

Uproot Assumptions, Uproot Suffering.

-Thaniyo Thero

“And what is ‘assumption’? There are these four kinds of assumptions. The assumption of sensual pleasures, the assumption of views, the assumption regarding the adherence to precepts and duties (i.e, practices thought to be able to cure or free you from suffering but only manage it), and the assumption of self-identity. This is called assumption.” - Sn12.2

Bodily pain and mental suffering

Having a body means that one will experience pleasure and pain but that does not mean that the mind is bound to be emotionally affected, as in, the various forms of joy or misery that appear simultaneously with what is felt, are gratuitously arisen, they are not what a feeling is but are consequences of assuming what a feeling is, and so to bring an end to that emotional suffering, one has to remove that assumption.

Not knowing that there is an assumption regarding a feeling, one delights in or resists it, and to that extent, depending on the intensity of the feeling, a corresponding emotion is also present. When the assumption is removed, then no matter the intensity of the feeling, no emotional suffering is possible.

The gratuitous assumption is that a feeling is "for me, mine, and myself". That assumption cannot easily be removed by merely believing that whatever is felt is not mine. Even though the belief is accurate, that nature of feeling not being mine needs to be clarified through repeated contemplation and real-life application by way of not acting out of craving regarding a feeling. It takes a great amount of effort to remove such an assumption because it is literally who you are.

The undoing of your self-view is the only way that one can, after an indeterminate amount of time, be free from suffering a feeling.

The common and natural way that a person tries to not suffer is to manage pleasure and pain with the intent to increase the pleasure or get rid of the pain. However, no matter how skilled one becomes at such management, the main problem which is the gratuitous assumption of ownership remains and as such that management can never bring liberation from suffering because it is just another symptom of the problem, another emotional response toward a feeling assumed as self. Acting out emotionally by way of management so that one can no longer suffer a feeling is a contradiction and a futile attempt because no amount of increase in the symptoms (the emotions) will cure the disease (of suffering). No amount of feeding the liability to suffer can cure the liability to suffer. One could *manage* pleasure and pain by patiently withstanding it without acting out of craving to increase or decrease the feeling, and as such, the pressure of craving a feeling would still be present, however, the only difference would be that as one patiently withstands (i.e does not act out of craving), one also simultaneously tries to remove the assumption of ownership through clarifying the nature of feeling and by doing so the pressure of craving (suffering) would diminish. That would be *Middle-way management*, which also helps you cope but it destroys the problem, as opposed to emotional management which only helps you cope with the problem you keep feeding.

One can restrain oneself from acting out angrily and succeed but such restraint will not uproot the problem from causing more symptoms that stem from 'identification with feeling and craving against pain' to arise again. The restraint is necessary but understanding is crucial if one wants to no longer need restraint management.

Many parents learn management skills from raising their young, they learn to endure the burden of discomfort through various coping mechanisms, and as a result, can take on a lot more pain. However, despite that type of discipline, they still get angry, they still have to try to be patient, and still have to employ some kind of management technique in which to cope with their internal resistance towards pain, their anger - their suffering.

Coping with one's mental anguish is good but not good enough because it means that one is still not exempt from suffering, it just means that one has learned how to cope within the given parameters. The problem is that those parameters do not stay the same. Circumstances change and can bring various challenges that one may not be able to handle. Challenges that could overwhelm even the most hardened individual. Take the case of a military person who can deal with many life-threatening painful situations, who can put their bodies through extreme pains, yet the loss of a loved one will bring them to tears, from which they may never recover. Despite enduring vast amounts of pain, there may still arise a pain so tremendous that one cannot mentally cope.

Delighting in the body, one's mind is obstructed

Another assumption that the common untrained person has is that this body is "for me, mine, myself". With such an assumption, attention is then absorbed into sensory experiences. This means that when the body is tired - the mind is clouded, when the body is heated - the mind is lustful, when the body is in a neutral state - the mind is bored, when the body is agitated - the mind is annoyed. When the mind is absorbed with delight into the wild and untamed senses, the mind is hindered by them, it is overwhelmed by lust, anger, restlessness, dullness, confusion, and so on.

Delighting in the body means that one's mind gets dragged around by the body and as such one's mental well-being is founded upon the bodily state which is prone to change, which means for that person, equilibrium of mind and long-term happiness is not a realistic goal. At most, they can only undergo happiness or a sense of success for as long as there is a comforting or pleasurable sense object manifesting for them.

How then can one be at peace no matter the bodily state or present feeling? How to not suffer no matter what?

Adopting a view to cope with suffering

I could hope that everything will work out in the end. I could think that bodily death will result in my eternal happiness. But none of those beliefs or assumptions will result in an assurance, here and now, that I am free from suffering or that I will never suffer again. Those beliefs only help me cope once again with the fact that I suffer now, that I am still susceptible to suffering, and that I do not know how to escape such a situation.

I can resign to ideas like: “Such is life. That's the way it is. This too will change. God has a plan, etc”, and on account of those concessions, I will feel some relief which doesn't last very long, so I will have to repeat those ideas like mantras, or scroll for another uplifting quote, trying once again to help myself get along with the fact that I do and can suffer.

What then is the escape from being subject to suffering? How can I no longer need coping mechanisms? The common way to try and escape suffering is through chasing a pleasant feeling, which results in one trying to set up assurances through insurance policies, savings, investments, vows of fidelity, dietary programs, skill acquisitions, meditation programs, exercise routines, family development, property acquisition, and any other form of ownership that will seemingly give the result of having permanent access to pleasure. One goes about trying to control the situation, trying to stabilize the unstable, through the proliferation of ownership for the everlasting access to pleasure, which is one's only relief plan from the fundamental discomfort of existence taken personally.

Acquisition and distraction

Those attempts at management rely on the fact that one is subject to suffering. If one was no longer liable, then those attempts, those various investments would no longer be emotionally needed. But as we know, even if a person can own a vast empire, or control many things, his acquisitions are based on a situation that is already out of his control, a situation that is fundamentally unownable, thus his attempt to own and control, and likewise with his adherence to certain meditation techniques or spiritual practices and views. If he were to reflect on this fundamental futile undertaking, he would most likely drown in sorrow. Therefore various ‘acts of distraction’ that give him a sense of security and help him from not facing the truth, become priceless. Such is the value of the entertainment industry or the significance of industry in general. (music, movies, culinary explorations, travel, art, socializing, building, planning, religion, retreats....)

All industry then can be seen as an attempt to satisfy one's need for freedom from suffering, yet the industry is built upon that suffering. It is fueled by the existence of one's personal liability to suffer, and to stop such industrious activities, would result in one coming face to face with one's suffering that one has been trying to outrun. Hence the apprehension of having nothing to do, the fear of solitude, stillness, or peace.

So once again, how to solve this problem? Should we stop all activities? No, because not all activities fuel the problem. It is only the activities of acting out of craving and holding an assumption that needs to be stopped for the problem to an end.

Managing my personal feelings is no cure

Our management acts such as chasing pleasure will never end in contentment because there will always be a need for more since pleasures to be had are infinite and subject to change. However, despite the nature of feeling being so evident yet subtle, we do not know it and therefore the assumption that the only way to escape suffering is pleasure is maintained and fueled by the

assumption of ownership of feeling, even though it's obvious that feeling is not mine because if it were I wouldn't be chasing it down. Such is the ordinary absurd mode of existence.

If pleasure is the escape from suffering then how much of it is required to result in never craving pleasure again?

One can think of all the pleasures that one has had and see that it hasn't worked out because still, you are subject to suffering. This realization could leave you discouraged, this realization that you cannot get all the pleasures that you desire and therefore it would be impossible for you to be free from suffering... "Unless I win the lottery!", you may think, which might give you some glimmer of hope, "Maybe just one big boost of pleasure would solve the problem?"

If you are at least understanding that the pleasures that could be had are infinite and your assumption that "pleasure is the escape from suffering", will result in a never-ending story of dissatisfaction because of pleasure being in its nature subject to change and un-ownable, then you should investigate further, for example, "Is pleasure even necessary in the first place? I chase pleasure because I think that, "Without it, I will continue to suffer", so it seems vital. One assumes that it will cure ones suffering, but then when pleasure arises it is felt as though it's not enough, and then it ceases sometime later and my suffering remains unchanged, which means that the pleasure that I worked so hard for, did not remedy my liability to suffering or even decrease its existence in any way. Therefore, pain is not the cause of my liability to suffering, because experiencing pleasure is not the cure. When I feel pleasure, I suffer for it to be, when I feel pain, I suffer for it to not be. Either way, my liability to suffer remains steady.

What exactly is the cause of my suffering?

When I suffer, I crave for it to disappear. That attitude, subtle as it is, is an attempt to get away from suffering, and so from the start, on that level, I begin the hopeless activity of trying to get rid of suffering by fueling it through my blind act of devotion towards chasing pleasure and contempt for pain.

One who has some self-reflexive abilities might then begin to challenge those gratuitous assumptions that pleasure is good and that it results in non-suffering, or that pain is bad, that it causes one to suffer and must be gotten rid of by any means necessary especially by the means of pleasure which is fundamentally good because that is what I am.

Is pleasure really good? Is it mine? We can already see that it carries no usefulness as a means of escape from suffering and no amount of assumed ownership changes that. Is pain the source of our suffering? We can see through these reflections that if the pain is the source, then escape is impossible because pain is always possible despite experiencing pleasure.

Ordinarily, when someone suffers pain, they automatically try to get rid of it, because they fundamentally, without question, don't want to feel it and assume that pain is the problem and pleasure is the solution. Failing to see that if that were the case, they would already no longer have a problem and therefore no longer need a solution.

There is pain and there will be pain. If I had a say in that, there would be no pain, to begin with, but there is pain, therefore I have no say in that. And when I resist it, I suffer it. When I try to make it not be, when I think that the pain which is not in my control, is in my control, I foolishly maintain my suffering. Again, if it were mine to control, then it would not exist in the first place.

One can realize that this pain, which has arisen by whatever means it has arisen, is not mine because it has appeared. I feel it but I do not own it. This type of contemplation helps one to restart, so to speak, from a place of what is true rather than from a place of assumption, or ignorance, and if we want to get down to the bottom of our suffering to uproot its cause, then we have to start seeing what we are doing wrong, we need to see what is occurring and this requires us to not automatically react by struggling to get rid of pain and delighting in pleasures and to be honest with ourselves about the failure in the previous means by which we were trying to be free from suffering.

I can delight in pleasure and I can hate pain, but either way pleasure and pain will arise and my delight and hate will not make any difference but will maintain the fact that when there is a feeling, and there is always a feeling, I will be emotionally affected one way or another.

All this means is that suffering is not caused by what is felt, but is rooted in my gratuitous assumption of ownership and my attitude towards it. If I did not resist my pain, I could not have an emotional state of anger, which requires resistance against my pain. If I did not delight in my pleasure, I could not have an emotional state of passion, which requires delighting in my pleasure.

Detachment from feeling

Feeling arises and ceases due to conditions that are also not my own, and while that happens, I am never its owner, my attitude of resistance towards it provides me with no protection from suffering and makes it worse, and things are only bad because I have unknowingly made them so through my gratuitous assumptions about what I am experiencing.

A feeling manifests blind to our attitudes, emotions, and sense of ownership. A feeling doesn't even know we exist, and how could it, it is just a feeling that feels.

Such realizations and repeated considerations along the right lines of the Middle-way application will slowly result in detachment from feeling i.e, the letting go of feeling through the destruction of assumptions. Such an indirect letting go of what is felt, on account of understanding that one can never hold on in the first place, directly results in an increase in non-agitation regarding an arisen feeling, it results in a more peaceful mind and body which are no longer emotionally charged up through an assumption of ownership and desperate attempts to control what is felt. The feeling is just left alone and one is no longer touched by it, so to speak, because one no longer touches it by taking it personally.

Samyutta Nikaya 36.3:

When one experiences pleasure, if one does not understand the feeling, the tendency to lust is present, for one not seeing the escape from it.

When one experiences pain, if one does not understand the feeling, the tendency to aversion is present, for one not seeing the escape from it.

The one of vast wisdom has taught regarding that peaceful feeling, neither-painful-nor-pleasant: If one seeks delight even in this, one is still not released from suffering.

But when a bhikkhu who is diligent, does not neglect discernment, then that intelligent man fully understands feelings in their entirety.

Having fully understood feelings, he is undefiled in this very life. Abiding in Dhamma, with the body's breakup, the knowledge-master cannot be fathomed."

Sn36.4. The Bottomless Abyss:

Bhikkhus, when the untaught common person makes the statement, 'In the great ocean there is a bottomless abyss,' he makes such a statement about something nonexistent and unreal. This, bhikkhus, is rather a designation for painful bodily feelings, that is, a 'bottomless abyss.'

When the untaught worldling is contacted by a painful bodily feeling, he sorrows, grieves, and laments; he weeps and beats his breast and becomes distraught. This is called an untaught worldling who has not risen in the bottomless abyss, one who has not gained a foothold.

But, bhikkhus, when the instructed noble disciple is contacted by a painful bodily feeling, he does not sorrow, grieve, or lament; he does not weep and beat his breast and become distraught. This is called an instructed noble disciple who has risen in the bottomless abyss, one who has gained a foothold.

*One who cannot withstand the arisen painful feelings, bodily feelings that sap one's life,
Who trembles when they touch him, a weakling of little strength, who cries out loud:
He has not risen from the bottomless abyss, nor has he even gained a foothold.*

*But one who can withstand (Adhivāseti) them, the arisen painful feelings, bodily feelings that sap one's life,
Who trembles not when they touch him: He has risen in the bottomless abyss, and has gained a foothold.*

Sn36.6 The Dart:

"Bhikkhus, the uninstructed common person, feels a pleasant feeling, a painful feeling, and a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling. The instructed noble disciple also feels a pleasant feeling, a painful feeling, and a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling. Therein, bhikkhus, what is the distinction, the disparity, the difference between the instructed noble disciple and the uninstructed common person?"...

... "Bhikkhus, when the uninstructed common person is being contacted by a painful feeling, he sorrows, grieves, and laments; he weeps, beating his breast, and becomes distraught. He feels two feelings—a bodily one and a mental one. Suppose they were to strike a man with a dart, and then they would strike him immediately afterward with a second dart so that the man would feel a feeling caused by two darts. Similarly, when the uninstructed common person is being contacted by a painful feeling ... he feels two feelings—a bodily one and a mental one.

"Being contacted by that same painful feeling, he harbors aversion towards it. When he harbors aversion toward painful feeling, the underlying tendency to aversion toward painful feeling lies behind this. Being contacted by a painful feeling, he seeks delight in sensual pleasure. For what reason? Because the uninstructed ordinary person does not know of any escape from painful feeling other than sensual pleasure. When he seeks delight in sensual pleasure, the underlying tendency to passion for pleasant feeling lies behind this. He does not understand as it is the appearance and the disappearance, the gratification, the danger, and the escape in the case of these feelings. When he does not understand these things, the underlying tendency to ignorance regarding neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling lies behind this.

"If he feels a pleasant feeling, he feels it attached. If he feels a painful feeling, he feels it attached. If he feels a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he feels it attached. This, bhikkhus, is called an uninstructed common person who is attached to birth, aging, and death; who is attached to sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair; who is attached to suffering, I say.

"Bhikkhus, when the instructed noble disciple is contacted by a painful feeling, he does not sorrow, grieve, or lament; he does not weep, beat his breast, and become distraught. He feels one feeling—a bodily one, not a mental one. Suppose they were to strike a man with a dart, but they would not strike him immediately afterward with a second dart so that the man would feel a feeling caused by one dart only. Similarly, when the instructed noble disciple is contacted by a painful feeling ... he feels one feeling—a bodily one, not a mental one.

"Being contacted by that same painful feeling, he harbors no aversion towards it. Since he harbors no aversion toward painful feeling, the underlying tendency to aversion toward painful feeling does not lie behind this. Being contacted by a painful feeling, he does not seek delight in sensual pleasure. For what reason? Because the instructed noble disciple knows of an escape from painful feeling other than sensual pleasure. Since he does not seek delight in sensual pleasure, the underlying tendency to lust for pleasant feeling does not lie behind this. He understands as it is the appearance and the disappearance, the gratification, the danger, and the escape in the case of these feelings. Since he understands these things, the underlying tendency to ignorance regarding neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling does not lie behind this.

“If he feels a pleasant feeling, he feels it detached. If he feels a painful feeling, he feels it detached. If he feels a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he feels it detached. This, bhikkhus, is called a noble disciple who is detached from birth, aging, and death; who is detached from sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair; who is detached from suffering, I say.

“This, bhikkhus, is the distinction, the disparity, the difference between the instructed noble disciple and the uninstructed common person.”

The wise one, knowledgeable, does not feel the pleasant and painful mental feeling. This is the great difference between the wise one and the ordinary person.

For the knowledgeable one who has comprehended Dhamma, who clearly sees this world and the next, desirable things do not provoke his mind, and towards the undesired, he has no aversion.

For him attraction and repulsion no more exist; both have been extinguished, brought to an end. Having known the dust-free, sorrowless state, the transcender of existence rightly understands.”

Sn36.7. The Sick Ward:

Bhikkhus, while a bhikkhu dwells thus, mindful and clearly comprehending, diligent, ardent, and resolute if there arises in him a pleasant feeling, he understands thus: ‘There has arisen in me a pleasant feeling. Now that is dependent, not independent. Dependent on what? Dependent on this very body. But this body is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen. So when the pleasant feeling has arisen in dependence on a body that is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, how could it be permanent?’ He dwells contemplating impermanence in the body and pleasant feeling, he dwells contemplating vanishing, contemplating fading away, contemplating cessation, contemplating relinquishment. As he dwells thus, the underlying tendency to lust regarding the body and regarding pleasant feeling is abandoned by him.

Bhikkhus, while a bhikkhu dwells thus, mindful and clearly comprehending, diligent, ardent, and resolute if there arises in him a painful feeling, he understands thus: ‘There has arisen in me a painful feeling. Now that is dependent, not independent. Dependent on what? Dependent on just this body. But this body is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen. So when the painful feeling has arisen in dependence on a body that is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, how could it be permanent?’ He dwells contemplating impermanence in the body and painful feeling, he dwells contemplating vanishing, contemplating fading away, contemplating cessation, contemplating relinquishment. As he dwells thus, the underlying tendency to aversion regarding the body and in regard to painful feeling is abandoned by him.

Bhikkhus, while a bhikkhu dwells thus, mindful and clearly comprehending, diligent, ardent, and resolute if there arises in him a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he understands thus: ‘There has arisen in me a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling. Now that is dependent, not independent. Dependent on what? Dependent on just this body. But this body is impermanent, conditioned,

dependently arisen. So when the neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling has arisen in dependence on a body that is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, how could it be permanent?' He dwells contemplating impermanence in the body and neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he dwells contemplating vanishing, contemplating fading away, contemplating cessation, contemplating relinquishment. As he dwells thus, the underlying tendency to ignorance regarding the body and neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling is abandoned by him.

If he feels a pleasant feeling, he understands: 'It is impermanent'; he understands: 'It is not held to'; he understands: 'It is not delighted in.' If he feels a painful feeling, he understands: 'It is impermanent'; he understands: 'It is not held to'; he understands: 'It is not delighted in.' If he feels a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he understands: 'It is impermanent'; he understands: 'It is not held to'; he understands: 'It is not delighted in.'

If he feels a pleasant feeling, he feels it detached; if he feels a painful feeling, he feels it detached; if he feels a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he feels it detached.

When he feels a feeling terminating with the body, he understands: 'I feel a feeling terminating with the body.' When he feels a feeling terminating with life, he understands: 'I feel a feeling terminating with life.' He understands: 'With the breakup of the body, following the exhaustion of life, all that is felt, not being delighted in, will become cool right here.'

Just as, bhikkhus, an oil lamp burns in dependence on the oil and the wick, and with the exhaustion of the oil and the wick it is extinguished through lack of fuel, so too, bhikkhus, when a bhikkhu feels a feeling terminating with the body ... terminating with life ... He understands: 'With the breakup of the body, following the exhaustion of life, all that is felt, not being delighted in, will become cool right here.'

Sn36.12. The Sky:

Bhikkhus, just as various winds blow in the sky: winds from the east, winds from the west, winds from the north, winds from the south, dusty winds and dustless winds, cold winds and hot winds, mild winds and strong winds; so too, various feelings arise in this body: pleasant feeling arises, painful feeling arises, neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling arises."

Just as many diverse winds blow back and forth across the sky, easterly winds and westerly winds, northerly winds and southerly winds, dusty winds and dustless winds, sometimes cold, sometimes hot, those that are strong and others mild, winds of many kinds that blow.

So in this very body here, various kinds of feelings arise, pleasant ones and painful ones, and those neither painful nor pleasant.

That wise one, not neglecting discernment, fully understands feelings in their entirety. Having fully understood feelings, he is undefiled in this very life. Standing in Dhamma, with the body's breakup, the knowledge-master cannot be reckoned.

