

Suffering (dukkha)

The second 'thought that turns the mind' towards liberation concerns suffering.

Life inevitability throws us curve balls; we get things we don't want, like illness and car crashes, and we don't get what we do want, like the perfect job or a warmer house. Things are unreliable.

The question is why does this cause us distress?

With acute events such as pain, there is a clear cause of distress. But even then, we can create more of a problem by our secondary reaction - such as worrying about how this will develop and affect our future. This is based on embedded learning and automated responses.

Buddhist teaching tells us to recognise this secondary effect, and points out that our habituated response is not based on any absolute truth.

We're also encouraged to dive deeper into the common thread of suffering - our attachment to wanting things to stay the same, or change in a particular way. Yet we all know that for the most part, things don't go the way we'd like them to.

More subtle still, is an underlying feeling of unsatisfactoriness. We can contact this when we slow down and observe ourselves in meditation. We may feel that something is missing, we may seek sensory stimulation, need distractions, or feel irritation or anger. It's the pervading sense that we want something to be different.

Linked to attachment is the truth of impermanence. We come to realise the futility of seeking happiness by holding on to or seeking external phenomena or conditions, that are temporary in their nature. Everything changes; whether relationships, possessions, or even our own identity. We inevitably face change and loss, at some point culminating in dying (which is another process of change).

More fundamentally, suffering comes from the mistaken view that we are separate beings, so try to mould the external world to our satisfaction. We are wholly interdependent, and the perceived external world is just that - a product of our distorted perception.

The path to reducing suffering involves recognizing these primary causes of suffering. We can then practice letting go of attachments, cultivate acceptance and nurture compassion toward ourselves and others. In this way, one can find peace and equanimity, even in the face of life's inevitable difficulties.

In softening our attachment to things, concepts and beliefs, we may come to understand that true and lasting joy and satisfaction is found inside of us and is not dependent on external conditions.