How Do You Want To Live?

The first Noble Truth, the unavoidable presence of dukkha (doo-kah) in human experience, is the first step on the Buddhist path towards liberation from distress and confusion, which is how I define dukkha. Our species operates in ways that strive to ignore or numb ourselves to the experience, and this ignorance is at the root of our current dilemma at the onset of what is becoming known as the Anthropocene Era, that is, the world-wide changes that are a manifestation of contemporary human culture. Regarding this issue I have frequently mentioned my belief that we are living during a period of the most radical social and environmental change in human history.

My father was born about the time of the first airplane flights and lived long enough to watch the first humans walk on the moon via television. Of course, he also was alive during the great Spanish flu epidemic of 1918, both World Wars and the Great Depression. I was born shortly after WW ll and have witnessed many cultural changes as well, especially during the late 1960’s and the 1970’s.

The last several years have been arguably the most disruptive of my life—the pandemic, the political upheavals of the Trump administration and then the invasion of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. We have been at war since 2001. There have been dramatic and quite destructive weather events all over the world in the last several years and it is likely to there will be even more unpredictable and destructive events for decades. Pollution is having a significant impact on the environment, creating the circumstances for the extinction of large segments of flora and fauna. We can perhaps describe these circumstances as the broadest and most extensive examples of humanity’s dukkha, and is caused by widespread cultural greed, hatred and ignorance.

We are immersed in a societal propaganda proliferation—commercial advertisements, media promulgated misinformation and the mundane conditioning of normal consumerism, which is so prevalent we give it the same amount of attention as we would the amount of traffic on the street on any day. It’s just traffic, but along with that congestion comes air pollution, plus the oil and parts of tires on the streets that wash into the sewers and lakes, etc. Manufacturing the pavement for the streets requires one of the largest segments of energy usage, along with the CO2 that is released into the atmosphere—how often do we consider this?

We are strongly conditioned to ignore or distract ourselves from the craving and clinging that produces dukkha but being mindful of craving and clinging, the second Noble Truth, plays an essential role in the process of Awakening. Traditionally, Buddhism focuses on the strictly spiritual and religious aspects of life—this is also characteristic of all the major faith traditions. However, these times require a broader focus that doesn’t discount the importance of spiritual development, but also involves a significant focus on how to effectively adapt to the dysfunctional and stressful conditions that are significantly changing what is called the biosphere, where all life exists.

Buddhist doctrine provides a way to foster this adaptation—for example, the concepts of *anicca* (ah-nee-chah), *dukkha* and *anatta* (ah-nah-tah). I believe these insightful concepts, at the core of the Buddha’s teachings, provide a valuable way to realize that we can adapt successfully and beneficially. Anicca represents the transitory nature of our subjectivity—our minds are changing constantly, even if those changes are noted as the same pattern of thoughts revolving in and out of consciousness, as new experiences and changing conditions, both internal and external, no longer seem viable or important. Because of this inconstancy, the third concept, *anatta*, is validated—there is no enduring or autonomous self in charge, either as the initiator or the victim of the consequences of choices and actions. The ego is quite fluid in the process of self-organization, easily influenced by changing internal and external events. In order for us to survive, we must “glue” this fluidity into a self—*my* thoughts, *my* beliefs, *my* identity. The Buddha called this “The tyranny of I, me and mine”. This gluing process involves craving and clinging, and the inevitable result is dukkha, which I translate as distress and confusion—the distress is the result of craving, an emotional response to events, either wanting or hating, reinforced by the confusion that is the result of the rigidity imposed by clinging to what the mind creates.

These concepts provide the ways and means to successfully adapt to a more wholesome way of being in these trying times. Because of anicca and anatta, we can change our self-organizing process. However, part of this change process requires direct awareness of *dukkha***,** which is hard to do, considering how strongly we have been indoctrinated. Three of the Seven Awakening Factors are essential in working with anicca and anatta in order to overcome dukkha: Mindfulness, Investigation of Mental Phenomena and Energy manifested as Right Effort.

In psychological terms, the propaganda described above is an *external locus of control*, which means that our values and self-identity are created as a reaction to external stimuli such as commercials, Facebook, cultural norms, etc. A major contributor to the heightened levels of mental health disorders that are currently being discovered in society involves the craving and clinging associated with an external locus of control. Our egocentric beliefs regarding security and self-worth are dependent upon what other people think of us or our status as consumers.

This conditioning fosters what I call “self-state conflict”, an idealized view of what constitutes a good life or self-worth, mostly determined by consumerism. For example, a major contributor to this idealization is the grading system in schools. Grading is necessary on one level, as this provides a way to become clearer about what we have mastered. A side effect is the identity that it fosters, either to be identified as smarter than the others or stupider. In either case, there is an external locus of control, which includes the school subject being tested, the competency of the teacher or textbook, the bias of the test grader, and the way social groups create hierarchies that judge and isolate. Even a child who excels in school still vulnerable to failure in living up to the ideal-- “If you’re so smart, how come you messed that up?” This dynamic process operates in many ways in our culture that go beyond the effects of being graded in school. When you add into that mix the way advertising and the media create standards of appearance or performance, dukkha is embedded in our culture.

A goal of psychotherapy is to help a person develop an *internal locus of control*, which means that one’s self-worth and security is derived from an internal value system. This system is also part of how we are indoctrinated in our culture, but this conditioning is derived from the core values of faith traditions: honesty, kindness, compassion, generosity, unselfishness, tolerance for others, etc. I believe these spiritual values provide guidance as we make the choices that affect how we life that are not afflicted with greed, hatred or ignorance.

Historically, part of our conditioning involves an over-emphasis on individuality. When I was being taught about Darwinian evolution, “The survival of the fittest” was understood to involve competition for resources, “The law of fang and claw—the strongest and smartest survived and the rest died off.” This view of evolution has been altered during my adulthood—those fittest for survival were not the most aggressive, but instead those who were able to adapt to changing environmental conditions successfully—able to cultivate the best fit for current circumstances. Aggression is considered to be much less adaptive compared to the ability to interact harmoniously with a natural and social environment. I believe this is the task at hand for the survival of the species, and each of us must learn how to more intelligently and benevolently cooperate socially in order to resolve the political and environmental dilemmas we are confronted with.

Here is a quote from the book “Real Change”, by Sharon Salzberg, pp.2-3:

We don’t live in isolated silos, disconnected from everyone else—it just feels that way sometimes. What happens to others inevitably affects us. Even if we have been ignoring or unaware of the situation of those we don’t know, we can wake up and see that our lives are actually intricately connected. What happens “over there” never nicely stays “over there”—it flows out. And what we do over here matters. This interconnectedness is not only a spiritual realization—science shows us this, economics shows us this, environmental awareness certainly shows us this, and even epidemiology shows us this.

We all struggle with what to change and what to let be, what we can affect and what we can’t, the effort it takes to foster change, and how it’s all to possible to burn out or shut down. I’ve learned that meditation can provide tools to help courage grow out of rage and resilience out of grief. I’ve learned that if your own life has been shattered by the actions of others, the perspective meditation offers can help you become whole. And even though it runs counter to what many of us have been taught, I’ve learned that deep acceptance is not inertness.

Further, on p. 17:

The people I find deeply inspiring derive their sense of purpose, their vision, their resolve, from different resources: faith traditions, traumatic losses, a sense of oneness with all that they learned in their families or a propulsion away from the values their families lived by. Their efforts in the world have been bolstered by community, nature, music, poetry. For me, the core meditations of mindfulness and lovingkindness have most directly awakened the same values of compassion, inclusion, and understanding, and I have found them the most sustaining practices of all. I celebrate the qualities that emerge from meditation practices and encourage us all to develop these tools to whatever degree we find helpful, but I myself don’t just draw inspiration from meditation practitioners. I want to lift up exemplary human qualities wherever I see them emerge, however people get there, because it is in recognizing those qualities that we remember what’s possible for us.

How do we realize our potential to create what I call “self-state integration”? To me, this integration of personality represents an internal locus of control that is organized around the Four Noble Truths and the diligent application of the Noble Eightfold Path. Of course, these concepts must be applied first on a more mundane, “How do I want my life to be?” level; as this is accomplished, spiritual development grows in rich soil.

The Virtue aggregate of the Noble Eightfold Path provides an important “compass heading” for cultivating an internal locus of control—Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood (I prefer the term “Right Lifestyle”—see below). To counter the influence of very sophisticated consumerist propaganda, we can envision goals for a wholesome and rewarding life, focusing on multiple facets of lifestyle choices. This goal-mapping must be realistic; it is not wise to try to live a socially isolated life.

Over the next several meetings I intend to explore how aspects of the Four Noble Truths, particularly the Noble Eightfold Path, can be applied to a variety of choices and behaviors that we can commit to for developing what I call Right Lifestyle, a slightly different concept from the Right Livelihood described in the Virtue aggregate of the Noble Eightfold Path. Right Lifestyle involves how we structure lived experience in this very dynamic and complex culture. As I write this, these areas of focus come to mind; this listing may be modified as I develop the trajectory of subjects to talk about:

* Mental Well-being, which will be a review of how to cultivate stress resilience, which provides relief from anxiety and depression, along with the maladaptive coping strategies prevalent in this culture, such as addiction in its various manifestations.
* Right Relationship, which reviews how mindfulness, lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity apply to enhancing relationship dynamics. This includes societal equity.
* An increased ability to reduce one’s “environmental footprint”, without reducing the quality of lived experience.
* Physical health—we benefit from a lifestyle that balances good nutrition with adequate exercise and wholesome, vitalizing activity.
* Financial responsibility—our culture conditions us as consumers, often to our disadvantage financially. How can we use the principles and practices of Buddhism be usefully applied to cultivate financial security?

The ways and means for developing these goals require insight and discipline, which are provided by the Training aggregate of the Noble Eightfold Path: Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. Mindfulness and Right Effort were already mentioned above; Right Concentration involves the effective unification of the other functions of the Noble Eightfold Path, already mentioned in regard to self-state-integration.

The term “Noble” Eightfold Path has a connotation that is often misunderstood. At the time of the Buddha, nobility was determined by the clan of one’s birth, and a virtuous life required a rigorous adherence to the social norms of that clan. The Buddha changed this attribution, instead regarding commitment to a rigorous adherence to the concepts and practices described in Buddhist doctrine to “ennoble” one’s life, regardless of which clan she or he was born into. I believe this ennobling is a beneficial goal for reforming life in wholesome ways as a result of the stresses of current social upheaval.