unpleasant event, so we should observe it and see what is actually happening rather than move on impulse as we usually do. Understanding is the only path out of delusion. I don't mean understanding in the way of the *kilesas*, by reading books or watching the TV. No, the understanding that leads to freedom comes through observation alone, observing the same thing over and over again until *sati* is so acute that it can catch each step of the process occurring within the five *khandhas*. When we truly understand, we won't need to read books or ask anyone else, because the understanding will have been born of experience — from insight in the literal sense of seeing inside. This is the understanding we need to overcome *avijjā*. Of course, we need intellectual understanding to grasp the teachings of the Lord Buddha initially, for that is what brings us to practice, but thereafter the only understanding we need comes through investigation. After all, the Lord Buddha didn't teach from books; he told his *bhikkhus* to go alone into the forests, mountains and caves to see the truth undistracted by other things.

The truth is there all the time. The truth that the Lord Buddha proclaimed 2,500 years ago is still there, and the moment we open our eyes, we see it for ourselves. You can get an inkling of this by being aware for a few hours each day of how you run away from *dukkha* – the truth will shimmer through. Whatever you do, think about why you are doing it, and you'll usually find there is an unpleasant feeling somewhere. It may only be restlessness of mind, yet you find yourself looking for something to do to avoid bearing with the unpleasantness. In *upacāra samādhi*, there is contentment and not the slightest desire to do anything or change anything. But the moment we withdraw from that state, the *kilesas* come back like a troop of forest monkeys, jumping from this tree to the next, after this banana or that banana. They want us to change something or do something else. If we are meditators, they urge us to change our method of meditation or our posture, but this is just another example of the *kilesas* making us run from one soap bubble to another. If you sit long enough in *samādhi*, you will start to experience the power of *avijjā*, how it lures you out to do this or that, to change this or that, to evade *dukkha* in this way or that, to comply with this but not with that, to doubt this or doubt that, to think about this or that, constantly. The moment we come out of the contentedness of *samādhi* where there is no desire, we experience the force of the *kilesas*, the fangs of *avijjā*. And when we come out of the deep state of *appanā samādhi* – in which the world, the five *khandhas*, has disappeared – the change is astonishing. It's like walking into a world war with bullets coming from all sides; we are hit by greed and then by hate, bang, bang, bang. People, particularly the 'good' Buddhists in the West, sometimes tell me that they are not greedy or hateful, but they have likes and dislikes, don't they? These are forms of greed and hate. People also say that they don't have to bother practising as they don't have *dukkha* and don't suffer; they intend to practise only when they have pain. But this shows a lack of understanding of the teachings of the Lord Buddha. It's when we come out of *samādhi* that we really see the force of the *kilesas* and the *dukkha* they cause.

This all happens because of *avijjā*, the fundamental ignorance which keeps us blind. It's because of *avijjā* that we don't see the *dukkha* that is present every moment, and why we need to be reminded of its existence every day. All we need do is open our eyes and see it, but *avijjā* keeps us in the dark and makes us not even want to see. This is where the problem lies – we don't care, and don't want to see *dukkha*. People say that they don't want to get enlightened because they like sex, or because they love being in love! When they say these silly things, they really mean that they don't want to see the truth. But if they could see the truth of *dukkha*, they could walk through and make an end of becoming. When the Lord Buddha was teaching his second discourse to the five ascetics in the deer park at Benares, all five became Arahants while listening, simply because they realised the truth of the teachings at a deep level. The moment they experienced the truth, they became enlightened. At other times during the life of the Lord Buddha, people attained to Sotāpanna, Sakadāgāmī or Anāgāmī just by hearing his teachings and experiencing the truth for themselves. On realising the truth that had been hidden inside themselves, they were able to pass through to the other side. We, by contrast, are stupid because we have been educated, trained to understand using the brain. We focus on the person teaching *Dhamma* and try to understand his words intellectually, but this is another trick of *avijjā*. If we listened with our hearts, the message would strike deep and bring real insight. If our hearts were open and the truth of *dukkha* really hit home, we would be almost there; we could pass through in a moment. *Dhamma* arises in the heart, and it originates in the heart, so we need to put our attention back to the heart where everything arises. The *kilesas* are all in the *citta*, and whatever we see or experience comes out of the *citta* as a projection. Once we put our attention back to the *citta*, we can see how these projections are made and stop falling for them time after time.



I want you all to understand the Lord Buddha's first noble truth, that *dukkha* exists, that it is present every moment and that it drives our lives. It comes from desire, greed and hate, likes and dislikes. If you set aside one, two or three days to observe it, you will begin to understand it profoundly. The Lord Buddha's teaching gets to the root of all causes, but we listen and understand it superficially – it goes in one ear and out the other. You might think that you want to get rid of *dukkha*, but that's just thought. Yes, everyone wants to get rid of *dukkha* from the moment they are born, but they run away from it instead of facing it and understanding it. It's nothing to be afraid of; it arises because of the nature of the world – *anicca*. Everything is constantly changing from one state to another and from one form to another, and the only time we don't notice it is when we are asleep. We have to have *sati* to be aware of impermanence and the *dukkha* associated with it. *Sati* and *paññā*, awareness and investigation with wisdom, can lead us to the end of *dukkha*, and, of course, they culminate in the great weapons of *maha-sati* and *maha-paññā* that lead the Anāgāmi beyond *avijjā*.

*Sati* is trained in *samādhi*, and *paññā* is developed through seeing, experiencing and investigating. Using *paññā*, we don't just accept what the *kilesas* are telling us – we question them instead. What do I want to do? Why do I want to do it? What will the results be? What is the body? What is feeling? You have to investigate and interrogate in this way, not just once but thousands of times. Don't assume you know and understand after investigating only once, for the thought "Now I know!" comes from *avijjā* and its fangs the *kilesas*. *Avijjā* is not only fundamental ignorance; it is wanting to know but not being able to know, because it can only know within the bounds of conventional reality. It cannot go beyond conventional reality because it itself is conventional reality. This is why *avijjā* can never know the truth.

To get down to the true knowingness we have to use any means that come to hand. The easiest method is to go into *appanā samādhi* where everything disappears and only the true nature of the *citta*, knowingness, remains. That's where we see the fallacy of the world, which is simply this: *avijjā* drives us to know and to understand, but we know everything already. The heart already knows, and all we need to do is open the heart and see for ourselves. Normally, we think, assume, memorise and fantasise, but this is the way of the *kilesas*, the way of *avijjā*. However, when the heart opens up, it sees and understands immediately – this is what we call insight. Some people try to figure out where insight comes from, but they can't; it arises from the nature of the *citta*. It's there all the time; all we need to do is open the heart and set it free. As the Lord Buddha said, the *Dhamma* is *sandiṭṭhiko* – right in front of our eyes, to be experienced by the wise here and now.