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Dharma talk - *Dukkha Vedana* and Strong Emotions (dharmaseed.org 74775)

Creative Engagement with Strong Emotions Through the Three Characteristics -

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0:37 So, this afternoon, one of the Characteristics I will talk about is the one which generally is in the middle, and it's *dukkha*. *Dukkha* is generally translated as suffering, as pain, as Many different people have translated the term in many different ways. So, this is the way you write it in Pali. And I think you have to see it slightly differently. Because *dukkha* the term is in the Four Noble Truths. And then you have *dukkha* in the Three Characteristics. They cover a little the same ground, but at one level are a little different. So, in terms of the Characteristics, it's really actually about experience. In the Noble Truths, it's really more about conditionality, but we're not talking about this, today, in that way there.

1:48 But, *dukkha* in the Three Characteristics actually has three meanings. That's [why] often it's not translated, because it has three meanings. So I want to look at the first two, which I'm not going to talk so much about. First meaning is, because of the impermanence, because of the first one [Characteristic], because of change, then one aspect of *dukkha* is unreliability. Because things change, things are not reliable. But this doesn't mean we cannot rely on things, as in, things can continue for a while in the same way. So, we live in houses, and, at one level, they're unreliable, but they're not destroyed every morning. Generally the houses we live in are structurally fine, so they continue even though they're unreliable, because things can happen: the painting can get flaky and the doors can go a bit funny and the boiler goes out. I mean, that's what happened to us last winter. So, it's unreliable up to a point, reliable up to a certain point. So, it's just creatively engaging with that fact, that things cannot be relied upon 100% all of the time. And then, if we creatively engage with the fact that things are relatively reliable but unreliable, then it can make things a little easier when things go wrong, especially with material things. But, I mean, us too. We might look like reliable people. And then, sometimes, due to conditions, we're not reliable. I'm sure Antonia did not on purpose double-book. She was very contrite! So all of us, at times, are unreliable because of different things.

4:14 Then there is another aspect of *dukkha*. It's what's called with this funny, long-winded word: unsatisfactoriness. And this is just saying, again, because things are changing, unreliable, they're unsatisfactory only as much as they cannot give us lasting satisfaction. That's what it's saying. It doesn't mean that we cannot have a certain level of satisfaction some of the time. It's just saying, you cannot have it last forever. So, it makes a difference between maybe us wanting things to really last in the same way all the time, and then the fact they might not. And so, instead of looking for lasting satisfaction, which kind of is impossible, we actually creatively engage in with what I would call contentment. So, like with unreliability, you could say to me, "Unreliability helps me to rejoice when things work." To me, this very much goes together: *mudita*, which is rejoicing and really appreciating. "Oh, this works." This is what I really experienced a lot, because I used to live in Korea, long ago, and then things really were not reliable. And then coming to live in Europe, suddenly everything was kind of more reliable: the electricity, the water. Things

seemed to work, more or less, most of the time, when I was always, “Wahh, this works! This is nice!” So, you can see the creative engagement. And then with the unsatisfactoriness is to realize, “Yeah, things are wonderful, but it won’t last.” Whatever it might be, it cannot last. But it doesn’t mean, again, I cannot enjoy it while it lasts. But we have to be careful of the perception that something is going to give me lasting satisfaction. But, instead, we can enjoy contentment and simplicity [and], nowadays a word in French which is very popular, sobriety. Something more simple, simplified.

7:13 But, what I want really to talk about is the third aspect of *dukkha*, which is pain. And then it’s really kind of like, pain, and so, when things are painful, when things are unpleasant. And today I would like to connect that to something I’m very interested in, in terms of strong emotions. And I would say, “Why do we experience strong emotions?” And here, because we’re talking about *dukkha*, I am going to focus more on unpleasant. Of course we can experience strong emotions which are actually happy. You could experience strong emotions of happiness, of joy, or love. But here again, you can have one which is a little amplified and agitating, and one which might still be love, joy, etc., but doesn’t have that possibly disturbing, grasping element. But this is not what we’re talking about now, but if you want to talk about it during the discussion, we can.

8:32 So, pain. If we look at strong negative emotions like anger, fear, anxiety, sadness, depression, etc., I would suggest that it has a lot to do with unpleasant tonality, and it’s what is called *dukkha vedana*. So, I am not so sure how you are familiar with this term, *vedana*. And *vedana* you can translate simply as feeling, but this is feeling as in feeling tone: tonality of experience upon contact through the senses. So, this is really basic. So, you could say that, in terms of looking at it from a Buddhist point of view / experience, you have the contact and the perception of sound, a sight, a taste, a sensation, a thought; and then immediately there is a tonality. It could be pleasant, unpleasant, or neither. And then that tonality (especially if it’s unpleasant, as I mentioned, we have a stronger reactivity to that, for survival purposes). And that unpleasant tonality can become what I would nearly call a feeling sensation in the body, which then can become an emotion and which then can become a disturbing emotion. And so that’s why personally I think mindfulness of *vedana* can be really interesting. And the Buddha points out a lot about it. That’s the second pillar of mindfulness, being aware of the tonality of experience. Because I think a lot of the time that’s where it starts, with these three things together: contact, perception, and feeling (or tonality).

10:48 So what does the Buddha say about *dukkha vedana*? So, painful feeling, unpleasant tonality, is that, as soon as we experience it, we have this immediate reaction of pushing it away. And even he has a text, where he says you not only just have the experience of unpleasant, but then you have the unpleasantness of your reaction to what is unpleasant. And he has this text, maybe I’ll read the text, but you might be familiar with. “So when one is contacted by a painful feeling, one sorrows, grieves, laments, beating one’s breast, becoming distraught. And at that time the person feels two feelings: a bodily one and a mental one.” So what he’s saying, because we have this reactivity to unpleasant tonality, in a way we have a tendency to amplify it. And so that’s why unpleasant tonality generally goes quite fast, amplified.

12:18 But then there is another thing which is interesting in terms of tonality, and I think that's something interesting to look at in meditation, is change. And that's what a nun in ancient times said, is that, "As long as an unpleasant tonality continues, it is painful; but when it stops, it becomes pleasant." And this, it's interesting, that sometimes.... And she said the same with, "As long as it's pleasant, it's pleasant; when it stops, the pleasant can become unpleasant." So, you have two things, that you have a pleasant tonality, and then, when it stops, because that pleasantness stops, instead of being neither pleasant nor unpleasant, it becomes unpleasant. But if it's unpleasant [and] it stops, ahhh, it's such a relief. You know when you stop having a headache or you stop having a problem or whatever it is, and it's like, ahhhhhhhh, it stops. So, you have also the changing nature of painful feelings.

13:42. One important thing in terms of painful feelings, unpleasant tonality. So, when we experience pain, you could say, when we experience *dukkha*, is that generally it's painful, that's obvious, but it's also isolating. I think this is one of the difficulties with pain of any kind, [whether] that it be mental, emotional, physical, whatever pain it might be, nobody can experience our pain for us. So, at that level, it's quite isolating. And, sometimes, it's interesting. When, long ago, the first time I really had lots of pain, my first thought, when I was a nun, was, "Why me?" And then I realized, "This is not very compassionate. You're basically saying, 'Why not somebody else?' It's not such a good idea." And then to see, "Oh that's what the Buddha talks about. Not that everything is painful, but that there is pain." And, when there is pain, how can we creatively engage with it?

15:04 And so, one of the things I see as [an] amplifying factor is what I call associative. When we have an unpleasant tonality, when we have a painful feeling, it feels the same the way it feels generally is very similar to other past and present experiences. It has the same feel, in the sense, we could say, it gives the same reaction. And so, when we experience a painful feeling now, a lot of the time it's very hard not to associate it with past painful feelings which had different conditions, not all the time but a lot of the time. But, this is going to compound it. So, we could say that the mindfulness of unpleasant tonality in part is to help us to dissolve that association, in terms of what is happening now. Not, it's similar to this in the past; but, what are the conditions now? Because, in the same way, we can project it in the future. If I experience this now, I'm going to experience it like this, or worse, in the future, which might be possible, but not necessarily so. I mean, again, it depends on what kind of pain it is.

16:57. So here then, you again have the three levels of pain. You have light, then you have habitual, then you have intense. And so, again, the same thing happens. If we have, I mean, you have physical pain, mental pain, here we talk a lot more about emotional pain, strong emotions. And so, when it's light, again, "How long does it last?" When you recognize that it's something you experienced before, "What are the conditions?" When it's intense, "How can we not amplify it?"

17:41 So here, now I want to look at it in terms of two strong emotions we might feel some of the time. The first one is anger. If we take anger.... And I know often anger has a bad press in Buddhism. But personally I think anger is just a function, a creative function, and the function is to give us energy and give us concern. But

one of the difficulties with anger is that it has very __ energy, lots of energy. So, it's hot and it's explosive. So it's kind of, like, it's to make us do something. And so, you could say you are what I would call constructive, creative anger. And one of the good examples that I experienced was, long ago, at a peace conference, when suddenly there was this little guy, old guy, who appeared on stage. And everyone was talking about peace and all of us were slightly falling asleep, with all this peaceful vibe. And then this little guy, who is one of my heroes, suddenly said, "I am angry! I am angry at poverty! I am angry at homelessness!" And this was L'Abbé Pierre, who was an amazing priest who actually really worked so hard to help people who were poor and who were homeless, and really helped to change things in France. And he was one of the early ones, in the '50's, in the '60's, I mean he's died now. And so here he was angry at something and his anger gave him the energy to do something wise and compassionate about it.

19:55 But then, you have what I would call disturbing anger, when actually the anger makes us attack, makes us be aggressive, and generally makes us unwise and uncompassionate, and often will lead to regret. And so, then, it becomes interesting to look at anger in terms of the three levels. Because the thing with the three levels [is], if you wait to do something about anger when it's intense, it's kind of late. It's very hard to not be activated when anger is intense. So then we can, I would say, work more when it's light, and then you can notice impatience. This is an interesting feeling. You're feeling calm, and then, suddenly, something is a little unpleasant, you're a little activated. And suddenly, you're impatient and you're a little irritated. It's interesting, that movement, from calm to suddenly.... And what is happening, generally, [is] an unpleasant tonality, something did not work the way you wanted, or somebody did something, or whatever it is. It's interesting, how does it feel, that impatience, that irritability, and it also brings the nervous system up.

21:43 Then you have habitual, where, again and again, you see yourself reacting, like, myself when I'm tired, or other people something really.... Again, you have the triggers, contributing factors, and the conditions, And this is really interesting to explore.

22:06 And then you have the third one, where you feel so ..., you're angry and you explode. Or not, I mean, different people have different ways. And then, how to work with that? And here you have a little [of] the conundrum, "Do I say something and it might be unwise, and I might regret it? Or do I don't say anything and then I become resentful, and then later down the line I will say something which will be unwise and I might regret?" This is very interesting, this kind of looking when it's intense.

22:54 And so, creative engagement is really kind of, "What is going on? What are my feelings? What am I reacting to? What can I do? Is it better not to do it now? Is it better to do it later? To speak later? How can I get the help of somebody else?" So, I think again in the discussion we can look at that, in terms of, "How do I creatively engage?"

23:27 Then you have another one, I'll mention briefly, is fear. Fear... I mean, this personally I think is very important, it's [a] survival mechanism. It's really our

whole organism's, kind of, red alert. But then, is it a real red alert, or not? And this is a little bit [where] the mindfulness will help us with. I remember, long ago, I was walking on a path in California, and suddenly my body jumped. And it was only afterwards I realized the jump was so that I would not put my foot on a small rattlesnake which was sunning on the path. So my body saw it before me, actually, before my.... So this is a good fear, to make us survive.

24:31 And then also what is interesting, with the light fear, is to notice when we have a near accident. We have a near accident: so we don't have an accident, we nearly had it. But once we nearly had it, but did not have it, actually we feel fear in the whole body and mind. When I used to live in Devon, I used to often experience this, because of the narrow lanes. And then you have the choice: "Do I feed it? Ahh, this is terrible! This nearly happened! And what if it had happened, and then da da da?" Or, just noticing, how the fear felt, and it was okay.

25:18 Then you have more when it's habitual. And then, with this fear, anxiety, which is habitual, one of the things I really look at is, how fear is contagious. If I am afraid, I can make other people afraid. If other people are afraid, they can make me afraid. And then the question is, "Is it for a good reason? Or is it not for any real reason?" So this is something I think we really need to look at, in terms of fear. And, I mean I know everybody has a different relationship with Covid. But when we started again to be a little together, teaching and things like that, I thought it was interesting, the first time I'm looking at the people and at one level being afraid of them. "Are they contagious or not?" And then you stayed together and then nothing happened, so you think, "Mmm! It's okay." But it's interesting, fear and how it can propagate or not.

26:34 And then intense fear, when it paralyzes us.

And then of course, fear in the future. Often we make ourselves frightened in the future. So we are okay now, but we create an unpleasant or painful feeling, thinking about what might happen. What if this happens or that happens? And so, I could say here, "It's a gift of mindfulness: What is really happening now?" And, this is something I learned when I was in Korea, in the temple. And once we decided to do an all-night sitting for a few days, and I had no problem with sitting, but I had problems with going to the toilet at night. So, at night I would go to the toilet at 2 o'clock in the morning, and suddenly my heart would go so fast, I was so frightened. Why was I frightened? Because of my imagination, because I had this nervous reaction to the black, to the dark. And I had this image: there is a guy behind me, with a knife, he is going to get me. But then, with the meditation and really inquiring what is really going on, I suddenly realized, "I am in the middle of nowhere, in the mountains. Who would know that I am here, to come and get me?" And after that, the fear was much less, much less. So, to respect fear, because I think it's a good indicator, up to a point, but also to bring this creative engagement: "Is this for good reason? Is it real? Is it in the future?"

28:50 So, how can we creatively engage, with the feeling that arises upon contact, ahhh, and then we feel something? And so, the mindfulness of the feeling tone is to help us to see it earlier [rather] than later. And also very much to look at the change of the tonality.

29:18 And this is really what I want to explore during the meditation. I want to do a guided meditation on mindfulness of feeling tone. So I'll use very simple things, like the body and sounds, and, through that contact, look at change, and look at tonality. So, shall we do that?