Working With Dukkha

A key concept of the Buddhist world view and liberation practice points to Dukkha as the primary motivation for the Buddha’s realization commitment—the process for Awakening is reflected in the Four Noble Truths: Dukkha, the cause of Dukkha, Liberation from Dukkha and the Path for accomplishing Liberation from Dukkha (The Noble Eightfold Path).

Typically, Dukkha is translated as *suffering;* I prefer the terms *distress and confusion*. *Distress* focuses on the *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 the self is enduring and autonomous—*the enchantment of this misconception creates maladaptive beliefs and behaviors, creating adverse outcomes for one’s life and the life of others.*

Here is what Wikipedia has to offer regarding the characteristics 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 dukkham 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.

The first category is inescapable; when we inhabit a body these experiences will happen—how we can condition the mind to not be adversely affected mentally by what the body must endure is the primary aspiration of Buddhism. The second of the characteristics relates to Anicca, the transient nature of phenomena, particularly mental phenomena. This references the distress of craving. The third relates to Anatta, the absence of an enduring and autonomous self. The self-fabricating process that is manifested by craving and clinging is a primary area of detached investigation through vipassana practice—the aspiration is to cultivate dispassion regarding the urgent feelings stimulated by a situation and dissolve the clinging that occurs through cultivating detached awareness.

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 another 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).

The primary driver for Dukkha is craving and clinging. *Tanha* is the Pali word for craving and it is derived from earlier terms describing *unquenchable thirst*. *Upadana* is the Pali word for clinging and it is derived from earlier terms describing *fuel or nutriment, that which provides the fuel for craving to burn*. Interestingly, the word *Nirvana can be described as what occurs when all the fuel is used up*; Buddhadassa, a well-respected master, suggested that country people put cooked rice out to cool from the heat of the fire and this cooling is nirvana.

One can make an argument that contemporary consumerist culture has cultivated the dissatisfaction characteristic 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. This 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 reports and entertaining shows that incite fear are commercials scientifically designed to manifest desire in whoever is watching—an alteration between generated fear and the promise of pleasure and happiness is consciously established to create the urge to consume a product in order to divert attention from fear 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 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 or depressive lethargy/hopelessness). This represents the First Noble Truth.
* To be directly aware of the selfing story that accompanies the physical symptoms.
* 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/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); this internal balance is facilitated by consciously releasing and relaxing any tension while breathing out.

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 fabrications, not a self, and this culminates in the realization we call Awakening. According to the teachings, there are progressive stages of Awakening. There is a realization that the Four Noble Truths actually produce what 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.