OPEN EYE
Meditation Group
See for Yourself

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Unburdened Heart & Mind

Is a mountain heavy?

It may be heavy in and of itself, but as long as we don't try to lift it up, it won't be heavy for us.

This is a metaphor that one of my teachers, Ajaan Suwat, often used when explaining how to stop suffering from the problems of life. You don't deny their existence—the mountains are heavy—and you don't run away from them. As he would further explain, you deal with problems where you have to and solve them where you can. You simply learn how not to carry them around. That's where the art of the practice lies: in living with real problems without making their reality burden the heart. (causing suffering)

Dukkha is a word notoriously hard to translate into English. In the Pāli canon, it applies both to physical and to mental pain and dis-ease, ranging from intense anguish to the subtlest sense of being burdened or confined. The Pāli commentaries explain dukkha as "that which is hard to bear." or "whatever puts a squeeze on the heart." Although no single English term covers all of these meanings, the word "stress"—as a strain on body or mind—seems as close as English can get to the Pāli term; "suffering" can be used in places where "stress" seems too mild.

The Buddha focused his teachings on the issue of stress because he had found a method for transcending it. To understand that method, we have to see which parts of our experience are marked by stress. From his perspective, experience falls into two broad categories: compounded—put together from causal forces and processes—and uncompounded.

All ordinary experience is compounded. Even a simple act as like looking at a flower is compounded, in that it depends on the physical conditions supporting the flower's existence together with all the complex physical and mental factors involved in the act of seeing and then creating a feeling, reacting to the experience.

The only experience that isn't compounded is extraordinary—nirvana—for it doesn't depend on causal factors of any kind.

When the Buddha talked about dukkha in terms of the three common characteristics—inconstancy, stress, and not-self—he said that all compounded experiences are innately stressful. From this point of view, even flower-gazing is stressful despite the obvious pleasure it provides, for it relies on a fragile tension among the inconstant combined factors making up the experience.

Thus if we want to go beyond stress we'll have to understand the nature of compounded experience. To meet this need, the Buddha talked about dukkha in another context: the four noble truths. Here, for strategic purposes, he divided compounded experience into three truths—1. stress, 2. its cause (craving), 3. and the way to its cessation (the noble eightfold path).

4. Uncompounded experience, release, he left as the remaining truth: the ending of stress. In defining the first truth he said that compounded experiences were stressful only when accompanied by clinging. In this sense, flower-gazing isn't stressful unless we cling to it, try to control, lament the previty of the experience, and try to base our happiness on it the passing phemonena.

To understand how to let go effectively, it's helpful to look at the Pāli word for clinging—upadāna—for it has a second meaning as well: the act of taking sustenance, as when a plant takes sustenance from the soil, or a fire from its fuel. This second

meaning for upadāna applies to the mind as well. When the mind clings to an object, it's feeding on that object. It's trying to gain nourishment from sensory pleasures, possessions, relationships, recognition, status, whatever, to make up for the gnawing sense of emptiness it feels inside. Unfortunately, this mental nourishment is temporary, so we keep hungering for more. Yet no matter how much the mind may try to possess and control its food sources to guarantee a constant supply, problems and obstacles will occur. The heart and mind are then burdened with continual strategies and the search.

So the issue of stress comes down to the feeding habits of the mind. If the mind didn't feel a driving need to feed, it wouldn't suffer. And perhaps no longer create hardships for the people and things it consumes—through possession and control. If we want to end suffering for ourselves and at the same time relieve the hardships of others, we thus have to develope an understanding of how we feed, and then sharpen its discernment so that the act of feeding becomes obvious to us. When the process of this kind of feeding becomes clear, we will lessen the hold of the habitual tendancy and can let go of this habit naturally.

The practice to end dukkha would be quick and easy if we could simply go straight for the discernment that puts an end to clinging habits. The feeding analogy, though, helps to explain why simply seeing the drawbacks of clinging isn't enough to make us let go.

The Buddha found that the way to go beyond clinging is to turn our clinging into the path of abandoning clinging.
- We'll need a certain amount of sensory pleasure—in terms of adequate food, clothing, and shelter—to find the strength to go beyond sensual passion.
- We'll need right view—seeing all things, including views, in terms of the four noble truths—to undermine our clinging to views.
- And we'll need a regimen of the five ethical precepts and the practice of meditation to put the mind in a solid position where it can drop its clinging to habits and practices.
- Underlying all this, we'll need a healthy sense of self-love, self-responsibility, and self-discipline to master the practices leading to the insight that cuts through our clinging to doctrines of the self.

So we start the path to the end of suffering, not by trying to drop our clingings immediately, but by learning to cling more strategically. In terms of the feeding analogy, we don't try to starve the mind. We simply change its diet, weaning it away from junk food in favor of health food, developing inner qualities that will make it so strong that it won't need to feed ever again.

The canon lists these qualities as five:

- conviction in the principle of karma—that our happiness depends on our own actions;

- persistence in abandoning unskillful qualities and developing skillful ones in their stead;

- mindfulness;

- concentration; and

- discernment.

Of these, concentration—at the level of jhāna, or intense absorption—is the strength that the Buddhist tradition most often compares to good, healthy food. Buddha compares the four deep levels of concentration to the provisions used to stock a journey.

The discerning mind is strengthened with the food of good concentration, it can begin contemplating the drawbacks of having to feed. This is the part of the Buddha's teaching that—for many of us—goes most directly against the grain, because feeding, in every sense of the word, is our primary way of relating to and enjoying the world around us.

When the mind is strong and well fed with concentration and discernment, it can begin to look objectively at the stress involved in having to feed....and through this investigation will eventually unburdening the mind and heart... reaching release.