

## *Beyond Natural Suffering*

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There's a fanciful definition of *dukkha*, or suffering, stress, in the commentary. I say it's fanciful because it's based on a technique that the commentary often uses to try to explain a Pali term by taking it apart into its supposed roots. In this case, *dukkha* is derived from words that mean a hub that doesn't fit on an axle properly. It's not a very useful definition, because it has all kinds of implications. If you put the hub back on the axle properly, then everything would be okay. That would seem to put an end to suffering. If you just bring your life back in line with nature, be okay with your natural desires and the natural way of things, then everything would be okay. But that's not what the Buddha taught. When he was defining suffering, he wasn't concerned with etymology. He was more concerned with how can you take the suffering apart so you can be done with it—what's the best way of analyzing suffering so that you get beyond it.

He started with a long list of the various things that are suffering, and then he came to a synopsis, which is that the five clinging aggregates are suffering: form as a clinging aggregate, feeling, perception, fabrication as a clinging aggregate, consciousness as a clinging aggregate. The usefulness of the synopsis is that you realize that clinging to these five things: That's suffering. The clinging is the problem. So when you have any experience of suffering, you have to look for the clinging. You look for what it is that you're clinging to and why you're clinging. That's how you can stop suffering.

And it's interesting that the Buddha's word for "clinging" here can also mean taking sustenance, feeding on something. How the mind feeds: That's how we suffer. We tend to think that we suffer because we're hungry and then we're okay when we feed. That's the natural course of things. But here the Buddha's actually calling into question the natural course of things. The act of feeding in and of itself is suffering. And it's caused by thirst—the times when you're feeling really hungry—all of which are very natural processes. Yet he's saying here that this natural process of being hungry and then finding yourself feeding on something, either physically or mentally: That's suffering. In other words, you have a happiness that's dependent on consuming things. It needs nourishment. If it doesn't get its nourishment, it's going to die. So you keep on looking for things to consume to assuage your hunger, but the consuming itself is suffering.

Thinkers in India before the Buddha talked a lot about feeding. But to them feeding was a good thing. After all, it's what keeps us alive. Their main concern

was how to figure out what's good food, and how to supply yourself with a limitless supply. That's what the Vedas are all about, and the Upanishads picked up the idea that by mystical knowledge you would provide yourself with a limitless, infinite source of food. You'd never have to worry about food again. You'd get all the food you need.

Everyone was taken with the idea that this is a natural process, that it must be a good thing. But when you see things in that way, this is what leads people to think that maybe the fowls in the air and beasts in the land were made so that we can feed on them. That's their purpose in being here. That immediately skews your perception of what's going on, that it's okay to be oppressive to other beings, because this is the natural way of things.

The Buddha had the courage to call that into question. This need to feed is, in and of itself, suffering. This explains a lot of the imagery that he used for describing becoming and the end to becoming. In some cases, he talked about food: food for the body, food for the mind. He also talked about the sustenance for fire—there's a lot of fire imagery in the Canon, and it's based on the idea that fire, too, needs sustenance in order to burn. He also uses agricultural imagery. Plants need the sustenance of soil and water in order to grow. Then he uses these processes—fire consuming its fuel, the growth of the plants from the soil, the mind's need to feed—as analogies for the process of clinging and becoming. In every case, it's a natural process, but it's something we have to learn how to overcome.

This is where his teachings get challenging, because they force us to question a lot of our assumptions. One category of the things that we cling to, of course, is our assumptions. The word *sañña*—which can be translated as “perception” or “label”—in Thailand is also translated as “assumption,” and it's a good translation. Our perceptions are shaped by the way we assume certain things. We get some raw sense data coming in through any of the senses and immediately make assumptions about it. We label it this, label it that. This must be that. That must be this. Then we cling to our assumptions. This is what makes us suffer. So when you find yourself suffering, you often have to look and see: Where is the assumption that you're not willing to let go of, that's causing you to suffer?

Of course, sometimes the retort is that the Buddha seems to be making assumptions in his teachings as well. But this fits into the general pattern of the path. As he said, we try to get the mind to the point where it's beyond the need for food, but you have to depend on food to keep the body going as you practice. Until you get the mind to a point beyond clinging, there are certain things you have to cling to. You cling to the desire to be skillful. You cling to the desire to

find a happiness that's totally innocent.

So there are assumptions and there are assumptions: the ones that when you cling to them just keep you mired in suffering, and others that, when you cling to them, can get you beyond suffering. That's where you finally let them go.

So an important part of the practice is to ask yourself, "What are the assumptions I'm holding on to that are making me suffer? Why do I like them so much?" And be willing to let the Buddha's teachings question those assumptions. It's typical here in the West to stick with our assumptions and start questioning the Buddha's assumptions. But a more fruitful practice is to be willing to subject our own assumptions to the questioning based on his.

For example, we don't like the idea that we have defilements. We like to think that the mind is basically pure, basically good, and that somehow outside influences are what disturb us and create the suffering. If only we could be left alone, then there wouldn't be any problems. Just let ourselves have our own natural way of doing things, and that should be enough. That's what we think.

But what we're actually doing is hiding from ourselves this impulse to feed. The mind is always hungry. You might say, "Well, it's a natural process." But again, the Buddha has you look at the body, the body's need for food and rest. Sometimes you say it has a need for sex. But what is the body after all? Just four elements. Which of those elements needs to feed? Does the earth element want to feed? The water element, the fire element, and the wind element: Do they need food? Do they care?

If you think your body cares, just let it get sick. There's going to be pain in the illness, but the body doesn't feel any compunction about giving you pain. It's the mind that doesn't like the pain. As the Buddha said, beings are creations of the mind. If it weren't for the mind entering into these physical elements, there wouldn't be a being here. There wouldn't be a body. It's the mind that has all these desires. And if you think the mind is perfectly innocent, that it just wants to be left alone, okay, leave things alone for several days and see what happens. You start getting hungry. There's pain in the body. You may say, "Well, the body needs to be fed," but the body isn't asking to be fed. This is just how the body reacts when there's no food. We don't like the pain, so we come out and we find something to end the pain.

That implicates us in this whole process of having to feed, where there's suffering both for the feeder and the fed-upon. It's a natural process, but it's suffering.

So it's not simply the case that we get the wheel on the axle right and everything will be okay, or that if we're allowed to follow our innocent natural

needs, everything will be all right. They are natural needs, they're not all that innocent. As the Buddha once said, "What is one? All beings subsist on food." Everybody has to feed in order to stay alive. Notice he says "being." The word "being" he defines as a creation of attachment. If it weren't for the mind's attachments, we wouldn't take on this identity as a being. We wouldn't have kept this body going. The earth, water, wind, fire would just be earth, water, wind, fire in some other form. And they're perfectly neutral about the whole thing.

When the body's going to die, it doesn't ask for permission. It just goes ahead and dies. It's not the body that doesn't want to die. *We* don't want it to die. As it ages and grows ill, it's just doing its body thing. But the mind's desire to use the body to find happiness: That's the problem. It seems perfectly innocent, a nice wheel placed nicely on its hub. But that's suffering, too.

So we have to learn how to question a lot of our assumptions about what's going on in the mind, what's causing trouble. If you think all the troubles are coming in from outside, a lot of what's going on in your mind is being hidden from you. Ignorance is not always innocent. Sometimes it's willful. So you have to learn how to question your need to feed, your need to keep on creating states of becoming. As the Buddha said, even the desire to put an end to becoming, just to block out everything and become nothing, just leads to a different state of becoming. We can't run away from this process without doing a lot of careful work. We have to turn around and look at our feeding, and learn how to feed skillfully as a beginning part of the path. Learn how to cling to skillful assumptions, skillful fabrications, as part of the path. Learn how to let go of the unskillful ones. Whenever you find yourself suffering for one reason or another, turn around and look at what it is that you're feeding on. The simple fact it's making you suffer means that it's not an innocent process.

So always keep the Buddha's analysis of suffering in mind, because it's the most useful way of looking at things and prying away your ignorance of how the mind is causing suffering. It's not an issue of just getting the wheel back on the hub, or getting the hub back on the axle. It's a question of looking into why we feed, and then learning how to strengthen the mind so that ultimately it gets to a point it doesn't need to feed anymore. That's when the definition of suffering as clinging has done its work.