

The Dark Night Of The Soul...

We can say that there are two Buddhisms.

There is the Buddhism that most people believe in at the ordinary level. It's the Buddhism they are brought into. Their first teachings, their baseline, or their starting point. And through that, you could say, everybody comes to the actual teachings of the Buddha. They come to the noble teachings via their own way of getting there, bringing their own baggage along with them. And as that baggage accumulates, it becomes a form of Buddhism in and of itself. We can actually label that as culture. For instance, you have Tibetan Buddhism or Thai Buddhism. Chinese Buddhism, Indian Buddhism, and now we've got the new kid on the block, Western Buddhism. Along with Zen, Chan, and all that kind of stuff.

Now, because the westerners were going into the Dharma, bringing a lot of their own stuff, the question then got raised, "Well, what about the Dark Knight of the Soul?" And the answer to that is, "Spot on, that's quite Western of you." Right, that's a brilliant, clear, and interesting point, and it seems to be now a major item on the list of what Buddhism is in the West. And we can say first off that we know exactly where the phrase came from, and those who really know, know exactly what the meaning of it is, and yet it's misapplied quite easily within Western Buddhism in their misunderstanding of the actual teachings of the Buddha.

So, what is then, the Dark Knight of the Soul?

It first came from Saint John of the Cross, and many, many of the Christian Saints and Mystics will have a dark night of the soul, and sometimes that dark night of the soul starts in middle age and they die with it years later. In fact, one of the recent examples of this is Mother Teresa, who got quite a lot of bad press from Christopher Hitchens. He was kind of spot on about her, as he was there just watching what was going on. Later we found out that she was truly in the dark night of the soul because of her memoirs that weren't published until about 20 years after she died. She really was going through a dark, dark night in the sense that here she is, a very, very high-class, high-quality, well-known nun, a world example of talking to Jesus day in and day out, and he did not answer once. "He never came up, he never answered my prayers. Why does Jesus and God not answer me?" Which actually, if you think about it from the perspective that she's in, becomes the dark night of the soul, because she has thrown everything into Christianity. She called on Jesus and he did not answer. She has thrown absolutely 100% of all of her faith, her reason, and everything into this thinking this is the way to go, and she's getting no results. She's got no option. She is in the depths of despair, so depressed and so in the mode of "got no way out, got no help coming", that she doesn't know what to do. That's a dark night, huh? That's where that comes from, and it's quite common in Christianity, quite more common than a lot of people want to recognize. Now the problem with the Christian version is that they've got nobody to turn to, to actually get some help, because their teachers and their fellow monks and nuns in their order are also in the depths of it, or about to slide into it. They can't go to the teacher and have the teacher bring them through the dark night of the soul.

The easy way out of the dark night of the soul is the Buddha's way out. It's to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and boogie on down the road. No help coming, no possibility of any

help coming. But in Buddhism, there was never any help coming in the first place. So why should we call it a dark night of the soul? We've grabbed a term out of mediaeval Christianity and applied it to something that is completely different within Buddhism. So, this is a real misapplication of the term. With that as context, we can then look at, well, where does this idea of the dark night of the soul come from within the context of Buddhism? Where in Buddhism did we get this application? And the answer to that is, let us say, a portion of a 5th Century A.D book called The Vishuddhi Magga. And that it is basically known in Western Buddhism as the 16 stages of insight.

Those 16 stages of insight are not something that comes from the time of the Buddha. It's not the teaching of the Buddha. It's a teaching that can get in the way of understanding the teachings of the Buddha. And here's the point, that in the practice they do, they actually are practising only a part of the eightfold noble path. Most notably sati and ditty. I.e to wake up and take a look. Then they called this 'noting'. But they don't do all of the eightfold noble path, especially the third item on the list, right noble effort. Once you see the dukkha, make a change. Now, this right effort to remove unwholesome thoughts, is in fact all over the suttas (MN 117, MN 19, MN 39 MN 118 and many more). Unwholesome thoughts are also called hindrances. So if you've been practising correctly and you've got no hindrances, where is this Dark Night of the Soul? The real teachings of the Buddha are good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end when it's taught properly with the right phrasing, in the right context, with right timing.

Where's the Dark night of the soul in there? Okay, it's not. But by the time you get into the Method of noting and seeing and looking and labelling over and over again, you begin to see everything starting to dissolve and fall apart. But the student at that level is not ready for such terrifying kinds of things, and they become frightened. Which, by the way, I've already gone through the first five or so stages of the 16 stages of insight, arriving at stage 6) fearfulness, 7) misery, and then 8) disgust, 9) despair. All right, there's your dark night of the soul right there. It's written right in the literature: despair. Ah, but that's only step 9), followed by step 10) a strong, strong desire to get out of your own self-made misery.

Everybody who I know comes to Buddhism before they learn anything about it. They come because they've already got this feeling of "I want out of here." I already know enough about dukkha, I want out. See, most ordinary people, they don't even understand what dukkha is. In order to get on the Noble Path, you've got to understand dukkha a little bit in the sense of "Ouch, this is me, and it hurts." But most people are one step behind and don't even notice that. I.e "Ouch, *you* stop hurting me." And that's where the rest of the world is at. They're in the blame game. They want it to be somebody else. We need a God, we need a Jesus, we need a devil, we need a saviour, we need a king. The actual Dark Night of the Soul is seeing that there is no help coming.

We need somebody else to fix us. And the entire teaching, by the way, of the second Noble Truth, is it's your own greed, your own delusion, and your own stupid ignorance that's causing your own problems. And often in the Burmese practice, there's a kind of precedence or importance of the three characteristics over the four noble truths. Once we understand the right way to go, we're obligated to go that way. We do, in fact, open up and see what's going on, so that we can become conscious of it. And when we let our conscience be our guide, we watch where we're going in the present moment. So going back

to the 16 stages of insight, the next step on the way after we have that strong desire to get out of the Dukkha that we, by the way, manufactured for ourselves in the first 10 or so stages of the Mahasi method with that noting, is we start to take the right effort. "I gotta get out of this, I got to do something."

And what's done then is right effort. In fact, in English, the way that it's normally described is step 11) redoubling our effort. I.e start putting in the right effort that needs to be put in, followed by step 12), which is the four noble truths. The Mahasi method waits until step 12 out of 16 to introduce the four noble truths. Hey folks, something's strange here, isn't it? They keep having you look at anicca and dukkha, and anicca and dukkha. Maybe you'll find anatta, and dukkha, and anatta, and dukkha. It's like digging your grave with your own shovel.

Is it just an analogy for life before finding the Four Noble Truths? Before finally figuring it out? That is terrible. That's what it is. It's a metaphor for what we do. Look at the fact that almost everyone goes through the first 11 steps of the 16 stages of Anapanasati before they ever even hear about meditation.

In fact, they begin to go searching and to find out about Anapanasati and meditation, simply because they've seen through enough dukkha to recognize that there's a bunch of shadows, there's a bunch of lies going on here. Things are falling apart, and I don't like it that way. Okay, there's your anicca and your dukkha right there, built right into us. And so, the way that we should actually introduce the teachings of the Buddha is with exactly what the teachings of the Buddha were. And the Buddha says, "I teach only one thing, and that is dukkha, dukkha nirodha." The way that it winds up being practised in Western Buddhism is "dukkha, more dukkha. Look at that dukkha, there's some dukkha. I see dukkha. That dukkha is connected to this dukkha. Let's chase that dukkha right down the dukkha rabbit hole", and we do that for hours, waiting for the bell to ring, and we never even get around to the actual teachings of the Buddha and the eightfold noble path. To find step three, what is the right Noble effort, and what do we actually need to do that takes the effort? And the effort that we need to take, is once we see the dukkha, come out of it immediately, sidestep it, don't let it hit you. See it flying through the air with the greatest of ease missing you by a mile.

Tibetan Buddhism is 70% Tibetan culture and 30% Buddhism, and it's a little bit less in Thailand, and so on, and so on. But the amount of mental identification in the West is just so much stronger than it is in any of these places that I've seen before. We are so used to using the mind for everything.

And so, could it be that the four noble truths are really saying dukkha, dukkha nirodha. Really, really understand and see the source of it, really experience what it's like to be free from it, and really figure out that all of it is found in this noble path when we can actually see that in the here and now. We actually then are fully capable of understanding the personality view, which is now Anatta. That you are not solid, you are not bound by your personality, that you can change, you can learn, and you can grow.

But you see, almost all of the religions that want to make money off of you, they want you to have a thick soul. That it can't change. You gotta go to Jesus to get your soul fixed. You can't do it yourself. Okay, so in fact, you could say that the entire teachings of the Buddha is a DIY

instruction kit for changing. And what are we going to change? The absolute easiest thing there is to change is this thought, because they just go bye-bye-bye. There's just one thought after another. You know how the human mind, one image after another, or one verbal thought after another, just rolls on by. So if they're there and so intangible, you'd think it'd be easy enough to change now wouldn't you? In fact, all you have to do is remember to change it, and in remembering to change it, you have already changed it.

Now you're remembering to change it, that's the thought. And so this is where the Mahasi method or Western Buddhism has forgotten how important the quality of the Noble Path is, in the sense of the right effort to remove the hindrances. Now it's very explicit in the actual Anapanasati Sutta (MN 118) by using the words "gladdening the mind." The interesting part about it is that it's not talking about gladdening the mind in the sense of just the thoughts, because that's more the content of the mind. But rather, changing the state of mind. And when you change the state of mind, it will change the thoughts. And quite often, the reverse is true too.

You change the thoughts you're having, and it'll change your state of mind. For instance, "Oh, I hate this" is in one kind of state of mind. And then the next words would be, "Oh, never mind," and now my state has changed. And so, the whole point here is by actually making the change from unwholesome into wholesome means we're going to actually put a positive spin on things. Another way of thinking about it is that we're no longer going to be judgmental or seeing what's right and what's wrong, or what we mean by a critical mind, And go back to the original job of Mommy. Mommy gets really critical with a five-year-old, but her original job was to be nurturing. And this is what we need to do. We need to start nurturing ourselves, letting ourselves be okay the way that we are. Everything is alright right here, right now, warts and all. And we don't have to sit there and enumerate the warts, which they want you to do in the Mahasi method.

Just say you're already okay, forget about it. Let the past go and be here now with some really wholesome thoughts and some really wholesome feelings about what's happening right here, right now. Now, that's the actual Noble Path and Four Noble Truths, and that we can start on as soon as we recognize, "I have seen enough Dukkha already," and now I'm going to start dealing with it directly by shoving it aside, and throwing it out."

So here's a little example of this. Imagine that you're out on the road, and along down the way there, you see a big, big truck coming. It may even be blowing its horn, telling you "Here he comes!" Now, the Mahasi method is to stand there and take it like a man, Popeye style, you know? Popeye the Sailor Man, and we just stand there and we just try to stop that truck, right? And it runs right over us.

Or we can take Western Buddhism's approach. They call it "Choiceless Awareness" by the way. "Oh, I see that truck coming, I'm just going to get scared and stand here terrified, watching that thing bear down on me," and then it hits me. "Choicelessly aware." This is not so choiceless, is it? Because we're full of terror.

And then there is the Buddha's way, the Anapanasati way, and that is just step aside, just get out of your own way, just move an inch or two and let it go, rushing right on by. We don't have to get hit, we don't have to stand in our own way. So this is the major change in the technique.

Some teachers say: "We need to know every kind of dukkha before transcending it. We must first be "Knower of the World," (Loka-vidu)." What that actually means is that we can see what culture is, we can see how it's got both benefits and Dukkha built into it, and we can see that just as culture. And when we go into the Dhamma, the more we see the Dukkha that's built into the culture, but we can see the Dukkha from the beginning. How far do you go into detail and how much Dukkha do you have to know? Because it's like having to name every fish in the ocean. Actually, there are only a few. Greed and ill-will experienced ignorantly, that's Dukkha.

If you don't have something that you like and you want it, that means that it must be good and you would be better off if you had it. This kind of thought process goes through the mind at 100 miles an hour. We begin to throw all of the culture into it. We become cultured. Culture bites. They're no longer little barbarians; they become civil, I guess is the word that they use, which means burdened down with the ball and chain so that we can't be the wild the way we actually are.

And so, we grow up being victims. In fact, this burden that we're carrying of society, the Buddha refers to that, in one of these woeful states, as the domesticated animal, the wowfull animal state. It means you've got to do what you're told to do, and you don't get a reward for it. You just do what you're told to do. You've got a promise of a reward, you've got a whole bunch of sticks and the promise of a carrot, but carrots are not around, just the stick, and you've got to do what you're told to do. And most of us grow up living our lives just like that, and we kind of get used to it and come back to a kind of a zero state that falls into fear and anxiety quite often.

So, what we're going to do here with Anapanasati, according to the Buddha, is we're going to begin to change that one thought at a time, one feeling at a time, one mind moment at a time, one here and now at a time.

We're going to decide that things have changed and this second is not the same as the last second. Let's do it again, let's practise the right effort to change, rather than our old choice of Dukkha. And so, over and over and over again, we keep practising, and we get good at it. And that's where success comes in. The Buddha was known, by the way, as a lion. He was a lion; he did not go to somebody else's show. Wherever he went, he was the centre of attention. That's in the Suttas, by the way. It's in the lion's roar, Sutta MN 12. So, if we understand that what we're doing is we're gaining our mojo, we're coming out of being a victim of society, blaming society, and having to put up with society... we transcend society. Get your mojo, get your strength, get your mind so straightened out that society cannot affect you. You become buoyant. The heavier you are, the deeper we sink into society. And the lighter we are, by throwing all those unwholesome thoughts out and having only happy, happy thoughts, we rise above the world. That's the Lokuttara, the "above the world" that translates, by the way, into the supermundane that we use sometimes, the supermundane of Lokuttara means to be above it all.

There is a story that everyone is an emperor of their own pile of dirt. The question is, are you going to be buried under your own pile of dirt, the victim? Are we going to be clawing our way out? Or are we just going to sit on top of your own world? Your choice, your attitude, this

moment, are you going to be on top of your own world, or are you going to be buried under your own dirt? This is the dark night of the soul, being buried under our own pile of dirt.

So, that's the actual teaching of the Buddha. The 16 stages of insight, the Dark Night of the Soul, is when we've dug ourselves pretty deep in our own pile of dirt. And the whole idea is to not even try to climb out. The night is dark.

However, correct practice is just right here right now, come out. And when you find yourself back under your own pile of dirt again, just come back out. It's your thought, your mind. Learn to control it, learn to change it. This is real mental training. And the first training that we're going to be put through is wholesome thoughts. One wholesome thought after another, after another. See the beauty in the world, see that you live in a paradise. Begin to take a really positive, Pollyanna attitude about things, and that will mellow into satisfaction at a really deep level. So, we have to practise. And then, where's the Dark Night of the Soul? Here, no Dark Night of the Soul. We feel really good. I can see that the Dark Night of the Soul is one really disparaging thought after another.

Right Sati, practise it often. Remember that each breath is a long breath, and each breath should be exhaled as a long, easy, joyful breath. That's where we start—building that foundation so that we have it every time, twice every breath cycle. Sometimes, there can be confusion about the fourth tetrad, thinking it's something special or an event. But the point is to settle down, to see straight, to bring our feelings into the present, and to calm the mind by gladdening the mind.

And then we can see all of this initial Dukkha, not just stuff that's in the Anapanasati Sutta. Here's the point: if you're going to teach a baby to swim, would you throw them into deep water? Or how about starting in a wading pool where they can stand up or touch the ground? That's how we want to begin, giving ourselves some skills, and then we can dive into deeper waters. Those skills are the body, feeling, and mind. And then we'll dive right into looking at what's really going on, which is the nature of constant change. Everything we like changes, and then we feel bad. So part of understanding this nature is that we've already cultivated a steady mind that can vividly see how vibrant the paradise that we live in is.

Now, to tie this in with Mahasi's teachings, I was instructed on a Mahasi retreat to note things three times. But I thought it was weird because by the first time, you've already noted it. It's already gone. It's like, you've got something, yeah, exactly. And each part of it is just not clinging onto the issues that are coming up and letting the new moment come up without interference.

And here's the point, here's the point that's actually quite useful for folks, and that is the word 'noting' is kind of a bad translation, because the Western mind thinks of noting like taking a note, a sticky note, almost telling a story. But it's more like, you can actually see things in movement out of the corner of your eye, and you don't have to spend any time with it at all. There's so much happening that comes into our field of view, and we want to start paying attention to more that is happening, rather than getting stuck on one thing, focused and concentrated. In fact, Anapanasati, the Buddha's teaching, is about samadhi, which does not mean concentration. It means waking up and taking in all that is vibrantly alive in the here

and now, in our senses. It's about being present and not overly focused or concentrated on some object of meditation.

So this is another example of how Western Buddhism sometimes gets a hold of this word 'concentration' and thinks, 'Yeah, I know how to do that!' But that's not what we're practising. We're practising continuously waking up into the present moment, taking a look at what we're doing, making a change, and congratulating ourselves. And then waking up again, taking a look, making a change, and congratulating ourselves over and over again. And when we do this, the mind becomes unified, and we become friends with ourselves. We stop with all these critical thoughts and start nurturing because the wholesome thoughts we're having are now wholesome thoughts about how nice everything is. And now, you're already forgiven of your sins. All you have to do is recognize that you're forgiven already. Your past is good enough. We don't have to go make up for the past or fix anything. It's dead, it's gone. And so, we can just dispense with the past. We don't need it now.

That doesn't mean that we can't have any memories. It's not about losing all of our memories. We're talking about using the past to determine how we feel right now. And it's better to feel the way we want to feel because we've felt bad a lot in the past. It's kind of like a toss-up, a merry-go-round. Sometimes we feel good, sometimes we feel bad. So, if we go into memories, we're going to get some bad along with the good. But if we practise Anapanasati correctly in the here and now, then we're having all good thoughts to build up into our Sankhara base. We begin to build up wholesomeness in our life. We begin to change our patterns and, therefore, change our habits. Our neural pathways begin to change. And this is liberation. The liberation, actually, we have to point something out: freedom's just another word for 'nothing left to lose'. Are you willing to go through that? I mean, how bad do you want Moksha? Because what it means is that you're free because you've got nothing left to lose. You've already chucked it all. And what is that? All the stuff that we're carrying around from our past. So, we have to let go of the past and be here in the present moment so that we can be free to make the kind of choices about how we want to feel right now.

So, that's what I advise you to do: practise well, over and over and over again.

The story of the pilgrim and the Pilgrim's Progress. When the pilgrim is progressing, he's not in the Holy place. What does the pilgrim do when he finally reaches the holy site? Well, in the Middle Ages, they just picked their stuff up and went to the next holy site. They spent 99% of their time on their way to a holy site, and once they got to the holy site, they didn't stay. Once you find yourself in a holy site, there you are. But don't make any decisions around it because you probably won't stay. Sustain it, get it going, but let it go when it's gone. And you'll find it soon enough again. But when you think that you have arrived without actually understanding that the arrival is not in what you've done, but in the fact that you've already wound up being in a paradise, in a holy space. These guys want to attain something. They work really hard for it. They put labels on themselves for people to take pot shots at them. The highest part of Western Buddhism, you see in Asia, they don't do much of that. For one thing, the monks don't claim much of anything, but a whole lot of western people will make claims about them.

That's all there is to the teaching of the Buddha, and it is marvellous. It gets even more marvellous once you get into the flow. They actually speak of that flow, it's called the sotopana, the stream-enterer. And yet, in Western Buddhism, it's just another thing to cling to. So, that's the issue about Western Buddhism.