Understanding Dukkha

During a recent self-retreat, I was confronted with unforeseen circumstances that disrupted my plans for an uninterrupted two-weeks of going deeper into my meditation practice. My self-retreats in the cottage in our back yard occur during the last two weeks of December, because I don’t care to be repeatedly confronted with the flood of Christmas indoctrination and as my way of silently protesting the crass consumerism during that time of year. December in Florida is typically a very mild period with moderately cool nighttime temperatures, but the December of 2022 was different. Right around Christmas, the winter storm Elliott wreaked havoc on the continental U.S., all the way from Canada down to Central Florida, and, after unseasonably high daily temperatures, 3 days of freezing weather was predicted. We have a number of subtropical and tropical fruiting plants such as pineapple, mango, avocado, papaya and other flowering plants that can be destroyed by freezing temperatures. After about a week of meditation practice, during which I was aware of the looming temperature drops, I stopped meditating for a day so my wife and could install a number of devices and sheets to cover the plants, the structure some of which were “contemplated” while meditating during the preceding days. After two days of unseasonably cold weather that was not as harsh as predicted, but cold enough to do some damage to the periphery of the leaves on the plants, we took a few hours to remove the sheets and other apparatus. This left me with perhaps 4 days after the freeze for more intensive meditation before the retreat ended.

Our tradition at the Orlando Insight Meditation Group meetings which occur after a significant retreat experience for a member of the community, the night following the event is dedicated to providing time for that person to talk about his or her experiences during the retreat. What to talk about became more complicated after this retreat experience. I did have Shaila Catherine’s “Beyond Distraction” to use as a referral source during the retreat, but what occurred to me at the end of the retreat was the opportunity to review the varieties of dukkha I experienced and how I worked with them, so here I go:

First, let me describe the traditional way of understanding dukkha as a concept. It is the first of the Four Noble Truths, the primary teaching of Buddhism. I prefer a different translation of dukkha than the traditional “suffering”—“distress and confusion”—and will explain this further later in the notes. Here is a traditional rendering of dukkha, from Wikipedia (The spelling of the word is in Sanskrit rather than the Theravadin Pali):

1. [Birth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J%C4%81ti_(Buddhism)) is duḥkha, [aging](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jar%C4%81mara%E1%B9%87a) is duḥkha, [illness](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/By%C4%81dhi_(Buddhism)) is duḥkha, [death](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jar%C4%81mara%E1%B9%87a) is duḥkha;
2. Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are duḥkha;
3. Association with the unbeloved is duḥkha; separation from the loved is duḥkha;
4. Not getting what is wanted is duḥkha.
5. In conclusion, the five [clinging-aggregates](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skandhas) are duḥkha.

The origins of the term are described in this way in Wikipedia:

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.[[5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Du%E1%B8%A5kha#cite_note-FOOTNOTESargeant2009303-6)

[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 [saṃsāra](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sa%E1%B9%83s%C4%81ra).

However, according to [Monier Monier-Williams](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monier_Monier-Williams), the actual roots of the [Pali](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pali) term [*dukkha*](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/dukkha) appear to be [Sanskrit](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanskrit) (*dus-*, "bad") + (*stha*, "to stand"). Regular phonological changes in the development of Sanskrit into the various [Prakrits](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prakrit) led to a shift from *dus-sthā* to *duḥkha* to *dukkha*.

Analayo concurs, stating that *dukkha* as derived from *duh-stha*, "standing badly," "conveys nuances of "uneasiness" or of being "uncomfortable."

The Buddha often repurposed Sanskrit words and Brahman concepts to more adequately express his revisionary insights into the human condition, and the word dukkha is one of them. Further in the Wikipedia article, a commentator describes the differing understanding that Buddhism describes compared to Hindu Brahman descriptions; again, note the different spelling of the word:

Hinduism emphasizes the understanding and acceptance of [*Atman*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C4%80tman_(Hinduism)) ("self", "soul") and [*Brahman*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brahman) ("the ultimate reality of the universe"). The connection is the distress and suffering caused by an individual situation that can counter a person's wishes and perception. *Duhkha*, in particular, refers to the sense of disappointing feelings that come from the gulf between perception and desires and true experience. In Hindi, *duhkha* generally means "difficult to do" or "to have hardship in doing" as it is inflexible. By contrast, Buddhism emphasizes the understanding and acceptance of [*anatta*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anatta) (*anatman*, "non-self", "non-soul"), the means to liberation from *duḥkha*. The root meaning of *duhkha* is used in various ways in different schools of Indian thought and Buddhism.

The Wikipedia article also describes three different understandings of the dukkha concept:

*Dukkha-dukkha*, **aversion to physical suffering** - 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 due to what is not desirable.

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

[*Sankhara*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sankhara)*-dukkha*, **the unsatisfactoriness of changing and impermanent "things"** - the incapability of conditioned things to give us lasting happiness. 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 lasting satisfaction, or a sense that things never measure up to our expectations or standards.

Here are my revisions of the concepts that I hope has more contemporary psychological relevance:

**Dukkha-dukkha** is the sensory world of embodied experience, and the realities of the physical vulnerability we all are confronted with—pain, illness, hunger, thirst, fatigue and either being too cold or too hot. This is unescapable—when you “buy a body, it comes with the package”. I believe the Buddha was quite clear in saying that dukkha-dukkha is unavoidable, but instead focused his liberating teachings on the remaining two variations of dukkha.

**Viparinama-dukkha** (vee-pah-ree-nah-mah doo-kah), in my view, is better understood and worked with psychologically using a slight addition to the concept of the transient nature of causes and conditions: life is unpredictable and uncertain, and we experience distress and confusion when, without Wisdom, we are confronted with unanticipated changes. This understanding was part of my contemplation during the recently completed retreat. I look forward to this retreat each year, and the weather reports from the past didn’t match up with the causes and conditions that produced Winter Storm Elliott’s sudden freeze conditions.

**Sankhara-dukkha** (sahn-kah-rah doo-kah), is the primary concern of Buddhist teachings—the conditioned nature of the natural world—and the remainder of my notes explore this variety of dukkha. Here is a conceptual explanation of sankhara, again from Wikipedia:

It is a complex concept, with no single-word English translation, that fuses "object and subject" as interdependent parts of each human's consciousness and epistemological process. It connotes "impression, disposition, conditioning, forming, perfecting in one's mind, influencing one's sensory and conceptual faculty" as well as any "preparation, sacrament" that "impresses, disposes, influences or conditions" how one thinks, conceives or feels…

In the first (passive) sense, *saṅkhāra* refers to "conditioned things" or "dispositions, mental imprint". All aggregates in the world – physical or mental concomitants, and all phenomena, state early Buddhist texts, are conditioned things. It can refer to any compound form in the universe whether a tree, a cloud, a human being, a thought or a molecule. All these are *saṅkhāras*, as well as everything that is physical and visible in the phenomenal world are conditioned things, or aggregates of mental conditions. The Buddha taught that all saṅkhāras are impermanent and essenceless. These subjective dispositions, states David Kalupahana, "prevented the Buddha from attempting to formulate an ultimately objective view of the world".

Since conditioned things and dispositions are perceptions and do not have real essence, they are not reliable sources of pleasure and they are impermanent. Understanding the significance of this reality is [wisdom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wisdom_in_Buddhism). This "conditioned things" sense of the word Saṅkhāra appears in [Four Noble Truths](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_Noble_Truths) and in Buddhist theory of dependent origination, that is how ignorance or misconceptions about impermanence and non-self leads to [Taṇhā](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ta%E1%B9%87h%C4%81) and rebirths.

I agree that everything in the universe is interdependently conditioned, even on a galactic scale, but that is not what the Buddha was teaching. He was focused on the interdependence of our subjective experience, and vipassana practice provides a penetrating analysis of this conditioning, primarily attempting to resolve the dukkha that occurs as a result of craving and clinging, the Second Noble Truth.

To explore this further I want to review a fundamental concept of Buddhism, which is often significantly and consequentially misunderstood--*anatta* (ah-nah-tah), traditionally translated as *non-self*, or alternatively expressed through another Pali word *sunnata* (soon-yah-tah), translated as *emptiness*. Non-self is not a nihilistic term, but rather means that our subjective experience, the “self”, is *fabricated* (Through the function of sankhara) and *transitory*, changing when circumstances no longer prompt the aggregation of that self-state organization. Our default self-experience is lacking Wisdom, that is, the absence of direct insight into the fabricated and impermanent nature of the self. The cultivation of insight is the primary tool for developing Wisdom.

Regarding craving and clinging, the primary cause of sankhara dukkha, I want to describe these processes from a psychological and neuroscientific perspective, associated with the original Pali terms of the teachings. The Pali word for craving is *tanha* (than-hah), traditionally translated as *an unquenchable thirst*. The Pali word for clinging is *upadana* (oo-pah-dah-nah), which is translated as *fuel* or *sustenance*.

I don’t want to go too deeply into the psychological and neurological bases of these issues, but here is a superficial description: Craving is a fundamental organic response to the environment, either to approach something nutritive and safe or to avoid that which is toxic and dangerous. There are parts of the brain that are primarily involved in this behavioral response—the nucleus accumbens is frequent target for research focused on addiction as well as depression. Adjacent to the nucleus accumbens is the hippocampus, a cluster of neurons that generate perceptual processes and which is deeply interconnected to the areas of the brain that are associated with long-term memory and decision-making processes, withing which the process of clinging occurs. These two functions, craving and clinging, create the phenomenon of the self, an essential characteristic of which is the notion that there is an observer/actor, recipient residing withing the process, and this self must be defended and/or gratified.