



Recognise - Gotama's first realisation

06 - Recognising life is painful, difficult and disappointing

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.

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

Surveying the dangerous shore: radical realism

Having established a commitment to harmlessness with the Five Gifts - the essential foundational planks for our raft - we now turn our attention more directly to the first stage of our journey. We turn to Recognising what it is to be human.

This involves 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 Gotama's (the Buddha's) first realisation: 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 naturally part of being human.

The word *dukkha* is sometimes 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 shared this reality and his teachings in order to help us be cushioned against the bumpy ride, to experience less pain and discomfort than we otherwise would.

A stark, modern rendering of the same insight might simply be: life is difficult and disappointing, we don't always get what we want, and then we die.

While this might sound pessimistic at first, 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 becomes a negative feedback loop that 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 help not to take the bumpy ride personally. In his first talk after his awakening, Gotama is said to have unpacked this same truth in more detail - the opening quote above enumerates the categories of dukkha he named. Let's unpack what he is pointing to:

- **Physical and emotional pain:** life in general - ageing, illness, physical pain and death - is 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, though we are often in denial of this reality. No one gets out 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, this too is 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 sits close to the heart of the pull of compulsive and reactive behaviours this workbook addresses.
- **The pain of clinging to self:** it is natural to see our sense of self as fixed and unchanging - most people do - but in reality we are made up of different, constantly changing aspects. This view is hard to hold lightly, 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. This is the seed of a teaching this workbook returns to more fully later - the teaching of not-self, *anattā* - when we look closely at [the five components of selfing](#).

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 this first stage of our journey. It's about seeing clearly, and more importantly accepting, that life is naturally painful, difficult and disappointing, and that our reactivity - including our denial of 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.

Gotama's first realisation is the beginning of the first of the four tasks at the heart of this programme. To Recognise is to see clearly, and without flinching, that life is sometimes naturally painful, difficult and disappointing - that we often don't get what we want, yet frequently encounter what we don't want. This is universal, not personal: we are all in the same boat. Recognising this honestly is what makes the remaining tasks - to Abandon the drives that deepen our own suffering, to Feel the freedom that opens up as their grip loosens, and to Train ourselves to sustain that freedom - possible at all.

Practice - the dukkha check-in

A short pause, several times a day (*skip this practice if you find it triggering*)

This practice asks nothing more than honest noticing. Several times through the day - perhaps when something goes wrong, or simply at set points such as waking, midday and before sleep - pause for a few breaths and ask:

- 1 What is here right now that is uncomfortable, unwanted or disappointing, however small?
- 2 Can I name it simply, without adding a story about why it shouldn't be happening or whose fault it is?
- 3 Can I silently acknowledge, "this is dukkha" - and let that be enough for now, without needing to fix, escape or judge it?

Naming a difficult feeling this plainly is not just a figure of speech. The neuroscientist Matthew Lieberman's research on affect labelling has found that putting a feeling into words - "this is disappointment," "this is sorrow" - measurably reduces activity in the brain's threat-response circuitry. This holds even though nothing about the situation itself has changed. Simply naming dukkha is already doing something.

Widening the practice: RAIN

At quieter moments - not mid-crisis, but somewhere calm enough to sit with this for a few minutes - the same honest noticing can be widened using RAIN. This sequence was developed by the meditation teacher Michele McDonald and is now widely taught, including by Tara Brach in the talk linked with this chapter:

- **Recognise** what is here, naming it as simply as in the short pause above: "this is dukkha."
- **Allow** it to be present exactly as it is, without needing it to be otherwise - not agreeing with it, not fighting it, just not pushing it away.
- **Investigate** with a kindly curiosity: where do I feel this in the body? What does it actually need right now - not what an old habit insists it needs, but what would genuinely help?
- **Nurture** yourself in whatever small way fits the moment: a hand resting on the chest, a few words of simple kindness, or simply staying present a little longer than we might otherwise have allowed ourselves.

A quiet dialogue with difficulty

Some people find it useful to put this into words, spoken or written, rather than holding it only as a silent process:

- "I see you. This is dukkha - the ordinary ache of being human, not a personal failing."
- "I don't need to fix you or get rid of you right now. I can let you be here."
- "What do you actually need from me?"

There is no fixed reply required. The point of the dialogue is simply to stay present with what is there long enough to see it clearly, rather than reacting to it on autopilot.

How to practise the dukkha check-in

- 1 Pause, wherever you are.
- 2 Notice what is uncomfortable, unwanted or disappointing, however small.
- 3 Name it simply: "this is dukkha."
- 4 Allow it to be present without needing to fix, escape or judge it.
- 5 If time and circumstance allow, widen into the fuller RAIN sequence above.

The aim, in either form, is not to dwell on difficulty or to manufacture gloom where none exists. It is to build the habit of clear, unflinching recognition - the same quality of seeing Gotama pointed to in his first realisation. That way, when real pain, difficulty or disappointment arises, we already have the practice of meeting it honestly, rather than pushing it away or being ambushed by it.

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](#))
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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.

Supporting material: scientific and philosophical perspectives on difficulty

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

- **Neuroscience:** our brains are wired with a negativity bias - we tend to pay more attention to, learn from and remember negative experiences over positive ones. This plausibly evolved as a survival mechanism, since remembering danger is crucial, but it contributes to our baseline sense of unease. Neuroscience also studies the pathways of physical and emotional pain, revealing how stress hormones such as cortisol affect the body and brain, and how chronic stress - often related to compulsive patterns and difficult life circumstances - can have long-term detrimental effects. Understanding these mechanisms normalises the experience of difficulty.
- **Psychology & Psychotherapy:** psychology extensively documents human suffering - anxiety, depression, grief, trauma, the pain of broken attachments, and the stress of major life changes. Concepts such as loss aversion (losses feel more impactful than equivalent gains) and hedonic adaptation (we quickly adjust to positive circumstances, returning to a baseline level of happiness) help explain why getting what we want so often fails to bring lasting satisfaction. Evolutionary psychology suggests some modern suffering arises from a mismatch between our evolved psychological predispositions - for high-calorie foods or social status, for example - and our current environment. Compulsive patterns of use are understood in the clinical literature as complex, bio-psycho-social in origin, involving genuine and often profound suffering.
- **Philosophy:** the problem of suffering is a central theme across 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 the focusing of our effort on our own inner responses - our judgments and our virtues. Recognising universal difficulty is framed here not as pessimism, but as a necessary step towards wisdom and equanimity.

These perspectives converge on the same essential point Gotama's first realisation makes: that difficulty and unsatisfactoriness are not a personal failing, but a fundamental feature of the human condition.

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 - it is profoundly empowering. 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*

With this honest terrain surveyed, we turn next to how the appropriate heart-response of self-compassion can help us hold what we've just recognised.

See the [Index of sutta references](#) (web, D8. The print books carry a consolidated sutta appendix instead.)

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