

*“And there arises this sense of confidence that  
we can bear with what we might  
previously have thought unbearable.”*



# Mindfulness of Dukkha

From a talk given by Ajahn Jitindriya

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I assume we all have the basic feeling, when we come to spiritual practice, of a certain amount of dissatisfaction with what we can find in the world.

We've tasted a certain amount of gratification in the sensory realm but find that it doesn't actually fulfill a deep inner need, so we come to spiritual practice to find something that fulfills that deeper need. It's a deeper longing really, a spiritual longing, for a peace, a stillness — perhaps a peace that can only come about through understanding what it is that makes us unpeaceful. We've all tasted various degrees of happiness and peace but they all pass away, they all, in their passing, leave us still with a sense of dissatisfaction and dis-ease with the world, with our situation, with our life the way we find it.

This is what keeps us seeking for something more fundamental, something that promises a lasting reprieve from *dukkha* — and this is indeed what the Buddha promises when he talks about his teaching, what he's found in terms of liberation. He said, in one of his more famous discourses:

“There is the Unborn, the Unoriginated, the Uncreated, the Unformed; if it weren't for this

Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unformed, there would be no escape from the born, the originated, the created, the formed. But since there is this Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unformed, then there is an escape from the born, the originated, the created, the formed.”

He’s talking about our psychological reality, the creation we experience as our internal world, as our external world — in fact, we are each our own world of experience, crossing over and interrelating with other worlds of experience, of people’s karmic predicaments.

The Buddha directs us to examine the world in which we find ourselves, our own experience, how we *receive* the world. The world is what we experience through the senses: the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and the mind (discriminating consciousness) as the sixth sense. If you think about it, there is nothing in the world we experience that is not through these six senses. The Buddha is directing us to examine these sensory doors, to come to understand the world that we experience because it’s only through this understanding that we can begin to appreciate what this Unborn, Uncreated, this Deathless, this ultimate refuge might be, within our own experience. The tack he’s taking is to come to know the obstructions to this ultimate peace, to know them so fully that they can then be put down, abandoned, let go of; seen through as not who and what we are.

This is a tremendous undertaking — to begin to examine our experience, examine what the

obstructions to the Deathless are — primarily because much of it is painful and our natural response and reaction to pain is to get away from it, to get rid of it.

Now this is a misunderstanding within ourselves. We're searching for this peace and this happiness but our habitual way of looking for that is to just push away that which is not peaceful and not conducive to happiness. So it takes quite a training of the mind and the heart to begin to turn towards what we experience as unpeaceful or productive of *dukkha* — that's why the Buddha started with *dukkha* as the beginning of his teaching. "I teach *dukkha* and the end of *dukkha*," these are conjoined, they come together — it's only through coming to understand our pain, our reactivity, that we can then experience that which is beyond *dukkha*.

~ DUKKHA: A CAUSE FOR FAITH TO ARISE ~

I've talked about this before because, for me, *dukkha* is the primary reflection in my practice. Some people think that this is a very pessimistic approach, and at times it may sound pessimistic — we all go through rather pessimistic periods and optimistic periods too — but it's also a realistic approach, it's about our actual experience.

It's a technique really, of bringing us fully into the present moment. We tend to deny so much of what we're feeling, we haven't developed the capacity to bear the pain of what we're feeling, we don't have the confidence to truly feel what we're experiencing — and by that

confidence I mean what the Buddha refers to as *saddha*: faith, confidence, trust. To really allow ourselves to experience what's going on, to be fully present, there needs to be this *saddha*, because in being present we're letting go of our habitual clinging to the past and the future, we're letting go of our tight hold on our world, our life. We're letting go of the attempt to make life comfortable, bearable, happy, and that's a very, very deep clinging we have — this tendency to want to create our world, to manipulate, and to avoid suffering.

To be fully present in the moment means that one has actually let go of that habit of the mind, that 'becoming' energy, that sense of creating oneself in the future — be it in just the next moment, or the next hour, or in habitually thinking about what I'm going to do tomorrow, or what might happen in ten years time. As we develop meditation we may all experience moments of being fully present and recognise the peace in that moment, but the difficulty is in sustaining this kind of reprieve from being stuck in the conceptual creation, the dualistic notions, of 'self' and 'the world.'

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with 'self' and 'the world,' it's rather the ignorance with which this habit of mental concocting continues, our grasping at mental notions — it keeps us in darkness and it keeps us in a cycle of recreating pain for ourselves. Until we can break free of this cycle we won't experience the full depth of the liberation that the Buddha's saying is available, is possible. So the practice is continuing to find

ways to break this cycle, to sustain the gaps of becoming, to increase our faith, increase our confidence.

The Buddha, in a sequence of Dhamma teaching, described dukkha as a condition for the arising of saddha, which is this faith, confidence and trust. We need to bring our awareness to this point of dukkha, or unsatisfactoriness, in the present moment, and develop this knowing awareness of it, then ultimately that's a position in which one can begin to find freedom from dukkha.

Inevitably, dukkha is painful because we are bound up in that experience, we're struggling with it, there's identity bound up there, there's a certain degree of unconscious activity that keeps us bound up there — and that is the case with any kind of painful physical, mental or emotional state we might happen to be feeling, whether they be major traumas or just minor things.

Just as in meditation, for example, when we find we're caught up in a run of thoughts or just noticing the mood of the mind that feels trapped, limited, bound, struggling — any sense of self at all is limited, bound, and has a sense of grief involved in it. We need to come to this point where we can be fully conscious of that and begin to know that as it is.

At first it means perhaps entering right into the struggle, which is difficult because we're often judging — “This is not right, this is not what the path is, I should be free of it.” These aren't conscious thoughts, these are just attitudes, almost hidden assumptions. We have to

begin to notice, “How do I relate to this struggle that’s going on?” Really feel it, be right in the midst of it and recognise that *this* is dukkha, this is pain, this is how it feels; this is discontent, this is grief, this is anger.

Whatever it is, we allow our mindfulness to be big enough to hold that, to bear with that. We can recognise when that’s happening — the heart can expand to hold the pain. If it can’t expand to hold that pain then it continues to be a struggle, a tight relationship, an un-open relationship to that experience; it can be pushed back into the unconscious, it can be denied, or it can be fully expressed yet still clung to, still hung on to.

We have to find a way, each for ourselves, to open up to that struggle. We can literally feel it in our bodies, that hard knot of tension. Allow your awareness of that knot to remain relaxed — it sounds like a contradiction in terms, but it means to remain relaxed with that tension, to not struggle with that tension, to not struggle with the pain — and in this way we can come to experience a peaceful relationship with a painful feeling. We’re not going to know how long this will take. Maybe we can be mindful of a difficult emotion and get awfully frustrated because it’s not changing! We need a constant checking on such attitudes by asking, “How am I relating to this experience?”

Just be prepared to feel it as it is, without favouring or opposing, and at some point there will be a release, an opening, and ‘the world’ will change. There will be a recognition of what the Buddha meant by

transcendence — it disappears, it no longer carries this sense of self, and with it the sense of ‘the world,’ of me and other, of past and future, of good and bad, right and wrong.

The whole mental construct of how we relate to experience can be dissolved in that moment, and that is a tasting of the Deathless. But we have to *recognise* that to appreciate it — it can also be missed. We can jump from one form of clinging to another. So when something ceases we can cling on to the delight that comes, “Oh, I’m glad that’s finished!” or a sense of pride over ‘what *I’ve* attained’ when something wonderful has come about. So again, there needs to be this consistency of awareness — awareness of the attitude of mind, of struggle, of clinging. You can feel these attitudes at a physical level if you are developing mindfulness of body.

This is perhaps the experience the Buddha was talking about when he said dukkha can condition the arising of saddha or faith. The more you experience this kind of turning to dukkha, opening to it, bearing with it unconditionally and seeing it pass away or seeing release coming through that, then that feeds into one’s sense of confidence, “Ah yes, this does work, this is the way.” And there arises this sense of confidence that we *can* bear with what we might previously have thought unbearable.

That’s a really important point, because so much of what we need to face are these great monsters and ghosts in the mind that seem unbearably difficult to be with, that seem to have a power to darken our awareness,



to push or turn our mindfulness from them. We have to keep turning to re-apply that attention, that openness of heart, and the more we do that the more confidence we gain, and the more trust we gain in facing into the unknown — the unknowing aspect of that being “How much can I bear? How long will this be here?”

There’s the *saddha*, or trust, that arises when something does cease and there’s a moment of non-identification — there can be a relaxation into that place of no identity, of no self. But quite often that can also be a frightening place for people, which is possibly why we can’t sustain it for very long — there’s often not *enough* faith or trust. That’s really the place of Buddha, the place of pure knowing, pure awareness. To be able to sustain that needs an incredible faith — where there’s no need to be reborn again.

~ THE MIND’S NATURE IS INTRINSICALLY PURE ~

In another quite famous teaching of the Buddha he said that the mind is luminous, its true nature is pure and luminous, that it is only defiled by transitory, adventitious defilements. We so often take what’s occurring in our minds, in our experience — everything that we experience from anger to delight within ourselves and in relationship — we take it all to be who and what we are ... “I’ve got a problem with anger,” or “I’ve got a problem with lust,” and how deeply we believe in that.

To experience the true nature of the mind really has nothing to do with who we *think* we are or what

our personality is like — whether we have a great personality or a pathetic personality, a great intellect or a dull intellect. It has nothing to do with whether we can even express it or not. It has to do with our capacity to look honestly within and to bear with what's there; and to develop the courage to continue to go deeper and deeper.

It doesn't mean we have to retreat to a cave or a *kuti* for years until we find it either. We all might long for that at times but actually we just need to keep facing into what life is presenting to us. Whatever we find ourselves involved with in our lives, this is our particular karmic predicament, and anything we're involved in has highly personal possibilities for learning. We're not here, involved with what we are for no reason — the predicaments we find ourselves in are the ones that can teach us the most.

But again, as I was questioning earlier: are we willing to face into it? I look at myself and my own practice and so often I find an unwillingness to face into what's presenting itself at that moment. There's this picking and choosing going on, and this idea that there's something better to be had elsewhere — 'the grass is always greener' syndrome runs so deeply in our attitudes. It's just this discontentment, lack of ability to fully be with, to open to dis-ease, pain, dukkha, right here, right now.

I think this way of practice I've been describing can bring together almost every strand of technique or

practice that the Buddha taught — it all comes into this practice of mindfulness and facing into dukkha. If we look closely and examine what is happening, we will see that the four foundations of mindfulness are being developed, that the eightfold path is being practised; the cultivation of loving-kindness and compassion, of empathetic joy and equanimity; the cultivation and balancing of the spiritual faculties of faith and wisdom, energy and concentration with mindfulness. These faculties are being worked all the time.

~ READING THE HEART ~

So it's not as if we first have to learn this great body of knowledge and understand it at the level of the intellect. I heard that Ajahn Chah often encouraged his disciples to put their books away — “Read the book of the heart,” he would say, because that's where the real knowledge is, that's where true understanding can arise. We get so used to the kind of satisfaction of knowing something through books, the satisfaction of intellectual understanding, but it's worlds away from experiential understanding, which can be very simple, very direct.

Often we don't have the confidence to go ahead with this kind of ‘private investigation.’ We've been undermined by many aspects of our cultural conditioning and education. There's the tendency in the modern world to obsess on personality and image and quick fixes of happiness and excitement, and we grow up with this tendency to feel that everyone else knows how to be

happy but somehow *we* don't. We are always looking to other people to affirm us or approve us or tell us how things are, how we should be and how we can be happy. But actually, each of us can know only for ourselves. The Buddha was saying just that. He provided hundreds of teachings to help people, pointing them back towards themselves, giving clues and pointers as to what to look at, and how to look at what we experience, to reap the most beneficial results.

Once when he was with a large group of monks in a forest, the Buddha picked up a handful of leaves and asked the bhikkhus, "What's more, all the leaves in the forest or just the leaves in my hand?" They said, "Well, of course all the leaves in the forest are many more than what's in your hand." And he said, "Just so, all the leaves in the forest can be compared to as much as I know, but the leaves in my hand, this is as much as I teach you because that is what is conducive for liberation."

So we can search for knowledge of many things and actually gain it, but it's not necessarily going to lead us towards this goal of liberation. If we pick up the thread of what the Buddha gave us, that's the direct route, and the essential teachings are very simple. This mindfulness that we've been talking about, this awareness of dukkha, understanding dukkha — that is what will lead us to see the end of dukkha.

In the teaching on the Four Noble Truths, the first Truth is phrased 'there is dukkha' — and the instruction is that it should be understood. The second

Truth is phrased ‘there is the cause of dukkha’ and the instruction is that its cause should be abandoned, when we realise the cause.

I can tell you that the Buddha said the cause of dukkha is *tanha*, craving, but that doesn’t help us in abandoning it, it doesn’t help us in understanding what craving is, it doesn’t help us to know how it arises in ourselves — all of that work we have to do ourselves.

The third Truth is about realising the cessation of dukkha, and the fourth Truth is that of developing the path leading to complete liberation. But the path is merely understanding dukkha and abandoning its cause in each moment — it’s not work that can be done in the future, it’s not work that can be done in the next minute, it’s only now.

So actually, when we examine it, it’s not too great an undertaking — because we can deal with things moment by moment, we have that capacity, if we allow ourselves, and don’t try to take on more than what this moment actually is. That’s the simplicity of it. However, as many people have said, “it sounds simple but it’s not easy.” Perhaps that’s because of our habit of wanting to take on too much, wanting to get too much. Don’t believe that liberation is a long way off, it’s not necessarily so. It’s always here and now, apparent — Dhamma can be seen here and now.

The path is often described as a gradual one — but it’s not something particularly done in stages, like cultivating the first aspect of the path, then the second

one, or working on the first foundation of mindfulness then the second one. It's the coming together of all of this in our practice in the moment, and it's a deepening spiral of understanding — it can arise in a moment, and it can deepen over time.

~ A POST-SCRIPT ~

I'd like to finish with this one little story from the scriptures, to bring us back to where we started — contemplating the created and the uncreated. One of the monks who had tremendous psychic powers wanted to know the answer to a deep question which troubled him in his meditation... 'Where do the four great elements cease without remainder?' That is, the foundation of material reality — earth, water, fire, air — where do they cease?

Apparently this monk went travelling through all the *Deva* realms and the Brahma worlds to ask the gods this question and he got to the highest Brahma realm, and was able to ask the Great Brahma himself, the highest god, who's supposed to know everything.

So he asked Great Brahma this question: "Where do the four great elements cease without remainder?" To which Brahma replied: "Monk, I am Brahma, Great Brahma, the Conqueror, the Unconquered, the All-Seeing, All-Powerful, the Lord, the Maker and Creator, the Ruler, Appointer and Orderer, Father of All That Has Been and Shall Be." And this monk said: "Well, where do the four great elements cease without remainder?"

And Brahma just kept saying, “I am the Great Brahma...” etc., etc.

This went on for a little while, then Brahma took the monk aside and said: “Don’t ask me that in front of my retinue...” (They don’t know that I don’t know it, basically.) He then said: “You’ve come to the wrong place, you should go to the Buddha, he’ll know the answer to your question.”

So this monk came back to the human realm and found the Buddha to ask this question: “Where do the four great elements cease without remainder?” The Buddha replied: “Monk, you’ve asked the question in the wrong way, rather you should ask ... ‘where do the four great elements find no footing?’”

The Buddha continued: “Where consciousness is signless, boundless, all luminous, that is where earth, water, fire and air find no footing. Both long and short, small and great, fair and foul, there ‘name and form’ are wholly destroyed, with the cessation of consciousness this is all destroyed.”

Name and form is *nama-rupa*, mentality/materiality — he’s pointing to a place where there is no longer the movement of the mind that clings to mentality and materiality, so there’s no longer the creation of the subject/object related ‘world,’ no longer the dualistic consciousness operating. “With the cessation of consciousness this is all destroyed.”

Sometimes people are confused by that phrase, ‘the cessation of consciousness.’ It’s a quelling of the

habitual movement of the mind as it is distracted by contact, by sense objects. It doesn't mean that one is *unconscious*, obliterated or annihilated. As he first says: "Where consciousness is signless, boundless and all luminous" — that sounds quite positive to me. It is found in the ultimate stillness, the mind no longer habitually re-acting to sense contact, re-creating the world that, as psychological beings, we inhabit.

*Evam.*