

All Fabrications Are Stressful

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I was asked a while back: “How is it that Buddhists can say that ‘All things are unsatisfactory,’ when we haven’t experienced all things?” Actually, he said, “How can *you* say that?” And I replied, “Well, *I* don’t say that things are unsatisfactory.” To begin with, “unsatisfactory” is a strange translation of the word *dukkha*. *Dukkha* means pain, suffering, stress—the whole gamut of things from very subtle levels of stress to extreme misery.

But even then, how can you say that “Everything is *dukkha*”? Well, we don’t. What the Buddha said is that “Everything *that’s fabricated* is *dukkha*.” What does fabrication mean? It’s the process that we use to experience the world, to experience ourselves.

That gives you the answer right there. If you realize that everything that comes through the six senses has to go through your process of fabrication, then you can legitimately see how all things fabricated are stressful. In other words, there is input that comes in from outside; the world is not totally illusory. There’s contact that comes in, but then we have to fashion the contact in order to make sense of it. And that process of fashioning that we’re doing: That’s inconstant and it’s going to be stressful because it’s inconstant. That’s why we can pass the value judgment that it’s not worthy of laying claim to it as “ours.”

The only thing that’s not filtered through the six senses is unbinding. That’s why it’s the goal. Everything else—even the *deva* worlds, the *Brahmā* worlds—has to be filtered through form, feeling, perception, thought constructs, consciousness. And the simple fact that they’re fabricated in this way—whatever the experience is—means that they’re going to be stressful. You can’t take them as a place where you can really rest.

That’s one level of stress, one level of suffering. Then, on top of that, there’s the question of whether we’re doing it skillfully or not. We can have some very unskillful feelings, very unskillful perceptions, unskillful thoughts, etc. So there are layers and layers of stress and suffering no matter where you go in the six senses.

The purpose of all this contemplation is to get the mind on the path, to get to that experience that’s not filtered through the senses. And this contemplation does that by inducing a strong sense of *samvega*. It’s like those reflections we have in the chant we repeat often in the evening: “I’m subject to aging, illness, death, separation. I’m the owner of my actions.” In the original *sutta* from which that

reflections comes, it goes on to say, “Not only am I subject to these things; everybody, everywhere you go, is subject to aging, illness, death, separation. Everybody has kamma as their arbitrator, kamma as their possession.”

The first round contemplation, the Buddha says, is the basis for heedfulness—realizing you’ve got to get your act together. It’s bad enough that we have aging, illness, and death, but our actions can make the situation even worse. We pile unskillful thoughts, unskillful words, unskillful deeds on top of the facts of aging, illness, and death—making things a lot harder, creating a lot more suffering. So, reflecting on the fact that your life is marked by these things, you want to become more skillful, more heedful.

But then, when you reflect that it’s everywhere—everybody is subject to these things, even the devas and Brahmās—that’s when you get on the path, realizing that you’ve got to get out.

So we look directly at the processes of our experience as we meditate. First, we get the mind to settle down. It’s like a course of therapy. Therapists will have you begin with what’s called “symptom management,” where they simply get you to calm down, to develop a feeling of security in the present moment. Only then can you do the real therapy, analyzing what’s going on in the mind so that you can come to some resolution—finding out, “Where in the mind is the mind telling itself stories that are harmful, hurtful? Why is the mind so rough with itself?”

It’s got lots of assumptions, and many of these assumptions go *way* back: back to times when we weren’t very rational, weren’t very knowledgeable. We were very, very young, trying to make sense of things. Sometimes we still have some ways of making sense of things that may have worked for the time being back then, but over the long run they can be really harmful.

It takes a mind that’s really, really still to see these things, to ferret them out. It’s only when you recognize them that you can do something about them. So we get the mind still, and then we can begin to do our analysis: “What in the mind is skillful? What in the mind is not?”

When the Buddha talks about the processes of meditation, it’s not just stilling; there’s also insight. A lot of people think that the insight means that you have to see things as inconstant, stressful, not-self; you have to say those words to yourself. That’s not the case. You just look at what you’re doing and look at the consequences. Whatever you can recognize as unskillful, you realize that you’ve actually chosen that unskillful way of thinking. But you can also think of an alternative that’s not so stressful. Then—whether you say “inconstant, stressful, not-self,” or not, the fact that you see that it’s stressful, and it’s optional, you can

choose something better—the mind will go for the better alternative, unless there's some aspect that it hasn't seen yet, that it's still holding on to.

But that's what the stillness is for: so that you can dig deeper and deeper to see these things. Deeper into what? Deeper into the present moment. When the Buddha discusses the insights that led to his awakening, they weren't insights into the world out there, or the self in here—things you can't see. They were insights into things that are happening right in the present moment, right on the surface of consciousness.

Look at all those factors in dependent co-arising. There's no reference to the world out there, and the Buddha actually discouraged people from thinking about, "What's in here that's experiencing these things?" It's just, "Look at these things as events. Look at them as activities, as they're immediately apparent." Keep it at that level. But be relentlessly aware, alert, mindful, so that you can notice subtle things that are happening.

The mind has its micro-expressions, just as your face has micro-expressions. We have the facial expressions that we compose, that we use to face the world. Sometimes they're like a mask. Occasionally, though, there's a little crack in the mask. As you move from one composed mask to another mask, little micro-expressions will flit across the face. Some people will ignore them; other people are sensitive to them.

It's the same inside the mind. The mind has its way of presenting things to itself, and then it will move on to another way of presenting things to itself, that it thinks is all right. But in between times, there can be these little dialogues, monologues, little fragments of this and that, and those will reveal a *lot* about what's going on. For the most part, we tend to skim over them. We don't want to look at them. Even though they're happening right here, we can't see them. That's the irony of all this.

What the Buddha is saying is, "Don't go looking for things behind the scenes. Just keep looking for what's here: right here, right now," because this is where those processes of fabrication are happening—the ones by which we try to make sense of the world.

You might ask, "Why do we try to make sense of the world?" It's because we've taken on the identity of a being. Beings have to feed. They have to make sense of the world out there so they can know what to feed on—this is a matter both of feeding on physical food and of feeding on emotional food, mental food. The fact that you're a being means you have to feed.

This is why anything you might experience as a being is going to be stressful: You have to keep processing your food. What does it mean to be a being? You

latch on to form, feeling, perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness. When they fall apart, then you latch on to new ones, and then new ones. You keep on going.

Even at death, when you can't stay with this body anymore, there's still a sense of you as a being that's going to go on to another life. It's based on craving, and the craving lands on someplace where it can become another being, to keep up the process.

So this is what the Buddha said is the suffering, the stress. You can't experience the world without being a being. So, no matter where you go in any world, there's going to be suffering and stress. Keep thinking about that.

And have confidence that there is a way out. It means looking at these processes as you're doing them.

It's because the Buddha understood the processes that he saw there's going to be suffering everywhere in every world. Wherever there's fabrication, there's going to be suffering.

It's the same way as when he saw the processes of the path. Someone once asked him, "Is the whole world going to be eventually awakened?" He didn't answer. "Half the world?" ... didn't answer. "A third of the world?" ... didn't answer. Venerable Ananda was sitting by, and he was concerned that the man asking the questions might get upset that the Buddha was not answering an important question. So he pulled the man aside.

He told him, "It's like a fortress. An experienced gatekeeper sees there's one gate into the fortress. He goes walking around the whole fortress, and he doesn't see any holes big enough even for a cat to slip through. Now, if he's wise and experienced, he doesn't come to the conclusion that 'So-and-so many people are going to come in and out of the fortress.' But he does know that 'If anybody sizable is going to come in and out of the fortress, they're going to have to do it through that gate.'"

So it's through seeing the processes that are here—right here, right now—that the Buddha was able to make these statements about *all* experience. Because all experience has to go through the gate. All experience has to follow these same processes. The only experience that's not subject to these things, as I said, is nibbana: unbinding. That's why he says it's the only really worthwhile goal.

So when you look at the suffering of your life, you might say, "Why am I suffering so much more than other people?" But that's a useless question. Everybody's suffering one way or another. And over a *long* course of time, your level of suffering has gone up and down. The level of your skill has gone up and

down. The useful question you can ask yourself is, “Do I want to keep on doing this?”

It’s potentially endless. Even when the universe collapses in the big crunch, there are places where beings can go. They say the very lowest levels of hell and the very highest Brahmā levels are not affected by the appearance or disappearance of the universe. Beings go there. Then, as a new universe reforms, you move back into the universe again.

How many times have you done this? Countless times. How many more do you want to do it? That’s a question you have to answer for yourself.