MINDFUL ADAPTATION TO STRESSFUL TIMES

The core of Buddhist teaching is oriented to the total transformation of the personality through the eradication of craving and clinging in order to experience Nirvana, the Unconditioned. Little or no emphasis is given by traditional Buddhist commentary to what Westerners call good mental health, instead focusing on the inevitable effects of karma, either from unwholesome behavior in this life or in a previous life.

Traditional Buddhist doctrine disregards the social norms of culture and is manifested by a total renunciation of society, termed *pabbajja*, *going forth*. This means discarding all personal possessions and relationships in order to focus entirely on experiencing Nirvana. Life in the monastic community minimizes otherwise normal human activities such as work or entertainment. There is plenty of interpersonal conflict, but it is not complicated by larger social stressors for the most part.

We do not live in a monastic culture, so renunciation is irrelevant for current “householder” practitioners of what is being termed *Secular Buddhism*. Not only is our culture not supportive of monastic communities, but we also are very strongly conditioned towards materialism and consumerism. From early childhood, before we are thoroughly indoctrinated by language, we are taught by example how important material things are and that a person’s value is related to his or her material and social status.

This is not to disregard the value of focusing on achieving Nirvanic experience—we must discover our way to this transformative insight through practices that are suitable for contemporary conditions, even though we are so strongly affected by materialism and consumerism. This is not a hopeless task; I believe that there are perhaps thousands of people alive today who have experienced Nirvana. There are also thousands of people who have trained themselves thoroughly to participate in and win various enterprises involving athletics, musicianship and other achievements that require significant time and effort devoted to training and discovering even more about exemplary performance through modern scientific research.

That being given, the focus of this talk and others following will be on cultivating practices that will allow us to be less adversely affected by the increasingly stressful circumstances of contemporary life. This talk will simply be an introductory overview of the various topics to be explored over the next several weeks. The goal of these talks will be to discuss how the basic practices outlined in the Four Noble Truths conceptual structure, when applied diligently, will be of great benefit. Topics will include the stress of consumerism, of the complexity of maintaining current lifestyles (paying bills, coping with traffic, etc.), interpersonal dynamics, political conflict, and media exposure. Tonight the focus will be to set the societal context of current life and then to review the first three of the Four Noble Truths. Next week the focus will be on the fourth Noble Truth, the Noble Eightfold Path. Subsequent talks will explore how the Four Noble Truths can be specifically applied to the various cultural stressors we deal with on a regular basis.

**SOCIAL CONTEXT**

Until the onset of the industrial age during the mid-nineteenth century, life was generally simple. Most people lived in small towns or villages and their daily life routines were organized around their own vicinity and familial customs and included farming, craftmanship and mercantile businesses. Most young folks did what their families did in previous generations and were somewhat isolated regarding what was going outside their geographic vicinity. Of course, people got illnesses and injuries and physical accommodations were minimal, and occasionally wars, famines and plagues created tremendous cultural upheaval, even for those born into great wealth and privilege. This was part of the “givenness” of life, before the modern conveniences of medicine, hygienic facilities and air conditioning.

Around the turn of the 19th into the 20th centuries, modern cultural organization began to form, and this was very disruptive of societal stability. Portions of the population began working away from home in factories and urbanization began to proliferate along with crowding and pollution. Political organizations became more potent and international conflicts became more impactful. Media such as the telegraph and telephone, along with other modalities allowed a broader exposure to events around the world, and immigration became quite prevalent, especially in the U.S. more recently, the internet age has disrupted cultural norms in ways the significance of which is currently unknowable. These cultural processes all created social stresses the human race had never been exposed to before.

In my life, a significant factor relates to intergenerational transmission of stress: my father was born, I believe, in 1905. His first automobile ride was at age 6, during the funeral of this father, who died of tuberculosis. He was a teenager during WWI and had to, as a teenager, nurse family members through the great flu epidemic that killed more people than the war. He barely made it through high school, got married and raised three children during the Great Depression. During WWII, he was too old to be drafted, but his wife left him, and I believe it caused or added to significant depression. He got my mother pregnant at the end of WWII and they remained together until I was 14 years old; during my childhood he became actively alcoholic and attempted suicide twice. After they divorced, he remarried, but remained depressed but not alcoholic for the rest of his life. He lived long enough to watch, on tv, the moon landing. He died in 1981 after a series of debilitating illnesses prompted by nicotine addiction and adult onset diabetes.

I mention all this because it represents to me an important model of what someone who lived through most of the 20th century witnessed and was stressed by. His experience was relatively mild compared to what those people who were more directly impacted by the two world wars and the great depression but was sufficiently impacted to produce debilitating distress. That impacted me, and I have spent half my life working through this intergenerational karma. It also provides me with the initial and ongoing motivation to understand and apply the Four Noble Truths. In fact, the death of my father in 1981 was an important crisis that set the circumstances for the beginning of my Buddhist lifestyle.

The traditional Buddhist view is that karma is individual, accumulated through the course of multiple lives and the recurrence of unwholesome karma, when not dealt with skillfully through the Four Noble Truths, perpetuates dukkha. I am personally agnostic about rebirth; whether the view is valid or not, my immediate response to life’s challenges is what is important, processed through the Noble Eightfold Path. I do believe that I can relate to karma as the impact my life history has on how I interpret and respond to current circumstances.

I believe there is value in considering “cultural karmic influences”, alluded to in the introductory remarks about how social life has been, and continues to be disrupted. Human culture is being radically transformed; my father lived long enough to witness early airplane flights being transformed into moon landings, observed through a device, television, that didn’t exist when he was born! In my lifetime, our culture has been radically transformed by media, first radio and tv, and now the internet. Any disaster around the world is reported, often live, to my home. There is more cultural diversity in the world than ever before, and the U.S. is the most diverse country on the planet. Consumerism is the dominant characteristic of U.S. culture, and is dependent upon maximizing greed as a value in life. Greed creates the illusion that what measures success in life is material, that whatever we have is not satisfying in any enduring and reliable way, and that more and more possessions provide more and more happiness. This cultural karma has created enormous distress and confusion in the populace and is destroying the ecology of the planet.

How can a spiritual practice that has matured for over 25 centuries be adapted to current personal and societal needs? At the core of Buddhist principles and practices the Four Noble Truths provide a foundation addressing life challenges. The fact that this system has persisted as long as it has demonstrates its usefulness in current circumstances. Over the next several weeks I want to bring the Four Noble Truths to bear on various stressful concerns that we all are confronted with; the challenge will be clarifying the application of this system to the differing circumstances. Here is a review of the first three of the Four Noble Truths to set the tone for future discussions:

**FIRST NOBLE TRUTH**

**Dukkha:** The traditional translation for dukkha has been suffering. The original meaning is addressed in an entry into the Wikipedia website according to Winthrop Sargeant:

The ancient Aryans who brought the Sanskrit language to India were a nomadic, horse- and cattle-breeding people who travelled in horse- or ox-drawn vehicles. *Su* and *dus* are prefixes indicating good or bad. The word *kha*, in later Sanskrit meaning "sky," "ether," or "space," was originally the word for "hole," particularly an axle hole of one of the Aryan's vehicles. Thus *sukha* … meant, originally, "having a good axle hole," while *duhkha* meant "having a poor axle hole," leading to discomfort.

This understanding presents a more workable terminology for dukkha. When the fit between and axle and the hub of a wheel on a cart is poorly crafted, the ride is uncomfortable and the cart could unpredictably fall apart. Other translations offered by contributors to Wikipedia include: dissatisfaction, pain, uncomfortable, uneasy, and others. Many contemporary commentaries simple don’t define dukkha, letting it represent its own actuality in the English language.

Traditionally, dukkha manifests in three different ways, as described in Wikipedia:

*Dukkha-dukkha*, the dukkha of painful experiences. This includes the physical and mental sufferings of [birth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J%C4%81ti_(Buddhism)), [aging](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jar%C4%81mara%E1%B9%87a), [illness](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/By%C4%81dhi_(Buddhism)), [dying](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jar%C4%81mara%E1%B9%87a); distress from what is not desirable.

*Viparinama-dukkha*, the dukkha of pleasant or happy experiences changing to unpleasant when the causes and conditions that produced the pleasant experiences cease.

*Sankhara-dukkha*, the dukkha of conditioned experience. This includes "a basic unsatisfactoriness pervading all existence, all forms of life, because all forms of life are changing, impermanent and without any inner core or substance." On this level, the term indicates a lack of satisfaction, a sense that things never measure up to our expectations or standards.

I prefer to translate dukkha as *distress* and *confusion*. I think that this terminology lends itself more clearly to the intention of the Four Noble Truths. *Distress* describes emotional urgency, either wanting or not wanting. *Confusion* describes a dynamic process of fundamental misunderstanding regarding how the mind operates, misrepresenting transient mental formations (thoughts and beliefs) as being reliable, certain and self-determining. This understanding also lends more clarity to the second Noble Truth:

**SECOND NOBLE TRUTH**

**The Cause of Dukkha:**  The cause of dukkha is craving and clinging. In the teachings, the emphasis is on overcoming craving to eliminate dukkha. However, in the commentaries and the dependent origination doctrine (paticca samuppada), craving and clinging are core processes in the creation of the experience of “selfing”. This doctrine is a core teaching of Buddhism, describing not only how dukkha is created, but also how dukkha is eradicated.

The Pali word for craving is *tanha*. This is how tanha is described in Wikipedia: “thirst, desire, longing, greed", either physical or mental.” This thirst is considered to be unquenchable, and is focused in three ways:

*Kama-taṇhā* (sensual pleasures craving): craving for sense objects which provide pleasant feeling, or craving for sensory pleasures. Walpola Rahula states that taṇhā includes not only desire for sense-pleasures, wealth and power, but also "desire for, and attachment to, ideas and ideals, views, opinions, theories, conceptions and beliefs (dhamma-taṇhā)."

*Bhava-taṇhā* (craving for being): craving to be something, to unite with an experience. This is ego-related, states Harvey, the seeking of certain identity and desire for certain type of rebirth eternally. Other scholars explain that this type of craving is driven by the wrong view of eternalism (eternal life) and about permanence.

*Vibhava-taṇhā* (craving for non-existence): craving to not experience unpleasant things in the current or future life, such as unpleasant people or situations. This sort of craving may include attempts at suicide and self-annihilation, and this only results in further [rebirth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rebirth_(Buddhism)) in a worse realm of existence. This type of craving, states Phra Thepyanmongkol, is driven by the wrong view of annihilationism, that there is no rebirth.

The Pali word for clinging is *upadana*. Here is the description in Wikipedia: "*attachment*" or "*grasping*", although the literal meaning is "*fuel*". Other commentaries regard upadana as *nutriment* or *sustenance*. The commentaries describe four types of clinging:

sense-pleasure clinging (*kamupadana*) (Clinging to material things and comforts to sustain oneself)

wrong-view clinging (*ditthupadana*) (Misperceiving that which is impermanent as permanent)

rites-and-rituals clinging (*silabbatupadana*) (Defining oneself through rigid “grounding” behaviors)

self-doctrine clinging (*attavadupadana*). (Identifying self-states as enduring and autonomous)

I prefer a neuroscientific understanding of craving and clinging. Craving is an instinctual drive, oriented either towards some pleasant reward (called affect-approach), or oriented toward avoiding some unpleasant experience (called affect-avoidance). This drive is mediated by neural pathways connecting the identification/reaction processes with reward seeking processes. When these processes operate outside the awareness that mindfulness provides and are lacking in the ability to manage impulsive reactivity effectively, problematic outcomes occur for choices made and acted on. Clinging is the inescapable gap between when a stimulus enters into neural pathways and when the ensuing process manifests in conscious awareness. This gap is a fraction of a second in duration, but during that brief interval, imagination can intrude on the defining and determining process and alter what the eye sees and what the “I” creates.

Functionally, craving and clinging creates a fundamental misperceiving process that creates a subject-object duality that frequently causes problems such as jumping to conclusions about another person’s motives or what the limits of one’s capabilities are. These misperceiving processes create distress and confusion, dukkha.

**THIRD NOBLE TRUTH**

**Liberation From Dukkha:** In the traditional view, the emphasis of this is the experience of Nirvana, the Unconditioned. This is certainly attainable, as was suggested earlier in these notes. In the context of these talks the focus of liberation from the immediate effects of craving and clinging. The original term for this process is *bodhi*, the *awakened state*. Awakening is emerging from the unconsciousness of sleep, and I think that is a useful metaphor for what I call *self-state integration*. Another term more commonly used is *good mental health*. We ordinarily are afflicted with self-state conflict, which is the distress and confusion that emerges when the idealized imagined self or situation doesn’t match with how the mind interprets what the senses experience.

Next week’s discussion will review the Fourth Noble Truth, the Noble Eightfold Path, and will provide a format for understanding how mindfulness practices can promote the emergence of self-state integration in the confrontations we have with current life stressors.