

HOW DOES MINDFULNESS TRANSFORM SUFFERING? I: THE NATURE AND ORIGINS OF *DUKKHA*

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This, the first of two linked papers, presents the Buddha's analysis of the nature and origins of dukkha (suffering) as a basis for understanding the ways in which mindfulness can transform suffering. The First and Second of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths are presented in a way that has proved helpful to teachers of mindfulness-based applications. These Truths offer a framework of understanding that can guide the application of mindfulness to stress and emotional disorders, while stressing the continuity and inevitability of the experience of dukkha in clients, teachers, and those primarily seeking a new way of being. The crucial involvement of self-view and identification with experience are emphasized.

This is the first of two linked papers discussing mindfulness and the transformation of suffering. This first paper focuses on presenting the Buddha's analysis of the nature and origins of suffering in a way that has proved useful to those who teach mindfulness-based applications (such as MBSR, MBCT). It is based on a talk on the Buddha's First and Second Noble Truths given by John Teasdale to a retreat specifically for instructors of MBSR/MBCT at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in December 2009.

The Four Noble Truths

When we look at the first major teaching that the Buddha gave after his awakening, we find that what he offered, what he saw as most important to tell others about first of all, was actually a conceptual framework, a framework of understanding. This was the teaching of the Four Noble Truths (*Samyutta Nikāya* 56:11).

In these truths, the Buddha encapsulated in four key insights the understanding that would allow others to awaken, to find the greater freedom and lasting peace and happiness that he had found.

These truths were presented very much as guides to action, something to be explored, tested, and checked out in our own experience, rather than to be

believed in as articles of blind faith (Batchelor 1997). It is for this reason that many people prefer to call them the Four Ennobling Truths—truths which will ennoble our being if we act upon them.

The Buddha was on an existential, or spiritual, quest. As the story is told, he was profoundly dissatisfied with the life of pleasure he had been leading, and set off to find a more ultimately satisfying way of being. And, as an act of compassion, he offered the Four Noble Truths as a guide for others who also feel ‘there must be more to life than this.’

But what of the clients and patients who come to our Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) classes? Mostly, they are primarily looking for relief from stress, or from recurrent depression, rather than the resolution of some existential dis-ease. How are the Four Noble Truths relevant to their concerns?

Part of the Buddha’s genius, and why his teachings are so relevant to our patients and clients, is that he saw that the patterns of mind that keep people trapped in emotional suffering are, fundamentally, the same patterns of mind that stand between all of us and the flowering of our potential for a more deeply satisfying way of being. Whether we are working to free ourselves from emotional distress, or to awaken to a new way of being, we are dealing with fundamentally the same patterns of mind.

The key concept here is *dukkha*, a Pali word with no real adequate English translation. (Pali is one of the ancient Indian languages in which the Buddha’s teachings were first recorded.) *Dukkha* is often translated as suffering, but this translation can be quite misleading. For that reason, many people prefer not to translate *dukkha*, and stick to the Pali term, not because they are enamoured of the trappings of Buddhism, but to avoid the limitations of translation.

Dukkha is the central focus of the Four Noble Truths. This first paper focuses primarily on the first two truths, which concern the nature and origins of *dukkha*. The second paper touches on the third and fourth truths which focus on the cessation of *dukkha*, and how, practically, we bring that about.

The First Noble Truth

The First Noble Truth identifies the problem. Sumedho (1992) expresses this Truth very simply: ‘There is *dukkha*’.

Dukkha covers a wide range of experience—from the intense anguish we can suffer from physical or emotional pain, through to the subtlest sense of world weariness or existential unease—the kind of thing that drove the Buddha himself to abandon his life of pleasure and to search for another way of being.

All forms of *dukkha* share a sense of unsatisfactoriness, of incompleteness, a sense that in some way we are missing out on life’s full potential. So long as we do not have a sense of complete peace, contentment, ease and wholeness, then we can be fairly sure that *dukkha* is present.

Sumedho's wording of the First Truth—There *is dukkha*—reminds us that *all* unawakened human beings share this experience.

We can often feel that we, alone of all beings, have been unable to get our lives sorted and discover the secret of lasting happiness, whereas everyone else has got this worked out. We can then see this as our own private failure or problem. And that identification, of course, just makes the sense of unsatisfactoriness worse.

The Buddha cut through this personalization of *dukkha* when he asserted quite simply 'There *is dukkha*'—this is just how it is for all of us. We do not need to take it personally—it's not me, it's not my fault but the normal unawakened human condition.

In fact, as we shall see, the inevitability of *dukkha* is pretty much built into the way our minds are structured at the current state of our evolution of consciousness. Once we realize that, it can be curiously comforting—so long, of course, as we know there is some possibility of freedom from *dukkha*.

We also do not need to feel so alone. We are all in this same boat together, whoever we are—whether teachers, patients, clients, or the person we pass in the street. All of us share in common two things—*dukkha*, and the simple wish to be happy. This realization can help us feel a greater sense of connection and compassion to all human beings.

The Buddha helpfully distinguished three domains or bases of *dukkha* (*Samyutta Nikāya* 38:14).

The first domain of *dukkha* is unsatisfactoriness related to situations of 'ordinary' obvious suffering: physical pain, emotional pain, having to endure situations we find unpleasant, not getting what we want, or being separated from that which we love.

These are all situations in which we experience clearly unpleasant feelings. The Buddha saw that unpleasant or uncomfortable physical sensations or emotional feelings are inherent in life. In themselves, they are not the problem. Rather, *dukkha* is the suffering we add to unpleasant feelings by the way we relate to them. Most often, it is this suffering, rather than the unpleasant feelings themselves, that is the main source of our unhappiness.

The Buddha put it this way:

When an untaught worldling is touched by a painful (bodily) feeling, he worries and grieves, he laments, beats his breast, weeps and is distraught. He thus experiences two kinds of feelings, a bodily and a mental feeling. It is as if a man were pierced by an arrow and, following the first piercing, he is hit by a second arrow. So that person will experience feelings caused by two arrows.

But in the case of a well-taught noble disciple, when he is touched by a painful feeling, he will not worry nor grieve and lament, he will not beat his breast and weep, nor will he be distraught. It is *one* kind of feeling he experiences, a bodily

one, but not a mental feeling. It is as if a man were pierced by an arrow, but was not hit by a second arrow following the first one. So this person experiences feelings caused by a single arrow only. (*Sallatha Sutta*)

The crucial message of this teaching is this: whereas unpleasant and uncomfortable feelings are unavoidable, *dukkha* in the sense of suffering is optional. And it is optional because we are the ones that actually fire that second arrow at ourselves!

So, for example, in depression, the first arrow of a simple feeling of sadness is transformed into a more intense and persistent state of depression when we add the second arrow of ruminative thinking.

Awakened beings still feel unpleasant feelings and sensations—the first arrow—but because they have learned a more skilful relationship to them they do not experience suffering—the second arrow.

Learning how not to shoot that second arrow at ourselves, how to relate more skilfully to unpleasant feelings so that we do not create *dukkha*, is a major focus of our practice and of what we teach in MBSR and MBCT classes.

The second domain of *dukkha* is unsatisfactoriness related to Change.

We would like our experiences of happiness and joy to continue indefinitely, but they do not. We would like our new clothes, our new car to be always just like they were on the day we bought them, but they get old, out of date, shabby and worn. We would like our loving relationships to always be as close and warm as the day we first fell in love but they inevitably have their ups and downs, and, eventually, our loved ones die. All such change is a further basis for *dukkha*.

Change, in and of itself, is not necessarily a problem. It only becomes a problem, a basis for suffering, when we do not want it to happen, as we shall see when we discuss the Second Noble Truth.

The third domain of *dukkha* is the unsatisfactoriness related to Conditionality.

The world and our experience are essentially unreliable and conditional. What this means is that what happens in our inner and outer worlds depends on a host of enormously complex, mutually interacting shifting conditions, many of which we are not even aware of, and most of which we cannot control. It follows that there is a basic unreliability to our experience; because we can never know or control all the conditions that affect whether or not something happens, however much we may try, we simply cannot rely 100% on anything working out in a particular way.

For example, on retreat, we might have the experience of a beautiful blissful meditation in our first sitting of the day. We sit down to the second session and, as far as we can tell, set things up in exactly the same way as we did in the first sitting. But now we find that the mind is all over the place. And the reason is simply that, for one reason or another, a different set of conditions is operating, not least of which is the subtle, perhaps almost unconscious, expectation or wish that this sitting be just like the first.

Again, in itself, this basic unreliability and conditionality of experience does not have to be a problem. It becomes a source of suffering because our minds just do not want to see things that way.

Our minds are concerned with getting us what we want, which means establishing some sense of control and predictability over our inner and outer worlds. To do that, parts of our minds reduce the enormous complexity of the conditional world to seeing it, not in terms of complex, dynamically shifting patterns of conditions, but in terms of independently existing ‘things,’ categories, or selfs with reliable, enduring, fixed characteristics and properties.

For example, rather than seeing the state of a meditation session in terms of the effects of many interacting conditions, our minds tend to see it in terms of simple categories such as ‘good meditator’ versus ‘bad meditator.’

Our minds work in this way because, in some areas, it does, indeed, offer us a greater sense of security and manageability. But the reality of basic unreliability and conditionality means that there are severe limits on the extent to which we can predict and control either the world or our experience.

This fundamental mismatch between the way our minds want to see things and the true nature of reality is an aspect of what is called ‘ignorance’ in Buddhism, and it is a very deeply rooted and all pervasive source of *dukkha*. It is what we had in mind when we said that *dukkha* is inevitable, given the way our minds are currently structured.

One of the most damaging aspects of ignorance is our tendency to identify with the varying and passing aspects of our experience, our moods, our feelings, our thoughts, the kind of meditation session we are having, as things that belong to or are parts of some underlying independently existing enduring self—me—these are *my* thoughts, *my* feelings, etc, the state of *my* meditation reflects who *I* am.

We will look more closely at the way this identification fuels *dukkha* when we consider the Second Noble Truth.

As we mentioned, the Four Truths are intended as very practical guidelines for us to find liberation and awakening. For this reason, each of the Truths is accompanied by a specific instruction or guideline for action. For the First Noble Truth this is: ‘*Dukkha* should be fully understood’. Here, in the original Pali, the word translated as ‘understanding’ (*pariññeyyam*) has the sense of ‘knowing comprehensively or completely—from all around’—not just getting to know *about* suffering intellectually or conceptually, but getting to know it by acquaintance, directly, from the inside, from experience.

We can only do that if we are prepared to open to the suffering and sense of unsatisfactoriness we experience—to have the courage to move in close to *dukkha*, to let it be while we investigate and understand its nature, and how we create and sustain it. The theme of moving in close to difficult experiences is of course central to MBSR and related approaches. Here, in the First Noble Truth, is where it came from originally.

Now, moving in close to suffering to understand it fully is, of course, very different from our habitual response, which is to want to get rid of suffering as

soon as possible. So, if we are to follow this recommendation of the First Noble Truth, we need to consciously and deliberately set and reset our intention to approach suffering with an open, courageous, and curious awareness, over and over again.

The First Noble Truth suggests that suffering, if we can hold it skilfully, is actually the way in to our quest for greater freedom and happiness rather than an obstacle to it. From the courageous investigation of our experience of suffering and unsatisfactoriness, we can discover the origins of *dukkha*, which are the focus of the Second Noble Truth.

The Second Noble Truth

The key insight of the Second Noble Truth is that the immediate cause of *dukkha* is *taṇhā*—a Pali word usually translated as craving or attachment to desire. But translations such as desire bring their own difficulties. So, again, as with *dukkha*, there is a case for not translating *taṇhā*, and sticking with the Pali—not in our secular mindfulness classes, of course, but as part of a framework for our own understanding.

The crucial essence of *taṇhā* is captured by the notion of unquenchable thirst—a thirst which can never be fully satisfied or quenched but which, tragically, we, nonetheless, feel compelled to keep trying to satisfy. It is this fatal combination of the unquenchability of the desire, coupled with our unwillingness to simply let go of it that creates suffering.

Attachment to desire has a compulsive quality—a subtle, or not so subtle, sense that we *need* things to be one way or another. This compulsion is reflected in our felt experience and inner language which are dominated by a sense of *must*, *should*, *ought*, *have to*, *need to*, *if only*.

The key message of the Second Noble Truth is this: Experience itself is not the problem—the problem is our relationship to it—our need to have it be a particular way.

As an idea, this message of the Second Truth is not too difficult to grasp or remember. But for this truth to be actually liberating, we have to embody that understanding experientially right in the moment that we encounter unpleasant feelings. And that can be really difficult. When we are confronted with the reality of searing pain in the knee, or great tiredness, or deep sadness, it is just so easy to see the unpleasant experience itself as the problem. We then put all our efforts into trying to get rid of the feelings, rather than exploring our relationship to them. And, from the perspective of the Second Noble Truth, it is that very reaction of needing to get rid of the unpleasant that actually creates the suffering.

The challenge at times of unpleasant experience is to embody experientially there and then, in the lens through which we view experience and in the way we relate to it, the understanding that will allow us to be with the unpleasant feelings without getting locked into struggle and suffering. And conceptual understanding, while not liberating in itself, has a key role to play here. Why else would

the Buddha have gone to the trouble to teach the Four Ennobling Truths in the way he did?

Some time ago, one of us (JDT) had an experience that underlined very clearly the relationship between understanding the Second Noble Truth intellectually and actually embodying that understanding experientially in liberating insight:

I was in the middle of preparing a talk on this Second Noble Truth and I had been thinking a lot about it, to the point where, in the early hours one morning, I found myself lying in bed with thoughts floating through my mind about the cause of *dukkha* being our relationship to the difficult, rather than the difficult itself.

And then I realised, with mild annoyance, that I had become quite awake. And, guess what, my mind's immediate reaction was 'Oh no, I don't want to be lying here awake for hours, I *have* to find a way to get back to sleep'. So, even though my thinking had just been focused on the idea that the problem is not experience itself, but our relationship to it, my immediate reaction was to try to work out how to be rid of this unwanted wakefulness, rather than to look at how I was relating to it.

But crucially, the fact that the idea was around meant that it was not long before it dawned on me 'Oh, this is aversion – the problem here is my need not to be awake rather than the wakefulness itself.'

And so, guided by the memory of that teaching, I then looked more closely at my actual experience, and I could sense very clearly in the moment that it was my irritation with being awake, and the somewhat driven quality of my need to get back to sleep that was the source of my annoyance and, ironically, the main thing keeping me awake. And from that clear seeing, there flowed very naturally a letting go of the irritation and of the need to sort out the wakefulness. I consciously befriended my wakefulness, and within a minute or two I was back asleep. (Teasdale)

As this little story illustrates, conceptual understanding of the origins of *dukkha*, is not, by itself, liberating. But if that conceptual understanding can be kept fresh and alive in the mind so that it is available to mould and shape the lens through which we actually see and are aware of difficult experiences, then it can be a vital ingredient of the liberating mix. One of the reasons these teachings repeat the same basic messages over and over again is to keep the conceptual understanding alive in that way. Eventually, after enough experiences in which conceptual knowledge is there as a support to guide the experiential lens, we establish a new experiential view which can continue its liberating work unaided.

The central problem with *taṇhā* is that we cannot let go—we cannot let go of our desire, our need for things to be a particular way, even though that very need is what is creating our suffering.

Why is it so difficult to let go of our attachment to desire? To answer that question, let us look more closely at the kinds of desires to which we get attached and suffer in consequence.

The Buddha identified three—desire for sense pleasures, desire for being, desire for not being (*Dīgha Nikāya* 22).

We get attached to the desire for pleasant sense experiences—pleasant tastes, smells, body sensations, sights, sounds, thoughts and feelings (in Buddhist psychology the mind is seen as a sixth sense).

At one level, such desire is rooted in our biology and has ensured our evolutionary survival. But that cannot be the whole story—in non-humans, these desires are quenchable—hunger and thirst and sexual appetite can be satisfied.

The essence of *taṇhā* is unquenchable thirst—as humans, we look to sense pleasures as a way to give me, this self, not just passing pleasant feelings, but lasting happiness—to make me the happy person I long to be.

But our biological make-up actually guarantees that sense pleasures never last—for example, our first bite of chocolate cake might give us great pleasure, our second and third bites a little less, our second and third slices even less, and if we continue eating the whole cake we discover that what was initially a source of pleasant experiences can quite quickly become a source of displeasure. And if we repeated this experience on a daily basis we would find that even that first bite progressively loses its appeal. For this reason, sense pleasure simply can never deliver the lasting happiness we seek—this thirst is unquenchable by this means.

It is the subtle involvement of self view here that makes it so difficult to let go. The centrality of self in craving becomes even clearer as we turn to the remaining two types of *taṇhā*—the craving to be and the craving to not be.

Attachment to the desire to be or to become has two aspects. The most basic is attachment to the desire to exist at all, to be alive, to continue to exist as this thing we call a self.

There is also attachment to the desire to be or become particular selves—either at the very general level, such as the need to be or become a self that is loved, a self that is respected, a self that is kind, a self that does things well, a self that is a good meditator, a self that is successful, or to be or become particular selves that are related to these more general selves at a specific level—a self that has a calm meditation in this sitting; a self that has crossed off all items from the to-do list, a self that gives a talk that is well received.

This is the realm of attainment, achievement and ambition.

The third area of craving is attachment to the desire to not be, or to not be or become a self that has particular experiences. In contrast to the first two forms of *taṇhā*, this is a negative craving—a need to find peace or relief from suffering by not being.

As with the positive craving to be, the negative craving to not be takes both general and more specific forms.

At the general level, there is attachment to the desire to not exist, to disappear—to be out of it, to put the head under the blankets and stay there, in the extreme, suicide. More commonly, at the specific level, there is attachment to the desire not to be or become a particular self—not to be a self that has certain experiences—for example, not to be a self that lies awake in bed in the middle of the night, not to be a self that feels sad, fearful, or angry, not to be a self that screws up, not to be the self that has these pains in my knees and back, not to be the self that has this mind that wanders incessantly when I am trying to meditate, not to be a self that still has 10 things left on my to-do list, not to be the kind of person who has these experiences.

You will have noticed that, as with the craving to be, over and over again, we have included the phrase ‘not to be a self that’ and this is because, as far as the creation of *dukkha* is concerned, there is a subtle but absolutely crucial difference between the simple desire not to have a certain experience and the desire not to be a self that has that experience. It is this involvement of self that makes it so difficult to let go. We can explain what we mean here by going back to the example of having a meditation session in which the mind is all over the place.

If we can focus on this as an experience, and remember the fundamental conditionality of all experience, then we would recognize that how a particular meditation session on a retreat unfolds is going to be determined by a whole host of factors such as how tired we are, how much pain the body is giving us, what was on the mind as we started the session, what day of the retreat this is, how much we are comparing our experience this session with another session or with an idea of how it should be, how kind we are with ourselves, and so on and so on.

If we can recognize the conditionality of our experience in this way, we may feel a little disappointed if the mind is all over the place, but we will not feel a great need not to have things be that way and we will not become preoccupied with thinking about what is wrong with us and our meditation.

The situation would be quite different if we were attached to the desire not to be the kind of self that has meditation sessions where the mind is all over the place. Once self view becomes involved, then, having such a session on one particular occasion is no longer seen simply in terms of the patterns of conditions that happened to prevail on that occasion, but in terms of more enduring and general aspects of the self.

The implications are then much wider and stretch longer into the future, and will depend on how the particular self view related to being all over the place in meditation is nested in a wider structure of self-views and self-models. One possibility might be something like this: *That was a bad meditation session. Perhaps I'm the kind of person who will never really get on top of this meditation thing. But I cannot be that, because then I shouldn't be teaching others to meditate, should I? Perhaps I'm just not the kind of person who's cut out for teaching MBSR after all. But I mustn't be that because then I would feel a useless kind of person. I cannot let myself*

be that kind of person because then I could never be happy in any lasting, real, kind of way And so on, and so on.

We have described this as a thought stream in the mind, but we might very well not be aware of these implications at the conscious level; the mind can derive them quite implicitly, and they will still affect us.

In this situation, having the mind wander in one meditation session is not seen as just an isolated experience, arising from a particular constellation of conditions. Rather, once the self becomes involved, one's whole future happiness and sense of meaning in life can seem to be on the line. So it is no wonder that we might feel such a compulsive need not to be the kind of self that has such experiences.

We could run through a similar analysis for the person who has been recurrently depressed in the past, who is attached to not being a self who gets sad because, on the basis of past experience, being that kind of self implies being a self who goes on to get severely depressed. For such a person, any sense of sadness is potentially threatening and to be avoided.

We can get some sense of the centrality and deep-rootedness of our attachment to not being certain kinds of self if we look at the fear of public speaking. A survey of the US population (Bruskin Associates 1973) found that fear of speaking before a group was the most commonly reported of all the fears surveyed, being reported more than twice as often as the fear of death. Such fear of public speaking reflects a need not to be a self that might be criticized or humiliated in some way. It seems that the possibility that our view of our self might be damaged ('I might look stupid', 'I might make a fool of myself') is more commonly experienced as threatening than the possibility that our bodies might die. And this is not just because we live in a relatively safe and healthy culture where the immediate risk of death is low—quite extraordinarily, the Buddha himself listed fear of public speaking as one of the five fears left behind by a person endowed with the four powers of wisdom, energy, an unblemished life, and beneficence, two and a half thousand years ago in Northern India (Aṅguttara Nikāya 9:5; the Five Fears are: fear for livelihood, fear of disrepute, fear of embarrassment in assemblies, fear of death, and fear of an unhappy future destiny).

It is the identification of experience with a sense of an enduring self that leads to our projecting our present suffering into the future: *I'm tired, I'm tired, again, it feels like I'm always tired, I'm just a tired kind of person who's never going to enjoy life to the full.* As another example, it can sometimes feel as though, unless I do something about it, the pain in my knee will continue until my leg actually drops off. Again, this reflects our 'being a self in pain' rather than simply having the experience 'pain is here.'

Once we are attached to the desire not to be the kind of self that has particular experiences, then the need to avoid those experiences, the anxiety that we might not be able to do so, and the distress if we cannot, all increase enormously. But, of course, the nature of reality means that it is simply impossible

never to have the feared experiences, never to have the mind wander throughout a session, never to feel sad, never to give a talk that is criticized. The thirst of *taṇhā* is unquenchable—however hard we try we will never completely satisfy the need not to be the self that has these experiences.

But it is actually even worse than that—the compulsive need to avoid being a certain kind of self creates a great busyness in the mind aimed at preventing that dreaded outcome occurring, or limiting the damage if it does. This ‘fixing’ busyness just serves to reinforce further the sense of self—‘me’—and to bring to the fore yet more self-views that need to be avoided or attained. And that stronger sense of ‘me’ means that it becomes even more pressing that I be or not be those kinds of self, which adds a further twist to the vicious spiral. This whole process has been called ‘selfing’ by contemporary teachers (Olendzki, A. 2005), or, more traditionally, ‘becoming’ (*kammabhava*) (see *Samyutta Nikāya* 12).

It is as if we not only had an unquenchable thirst that cannot be permanently satisfied, however much water we might drink, but that we are actually drinking salt water which just increases our thirst with every drink.

We can see such a process at work in many of the aversive patterns of mind that underpin emotional disorders. Self-focused rumination in depression can transform what might be just a passing sadness into a more persistent and intense state of depression. Self-focused worry can transform otherwise transient feelings of fear into persistent anxiety.

So what are we to do?

Well, given that the Second Noble Truth identifies the origin of *dukkha* as attachment to desire, it then goes on, reasonably enough, to the instruction that: ‘Attachment to desire should be let go of.’ Similarly, the essence of the Buddha’s teaching can be summarized as: ‘Nothing whatever should be grasped at or clung to as “me” or “mine”’ (Buddhadāsa 1989, 138). In other words: ‘Do not take anything personally.’

Unfortunately, this is easier said than done. But it is at this point that the conditionality of experience actually comes to our rescue.

The Buddha had the simple but actually quite brilliant insight that if *dukkha* and craving arise as a result of one set of conditions, then they will cease if those conditions can be changed and we deliberately arrange a different set of conditions.

And the wonderful thing about the Buddha was that he then went on to translate this theoretical understanding into action in his own life. What he discovered empirically in that way is summarized in the Third and Fourth Noble Truths.

The Third Noble Truth tells us that the cessation of *dukkha* is possible, and it is to be realized through the cessation of craving.

The Fourth Noble Truth describes an integrated training programme, known as The Noble Eightfold Path that enables us to do that. It consists of eight elements, each of which synergizes and reinforces all the other elements. One element is wise mindfulness. But the path also includes elements related to

understanding and intention, ethical behaviour, and to two further aspects of meditation.

The ultimate goal of this Noble Eightfold Path is the complete and final cessation of *dukkha*, in other words nibbana/nirvana. But, fortunately for ourselves and the clients and patients we see in our MBSR and MBCT classes, we do not need to wait until we are at that point before we can experience the benefits of releasing our attachment to desires. As the Thai teacher Ajahn Chah puts it: 'If you let go a little, you will have a little peace. If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of peace. If you let go completely, you will have complete peace' (Chah, Kornfield, and Breiter 2004). In other words, whether we are primarily interested in relieving obvious suffering right now, or whether our ultimate goal is also to eliminate *dukkha* once and for all, letting go of craving and aversion is the path to peace. In the second of these two linked papers we will look more closely at the way mindfulness assists the transformation of suffering in this way.

To conclude this paper, we will briefly consider the relevance to teachers of MBSR and MBCT of the conceptual framework we have described.

Why should teachers of MBSR and MBCT know about the First and Second Noble Truths?

What added benefit is there for teachers of mindfulness-based applications to know and understand the particular conceptual framework we have presented?

There are two aspects to this question: (1) What benefit is there in having *any* conceptual framework to guide the teaching of MBSR, MBCT, etc.? (2) What benefit is there in having the *particular* conceptual framework offered by the Buddha in the Four Noble Truths?

Without any framework of understanding to guide it, the application of mindfulness practices to problems of stress, emotional disorder and the like reduces to teaching and learning a series of techniques. This would offer students an opportunity to learn how to control aspects of their attention, which would enable them to gather and settle the mind. They would then primarily acquire skills of concentration, similar to those taught in other concentration practices, such as transcendental meditation. These are of benefit in calming and relaxing the mind.

However, without an understanding of the nature of the suffering they are experiencing, or of how mindfulness has its range of effects in reducing that suffering (which we will discuss in detail in Paper II), neither students nor teachers would be able to focus the application of mindfulness more specifically and effectively to transform the processes that create and sustain suffering. In this way, patients and clients would be exposed to only a narrow range of the total therapeutic resources potentially available to them. For that reason, the beneficial impact of mindfulness programmes are likely to be less than they might otherwise be.

A further limitation of working without a framework of understanding of how suffering arises and how mindfulness can heal that suffering is that when difficulties or obstacles are encountered, there is no 'road map' to consult to find an alternative way forward—all one can do is to attempt to apply the same techniques more vigorously to 'drive through' the road block. Further, without some underlying understanding to guide and motivate them, it is difficult for either students or teachers to commit to some of the more challenging aspects of mindfulness practice—such as 'moving in close' to suffering—which, according to the analysis we have described, are where the greatest potential for long-term therapeutic change lies.

If we accept that it is useful to have some framework of understanding to guide applications of mindfulness, what are the strengths of the framework we have described? We will here describe three.

First, it has great generality; the analysis offered in the Noble Truths is meant to be equally applicable to the full range of suffering from the slightest sense of existential unease through to the problems of recurrent major depression and panic disorder. This wide generality means: (1) although teachers and clients or patients may be experiencing different intensities of suffering, the underlying mechanisms are the same, so that teachers can share a sense of fellowship and compassion with their students, and can draw on their own experience to enrich their teaching of mindfulness; (2) students can acquire skills and understanding in working with lower intensities of 'everyday' suffering that are directly relevant to working with the more intense problems that led them to seek help; and (3) their experience of practicing mindfulness as part of a 'therapeutic' programme may open a doorway for clients and patients to become interested in exploring the relevance of mindfulness to their lives more generally.

Second, the view that *dukkha* is universal and unavoidable, given the way our minds work, can help reduce the personal identification with suffering, which, as we have seen, is a central aspect of the creation of suffering, according to the Buddha's analysis. If this analysis is correct, it also means that the seductive quest for *any* 'quick fix' solution to the problem of suffering ('if only I had the right car, house, partner, career, looks, knowledge, community, etc. etc., I would be happy') is doomed to failure. If this is the case, it would be good to know it.

Third, this framework of understanding was the one that originally led to the integration and development of mindfulness practices as a central component of an integrated programme to reduce and eliminate suffering. Two and a half millennia of experience in the application of mindfulness in this context have provided an invaluable basis for refining and developing the use of mindfulness to heal suffering. Anecdotal evidence within this tradition also provides innumerable examples showing that, when guided by the framework of understanding of the Four Noble truths, mindfulness 'works'. Most of the recent, more systematic evidence that mindfulness, in the shape of MBSR and MBCT, 'works' has also come from studies in which the instructors have worked within an understanding of

mindfulness related, in one way or another, to the framework the Buddha proposed.

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