



This document is an extract from the full chapter which is available for download in the table via this [link](#) and is intended for use by participants of meetings.

## 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.

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### 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?
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### 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?
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### **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.

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