

Buddhist Discussion Centre (Upwey) Ltd.



The Meaning of Dukkha

Summary of a talk given by the Venerable Phra Khantipalo at the Buddhist Discussion Centre (Upwey) Ltd. on 14 March, 1982

The Buddha never heard of the word "yana". You must consider that. You know Mahayana, Hinayana, Vajrayana, or Bodhisattvayana, or Buddhayana, or how many others can you find?

No, there weren't any such things in the Buddha's day. And he is unlikely to have instituted such things, because the Buddha is a Teacher of universal dhamma, and does not teach sectarianism. Part of the trouble with the unenlightened mind is that it has to label everything.

Of course, we have words, and those words are recognised names for things. But then we get confused by using the words, and think the words are the things. We work the words up into a pattern, major concepts, and then we believe in the concepts which the confused mind thinks up. So actually, we believe our own confused minds. So what could be more confused than that? Just because the ideas happen to be there, we believe they are true.

Now I can think of an idea immediately. A mountain of gold, five miles high, in the middle of Australia. As an idea it's quite a logical idea. Such things as mountains do exist, gold also exists, the middle of Australia exists, and if you put them all together, it is possible. But should a mining company come and say, "Look, we heard you discovered this mountain of solid gold. We are interested. We will go halves with you", or something like that. That would be rather generous of them, though. You cannot point it out, you can only say "yes, well it is sort of in here, (pointing to the heart) a mountain of gold five miles high in the middle of Australia, it is in here".

Now that is an idea, that is a concept. If you fantasize about it enough, it will become true for you, and then you will live in a private world where you are seeking a mountain of gold five miles high in the middle of Australia. Although the words are there, which are true, the concept which is built out of them is not true. And it is the same when people come to conceptualise about dhamma, then they use the words, the words are true, but the ideas that they derive from it are not true. And that again and again and again happens, so we are caught in a kind of cleft stick, because all we have got for communication is words, apart from the odd people who can communicate direct mind to mind. Let's not consider them because they are rather unusual and rare. So then, most people, all they have got is words.

An important part of the dhamma is knowing how to use the words correctly so that the words do not give rise to concepts which are false, and then knowing how to put those ideas, those concepts, which are in terms of words, into practice. Now, if you are successful then, what will happen is that you get beyond the words. It doesn't happen on the level of sila, but it does happen on the level of samadhi. A Dhamma beyond the level of words, beyond the range of words, then you get some experience which is different from the people whose world is a world of words. But even then, you have to still be careful, because although the words are not present in that experience, and you can say there is a wordless experience, yet even so, it can be misinterpreted when the mind returns to the world afterwards.

Suppose you are a mystic of some tradition or other, perhaps not a Buddhist one, and you have a teaching, a doctrine, and that doctrine is all written in Dhamma books, and it is the sort of doctrine that one does not question because it comes from on high somewhere. If it is like that, when you get back to the world of words, after your experience, you do not try to investigate that experience to find out what it is like. Instead you try to fit that experience into words. Where does that experience I have had fit in? And this means that this experience is distorted in terms of the words, because it is not just an experience which is then examined, perhaps with insight, to find out about it, to find out about its impermanence, or its dukkha, or even its not-self nature, not examined in such a way. It has to be made to fit, even if it does not fit.

It has to be pushed in somewhere, so generally with that kind of teaching, one has to use that "Bed of Procrustes" method. You know that Procrustean method? Old Procrustes, he is supposed to have lived in ancient Greece, and he was a robber, and he had this bed. He used to capture people who came over the pass where he lived, and he used to fit them to his bed. If they were too short for the bed, then he stretched them to fit, and if they were too long, he chopped them off to fit. If they were the right length he let them go. That was his method. Also if one does this with one's experiences, when one refers them back to words, and says, look it is like this, it is like this, it is like this, using the Procrustean method to make them fit, this is in opposition to dhamma, this way of looking at things.

The way of dhamma is not to try to make the experience fit the words. The words may be found to describe the experience, and they may or they may not, because other people in meditation have all sorts of experiences, all sorts of things happen to them. But every kind of experience can be subjected to the investigation - what is its true nature? Is it a conditioned or an unconditioned dhamma? There is no third category. If it is a conditioned dhamma, okay, then it is an experience of samsara, even though a very subtle one perhaps. If it is an unconditioned dhamma, well then that is the real thing, that is Nibbana.

So how does one tell the unconditioned from the conditioned? If you think about it, you must know that the guidelines given by the Buddha are very clear and precise. Now these experiences that arise, they have to be tested against, they have to be tried against, whether they are impermanent, whether in a subtle way they are dukkha, or whether they have the characteristic of not-self. The Buddha selected these three, these three aspects of reality as the

touchstone to find out about the experiences. He selected these three, not that he had the word impermanence or not-self in his mind at any time when they were being experienced, but he has the genius of translating to language the wordless experiences of enlightenment. He knew too that it is possible to misinterpret experiences that one has in meditation and believe that they are enlightenment experiences.

Disaster on any spiritual path arises, because they suppose that they no longer have anything left to do. Having reached the summit, there is not any Dhamma, nowhere to go. So you do not try, and since you do not try and you believe that you do not have any defilements, the defilements increase, increase a hundredfold in no time at all. This is what comes from misinterpretation of the experience. You have to test it out, you find out about it when one gets out of the calm enough to investigate. Oh, well, what is it like? Is it like impermanence, an impermanence experience, or a dukkha experience, or a not-self experience? If it is something else apart from that, like it is remembering your former lives, or seeing what Mrs. Smith is doing across the road, or knowing the kinds of kamma that other people have made, or something like this, these kind of things, it has nothing to do with enlightenment.

The way of craving is to grasp at these experiences and make a lot of these things. To Dhamma mountains out of molehills in fact. If you have a nice little experience in meditation of some kind, if you repeat it to your friends, and tell other people about it, which shouldn't be done, of course, then the size of the experience increases the more that you talk about it. What starts off as a quite modest bright light shining in front of you may be a light like ten thousand suns or something like that by the time you have described it a few times. That is something to be rather careful about.

Misinterpretation of dhamma in terms of words is a difficult thing not to do. One has to be careful to avoid it. One won't make any more effort. But also, on a lower level, one has to be careful about words too. Words are tricky things. Although we are used to using words, we are used to using English words yet they are tricky things, and when the dhamma is described in English, it is very easy to give the wrong impression.

The word "suffering" was used as the translation of "dukkha". If one understands like that, (the word "suffering" can encompass all that Buddha means by "dukkha") you can get a very slanted and distorted picture of what he is talking about, because suffering is a fairly unsubtle kind of word. If you have got suffering with regard to the body it must mean something fairly serious. Just because you have been sitting there for half an hour, you are not going to say "I have got suffering in the body". People do not use it like that, only Buddhists perhaps.

Also mental suffering means something fairly heavy. It is not going to mean slight troubles and small things, or fine kind of troubles. So they have understood in the ordinary way of the English language. But when it is understood like that, then the Buddha's teachings are quite distorted, because they do not see the more subtle aspects of dukkha, and when one doesn't understand the more subtle aspects of dukkha, one can miss the whole point, because obviously suffering, the English varieties, are quite limited.

Now, dukkha is characteristic of everything that is conditioned. When people see suffering described as a characteristic of all that is conditioned, they cannot understand it.

Unless a person has that kind of experience in meditation, and knows the unsatisfactory nature of even a calm and blissful experience, they won't know what the Buddha is talking about, about the dukkha. When it is regarded as calm and blissful, that gives a chance to the craving and greed to get into it and stick there. It becomes one of those places where one can exist there. Different levels for consciousness to exist on, and to stick on. But then if it is investigated, you see it is not satisfactory, and that is the way of release from it, that is the way of freedom from it, and then one can refine it a bit more and find out a bit more.

Our use of words is quite important, communicate the dhamma to others with words whether written or spoken, and we have got all those ideas nicely sorted out in our heads, if we have studied and practiced a bit, but, you have to consider how those ideas will be viewed by other people who do not have that background at all. The communication becomes quite a difficult business. Anyway, it is a much more chancy business of communication in that case because Dhamma seems quite obvious to us individually what words mean, but they have slightly different shades of meaning for different people, and when we come to consider different teachings and the way they use words; "dhamma" in India, see, all sorts of people use the word "dhamma". It does not have the same meaning at all.

When Buddhists use "dhamma" and Hindus use "dhamma" they can be talking about quite different things. What is dhamma in the sense of duty, caste duty, for a Hindu, certainly is not anything to do with Buddha Dhamma. It can in fact be opposite to loving-kindness and compassion. Jains also use the word "dhamma", Sikhs use the word "dhamma". They all use the word "dhamma" with their own particular flavours to it. A single word can have many different shades of meaning, many different computations.

References

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"The gift of Dhamma excels all other gifts".