

Dukkha, explained

Thanissara



Having loved enough and lost enough, I am no longer searching, just opening, no longer trying to make sense of pain, but being a soft and sturdy home in which real things can land. These are the irritations that rub to a pearl.

—Mark Nepo

One of the essential messages of the Buddha is that it's really important to get to know the experience of *dukkha*, or dissatisfaction. Not to know it intellectually, not to write a thesis about it, but to get to know it by meeting this experience directly. Until we know *dukkha*, we don't really have a way to end it. The discourse of the four truths that the Buddha gave after his awakening begins not with enlightenment, but with the encouragement to know *dukkha*, to know it in order to overcome it.

To know the experience of suffering can sound fairly straightforward. But the mind is pretty slippery around the experience of *dukkha*. We tend to say, "The problem is it's too hot or too cold, or it's the situation I'm in, or because I got so screwed up when I was a kid, or it's my partner, or my job." Of course external factors contribute to our happiness or suffering, we don't need to dismiss the factors that shape our lives—but in Vipassana we're not trying to figure out where the *dukkha* came from. Instead we work with pain and suffering as we experience it, without blaming others, repressing it, or projecting it inward onto our self. Meeting *dukkha* in this direct way doesn't preclude challenging or changing our individual or collective circumstance, but it does empower us to stop unnecessary suffering right at the place we experience it, which is the mind.

When we experience *dukkha*, our first instinct is to move our attention away and distract ourselves. We have billion-dollar industries based on entertainment and consumption keeping us distracted

from this core truth of life. But are we more content? Conversely, we can become addicted to pain, finding ourselves repeatedly gravitating toward worry, old wounds, and resentments. We can even wallow in suffering, our own and others'. Some people become sufferers, great martyrs thinking "no one suffers as much as me—let me just tell you about it." We all have complex reactions to this everyday experience of un-satisfactoriness. Often those reactions are personalized as "my problem." It is very common for the mind to project suffering onto the "self," interpreting *dukkha* as a personal failure: we are failing because we suffer. Or the mind will project our suffering onto those around us; it's somehow "their fault." In this activity of projection and blame we miss how the mind itself generates an endless stream of *dukkha* through its inability to accept self, others, and life as it is. In short, it's our reactivity that generates *dukkha*, keeping us agitated and therefore unable to contemplate the actual, direct, here and now experience of it.

The Buddha's way of explaining *dukkha* is a great relief. He didn't say, "Well, it's your suffering, it's your fault." Nor was his teaching, as it is sometimes articulated, "This world's just a pile of suffering." That's pretty negative. Actually he put it in a very dispassionate way. He just said, "There is *dukkha*." Just as one might comment on a fact of nature, saying "It's raining hard today" or "The trees are shedding their leaves." *Dukkha* is inherent within the conditioned realm. Conditions mean anything that emerges from formlessness and comes into form, whether it's the body, feelings, perception, thought, or sensations. Whatever form emerges, *dukkha* is inherent. Things are *dukkha* because they are impermanent and therefore unreliable. Actually, *dukkha* is natural and not suffering. It becomes suffering when the mind identifies with phenomena and grasps. The meaning of *dukkha* that conveys this process is derived from the breakdown of the word into *du*, which means "apart from" and *kha*—or *akash*—which means "space." This gives the sense of being apart from the spacious, the perfect, and the complete. In this way *dukkha* conveys the deepest anguish and dilemma of the self, which is its state of separation from the whole.

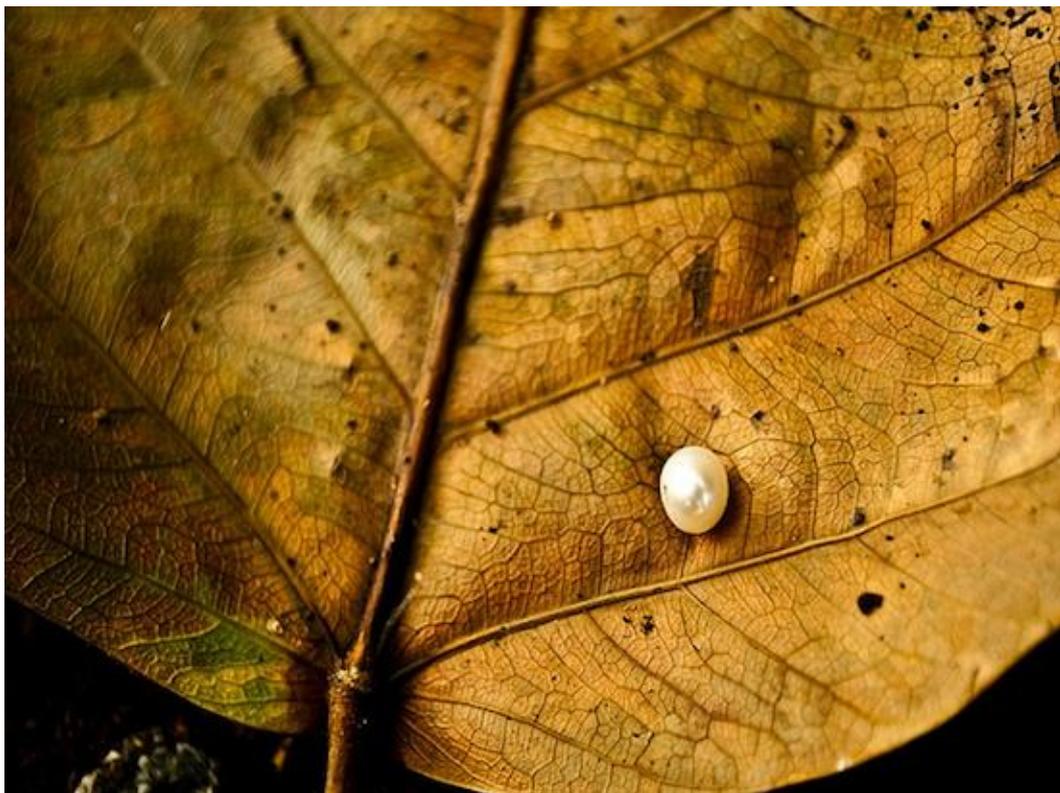
In meditation, when we bring attention to "now," it allows whatever is present to be real to us. For example, we notice the breath, the body, our feelings, and whatever impinges upon our senses. Attention illuminates whatever is here, which is often the experience of *dukkha*. Usually, even at a very subtle level, there will be some sense of discontent, anxiety, or restlessness. It's important to know *dukkha*, not to obsess about it, but just to meet it. It's important because if we don't know it, we continue to generate *dukkha* from false assumptions. We actually make *dukkha*; the mind habitually and unconsciously generates *it*.

Dukkha is different from pain. Buddhist thought makes a distinction between pain and suffering. Pain is part of our human experience. For example, getting sick is painful, as is grief at the loss of a loved one; this is natural and appropriate. However, we then tend to generate a whole extra layer of suffering, through our difficulty in accepting how things are. When we resist the natural flow of life we create suffering, stress, and struggle. When we assume ownership and permanence in a world that is constantly changing, we become burdened. In essence, it is the ignorance of the mind, when it doesn't see the true nature of reality, which produces suffering. And so, our relationship to "how it is" becomes the conditioning factor for either generating or reducing suffering.

We are doing the suffering; no one is doing it to us. It is because of this that we can free ourselves from unnecessary *dukkha*. This is not always easy to do. "How it is" can really challenge us. Yet even though

it is difficult, this is a doable practice, otherwise the Buddha would not have taught it for regular people like us.

For example, I suffered when the unethical behaviour of someone I trusted came to light. It had a devastating impact. I felt betrayed. The theme of betrayal became a powerful contemplation, particularly as there was no resolution. In the end this situation taught me a lot. I kept reflecting on where the suffering really was. Was it in the behaviour of the other, in the divisiveness that followed, in the blame that was projected? I wanted more truth to come out, but it didn't, it stayed hidden in a web of lies. When lies are covered up, it leaves those abused without recourse to justice. This is a powerful theme that runs through human history: people manipulating others for their own ends, while at the same time distracting from their behaviour by shifting blame elsewhere. We'd be naive not to understand that the conversion of lies to "truths" is pervasive in contemporary political and corporate culture. When apprehended correctly, such experiences become the sharpening for our wise realism.



To have a conscious relationship to suffering is different than having an unconscious one. We will all experience pain, simply due to our incarnation into form. It is part of being human. We experience bodily pains, ill health, fatigue, hunger, thirst, and as we get older we will feel the pains of aging. That's just the way it is. Freedom from dukkha doesn't mean eternal youth, or that we are never going to have a headache, never going to feel irritation, or loss, or get betrayed and hurt by others. Freedom from dukkha is not abdication from the human race, but a deeper acceptance of how we are, an acceptance that brings both equanimity, and also a clearer response.

Dukkha is also categorized as the pain of things ending. Even within pleasant experiences there is dukkha, because the nature of conditioned things is to pass. All things already have their endings within them. If we become attuned to this, then we can appreciate the moment. We can appreciate the extraordinary fact of our unique and precious lives. We can even appreciate dukkha, rather than

resisting it. We understand that the experience of suffering is a portal to our awakening. We don't wish for suffering, but once we understand how to be in relationship with it, it becomes the means through which we mature as loving and wise people.

The Buddha placed the contemplation of dukkha at the heart of his teaching. The foundation of Buddhist teaching is formulated around his four noble truths: "There is dukkha," "Dukkha has a cause," "Dukkha has an end," and "The eightfold path which brings about the ending of dukkha." Each of these truths has a corresponding practice. In response to the first truth, the practice is to "meet, understand, and contemplate" dukkha. The practice for the second truth is to "let go or abandon" the causes of dukkha. The third is to "realize or recognize" the end of dukkha, and the fourth is to "develop or cultivate" the path leading out of dukkha. Sometimes this teaching is misrepresented as a negative view on life, such as "Buddhists are just into suffering." Actually, it's a very positive message, as it says we can do something about the dukkha we unconsciously generate and then experience. This simple teaching is actually extremely profound and direct. It offers a clear diagnosis of the fact of suffering, an insight into the causes of suffering, and a remedy and cure for suffering.

The four noble truths may not be a very fashionable teaching, but it's an extremely profound one. Wherever we are, when dukkha arises, we have a pathway to peace. In calming meditation, we develop strength of mind through the practice of steadying attention on the breath, body, or our chosen object of contemplation. In insight meditation, we take that same strength of attentiveness and bring it directly to the experience of dukkha, as it is felt within the body and heart. We do this in a very particular way, by neither justifying nor trying to fix the pain, neither being overwhelmed nor shaped by it, nor repressing or distancing ourselves. The art of meditation is to meet dukkha directly, to breathe with it, and inquire into it. This is ultimately less painful than avoiding it.

I remember as a young nun I suffered a lot. I trained in a male monastic hierarchy deeply ambivalent to the presence of nuns. Initially, I didn't see the impact, but as time went on, I noticed it generated a painful and divisive power dynamic. I was grateful to live as a monastic, but the fine line between "training" and the blunt use of power was unhealthy—particularly when as nuns, we had no agency in the decisions that shaped our lives.

However, there wasn't much I could do about the situation. Basically, it was just a lot of suffering. One day, I was contemplating the pain in my heart due to some new rules that had been handed down without consultation, which I found churlish. I was just right there, holding attention to the sensation. It felt like a knife in my chest and a hand around my throat. It was very visceral, and although the trigger was a controlling hierarchy, the feeling felt ancient. It was the familiar pain of powerlessness. In the middle of my walking meditation, I stopped and stretched out my arms like Christ on the cross, and screamed out, "I accept this suffering!" It sounds dramatic (and somewhat inflated), and fortunately I was well hidden in the monastery forest! But something profound happened. I realized I could be with a painful dynamic and not suffer. My suffering was there because I didn't want things the way they were. In my acceptance, the suffering turned to compassion. I felt compassion for the monks and nuns, for myself, for everything and everyone. Meeting experience *as it is* empowers. We may not always be able to change a challenging situation, but we can be better resourced to engage with it.

Ajahn Chah came from a farming community in Northeast Thailand and left school at thirteen. He tended to put things in un-academic, immediate, and straightforward ways. He often pointed to the fact that dukkha arises because the mind is caught up in "wanting and not wanting." We want what is not here and don't want what is here. This is very simply put and yet challenging to really see. However, framing it like this, Ajahn Chah points to a direct practice. With some steadiness of mind, we can reflect on desire, and its internal narrative of always wanting things to be different from what they are. We frame our experience: "I don't want it to be like this; I want it to be different." Each moment we want, long, wait, and look for something that is not there, we generate dukkha. Conversely, when there is resistance or aversion to how it is, we generate dukkha. We resist what is "now." The push and pull of the mind undermines our capacity for contentment. When we look into the second truth of desire and aversion, we get perspective. What we struggle with can be okay. It is workable. We can work with all of it, people blaming us, pains in the body, emotional turmoil—instead of continually adding dukkha through our judgment, "It shouldn't be like this."

A lot of the time we feel, "It shouldn't be like this!" It should be somehow different. We should be in a heaven-like world. But we weren't born into heaven; we were born in this world, with its wars, environmental degradation, suffering, exploitation, difficulty, and pain. Accepting the reality of dukkha isn't an abdication from response, it is a way to understand that the most effective way we can change the world is through the quality of our own awareness. As we work to resolve our personal dukkha, we lessen the possibility that our actions will increase the suffering that already exists.

When Kittisaro was a novice monk, just before his full ordination, his parents took a trip to Thailand, all the way from Chattanooga, Tennessee, to find out what he was doing. In the process they met Ajahn Chah. Kittisaro's father is a very astute political observer and at that time he was concerned, as were most Americans, with the war in Vietnam and the threat of communism. He was concerned that the monastery, which was on the border of Laos, would be invaded by communist guerrillas. Ajahn Chah said that the thing he should really worry about was the "communist guerrillas in the mind." I guess nowadays he would have pointed us back to the "terrorists of the mind."

This is where we begin and end. We take everything back to the mind. As we experience life, all sorts of feelings, thoughts, and reactions arise. Our problem isn't so much "what is" but our relationship to what is. When I consider my own suffering, so much of it comes from the fact that I simply cannot accept life, and people as they are. I get upset by what people do. Ajahn Chah said it's like hollering at a person who upsets you. Then someone comes up and says, "You know, that person is crazy." You relax, because suddenly there's perspective. Until we are mature human beings, we're all a little crazy; we all produce suffering. So it means we are going to learn patience! The ongoing inquiry into the nature of suffering is a patient process. These four truths are a deepening hologram: wherever we touch them we enter the process of contemplation. When we locate clinging, desire, and aversion, then, as encouraged by the Buddha, we let go.



Letting go is the third noble truth. Vipassana insight meditation reveals where we hold on. Where we hold on, right there is dukkha. Right where there's dukkha is the place of letting go. In insight meditation we contemplate the nature of suffering and its release. Actually, the mind in its natural state is open, aware, and present. It is reflective. But the mind, when tinged by ignorance, has a tendency to constrict around thought-forms and desire, generating a sense of self that feels "It's not enough" or "I'm not enough." Our lack of inner freedom is often born from this feeling of "not enough." The constriction around "I need to be something more" or "I don't want what is here" is a constant irritation. Ajahn Chah likened it to a dog with mange. He goes into the shade, to the heat, from place to place, running around everywhere trying to find relief, scratching here, scratching there. The dog keeps feeling each place is the problem, not realizing his discomfort is due to his own skin.

In a moment of just stopping and relinquishing our addiction to "wanting and not wanting," a whole other dimension opens up. When the cause of dukkha is released, we recognize a timeless abiding, always here now, which is the heart/mind's natural state. Recognizing the mind in its natural state is not something to attain; it's a realization. When grasping and resistance cease, the endless chasing of one thing after another, then the mind recognizes the taste of its own nature, which is the taste of peace. This peace is *nibbana*.

Just as the grit in an oyster becomes a pearl, so dukkha has its function. Awakening quickens through wise contemplation of suffering. Instead of blindly reacting to the experience of dukkha, shifting around it or blaming someone else for it, we apprehend it directly, and more quickly. A conditioning factor for this process is what the Buddha called *nibbida*, which means "disenchantment." We finally come to a place in ourselves when we know another experience isn't going to alleviate our basic sense of discontent—the next holiday, the next acquisition, or the next exciting distraction. In our contemporary society, when we feel *disenchanted* it is seen as a problem. We are encouraged to go shopping, take medication, or find some other escape. We think, "If I sit on the beach today I'll be much happier than staying here." So we go to the beach. We're happy for a few minutes and then think, "If I just had a nice coffee, I'd feel better." Or we think, "It's too hot here. If I go up into the

mountains where it's cooler, I'd be happy." This seeking drives us on and on. It's a good sign when we begin to be suspicious of endless pursuit; it means we're not buying into it so much. Periods of retreat bring us into direct confrontation with what we've been trying desperately to avoid—this basic feeling of dissatisfaction. This isn't to say that things like anti-depressants and holidays don't have their place. But even when we get life as perfect as we can, the underlying message of dukkha still crashes in. It prods us until we respond to the invitation to contemplate our experience more carefully. Sometimes when we acknowledge the presence of suffering, we immediately want a solution. Fix it quick! Get a Band-Aid! Take it away!

This is kind and careful work. When circumstances generate pain or anguish, we can lessen dukkha by patiently containing our reactivity. Then, at the place of suffering, the journey of transformation opens up. As beautifully articulated in Mark Nepo's poem, we become "a soft and sturdy home in which real things can land." This describes perfectly the quality of awareness and receptivity needed to undertake the journey through suffering. We "no longer try to make sense of the pain." We create a space and allow awareness to provide a gentle holding for the "irritations that rub to a pearl." This is the work of Vipassana. As we inquire into the moment, dukkha becomes dharma, or nature, rather than "me" that is wrong or bad. As we listen more deeply to suffering, we begin to notice non-suffering. The heart realizes its innate courage, strength, and invincibility. This journey through pain and suffering burns away the impurities, and what is revealed is something pristine, clear, and beautiful, like a moonlit pearl: the tender, merciful heart, and its infinite ability to receive the cries of the world.

When we're with suffering, it's as if we are with a child that's very unhappy. If the child is wailing and wriggling, wanting to get away, wanting something but it doesn't know what, we kindly hold the child. Sometimes we can experience our minds as the child and the awareness as the mother. The child of the mind can be really hurting and screaming, "I can't bear this. I'm hopeless!" Or, "No one is there for me," or just an unnameable pain that seems so familiar, so ancient, and so intractable. But the mother, our aware, present heart, just sits it out and waits patiently for the deeper truth to emerge. She is breathing with the pain while gently holding the mind and body with kind awareness. Then something happens; something beyond the re-activity of the mind. Instead the heart softens. It sees its own nature: spacious, non-suffering, peaceful, and timeless. Here is freedom. Here we find the courage to bear suffering in order to overcome it.

All the world is full of suffering. It is also full of overcoming.

—Helen Keller

Thanissara began her Theravada Buddhist practice in 1975. Shortly thereafter she spent 12 years as a nun, during which she co-founded the Chithurst Monastery and Amaravati Buddhist Monastery. In 2002, she authored a book of poems entitled *Garden of the Midnight Rosary*.

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