



The first stage - recognising what it is to be human.

The first realisation – recognising that life can be painful, difficult and disappointing.

Surveying the terrain of the dangerous shore : facing reality with clarity

“The nature of being human is that we are vulnerable. This is not a personal failing—it’s the very ground from which compassion and wisdom grow.”

Tara Brach — Radical Acceptance

Having established a commitment to harmlessness with the Five Precepts – the essential foundational planks for our RAFT to Freedom – we now turn our attention more directly to the first stage of our journey: **Recognising** what it is to be human.

This involves us taking an honest, clear-eyed look at the fundamental nature of our experience. Before we can effectively build our raft and navigate away from the dangerous shore of the pull of compulsive and reactive behaviours, we need to understand the terrain we are standing on and the currents we will be navigating.

This honest assessment is grounded in the first realisation of Gotama (the Buddha), that life is naturally painful, difficult and disappointing. The Pali word is *Dukkha*, often translated as ‘suffering,’ but its meaning is much broader and more complicated than that. It encompasses the entire spectrum of unsatisfactoriness, stress, difficulty, discomfort, pain, and disappointment that is a natural part of being human.

The word *dukkha* is often illustrated using the image of a cart with an ill-fitting axle, which results in a bumpy and uncomfortable ride. There is no doubt that the pain, difficulties and disappointments we encounter - life’s ups and downs - are often experienced as an uncomfortable journey! Gotama (The Buddha), shared these realities and his teachings, in order to

help us to be cushioned against this bumpy ride, to experience less pain and discomfort.

A stark, modern rendering might be: *"Life is difficult and disappointing, you don't get what you want, and then you die."*

While this might sound pessimistic initially, Gotama's intention was not to cause despair, but to give us a realistic understanding – to manage our expectations. He presented this not as a depressing final word, but as the first reality we need to recognise and comprehend fully if we wish to find our way to lasting freedom.

For many of us our natural response to the inevitable pain, difficulties and disappointments of life, leads us to harmful patterns of escape and self-sabotage, in a futile effort to cushion the discomfort. This is a negative feedback loop which just causes more pain for ourselves and others, and so it goes on.

Ignoring the difficult terrain or pretending the dangerous currents don't exist won't help us reach the safe shore. **Recognising** dukkha, is the necessary starting point for diagnosing our situation and motivating us to gather the materials for our raft. It helps us see *why* we need to construct our raft in the first place.

It can be helpful not to take the bumpy ride personally, in his first talk after his awakening, Gotama is believed to have said:

"Now this ... is the reality which is pain [dukkha]: birth is painful, aging is painful, illness is painful, death is painful; sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, unhappiness and distress are painful; being stuck with what is disliked is painful; separation from what is liked is painful; not to get what one wants is painful; in summary, clinging to a 'self' that demands to be satisfied is painful."

There's a lot here, so let's unpack what Gotama is saying here;

★ **Physical and emotional pain:** Life in general, be it aging, illness, physical pain and death are painful. On top of this, difficult emotions such as sorrow, grief and distress add more pain into the mix. These are universal human experiences, forms of suffering we can all readily

recognise, but we are often in denial of this reality. The truth is that no one gets out of here unscathed!

- ★ **Pain of unwanted contact:** When we are stuck with people, situations, or feelings we dislike, it causes us pain and distress.
- ★ **Pain of separation:** When we lose people, things, status, or experiences that we cherish is also painful.
- ★ **Pain of not getting what we want:** Whether it's a substance, a relationship, a job, or a state of mind - not getting what we desire - is a constant source of dissatisfaction and disappointment. This is particularly relevant to the pull of compulsive and reactive behaviours driving our addictions and compulsions.
- ★ **The pain of clinging to 'self':** It is natural to see our 'self' as fixed and unchanging (most people do), but in reality we are made up of different aspects of 'self' - which constantly change. This view of our 'self' is hard to understand and can cause us much suffering. Because these aspects of our experience are constantly changing and ultimately beyond our control, grasping onto them as 'me' or 'mine' inevitably leads to subtle (or not-so-subtle) pain.

Recognising dukkha in its various forms – from the gross pain of loss or illness to the subtle stress of change – is the primary task of the first stage of our journey. It's about seeing clearly, but more importantly accepting, that life is naturally painful, difficult and disappointing. And that our reactivity, including our denial and resistance to this reality creates a 'dangerous shore'. This recognition, done with courage and an ever emerging clarity, motivates us to wholeheartedly engage in building our raft and undertaking the journey towards the 'safe shore', free of avoidable and unnecessary pain.

Self-reflections

Sit quietly and consider these questions, allowing feelings to arise without judgment:

- ★ How does the direct statement '*Life is painful, difficult and disappointing...*' land for me? Is there resistance, acceptance, or something else?
- ★ Looking at the Gotama's list (aging, illness, death, sorrow, separation from loved ones, union with the disliked, not getting what one wants),

which aspects of 'dukkha' feel most prominent or challenging in my life right now?

- ★ How has the specific suffering related to my craving or compulsive behaviour manifested in these different categories?
- ★ Can I recall moments of subtle unsatisfactoriness even when things seemed outwardly 'okay'? What did that feel like?
- ★ Could recognising and facing my pain, difficulties, and disappointments — seeing them clearly instead of avoiding or denying them — actually help support my moving from suffering to freedom?
- ★ Do you know anyone who has never experienced pain, difficulty and disappointment? For example, can money buy you happiness?

Journaling prompts

Use your journal to explore your personal understanding of '*dukkha*':

- ★ **Personal inventory of dukkha:** Reflecting on Gotama's list, write down specific examples from your own life for each category where possible (for example, an experience of physical pain, a significant loss, a time of intense frustration from not getting something, and so forth).
- ★ **Craving and compulsion specific dukkha:** Focus specifically on your experience with craving and compulsion. How did it create or intensify suffering in each of the categories listed by Gotama? Be specific (examples include, physical pain from withdrawal, sorrow caused to loved ones, separation from health/job/family, constant frustration of craving).
- ★ **The pain of 'not getting':** Explore the experience of "not to get what one wants" in relation to craving. Describe the mental and physical feeling of wanting something intensely (a substance, an experience, relief) and not being able to have it, or the disappointment when it doesn't deliver lasting satisfaction.
- ★ **Recognising versus resigning:** Write about the difference between clearly recognising the reality of *Dukkha* and resigning yourself to it in a hopeless way. How can acknowledging the 'dangerous shore' empower you to build the raft, rather than just making you feel stuck?

Supporting Material: Scientific and Philosophical Perspectives on Difficulty

For those interested in the science and philosophy behind this practice, here is a brief overview:

Our aspiration to recognise '*dukkha*' clearly is supported by observations from various fields:

- **Neuroscience:** Our brains are wired with a 'negativity bias' – we tend to pay more attention to, learn from, and remember negative experiences more than positive ones. This likely evolved as a survival mechanism (remembering danger is crucial) but contributes to our baseline sense of unease. Neuroscience also studies the pathways of physical and emotional pain, revealing how stress hormones (like cortisol) impact the body and brain, and how chronic stress (often related to addiction and difficult life circumstances) can have long-term detrimental effects. Understanding these mechanisms normalises the experience of difficulty.
- **Psychology:** Psychology extensively documents human suffering: anxiety disorders, depression, grief, trauma (PTSD), the pain of broken attachments, and the stress of major life changes. Concepts like "loss aversion" (losses feel more impactful than equivalent gains) and 'hedonic adaptation' (we quickly get used to positive circumstances, returning to a baseline happiness level) explain why "getting what we want" often fails to bring lasting satisfaction. Evolutionary psychology suggests some modern suffering arises from a mismatch between our evolved psychological predispositions (for example, for high-calorie foods, social status) and our current environment. Addiction itself is understood as a complex bio-psycho-social disorder involving immense suffering.
- **Philosophy:** The 'problem of suffering' is a central theme in many philosophical traditions. Existentialism grapples directly with the anxieties of existence – freedom, responsibility, isolation, meaninglessness, and the awareness of death. Stoicism teaches acceptance of what we cannot control (including inevitable pain, loss, and difficulty) and focusing effort on our inner responses – our judgments and virtues. Recognising universal difficulties is framed not as pessimism, but as a necessary step towards wisdom and equanimity.

These perspectives reinforce Gotama's first realisation, that difficulty and unsatisfactoriness are not personal failings but fundamental aspects of the human condition, amplified but not solely caused by addiction. Recognising this is essential for navigating the terrain effectively.

Remember to remember

Acknowledging the reality of 'dukkha' is perhaps the most crucial first step in gathering the necessary understanding for our raft. It requires courage to look directly at the difficulties inherent in life and those specifically created or exacerbated by our harmful compulsive patterns. But this clear seeing is not meant to discourage us; rather, it is profoundly empowering. When we understand the nature of the 'dangerous shore' – the pervasive unsatisfactoriness described by Gotama – we develop a powerful motivation to build our raft and make the journey. We see the necessity of the foundational planks of the 'Five Gifts' to prevent adding further harm, and we understand *why* we need to gather the further materials such as mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom.

By honestly **Recognising** this terrain, we are not resigning ourselves to suffering, but preparing ourselves intelligently and compassionately for the journey towards freedom. Let us continue this exploration of the first stage of our journey, by looking next at how the appropriate heart-response of self-compassion, can help us navigate this recognition.

Sutta References

- [**Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta \(SN 56.11 - Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion\)**](#): This is the primary source for the definition of the First Noble Truth.
 - *Summary*: In his first sermon, the Buddha defines the Noble Truth of Suffering (*Dukkha*) by enumerating its various forms: birth, aging, illness, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, unhappiness, distress, association with the disliked, separation from the liked, not getting what one wants, and fundamentally, the five aggregates subject to clinging (*pañcupādānakkhandhā*). He states that this truth is to be fully understood (*pariññeyya*).
- [**Dukkha Sutta \(SN 38.14 - Suffering\)**](#): A dialogue specifically exploring the meaning of Dukkha.

- *Summary:* Sāriputta asks the Buddha what 'suffering' (*Dukkha*) refers to. The Buddha replies by enumerating the same categories as in the first sermon (birth, aging, death, sorrow, etc., including the five aggregates of clinging), confirming this comprehensive understanding of the term. It reinforces that *Dukkha* encompasses a wide range of unsatisfactory experiences, both gross and subtle.

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