Understanding Dukkha

Understanding the characteristics of dukkha (doo-kah) and how to transform the experience of this core element of the human condition into a liberating contemplation is a fundamental aspiration within the Buddhist path towards Awakening. The Buddha emphasized the importance of this as he described the key factors of life experience-- the process to be understood and developed for Awakening is reflected in the Four Noble Truths: dukkha, the cause of dukkha, liberation from dukkha and the practice elements to be perfected for accomplishing liberation from dukkha (The Noble Eightfold Path).

The original meaning of dukkha clarifies how it affects our life experience. The Aryan people, a migratory culture, had moved into Northern India several generations before the time of the Buddha. Because of their frequent travelling, they used transportation metaphors. The root words for dukkha are described in a Wikipedia entry, quoting Joseph Goldstein:

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).

Another etymological understanding of dukkha derives from Sanskrit and originally described the experience of imbalance—“standing badly”.

Typically, dukkha is translated as *suffering;* I prefer the terms *distress and confusion*. *Distress* focuses on the *impulsively reactive experience of craving*—for pleasant feelings to be realized and sustained and for unpleasant feelings to be avoided and eliminated. *Confusion* focuses on the *experience of clinging*—the misconception that there is a self, which seems to be enduring and autonomous—*the enchantment of this misconception creates maladaptive beliefs and behaviors, which is unreliable, often creating adverse outcomes for one’s life and the life of others.*

The classical rendering of dukkha is found in several of the suttas:

1. Birth is dukkha, aging is dukkha, illness is dukkha, death is dukkha.
2. Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are dukkha.
3. Association with the unbeloved is dukkha; separation from the loved is dukkha.
4. Not getting what is wanted is dukkha.
5. In conclusion, the five clinging-aggregates are dukkha.

Here is how Wikipedia describes the three varieties of dukkha:

* *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.

This description provides different aspect of dukkha—when dukkha is present, the body is tense, the ongoing circumstances associated with the arising of dukkha are unexpected, and to some degree out of one’s control, and the “selfing story” that emerges in the mind is a fabrication based on prior experience. It is useful to contemplate them separately; the categorization of contemplation supports seeing dukkha as an impersonal phenomenon, not a self.

The first category of dukkha is inescapable; when we inhabit a body physical experiences will happen—how we can condition the mind to not be adversely affected emotionally by what the body must endure is the primary aspiration of Buddhism.

The second of the categories, viparinama (vee-pah-ree-nah-mah), relates to *anicca* (ah-nee-chah), the *transient nature of phenomena*—the unreliable status of whatever self-state arises into consciousness. The fundamental and organic nature of our instinctual drives is core to the distress of craving. The Pali word for craving is *tanha* (than-hah), which translates as an *unquenchable thirst*. It would seem that desire for pleasurable experience is harmless, but the wanting is not tranquil, and even when we get to eat our favorite dessert as much as we want, the pleasurable aspect of the dessert doesn’t last. I might be proud of my shiny new car but become anxious about the potential for damage to it.

The third relates to *anatta* (ah-nah-tah), the *absence of an enduring and autonomous self*. The Pali word for clinging is *upadana* (oo-pah-dah-nah), which is translated as *fuel* or *sustenance*—that which feeds tanha. Psychologically, one’s self-defining flow of experience involves a mutually reinforcing cycle between the urgently felt feelings of current circumstantial stimulations and any memories that can be associated with the circumstances. The inability to effectively monitor this feedback loop and make effective flows of thought and action is called *avijja* (ah-vee-jah) in Pali, translated as *ignorance*, more specifically as the *absence of vijja*, which is wisdom. Wisdom involves the ability to clearly understand the impersonal nature of subjective experience and the ability to effectively manage subsequent thoughts and actions.

The self-fabricating process that is the ongoing result of craving and clinging is skillfully addressed through the cultivated development of detached investigation through vipassana practice—the goal is to cultivate increasingly reduces reactivity regarding the urgent feelings stimulated by a situation and dissolve the clinging that occurs through realizing the impersonal nature of self-experience. Interestingly, the word *Nirvana* *can be described as what occurs when all the fuel of tanha is used up*. Buddhadasa, a well-respected master, suggested that country people put cooked rice out to cool from the heat of the fire and this cooling is comparable to nirvana.

One can make an argument that contemporary consumerist culture has cultivated the dissatisfaction characteristic of the three manifestations of dukkha to build and sustain consumption for profit. We are all familiar with the catch phrase regarding news reporting: “If it bleeds it leads”. The reporting of murders, social conflict and natural catastrophes dominates what is reported; research over the last few decades demonstrates that the incitement capability of “bad news” activates attention centers in the brain, a response left over from the days (Just a few generations ago, even for contemporary U.S. residents) when there were actual mortal threats immediately in the environment. Internet-based media are managed by carefully constructed algorithms to increase the “click rate” seduction that keeps one engaged, often for longer times than anticipated. Media programmers build on this to cultivate the increasing levels of outrage that keeps viewers engaged. This computer programming generates anxiety, even when the mortal threat reported occurs thousands of miles away. Even if the media is simply providing entertainment, there is a preponderance of fictional and true crime shows on TV—our nervous systems are empathically stimulated by the perceived risk and loss of the characters portrayed on the shows.

Immersed in the media documentary reports and entertaining shows that incite fear are commercials scientifically designed to generate pleasurable craving/clinging in whoever is watching—the alternation between generated fear and the promise of pleasure and happiness is intentionally established to create the urge to consume a product in order to divert attention away from fear and towards desire, two of the Five Hindrances; both are manifestations of dukkha. Our nervous systems are aroused by fear and desire even though most of us life lives that are more convenient, secure and comfortable than previous generations. This is an irony of this era—even though most people are safe and secure; the diagnoses of anxiety and depression are epidemic in our culture.

We are enticed to believe that the creature comforts we consume are a reliable solution for dukkha; if you eat such and such food, wear certain clothing, drive a particular car, you will be happy and attractive (How many folks in commercials are unhappy and unattractive?). The culturally divisive atmosphere cultivated by certain elements of the media generates a fear of the “Other”, which is in opposition to the universality and interdependence that is at the core of all the world’s spiritual institutions.

A fundamental aspect of the Buddhist antidote for dukkha is found in the Four Noble Truths:

* To be directly aware of the experience of dukkha as it manifests in the body (muscle tension, surges of anxious urgency associated with pleasurable desire or depressive lethargy/hopelessness). This represents the First Noble Truth.
* To be directly aware of the urgent, impulsive emotionally reactive selfing story that accompanies the physical symptoms. Understand the impersonal characteristics of the process.
* To mindfully note the generated story as clinging (A primary characteristic of the Second Noble Truth) and detach from identifying the story as self-defining—it is a fabrication of the mind, and the thoughts are transient and insubstantial.
* To focus with equanimity on the physical symptoms and use breath awareness to release the anxious urgency (Craving, the other primary characteristic of the Second Noble Truth), along with awareness of the fabricated nature of the selfing story that accompanies the craving. This internal letting go of craving and clinging is facilitated by consciously releasing and relaxing any tension while breathing out.

An often overlooked function of dukkha is motivational—as we become more mindfully aware of the distress and confusion that arises as the result of ignorance, commitment to the liberating potential of vipassana increases. We need to experience dukkha in order to move along the path toward Awakening. Chogyam Trungpa, a famous Tibetan teacher, once said something like “When you get serious about spiritual development, it’s one insult after another.” In my experience, my life is more oriented towards wisdom and less prone to ignorance because I am more clearly aware of the various forms of dukkha and the ways and means to reduced their control over my life.

The practice of detaching and releasing described above manifests as renunciation; every time we note a distraction from the breath and return attention to the breath sensations, we are cultivating renunciation. Even when the distraction is fleeting and benign, parts of the brain that monitor internal processes are strengthened and other neural pathways associated with reducing impulsive reactivity are also strengthened. When this process is matured with long-term committed practice, dispassion regarding the emerging feelings and selfing story is manifested, providing equanimity, overcoming the grosser forms of dukkha, that is, anxiety and depression.

Ultimately, the accumulated capacity for equanimous detachment allows the vipassana process to become more subtly and deeply liberating, eventually manifesting as direct awareness of the arising and passing of the stream of self-state organizations as entirely composed of fabrications, not a self, and this culminates in the realization we call Nirvana--Awakening. According to the teachings, there are progressive stages of Awakening. There is a realization that the Four Noble Truths actually produce the liberating insight that the concepts describe: the absence of an enduring and autonomous self. Further experiences of Nirvana, the Unconditioned, wear away any predispositions towards craving and clinging, until the ultimate Awakening that is manifested in the Arahant realization.