

## Five Levels of Suffering

**Gil Fronsdal**

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So I'd like to talk about a topic which maybe will be very unpopular. It's supposed to be really popular. And I talk about suffering, and to really get your attention or have you race for the door, I could say a little saying: part of the purpose of Buddhist practice is so you can suffer better. Isn't that nice? But suffering better doesn't mean, you know, being ground down by it and just having, you know, higher-quality suffering so you can really feel bad. What suffering better means is to suffer in a way that better leads to the end of suffering.

To somehow face the suffering, see it clearly, so that we can come to the end of suffering. The Buddha has said, to have claimed, that what he teaches is suffering and the end of suffering. And the word suffering is an English translation of the Pāli word *dukkha*, d-u-k-k-h-a, *dukkha*. And it could be, you know, there are a lot of different other choices than the English word suffering. I suspect that one of the reasons that word was chosen to translate *dukkha* into English was that the Victorian English translators were kind of borrowing religious terminology from Christianity in order to enhance the religiosity of Buddhism, and suffering was kind of an important thing for certain Christians.

Right, the suffering of Christ and things like that. It's a really big role there. And another translator prefers the word stress instead of suffering. And one of the reasons he likes that is that as the Buddhist path, the practice, meditation gets really deep, you wouldn't really use suffering, it's a heavy word, for what's left there. But there is a kind of subtle stress that that person in deep practice is still navigating, even though there might be a lot of happiness at the same time.

Sometimes I've kind of wondered whether we could use the word unease as a translation for it, or even better, if we used a hyphen, dis-ease. And that kind of ties it to the idea of disease, of a sickness. And sometimes there's a movement in early Buddhism to say the Buddha was a

doctor and he's addressing the disease of *dukkha*. But if we hyphenate it as dis-ease, so that it really kind of points to a possibility of some profound sense of peace or ease that involves the end of suffering.

And so what I'd like to do today in talking about suffering is to orient ourselves around it in the very classic way in Buddhism, which is that Buddhism presents practice as a journey. It's a gradual path of unfolding. There's an arc that we're on, that we're moving through. And I'd like to talk about five different levels of going deeper and deeper into this world of suffering, and this deeper and deeper suffering better, until we come to the end of suffering.

And these five different, what I'm calling levels, are also fairly common ways that *dukkha*, suffering, is talked about. But often they're just not considered in terms of how they fit into a kind of progressive path of deepening. And so it might just be one, you know, people talk about this particular way, and that's the only way they're talking about. And so listening to it, you don't see the wider context and how it can fit into an unfolding that goes on over time. You don't understand the context for each one.

So the first level is maybe we can call *dukkha-dukkha*, a suffering that just suffers. Right. And this is where suffering, we're so in our distress, our fears, our anxieties, our angers, that it's almost like all of us is that. It isn't that we have some anger; we are angry. And the anger is so full that there's nothing else.

Right? And it might be so strong that we don't really even know that we're suffering in some powerful way, that we're a terrible combination of grief and distress and discouragement and self-loathing and guilt and hatred, you know, all wrapped up in one big, wonderful package. Maybe it has a nice ribbon around it. But it's just like a big mass. And it's just everything. For some people, it's all they know.

And they don't even know why they're feeling so bad. They just feel awful. And it just, this is how it is. And I am this way. And it feels inevitable. It feels like it has a lot of authority.

This is how it is. But it can also be very confusing because there's not a lot of self-awareness about it, except kind of where it's who we are. We sometimes identify with it strongly. And there's no hope. And so that's how it can be.

That's the first level, kind of a level before encountering something like Buddhism. But then in Buddhism, we talk about suffering. And the idea is to talk about it directly and name it. And I've known people who've come to Buddhism, and the first encounter with it was a talk that someone gave on suffering, on the *Four Noble Truths*, which emphasize suffering. And they're so relieved because they grew up in a setting, maybe with a family, where suffering

was denied or ignored or pushed under the carpet.

It's not something anybody wanted to talk about. They had some kind of overarching world-view, religious view, that somehow made everything rosy, made everything kind of wonderful. And you're supposed to appreciate the wonderful, you know, how pastorally wonderful this world is, and smile. And somehow people have talked to me. I just felt that their life was a lie, but no one was talking about it.

And then when they come to Buddhism and suffering is talked about so directly, they feel a big relief. Finally, we can talk about this. And so then we encounter the second level, where we begin to recognize suffering as suffering. And this is considered to be a very significant shift because it's kind of like we step away from it well enough to recognize, oh, this is what's happening.

And that clear recognition, where we're no longer submerged in it or drowning in it, but kind of our head goes out of the water and now we kind of say, oh, it's, you know, I'm in water, you know, and I was over my head in water, but now my head pops up and I can see it. This is suffering. And all kinds of things can begin happening with that clear recognition. One is we have enough distance from it, or enough overview of it, that we can try to address it.

We can consider maybe there's another way. Maybe I don't have to give it so much authority in my life. Maybe I can question it. Maybe it's not the full story. Maybe there's more. The clearer that recognition is, that we're stepping away from it, the clearer you get a sense of something in me is not suffering.

The ability to name it is not suffering. That belongs to some different dimension. This is something different. And there can be, by that kind of clear recognition of suffering, a decision to do something about it. There's an ancient lore in Buddhism, the idea that no one comes to Buddhism without suffering first.

That suffering, that it's the motivation to overcome the suffering, deal with the suffering, come to the end of suffering, improve on one's life so there's less suffering, that that's kind of a fundamental orientation that most people who come to this practice bring with them. And so what's necessary for that to happen, there has to be some acknowledgement of suffering. So there has to be some desperation, some inspiration. And some people come because they're inspired that there's a better way. And some people come because they don't know, they're just, you know, everything else seems hopeless.

They're so desperate, okay, I'll try this. They say this, maybe it helps, so I'll come and do it. So this willingness to see it for what it is is also the beginning of understanding that suffering is

not just a mass of things, but it can be questioned. And in Buddhism, there's a very interesting move around this recognition. And that is, the word suffering is treated as an adjective, not as a noun.

The word *dukkha* is describing something in particular. It's not a thing in and of itself. In the first level, it's just suffering, just everything, and it's a thing. I'm just suffering and identify so much with suffering. With the second level, the clear recognition of it, the movement that Buddhism suggests is to be very specific, saying this is suffering, this is suffering.

So begin recognizing the specificity of it, not the generality of it. Easier said than done, because sometimes it's the sum total of all the challenges of a life that are packaged together. It's hard to see it that way. It just seems like we're just carrying it with us. There's like a cloud of suffering, and we don't quite even know what it's about.

But there's this kind of movement that mindfulness brings, to begin to slowly, slowly begin to see in the present moment what is the particular suffering that is here. And it becomes, for example, a mind, an angry mind. Not that I am angry, but the mind is angry. Or there is driving fear. Someone is really afraid, they had an accident, now they're afraid of driving.

And so there's kind of a suffering around driving because of that intense fear around it. But it's a very particular, oh, this is *dukkha* related to driving. This is a particular thing, here, here. And when we see it as an adjective rather than a noun, then it's easier to work with. Because then we can start looking at it and seeing that maybe it isn't so absolute, so full.

That whatever it's characterizing, it can be freed from that way. It can be changed. It can be characterized by something else. So this movement is to be able to recognize, oh, this is suffering, this is what it is. It opens a door for some new possibility.

Then the third level is to begin seeing it so clearly that we see that there is pain, and there's our contribution to the pain. There is a challenge, and it's what we do in relationship to it. The most classic metaphor, analogy, is that of the two arrows. The first arrow is being struck by life. The second arrow is what we do in response to that.

So that, you know, if maybe I leave here today and my car has a flat tire, that's, you know, kind of a distressing thing, especially if you have an important place to go to. And so there might be an uncomfortable event, and it's raining, and how do you deal with the flat tire? But then the second arrow would be, why didn't I check my tires? I knew it was going flat, but I thought it would last for a few more weeks. And I had lots of time.

Why did I put it off? I'm always putting things off. I'm such a terrible procrastinator. And I'm really a really lousy person because I'm the world's best procrastinator. And look at all this

trouble I get. It goes on and on.

And we don't just do one second arrow. We do third and fourth and fifth. And because at some point you might say, well, I'm not even a good procrastinator. If I was going to procrastinate, I should at least do a good job at it. It's a little bit embarrassing how poorly I do it. And some people specialize in all these arrows pointing and just building up.

So these second arrows are considered to be what's optional. Some things are not optional in a human life. We have sensitive hearts. In some of the depth of our hearts, the fullness of our hearts, if we really are present, there will be times of grief, there will be times of loss, there will be times of sadness and fear and all kinds of things that might be there. And in some ways, we're not trying to stop being human.

These things are kind of sacred, maybe even, if they can be felt cleanly and fully without the second arrows. But to understand the second arrows. So grief is one of those. I think grief can be very sacred because of how it represents sometimes the depth of human feeling in the heart. And to trust that and to open to it is one of the great gifts of mindfulness practice.

But there's a lot of second arrows around grief. I should be over it by now, or I should be doing a better job with grief. You know, people are asking me, are you still grieving? Why is that? Haven't you had long enough time now? Or, you know, you should probably go see a therapist. You're not doing it very well.

You know, there's all kinds of ways in which we add suffering on top of suffering with basic human emotional responses. Right. And so mindfulness begins separating out the suffering, the pain we have, from our contribution to it. And that's a radical thing to begin doing, considering, how am I contributing? The situation is bad. It's uncomfortable to be out in the rain trying to change a flat tire.

That's unfortunate. But are we making it worse? We're making it worse than it has to be. Yeah. And are we suffering worse rather than suffering better, making it worse, rather than somehow making it better in the sense of seeing it, being free of it, not adding layers and layers of suffering?

So that's a third level. So the first level is just unremitting suffering with no exit. The second is to begin to exit it by seeing it clearly for what it is. The third is to begin seeing our contribution to it, how we add to it. And so this is moving through the levels.

And I can talk about it quickly here, but this might take years, a long time, to kind of find our way through these levels, or we find it repeatedly. We go through these cycles of going through these levels in different ways for different issues and conditions in our life. But

there's a process, and it's a gradual process. And so this thing about understanding, recognizing suffering and seeing our contribution, it might be, if we're practicing to do that, that we start with the small sufferings of life, the small places of dis-ease, places where it's kind of manageable.

I don't know what you think about a flat tire. Maybe that's relatively small, and you look at the flat tire and you say, wow, this teacher just told me about flat tires and practicing with flat tires. I just got this Dharma talk about it. Well, this is not like the worst that could happen. Maybe I can try to practice with this.

Let me try to look and see, how am I contributing to my suffering and making it worse? And maybe there's even smaller things. I don't know what it would be. I mean, I don't want to make it too petty so it seems to disrespect the kind of difficulty of our suffering. But there might be small things.

It might be that, you know, you're maybe cooking something at home and you ran out of sugar. And it's raining and your car has a flat tire. But the big issue is like the sugar. You got to have the sugar. And so, okay, I'll look at this. What is really going on here?

Let me stop. Let me sit down. Let me kind of really recognize the sugar suffering. Let me look and see what's going on here. And what am I doing to contribute to it? How am I making it worse?

So looking at suffering, looking at small steps, because then we start becoming familiar with our strategy, familiar with how to do this, so that when it comes to really big suffering that we get, and there are some horrendous things that can happen to us. And some of you probably have had that happen in your life, and maybe are even sitting here with that. Sometimes people come to IMC in order to be able to sit with their distress, their difficulty, in community and feel somehow more supported to be present for it, to breathe with it, because it's so hard to do it alone.

So slowly, you know, we do the small things so we're prepared and ready when this becomes really big and becomes much more challenging. So then we come to the fourth level of meeting our suffering, suffering better. And that is, we start experiencing it as a present-moment direct experience. We start really learning how to be present for it in and of itself. We've seen how we contribute to it.

Maybe that's beginning to lessen. But we start seeing that there's a kind of way in which there is dis-ease which involves an immediacy in this present moment of contracting, of tightening up, constricting, of somehow burning, somehow getting really hot, somehow freezing,

somehow shutting all the systems down, somehow feeling overwhelmed. And it's a way that everything in our shoulders and chest kind of contracts and tightens around our heart.

There's something physical that's going on, sometimes in the body, sometimes in the mind, that there's a physicality, there are direct sensations here and now of what this experience of suffering is like. So now we're not necessarily looking at what the suffering is, why it's there, where it comes from. We're not necessarily looking at our contribution anymore. But we're looking at the immediate felt-sense experience.

What it really feels like right here and now. What are the particular sensations here and now that make up this experience? It's kind of a paradigm shift, where we're no longer looking at the psychology of it, no longer looking at the biography of our suffering, the conditions why it's there. But now we're getting so simple with the mindfulness practice that we're just willing to just experience it as present-moment phenomena, almost as if we don't want to even think about calling it suffering anymore.

But it's the physicality, the sense experience of what this is like. It's getting really close. And that has a number of advantages. One is that an important part of this thing called *dukkha* is not so much what we're contributing to it anymore, but *dukkha* in and of itself is, in Buddhism they say, craving, clinging, or grasping.

And grasping and clinging in particular point to kind of a physical metaphor for what we do internally, emotionally, psychologically, physically even, with holding on to something, attached to something. What is it? And we're not looking at what we're attached to in order to let go. It's more like we're beginning to feel the attachment itself.

And the advantage of this is that it's very simple, and it's kind of beginning to trust that our inner life, our body, the practice, can take care of things itself without us having to engineer, navigate, make the practice work. So the analogy I like to use is if you hold your hand in a fist for a long time and really hold it tight, you'll notice sooner or later that what the hand kind of wants to do is to relax. It wants to soften. And then because you want to keep, make sure that everyone knows that you're angry, you have to kind of tighten up again.

But then if you get distracted, you loosen up. Oh, wait, I forgot. I'm supposed to be angry. You know, you have to keep doing it. But the natural movement of the fist is to relax. Sometimes it's very hard to do this if we're, like, really afraid or something, and really attached to it or really caught in it for all kinds of, who knows what kind of reasons.

And then we have a friend who comes along and puts their soft hand underneath our fist and says, here, rest your fist here. And just that makes it like, wow. Then it releases by itself,

much faster, because we have that support. In mindfulness practice, we're meant to be our own friend that way, where mindfulness is the equivalent of the hand coming underneath our suffering and just holding it, being with it.

And for that to happen, it really helps if we understand the physical place that's the home for our particular distress, our dis-ease. And sometimes it's all over the body, and then you hold the whole body that way. But sometimes it's very specific. It might be in the chest area, the heart area. It might be in the belly.

It might be in the hands, in the shoulders, in the head, behind the forehead. Many places where the center of gravity of the particular dis-ease might be. And to begin bringing attention to just being there in the moment as a present-moment phenomenon is where there's no need to think about the past, the future, what's going to happen to us, where it came from. It's so simple, just here.

That's the fourth level, and that's one of the deeper possibilities of mindfulness practice. And then the fifth level is starting to experience freedom, where the suffering we are experiencing still is experienced within the freedom of the mind, the freedom of the heart, where something, yes, is not caught by the suffering, not reactive to the suffering. It's almost like there's more space, a space of freedom, where the suffering can be there. But now, if we identify with anything, it is with the open hand that holds the suffering, the hand that's been released, that has that ability.

If you have two fists, they don't really support each other very well. But if one hand opens, it can support the place where that's tight. So at some point we start discovering some capacity for mindfulness, for awareness, that can be open in a spacious, open, relaxed way. They're just, oh, look here. Here is something to love. Here is something to be kind to and support in this open way.

There's a sense of freedom. And the important aspect of this, this fifth level, is that now it's easier to not try to do anything about the suffering. It's no longer negotiating, fixing, figuring it out. It's no longer finding how to be mindful of it clearly, step away, and see it. It's no longer seeing our contribution.

There's very little of that clinging left around it, but there might still be some. But the clinging is not a problem. There are no problems because there's so much freedom, so much spaciousness, so much peace that can hold it. And this is another paradigm shift in practice. The idea that, wow, I can suffer and it's not a problem.

Who would have thought? It's just, you know, just a little bit of disease. And I can manage with

that. I'm comfortable with that. I can be free while it's there. And so we're no longer trying to make anything happen in relationship to the suffering, in relationship to the stress.

We're just allowing it to be there, but held in this space of freedom. And why that's so important in Buddhism is that after we go through all these five levels and come to a place where we're not trying to make anything happen, that creates the conditions for that freedom to open fully. It's kind of like there's been a wonderful lotus that has been holding some jewel inside, and it's beginning to open, but it's still protecting that jewel and keeping it from shining on the world. But finally, by itself, the lotus opens up fully.

There's something about the full expression of freedom, the full expression of liberation, liberation from suffering, the end of suffering, that is not something we can do. But we create the conditions for it by going through these five levels and coming to the time and place where we can be with our suffering in this very free, relaxed, open way. We're not defined by it. We're not troubled by it. We're not trying to understand it anymore.

We're just allowing it to be there in a very, very simple way. And then something can let go. Something can be released. So five levels to suffering, to work and practicing with it. And sometimes Buddhist teachers will talk about these without calling them levels.

I just made that up, so don't go looking for it anywhere. But they'll be talking about individual ones of these areas, and it's one of the options. And I think it's helpful to understand that it's one of the options in a wider context of an unfolding path, unfolding development of practice. So you say, oh, they're talking about one option now. This is one of the great options. But I'm the next option.

You know, I'm ready for something else, or I'm just still at the first level. You know, this thing about feeling it in my body, I mean, that's ridiculous. How could anybody do that? It's just like the world is just saturated. My world is fully saturated. There's nowhere that it's not my suffering.

And so five levels of suffering. And the final thing I'll say is that there is a teaching from the Buddha that to really engage deeply, turning towards suffering, to really take it seriously, is a condition for the arising of inspiration, of a faith, of a confidence, of a big yes. Yes, there is a practice. Yes, there's a possibility of coming to the end of suffering. Isn't this good news?

So rather than all this, what I'm talking about, just being more depressing news, that spending it all Sunday, you can do better things on Sunday morning than, you know, come in here and talk about suffering. I mean, you know, so I apologize, those of you who had better things to do. But it is also meant to be a foundation for an inspiring, for an inspiration. Yes, isn't this

good news? We can do something. There is hope. There is possibility. Yeah.

So those are my thoughts for today. And so maybe now you can appreciate why I would say that we're trying to suffer better. Because most people, what they do is they just suffer worse. And there is a better way to do it than suffering worse.

So it is the tea today. Everyone's welcome to stay. And it's very nice, I think, on these days to say hello to each other, to introduce yourselves. Some of you don't want to do that. If we have all kinds of good reasons why you don't want to do that, you're welcome to just sit quietly.

It's kind of nice to sit quietly meditating while everybody's chattering around you. So that's one option. The other option is you can leave. But it's also nice if you could just, you know, say hello. And the idea is to turn to one or two people next to you and just look around, make sure no one was left alone because everyone turned the other direction accidentally.

Just look around and invite everyone to be part of this little group and say hello. And if you want to say something that was useful for you, beneficial for you in this talk, maybe share that so it can live onward. And then I'll ring a bell in about six minutes or so to kind of get ready for the tea time and the formal ending. So if you turn to someone and say hello, or sit quietly as you wish.