**STRESS AND THE DHAMMA**

The historical Buddha spoke to people whose culture was radically different from ours. Most people lived lives that were very stable, and living in a caste system provided very clear-cut roles for them. At the same time, there was considerable cultural transformation occurring—the first coherent political states were organizing, and towns and cities were emerging out of what had been a primarily agrarian social organization. Even though Siddhattha Gotama, the future Buddha, was raised in what amounted to a republic, there were kingdoms emerging that were warlike and desired to conquer adjoining territory; in fact, the birthplace of Siddhattha was overrun and burned during his lifetime.

Underlying all these circumstances was the fact that, although cultural norms might be stable during one’s lifetime, the fragility of life was quite evident. There was the problem of disease, injury and other conditions that would simply be inconvenient and uncomfortable in modern life, yet would have fatal outcomes for whoever was affected by them. Apparently, this fragility was hidden from him during his youth, but eventually he must have realized the fragility of life in such a way that it inspired him to leave all his comfort and privilege, living under very primitive conditions, devoting his life to addressing the problem of human distress.

Today, we live in circumstances that are quite different, in fact, almost describable as being flipped. We live in an environment that provides great comfort and physical security, and the average life span of someone today is quite significantly longer and more comfortable than just 100 years ago! Even though that security is provided for the large majority of Americans, the cultural norms and environmental stimuli have become extraordinarily fluid and demanding a lot of time and effort to cope with.

My father was born before the first airplane flight, and lived long enough to watch the moon landing on television! During his lifetime, he was a child during WW I, the great flu epidemic of 1918, raised a family during the depression, witnessed WW II, the Cold War, and other enormously impactful events. During that time, he also was introduced to the automobile, mass transit, the implementation of air conditioning, the radio, television, major political shifts and the onset of consumerism.

I say these things to illustrate that, even though our era provides us with great physical security and domestic comfort, we’re immersed in an environment that is very demanding on the human nervous system. If Siddhattha Gotama was alive today, he would recognize the people he met as human, but the environment would be quite radically different and would place very different stresses on him than 25 centuries ago.

It seems to me that the predominant fears that folks experience in this era are more about status, social acceptability, the loss of creature comforts and identifiable roles. Of course, those of us who commute on the interstate are exposed to the possibility of mortal danger, however statistically minimal the risk is. When we watch the news, however, nearly all of what is shown represents some sort of threat—crime, financial ruin, political turmoil, illness, etc. Advertising emphasizes what we *don’t* have, implying that we need something more than what we currently have or experience to *really* enjoy life!

**WHAT IS STRESS?**

Here is a quote from the Dukkha Sutta, from the Sutta Nipata:

"There are these three forms of stressfulness, my friend: the stressfulness of pain, the stressfulness of fabrication, the stressfulness of change. These are the three forms of stressfulness."

The stressfulness of pain simply refers to the consequences of living: hunger, injury, disease, fatigue, grief, and so on. The stressfulness of change refers to the intrinsic instability of life’s circumstances. This can be experienced directly as moments of “selfing” arise and collapse incessantly, and as the unpredictability of circumstances—environmental conditions can change rapidly and beyond anyone’s control. The third form of dukkha is the one that Buddhism addresses, that of mental fabrication. The degree to which a mental fabrication either fosters well-being or dis-ease is the primary goal of vipassana practice.

There are two different types of stress: *distress* and *eustress*. *Distress* is the body’s reaction to unpleasant stimuli. It is experienced physically and psychologically as a threat. In our culture, the loss of status or physical comforts are considered as threats, and the body reacts in the same way as if confronted with a threat to physical safety. *Eustress* is the body’s reaction to pleasant stimuli, and has physical and psychological elements. Pleasant stress is considered to be the result of effective coping with stimulation, and is generally regarded as beneficial. From a Buddhist perspective, which is organized around impermanence and the results from the process of craving and clinging, eustress that relies on external factors (including social status) is ultimately not beneficial, as the mental fabrications associated with wanting pleasant stimulation to continue creates distress when the pleasant feeling is threatened, either directly, or through realizing the potential of the pleasure ceasing. The cultivation of samadhi/passadhi (stability of focus and inner tranquility) through regular meditation practice produces feelings of well-being that can be considered as eustress, but are much less vulnerable to craving and clinging, particularly when vipassana illuminates the conditional and transitory nature of samadhi/passadhi.

What happens to the body when a stress reaction is occurring?

* The processes involved with attention become fixated on the stress-inducing perceptions to the exclusion of other considerations through craving and clinging.
* Hormones generated in the pituitary gland send signals to the adrenal glands located on top of the kidneys. These glands secrete adrenaline, which increases muscle tension, blood pressure and heart rate. Cortisol is also secreted, which increases glucose production and the immune response.
* When the stress is prolonged and/or chronic, the otherwise beneficial effects of adrenaline and cortisol become toxic.

When the stressful circumstances are brief and clearly understood, the presence of adrenaline and cortisol in the body is beneficial. When the stressful circumstances are persistent and/or the outcome is uncertain, the levels of adrenaline and cortisol become toxic. This toxicity results in chronic high blood pressure, structural changes in the brain that reduce emotional self-regulation, chronic headaches or back pain, and hypervigilance regarding potential threats. Additionally, there is an increased vulnerability to disorders of the immune system, which can make it easier to get sick, or by creating or aggravating diseases and disorders such as rheumatoid arthritis or colitis. There is an epidemic of Type 2 diabetes in our culture; one of the functions of cortisol is to activate insulin, and that may play a role in generating diabetes.

**STRESS AND THE FIVE HINDRANCES**

The experience of samadhi/passadhi is dependent upon setting aside the five hindrances: *sensual desire, aversion and ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry,* and *skeptical doubt*. Sensual desire is characterized by excitement and fixation on a desirable focus of attention. Aversion and ill-will is characterized by excitement and fixation on an undesirable focus of attention. Sloth and torpor is characterized by dullness and drowsiness regarding any focus of attention, and skeptical doubt, which is characterized by indecisiveness, confusion and the absence of commitment regarding a focus of attention. There are elements of restlessness in any moment of the mind that is unwholesome; that is, a restless and agitated mind is characteristic of unwholesomeness in life. The hindrance that is most easily associated with stress is restlessness and worry, uddhacca/kukkuccha. Here’s what Wikipedia says about restlessness:

In the [Visuddhimagga](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Visuddhimagga) (II, Part IX, Chapter I, 250) gives the following definition of uddhacca:...It has mental excitement as characteristic like wind-tossed water; wavering as function, like a flag waving in the wind; whirling as manifestation like scattered ashes struck by a stone; unsystematic thought owing to mental excitement as proximate cause; and it should be regarded as mental distraction over an object of excitement.

Here’s the rendering of worry in the Wikipedia:

The [Atthasālinī](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atthas%C4%81lin%C4%AB) (II, Book II, Part IX, Chapter III, 258) gives the following definition of kukkucca: ...It has repentance as characteristic, sorrow at deeds of commission and omission as function, regret as manifestation, deeds of commission and omission as proximate cause, and it should be regarded as a state of bondage.

The definition of kukkucca in the Buddhist tradition is organized around ethical behavior; the cause of worry is the stress that arises from misdeeds. In a contemporary context, worry includes this, in addition to a quality of self-talk that is intrusive, repetitive and can manifest as preoccupation with something painful that happened in the past or anticipating something that might happen in the future.

The characteristic emotional tone of restlessness and worry is counteracted by the practice of mindfulness of breathing. Staying with the breath sensation for several cycles of breathing in and out stabilizes attention. This is combined with mindfully noting the “selfing story” that is associated with the restlessness and diverting attention away from the internal commentary and back to the breath.

**WHAT CULTURAL FACTORS CREATE AND SUPPORT TOXIC STRESS RESPONSES?**

As mentioned above, our culture is radically different from earlier eras of human existence. Here are some considerations in this regard: The latest American Psychological Association (APA) report in January of 2017 notes that American’s reports of stress on a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 indicating the highest level, that the rating increased from 4.8 to 5.1, and that the strongest influences for stress are political and related to social media access (Social media including cable news, Facebook, the internet, etc.).

The neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky, who wrote “Why Zebras Don’t Get Ulcers”, has written a new book, “Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst”. The premise of the book is that much of our stress is unconscious and instinctively reactive, and due to the perception that we can’t control aspects of life. This might include work, relationships, disturbed weather patterns and social conditions involving politics, race, poverty, etc.

* In a consumer culture, we are strongly conditioned toward fabricated “necessities”, such as clothing styles, creature comforts, entertainment modalities (movies, tv, the internet, smart phones, etc.) The embedded message in the ads that promote consumption is that we can be happier if we consume what is marketed, and if we don’t have what the ad promises, we will be deprived. The nervous and hormonal system interprets these wants as requirements for survival, unless mindfulness sees through the flawed premise of the ad.
* With a 24 hour news cycle and instantaneous transmission of information, we are bombarded with misery and suggestions that the world isn’t safe. This strategy works because the nervous and hormonal system is primed to be alert to potential threats. Even though we can be rationally clear that a war or catastrophe on the other side or the planet, environmental degradation and the climate changes that result from pollution, or crime in impoverished metropolitan areas aren’t direct threats, subconsciously, adrenaline and cortisol production is enhanced. One of the benefits of ongoing mindfulness practice, combined with the beneficial effects of samadhi/passadhi, is the increased ability to notice and disregard the misperceptions that mass media prompts.
* There is persistent pressure from emails, text messages, tweets, and so on, that seem to demand immediate response, which arouses the production stress. Because of the increasing use of computers and software, more productivity can be gained from fewer employees in the workplace. The increasing divide between the “haves” and the “have nots” creates stress for both segments of the population—the have nots feel inadequate and powerless, and the haves fear losing the privileges and comforts of being on top of the consumption category.

**WHAT IS THE PREVALENCE OF STRESS IN OUR CULTURE?**

What can statistical analysis tell us about the percentage of the current population adversely affected by stress? Here is the data downloaded from Statistic Brain Research Institute on May 29th, 2015, and gathered by the Institute in March and April, 2015:

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| Percent of people who regularly experience physical symptoms caused by stress: 77% | 77 % |
| Regularly experience psychological symptoms caused by stress: 73% | | 73 % |
| Feel they are living with extreme stress: 33% | | 33 % |
| Feel their stress has increased over the past five years: 48% | | 48 % |
| Cited money and work as the leading cause of their stress: 76% | | 76 % |
| Reported lying awake at night due to stress: 48% | | 48 % |

Here is data on how this stress is impacting their lives:

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| Percent who say stress has a negative impact on their personal and professional life: 48% |
| Employed adults who say they have difficulty managing work and family responsibilities: 31%. |
| Percent who cited jobs interfering with their family or personal time as a significant source of stress: 35% |
| Perccent who said stress has caused them to fight with people close to them: 54% |
| Reported being alienated from a friend or family member because of stress: 26% |
| Annual costs to employers in stress related health care and missed work: $300 billion |
| Percent who say they are "always" or "often" under stress at work: 30% |

Here is a listing of the physical and psychological symptoms of stress:

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| Fatigue: 51% |
| Headache: 44% |
| Upset stomach: 34% |
| Muscle tension: 30% |
| Change in appetite: 23% |
| Teeth grinding: 23% |
| Change in sex drive: 15% |
| Feeling dizzy: 13% |
| Irritability or anger: 50% |
| Feeling nervous: 45% |
| Lack of energy: 45% |
| Feeling as though you could cry¨35% |