

To Suffer Is an Active Verb

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When we say that we suffer, we usually think that we're on the passive receiving end of the suffering. It's something imposed on us, something to which we have to submit. In some of our more mature moments, we realize that there are times when we're adding to our own suffering, but we tend to see this more clearly in other people than we see it in ourselves. This is one of the reasons why, when we come to the four noble truths, the Buddha's analysis of suffering, we have to take them on faith—because, in his analysis, to suffer is an active verb. It's something we're doing actively. It's a choice we make. It's a choice we make badly, out of ignorance. The suffering is in the activity of clinging.

There was a scholarly book a while back that analyzed the Buddha's first noble truth as if suffering were the five aggregates. The author went on to say that, because the five aggregates cover all of our experience, maybe the word *dukkha* doesn't mean "suffering." Maybe it means "experience." Other people have taken that idea and have run all over the place with it. But what the scholar said was not in line with what the Buddha said. Suffering, he said, is the five *clinging*-aggregates. Where there are aggregates without clinging—say, in an arahant—there's no suffering. Even when there's pain in the aggregates, the arahant's mind isn't suffering. It's the act of clinging to these things, out of passion, out of delight in them because we find them alluring: That's the suffering.

And it's something we're doing right now. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha doesn't have us try to go back into the past and ask, "What did I do to deserve an illness, a mental state, a situation in life?" He said that if you tried to trace all those things back, you'd go crazy. In fact, he said, you can't trace back and find a beginning point for the ignorance that underlies suffering. But you can see what you're doing to sustain it now.

So we're not here to find the beginning points of these things. We're here to find out how we're sustaining them, how we keep them going. That's something we're doing in the present moment, which means it's something we can watch in action.

This is one of the reasons why the quality of alertness in mindfulness practice is focused not on the present moment in general, on whatever happens to pop up in the present moment, but specifically on what you're doing and the results of what you're doing. That's where alertness is focused because that's where the problem lies—and also where the potential for the solution lies.

We look to see the level of suffering in the mind, and then try to see how it's connected with what we're doing. The Buddha says to watch it to see it go up and down so that you can detect the causes. When are you going to watch it best? When you're getting the mind into concentration. That's when you're least distracted. You get the mind to settle down with a sense of well-being so that you become more sensitive to slight instances of stress or suffering. Then you try to notice them go up and down. When they go up, ask yourself, "What did I do?" When they go down, "What did I do, or what did I stop doing?" That's how you're going to see the cause.

At the same time, that's how you're going to see the allure. We don't think that we like to go for suffering, but suffering and pleasure are part and parcel of the same thing. Ajaan Chah's image is of a snake. You see that the snake has two ends: an end that has teeth and an end that doesn't have teeth. You figure that the end without teeth is a safe end to catch hold of, without realizing, of course, that the end without teeth is connected to the end with teeth. And the end with teeth will turn around and bite you. We grab after the aggregates. We grab after the allure of the aggregates. And they bite.

The irony in all of this is that the aggregates themselves are things that we put together. We've got potentials coming in from the past for form, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness. And then, for the sake of having aggregates to use, we fashion them—we put them together—into actual aggregates. The Pali in this particular sutta is rather strange: It says that we do this for the sake of feelingness, for the sake of formness, for the sake of perceptionhood, and so on. It's a strange statement, but the important part of the statement is the "for the sake of."

We have a plan for these aggregates, maybe a confused and not-very-conscious plan, but we put them together for a purpose. We want some pleasure out of them. And in anticipation of the pleasure, we grab hold of them. Oftentimes we grab hold of them even when they're producing pain, because we're afraid that if we don't grab hold of *something*, what is there? We identify ourselves with our grabbing hold, with our feeding off of these things. Our fear is that if we stop feeding off these things, we won't be. We won't exist.

So our very sense of who we are or what we are gets all tied up in our suffering, which makes it hard to separate these things out. It's like you're taking off your arm or your leg to examine it. This is why the analysis of your sense of self into a whole committee of selves is useful. You try to identify with the self that's doing the concentration. As for any other self that's going to come up and propose that you go off and enjoy some of the hindrances, you can dis-identify with it. And

then take it apart. Take off its arms and legs. Try to see: “Where is the allure there? Why do I go for these things?” And because the mind has many layers of deception, you’re going to have to look at this again and again and again.

Here, too, the approach of watching the level of stress go up and go down while you try to notice, “What did I do just now?”: That’s one of the ways in which you can pry these layers away. You’re looking right at the moment when you’re actually making the choice. If you looked at it a few seconds later, you might come up with another reason for why you did something. We’re very good at making up reasons for why we do things, especially after the fact, so if you want to see through the make-believe, you’ve got to watch these things right as they’re happening.

What is the allure right now? When you really see it, you begin to realize that it’s not really worth it. A sense of dismay arises. You realize how stupid you’ve been. This is when you develop a sense of disenchantment, or *nibbada*. This word also means the feeling you have when you’ve been feeding on something and you suddenly realize that you’ve had enough. You really don’t want it anymore. There’s a touch of dismay there, but also a sense of sobering up—because when you see the extent to which you’re responsible for your own suffering, that’s when you become mature. This is why one of the epithets for the Buddha was that he was exceedingly mature.

He saw that suffering lies in what we’re doing right now. It’s not being imposed on us from outside. We’re the ones who are actively going out and creating it, engaging in it, doing it. So when you see that this is an activity that’s not worth it, you can drop it. That’s how it’s droppable: because it’s an activity. You simply learn how to stop doing it. If this sense of disenchantment goes deep enough, it’s followed by dispassion. And dispassion is followed by release. You can stop the suffering because you can stop *doing* the suffering. And that’s what counts.

So when things come up in life, don’t ask yourself, “What kamma did I do in the past that’s making me suffer now?” or “What is somebody else doing to me that’s making me suffer?” The question is: “What am I doing right now? To what extent am I actively creating the suffering? To what extent can I see that it really is true that to suffer is an active verb, that it all comes from my own actions?” When you see that, you also see the opportunity not to do those things anymore. You’re not compelled to do them anymore. That’s when you’re free. As for where the outside conditions came from in the past, that’s no longer an issue. The suffering you were creating moment to moment was the only suffering that was weighing down the mind. And now you’ve stopped.