

The Particulars of Your Suffering

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I once knew a journalist in Bangkok who asked me why Buddhism focuses so much on suffering. He said, “I don’t have any suffering in my life. Why all the talk about suffering?” So I asked him if he had any stress in his life and he said, “Oh yeah, lots and lots of stress.” And he proceeded to tell me all the different things in his family and his work that were stressing him out.

So regardless of what you call it, suffering or stress, if you’re not an arahant, you’re suffering from it. And it’s good to recognize that everybody is suffering in the same way. There are differences in the particulars, but deep down inside everybody has that same sense of being burdened, being overcome: pushed in ways they’d rather not be pushed, weighed down in ways they’d rather not be weighed down.

As the Buddha said, when you face *dukkha*—suffering or stress—you have two reactions. One is a sense of bewilderment: Why is this happening to me? And the second is a search: Is there anyone who knows a way out from this suffering and stress?

The Buddha took that sense of bewilderment very seriously. The other teachings given in his time that he criticized the most were the ones that he said leave people bewildered: teachings that would say there’s nothing you can do because you have no power of action or choice. That, he said, leaves you unprotected, leaves you bewildered. Or the teaching that your life is totally dependent on the decisions of some creator god: That, too, leaves you unprotected and bewildered. Or the teaching that everything is random, there’s no pattern to why you suffer, so no matter how hard you try to figure it out, there’s no pattern to be discerned: That leaves you bewildered and unprotected as well, for it leaves you with no way of making a decision as to what you should and shouldn’t do to deal with your suffering.

So he offered his teachings as aids both in overcoming bewilderment and in finding protection, i.e., protection from the suffering. One of the first things he has you do is try to take the personal sting out of your suffering. This is very hard for people to do. We’re obsessed with the particulars of our suffering. I’ve noticed that people can go over and over and over again the particulars of why they’re suffering and why their suffering is special. This, of course, keeps them more bound to their suffering.

So it’s important that you look into why you may have that feeling: what sort of special attention you want to demand, or you feel you deserve. I’ve run into some people who develop that feeling of deserving special attention to the point where, if they’re not given that special attention, they see themselves as martyrs. There’s a certain enjoyment in martyrdom, but it still leaves you unprotected. It’s still not a solution for suffering. You don’t want to focus on the particulars. You want to focus on a different kind of detail: the universal details. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha has us develop the *brahma-viharas*: realizing that everybody is suffering and it would be better if we could all find a way to true happiness; feeling compassion for all those who are suffering and empathetic joy for those who are not.

In other words, if you see that someone’s better off than you are, you don’t give into feelings of jealousy or resentment. You don’t want to pull them down to your level or what you perceive as your level. After all, if you really look carefully into people’s hearts, you find that even people who look happy on the outside still have their suffering. It may seem minor to you, but it’s still suffering. Remember, we’re all looking for happiness and many of us have found at least a measure of happiness but it’s not secure. So there’s no need to feel jealousy for people who are in what seems to be a fortunate but actually is a very insecure place. You’re happy for them but you also need to have compassion for their insecurity.

Then there’s equanimity, realizing that there’s an awful lot going on, both in the world and in you, that your

choices cannot change. There are people you would like to see happier than they are, but they're not. There are things you can't change in one way or another in your own life. You realize that other people have the same problem: There are things in their lives that they would like to change but they can't.

This is how equanimity gives rise to a sense of *samvega*: the realization that we're all suffering in one way or another, and in a lot of ways we can't do anything about. Unless we practice.

To think of all the suffering in the world is not meant to get you depressed. It's meant for you to question yourself: How can I find a way out? If I can find a way out, how can I share it with others? This means that instead of looking to other people for a cure for your suffering, leading to your happiness, you want to find what you can within.

This way, having looked at all the sufferings of other beings, and developing a sense of goodwill for all beings, you come back to the particulars of your suffering from a different perspective. Instead of looking at what makes your suffering special or different, you want to look at it in terms of what it has in common with everyone else's.

This is where the Buddha's summary of what suffering *is* becomes really important. It's the five clinging aggregates: clinging to form, clinging to feeling, clinging to perceptions, clinging to fabrications, clinging to consciousness at the senses. It sounds pretty abstract, and you may wonder where the Buddha got this particular way of dividing up the pie of your experience. Apparently, it comes from his practice of concentration. When you try to get the mind to settle down here in the present moment, the first thing you come into contact with, of course, is the body. You've got the breath coming in, going out. That's form. And you're going to encounter feelings. There'll be feelings of pleasure, feelings of pain, neither pleasure nor pain. You want to learn how to deal with those feelings in a way that allows you to settle down. This is where perception comes in. You perceive the breath not only as the air coming in and out of the lungs but also as energy that suffuses the body. You start thinking about how that energy could be adjusted, how it could be made more comfortable so that you have a better place to settle down. That's fabrication: thinking about the breath and then evaluating the breath. Then there's the consciousness of all these things.

So those are the components of concentration practice. And you find that as you try to bring the mind into oneness with its object, you have to learn how to isolate these particular functions of the mind, these aspects of your experience, so that you can adjust them skillfully. How do you adjust the form, i.e., the breath? Well, that requires fabrication and it also requires perception because some perceptions get in the way of even imagining that breath energy could go down the back or out the legs, or that it could have an effect on any pains that you might feel in the body, any sense of blockage in the body. If you perceive the breath simply as air coming in and out of the lungs, then the breath is totally irrelevant, say, to the sense of blockage in your knee. But if you perceive the breath as the energy flowing through the nerves and through the blood vessels, then the question is: Why is there a blockage there? How is it related to the flow of the breath? How can you get around it? How can you dissolve it away? You need to learn how to isolate your perceptions and then adjust them.

You also need to learn how to isolate your feelings. There may be pains in different parts of the body but is there pain everywhere in the body? No. Some parts of the body feel okay. And because they're simply okay they may not demand a lot of attention, but if you learn how to give them attention and space to grow, to develop, then this sense of okay-ness becomes more than just okay. It becomes positively pleasant. There's a sense of fullness and refreshment that can come when you give these areas of wellbeing in the body some space, when you give them a chance to grow as you hover around them and protect them.

So as you're getting the mind to settle down, these are the mental functions you have to pay attention to: feeling, perception, fabrication. At the same time, you gain a different sense of your consciousness. It doesn't have to be just in one spot or scattered outside. You can suffuse the whole body with your awareness so that you're sensitive to the whole body, all at once, all at once continually. This allows the mind to settle down so that you can drop the activity of evaluation because everything feels really fine and you can actually become one with the breath, along with a sense of ease and fullness.

Sometimes, though, the fullness gets to be too much. This is where perception comes in handy again. You can perceive a more subtle level of breath energy that's not so active, not so burdensome—because the sense of rapture can get really strong. In the beginning it's really nice to have that sense of refreshment and fullness, but after a while it can get tiresome and oppressive. So you can use your perception of a more subtle breath energy to tune into a different level where there's simply ease in the body.

Then you use your sense of perception to let the breath stop, as you hold in mind the idea that there is an oxygen exchange at the pores of your skin. And if the mind is really, really still, the brain is using less oxygen, and the oxygen coming in through the pores is enough. So it's okay to allow the breathing to stop.

This is the way the mind gets into stronger and stronger concentration. From there you can move it even to more subtle levels of concentration. When the breath energy is still, your sense of the definition of the body, the surface of the body, begins to dissolve. It's like you're sitting here with a cloud of little dots of feeling. You have the option of focusing on the dots or on the space between the dots. You realize that that space has no end; there's no boundary around it. You hold that perception in mind. That creates an even more subtle level of concentration. And so on through the different levels of absorption. It's all a matter of feeling and perception. Fabrications of different kinds fall silent as your directed thought and evaluation drop away, as the motion of the breathing drops away.

It's in this way that the different aggregates separate out. You isolate them as you get the mind into concentration in the same way that someone who has to develop a physical skill has to learn how to isolate different muscles. When you're playing the piano, when you're dancing, you have to be able to isolate the different muscles in your hands and arms and legs and back, in your torso in general, so that you can move the body in precisely the way you want. It's the same way with concentration practice. You have to isolate these different functions of the mind to get the mind to settle down.

Once you've isolated them, you've got the raw material for understanding why there's suffering, because the Buddha said that suffering is clinging to these aggregates. You've got hands-on experience with all these fabrications. In fact, one of the most important insights in all of this is to see how all of these different aggregates are fabricated. There's an intentional element in each, even in your experience of the form of the body. For instance, you have hands all the time but you're conscious of them only when you think of using them, when you feel the need to use them. Otherwise, the perception of the hands gets blurred. The same with the other parts of the body. There's an intentional element in your experience of all these things.

So look into that intentional element, that element of fabrication, to see where any clinging is lurking in there. By looking at your experience in this way, you're getting yourself out of the narratives, all the particular, personal details of your particular sufferings—the details that distract you from actually learning how to put an end to the suffering. Instead, you turn your attention to the details that help you get out. Exactly how is perception contributing to your suffering? How is feeling, how is fabrication, form, consciousness? What does it mean to cling to these things? The Buddha defines clinging as passion and delight, and it can come in four ways: through sensual obsessions, through views, through habits and practices, and through ideas of what your identity is. Those are the ways in which we cling, in which we take passion and delight in these aggregates.

As we do this, we're moving into some very delicate details here but they're details of a different sort. They're not so personal in the sense of your particular narrative of your particular sufferings, but they *are* personal in the sense that they're intimate. They're happening right in your own mind. By looking at the intimate details that all forms of suffering have in common, you open the possibility of freeing yourself.

So wherever you find yourself caught up in the details of why you're suffering or why you're feeling that nobody loves you, nobody cares for you, nobody's really helping you with your sufferings, or why you're oppressed by a particular aspect of your life, remember: Everybody's suffering in one way or another. Obsessing about those particular details is not going to get you out. But if you turn around and look at the universal details, that opens the possibility to freedom.

Learn to acquaint yourself with these aggregates in action as you get the mind to settle down—because they

provide the key for understanding how you can do more than just settle down. You can make your escape.