REVIEWING THE FIRST NOBLE TRUTH

I have been a student of Buddhism for over 40 years and one of its most admirable aspects is the coherence of the conceptual structure of what is called “The Four Noble Truths”, the first of which is the Truth that life is inherently lacking in security and comfort. No matter how hard we try to control the course of life’s circumstances, we are always confronted with the possibility of distress of some sort. The Buddha taught that the entirety of his mission was to teach people to understand the essential nature of this distress and the ways and means to come to terms with it. Here is part of the relevant discourse:

“Now this, monks, is the noble truth of stress: Birth is stressful, aging is stressful, death is stressful; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair are stressful; association with the unbeloved is stressful, separation from the loved is stressful, not getting what is wanted is stressful. In short, the five clinging-aggregates are stressful.” Translation of the Four Noble Truths Discourse by Thanissaro

The *stress* described in the quote above is *dukkha* (doo-kah) in Pali, the classical language of Theravada Buddhism. Thanissaro prefers this translation, rather than *suffering*, which is the traditional rendering. I personally prefer *distress* and *confusion*—*distress* brings attention to the emotional aspect of what is described in the quote, while *confusion* brings attention to the fundamental flaw that shapes all human cognition, which is that our rendition of subjective experience is inherently incomplete and unreliable, fundamentally because our internal narrative creates a subject/object duality, and our thought processes can’t reliably describe and/or control what happens in the world because subjective is constantly changing, a “stream of consciousness”. The five clinging-aggregates mentioned in the quote are form, feeling, perception, mental fabricators and consciousness. These factors are interacting in very dynamic and complex ways, creating the illusion that there is an enduring observer and controller “hovering” over what is happening; close observation reveals this is not true.

It is helpful to understand the origin of the word dukkha. According to the entry on dukkha in Wikipedia:

[Joseph Goldstein](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Goldstein_(writer)), American [vipassana](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vipassana) teacher and writer, explains the etymology as follows: The word *dukkha* is made up of the prefix *du* and the root *kha*. *Du* means "bad" or "difficult". *Kha* means "empty". "Empty", here, refers to several things—some specific, others more general. One of the specific meanings refers to the empty axle hole of a wheel. If the axle fits badly into the center hole, we get a very bumpy ride. This is a good analogy for our ride through [samsara](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sa%E1%B9%83s%C4%81ra).

The word *samsara* (sahm-sah-rah)is translated as *wandering* or *transitory*, with an element of existential uncertainty. The concept is embedded in all Indian philosophy and is considered to be the ongoing experiential unpleasantness of rebirth and the illusory nature of existence. I believe my translation of dukkha as distress and confusion not only provides a description of experience that covers both the emotional and cognitive aspects of subjective experience—it also provides focal points for mindful investigation and regulation of the ongoing process of self-creation that is an essential element of Buddhist thought.

There are different forms of dukkha, related to the five clinging-aggregates described above:

*Dukkha-dukkha*, which is the distress and confusion associated with form, that is, when you “buy an embodied experience, this comes with the package”. Physical pain, hunger, fatigue, limits of vitality, illness, and any other physiological discomfort. These sorts of experience are inevitable. Buddhism doesn’t propose eradicating them—the Buddha, who mostly lived outdoors from age 30 until death at around 85, exposed to hot summers and other deprivations, according to the teachings, suffered from various ailments, including arthritis, and is said to have died from food poisoning. His liberation teaching focused primarily on realizing the potential of understanding and mastering the second and third forms of dukkha.

*Sankhara-dukkha*, which is the distress and confusion that occurs because of the essential inadequacies that produce a sense of there being an enduring/autonomous self. Sankhara (sahn-kah-rah) is a complex term, the simplest rendering of which is the process of *mental fabrication* or *conditioning*. Sankhara refers to prior experience, from which impressions are “pulled together” to fabricate a more or less coherent sense of a subject experiencing events. It also refers to the immediate “pulling together” process that occurs on a moment-by-moment basis for each person. In this way, sankhara can be a noun, that is the “historical record” stored in the brain, and a verb, as the self-state organizing process operates. This creates the fundamental flaw mentioned earlier, that there is an enduring and isolated/independent observer/operator in relation to an object. The “object” can either be a physiological stimulus within the body, such as pain, or otherwise an external event that stimulates seeing, hearing, smelling or tasting, and this represents the clinging-aggregate of *form*. In terms of the other clinging-aggregates, *feeling, perception* and *mental fabrications* are reflected in *consciousness*. The most profound understanding of sankhara-dukkha involves the Buddhist concept of *anatta* (ah-nah-tah), *the absence of an enduring/autonomous self*. Life experiences are inextricably and unavoidably complex—the dynamic interactions between external stimuli and internally fabricated meaning-making and adaptive behavioral activities. The external stimuli might be rapidly changing or relatively inert, as is the case with stones, water, trees, etc. Perceptions, feelings and mental fabricating processes are constantly and rapidly changing; investigating the nature of this sort of change involves the practice of *insight meditation*, called *vipassana* (vih-pah-sah-nah). This complexity confounds any attempt to create and sustain an enduring self—the self is created in an ongoing way, and the imperfection of this process manifests as dukkha. Coming to terms with sankhara-dukkha is the primary project in the process of achieving the Third Noble Truth, liberation from dukkha, is the goal of vipassana practice. It is manifested through understanding, practicing and realizing the Fourth Noble Truth, the Noble Eightfold Path.

*Viparinama-dukkha* is the distress and confusion associated with the transitoriness and unreliability of subjective experience. *Viparinama* is pronounced vee-pah-ree-nah-mah. External events change, often without one’s ability to predict or control the changes. More important for vipassana practice is investigation of the transitory and unreliable nature of sankhara-dukkha. This is reflected in one of the three characteristics that are found in the Buddhist conceptual base—*anicca* (ah-nee-chah), *the constantly changing nature of subjective experience*. Direct investigation of anicca is one of the skills to be developed to realize the Third Noble Truth, liberation from dukkha.

All of the Buddhist concepts that describe the processes that promote liberation from dukkha emphasize three levels of understanding: *Conceptual Understanding, Determined Cultivation of Awareness*, and *Direct Subjective Confirmation*. First, we study the teachings and listen to the Dharma talks in order to understand the rationale embedded in the system. Secondly, we diligently train the mind through the disciplines described in the Fourth Noble Truth, the Noble Eightfold Path; with enough mindful investigation we can subjectively realize what was previously conceptual. In the Four Noble Truths Discourse, the progression is described in this way:

“Vision arose, insight arose, discernment arose, knowledge arose, illumination arose within me with regard to things never heard before: ‘This is the noble truth of stress’ … ‘This noble truth of stress is to be comprehended’ … ‘This noble truth of stress has been comprehended.’ Translated by Thanissaro

In the above quote, *vision* refers to conceptual understanding, *insight* and *discernment* refers to the cultivated awareness skills described in the Noble Eightfold Path—Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. Right Mindfulness provides the *insight* and Right Effort provides the *discernment*, and Right Concentration is the unified cooperation of these two disciplines for determined cultivation of awareness. *Knowledge* and *illumination* represent *direct subjective confirmation* of dukkha’s characteristics, distress and confusion. These terms are also found in the discourse regarding the other three Noble Truths—the cause of dukkha, liberation from dukkha, and the ways and means through which liberation is achieved.

There is a progression of insightful awareness regarding dukkha. The most obvious examples are found in regard to dukkha-dukkha experience. Training the mind to be less preoccupied and reactive to mild physical discomfort is a useful practice for cultivating vipassana. When physical discomfort such as an itch appears in consciousness, the primary distress and confusion is caused by ignorance regarding how the mind creates a self, relative to the unpleasant feeling associated with the sensation. The untrained mind will typically automatically initiate behavior to scratch the itch, and that is a harmless action which provides an opportunity to mindfully observe the dukkha-dukkha of the physical sensation and differentiate that part of the experience from the mind-created sankhara-dukkha reaction allowing a person to practice letting go of the distress and confusion which causes the sankhara-dukkha. The *distress* is the impulsive emotional reactivity, and the *confusion* is the false threat caused by sankhara-dukkha that prompts the body to scratch the itch. Learning to accept the felt, impulsive urgency of the physical discomfort without being controlled by the sankhara-dukkha literally changes the structure of the brain towards more self-awareness and self-discipline in circumstances other than the mild irritation of an itch. Other situations involving unaware, impulsive reactivity might have more consequential outcomes, for example, quickly flipping into anger when events conflict with expected outcomes.

Another level of awareness that is more subtle but frequently more negatively consequential is the sankhara-dukkha associated with what is called in psychotherapy a *cognitive distortion*. These negative sankhara are a core dysfunction in psychological disorders such as depression and anxiety, which are arguably at epidemic levels in contemporary society. Examples of cognitive distortions include *perfectionism*, while another is called *negativity bias*, both of which can be exaggerated responses to relatively minor problems in life. There are more cognitive distortions, but these are sufficient to illustrate this level of sankhara-dukkha. When a person’s cognitive process is preoccupied with a particular view, such as “I cannot allow any imperfection in my performance”, this represents the *confusion*, while the anxiety or depression that accompanies the distortion represents the *distress*. The goal of Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy, MBCT, which is becoming a standard treatment for anxiety and depression, is to train oneself to mindfully monitor the internal narratives of life experience, recognize the cognitive distortion, resist the urge to “scratch the itch” of perfectionistic narratives and allow the accompanying emotions to naturally dissolve. The mind can then create a self-organization that is more creatively adaptive and no longer afflicted by anxiety or depression.

Another subtle form of dukkha is caused by craving and clinging to pleasant physical or mental feelings. The Buddha said that pleasant feeling is the most difficult sort of sankhara to be understood as dukkha. We are hard-wired to seek and protect pleasant feelings and the confidence that comes from self-affirming cognitive processes, but dukkha is embedded in these experiences as well—there is distress and confusion woven into the experience of wanting a pleasant experience, there is distress and confusion in the experience itself, because of the insecurity described by viparinama, and there is obviously dukkha associated with the loss of the pleasurable physical or mental self-state organization.

The most subtle level of liberating awareness regarding any form of dukkha is to realize the impersonal and impermanent nature of *any* self-organizing process. This is at the core of the three characteristics of *anicca, dukkha* and *anatta*, the transitory, the essentially insecure and unsatisfactory nature of subjective experience and the absence of an autonomous self. This involves a persistent and non-reactive investigation of the arising and dissolving of self-state organizations, accompanied by an increasingly detached and non-reactive awareness of how craving and clinging create a misperception that there is an enduring/autonomous self that demands either gratification or protection. When there is an immediate and detached awareness of dukkha and the causes of dukkha, the dukkha-laden self that is forming dissolves because attachment to the process of craving and clinging has been drained of energy or interest.

The realization of this liberation involves the cultivation of the other three Noble Truths, with particular emphasis on conceptual understanding of the concepts and development of the requisite vipassana skills that will foster liberation from dukkha. Each time the process of vipassana releases attention from craving and clinging to go back to the benign embodied awareness associated with mindfulness of breathing, a moment of freedom from dukkha is realized; the ultimate goal of practice is to string a sufficient number of these liberating moments of awareness together to promote ultimate freedom, the realization of nirvana.