Understanding Dukkha

**Top of Form**

**Dukkha Sutta: Stress**

translated from the Pali by

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

[© 1999](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn38/sn38.014.than.html#F_termsOfUse)

On one occasion Ven. Sariputta was staying in Magadha in Nalaka Village. Then Jambukhadika the wanderer went to Ven. Sariputta and, on arrival, exchanged courteous greetings with him. After this exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to Ven. Sariputta: "'Stress, stress,' it is said, my friend Sariputta. Which type of stress [are they referring to]?"

"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."

"But is there a path, is there a practice for the full comprehension of these forms of stressfulness?"

"Yes, there is a path, there is a practice for the full comprehension of these forms of stressfulness."

"Then what is the path, what is the practice for the full comprehension of these forms of stressfulness?"

"Precisely this Noble Eightfold Path, my friend — right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This is the path, this is the practice for the full comprehension of these forms of stressfulness."

"It's an auspicious path, my friend, an auspicious practice for the full comprehension of these forms of stressfulness — enough for the sake of heedfulness."

"Dukkha Sutta: Stress" (SN 38.14), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight (BCBS Edition)*, 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn38/sn38.014.than.html> .

The traditional translation of *dukkha* is *suffering*. Note in Thanissaro’s translation, dukkha is *stress*. Other renderings would include *unsatisfactoriness, insufficiency* and *painfulness*, among others. The translation I prefer is *distress* *and confusion*. The cause of dukkha is found in the composition of the Second Noble Truth, that is, *craving*, or *unquenchable thirst* (*tanha*, pronounced than-hah) and *clinging* (*upadana*, pronounced oo-pah-dahn-ah). The reason I prefer distress relates to the urgent unpleasantness of thirst; confusion relates to the inherent uncertainty of memory’s rendering of what is happening. A person can easily misperceive what is happening, due to ego defense or ego gratification, and that is what clinging represents. The literal translation of *upadana* is *the fuel that keeps the fire burning* and relates to the obligation of the Vedic priests to keep sacred fires burning perpetually.

In “Satipatthana-The Direct Path To Realization”, Analayo offers additional insight regarding the origins of the term on page 234:

“*Dukkha* can be derived from the Sanskrit *kha*, one meaning of which is “the axle-hole of a wheel”, and the antithetic prefix *duh* (= *dus*), which stands for “difficulty” or “badness”. The complete term then evokes the image of an axle not fitting properly into its hole. According to this image, dukkha suggests “disharmony” or “friction”. Alternatively, *dukkha* can be related to the Sanskrit *stha*, “standing” or “abiding”, combined with the same antithetic prefix *duh*. *Dukkha* in the sense of “standing badly” then conveys nuances of “uneasiness” or of being “uncomfortable”. In order to catch the various nuances of “*dukkha*”, the most convenient translation is “unsatisfactoriness”, though it might be best to leave the term untranslated.”

The term describing the alternate of dukkha is *sukha*, traditionally translated as “happiness”; the original meaning was the characteristic associated with a good fit between the axle and the wheel on a cart “running swiftly and easily”. A more appropriate rendering might then be “satisfying”, “easeful” or “fulfilling current circumstances”.

Dukkha is one of the three characteristics of human existence: anicca (impermanence), dukkha (distress and confusion) and anatta (the absence of an autonomous, enduring self). Because of ignorance of these circumstances, life is hard, driven by desire for pleasantness to be obtained and its enjoyment uninterrupted, or the desire to avoid, control and destroy unpleasantness.

As the First Noble Truth, dukkha is to be understood; this understanding is both conceptual and experiential. The preceding paragraph provides a basic conceptual understanding, and the investigation of how distress and confusion is experienced though Right Mindfulness, Right Effort and Right Concentration provides the opportunity to experientially understand the nature and experience of craving and clinging, the Second Noble Truth.

Dukkha manifests in different ways (downloaded from Wikipedia February 6, 2018):

* *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 the changing nature of all things. This includes the frustration of not getting what you want.
* *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.

An important distinction regarding the three characteristics just described is to realize that physically painful sensations are not in and of themselves dukkha-the liberation teachings always bring attention to how the mind makes meaning out of the raw data of physical stimulation (in this regard I dispute the “mental sufferings” mentioned in the Wikipedia quote). In my personal experience with kidney stones, a quite physically painful occurrence, I mindfully observed how my body squirmed from the agony but was otherwise calm and curious about what was happening.

It is not possible to control the nature of impermanence, the second category of dukkha (despite the efforts of the cosmetic surgery profession!). The utter complexity of reality is constantly rearranging, and the dynamic interplay can only marginally be managed. We can construct objects from steel that will far outlast a human’s life, but eventually will degrade into more basic elements, due to the effects of other materials and processes in the environment. Of course, the human process of thinking moves along quite rapidly: neural signals travel hundreds of miles and hour over small distances, and operate in oscillating waves multiple times per second.

This is where the third category operates, *sankhara-dukkha*. This mental function includes all the various ways that raw sensory data is processed into conscious thoughts and behaviors. In Buddhist psychology, these categories of mental functions are called *sankhara*; another term that is practically synonymous is *cetasika*. The cetasikas are organized in various ways: universal, occasional, unwholesome and wholesome. The various sankhara functions are coordinated by intention or volition (*cetana* in Pali) and are involved in any moment of selfing. Dukkha involves the coordination of universal, unwholesome and often occasional cetasikas.

**Overcoming Dukkha:** The antidote for dukkha involves “the full comprehension of stress”, mentioned at the beginning of these notes. This process involves the intentional coordination of the universal, wholesome and often occasional cetasikas. Right Mindfulness is a wholesome cetasika, combined with Right Effort and Right Concentration, elements of the Noble Eightfold Path. This practice reveals the Second Noble Truth, that is, craving and clinging, which, like the First Noble Truth, is to be understood both conceptually and experientially.

Mindfulness of breathing is a wholesome manifestation in the mind—dukkha is inoperative at that point. When attention is drawn away from breath awareness, the alternate focus of attention could be wholesome or unwholesome. Noting the emergence of an unwholesome self-state organization involves mindfulness and renunciation of that focal point. Right Effort provides redirecting attention back to the wholesomeness of breath awareness. When this sort of practice is well-established, the ability to manage where attention is stabilized and resulting wholesome behavior (Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood) generalizes, that is, breath awareness may or may not be involved, but one’s ability to evoke and sustain self-state organizations imbued with sukha is enhanced. This is the process of awakening.