

## *To Comprehend Suffering*

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When we compare the Buddha's teachings to other teachings of his time, what's really striking is his focus. Other people started with descriptions of the world. "This is the nature of the world," they say. "It's eternal, not eternal, finite, infinite." Or, "This is the nature of the soul or the self: eternal, not eternal, finite, infinite."

He started with a path of practice—the noble eightfold path, which he said would generate knowledge and vision, would lead to peace, direct knowledge, self-awakening, unbinding. The emphasis from the very beginning was practical—a course of action, a course of training that would lead to results.

So we should think about that as we practice. We're here doing the training. This is the heart of the teaching, the central focus of the teaching, so pay a lot of attention right here and think about what the Buddha had to say about what you're going to find right here.

He started his path with right view. And right view, of course, is the four noble truths, focused on the issue of stress, suffering—*dukkha* is the Pāli term. In its ordinary, everyday meaning, *dukkha* means "pain."

Sometimes you hear it described etymologically. *Du-* means "bad"; *kha-* can mean either "the hub of a wheel" or "space," the idea being, in the first case, that it's like a hub that hasn't been properly fixed on its axle. As you ride along, it's uncomfortable. The second one is explained as, "The mind is in a bad space."

But the Buddha never used images like that. For him, *dukkha* was like a fire that burns away at the heart. It's like a precipice: You fall down over the precipice and you can get badly injured. It's like the darkness between galaxies: It can get you totally lost. But, he says, if you comprehend it, you can put an end to it. That's the duty with regard to the first noble truth.

The first noble truth defines *dukkha* first with examples: There's the *dukkha* of birth, aging, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair. That covers both physical pain and mental pain, and the pain that comes with birth, aging, and death. But then he gives a synopsis that's not nearly as direct, or doesn't seem to be as direct as the examples.

The examples are things that everyone knows, but the synopsis gets technical: the five clinging-aggregates. The first word that strikes you is aggregates: These are the activities of form, feelings, perceptions, thought-fabrications, and consciousness. But the important word there is the clinging, because there are

places where he says that the aggregates on their own are experienced by arahants. Arahants have form, feelings, perceptions, thought-fabrications, consciousness, but they don't suffer, because they don't have the clinging.

So, the first noble truth: To comprehend *dukkha*, you have to comprehend it as clinging. Every time you suffer, every time there's a weight on the mind, a fire burning in the mind, darkness in the mind—it's in the clinging. That's what's burning; that's what's dark.

So, you try to put out the fire, try to bring some light to the darkness, by looking at the kinds of clinging and also understanding the craving that causes the clinging. Because craving is the second noble truth, the origination of suffering, and part of comprehending the suffering is to see where it comes from.

Sometimes you hear the word *dukkha* translated as “dissatisfaction” or “unsatisfactoriness,” which is not a very satisfactory translation, because it sounds as if it's saying that if you could allow yourself to be satisfied with things as they are, there would be no problem. In fact, that's sometimes how the cause of suffering is defined: wanting things to be other than what they are, which carries the implication that if you could learn some patience and some equanimity, some endurance, some acceptance, there wouldn't be any suffering.

But the Buddha's teaching goes a lot deeper than that. Suffering comes, he says, from three types of craving, which can be very strong.

First, craving for sensuality: your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures, food being number one; sex being number two. The Buddha was wise to see that even when your fantasies go as you would like, there's still stress, there's still suffering.

The second kind of craving is craving for becoming: wanting to take on an identity in a particular world of experience. This can happen on the micro level, as you think about things you want and then who you are as the person who could gain those things and enjoy those things; and then the world in which those things are found or that's relevant to gaining those things. All of that is a becoming. Those becomings happen in the mind all the time. Then they can play out in the world outside, as becomings on the macro level, as you take on a new identity with each birth. And here again, your thoughts of becoming in the mind could go precisely as you want them to, but there's still going to be stress; there's still suffering.

Craving for non-becoming is the third kind of craving. It happens when you have an identity in a particular world and you don't like it, and you want to see it abolished; you want to see it annihilated. And, even if it were annihilated, you'd

still suffer. You'd cling to passion for annihilation, and that clinging would constitute suffering.

In all three of those cases, from the craving comes clinging. There's clinging for sensuality; clinging to views—views about the world—in other words, views related to becoming; clinging to habits and practices—you have a particular idea of how things should be done and you hold to it regardless of whether it really gets good results or not; and then clinging to ideas of the self, ways of defining yourself.

Those four kinds of clinging then get focused on the five aggregates. When you can see your suffering in those terms, that's when you comprehend it.

Now, to actually observe suffering in those terms requires good powers of concentration together with right view, which is why you have to develop a path. And concentration, to be *honest* concentration, requires virtue. It also requires mindfulness and alertness, so that you can watch what's actually happening in the present moment.

It's in this way that the duties of the four noble truths all come together. When the path is fully developed, that's when you complete the duty for the third noble truth, which is dispassion for the craving. That dispassion is to be realized.

So, this is the framework for understanding what we're doing here. And you'll notice, if you look at the mind while you're practicing right concentration, that you're actually using some of those forms of clinging in the concentration itself. Not clinging to sensuality—that's the clinging you put totally aside—but you have some views: right views. You have some ideas about habits and practices—how to get the mind to settle down. And you have at least an idea of yourself as being competent to do this, and that you'll benefit from it. This is not a full-blown doctrine of the self, but it is a sense of the self that you're going to need.

So, what you're doing is taking part of what's suffering and you're turning it into the path. As many people have said, the things you know best are the things you do. So, you're going to be watching yourself as you develop the path out of the aggregates, because right there you're going to really see the aggregates clearly—and you're going to get to see your clinging clearly as well.

First, you'll be looking for the clings that get in the way of getting the mind to settle down. It's good to learn how to step back from them and name them, whether they're sensuality or a view about the world or a view about yourself or a view about what you should be doing now instead of practicing. Learn to see those things as the suffering.

As Ajaan Suwat would say, "Anything that disturbs your concentration: Chalk it up to suffering." If it's not suffering, then it's going to be the craving—one of

the two. It's something you want to comprehend, or, if it's craving, you let it go. But learn to see events in the mind in these terms.

This is why the Buddha starts the path with right view. He's giving you a framework. Change the way you look at your suffering. It's not enough to say simply, "Well, I see that there is suffering," and just witness the pain, witness the anguish. Try to apply the framework and the definitions and duties within the framework: Which aggregate are you clinging to? What kind of clinging are you using? When you see that, you really begin to comprehend the suffering.

As the things that interfere with the concentration get cleared away, you can begin to turn in to look at the concentration itself. It's made up of these same aggregates and clingings: There are some views in there, there are some habits and practices, there's a sense of self. Start taking that apart.

It's like painting yourself into a corner: You've painted the whole floor, and all that's left is the little spot where you're standing. To get out, you've got to destroy the walls—or ask yourself if the walls really are there. You've assumed the walls are there up to that point, but there comes a point where you see that the walls were an assumption that you no longer have to assume. That way, you can complete the job and be free. That's what the Buddha promises.

So, whenever there's any suffering in the mind, ask yourself, "Can I look at it in these terms?"

The Buddha's lending us some of his insights. In the very beginning, things are not clearly so. All too often you hear that the four noble truths are not beliefs; they're simply statements of fact. But actually, you have to believe them in the beginning, because they're not all that obvious. You believe the framework so that you can apply it and the duties it recommends to see if it works. It's not just a floating belief; it's a working hypothesis, but you have to be clear about the fact that you're still learning about the framework. The more you apply it, the more you're going to understand it, and the more you'll see how beneficial it is. That's how you go from conviction to knowledge, from feeling your way around the problem of suffering to actually comprehending it.