

To Comprehend Suffering

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There are two kinds of stress in life. There's the stress of things on their own, given that they're compounded and that it takes a certain amount of effort for them to stay together because they're unstable compounds. That's one kind of stress.

The other kind of stress is the stress that comes from craving. And that's the real problem.

The fact that your experience of a tree is a stressful experience simply because there are compounded elements there: That's not a real problem. The real problem is if you cling to the tree, if you hold on to it, if you try to find happiness based on the tree. Then you've got a problem.

The first kind of stress is the stress of the three characteristics.

The second kind is the stress in the four noble truths, *dukkha*, which can also be translated as suffering or dis-ease. That, the Buddha said, we have to comprehend. And he gave us tools for comprehending it: the five aggregates. If there's any stress weighing the mind down, you can know for sure that it's because you're clinging to any one of the five aggregates or any combination of them.

Even though we take our suffering very personally, these are tools for depersonalizing it, for learning to step back from the suffering so that we can watch it and see it simply as an event. We can learn to put it at arm's length so that we don't build up an identity around it.

This is one of the reasons I like to translate the word *dukkha* as "stress." If we translate it as "suffering," sometimes we build up melodramatic narratives around the suffering. But if you say simply, "Okay, there's stress in life and it doesn't have to be there," it makes it less romantic. You can look at it simply as a totally unnecessary addition to what's going on.

And as long as you're experiencing time and space as you're living this life, you have to deal with the aggregates. As you have to look after your body or what's going on in the mind, there are going to be feelings and perceptions and thought-constructs and consciousness: That's all part of this life.

It's the clinging that's optional; it's the clinging that's unnecessary. That's what you've got to learn to comprehend. But first, to comprehend it, you have to understand: What are the five objects you cling to? Because seeing them helps take apart this sense of "me" here or the "my" suffering, and you can look at it in impersonal terms.

There's form. Form can be the form of your body or it can be any sensory input at all. As for the form of the body, it's made of what are called the four elements or the four properties: solidity, liquidity, energy, and warmth. Those kinds of sensations count as form. You're sitting here: The reason you know there's a body here is because of these four kinds of sensations.

Now, on top of that, there may be feelings of pleasure or pain or neutral feelings. And even though these may be associated with the body, they themselves are not "body."

It's important to make that distinction, because we often confuse them. Say there's a pain in your leg, a pain in your back, or a pain in your shoulder. The pain and the shoulder often get equated in your mind, as if the pain has seized the shoulder or fully inhabiting the shoulder. You feel you can't have any experience of shoulder without the pain. Or the same with the knee: Wherever the body and the pain are dwelling together, we tend to glom them together as one thing. And so, say, the pain and the sensation of solidity become one. Or the pain and sensation of warmth become one.

Now, the solidity lasts for quite a while. The same with the other elements. That makes it seem as if the pain is one constant buzz right there because you've glued it together with something that's more solid and lasting.

But you can learn how to distinguish between these two things: There's the pleasure and there's the pain on one side, and then there's the solidity and warmth and liquidity and energy on the other side. Put them on two different sides. See them as two different kinds of sensations.

Then, say, if there's a pain in your leg, focus on the form sensations and allow the pain and pleasure sensations to just come and go. You begin to see that they really are very fleeting: They come and go, come and go, come and go. And just that insight is often enough to help you see that the suffering you so strongly identified with is not nearly as solid as you thought it was. You glued it onto something solid, but now you can unglue it.

This is why discernment is often compared to a knife, cutting through different things, allowing you to analyze your sensation of the body in different ways, to separate things that were glued together.

As you're watching the pains coming and going, you begin to see that they're affected by your perceptions, the labels you put on things. One of the major labels of course is your label of "the pain." There may be also a visual image in the mind that you create around the pain. That, too, counts as a perception.

Learn to see these perceptions as events separate from the pain, because the perceptions arise and pass away. The perceptions arise and pass away and will have

an influence on the amount of suffering you have around the pain.

Sometimes a perception actually influences the actual experience of physical pain as well. So you want to look for that connection. And the only way you can see the connection is to realize that they are separate things that arise and pass away together.

So that's one of the things you want to look for. When there's a physical pain and yet there's also mental pain that goes along with it, the mental pain is totally unnecessary. The physical pain is part of having a body. These things are bound to be there. But the mental pain is unnecessary—you don't have to carry the physical pain around. The reason you *do* carry it around is because of a perception: the perception of "my" pain or "my knee is pained."

So again, you can use the template of the aggregates to start dividing these things up. There's the body, and there's a feeling and then there's the perception, the label you have about the pain.

And then there are thought-constructs. These are the narratives you build up around the pain: "Why is this happening to me? I don't deserve this." Or you think about all the pain you've suffered for the past hour or so. Especially if you've been ill, it's been there for a long time and it may be for a long time into the future. You start thinking about that, and it adds more suffering on top of the pain right now.

So again, see that the perception and the thought-constructs are optional. You don't have to believe them; you don't have to feed off them.

This is where our emotions around pain, both physical and mental, get formed, in this area of thought-constructs. We put all these things together into stories of "Why is this happening to me?" And on and on and on. So take them apart as something separate.

And then there's your consciousness of these things: just the simple awareness. The pain is one thing; the awareness of the pain is something else. Again, they don't have to be glommed or glued together the way they often are.

Try to see the pain simply as something "*bhutam*"—as something that has come to be, without looking at what you might make out of it, or how you might connect it with something else and equate it with something else. See it just as something that's there, on its own, separate from the form, separate from the perception, separate from the thought-construct, separate from the awareness.

When you can be aware of these things as separate things, it begins to cut the suffering down to size, to chop it up into little bits.

At the same time, you can pull out of it—whatever your clinging was to these things, your identification with them as "me" or "mine." Or your feeling that you

are being oppressed by the pain and you want to find some sensations of pleasure: You struggle with those, but you can stop that, and just look at, “Okay, this is something that has simply come into being. I want to watch it as it is coming to be”—without seeing what you can whip it up into.

It’s like having raw materials for a meal, but you realize that every time you put the meal together, the food tastes horrible. So can you just leave the raw materials alone and not try to feed off them, not try to make a meal out of them.

Of course the mind will complain, “What are you going to feed on?” This is why we have concentration. This is why we have our topics of meditation, to give the mind something else to feed on, so that it doesn’t have to feed off its perceptions and thought-constructs that lead to suffering.

So try to get the mind into a good solid place. As the Buddha said, it’s when the mind is in concentration that it can see things as they’ve come into being, i.e., before you’ve manipulated them and dressed them up into something else. Just see the raw materials as they are. The mind in concentration can see them. The mind out of concentration can’t see them in that way.

Once the mind gets settled down and you encounter a pain someplace in the body or a feeling of dis-ease in the mind, learn how to take it apart in terms of these raw materials. This way, when you cut suffering down to size, you find it’s a lot more manageable. You don’t have to suffer. You don’t have to make those wretched meals that you’ve been making for so long. On the one hand, you’ve got better food, and this better food ultimately will take you to the point where you don’t need to feed. The raw materials can be left as raw materials. If you do put them together, you’ve learned how to put them together in a much more skillful way, as factors of the path. And if you don’t need to feed, you can give them to other people who *do* need to feed, to help them along their way.

So these are a few beginning directions in how to comprehend suffering, the suffering that comes from our craving and clinging and ignorance. Because that’s the only suffering that’s really a problem.

You find that as you start along in this direction you’ll gain your own insights into precisely how you’ve been feeding, precisely how you’ve been trying to put these things together into whatever the kind of meal it was.

But this is enough to give you a start.