

The Components of Suffering

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Let your mind settle in. Stay with the breath. There's nowhere else you have to go, nothing else you have to do right now. Just be with your breathing. When the breath comes in, you know it's coming in. When the breath goes out, you know it's going out. Allow it to come in and go out in a way that feels good and refreshing. If you're feeling tired, you may want to breathe in a way that's energizing. If you're feeling frenetic, breathe in a way that's more calming. Gain a sense of what the breath can do for the body and the mind here in the present moment.

Do what you can to put the mind in a good mood. In other words, if you approach the process of meditation with a lot of anxiety, with a lot of frustration, that anxiety and frustration will show up in the breath and simply make things worse. So remind yourself: Not too much is demanded of you right now, just being with the breath. If you notice you've wandered off, just bring the mind right back. If it wanders off again, bring it back again and try to make the breath even more comfortable. As you keep at this, you find that the mind develops a stronger and stronger foundation, a place where it can stay, a place where it really feels safe, where it feels at home, where it can look at the larger issues in life and not mess them up.

The Buddha talks about suffering as his number one truth, and when we hear about that, many of us want to run away. We feel that we have enough suffering in life; we don't want to hear about it anymore. But the Buddha's whole reason for teaching about suffering is because he has a cure. To work that cure, though, you first have to get the mind in good shape, because most of us, when we deal with suffering, simply make the issue worse. We feel threatened by it, we feel surrounded by it, we start getting desperate, and in our desperation we do all kinds of things that are harmful, both to ourselves and to people around us.

So first get the mind in a good mood. All you need is the breath coming in and out with a sense of wellbeing. If you're really observant and become familiar with the breath over time, you find that that sense of wellbeing starts permeating throughout other parts of your life as well. And when you've got a sense of wellbeing you can depend on, *then* you can turn to the issue of

suffering to see exactly what suffering is, looking at it not so much out of desperation as out of curiosity. As the Buddha said, the best way to deal with suffering is to comprehend it, as in the passage we chanted just now. He said most people don't discern suffering. We suffer, we feel it, but we don't discern it, we don't understand it. The Buddha said that if you understand it, you can manage it, you can put an end to it. If you don't understand it, you just keep on suffering and never put an end to it at all.

In his first sermon he describes suffering: the suffering of birth, the suffering of aging, the suffering of illness, the suffering of death, of being separated from what you love, of being conjoined with things you don't like, of not getting what you want. That seems to be a pretty good summation, but then he boils it down to even more basic terms. This is where the discussion gets technical. He analyses suffering down to five heaps, five clinging-aggregates: form imbued with clinging, feeling imbued with clinging, perceptions, thought-fabrications, and consciousness, all imbued with clinging. The clinging is the important element. It's what turns ordinary form, feeling, and so forth, into suffering.

We're often told that these aggregates are the Buddha's description of what we are, but that wasn't his purpose in formulating this teaching. His purpose was to give us tools for breaking suffering down into manageable pieces. For most of us, suffering is an enormous issue, much larger and more pressing than the abstract question of who or what we are. When suffering comes, it overwhelms us. We can't stand up under its weight. In fact that's one of the traditional definitions of suffering: that which is hard to bear. And it's hard to bear because we feel overwhelmed. When it hits hard, it seems like an enormous mountain filling our awareness. We can't get a handle on it. The purpose of dividing it into these five heaps is to break the mountain down into gravel, and the gravel down into dust. This helps us realize that no matter what the type of suffering — whether it's the suffering of aging, illness, death, the suffering of separation, the suffering of not getting what we want — it can all be analyzed into just five sorts of things. That's all it is. And furthermore we can look at these five sorts of things and see that there's nothing there worth suffering over. We build enormous narratives around our pains, but what are those narratives? They're just perceptions combined with the thought-fabrications built out of them. If we cling to those narratives they're going to make us suffer. But if we take them apart, we see that there's nothing much there.

So the Buddha has us focus, not so much on the story line, but on the building blocks we use to put the story line together. If you get down to the building blocks, you begin to see how artificial this whole process is — because these aggregates are not things. They're actually activities, things we do. We suffer because we cling to certain activities, certain movements of the mind. So to cut through this clinging, you have to keep breaking your suffering down and analyzing it: What's going on here? Suppose there's a pain in your leg and you're suffering from it. What's going on there? There's the form of the body, and then there are the actual feelings of pain. And then there are the perceptions, the labels you put on the feeling; the thought-fabrications, the stories you build around the feeling; and then the consciousness, the repeated acts of being conscious of all these things.

So instead of building up the stories around the feeling — getting angry about the feeling, getting upset about it, worrying about it — if the mind is calm enough you can start taking the suffering surrounding the feeling apart. What's going on? What's actually there? There's the form of the body, which is actually separate from the feeling, although we often glom the two together. If there's a pain in our knee, it feels like our whole knee is nothing but pain. But if you look at it carefully, there's the form of your body, and then there are the feelings flickering around the form. They're not a single, solid thing. Many times we perceive the feeling to be a solid thing, but now we're taking that perception apart. Actually there's not just one perception. There are many repeated perceptions, just as there are many moments of feeling. This is why these things are called *khandhas*, or heaps. Like heaps of gravel or heaps of sand, they're made out of small individual events, small individual motions, either physical motions or mental motions. So you break them down, break them down. And once they're broken down, they're not too big to handle. You can change them. For example, those perceptions you applied to the feelings: What happens if you change them from perceptions of "pain" to simply perceptions of "sensation"?

Or you can try to analyze the sensation into its physical aspects: the sensation of warmth or heat, or maybe a sense of blockage that feels solid. If you actually take those solid feelings apart, though, you begin to see they're not so solid after all.

Then there are the stories you build up around the sensations, the fears of what will happen if you don't do something about the pain. If you sit here for the next hour, is your leg going to fall off? Will you harm the tissues of the body by cutting off the blood? The mind can build up all sorts of stories about the

sensations, but instead of looking at the stories and getting caught up in the story line, just look at them as words coming through the mind without your having to believe them. Simply watch the stories as individual words. Then you begin to see that if you cling to the story line, you make the pain worse. So why cling to it? You don't have to follow the story line. It's not a movie you've paid to see. You're not missing anything important if you don't follow it through to the end.

So what you want to do is take the suffering apart into its component parts and locate the clinging that turns those component parts into the suffering. If you take each component part on its own, it's not all that bad. The aggregate itself is not suffering. There can be a pain in the leg but we suffer simply because we identify with it, we lay claim to it as ours. That's why we suffer. Without the act of identification, without the clinging, there would be no suffering. The mental label that says "mine" or "my pain," "my leg," or whatever: What happens if you drop it? You don't have to think it. There's nobody forcing you to think it. There's simply the force of habit. And habits can be changed.

As you take the suffering apart into little bits and pieces like this, it's a lot more manageable. Many times the pain may still be there, but there's no suffering. Or sometimes when you're not worked up about it, the pain actually goes away. Some physical pains are physical in their causes; others are more mental in theirs. Even physical pain has its mental component, as the mind chooses which sensations to focus on and which ones to ignore, which ones to downplay and which ones to magnify with its stories and running commentary. You can see this mental component clearly when you stop the commentary, or when you just step back and watch the commentary as you would something curious, and say "Well, why would I believe that?" and suddenly the suffering goes away. Whether or not the pain is still there, the suffering is gone. That's when you see that the issue was not the pain but the unnecessary suffering you created by clinging to these feelings and perceptions. When you see clearly the things you've been clinging to, and that they're not really worth clinging to, the suffering breaks down. The mountain is leveled and pulverized into dust. When you've mastered this skill, that's the end of suffering.