



Avoidance patterns in the face of suffering

Dominique Side

Dukkha, or suffering, is the first Noble Truth; the Buddha encourages us to ‘know’ the truth of suffering, to understand it thoroughly. In one way, it is common knowledge that people suffer. Given that all of us are already familiar with the experience, we might wonder why the Buddha put such emphasis on coming to know suffering. The importance of this first Noble Truth may be ascribed to two things:

1. Our ordinary knowledge of suffering may be quite superficial and hasty, so there is a need to reflect more thoroughly on the experience to have knowledge that is more complete and that goes deeper.
2. Many of us have a tendency to avoid suffering. We cannot face it or accept it, and so we develop elaborate patterns of self defence, avoidance, escape, denial and suppression. Whenever this is the case, deliberate effort is required to come to ‘know’ suffering.

The Theravadin scholar Ajahn Sucitto¹ addresses questions around the avoidance of suffering:

The approach of the Buddha’s teaching is to see where we can give up the defences, distractions, or complaining that the existential dukkha normally evokes in us. And for this, I’d recommend acknowledging and giving up not external supports but defensive and distracting ego-activity. The escape from dukkha that we can achieve in the ego-based way is accompanied by either running, fidgeting, and scrambling, or by hardening, defending, possessing, and tightening up. We run or we build a wall. Try to feel when these occur – then steady yourself, hold gently, and let your sense of being soften. Dukkha is not to be blamed, cursed, or agonised over; dukkha is to be understood.

To see if this method works, give it a try – not on the suffering that we can get rid of temporarily, like mild discomfort or hunger, but on the dukkha that we can’t do anything about. For example, bring to mind the dukkha of ageing and death (things we cannot control); or the dukkha of being separated from what we love and having to face what we dislike (a pattern that we can alter in detail but not in

¹ *Turning the Wheel of Truth* by Ajahn Sucitto, pp.101-2.



a fundamental way). Try to stay steady and open without thinking of something else, and let the agitation or the shrugging off pass through you. Be aware of your body, and breathe in and out slowly and deeply. Give your mind and heart time to find a balance. It will feel wider, clearer, and firmer than before.

Suggestions for reflection and discussion

- When I feel existential suffering, what is my habitual avoidance strategy? Do I try to run away or do I defend myself against it? For example, do I distract myself or do I close up?
- What makes it so difficult for me to face suffering in the moment?
- Why is it difficult to accept that suffering is part of life?
- Consider the habitual avoidance of suffering in relation to trauma.

Taking it further

Research how modern psychology describes the ways we react to experiences of suffering. How do they relate to the Buddhist analysis?



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