



06 - Recognising life is painful, difficult and disappointing

This document is an extract from the full chapter, which is available for download in the table via this link: <https://raft2freedom.org/raft-to-freedom-downloads/>

Now this, monks, for the spiritually ennobled, is the painful (dukkha) true reality: birth is painful, ageing is painful, illness is painful, death is painful; sorrow, lamentation, (physical) pain, unhappiness and distress are painful; union with what is disliked is painful; separation from what is liked is painful; not to get what one wants is painful; in brief, the five bundles of grasping-fuel are painful.

*- Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11), translated by Peter Harvey, in *An Introduction to Buddhism* (2013)*

Life, as Gotama (the Buddha) first taught it, is naturally painful, difficult and disappointing - dukkha. This isn't pessimism: it's the honest starting point for the whole journey. Just as a cart with an ill-fitting axle gives a bumpy ride, being human means encountering ageing, illness, loss, unwanted contact, and simply not getting what we want - universal experiences, not personal failings.

Our usual response to this discomfort is to reach for harmful patterns of escape and self-sabotage, which only deepens the very pain we're trying to avoid. Recognising dukkha honestly, without flinching and without resigning ourselves to it, is what motivates us to build our raft in the first place - it's the reason the rest of this journey is worth making.

This recognition is the first of the workbook's four tasks: to Recognise clearly what is here, so that we can go on to Abandon the drives that deepen our suffering, Feel the freedom that opens as their grip loosens, and Train ourselves to sustain it. None of the rest is possible without this first honest look.

Self-reflections

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

- 1 How does the direct statement "life is painful, difficult and disappointing" land for me? Is there resistance, acceptance, or something else? ([view card](#))
- 2 Looking at Gotama's list - ageing, illness, death, sorrow, separation from what I love, contact with what I dislike, not getting what I want - which of these feel most prominent or challenging in my life right now? ([view card](#))
- 3 How has the specific suffering related to my own reactivity or compulsive behaviour shown up across these different categories? ([view card](#))
- 4 Can I recall moments of subtle unsatisfactoriness even when things seemed outwardly "okay"? What did that feel like? ([view card](#))
- 5 Could recognising and facing my pain, difficulties and disappointments - seeing them clearly instead of avoiding or denying them - actually help support my own movement from suffering towards freedom? ([view card](#))
- 6 Do I know anyone who has never experienced pain, difficulty or disappointment? Can money, or getting what I want, ever fully buy me freedom from this? ([view card](#))
- 7 When I picture the image of a cart with an ill-fitting axle, jolting over every bump in the road - how much does that describe the ride my own life has taken? What would a smoother-riding cart look like for me? ([view card](#))

Journaling prompts

Use your journal to explore your own understanding of dukkha:

- 1 **Personal inventory of dukkha:** reflecting on Gotama's list, write down specific examples from your own life for each category where possible - an experience of physical pain, a significant loss, a time of intense frustration at not getting something, and so on.
- 2 **Craving and compulsion specific dukkha:** focus specifically on your own experience with craving and compulsion. How did it create or intensify suffering in each of the categories Gotama named? Be specific - physical discomfort, sorrow caused to loved ones, separation from health, work or family, the constant frustration of craving itself.
- 3 **The pain of not getting:** explore your own experience of "not getting 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 the lasting satisfaction it promised.
- 4 **Recognising versus resigning:** write about the difference, for you, 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 your raft, rather than simply leaving you feeling stuck?

- 5 **The uneven axle:** write about where your own life's ride currently feels bumpiest. What does that tell you about what most needs your honest attention right now?
- 6 **Not personal, not permanent:** write about how it might change your relationship to a current difficulty to see it as part of the shared human condition - something everyone eventually meets - rather than as a personal failing unique to you.
- 7 **Gathering materials:** having recognised this terrain more clearly, what do you feel you most need to gather for your own raft right now - a particular support, a practice, a new hobby, an honest conversation? Name it, however small.

For a printable reminder to carry this stage's practice into daily life, see the Self-Compassion card: <https://raft2freedom.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/08/appropriate-response-self-compassion.png>

Remember to remember

Acknowledging the reality of dukkha is perhaps the most crucial first step in gathering the understanding we need for our raft. It takes courage to look directly at the difficulties inherent in life, and at those specifically created or made worse by our own harmful, compulsive patterns. But this clear seeing is not meant to discourage us; rather, it is profoundly empowering, because once we understand the true shape of the terrain we are standing on, we can finally see why the rest of the journey is worth making.

By honestly recognising this terrain, we are not resigning ourselves to suffering, but preparing ourselves - intelligently and compassionately - for the journey towards freedom.

Yet those who face this truth do not find it a formula for despair, but a gateway to compassion. For within the heart is found a freedom and love even greater than the suffering. By facing the pain of the world they awaken a fearless and merciful heart, the universal birthright of humanity. When we honor the gate of suffering, what arises is the wondrous power of compassion.
- Jack Kornfield, *The Truth About Suffering*

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