



**OpenEye**

Mindful Space

See for Yourself

## Breaking Down Suffering

### Discernment

- Thanisarro Bhikku

**If you ever had to tackle a large or overwhelming job, we all learn the basic principle that if you want to get anywhere with it, you have to break it down into little jobs, into manageable pieces...**

...then you tackle the pieces bit by bit by bit, and after a while you find the job gets done. You need the large overview so that you know how to break it down into manageable pieces, but when you actually do the work, you focus on the little bits and pieces.

This job we have here of tackling suffering is the same sort of thing. It seems overwhelming. You can think of it as this huge big mass, and the Buddha sometimes talks about it as a mass of suffering—because that’s how most of us experience it, especially when it gets really big, when it really weighs down on the mind.

But the whole purpose of discernment is to be able to break it down into little pieces so that you can see how it’s constructed and how it doesn’t have to be constructed. This is what the Buddha’s teachings on the five aggregates, the six sense spheres, the four or the six properties, dependent co-arising, are for. They’re all designed to take suffering and to break it down into manageable pieces. The reason we call this discernment is just that—its ability to see subtle distinctions—because the pieces are subtle and the distinctions between them are subtle.

This is why we have to practice concentration as a basis for this kind of discernment. If your mind isn’t really still, if your awareness isn’t really sharp and quick, you’re going to miss all the subtleties. Everything gets glommed together. It’s all right here, but if you don’t see the distinctions, everything is going to stay just as a big lump right here, a big mass right here in the present moment. Say, for instance, that you’re feeling a sense of depression, a sense of sadness. There’s a physical side to it and there’s the mental side. The mental

side is made up of lots of little thoughts that are all glommed together. So the Buddha recommends that you take it apart in terms of the khandhas, in terms of the aggregates. Look for the feeling, and then look for the perception. An important perception is saying, “This is my suffering, this is happening to me,” which may be true but you don’t have to think it. It’s an optional thought. You could simply say, “This is suffering,” and leave it at that. That would adequately describe the situation and would also be more helpful. The thing is, you have to catch the mind in the act of applying that particular perception. It will do it repeatedly again and again and again. That’s what clinging is. It’s holding onto a particular thought and just repeating it over and over again.

When you can see that happening, you realize that you’ve got the choice to drop it. You don’t have to keep hitting yourself over the head. This is the same principle that applies to right speech. As the Buddha said, there are things that may be true but if they’re not useful, if this is not the right time for them, we don’t say them. Take that principle and apply it to the mind, to your inner conversation. There may be perceptions that in one way or other are true enough, but they’re not useful and this is not the right time for them. They’re actually causing you suffering, so why bring them in?

If physical side of the suffering is what seems oppressive, take things apart in terms of the properties: earth, water, wind, and fire. Suppose there’s a pain in your knee. The sensations you’ve got around that pain in the knee: Which ones are just physical sensations and which ones are feeling? In other words, which ones are rupa, or form, and which ones are feeling? Any sense of heat is form, any sense of movement is form; coolness, solidity: these things are all form. But then there’s the feeling of pain that sort of flickers among them. It’s something different. It’s a different aggregate. This is where the aggregates and the elements can get together, and this is where we can distinguish among them. But one way of distinguishing between feeling and form is just

---

that: try to see which sensations in that sensation of pain are simply the aggregates of form, the properties of the body, and which are the actual feeling. Try to tease these things out. This is the work of discernment. It discerns distinctions, it sees things clearly.

This is why it's called discernment. So we're not here trying to gain the wisdom that lets us simply accept things. Sometimes people think that that's the ultimate wisdom of Buddhism: learning to be equanimous, patient, accepting of everything. Suffering comes, and you tell yourself that that's just the nature of experience, that's the way it is. Craving comes, well, just accept the craving, that's the way it is.

Now that is the beginning part of discernment, the ability to admit what's going on. But then as the Buddha said in his first sermon, discernment is not just knowing the truth, that this is the way things are. There is equally important—a task to do with each of these truths.

When there's suffering, you try to comprehend it. And comprehending it doesn't mean simply accepting it. It means ferreting out the bits and pieces from which it's constructed. What are the raw materials of suffering? It is just these things: form, feeling, perception, fabrication, consciousness. If you look at the suffering in those terms, takes a lot of the sting out. Because as you see the perception that it's "my" suffering or that "I'm" suffering is just that: it's a momentary event in the mind. But it brings a big sting with it. So you have the choice not to say that to yourself, not to think in terms of those perceptions. Then you find that as you take the events apart, tease them apart this way, there's less and less and less suffering. That big mass of suffering gets broken down into little bits. And as in the image in the Canon, finally it gets winnowed into a high wind and blown away, because you realize that you were the one who's been gluing all these pieces together, and then weighing yourself down with them.

The primary ingredient in this glue is the sense that "I am the one who is suffering, this is my suffering, this is happening to me, I'm in the midst of the suffering, or I am the suffering, or the suffering is in me." The Buddha has you take this sensation of suffering and tease it apart in terms of the aggregates and then ask of each of these aggregates: "Is this something in me or am I in it? Is this mine? Is this me?" And as you're able to look at these things—and it's not going to be

a little block that you could sit there and watch. It's going to be a very quick event in the mind, especially the mental khandhas. But if you learn simply to observe that, "There is this, there is this, that's all," you see that as you encounter difficult situations—pain in the body, anything difficult, anything that would make you suffer—you have the choice to think in ways that would make you suffer or not, because you can see these events happening simply as events. That's all.

That's what discernment is all about. Ferreting these things out, realizing that they're individual events in the mind and you don't have to glue them together in the old way. You can look at them from a different standpoint.

This is what the Dhamma does. It gives us a new frame from which to look at things. This is why Dhamma talks are not just here for information. They're here to help you look at things in a whole new way, applying the four noble truths to your experience. That's the framework the Buddha gives you.

It's not only the framework for his teachings, but also the framework he'd like you to apply to your experience. It's hard to shift frameworks. We're used to our old frameworks, so we tend just to bring the four noble truths in as new information. If that's all they are, just a piece of news you've heard, they really don't make that much difference. But if you make up your mind that you're going to look at everything from this perspective, and keep at it, keep at it, you find that it's really useful. It not only points out the way things are, but also shows what you can do so that you don't have to suffer from the way things are.

So try to get the mind still enough to allow your discernment to get more and more refined, more and more subtle. It works in stages. The more still the mind can be, the more refined your discernment can be, the more subtleties you can see—and the more you can put an end to your suffering. Ajaan Fuang used to say that the discernment that comes from concentration is special. It goes deeper into the mind than discernment not based on concentration. When you've heard the topics of discernment—four noble truths, five aggregates, six sense spheres, the properties, dependent co-arising—you can hear them, you can think about them, you can talk about them, but if you don't actually see these things in action, they don't go to your heart. The whole purpose of concentration is so you can see them in action. They are very quick, they are very subtle so you have to be very, very still. But if you see them in the stillness, the understanding goes straight to the heart. That's where it really can make a difference.

---