

Dharmette: Insight (25) Dissolving the Tension of Suffering

Gil Fronsdal

July 11, 2025

Keywords: dukkha, mindfulness, clinging, Ajahn Chah, Vipassanā, samādhi, not-self, pāramīs, Sati Center, insight

Hello and welcome to this series of talks on Insight, the core recognitions that arise from doing mindfulness practice, the core recognitions that help set us free, loosen us, liberate us from clinging and suffering. One of those deep recognitions, deep seeings, deep revelations, is a deeper understanding of suffering. It's a big word, we've been talking about it now for a number of days. But one important aspect of it is to appreciate that whatever it is that Buddhists are talking about, when they talk about suffering, that it comes with tension. It comes with a holding on tight. It comes with a solidification of some inner parts of ourselves, the mind, the heart, the inner life gets frozen, gets stuck, gets locked into something.

So there's a whole series of words that can be used that are near synonyms. Maybe some of these words work better for others. But if I am angry with something, and I need to express that anger to other people or believe I have to, and so I make a fist in order to express myself, and I pound my fist into my other hand, and, you know, insisting that the English language has too many letters to keep track of. It's too many letters. We should have fewer letters. And yes, I could be in a campaign to change the English language.

But I could be suffering if I'm trying to do that and trying to get everyone on the bandwagon and insist how right I am and how important this is. And there might be good reasons for this kind of idea, but I'm suffering because of it. So I could be looking at my suffering and trying to understand why I have this idea, what's the philosophy behind it, what's the linguistic elements of it, what's the real right count for letters, and maybe, you know, just caught up in the ideas of it. And I don't notice that I have my hand in a fist. Independent of whether I solve the issues of the number of letters in the English language, I just relax my hand. Life becomes so much easier without that fist at hand, without that tightness and contraction and eventually spasming of the hand.

I can separate out the concern about letters from the tension in which my hand is in. So in the same way, we might have very good concerns we have, much more important than number of letters, things that we're attached to, things that are really precious and important for us. And we're suffering because of it. We're stressed because of it. We are burdened by it. We feel sometimes oppressed by some things.

Sometimes we feel fear. Sometimes we feel ambition. Sometimes we feel disappointment and hurt. And many, many things that we feel. And if we're kind of concerned with the subject of the suffering, then we might be caught in a maze of concerns. And he said, she said, they said, preoccupations.

But instead, go look and see where the tension is. Where's the pressure? Where is the locked in? Where is the tightness? Where is the agitation? Where is the clinging, the craving?

Where is the leaning forward? Where is the pulling back? And the deeper way to really address the topic of suffering in this insight is not to stay with the details and complexity of the subject of what we're concerned with, but rather to really take responsibility for the relationship we have to that subject. But in doing that, don't think even more about it. The art of mindfulness is to learn to feel, to sense, to experience the sensations that come with suffering, the tightness, the tension, the pressure, the clinging, the locked inness, the shutting down, the turning off, the giving up. All these different kind of ways that can feel like, oh, there's where the holding is.

There's where the dropping away, you know, kind of pulling back and escaping is the desire to run away. Feel all that so that, and that, then you start feeling where we're resisting change, where we're standing against change, where we're kind of solidifying, right? Tightening up, making something more constant artificially, artificially in the sense that it's an artifact of the mind, of our attitudes that are holding on tight. So the art of mindfulness is to take a deep look at where the solidity is, where the constancy is, where there's the continuity that comes from holding on tight, comes from a physical, and even in the mind, it can feel physical or almost physical. The pressure, the tight constellation, the narrowing of happens in the awareness and the mind around some concern, some preoccupation. It can be that the weight of something, we talk about the weight on our shoulders, the weight of responsibility is not... in the responsibility.

It's in the ways in which we have almost physically tightened up, solidified, locked in, gotten frozen around something. There's a wonderful story of Ajahn Chah, the famous Thai monk who is a teacher for many of the early Vipassanā teachers, insight teachers, and who was going for a walk with someone and pointed, I guess, to some really big boulder and said to,

and asked, is that boulder heavy? And the student said, oh yes, it's really heavy. And Ajahn Chah said, no, it's not heavy. It's only heavy if you try to lift it. And so what are we, so the burdens of the world, we're holding up the burdens of the world because we're trying to lift it.

Maybe it's not necessary to lift anything, hold anything. And the benefit of this is that when we tighten up, when we contract, when we get fixated, when we cling to things and crave for things, we're actually narrowing our intelligence, narrowing the scope of our heart, our emotional, mental sensitivity. We're losing touch with the wide range and scope by which our understanding, our wisdom, our care, our love can operate. And it's counterintuitive because the preoccupations we have can be so important, and we need this, and we need to protect myself. I need to have this. I need.

I have to take care of this. I have to criticize myself. I had to figure out something else. And that insistence is part of that tightness. That insistence is part of that sense of physical pressure. But it has so much authority.

But to learn over time that we are wiser, more caring, more open, more intelligent when we don't get locked in, when we don't get caught, and when we're free. And so this insight into suffering in Buddhism is very much supported by really being mindful, really seeing and recognizing the actual tension that's there with our suffering. So you might have some cause like changing how many letters there are in the English alphabet, but pay attention to how you're insisting that things should be different and how they have to be a certain way and how are you going to really change the English language, change all the dictionaries, in some way, pay attention to how you're making that fist. Don't tighten up. You can still make effort to change the English language, but at least don't compromise your hand. Don't compromise your heart.

Don't compromise your mind. Don't compromise the quality of your inner life. Your inner life is precious. Letting go of tension, letting go of pressure, to allow the inner life to grow, mature, free, develop in beautiful ways. It is possible. And so this insight into suffering is such an important part of not suffering.

So thank you very much. And I believe that that will be the end of the... discussions here about suffering. Maybe we've suffered enough now. But there's one more area of suffering that is so important that it is considered the third important insight to have. And that is into this perplexing topic for many people of not-self. Right? And that'll be the topic when I start this up again, unless some reason there's revelation happens on suffering some more.

So I'll be away for two weeks. Next week, Ying Chen is coming, and she's a wonderful teacher. She's been here before on YouTube, and I'm very happy that she'll be with you. The following week, in the way things are working out, we're going to do a replay of right near the beginning of the year when we were doing *samādhi*. *Samādhi* is the foundation for insight, and I thought it might be nice while I'm away to go back to the beginning. And so we're going to do a rerun and play the third week in the *Samādhi* series that had a lot to do with developing *samādhi* around breathing.

And hopefully that's a good foundation for when I return after that to pick up the insight into not-self. And finally, maybe I've said this enough, I apologize, but for those of you who would like to study more of the things that I'm going to be offering in the fall, I have three programs in the fall. One is this called Anukampa, which is a 11-month program on looking at one's practice life, Dharma life, spiritual life, through the lens of the *pāramīs*, the perfections, and 10 spiritual themes that come out of the Western world of chaplaincy, spiritual care. The other is the chaplaincy program itself. It's a beautiful, wonderful program that we offer both online and in-person. And I do the in-person part.

This is for people who want to be involved as a volunteer or professionally in the world of spiritual care. And then the third is through... Those are both through Sati Center. Sati Center. The third is offered through IMC, and that is called the Equivalence of Ethics and Enlightenment. And it's a program, it's an eight, nine month program looking at the foundational teachings of ethics in the teachings of the Buddha and how it applies to our life. And appreciating that ethics and enlightenment are not really two different things, and they are integrated deeply from the beginning and end of the path of practice.

So may you suffer wisely over these next two weeks, and when we come back, we'll continue this series. Thank you very much.