**Notes and Quotes for January 22, 2023 *Dharma Reflections*:**

**What’s On the Path?**

***Part Two: The Response to Suffering***

Okay. So here we are, embodied as human beings, with the leisure and capacity to observe our situation, to consider the implications of existence, and to decide how to proceed. We have accumulated merit sufficient to have heard about and to have some respect for the teachings of the Buddha. We accept, at least provisionally, the core elements of the Dharma, and have begun investigating how they might be true and applicable to our own lives. And we keep coming back to the very first teachings of the Buddha, the very foundation of the Dharma: The Four Noble Truths. Since we’re human, we’d like to forget about them, we wish they weren’t true; yet in our bones and hearts and in the life we experience every day, we keep feeling a deep resonance with the vibrations of that teaching. So where does this leave us?

In this group, as adults who are already wearing out their third (or thirtieth) set of tires, we already recognize our propensity to deceive ourselves—especially when uncomfortable, particularly when in pain. We’ve all spent enough time on the cushion, and in therapy, and in stumbling through relationships, to have recognized a pattern—if it hurts, or we think it might, the impulse is to turn away, to reject, to hide it, or cover it up—avoidance, evasion, distraction, and numbing out are second nature to us.

We do have a choice. In each painful situation, in each awkward circumstance, we have choices—to notice, or to ignore; to investigate, or to distract; to experience, or to divert; to hold, or to try to drop; to feel, or to think; to act, or to talk. And as to that first truth (conditioned existence is *duhkha*), today we’re going to arrest our impulse to gloss over it or glide past it; today, we’re going to dive into it. *Life as we’ve been living it is painful, unsatisfactory, out of kilter, and unavoidably so.* Today, we notice this; and investigate this; and experience this; and hold this; and feel this; and engage it with our whole body and mind. Today, we’re going to intentionally rub our own noses in this distasteful truth of life, so that we’ll better know, going forward, what we’re dealing with.

**The Five Remembrances**

1. I am of the nature to grow old. There is no way to escape growing old.  
2. I am of the nature to have ill health. There is no way to escape ill health.  
3. I am of the nature to die. There is no way to escape death.  
4. All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape being separated from them.  
5. My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my actions. My actions are the ground upon which I stand.

- trans. by Thích Nhất Hạnh

“The Buddha said that true duhkha is to be known, true origins are to be eliminated, true cessations are to be actualized, and true paths are to be cultivated. In specifying that true duhkha is to be known, the Buddha was giving us an important message: unless we identify the unsatisfactory circumstances that afflict us, we will never attempt to free ourselves from them. If we don’t know we are ill or deny the fact that we are, we will not go to the doctor or take the prescribed medicine. Meanwhile, an insidious disease will fester inside us….

“When reflecting on the various types of duhkha, keep in mind that the purpose is to generate the determination to be free from samsara and attain liberation…. Meditating on true duhkha involves taking responsibility for our situation and our problems and dealing with them wisely.

“We may think that we’re already aware of our misery, so there’s no need to contemplate it. Although we may be aware of our gross duhkha, we probably are not aware of duhkha’s subtler levels. Until we recognize these, we won’t seek to be free from them….

“Real understanding comes from observing our own experiences—our bodies and minds, our lives and deaths. It involves facing the disparity between the belief that we are in control of our lives and the reality of what actually is.

* *Samsara, Nirvana, and Buddha Nature* (vol. 3 of THE LIBRARY OF WISDOM AND COMPASSION), The Dalai Lama and Thubten Chodron, Wisdom, 2018, pp. 39-40.

“If you do not ponder the sufferings of the cycle of existence, disillusionment with the cycle of existence will not arise. If disillusionment with the cycle of existence does not arise, whatever Dharma you practice, it cannot be disengaged from this life, and the craving and attachment of this life are not severed. Thus, pondering the sufferings of the cycle of existence is extremely important.”

* *Natural Liberation—Padmasambhava’s Teachings on the Six Bardos*, trans. by B. Alan Wallace, Wisdom, 2008, p. 16.

”*Samskara-duhkha* is a form of anxiety etched indelibly into the structure of personality. It is an existential or, perhaps better, a spiritual disorder, a dis-ease that permeates my identity as an individual person—which is to say, my entire psychological life. Merely to exist as an individual, to identify with a particular set of memories and traits, hopes and dreams—to think *this is me, here I am doing such and such, exercising my preferences, pursuing my goals—*is to be dis-eased. This truth is hidden from view behind a cloud of denial, which periodically allows for the illusion of happiness. Certainly we learn to accept that life is far from perfect and that it brings times of sadness and even despair; but Buddhism’s first noble truth goes much deeper. We do not see—nor do we *want* to see—how everything about our experience in this world, including our pleasure, is inherently dis-eased. This is the truth about what it means to be a self-conscious, self-centered individual, and our resistance to seeing and accepting this truth is literally built into our identity. Denial, in this sense, is the groundwork of the personality, the bulwark of my sense of myself as one person set apart from others. We find it virtually impossible to admit—as Prince Gautama did when he left the palace—that our hard-won moments of happiness are a charade. It is simply too much to bear.

“Denial always comes at a price, however, and the cost of not facing up to the truth of our dis-ease is high. It requires a formidable reservoir of psychic energy to maintain the pretense of even a periodic, ephemeral happiness…. No wonder Buddhism teaches that this most subtle form of dis-ease is perceived only at a relatively advanced stage of the spiritual path when attachment to the sense of self has already become so attenuated that one no longer resists such an insight.

“The characteristic response of denial, when confronted with the truth, is anger. *This can’t be what Buddhism teaches. It is simply too bitter a pill to swallow.* In any case, what is called for is not belief…. Ultimately, one must look for oneself and see the workings of *duhkha* in one’s own experience. I must see for myself whether dis-ease is the water I swim in, the air I breathe. This is where the spiritual path began for Prince Gautama, which is no doubt why, as the Buddha, he made the pointing out of dis-ease the subject of his first noble truth….

“The more I wiggle and squirm, scheme and strategize to get what I want, the more hopelessly dis-eased I become…. But when the nature of my illness—the quiet desperation of the isolated, individual self, striving to be happy—is unearthed, brought into the light of awareness and clearly seen for what it is, then this very seeing lays the ground for a cure.”

* *What I Don’t Know About Death*, C. W. Huntington Jr., Wisdom, 2021, pp. 38-40.

“The question could be raised here: ‘Is it ever possible to change the very nature of our existence, formed as it is by contaminated physical and mental components? Is it at all possible to exist without being enmeshed in such a conditioned existence?’ In discussing cessation, Buddhism is pointing to the possibility of freedom, meaning total elimination of all negative aspects of our psyche, the possibility of complete freedom from all suffering. This is an issue that requires serious thought on the part of a practitioner.”

* *Practicing Wisdom—The Perfection of Shantideva’s Bodhisattva Way*, The Dalai Lama, Wisdom, 2005, p. 9

“In Buddhist cosmology, this world in which Sakyamuni was the Buddha is called the world of endurance, *saha* in Sanskrit. This is considered an auspicious place to practice. Living in this difficult place, filled with situations of apparent suffering, cruelty, and injustice, we can develop our capacity to endure, to be patient with our life, to learn how to respond appropriately and helpfully, without feeling overwhelmed or compelled to act impulsively.”

* *Faces of Compassion—Classic Bodhisattva Archetypes and Their Modern Expression*, Taigen Dan Leighton, Wisdom, 2012, p. 70.

“We simply must act *as if*… there really is a path and a goal, even though there isn’t. You must follow the path that is not a path so you can see for yourself that it leads nowhere or, perhaps more precisely, that it leads back to exactly where you started. You must wake up *in* the dream in order to see the dream for what it is, to see that waking up is itself, in some inexplicable manner, an illusion, because there never was anything other than the dream.”

* *What I Don’t Know About Death*, C. W. Huntington Jr., Wisdom, 2021, p. 110.

“Many people wish to help others, but they have not yet discovered the aspiration to realize Buddhahood for that purpose. If we look into our hearts and minds, and discover the aspiration to help beings, and we take care of that wish, it may eventually grow into the aspiration to realize Buddhahood. Is there a wish for the welfare of beings in your heart? Do you sense a wish for Buddhahood?

“As we continue on our path, we will awaken to the reality that our entire life and practice is not something that we do alone. We understand that our practice is a gift from all beings and a gift that we give to all beings. This is the ultimate truth of our life.”

* *Entering the Mind of Buddha—Zen and the Six Heroic Practices of Bodhisattvas,* Reb Anderson, Shambhala, 2019, p. 13.

“The Mahayana is without a doubt a path dedicated to the liberation of all beings. When one enters the Mahayana path, one is said to join the family of bodhisattvas….

“The suffering from which we wish to liberate other sentient beings… has three levels. The first level includes the obvious physical and mental sensations of pain and discomfort that we can all easily identify as suffering….

“The second level of suffering is the suffering of change. Although certain experiences or sensations may seem pleasurable and desirable now, inherent within them is the potential for culminating in an unsatisfactory experience. Another way of saying this is that experiences do not last forever; desirable experiences will eventually be replaced by a neutral experience or by an undesirable experience…. Often, the more we pursue these (desirable) experiences, the greater our level of disillusionment, dissatisfaction, and unhappiness becomes….

“But the third level of suffering is the most significant—the pervasive suffering of conditioning. This refers to the very fact of our unenlightened existence, the fact that we are ruled by negative emotions and their underlying root cause, namely our own fundamental ignorance of the nature of reality. Buddhism asserts that as long as we are under the control of this fundamental ignorance, we are suffering; this unenlightened existence is suffering by its very nature.

“If we are to cultivate the deepest wisdom, we must understand suffering at its deepest, most pervasive level. In turn, freedom from that level of suffering is true nirvana, true liberation, the true state of cessation. Freedom from the first level of suffering alone… is not true cessation of suffering. Freedom from the second level again is not true cessation….

“It is said that freedom from the first level of suffering is attained to some degree by attaining higher rebirths—a more fortunate human rebirth, or rebirth as a long-lived god. Freedom from the second level of suffering can be attained through mundane meditative states. For example, through the practice of deep meditative absorption, an individual can experience what is called the four form realms and the four formless realms…. Thus, without escaping cyclic existence, there are realms in which one can gain freedom from both the first and second levels of suffering. Freedom from the third level of suffering is the true Dharma, which protects us from *all* suffering and negativity. And the path leading to that Dharma is called the Buddha’s way.”

* *The Essence of the Heart Sutra (The Dalai Lama’s Heart of Wisdom Teachings)*, trans. by Geshe Thupten Jinpa, Wisdom, 2002, pp. 49-52.

“When you were a kid, you roller-skated until you fell and skinned your knee. Without thinking, you reached for it, touched the wound with careful attention, and you held it. You did this because you are hardwired to do this. You are hardwired to reach for suffering, and care for it. Before you think, before your ideas, before anything, before there’s even a ‘you’ and before your ideas of ‘I’ and ‘wound’ and certainly way before your fancy ideas of ‘being good’ or, heaven forbid, ‘compassion.’

“You do this because it’s your nature.

“Kwan Yin, the symbol of perfect and universal compassion in Buddhism, is sometimes depicted as having dozens, or even hundreds, of hands, each with an eye in its palm. It’s a strange image to some of us, but the image is designed to symbolize the vast capacity that we each have for compassion: to see and meet suffering with tenderness, wisdom, and care. We are all Kwan Yin.

“‘Which means all of reality is love, love that accepts suffering. To say that love or compassion is something extra, something particular, some admirable feeling or impulse, is good, but it misses this crucial point about life,’ Norman Fischer said.

“Compassion is your nature. Compassion is The Nature. It’s the nature of your consciousness.

“Make your life into this. Make your life into one big teaching for the wounded, the hurt, and caring for it. That’s all.

“It’s actually that simple. Not easy, but simple.

“There is no Dharma beyond this.”

* *Singing and Dancing Are the Voice of the Law—A Commentary on Hakuin’s “Song of Zazen,” Bussho Lahn, Monkfish, 2022.*

“For Buddhahood, the goal to be achieved,   
The supreme instrument is bodhichitta,  
Gained through four unbounded attitudes.  
And as this wondrous chariot makes its way  
In aspiration and in action,  
It causes the inferior view, the wish for one’s own peace, to wane.”

* *Treasury of Precious Qualities—Book One: Sutra Teachings*, Jigme Lingpa, trans., Revised Edition, Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2010, p. 63.

“Now we have this great vessel of freedoms and resources, so difficult to obtain.  
So that we may liberate ourselves and others from the ocean of samsara,  
Day and night, without distraction,  
To listen, contemplate, and meditate is the practice of a bodhisattva.”

Dzaltrul Ngawang Tenzin Norbu (trans. Christopher Stagg), *A Guide to the Thirty-Seven Practices of the Bodhisattva*, Snow Lion, 2020, p.3

“When even just one person at one time sits in zazen,  
They become, imperceptibly, one with each and all of  
The myriad things, and permeate completely all time,  
So that within the limitless universe, throughout past,  
Future, and present, they are performing the eternal   
And ceaseless work of guiding beings to enlightenment….

“You should know that even if all the buddhas in the Ten directions, as numerous as the sands of the Ganges River, together engage the full power of their  
Buddha wisdom, they could never reach the limit, or  
Measure, or comprehend the virtue of one person’s zazen.”

* From “Jiyuyu Samadhi” by Dogen-zenji

**Possible Discussion Points:**

1. What do you think and feel when hearing the suggestion to turn toward what is painful? Try to do this without failure or omission for ten minutes. What happened?
2. How might experiencing and holding your pain lead to experiencing and holding and doing something about others’ suffering?
3. “If you do not ponder the sufferings of the cycle of existence, disillusionment with the cycle of existence will not arise. If disillusionment with the cycle of existence does not arise, whatever Dharma you practice, it cannot be disengaged from this life, and the craving and attachment of this life are not severed. Thus, pondering the sufferings of the cycle of existence is extremely important.” Why is it extremely important to disengage from this life, and the craving and attachment of this life? (Hint: the powerful and indelible force of karma, combined with the likelihood of our having caused a lot of harm since the beginningless beginning.)
4. Consider whether you might be able more fully to engage with and soothe the suffering of others if you were less attached to self-centered and self-cherishing habits.
5. Does understanding the value of recognizing suffering, of turning toward suffering, change the quality of your zazen? “Yes, what I experience while doing zazen is at times painful. That’s partly why I do it.” — Crazy, or not crazy?
6. Can you think of any other logical reaction to the inescapability of suffering as a conditioned being, other than consciously turning and directing your energy toward recognizing your own bodhisattvic and Buddhic nature?
7. What if it became clear to you that this one particular lifetime is a true crossroads, that it is either: continue cycling through painful samsara, or: cherish and develop bodhicitta as the only possible escape, not only for yourself, but for all beings?