



## **Core Buddhist Teachings and their Application to Daily Life**

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### **Introduction**

What is the goal of the Buddha's teachings? From the Dharmakaya website: "The best explanation of Buddha's teachings is summarized in the Sanskrit word dharma, which means "the way things are." Buddha found enlightenment when he perceived the true nature of the mind. This embodies awareness—moving beyond the obstructions of ego and self-absorption in order to see clearly and simply the way things truly are. Awareness is both the path and the ultimate goal of all Buddhist teachings.

Buddha was a human being, nothing more. When asked by a follower if he were a man or a god, he answered with a simple truth: I am awake. He was a human being who had discovered, through hard work and patience, a path to a freedom of mind which released him from the fear, clinging and drive for personal security that lies at the heart of how humans live."<sup>i</sup>

As the Buddha explained to Dona, a brahman:

"Like a blue lotus, rising up,  
unsmeared by water,  
unsmeared am I by the world,  
and so, brahman,  
I'm awake."<sup>ii</sup>

The purpose of this series is to explore "the way things are" in daily life through the Buddha's teachings and mindfulness. Bhante Gunaratana defined mindfulness as "paying attention moment to moment to what is." Ken McLeod noted that "Buddhist practice is not an effort to confirm or validate a sense of what we are. It is about seeing and experiencing what is."<sup>iii</sup> The challenge of mindfulness is determining what the "what is" is. These core teachings help us to see clearly the "what is."

The Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama) was born 2600 years ago in eastern India. He was a prince whose father kept him within the palace confines so as to provide him with every luxury in life and to shield him from experiencing suffering. However, once when making a trip outside of the palace, the Buddha saw suffering in the forms of birth, aging, disease and death. Struck by this, he left his wife and son to explore the way to end suffering. Having been exposed to luxury, the Buddha tried the opposite, asceticism, and discovered that this did not end suffering either. The Buddha then discovered the "middle way," a way of ending suffering that does not go to extremes. In this regard, he became awakened to what life is. He devoted the rest of this life traveling through India teaching the practice of

what he had discovered. The Buddha said, “What I teach now as before, O monks, is suffering and the cessation of suffering.”<sup>iv</sup>

## Overview

There are four core teachings that we will explore:

Understanding Experience: The Three Characteristics: Saṃyutta Nikāya 22.45 <sup>v</sup>

How We Process Experiences: The Five Aggregates: Khandha Sutta <sup>vi</sup>

The Causes of Suffering: The Three Poisons: Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta <sup>vii</sup>

Suffering as a Disease: The Principles of Suffering Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta <sup>viii</sup>

## How can these teaching be applied to our daily life?

The Buddha gave many talks to different groups of people over his lifetime as well as meeting with individuals. These talks or discourses are called suttas (in the Pali language of his time). His basic method of teaching was threefold. He wanted his listeners to:

1. hear his discourse
2. reflect on it to understand
3. experience it to know if it is beneficial for them.

In this series, we will follow his pattern. The teachings and relevant commentary will be presented and there will be time for open reflection and discussion. There will be exercises to experience the teachings more fully and for you to see if they are beneficial for you.

## Teaching I: Understanding Experience: The Three Characteristics

An experience is defined as an awareness of what we sense through our six sense organs: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. These sense organs contact **sense objects** (tangible objects, visible objects, sounds, smells, tastes, and mental objects: thoughts/memories). This interaction is called **form**. All of our experiences begin here via one or more of these sense organs. However, although our sense organs are constantly sensing, we are not aware of this interaction until our **consciousness** makes contact with the sense organ and the object sensed. When all three factors are connected, we become **aware** of what is called a **pure experience**. The experience is pure because our mind has not added anything to it at this point. Note that it is difficult to be aware of a pure experience because our mind is very quick in identifying an object which is adding something to it. For example, instead of being aware of the pure experience of a sound, we experience it as the bark of a dog or the whistle of the wind. More on this later.

The Buddha taught that all of our experiences regardless of their sense origin share three common characteristics. “Bhikkhus (monks), form is impermanent. What is impermanent is suffering. What is suffering is nonself. What is should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’ When one sees this thus as it really is with correct wisdom, the mind becomes dispassionate and is liberated from the taints by nonclinging.”<sup>ix</sup>

These three attributes are called the Three Characteristics of Existence.<sup>x</sup> They are impermanence, dissatisfaction and selfless nature.

To paraphrase the Buddha's teaching: Impermanence, the first characteristic is constant change. Nothing ever stays the same even for a nanosecond. For example, thoughts arise in the mind and fall away. A similar thought may reappear, but it is not the same. Because of impermanence, the second characteristic is that no thought, memory, perception or sensation can give any lasting satisfaction or dissatisfaction. In other words, all experiences are eventually found to be unsatisfactory. And finally, because of impermanence, the third characteristic is that all phenomena are of selfless nature. They are not who we are; we cannot own or possess them.

### **Impermanence**

Bhante Gunaratana notes: "When we recognize that every impermanent thing is changing and leaves no trace, and that every signless, impermanent thing is empty of self and leads only to suffering, our desire to possess or hold on to ever-changing, suffering-producing, and selfless things and people evaporates. We wish only to be liberated— to be free from all of it. As the Buddha explained, "Seeing thus, the impermanence, suffering, and selflessness of all conditioned things, one becomes disenchanted with everything.""<sup>xi</sup>

As Haleigh Atwood, editorial assistant, Lion's Roar magazine notes: "Impermanence is an inescapable, essential fact of life. As the Buddha said in his final teaching, "All compounded things are subject to vanish." Whether it's the last cookie in the jar, the first gray hair on your head, or the coral reefs bleaching in a warming ocean, all conditioned things — big or small, brief or long-lived — eventually pass away.

There is beauty in knowing that everything we hold dear will eventually slip through our fingers. When we acknowledge and embrace this, we can appreciate the interconnection inherent in impermanence.

There's a phrase that has stayed with me since I first read it on a fridge magnet: "Change is inevitable, except from a vending machine." Even though it's corny, it helps. When I find myself clinging to what feels familiar and safe, I think of that magnet. It helps me step back and recognize that impermanence is fundamental to existence. It also helps when I'm waiting and wishing for change with bated breath. Acknowledging impermanence is one way of accepting that "this too shall pass." Change is not always loss — it can be renewing and refreshing.

Finally, this quote helps me bear witness to the changing world around me without flinching and turning away. Friends will move away, my eye prescription will get worse, and maybe most of the ocean's coral will not survive the coming decades. In the midst of it all, the lessons of impermanence and interconnection keep me grounded in a state of cherishing what is here now and appreciating what rises to take its place.

While change constantly unravels what we know, it also ties us together. As Norman Fischer writes, "change is never lonely; it is always all-inclusive. We're all always in this together." There is comfort in knowing that while everything vanishes, impermanence goes on."

From Thich Nhat Hanh: "We are often sad and suffer a lot when things change, but change and impermanence have a positive side. Thanks to impermanence, everything is possible. Life itself is

possible. If a grain of corn is not impermanent, it can never be transformed into a stalk of corn. If the stalk were not impermanent, it could never provide us with the ear of corn we eat. If your daughter is not impermanent, she cannot grow up to become a woman. Then your grandchildren would never manifest. So instead of complaining about impermanence, we should say, “Warm welcome and long live impermanence.” We should be happy. When we can see the miracle of impermanence our sadness and suffering will pass.”<sup>xii</sup>

### **Experiencing Impermanence**

Seated and with eyes closed, touch the seat of whatever you are sitting on. Now listen for any sounds. What happened to your awareness of the touch of the seat? Your sense base, the hand, is touching the sense object, the seat, but your consciousness has moved on to the sense base, ear. The experience of the seat arose when consciousness was present with it and the experience fell away when consciousness left. Do you get the impermanence?

### **Inability to Give Lasting Satisfaction**

Since no experience is permanent, we cannot count on it to give us lasting satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Sometimes we believe that satisfaction or dissatisfaction is permanent but that is because we have attached to the memory of the experience and allow it to keep recurring in our mind. However, each recurrence is not the exact same experience. With satisfying experiences, we gradually develop tolerance to the recurrent experiences with less satisfaction each time. This results in a craving for more pleasurable experiences. With dissatisfactory experiences, the recurring memories may be more intense over time as fear sets in. However, we must be aware that we are experiencing different recurrences. The original experience has fallen away.

### **Experiencing inability to provide lasting satisfaction**

Go back to your awareness of the seat and try to stay with it. What is the texture? What is the temperature of the seat? Note that when you are determining the temperature, you are no longer experiencing the texture. Your consciousness has shifted again! So, touching the seat is not one but many experiences. Can you see the inability to provide lasting satisfaction with touching the seat?

### **Selfless Nature**

Jack Kornfield notes: “Deep meditation can untangle the sense of identity. There are, in fact, many ways in which we can realize the emptiness of self. When we are silent and attentive, we can sense directly how nothing in the world can be truly possessed by us. Clearly we do not possess outer things; we are in some relationship with our cars, our home, our family, our jobs, but whatever that relationship is, it is “ours” only for a short time. In the end, things, people, or tasks die or change or we lose them. Nothing is exempt.

When we bring attention to any moment of experience, we discover that we do not possess it either. As we look, we find that we neither invite our thoughts nor own them. We might even wish them to stop, but our thoughts seem to think themselves, arising and passing according to their nature.

The same is true of our feelings. How many of us believe we control our feelings? As we pay attention, we see that they are more like the weather-moods and feelings change according to certain conditions,

and are neither possessed nor directed by our consciousness or desires. Do we order happiness, sadness, irritation, excitement, or restlessness to come? Feelings arise by themselves, as the breath breathes itself, as sounds sound themselves.

Our body, too, follows its own laws. The body which we carry is a bag of bones and fluid that cannot be possessed. It ages, gets sick, or changes in ways we might not wish it to, all according to its own nature. The more we look, in fact, the more deeply we see that we possess nothing within or without.”<sup>xiii</sup>

### **Experiencing selfless nature**

Go back to your awareness of the seat. Now ask yourself, “who is touching the seat?” You might say that, “It is me.” But who is me? Can you find anything of me or are you just experiencing touching the seat? Can you get the selfless nature of touching the seat? A self is not required! You will discover as Bhante G. notes “Thus the more you focus on mind itself, the less solid it seems. Like everything else that exists, it is always changing. Moreover, you discover, there is no permanent entity; no one is running the movie projector. All is flux, all is flow, all is process. **In reality, who you are is simply this constant flow of changing moments of mind.** Since you cannot control this process, you have no choice but to let go. In letting go, you experience joy and you taste for an instant the freedom and happiness that is the goal of the Buddha’s path. Then you know that this mind can be used to gain wisdom.”<sup>xiv</sup>

### **Summary**

“Mindfulness sees the true nature of all phenomena. Mindfulness and only Mindfulness can perceive the three prime characteristics that Buddhism teaches are the deepest truths of existence. In Pali these three are called Anicca (impermanence), Dukkha (unsatisfactoriness), and Anatta (selflessness -- the absence of a permanent, unchanging, entity that we call Soul or Self). These truths are not present in Buddhist teaching as dogmas demanding blind faith. The Buddhists feel that these truths are universal and self-evident to anyone who cares to investigate in a proper way. Mindfulness is the method of investigation. Mindfulness alone has the power to reveal the deepest level of reality available to human observation. At this level of inspection, one sees the following: (a) all conditioned things are inherently transitory; (b) every worldly thing is, in the end, unsatisfying; and (c) there are really no entities that are unchanging or permanent, only processes.”<sup>xv</sup>

### **Meditation: Who are you?**

The first question is where are your boundaries now? Do you have boundaries, on present evidence? What is your shape at this time? Do you have a surface where you stop and your environment begins? What is the shape of that surface, that envelope which contains you? What envelope, what surface, on present evidence?

Do you have any shape now, let alone a human shape? How do you know I’m not a wonderful magician that’s turned you into an animal? How do you know I haven’t done that? Perhaps I have.

Without moving them, count your toes. Toes? What toes? Or your legs, for that matter? Do you have, on present evidence, any shape at all, let alone a human shape? Isn’t it imagination which makes a human body here at this moment?

Are you a thing in a great big environment, or are you Space or Room or infinite Capacity? Well, is it infinite? Can you find any boundaries to the environment, let alone to this nonexistent nuclear object in it?

How tall are you, on present evidence? Don't you go on and on and on, upwards, sideways, downwards, frontways, backways? Is there any limit to you, and is there anything in the middle, any central object in this vast, limitless Capacity which you are? You are the authority – look to see.

Another name for this Capacity is Silence. Are you not now the Silence into which these sounds are dropping? The sounds come and go. Everything that changes dies. Sounds are born into your Silence and die out of it. Silence itself – what can die there? Are you not Silence for sounds, just as you are now infinite Space, Capacity, for all sorts of sensations, like warmth, one or two little tensions, a sense of pressure somewhere? Lots of sensations. And they are all coming and going, aren't they? But are you coming and going?

Then, of course, in this Space, in this Capacity, arising all the time is a great succession of thoughts, of images and ideas, clothed with feeling, arising here in the Space, flourishing, disappearing. Thoughts and feelings are born, flourish, and die in the awareness, the awakenss, of this great Space. Is there anything Here to perish? Isn't it like being an infinite television screen on which the program is sometimes tragic, sometimes comic, sometimes rough, sometimes mild. Shoot-ups, burnings are all going on without effect on the screen. You don't have to clean up or repair it after a wild West program. Isn't this what you are like, this immaculate, infinite Screen? What are you now but this awake, invulnerable Capacity?

On present evidence, what nationality are you? What is your name, occupation? What are your qualifications, on present evidence? Is there anything that survives here and now from those regions - the regions of your address, telephone number and nationality - to tell you Who you are? On present evidence, how old are you? Does age have any meaning now? On present evidence, what sex are you? Can you find anything at all, any of those characteristics with which you had identified so strongly? We build that little one up, spend our lives building a picture of who we are as human beings. Isn't it out there in your imagination? Is it Who you really are at the Center of your life? Isn't all that stuff peripheral and not given Here and not given Now? In other words, all that self-image which we had accumulated is not oneself. Who are you at this time on present evidence? What can you say?

What do you need now to be yourself? Do you need any of that accumulated stuff to be yourself? If you needed it, wouldn't you feel discomforted now? Wouldn't you feel you had been robbed? How do you feel? How does it feel to be stripped of everything you had identified with, that you had spent so much energy and enthusiasm building up Here, this personality, these achievements, these qualifications? How does it feel to be peeled of that stuff, to lose sight of it, to let it go, to have it taken away from you? Do you feel angry, disgusted, insulted? Do you feel you have come to a strange, dangerous, horrible place where you don't belong? or do you feel that you have dropped many, many burdens, all burdens

really, falling like leaves from a tree with such ease and with such readiness, and that you have come Home to the place where at last you are unburdened of all things, the place which is your bedrock and your eternal home? Because if you feel that, I would say that you are awake to Who you are.

I put it to you that you are not, in fact, able on present evidence to say what you are, to say, “I am this” or “I am that” giving answers such as nationality and name and age and sex and humanness and all those other things. If you could, it would be the death of you because all that stuff dies. Like the morning dew, it perishes. But it’s impossible now to find any of those things What can you say? I suggest you can say one thing and one thing only: I am.

Whose name is that? I am. Is that the name of the one who will perish, or is it the name of the only One who will not perish? I am. This is your true identity, is it not? Is there a more prestigious, marvelous name to have than that? Do we deserve it? Are we built to that divine design? I am, and even beyond I am. I am is too complicated. You rise, with no help, from the unspeakable, the unknowable, the mystery.

Doesn’t it feel absolutely in order, right, true, comfortable? Isn’t this entry into our true nature, and haven’t we been this all along but we just didn’t notice it? Isn’t this our Homecoming? You are the authority – look to see.

In a moment, we will flood this Space with color and shape. Does your name change from I am when you flood the Space with shape and color and movement? I suggest your name will still be I am, the name of the One who does not perish. Let us try it now. Open your eyes and flood your vision with the wonderful view. Your name remains, I suggest, I am.

BEYOND BELIEFS (based on Douglas Harding’s work)

## Teaching II: How We Process Pure Experiences: The Five Aggregates

In the last session, we explored how pure experience arises from form (a sense organ making contact with a sense object) and how we are aware of this experience when our consciousness makes contact with form. Once we are aware of this pure experience, the mind compares this experience with stored memories and beliefs in an effort to deal with it (process it). For example, if our eyes make contact with an object such as a balloon, we can't identify this object until the mind compares with what is stored in our memory. If we had never seen a balloon before, we wouldn't know what it is. Besides trying to identify this form, the mind also judges and reacts. The judging, identification and reaction are called feelings, perceptions and mental formations. The Buddha described the five factors of how we experience life as form, consciousness, feelings perception and mental formations. He called these the five aggregates or collections of experience.

The Blessed One said, "Now what, monks, are the five aggregates?"

"Any form whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: That is called the form aggregate.

"Any feeling whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: That is called the feeling aggregate.

"Any perception whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: That is called the perception aggregate.

"Any fabrications whatsoever that are past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: Those are called the fabrication aggregate.

"Any consciousness whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: That is called the consciousness aggregate."xvi

These are called the five aggregates.

What is the importance of this teaching? Analayo states: "As a description of empirical personality, the five aggregates thus point to those central aspects of personal experience that need to be understood in order to progress towards realization."xvii

### Feelings, Perception, and Mental Formations

Feelings are what is sensed in the body about the experience. These feelings are not emotions. (Emotions are mental formations as noted below.) Feelings occur instantly after awareness and are a judgement: either pleasant, neutral or unpleasant. After a feeling arises, a perception (mental impression, identification, recognition, discrimination, assessment) of the experience arises in the mind. Note that the perception is dependent on memory for identification. If we have no previous memory of what we have originally sensed, we can't identify it. Next, mental formations (emotions) arise as a result of the feeling and the perception. Depending on the intensity of the mental formation, a reaction (what we say and do) might occur.



The processing of experiences is summarized in the diagram below:

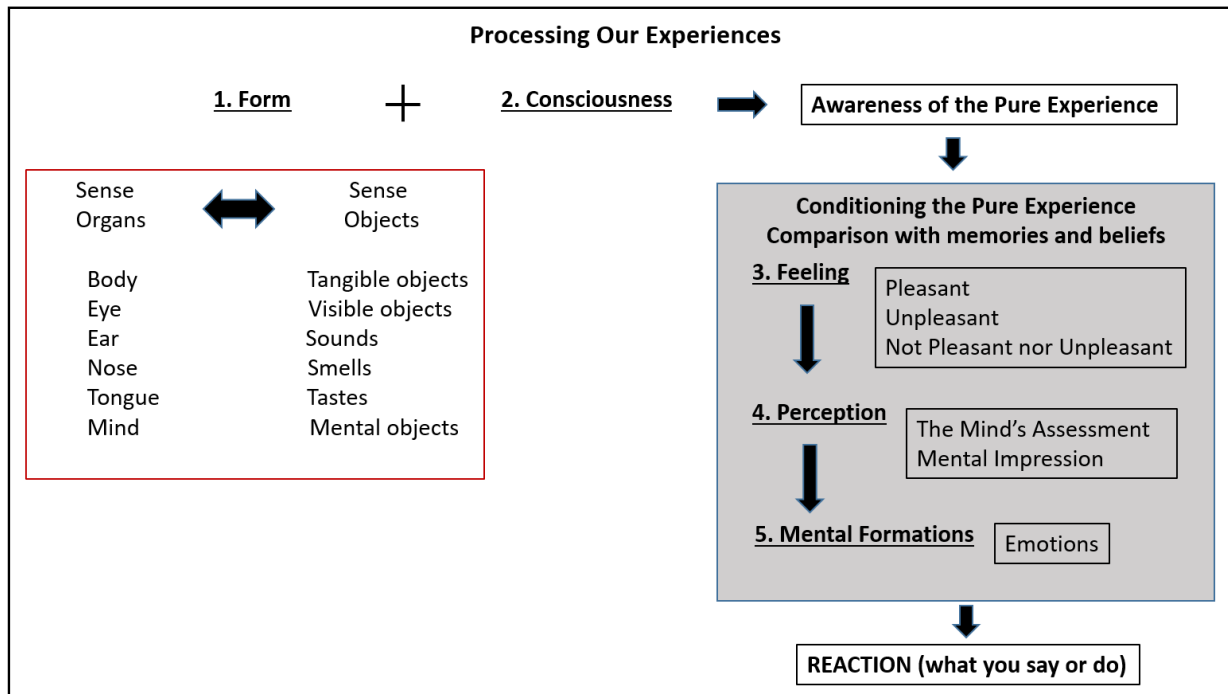


Figure 1. How We Experience and React

**Example**

Let's explore an example of how this process of experiencing works. You are walking down the street. Your eyes (sense organs) make contact with a person (sense object). Once your consciousness makes contact with this form, an unpleasant feeling in the body arises. The perception that arises is that of an unpleasant person because of the comparison with past memories. Next, the mental formation that may arise might be anger or ill-will toward that person. Your outward reaction might be to speak harshly to that person. All of this happens very quickly.

Thich Nhat Hanh states in *Understanding Our Mind*: "When seeds in our store consciousness (memory) manifest themselves in our mind consciousness, either we perceive them directly or we do not perceive them directly. There are three modes, or fields, of perception: direct, as representation, and as mere images. According to the Manifestation Only teachings, the way we perceive reality has everything to do with our happiness and suffering."<sup>xviii</sup> He is saying that the direct perception is from the pure experience, as representation is the conditioned perception, and as mere images is the general way in which we identify. The as representation perception is likely to be false because it is conditioned by our memories and beliefs.

Without an understanding of the internal conditioning process, you may only be aware of the mental formation, anger, and therefore blame the person for causing this emotion, rather than your mind. You might even say, "This person made me angry." Yet, the anger actually arose from the mind associating the image of this person with your internal memories and beliefs. Another person seeing this person might experience a different emotion or nothing at all.

The problem is that our awareness of the pure experience is quickly replaced by the conditioned experience with the resultant mental formation(s). We forget that all we initially experienced was seeing an object (a person). The anger that we felt came from the mind's memories.

In summary, that initial pure experience has been changed by the mind into a different experience, one that we believe is the real experience. And this is the experience that we (1) act on and (2) commit to our store of memories to compare with future experiences. As W.G. Sebald noted: "Memories lie slumbering within us for months and years, quietly proliferating, until they are woken by some trifle and in some strange way blind us to life."

By being mindfully aware of this process of how we experience life, we can reduce our suffering because we realize that the cause is within us, not the external pure experience that triggered it. When you say, "That makes me angry," it really is the neutral "that" that triggered something within you to cause anger to arise." The correct response would be "Anger has arisen in me."

In the heat of the moment, all that happened is that a conditioned experience arose from a pure experience. And we forget that all experiences share the three characteristics of impermanence, inability to provide lasting satisfaction and selfless nature. Instead we believe that we are that emotion and reaction.

We forget who we are. To repeat, in reality, who you are is simply this constant flow of changing moments of mind. Since you cannot control this process, you have no choice but to let go. In letting go, you experience joy and you taste for an instant the freedom and happiness that is the goal of the Buddha's path. Then you know that this mind can be used to gain wisdom."xix

#### Exercise

Partner with another person. Each of you recall a recent experience in which you were negatively reacted about something. Using the diagram of how we experience life, review each step of this encounter with your partner.

Briefly describe the reaction (what you said and did).

What was the form (pure experience)? Describe which sense organ came in contact with what sense object.

What feelings arose (pleasant, unpleasant, neutral)?

What was the perception (mental impression)?

What mental formation(s) (emotion(s)) arose?

What reaction did you have? What did you say or do?

Can you see that the mind created this reaction and that it was not the sense object?

### Teaching III: The Causes of Suffering: The Three Poisons

Now that we understand what an experience is and how our mind conditions that experience to cause feelings, perceptions and mental formations to arise, we are able to see that it is important to pay attention to the stored memories and beliefs in the mind which cause our suffering and dissatisfaction. Being aware of these memories and beliefs help us to understand why we are suffering. These stored memories and beliefs came from our past actions. Although we can't undo the past, we can realize that acting skillfully will help to purify our mind and lessen the hold that these memories and beliefs have on our mind states. "The basis of Buddhist morality is that acting in unskillful ways leads to unhappy results and acting in skillful ways leads to happy results."<sup>xx</sup> When we act unskillfully, it is because we have an unskillful mind state that leads to unpleasant feelings, perceptions and mental formations. What are these unskillful mind states?

#### The Three Poisons

The Buddha described the mind states of greed, aversion (ill-will) and delusion as the three poisons that lead to unskillful behavior and thus cause suffering. "And what are the roots of what is unskillful? Greed is a root of what is unskillful, aversion is a root of what is unskillful, delusion is a root of what is unskillful. These are called the roots of what is unskillful."<sup>xxi</sup>

"Greed, aversion, delusion destroy  
the self-same person of evil mind  
from whom they are born,  
like the fruiting  
of the bamboo."<sup>xxii</sup>

Where do these poisons come from? As we will see in the next teaching, the poisons come from our deep attachment to our experiences. For example, with greed, we experience something that is very pleasant, and we can't get enough of it. We aren't satisfied with what we have. This intense desire obscures our present experience; we are unable to enjoy what we have because we are focused on getting more or protecting what we have. We have become addicted.

Thich Nhat Hanh states: "Addiction is an internal knot. We do not start out being addicted to drugs, alcohol, or an unwholesome relationship. The knot is tied gradually. If internal knots announced themselves with a loud noise when they formed, we would know immediately that they were there. But we can't discern the moment when we became addicted to drugs or alcohol. We don't know exactly when we became infatuated with someone who is not good for us. The process of the formation of an internal knot happens stealthily. If we are guarding the six senses, however, as soon as we have a feeling of attachment, we will be aware of it. We know that we have a sweet feeling of attachment when we hold a glass of wine or a cigarette, or toward a person we should not be so close to. We know where this pleasant feeling is going to take us. With mindfulness—the recognition of what is happening as it is happening—the internal knot of attachment will not be able to form without our noticing it until it is too late."<sup>xxiii</sup>

Andrew Olendzki states: “Mindfulness is awareness, with attention, in the present moment, on purpose—and with an attitude or intentional stance of nonattached equanimity”

Mindfulness is an inherently wholesome or healthy mental factor, so it cannot function at any moment when the mind is under the influence of greed or hatred, even in their mildest versions of favoring and opposing. Anytime you want or don’t want things be a certain way, the mind is not being mindful.

Mindfulness requires a thoroughgoing equanimity. This does not mean you don’t care or are indifferent to what is happening, only that the mind is evenly balanced and fully aware of things exactly as they are, without the desire to change them by favoring one thing or opposing another.

Mindfulness is a mind state that is engaged with the object of attention, but that engagement is disengaged from craving. One breathes mindfully, not wanting the breath to be long or short but just being aware of it as it is. One walks mindfully, back and forth, with no desire to get somewhere, simply noticing the nuanced textures of physical sensations arising and passing away in the body. Mindfulness is thus all of the above—awareness, with attention, in the present moment, on purpose—with the important addition: and with an attitude or intentional stance of nonattached equanimity.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

Each of these unskillful mind states are accompanied by specific bodily sensations. We can become aware of these to know which is present. For example, Hai An (Sister Ocean), a Buddhist monastic notes: “For me, craving presents as a physical sense of reaching forward, whereas aversion feels like a hardening and pushing away. Both of these can be released by relaxing the muscles of the body and taking a few deep breaths. Delusion is a dull agitation of the nervous system and pressure in my forehead that I let go of by broadening my gaze and sensing my feet on the ground. Once you know how the poisons feel, you can recognize their absence through sensations rather than thinking abstractly about whether they are there or not. From there you can find a sweet spot, free from the poisons—a moment of awakening worthy of being savored in any season.”<sup>xxv</sup>

Let’s explore each one of these unskillful mind states:

**Greed** is intense desire which leads to the mind state of grasping, attachment, wanting to hold on to something and not let go.

Exercise: Close your eyes and reflect on a recent experience of intense desire, something that you really wanted or something that you had and you wanted to protect. What do you feel in your body?

**Aversion** is ill-will leading to the mind state of pushing away, resisting. The more that we resist, the more that the mind state stays present in the mind.

The Buddha discovered suffering by observing the life cycle which consists of birth, aging, sickness and death. Each of these can cause dissatisfaction. For example, when we are born, we want all sorts of things such as being held and rocked. And when we don’t get what we want we cry (suffer). During our life, we experience aging and sickness. And finally, we encounter death. Even though we logically know

that we cannot escape death, we fear its coming. To quell this fear, we turn to pleasures of the senses (seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, smelling, thinking) as a way to escape the inevitability of our mortality.

Exercise: Close your eyes and reflect on a recent experience of ill-will, an episode of intense aversion to someone or something that happened to you. What do you feel in your body?

**Delusion** is the lack of wisdom (ignorance) in seeing how life really is leading to the mind state of confusion. Instead of realizing the three characteristics of all phenomena (impermanence, inability to provide lasting satisfaction and selfless nature, we delude ourselves longing for permanence, lasting satisfaction and belief in a permanent self.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The mind wants stability and doesn't like change. In *The Buddha's Brain*, Rick Hanson and Richard Mendius note that the mind evolved with a priority for survival with happiness being optional. For security, survival and protection, the mind adopted the following three strategies:

- create boundaries between you and the world,
- maintain stability
- approach opportunities and avoid threats.<sup>xxvii</sup>

While these strategies might benefit survival, they have the potential to cause suffering as all of them lead to isolation, frustration, and narrowing our options for happiness. **Life is change; we can't avoid it.**

Also, the thought of not being in control can cause immense suffering. What makes us think that we are ever in control? This is delusion!

*"If we were really in control of our lives, we'd have no reason to be dissatisfied. But we're not in control. Time after time we don't get what we want, and we get what we don't want.*

*We want our perfect job, perfect office, perfect boss, and perfect pay to continue forever, but they change, and we have no say about why or when. We want to keep our loved ones, but no matter how tightly we cling to them, someday we'll be separated. To stay healthy we take herbs and vitamins, work out, and eat right, but we still get sick. We want to remain young and strong and hope that old age will happen only to others, but years pass and we discover that our body has other plans. Whatever ideal situation we're in, we naturally wish to hold on to it. But we have no control over the law of impermanence. Everything exists by consent of this law, and we have no protection against it."<sup>xxviii</sup>*

Exercise: Close your eyes and reflect on a recent experience of confusion, something that was not quite going right but lacks intense desire or aversion. What do you feel in your body?

## Teaching IV Suffering is a Disease: The Principles of Suffering

So far, we have explored what an experience is, how we really experience life and the three unskillful states of mind that cause suffering. Our last core teaching in this series provides a framework for how we can deal with suffering.

### The Principles of Suffering (Four Noble Truths)

The Buddha said in the [Alagaddupama Sutta](#): “What I teach now as before, O monks, is suffering and the cessation of suffering.” His approach was similar that of a medical physician dealing with physical illnesses. Suffering is a disease (dis ease) has symptoms, a cause, a cure and a prescription for its cessation. The Buddha outlined these principles as the Four Noble Truths. When we view suffering as a disease, it is easier to address because we realize that suffering affects everyone and can more easily abandon our judgment about our suffering. Just like flu or cancer, we are all at risk.

The principles of the disease of suffering can be summarized as noted below:

Principles of Suffering	Explanation
Symptoms	Dissatisfaction, stress, fear, tension, anxiety, worry, depression, disappointment, anger, jealousy, abandonment, nervousness, mental pain, etc..
Cause	Wanting life to be other than it is, attachment to an outcome
Cure	Stop craving, let go
Prescription	The Eightfold Path

### Symptoms: Dissatisfaction

Suffering exists and is a disease. Dissatisfaction with what life hands us is universal. We may use other names to describe our symptoms of suffering: stress, fear, tension, anxiety, worry, depression, disappointment, anger, jealousy, abandonment, nervousness or mental pain. The Atlas of Emotions ([atlasofemotions.org](http://atlasofemotions.org)) provides a range of descriptions for the categories of anger, fear, disgust, and sadness. For example, the emotion of anger ranges from annoyance, frustration, exasperation, argumentativeness, bitterness, vengefulness to fury.

### Cause: We want life to be other than it is.

The three poisons (greed, aversion and delusion) cause suffering. Each poison creates attachment. With greed, we are attached to getting more or protecting what we have, with aversion, we are attached to getting rid of the unpleasant and with delusion, we are attached to confusion and ignorance (the opposites of investigation and learning). The bottom line is that we want we are experiencing in life to be other than it is. We long for something else. We have expectations of outcomes that are in direct conflict with what life is giving us. This “fever of unsatisfied longing” is often referred to as craving or desire. This craving does not and cannot lead to lasting happiness, the peace that we seek.

The most familiar type of craving is what we get from our six sense bases (body, eyes, ears, nose, tongue and mind). As Joseph Goldstein notes, “All of these desires are just our usual engagement with life – enjoying and wanting what is pleasurable, avoid as best we can what is disagreeable.” This engagement

is never ending. As the Buddha noted, “...people who are not free from lust for sensual pleasures, who are devoured by craving for sensual pleasures, who burn with the fever of sensual pleasures, still indulge in sensual pleasures; the more they indulge in sensual pleasures, the more their craving for sensual pleasures increases and the more they are burned by the fever of sensual pleasures, yet they find a certain measure of satisfaction and enjoyment in dependence on the five cords of sensual pleasure.” [MN](#)

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### **Cure: Stop craving, let go**

As we learned, craving (wanting) is the cause of suffering. Cravings arise constantly. It is when we cling to a craving that suffering arises. Clinging is attachment. When we attach to a craving, we are in a trance, unaware of other possibilities and the effect that this craving is having on our life. It is not just wanting life to be other than it is, it is being attached to the concept, life **should be** other than it is. We then become dissatisfied and obsessed with the should. We have choices – continue the obsession, do something (act), or let go. Continuing the obsession with out acting just increases the suffering.

The good news is that with motivation, there can be freedom from attachment (clinging). Freedom from attachment is not a onetime letting go but something to be practiced each time craving arises. This is letting go many times, moment to moment. It is helpful to realize letting go can happen because all phenomena are impermanent. After the Buddha gave his first teaching, one of the monks stated that “All that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing.” However, when our attachment to a desire (craving) falls away, there is a tendency to attach to another. This can lead to an endless cycle of attachments. Sumedho noted, “I was brought up in America — the land of freedom. It promises the right to be happy, but what it really offers is the right to be attached to everything.”<sup>xxix</sup>

Sumedho asks us to reflect frequently on “All that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing.” “I would like to emphasize how important it is to develop this way of reflecting. Rather than just developing a method of tranquillising your mind, which certainly is one part of the practice, **really see that proper meditation is a commitment to wise investigation**. It involves a courageous effort to look deeply into things, not as analyzing yourself and making judgments about why you suffer on a personal level but resolving to really follow the path until you have profound understanding. Such perfect understanding is based upon the pattern of arising and ceasing. Once this law is understood, everything is seen as fitting into that pattern.”<sup>xxx</sup>

What would it be like if there were complete cessation? As Phillip Moffitt notes, “Thus when there is cessation, your mind no longer burns in response to the arising of pleasant and unpleasant in your life...Your mind is willing to be with what is true in the moment and isn’t disturbed by it.”<sup>xxxi</sup>

### **Prescription: The Eightfold Path**

Although the cure for suffering is letting go of craving, it requires a comprehensive approach. The Buddha described eight steps that are combined into three components: wisdom, skillful living, and mindful practice.

#### **Living with Wisdom** (2 steps):

Skillful Understanding: gaining an understanding of what life is really about.

Skillful Intention: practicing generosity, loving-kindness and compassion.

#### **Living a Skillful Life** (3 steps):

Skillful Speech: not lying, speaking harshly

Skillful Action: following the five precepts

- Abstaining from killing.
- Abstaining from stealing.
- Abstaining from speaking falsely.
- Abstaining from sexual misconduct.
- Abstaining from misusing intoxicants that cloud the mind.

Skillful Livelihood: engaging in activities that support your spiritual path and which do not harm yourself or others.

**Living Mindfully** (3 steps):

Skillful Effort: developing wholesome mental states.

Skillful Mindfulness: seeing things as they really are.

Skillful Concentration: being able to focus on the task at hand.

**In Summary**, Stephan Bachelor states the four principles of suffering:

Embrace life (comprehend)

Let go of what arises. (abandon)

See its ceasing. (realize) (develop)

Act!<sup>xxxii</sup>

### **Exercise**

Reflect on a recent unpleasant experience.

What were the symptoms?

Was the cause wanting life to be other than it was or wanting a different outcome?

Did you let go or are you still attached?

### **Summary**

We have explored in this series of core teachings”

1. How our experiences are impermanent, are unable to give lasting satisfaction and are of selfless nature (the three characteristics)
2. How we really experience life (the five aggregates of clinging)
3. How three unskillful states of mind (greed, aversion, delusion) cause suffering (the three poisons)
4. How we can deal with suffering (the Four Principles of Suffering).

Having gained this understanding, we can apply prescription of the Eightfold Path which includes the practices of meditation and mindfulness to seek peace, happiness and joy. Another benefit of following this path is that you will develop more loving-kindness, compassion for yourself and others as well as sympathetic joy for others and resilience (equanimity). One of the best texts on the Eightfold Path is Eight Steps to Happiness by Bhante Gunaratana.<sup>xxxiii</sup> A series of talks on this text is available on our White Hall Meditation website. (<https://www.whitehallmeditation.org/the-eightfold-path/>)

Below is a summary of the core teachings.



## Core Buddhist Teachings and their Application to Daily Life: Summary

**Pure Experience** is form (sense organ in contact with a sense object) in contact with consciousness. Each experience has **three characteristics**: impermanent, unable to give lasting satisfaction, and selfless (ungraspable) nature.

### Experiencing Impermanence

Seated and with eyes closed, experience the seat of whatever you are sitting on by touching it. Now listen for any sounds. What happened to your awareness of the touch of the seat? Your sense base, the hand, is touching the sense object, the seat, but your consciousness has moved on to the sense base, ear. The experience of the seat arose when consciousness was present with it and the experience fell away when consciousness left. If you become aware of touching the seat again, that is a new and different experience. Can you realize impermanence?

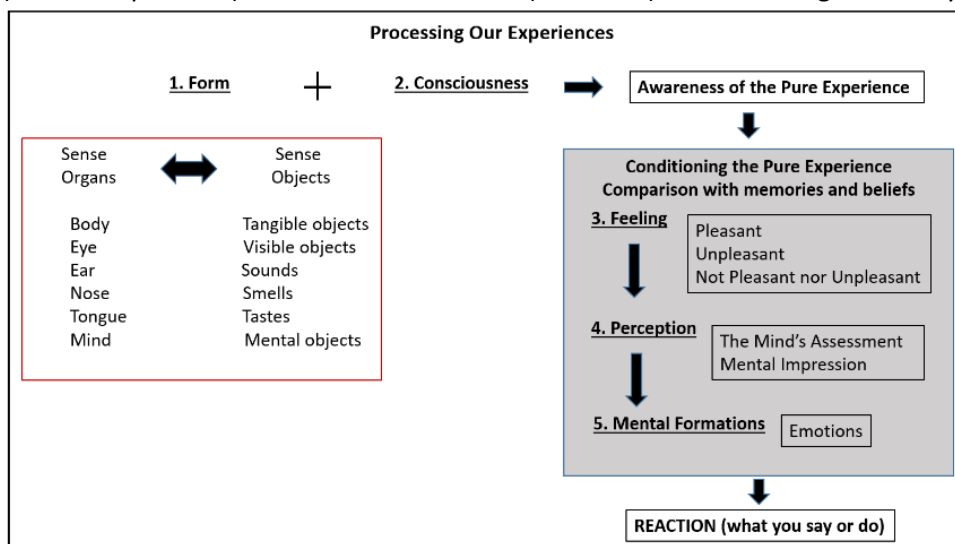
### Experiencing inability to provide lasting satisfaction

Go back to your awareness of the seat and try to stay with it. What is the texture? What is the temperature of the seat? Note that when you are determining the temperature, you are no longer experiencing the texture. Your consciousness has shifted again! So, touching the seat is not one but many experiences. Can you realize the inability to provide lasting satisfaction with the touching of the seat?

### Experiencing selfless nature

Go back to your awareness of the seat. Now ask yourself, “who is touching the seat?” You might say that, “It is me.” But who is me? Can you find anything of me or are you just experiencing touching the seat? Can you realize the selfless nature of the touching the seat?

**Conditioning:** Our mind conditions the pure experience by comparing it with stored memories and beliefs and transforming that experience into feelings (pleasant, unpleasant or neutral), perception (mental impression) and mental formations (emotions). We then might react by speaking or acting.



### Experiencing conditioning

Reflect on a recent pure experience such as seeing someone with your eyes and reacting negatively. In a non-judgmental way, describe the feelings, perception, and mental formations that arose. Describe the reaction.

The three mind states causing suffering are greed, aversion, and delusion which are felt in the body and are signals that we are attached to them.

**Greed** is intense desire which leads to the mind state of grasping, attachment, wanting to hold on to something and not let go.

Exercise: Close your eyes and reflect on a recent experience of intense desire, something that you really wanted or something that you had and you wanted to protect. What do you feel in your body?

**Aversion** is ill-will leading to the mind state of pushing away, resisting unpleasantness.

Exercise: Close your eyes and reflect on a recent experience of ill-will, an episode of intense aversion to someone or something that happened to you. What do you feel in your body?

**Delusion** is the lack of wisdom (ignorance) in seeing how life really is leading to the mind state of confusion. Instead of realizing the three characteristics of all phenomena (impermanence, inability to provide lasting satisfaction and selfless nature, we delude ourselves longing for permanence, lasting satisfaction and belief in a permanent self.

Exercise: Close your eyes and reflect on a recent experience of confusion, something that was not quite going right but lacks intense desire or aversion. What do you feel in your body?

**In summary**, a pure experience can be transformed (conditioned) into an unpleasant experience.

With that unpleasant experience, we want life to be other than it is and we suffer.

If we are not aware that we are trying to cure our suffering with greed or aversion or being stuck in delusion (ignorance), we remain suffering.

The Buddha offered another strategy: be mindful, recognize the craving, stop craving and let go. Follow the Eightfold Path (gain wisdom, be virtuous, practice concentration and mindfulness).

Suffering as a disease (dis-ease):

Principles of Suffering	Explanation
Symptoms	Dissatisfaction, stress, fear, tension, anxiety, worry, depression, disappointment, anger, jealousy, abandonment, nervousness, mental pain, etc..
Cause	Wanting life to be other than it is, attachment to an outcome
Cure	Stop craving, let go
Prescription	The Eightfold Path

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