

1: Life is Suffering?

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This Dharma talk series is looking at “The Four Noble Truths”, the Ariya Saccani” “Ariya sathya”, the Pali word “Saccha” and the Sanskrit from that word, “Sathya”, “that which is” or “truth”. The Four Noble Truths are four basic facts about our experience. And they are noble because they are true.

This ancient description of our existential situation and the means to resolve it were the Buddha’s first Teaching. They were given to his first five students after he himself Woke Up to the actual nature of experiencing. This Teaching was the first turning of the Wheel of Dharma and it set the Transmission of this Lineage of realized practice in motion.

In a teisho entitled “Becoming Buddha” from “The Complete Teachings of Reality” series, Zen Master Anzan Hoshin says,

“These facts are: first, that all conditioned existence gives rise to dukkha or unsatisfactoriness, suffering, contraction, and confusion. The second Noble Truth is: this suffering, this dukkha is fueled by the mechanism of grasping, of trying to hold, to hold on to something when it cannot be held and by continually misunderstanding the nature of our experience.”

Now the good news; Anzan roshi goes on to say that,

“The third Noble Truth is that it is possible to end this. The Buddha himself had experienced the end of this dukkha, this suffering”. And the fourth: “That it is possible for others to experience this by practising.”

This Dharma Talk is looking at the first of these four which says that all conditioned experience gives rise to dukkha or unsatisfactoriness. What does this mean?

One of the things that puzzled me for a very long time before I became a student of Anzan roshi was this expression that I’d heard which said that “this life is suffering.” “Life is suffering.” That struck me from my own experience as not exactly true. One translation of the Buddha’s presentation of the first Noble Truth is,

“But what, oh monks, is the Noble Truth of suffering? Birth is suffering. Decay is suffering. Death is suffering. Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair, are suffering.”

Now is that what he actually said? I don’t think so. Or if that was what was actually said it probably has become, obviously, not probably, obviously, very distorted over 2600 years being heard by who knows how many ears and then being repeated by who knows how many mouths many of which weren’t practising, as we know it.

The Buddha is reported to have said in this translation that birth is suffering. Well, I myself have never give birth but I have worked in the delivery room. I have been present when beings gave been born, and not just human beings, other beings, and indeed the mother suffers in the sense that there is pain as the soft tissues are stretched, as the muscles contract and release, as the bones of the pelvic girdle separate to make room for a body with a head that is bigger than the tunnel through which it must travel. This must hurt. Any being

given birth does let those around know that it knows that it is experiencing something extraordinary; something that is stretching the being beyond anything they thought was possible. But it is possible and it is what every mammal does.

So what's the Buddha really saying? Anzan roshi says that the Buddha is pointing out that the body is subject to birth, old age, sickness, and death and that you can't hide from the uncertainties of life. You can't escape. You are alive. The bodymind is alive.

The Buddha goes on to say that death is suffering. The decay of the bodymind is what the bodymind does and starts to do it right after it is born: losing cells, getting older. Decay of the bodymind is what the bodymind does and then the bodymind dies at some point. Death is something that anything that lives, does. Death is a fact. That which is born, brought into existence will die. Nothing can or will remain static and unchanging. Everything arises and decays. Birth, old age, sickness, and death, are what life does.

Life is not suffering. Your life in this moment is not something to be borne. It is the vivid display of this moment and be it birthing or being born, crying or laughing, falling down and skinning a knee, or feeling the last breath leave the body, it is always this moment. And in this moment there is no suffering. There is only the vivid display of this moment. This is what we must practise. This moment is the only moment we can practise because we don't know if there will be another moment.

So, I think we can conclude that, with people being lazy, and from the beginning of language apparently liking to come up with pat phrases - bumper stickers before there were bumpers - we have the pat phrase, "Life is suffering". This is a misunderstanding. This is a whisper game. Don't be fooled by it. The Buddha may have said something like, you're alive; you're in this bodymind; the bodymind is subject to birth, old age, sickness, and death, so since this is true don't waste your time in recoil and fantasies. Accept it as what life does. Birth goes on so live with it. That's reality, you can't change it. Decay goes on, accept it, you can't change it. Death happens to anything that is born. This is reality. There's nothing we can do because nothing will stop this because this is what life does.

Life is not suffering. As the Roshi's translation says,

"Conditioned experiencing is suffering. Life is life. Experiencing which is conditioned by anything whatsoever, so that there are obstructions or obscurations, closes down, contracts, and filters experiencing. Everything that is experienced is filtered through that obstruction and thereby distorted."

Now, pain, a pain in the knee for example, that's something that I'm sure, I'm just guessing here, I'm sure we've all experienced it; a pain in the knee when we are sitting is what the bodymind is doing and there's very good reason for that because we are being stretched. The bodymind is being stretched. When those experiences, when those sensations are attended to openly we can notice that those sensations are not constant, they are not solid, and they are not a thing. Sensations flicker and change, sometimes opening completely and dropping away.

We have a tendency to give rise to thoughts about that pain and to allow attention to move into thoughts about the pain. The pain and the thoughts about the pain are two entirely different things. As we allow attention to fall into the thoughts we are distancing ourselves from this moment of experiencing, from the experiencing of the sensations. We are creating a concept of what pain is, what it means, what the consequences are and, "Why me? Why me? What did I do to deserve this pain?" We become so busy with our

fantasies and our stories about what we are experiencing that it is, indeed, as if we are no longer experiencing those sensations. Everything is filtered through the obstruction we have created. Seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, feeling, smelling, are obscured by the story we have created. That causes us to suffer. The space of open experiencing is corrupted. This is suffering. This is dukkha.

“Dukkha” has its roots in Sanskrit. “Du” means bad, “kkha” means pace. The word “dukkha” is describing bad space. A classic metaphor is of the hole that the axle of a wheel passes through being broken or blocked. So, fundamentally, with dukkha there is a sense that things don’t work, things are not working out for us. “Why me?” and, of course, things aren’t working out because we are creating the obstruction which has broken the openness of experiencing into self and other, this and that. When we notice that this is what we are doing we can practise: we feel the breath rising and falling in the body in this moment. This is life.

The Buddha went on to say that, “Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair, are suffering.” This translation is a little bit more “on”. This is something we can understand more clearly because although we can grieve and feel sorrow, we can cry when something unfortunate happens; we need not focus on that sorrow, on that grief, on that crying, to the exclusion of everything else that we are experiencing. When we do we cause ourselves to suffer. This is the creation of “dukkha” of bad space. Practice teaches us how to open around this, to give it room, so that it can unknot itself.

We do this creation of suffering over and over again. For example, there are things that we want and we can pine over these things believing that if we just had them everything would be all right and we are so busy focusing on what we think we don’t have that we don’t notice what’s going on. We don’t want to be lonely. We can become so busy being contracted around this fear of being lonely, so busy with this lonely self we have created that we don’t even notice that there are other beings around us, maybe laughing, maybe just breathing, maybe walking by, maybe growing in a pot, maybe curling around our leg trying to get our attention, and we don’t notice that is impossible for us to be alone.

There are four kinds of “dukkha” described: the dukkha of not getting what we want; the dukkha of getting what we want and losing it; the dukkha of getting what we don’t want; and then, the dukkha of dukkhas, the inevitability of suffering that follows along after the introduction of the image of a self. So, the moment contraction occurs in the bodymind and obscures open experiencing we have self and, necessarily at that moment, the misunderstanding that everything else is other. ~ And let the suffering commence. And it does until we are fortunate enough to arrive in a place where we can receive the Teachings of Reality and where we can practise.

A recent innovation, I think it is North American Buddhist, is that there is something called “necessary suffering”. “Necessary suffering” being, of course, birth, old age, sickness, and death. And that there is “unnecessary suffering” which is, of course, the thoughts and feelings that we use to create a self that is separate and distinct from everything else and is suffering because the universe is not supplying it with what it wants. When we see those thoughts and feelings we can open around this “unnecessary suffering”. Well, again, this confuses the issue for me. Birth, old age, sickness, and death, are what life does, period. And then there’s suffering which is “treatable”.

[laughter]

We sit. We feel the breath moving in and out of the bodymind. We see thoughts as thoughts. We see feelings

arising. We feel sensations. Any time we notice anything at all about how we are we practise, we are practising the practice of Awareness Itself. Whatever arises and falls comes and goes as the activity of Awareness Itself. Awareness cannot be conditioned by what arises within it. Awareness is the only condition.

Zen Master Anzan Hoshin says, in "Round and Bright", "that true reverence is not a feeling about something. It is respectfully allowing a space in which something can present itself on its own terms." So in that sense, the Monastery, Dainen-ji, is a place of reverence, in the sense that it provides for us a space in which anything can present itself on its own terms and be opened. The bodymind, your bodymind, is a space which you can allow anything to present itself on its own terms. That space is aware, that space is open, that is the space that arises as all beings. That space is you. Take care of it. Open obstructions that try and pull together a self that is separate. This (separation) is an illusion, it is impossible. So practise.

As this moment arises within Awareness, Awareness arises as this moment. Anzan roshi says, "In order for our practice to be complete practice it must be born anew in each moment as each moment. Open completely to whatever arises."