

Two Types of Dukkha

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The Buddha talks about two kinds of stress or suffering, in two main contexts. There's a stress or suffering in the fact that all things that are fabricated and inconstant. There's stress simply in the fact of the fabrication.

The fact that they're inconstant means that as you focus on trying to find happiness in them, it's really hard. It's like trying to build your house on a sandy plot where the ocean is coming in and there are lots of earthquakes. Things are constantly changing. It's very unstable.

If you try to place your happiness there, you suffer. That's a different kind of suffering. That's the suffering of the four noble truths—the suffering that comes from craving.

The Buddha has you focus attention on this second kind of suffering because you can do something about that. When you do something about that, then you don't have to suffer from the other kind of stress. After all, arahants live in the same world we do. Their experience of the six senses is fabricated, so there will be that stress, but their minds don't suffer from that stress. That's because they don't have any craving.

What this means in practical terms is that the world can be pretty bad, the people in the world can say all kinds of things, do all kinds of things—thoughtful, thoughtless; kind, unkind; well-meaning, ill-meaning—and it can be painful. So the Buddha is not denying that there are bad things out there, but he is saying that the suffering that really weighs down your heart and mind, the suffering that really matters, is the suffering that you add on top of these things.

This is why we sit and meditate, closing our eyes to the world, so that we can see what the mind is doing right now that's adding unnecessary suffering, adding unnecessary stress to what we're experiencing. We try to bring our attention as much as we can into the present moment so that we can watch the workings of the mind.

Otherwise, we get into thought worlds, and thought worlds can take us far away into the past, far into the future, all around the world many times in the blink of an eye. When we get into those thought worlds, we can't see how they're constructed. We have to be able to step out of them a little bit and go back to the construction site. The construction site is right here, right now. We focus on the breath because it's very close to where these things are being constructed.

In fact, the way you breathe sometimes plays a role in how a thought forms. So, try to stay here as much as you can. In the beginning, you don't want to get involved in anything else. Just stay right with the breath, be as steady as you can, as calm as you can, and learn how to relate to the breath in a way that you can be friends.

We have lots of cartoon ideas about how we breathe, or how we should know the breath. For instance, when you're told to be aware of the in-and-out breath, part of the mind says, "Well, I have to have a little marker between the in-breath and the out-breath," and the marker doesn't happen on its own. So you add it, tighten up a little bit. Your tense up a little bit. And that tightness and tension prevents a sense of well-being from growing.

So think of the in-breath flowing into the out-breath, the out-breath flowing into the in-breath. Like the waters of the tides, they mingle so that there's one element all the way through. Then think of the in-and-out breath mingling with the other breath energies in the body. Ajaan Lee recommends starting with a couple of good long, deep in-and-out breaths. He doesn't say why, but it's partly so that you can be clear about the breathing: how it feels and where it's prominent. It's also needed because as you continue with the meditation, the breath gets more and more gentle, more and more refined, to the point where the breath energy seems to get still. It's going to be a full stillness.

You want to oxygenate your blood first. You can think of all the pores of your skin opening up, so that the breath can come in anywhere in the body. I have a student who has lung problems. She has to wear an oxygen monitor and she found when she sits and meditates and consciously thinks of all the pores opening up, the oxygen level in her blood goes up.

This is one way that you can allow the breath to grow calm, even to the point where it seems to stop, yet you're not going to be deprived of oxygen. You tap into the breath energy. Ajaan Lee talks about how the breath energy spreads around the world. It's not just in your body. When it's all connected like that, then you can be very, very still, yet the body has all of its oxygen needs met.

Then learn how to stay here. Whether the breath is coming in and out or not coming in and out, you want to stay right here, as long as you can. Get used to being here. Make this your default mode. This is where you keep coming back. This is your home.

It's a lot easier to work from home than it is, say, from a bus station, which is what most people's minds are like. All the doors are open; everybody can come in and go out. All kinds of people come in and go out. All kinds of things are happening in the bus station, so it's hard to find any peace. So close the windows,

close the doors. Make this a home. If anyone's going to come in, they come in with your permission. Whoever's going to go out, goes out with your permission. What people do when they come in, they have to have your permission as well. You're the one in charge. Ajaan Chah has the image of a person at home sitting in the only chair in the house. Everybody else who comes into the house has to stand. As long as you don't get up and let somebody else take your chair, you're the one in charge.

So your chair is right here with the breath. When things get really solid like this, when you feel really secure being with the breath, that's when you can allow other thoughts to come in. But allow them in a sense that you're going to watch them from outside. You're not going to get into them. You're not going to travel around inside them. You're going to stay right here. And as you stay right here, you can begin to see how they're constructed. You see the way in which you've been participating in the construction. Some of the constructions come in little bits and pieces, like bricks and mortar and other construction materials being sent in from the past. Your intentions right here in the present then turn those materials into little houses. Sometimes they're dog houses, sometimes they're human houses, sometimes deva palaces.

But you want to realize the extent to which you play a role in shaping whatever is being built. Often you find yourself shaping a really bad place to stay. Ask yourself, "Don't you have some better skills?" When people are really skilled, they can take any kind of material and make a decent house out of it.

When I was staying with Ajaan Fuang, one time he asked me to build a shed, and he told me not to use anything new. I had to take scraps from around the monastery, which meant I had to learn how to be ingenious. Some of the scraps were pretty scrappy, but I was able to put together a decent shed. In fact, it's still there. I learned a lot, much more than if I'd been able to buy new things.

So even when bad things are coming in through your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, thoughts of the past, or thoughts of the future, remind yourself that you can make something good out of even bad things coming in. At the very least, you can gain some insight into the extent to which you've allowed your thoughts to take over, allowed yourself to travel around too much in those thoughts. When you gain that insight, there's a sense of well-being. And from the well-being there comes a sense of peace.

The Buddha talks about two different ways you can develop equanimity skillfully. The kind of equanimity that he recommends is not just being accepting or non-reactive to whatever happens. First you have to find a sense of well-being inside, so that you can satisfy the mind's needs for well-being.

One of the two ways he recommends is that you develop concentration. Have a sense of ease with the breath, rapture with the breath, refreshment with the breath, whatever your topic is. Then, from that, you can settle into equanimity with a sense of well-being.

The other way is to gain insight, to see how you've been fooled by the mind's fabrications, to the point where you see an opening where you don't have to be fooled. There's a great sense of joy that comes with that. You've been released. Then, from the release comes the equanimity. That's one of the side effects because, after all, the release itself is something very, very pleasant. A great sense of relief. That allows you to be equanimous about other things.

So either way, the equanimity has to come from a sense of well-being if it's going to be healthy. Otherwise, if you force yourself simply to accept, accept, accept, it just becomes depressing. So work on your concentration, work on your insight to gain a sense of well-being and joy. You'll begin to see exactly where you're adding to the suffering, exactly how you're clinging, where your cravings are.

This is why the Buddha began his teaching career by talking about the four noble truths, because the issues always come down to them. The suffering that weighs on the mind is the clinging. It's a pretty radical idea. That suffering is caused by the craving—in other words, things that are happening right here, right now.

When you see this and you realize that you don't have to cling, then you can let go. And it's not that these things hold you down or hold you back. You're being held back by your own clinging, held back by your own craving. So when you can let go, the things of the world are not going to try to run after you. When you let them go, everybody goes back home to their own place.

So it's important that we see that there are these two types of suffering, two types of dukkha: the suffering in what are called the three characteristics, the suffering that's in inconstancy, and then the suffering in the four noble truths, which comes from craving. When you take care of the second one, the first one is no longer a problem.

So the second type of suffering is where your energy is going to be focused. When that problem is solved, there's nothing else to weigh down the mind.