Buddhist Three Characteristics Part 1

Dukkha

My intention for the next few meetings is to review the Buddhist concepts of Anicca (the fleeting and transitory nature of subjective experience), Dukkha (the distress and confusion that is caused by craving and clinging), and Anatta (the absence of an enduring/autonomous self). the topic for this talk is a more in-depth review of the second of the three, dukkha—my reasoning is that, even though the traditional ordering of the three is as written above, I find it more useful practically to describe dukkha first and then how the nature and direct experience of anicca and anatta brings relief from dukkha, at least initially and momentarily. These characteristics of anicca and anatta will be reviewed in subsequent talks.

First, what was the original intention associated with the word *dukkha*? Joseph Goldstein, in his book “Mindfulness—A Practical Guide to Awakening”, refers to the origins of this concept on pp.288-299:

“The word is made up of the prefix *du* and the root *kha*. *Du* means “bad” or “difficult”. *Kha* means “empty” …One of the specific meanings refers to the empty axle hole of a wheel. If the axle fits badly into the center hole, we get a very bumpy ride…In more general philosophical terms, “empty” means devoid of permanence and devoid of a self that can control phenomena.”

I would add that, in addition to the bumpy ride, occasionally the wheel might fall off! Many of us have had that experience metaphorically during this pandemic.

Rather than *suffering*, the traditional translation of dukkha, I prefer the terms *distress and confusion*. *Distress* refers to the emotional aspects of experience and *confusion* refers to the conflicted and inherently unreliable cognitive aspects of experience. An alternative translation of dukkha is *unsatisfactoriness*, and that also applies. There is a term in existential psychology that is relevant to unsatisfactoriness—*existential anxiety*—that focuses on *the uncertainty of one’s identity and world view*, rather than just the universal potential to die, which we ultimately cannot control.

The primary cause of dukkha is *craving* and *clinging*. In terms of distress and confusion, *distress* is expressed as *craving* and *confusion* as *clinging*. Most Buddhist commentaries assert that the primary cause of dukkha is *craving*-- *tanha* (tahn-hah) in Pali, typically translated as *unquenchable thirst*. It is very important to understand through direct experience that another essential component is *clinging*, *upadana* (oo-pah-dah-nah) in Pali, typically translated as *fuel* or *sustenance*. I want to explore these concepts further here:

**Tanha**: This is experienced as a driving urgency, an impulse towards action, either to approach and sustain pleasant feelings or avoid or get rid of unpleasant feelings. Our culture has this hunger woven into the fabric of consumerism—we often find that just watching the breath, which is fundamentally lacking in craving, creates an urgency to be distracted from the “boredom” of internal calmness and simplicity. In contemporary psychology, this urgency is called *affect*, and can be experienced as an emotion but is more primarily an impulsive reactivity. When we are thirsty, there is a process in the brain that seeks to quench the thirst through drinking liquids, and when we have drunk enough, the brain’s chemistry creates an awareness that the thirst is quenched.

Tanha is a different sort of phenomena in that the thirst is not satisfied—obviously this can be associated with drinking liquids, but is also operating through other affective processes, primarily of a mental nature, but often associated with a physical element. A useful example is alcoholism: A person is obviously drinking liquids, but the signal that the body is no longer thirsty is disabled by some sort of emotional distress.

As a psychotherapist for many years, sometimes helping alcoholics or others afflicted by addiction, I know that underlying the affective thirst for intoxication is some psychological disturbance such as depression, anxiety, or unresolved trauma, and this inevitably involves upadana, clinging to some sort of identification or attachment to a particular view. Until the distress and confusion that precedes the thirst for alcohol is resolved, a person’s life is controlled by an unquenchable desire for intoxication.

**Upadana**: This is experienced as what Buddhism conceptualizes as *attachment to view* and is manifested in what I call *the selfing story*. The technical translation of upadana is *fuel* or *sustenance* and this originally was related by the Buddha and his followers to the ritual practices of Brahmin priests, who used a sacred fuel to feed ritual fires and the application of the fuel was called upadana and was intended to keep the ritual fires burning perpetually; this was assumed to be required to maintain a wholesome relationship to Brahma, their equivalent to God. The Buddha repurposed this ritual practice, focused on our natural propensity to describe ourselves and the world through an ongoing internal monologue, which is the selfing story. The process of creating the story is upadana and, even though internal commentary is essential for effective functioning in society, the story itself is an unreliable representation of how the world operates.

The processing of raw sensory data into consciousness requires a level of creative fabrication that Buddhism terms *papanca* (pah-pahn-chah), which translates as *proliferation from an initial perception—*for example, a sound is just vibration in whatever medium will transport it, usually air; there is an initial awareness of the sound, the perception, followed by a more elaborate and creative process that names the origin of the sound and whether it represents a threat. This process defines our species and is required in order for us to function in our complex culture. However, existential anxiety is an inevitable byproduct of this creative process—we become psychologically anxious when our status is threatened, or our familiar routines are disrupted. Of course, fear of death is the most fundamental driver of anxiety, but contemporary U.S. culture is extremely safe compared to that of our ancestors, but we are also afflicted by existential fears that manifest as depression and social anxiety. This is the clinging part of dukkha.

There are three subcategories that are useful for analyzing dukkha, but it is important to understand that all three categories are always a part of the experience of dukkha: *dukkha dukkha, sankhara dukkha* and *viparinama dukkha.* Even though they are categorized differently they can be considered as three aspects of every moment of experience except for nirvana, which is translated as “the total extinction of the fires of tanha and upadana”. This can have reference to the fuel which sustained the sacred flames of Brahman ritual practice but goes to the ultimate liberation of the mind from any perception of an autonomous/enduring self. When there is any unliberated moment of experience there are physical and mental components of dukkha. Here are more specific reviews of these concepts:

**Dukkha Dukkha** (dew-kah dew-kah): This is the essential distress and confusion of physical experience---painful or pleasant sensations of any sort such as physical injury or illness, hunger, being too cold or too warm, fatigue and so on. This is inescapable—"when we buy a body it comes with the package”. A famous Buddhist image is that of considering life experience as comprising two arrows: Physical discomfort is an inevitable arrow, while the second arrow is the result of papanca, the mental fabrication that occurs as the mind makes a meaningful self regarding the physical experience. Buddhist psychology terms this interactive process as *nama/rupa*, with *nama* representing *the mind’s creation* and *rupa* the *basic sensory aspect of experience*.

**Sankhara Dukkha** (sahn-kah-rah dew-kah): The word sankhara has a complex meaning, both as *the stored (but fabricated) history in the mind that is drawn upon for meaning-making* as well as *the dynamic process of fabricating meaning*. As an historical reference it is like a noun and when activated to make meaning it operates as a verb. The potency of sankhara is derived from the impulsivity of craving coupled with the built-in need humans have to integrate various possible meanings that can be applied in a situation in the form of clinging or attachment to a particular cognitive formation in awareness. These set points are inherently unstable, as the stream of incoming stimulation occurs much more rapidly than the mind can clearly comprehend, so papanca creates the pseudo-reality of the selfing story. The instability of the selfing story manifests the third category—

**Viparinama Dukkha** (vee-pah-ree-nah-mah dew-kah): This is typically translated as *dukkha resulting from change*--since impermanence is one of the three basic characteristics of subjective experience, this makes sense. Once again relating to distress and confusion regarding dukkha, I conceive this aspect as *the unstable and unreliable characteristics of experience* (recall the example of the wheel falling off of the cart); in this way it is closely related to the function of confusion. There is a quality of frustration and disappointment associated with viparinama. I can recall how many times I experience shock and annoyance when my plans, projects and behavior doesn’t meet some idealized standard.

These are the concepts related to dukkha; more importantly, how can we utilize these concepts in our mindfulness meditation practice? The primary strategies are to train the mind to be aware of the characteristic “symptoms” of dukkha with undistracted and non-reactive mindfulness. Contemporary research strongly suggests that repeatedly investigating the breath, being aware of how the mind reactively gets distracted by some manifestation of dukkha, either strongly or more subtly, and then letting go of the craving and clinging to go back to the breath restructures the way the brain processes papanca. We learn to become aware of the impulsive urgency as a transient feeling rather than a foregone conclusion about what is happening in awareness. Cultivating a persistent intention to note that process of distraction and relinquishment back to the breath fosters awareness of anicca and anatta, topics for upcoming talks.