



## **The Foundation of Stress**

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### **Suffering and Stress**

In one of the Buddha's teachings when asked his purpose, he said: "What I teach now as before, O monks, is suffering and the cessation of suffering."<sup>1</sup> This is what the teachings are all about, understanding stress (suffering) and how to end it.

Please note: In this talk, I will be using the words suffering and stress interchangeably as stress is better understood in modern times.

### **How did the Buddha come to teach about stress?**

The Buddha was in the upper class in India. His father, a prince, was determined not to let his son suffer. So, he made it possible for him to have every form of luxury and pleasure. One day, the Buddha, wandered outside of the royal boundaries and he witnessed people suffering from birth, old age, disease, and dying.

Since having led a pleasurable life which didn't seem to lessen suffering, he left his wife and child and started on a path to discover how to reduce suffering. He started by becoming an ascetic, denying himself every pleasure. This didn't work either and, as he contemplated this under the Bodhi tree in India, the answer came to him. He called it the middle way.

The Buddha came to understand that stress is ultimately due to causes and conditions. He explained: "When this is, that is.

From the arising of this comes the arising of that.

When this isn't, that isn't.

From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that."<sup>2</sup>

What the Buddha meant was that when something arises such as when the mind perceives an unpleasant experience, there may be a stress reaction such as anger arise (when this is, that is, from the arising of this comes the arising of that). If the unpleasant experience falls away or is abandoned, anger dissipates (When this isn't, that isn't, From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that). This is the foundation of the cause of stress, causes and conditions. The Buddha explained this in more detail calling it dependent origination which we don't have time to delve into that now.

## Understanding Stress

Stress is the reaction in our body and mind to pressure that can come from changing circumstances. For example, we may need to meet a deadline, we may be threatened, we may be asked to do something that we don't want to do, we may not like the way things are turning out, we may feel at the loss of a loved one, etc. All of these circumstances may cause stress because we would rather not have to deal with change, and we wish that things would stay the way that they are or change to what we want it to be. Stress reactions can manifest as dissatisfaction, fear, tension, anxiety, worry, depression, disappointment, anger, jealousy, abandonment, nervousness, or pain (particularly mental pain). And stress can have harmful effects on our bodies such as elevated blood pressure, headaches, chest pain, upset stomach, problems sleeping, etc.

## The Middle Way

The Buddha explains the middle way when he gave his first teaching to five monks:

“There are these two extremes that are not to be indulged in by one who has gone forth [to seek the truth of suffering]. Which two? That which is devoted to sensual pleasure in connection with sensuality: base, vulgar, common, ignoble, unprofitable; and that which is devoted to self-affliction: painful, ignoble, unprofitable. Avoiding both of these extremes, the middle way realized by the Tathāgata [the Buddha]—producing vision, producing knowledge—leads to stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding.

“And what is the middle way realized by the Tathāgata that—producing vision, producing knowledge—leads to stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding? Precisely this noble eightfold path: right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This is the middle way realized by the Tathāgata that—producing vision, producing knowledge—leads to stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding.”<sup>3</sup>

The Buddha went on to explain the truth of stress in four simple principles called the Four Noble Truths.

In the Buddha's words:

**Noble Truth 1** “Now this, monks, is the **noble truth of stress**: Birth is stressful, aging is stressful, death is stressful; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair are stressful; association with the unbeloved is stressful, separation from the loved is stressful, not getting what is wanted is stressful.

**Noble Truth 2** “And this, monks, is the noble truth of the **origination** of stress: the craving that makes for further becoming—accompanied by passion & delight, relishing now here & now there—i.e., craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming.

**Noble Truth 3** “And this, monks, is the noble truth of the **cessation** of stress: the remainderless fading & cessation, renunciation, relinquishment, release, & letting go of that very craving.

**Noble Truth 4** “And this, monks, is the noble truth of **the way of practice** leading to the cessation of stress: precisely this noble eightfold path—right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.”

Put simply, the four principles of stress state the origin, the cause, the cure, and the way of practice. This is similar to describing a disease: the symptoms, the cause, the cure and the management plan. In fact, stress is a disease – dis ease.

So, the Foundation of what we at White Hall Mediation teach to deal with stress is the Buddha's teachings as noted above..

### **The Eightfold Path**

The Eightfold Path is divided into three components: wisdom, morality, and concentration.

**Wisdom** consists of two steps:

- **Skillful Understanding:** gaining an understanding of what life is really about.
- **Skillful Intention:** practicing generosity, loving-kindness and compassion.

**Morality** (Virtue) is adopting core values and living your life in accordance with them. The three core values are contained in the steps:

- **Skillful Speech**
- **Skillful Action**
- **Skillful Livelihood.**

**Concentration** is the process for practice and contains three steps:

- **Skillful Effort;** developing wholesome mental states.
- **Skillful Mindfulness:** seeing things as they really are. (Paying Attention Moment to Moment to What Is.
- **Skillful Concentration:** being able to focus on the present – the “what is”.

There are many commentaries on the Eightfold Path by those who came after the Buddha. The commentary that we recommend is [Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness: Walking the Buddha's Path](#) by Bhante Gunaratana.

Bhante Henepola Gunaratana is the founding abbot of the Bhavana Society. Born in rural Sri Lanka, he has been a monk since age 12 and took full ordination at age 20 in 1947. He came to the United States in 1968. “Bhante G” (as he is fondly called by his students) has written a number of books, including the now-classic meditation manual Mindfulness In Plain English and its companion Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness. Bhante G regularly leads retreats on vipassana, mindfulness, metta (loving-friendliness), concentration, and other topics at the Bhavana Society.”<sup>4</sup>

Laura Good and I did a series on the Eightfold Path using the Eight Mindful Steps as the main reference. It is available on our [website](#).

In summary, causes and conditions come together to cause craving and clinging. Craving and clinging cause stress to arise. The Four Noble Truths enhance our understanding of this and offer a path to successfully deal with stress that arises.

For your practice, I highly recommend reading and reflecting on Bhante G's Eight Mindful Steps. White Hall Meditation has adopted text as our main core resource.

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<sup>1</sup> [Alagaddupama Sutta: The Snake Simile](#) MN 22 translated from the Pali by Nyanaponika Thera

<sup>2</sup> [Ud 1:3 Awakening](#) (3) (Bodhi Sutta)

<sup>3</sup> Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion [Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta](#) (SN 56:11)

<sup>4</sup> <https://bhavanasociety.org/the-bhavana-community>