

## Inner Landscape, Part 3: Dissolving Suffering

### Review

This is the third reflection in a series called “The Inner Landscape” in which we’ve been exploring what we see when we look inside our mind-hearts. Following Rick Hanson’s lead, I’ve structured these reflections as a three-way conversation between our inner experience, the Buddha’s commentary, and science.

We started with the Buddha’s seminal question, “How can we alleviate suffering?” To answer that we have to answer the question, “What is suffering?” At the very least, suffering is a kind of experience. This begs a larger question, “What is experience?”

The Buddha’s answer describes five *khandas* or five clusters of experience:

- *Rūpa* — body sensations
- *Vedanā* — pleasant, painful, neither-pleasant-nor-painful, and possibly need for connection
- *Sañña* — perception or labeling
- *Saṅkhāra* — thoughts, beliefs, mental constructs, stories
- *Viññāna* — awareness itself without which we’d know none of the other four *khandas*

Taken together these five include everything we can experience. We explored each with an emphasis on *vedanā*, the neglected stepchild of the *khandas*. I offered the *vedanā* meter and *taṇhā* meter as tools that help us see *vedanā* more clearly.

Now we can reframe the question,

“What is suffering?” as “What turns experience into suffering?”

### Buddha

To answer this, let’s see what the Buddha had to say. Earlier I quoted the *Sammā Diṭṭhi Sutta: The Discourse on Wise View (Majjhima Nikaya 9:15)* where he said:

*Birth is suffering; aging is suffering; sickness is suffering; death is suffering; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are suffering; not to obtain what one wants is suffering;*

We noted that these are not a definition but examples of suffering. The Buddha then offered a definition:

*In short, the five aggregates (or five khandas) affected by clinging are suffering. This is called suffering.*

I skipped lightly over this definition because we needed to understand the five *khandas* first. Now we’ve done that. So let’s unpack his definition: “*khandas* affected by clinging.”

“Clinging” is a translation of the *Pāli* word “*upādāna*.” Clinging/*upādāna* is the way the mind shrink-wraps around an experience and gives it a label. We experience *Upādāna* as a thought. It’s the beginning of words and concepts.

Since the *khandas* include everything we can experience, the Buddha is saying anything we experience that is affected by clinging is suffering. Anything the mind grabs hold of or pushes away creates suffering. In other words: **clinging turns experience into suffering.**

Where does clinging/upādāna come from?

In Dependent Origination, clinging is always preceded by *taṇhā* (craving) — a pre-verbal, instinctual tightening. The second Ennobling Truth says our experience of suffering is rooted in *taṇhā*. Clinging creates suffering. And clinging has roots that go down into *taṇhā*.

Where does *taṇhā* come from?

In Dependent Origination, *taṇhā* is always preceded by *vedanā* – feeling tone of pleasant, painful, neither-pleasant-nor-painful. Dependent Origination gives us this sequence: *vedanā* can trigger *taṇhā* (craving) which can trigger clinging (*upādāna*) which we experience as suffering.

What is *vedanā*?

*Vedanā* is a kind of experience. As I explored this in an earlier reflection, neuroscientists define “experience” as the tip of the iceberg of the information that flows through the body. More specifically, *vedanā* is a signal that something needs attention.

*Vedanā* itself has no particular charge. It's just a message, like: “Houston, we have a problem.” On the Apollo 13 mission to the moon, the astronaut Jack Swigert felt an explosion and observed warning lights. We wouldn't have blamed him for yelling, “Yikes, we're all gonna die!” But his training to see objectively and impersonally kicked in. He calmly signaled there was a concern that needed attention: “Houston, we have a problem.”

*Vedanā* is like that. It's calm information without tension. If it's a threat (“There's a rat in the closet”) the signal will be an uncomfortable mental experience: fear, anger, imbalance. If it's a need-satisfaction concern (“I haven't eaten in a while”) the signal will be a pleasant feeling toward an object such as food. If it's a connection concern (“I've been alone for a while”) the signal will be thoughts or feelings about

people.

*Vedanā* can quickly trigger *taṇhā* that can bring a very large charge to our experience. But the *vedanā* itself is just flat, emotionless information.

To summarize, *vedanā* (feeling tone) can lead to *taṇhā* (craving or tension) which can lead to *upādāna* (clinging). The Buddha said suffering is any experience affected by clinging. Notice that it is possible to experience *vedanā* without suffering. But once *upādāna* arises, we suffer. *Taṇhā* floats in a grey area in between. We'll come back to this important point shortly.

### *Baked In?*

But first, let's look at another interesting question: “Can we survive without suffering?” “Is suffering essential to life as we know it?” “Are bummers baked into life as we understand it?”

The Buddha gave two answers: “Yes” and “No.” “Yes: *dukkha* (suffering) is embedded in the relative world in which we live. It's unavoidable.” And “No: we can attenuate and dissolve suffering.”

### *Serenity*

To untangle this seeming contradiction, consider an allegory from the 2005 science fiction movie *Serenity*:

*Hundreds of years in the future, humans are terraforming planets to support human life. On the distant planet of Miranda, a colony introduces Pax G23 into the air filtration system. Pax is a new drug designed to suppress aggression and make people happy.*

*Communication from the colony stops. The authorities assume there has been an invasion or natural disaster, or the Pax23 has backfired. The “23” in the name suggests there were earlier versions that didn't work.*

*Through a series of adventures, the movie's lead characters arrive on Miranda. They find everyone dead. There are no signs of invasion, natural disaster, poisoning, or violence. A*

woman apparently died while leaning against a library window. A man lies smiling and dead on the floor of a public building. Others died sitting in chairs or lying in the grass. Corpses are everywhere.

Eventually they figure out that Pax had worked too well. It had removed aggression and any emotion that might lead to aggression: hatred, anger, desire, greed, wanting, yearning, caring, hunger. The people became so peaceful and unmotivated that they stopped working, socializing, eating, or even moving — they just sat down and died.

In normal, everyday life, the complete absence of desire would be a complete disaster. Like the people on Miranda under Pax G23, we'd have no motivation to turn off the stove, feed the children, come out of the rain, get out of bed in the morning, or even eat. We'd waste away and die. Just consider what you've done today. If you had not motivation to do anything, what would your day have been like? Would it be worth living?

Yet the Buddha discovered that the roots of suffering are desire and its fraternal triplets: desire, aversion, and delusion.

There is a good case for the necessity — perhaps even the goodness — of suffering. Without some discomfort, we might not live long enough to experience much of anything. As the meditation master Sayadaw U Tejaniya puts it, "Suffering gives us motivation."

Yet, the Buddha also says it's good to end suffering.

### *Signal vs. Charge*

Allowing for the difficulties of translating from his spoken *Prakrit* to written *Pāli* and from *Pāli* to English, I think he was saying there's a difference between a signal of pleasure, pain, or neither-pain-nor-pleasure on the one hand and on the other hand the drive, urgency, or motivation to do something about it. We can't live without *vedanā*. We can't live

without the signals in our system that alert us to a problem about a threat, need satisfaction, connection, or confusion. We also need enough motivation (*taṇhā* and *chanda*) to do something about it. But if we're skillful and wise, the signal and motivation don't have to tip over into clinging and suffering.

### *Our Experience*

Let's consider this in our own experience. We alluded to this in the second reflection in this series:

We can eat ice cream, find it pleasurable and crave more. We suffer. We can also eat some ice cream, find it satisfying, and feel no need for more. We can experience pleasure without suffering.

We can sit in the meditation hall as someone tiptoes past and think, "They're disturbing my meditation. I wish they'd stop stomping around!" We feel aversion, and clinging. We suffer.

We can sit in the meditation hall as someone enters and lets the door slam. If our equanimity is strong, we hear the sound pass through us but remain undisturbed. We don't suffer.

Yogis who have meditated for years often report that they've become sensitive to subtler signals. Colors are brighter, nuances of feeling are clearer, flavors are more pronounced. And at the same time, over the years they have found themselves feeling more and more comfortable in highly charged situations.

My therapist turned to me once and said, "Doug, it's only pain." I thought, "Oh yeah. Right. It *is* only pain. What's the big deal?" She helped me see that I could observe huge charges without being thrown off balance.

Those who worked with the *Vedanā* and *Taṇhā* Meters (see "Inner Landscape 2") may have seen that signals of pleasant and unpleasant are different from the

urgency to do something about them. They aren't the same thing. Without urgency, there is more equanimity and less suffering.

I trained and worked for years as a bioenergetics therapist. Bioenergetics is a form of psychotherapy that pays close attention to the way energy runs through the body. From my work on myself in psychotherapy, as a psychotherapist, in meditation, and as a meditation teacher, I've come to an understanding of suffering that is in harmony with modern psychology and ancient Buddhism:

*When the strength of a signal and the charge around it is within the range of what we can manage gracefully, we don't suffer.*

*When the charge is more than we can gracefully manage, our system gets overwhelmed. Chanda (wholesome instincts) becomes tanhā (craving, aversion, confusion) and we suffer.*

## *Alleviating Suffering*

With this understanding of suffering, I'll turn back to our starting question: "How do we dissolve suffering?"

## *Science*

Let's first bring science back into the conversation by reframing what I just said into the language of neurology.

Throughout the day, sensory information as well as thoughts, feelings, plans, ideas, beliefs, etc. are being passed through our bodies via the nervous system, blood chemistry, and probably other subtler systems. Mixed in with this information are drive states, signals for energy to be released, instructions to move various muscles, etc.

Most of this information is below conscious awareness. Some is not. If the drive states are too weak, we become docile, like the people on the planet Mirada. If the drive states are too strong — more than we know what to do with — our

system is overwhelmed and suffering arises.

## *Middle Way*

The question becomes how do we create the conditions in which there is enough drive to move around and live fulfilling lives but not so much tension that we suffer? How do we find this middle way?

## *Complexity*

The question is complex. For example:

*I grew up in Houston, Texas within biking distance of the Sheraton Hilton hotel. It had a large, Olympic size swimming pool including a ten-meter diving platform. On many summer days, my friend Bruce and I rode over there to swim.*

*Jumping off the ten-meter platform was scary. Our velocity when we hit the water was considerable. Doing a belly flop was extremely painful — it could knock the wind out of us, or worse.*

*Yet we leapt off the platform all the time. At first, we jumped feet first to be safe and get a feel for it. Later we just dove headfirst. As we did, anxiety arose in the background. To not have any worry would be crazy.*

*Yet we had a great time. Jumping off that high platform was not suffering. We learned how to manage safety needs enough to stay within the range of what we could handle and still enjoy the lovely thrill of it all.*

Here's another example:

*Over the years of growing up, I built 20 or 30 tree houses. Only we called them "tree forts" — "houses" were for girls, "forts" were for boys.*

*My friend Lindsey had a 75 foot oak tree in his yard. We built a fort 25 feet off the ground. A narrow limb rose off one side of the fort. I built a crow's nest toward the top of that limb. There was nothing but empty space between that little platform and the ground fifty feet below.*

*Sitting in the crow's nest, there were signals*

*about danger and safety – my heart often pounded. But I learned to manage those signals well enough to have the time of my life.*

Here's another example: imagine driving down the interstate at 65 miles an hour in four tons of steel as other cars whiz past. If somebody wanders a few feet over the white lines, we'll go up in a fireball.

Yet we can mostly manage this without suffering. If we had no anxiety at all, we'd be insane. But we can usually manage it well enough to remain alert without going over the top into stress and suffering.

## *Equanimity*

So the question of alleviating suffering is not how to get rid of *vedanā* — they are just signals. It's not even how to get rid of *taṇhā* — that is just tension that can keep us on our toes when appropriate. It's how to manage the situation without tipping over into suffering.

This as an operational definition of equanimity — how do we meet the challenges of life without numbing out or stressing out. The Buddha called this, "The Middle Way." How do we have full, rich experiences without going into suffering?

Wilhelm Riech once said, "Anxiety is excitement without oxygen."

If we relax into high-energy states and breathe easily, they are just energy and excitement. If we tighten up, they turn into anxiety and bummers.

The Buddha, offered an image of how to dissolve suffering: If we stir a teaspoon of salt into a glass of water, the water becomes so salty we can't drink it. If we stir that salt into a large body of water, we don't notice it.<sup>1</sup>

The Buddha suggested that life has its teaspoon of salt. Life has its stressors. For some it is only a half-teaspoon. For others it

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<sup>1</sup> "Lonaphala Sutta: The Lump of Salt," *Anguttara Nikāya* 3.99

may be a few tablespoons. However, the larger our container, the less the stressors affect us.

Making the container bigger is the solution. Making the container bigger is the key to equanimity.

Equanimity doesn't come from fortifying ourselves against life. It comes from expanding to include more and more. There are three ways to go about feeling better:

1. Reduce the amount of salt. It doesn't work so well. We have a little influence on the world around us. But ultimately the world doesn't care what we want it to be. It is what it is.

2. Numb out our sensitivity to salt. In other words, we can dull ourselves with drugs, distractions, or purposely focusing attention elsewhere. This doesn't work so well either. We can numb out and push unpleasantness aside a little bit. But ultimately we don't really have that much control over our bodies. They obey universal, impersonal laws.

3. Make our container bigger. Doing this is not always easy. But it does work. When meditation works, we are making our container bigger.

How can we do it?

## *Three Essential Practices*

The Buddha recommended three essential practices. There are lots of ways to implement them. But without all three, we are ripe for suffering.<sup>2</sup>

### *Turning Toward*

The first practice is turning toward whatever life brings our way. The Buddha

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<sup>2</sup> You can find a longer discussion of these three practices on the web at [www.dougkraft.com/?p=ThreeEssential](http://www.dougkraft.com/?p=ThreeEssential) or in my book *Meditator's Field Guide*, (Easing Awake Books, 2017), chapter 1.

articulates this in the first Ennobling Truth. He said we must understand suffering. We can't understand suffering if we're busy fighting, running away, controlling, or fixing it. We have to turn toward suffering and learn how it arises, hangs around, and fades away. We must get to know instinctively how it works.

### *Relaxing Into*

The second practice is relaxing into whatever tension we experience. The second Ennobling Truth is that our experience of suffering is rooted in *taṇhā* — the pre-verbal, pre-conceptual tension that can be triggered by *vedanā*. The practice the Buddha assigned to *taṇhā* is "abandon." We are to understand suffering (the first ennobling truth). But we are to abandon *taṇhā* (the second Truth).

To abandon *taṇhā* we relax. It helps to say "relax into" to be clear that relaxing is not a means of relaxing *away* from suffering or *avoiding* bummers. It's a way to be with them and be relaxed and open at the same time. Over time this allows our containers to expand.

### *Savoring*

The third practice is savoring. If we turn toward and relax into, we may experience peace, well being, uplift or other wholesome, healing qualities. In the text of the third Ennobling Truth, the Buddha says we are to "realize" these uplifted qualities while they are present – to savor them while they last and let them seep into our bones. In this way we realize that they are real.

All states are temporary. They come and go depending on conditions. We have gotten pretty good at finding uplifting states. Using meditation, therapy, groups, music, yoga, exercise, art, drugs, entertainment, etc. we can find ways to touch good feeling states. But we aren't so good at savoring.

How do we go beyond temporary relief

from suffering to a deeper, more continuous abiding in well-being? Rick Hanson describes this as "turning states into traits."

Savoring helps us embody the experience. It doesn't help to try to grab hold of them or try to hang onto them. It also doesn't help to pass over them without letting them sink in a bit. The Buddha offered a middle way: savoring the uplift while it's here; knowing that it is real or realize it by enjoying it.

One of the Buddhist term for this is "*nāmarūpa*." "*Nāma*" means "mind." "*Rūpa*" means body. *Nāmarūpa* is "mind-body" as a unified system.

Theravada/Vipassanā/Insight meditation is pretty good on the mind side: insight, recognizing, seeing things as impersonal, etc. But it's not so good at allowing these insubstantial mental qualities to seep down into the underlying body — helping the fleeting states become embodied underlying traits. The Buddha said the way to do this is to savor the *brahmavihāras* or other uplifted qualities when they arise.

It turns out that there are more uplifted qualities than contracted ones. Here are a few:

#### ***The Brahmavihāras:***

*Mettā* — friendliness  
*Karuṇā* — compassion  
*Muditā* — joy  
*Upekkhā* — equanimity

#### ***Spiritual Faculties***

*Saddhā* — faith, confidence  
*Viriya* — energy without strain or push  
*Sati* — awareness, mindfulness, hurtfulness  
*Samādhi* — stability of mind, collectedness  
*Paññā* — wisdom

#### ***Awakening Factors***

*Dhamma vicaya* — curiosity, investigation of mental phenomena,  
*Sati* — awareness, mindfulness, hurtfulness  
*Viriya* — relaxed and open energy

*Pīti* — joy  
*Passaddhi* — calm, tranquility  
*Samādhi* — stability of mind, collectedness  
*Upekkhā* — equanimity

### **Others**

*Gratitude*  
*Forgiveness*  
*Contentment*

For most of us, incorporating any of these into our practice makes the practice easier. One way to do it is by cultivating awareness alone. As awareness deepens it will pull in other uplifting qualities. However most people find it easier to intentionally incorporate other uplifted qualities up front. The Buddha often seemed to have favored this approach.

Another reason savoring is so important is the brain is four times more sensitive to negatives than positives. This ingrained tendency to hang onto the negatives helped our ancestors survive when we were a marginal species in a world of giant predators. It helped us survive.

But today, when we are at the top of the food chain, it doesn't help us thrive. Expansive states pass through us quickly while negatives leave a more durable impression.

By intentionally savoring expansive qualities, we build inner resources and become more resilient. When difficulty comes along, we have more space inside — more equanimity — to greet the signals for safety, satisfaction, connection without freaking out, running away, or going numb. We can get hungry and be okay with being hungry until we can get some food. We can manage our safety needs without getting hysterical or uptight. We can manage relationship in a rough spots without flying off the handle or sulking away in silence. We can manage relationship conflicts without being conflict avoidant.

### *Cultivating Grace*

Another way to describe savoring is

“Cultivating grace.” Think of grace as anything we have to enjoy that we don't have to earn. This includes simple things like air, sunlight, natural food, good company, a clear sky on a starry night, and so forth. We don't have to have any particular theology or belief system to realize there is a lot in life that we enjoy without earning it.

The Brahmavihāras, spiritual faculties, and awakening factors are grace in that these qualities are present all the time beneath the tension that draws our attention away from them.

Since they are already quietly in the background, we can't create them. But we can make ourselves more sensitive to noticing them by quieting down, opening up, and listening. This makes our systems more responsive to the pleasantness around us and more resilient when caught in the unpleasant.

### *The six Rs*

Another way to savor wholesome qualities, cultivate grace, and deepen equanimity is using the six Rs. Consider:

**Recognize** is about turning toward what arises.

**Release** is about letting go of storylines and letting go of controlling, managing, fixing or attenuating our experience. This allows us to recognize it on its own terms.

**Relax** is about relaxing into our experience, whatever it is, so we can release the tension without turning away.

**Re-Smiling** or bringing in uplifted qualities is part of savoring.

**Return** returns us to our home base of radiating uplifted qualities. This deepens equanimity and encourages us to expand out of our seemingly small containers.

**Repeat** builds patience and equanimity.

## *Equanimity*

To close let me emphasize that nothing in the practice is about intentionally trying to stop desires or needs. The practice is about seeing them effectively and knowing how to relate to them wisely. It's not about getting rid of them. It's about relaxing the tension or drive without being foolish.

As equanimity gets stronger without becoming one-pointed, awareness becomes more sensitive. We notice subtler and subtler signals and tensions that used to fly below the radar. The tensions may become easier to see even as they affect us less and

less.

This is true up through the seventh jhāna. After that, the sensory information as well as other signals and tensions begin to fall away completely. It can be fascinating and bring us into a whole new world that has always been under our noses, too close to see.

Eventually it falls away completely which helps cultivate the deepest kind of equanimity and the deepest kind of resilience: dispassion.