

## Suffering



Last night Berget Jelane gave a talk on dukkha (suffering). Berget has been practicing meditation since 1986 and is a student of Gil Fronsdal. She is a graduate of Spirit Rock's Community Dharma Leader program and the Sati Center's Chaplaincy Training. Berget is a psychotherapist and uses mindfulness in her work with people".

*If you pay attention for just five minutes, you know some very fundamental dharma: things change, nothing stays comfortable, sensations come and go quite impersonally, according to conditions, but not because of anything that you do or think you do. Changes come and go quite by themselves. In the first five minutes of paying attention, you learn that pleasant sensations lead to the desire that these sensations will stay and that unpleasant sensations lead to the hope that they will go away. And both the attraction and the aversion amount to tension in the mind. Both are uncomfortable. So in the first minutes, you get a big lesson about suffering: wanting things to be other than what they are. Such a tremendous amount of truth to be learned just closing your eyes and paying attention to bodily sensations.*

~ Sylvia Boorstein, in *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, Fall 1992

Dukkha is a Pali word that is often translated as "suffering." However, dukkha means much more than that. Some of the grammatical roots of dukkha include "uneasy", "unsteady" or "disquieted". Dukkha is difficult to translate. Sometimes it is compared to a wheel on a cart that is not attached properly, so every rotation causes a bump. Another sense is that of an unbalanced potter's wheel, that vibrates and screeches. Dukkha includes many degrees of "suffering": pain, unsatisfactoriness, stress, dissatisfaction, anxiety, frustration, discomfort, depression, grief, misery, etc.

The translation of the First Noble Truth as "Life is suffering" is somewhat of a narrowed view. A better sense of the original is that there is stress, anxiety, dissatisfaction, discomfort, and pain in life. Some make a distinction between pain and suffering: pain is inevitable, suffering is optional.

Dukkha has a much broader meaning than just "suffering." Dukkha includes all the things that we do to ourselves, whether it is trying to prolong joy, or run away from the unpleasant, that make our lives less than satisfactory. The elimination of dukkha is the primary aim of Buddhism.

Dukkha is one of the Three Marks of Existence ( [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three\\_marks\\_of\\_existence](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_marks_of_existence)) or the three characteristics of all created things.

*"All created things are impermanent"  
Seeing this with insight,  
One becomes disenchanted with suffering.  
This is the path to purity.*

*“All created things are suffering”  
Seeing this with insight,  
One becomes disenchanted with suffering.  
This is the path to purity.*

*“All created things are not-self”  
Seeing this with insight,  
One becomes disenchanted with suffering.  
This is the path to purity.*

Dhammapada 277-279, translation by Gil Fronsdal.

Rather than avoid suffering, we should seek to embrace it and understand it. Gil Fronsdal discusses this in *Intolerance to Suffering* (from *The Issue at Hand*)

*Buddhism is often considered a religion of tolerance. In many ways it is. But a particular kind of intolerance develops as we practice: intolerance to suffering. I use the word "intolerance" to be deliberately provocative, to encourage you to reflect on suffering and the issues surrounding it.*

*Taking suffering seriously is an important element of Buddhist practice. To ignore it is to miss a powerful opportunity. Intolerance to suffering motivated the Buddha to find liberation from it. Suffering, a feeling of dissatisfaction with life, motivates people to engage in spiritual practice. The Buddha's challenge is for us to become free of our suffering.*

*People are often quite tolerant of their suffering, particularly of the subtle suffering in everyday activities. For example, we may not pay attention to the subtle tension in the way we drive: going a little faster than is comfortable, judging other drivers, or perhaps being anxious about our destination. Such minor stress tends to build over time, affecting our overall mood.*

*People also tolerate larger suffering. For example, we may be afraid that addressing certain issues in our relationships will cause even more suffering, so we choose not to. Or we may passively tolerate such existential anxiety as the fear of death, never really looking into it deeply, never freeing ourselves of its grip on our life.*

*We have many ways of tolerating suffering, and many reasons for doing so. We may fear the consequences of facing our suffering. We may become numb to it, or turn away from it. We can intentionally deny the existence of something that is quite uncomfortable.*

*We may also tolerate our suffering because of ambition or desire. Or we may be willing to tolerate some suffering to achieve what we perceive is a greater good. Sometimes this tolerance is a necessary component of life. To graduate from college, for example, many of us tolerated unpleasant situations. We were willing to put up with the discomfort because of the value of education.*

*But such tradeoffs are not always worthwhile. When we consider our deepest values, we may find that what we are pursuing is not really worth it. For example, financial wealth may not be worth the years of stress needed to achieve it.*

*Major crises and personal tragedies can be very difficult to deal with, but they can be easier if we have had experience with smaller issues. The subtle suffering in our lives - such as in the way we drive, or talk to co-workers - may seem unimportant. But if we attend to the small ways that we*

*suffer, we create a context of greater ease, peace, and responsibility, which can make it easier to deal with the bigger difficulties when they arise.*

*Being intolerant of suffering, in the Buddhist sense, does not mean that we reject it or fight against it. It means that we stop and look at it, not morbidly, but rather because we have faith in the possibility of living a joyful and peaceful life, if we can understand our sufferings.*

*In Buddhist practice, we investigate the nature of suffering. One of the first things we may notice is our relationship to it. We may discover how we tolerate, avoid or accept suffering in unhealthy ways.*

*We may notice our aversion to suffering. Trying to push something out of the heart is another form of suffering. Aversion to suffering creates even more suffering.*

*... suffering occurs in the present moment, and is actually held in place by craving, aversion or fear that are also occurring in the present. If we can release the holding, suffering loosens. Mindfulness joined with concentration allows us to see the moment-to-moment holding at the heart of our suffering.*

*Intolerance to suffering may co-exist with joy. Certainly not joy in the suffering itself, but the joy of bringing our practice to bear on it. As we become intolerant of our suffering and face it honestly, we begin to see the possibility of living a joyful and peaceful life.*

In closing, some wisdom from the Sufis...

*Overcome any bitterness that may have come  
because you were not up to the magnitude of the pain  
that was entrusted to you.  
Like the mother of the world  
who carries the pain of the world in her heart,  
each of us is part of her heart  
therefore, endowed  
with a certain measure of cosmic pain.  
You are sharing in the totality of that pain.  
You are called upon to meet it in joy instead of self-pity.  
The Secret: offer your heart as a vehicle to transform cosmic suffering into joy.*