

Chapter 5

Liberation from Suffering

Words like “happiness” and “suffering” acquire a tantalizing allure when we recognize that they are relative. Could our “normal” everyday emotions feel like suffering—to someone whose inner emotional climate has, through practice, changed beyond recognition?

This chapter will outline the essence of Buddhadasa’s (re)discovery.

Imagine a research lab where the way to a better life and life experience is the subject of study; where the researcher's mind and body are his instruments.

A lab of this kind existed.

Twenty-five centuries ago in the forests of India. Rabindranath Tagore described it in a booklet titled *Sadhana*, subtitled "The Realisation of Life". Having become the first non-European Nobel laureate, Tagore took it upon himself to point to idiosyncratic nature of India's offering to culture; and to humanity's quest of *logos* in particular:

"[I]n India it was in the forests that our civilization had its birth, and it took a distinct character from this origin and environment. It was surrounded by the vast life of nature, was fed and clothed by her, and had the closest and most constant intercourse with her varying aspects....Having been in constant contact with the living growth of nature [the man's] mind was free from the desire to extend his dominion by erecting boundary walls around his acquisition. His aim was not to acquire but to realise, to enlarge his consciousness by growth with and growing into his surroundings. He felt that truth is all-comprehensive, that there is no such thing as absolute isolation in existence, and the only way of attaining truth is through the interpenetration of our being into all objects. To realise this great harmony between man's spirit and the spirit of the world was the endeavor of the forest-dwelling sages of ancient India."

Not only in the 'forrest lab'—but also in the society that surrounded it—was "this great harmony between man's spirit and the spirit of the world" esteemed as *the* worthiest of human goals:

"There were the virtuous, the wise, the courageous; there were the statesmen, kings and emperors of India; but whom amongst all these classes did [India] look up to and choose to be the rep-

representative of men? They were the rishis...who having attained the supreme soul in knowledge were filled with wisdom..."

Twenty-five centuries ago a sensation thundered in the 'forest lab' and reverberated through India:

Siddhartha succeeded!

He reached the supreme goal; he attained *complete* enlightenment! Kings and commoners rushed across the land to hear his words; and receive his *darshan*.



In a culture that esteemed the spiritually realized more highly than its kings—it should not surprise us that *even a prince* could leave the comfort of his palace to join 'the forest lab'. Yet I did not feel at all convinced by the official narrative of Buddhism, as I encountered it in books.

Could even a prince be so sheltered, so outright naïve, as to be shocked to see people suffer?

And leave his sheltered existence to seek "a cure to suffering"; and succeed after years of tribulation, and at first hesitate: "Will people be able to understand a truth so profound?" Prince Siddhartha, or Buddha as he's now widely known, decided that his insight was too important to be kept for himself; he made "The Four Noble Truths" the theme of his first sermon; of which "The First Noble Truth" was the *existence* of suffering.

Isn't the existence of suffering just *obvious*?

All fell into place when I learned (during my first visit and study at the Suan Mokkh forest monastery in Southern Thailand) to replace the word "suffering" by the **Buddhist** keyword *dukkha*.

What is *dukkha*?

It is (I learned at Suan Mokkh) exactly what you may want it to be if you've given this matter a bit of thought:

Dukkha is avoidable suffering of a specific kind; which is so common that we don't even have a name for it.

We can truly comprehend “The First Noble Truth” only when we are sufficiently liberated from *dukkha* to (have an independent frame of reference and be able to) *identify* it as suffering.

Samvegaparigittanapatha (Expression of Spiritual Urgency) *sutta* explains:

“Birth is dukkha,
Ageing is dukkha,
And death is dukkha.
Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are dukkha.
Experiencing the unloved and disliked is dukkha.
Wanting things and not getting them is dukkha.”

And gives us a hint that a range of events and conditions that we normally consider as “objectively” painful—are no longer that when the way of liberation has been successfully followed. The *Expression of Spiritual Urgency Sutta* concludes:

“May we all realize in this very life the quenching of this whole mess of dukkha!”



How can we liberate ourselves from *dukkha*?

A complete answer is of course the whole legacy of the Buddhist tradition; from which I'll here only highlight a single **key point**; and offer it to you as a piece in a puzzle, which will complete the roadmap to inner **wholeness** I've undertaken to draft in this first part of this book:

Paticcasamuppada ("dependent origination") as an ignored law of nature; which I'll call **origination of conditioning**.

It's what Ajahn Meddhi undertook to explain to Walailak University students by interpreting the *Wheel of Life mandala*. Allow me this simplification:

Origination of conditioning is a certain knee-jerk reaction.

Or more accurately a *sequence* of knee-jerk reactions; which trigger one another like falling dominos. **Origination of conditioning** is a sequence of inner psychic events or processes whose final result is **dukkha**.

The easiest way to avoid **dukkha** is to stop this chain reaction at its point of inception.

The further the **origination of conditioning** has advanced, the more difficult it will be to disrupt its progression. The **praxis**, which leads to the quenching of **dukkha** and dramatically better life and life experience—is a wonderfully simple technique.

Which, as it is customary at Suan Mokkh, I'll call "**mindfulness** at the point of **contact**".

Contact here refers to our encounter of *anything* that could arouse the emotions of attraction or repulsion; which might be an event, or a person or thing; or even just a *thought* of something you may wish to happen or fear *might* happen. **Mindfulness** is the presence and alertness of the **mind**. To have **mindfulness** at the point of **contact** is to be sufficiently alert when **contact** happens to be able to say "No! I am *not* engaging."

Because already when **contact** has led to **feeling**, which is the second stage in **origination of conditioning**, the chain of events that lead to **dukkha** will be more difficult to break.



Did you notice the irony?

The way we “pursue happiness” (*by seeking* that momentary high) is exactly what **Buddhism** identified as the way to **dukkha**!

We use advertising to *eliminate* **mindfulness**.

And technology to *accentuate* **feeling**.



As I said—I don’t expect you to **believe** any of this.

My aim is *not* to convince you—but to help develop and institute a **science** that will give us **knowledge** about **pivotal** themes, such as happiness; or whatever else might be worth “pursuing”; a **science** that will foster the guiding principles that we may learn at school *and live by*.

Although he did not articulate it in this way, Buddhadasa’s aim was similar. As a true man of his century, Buddhadasa distanced himself from **belief**; and saw **origination of conditioning** as a law of nature, verifiable by experiment. And having also seen in it the shared wellspring of all **religion**, and as an antidote to **materialism** (which in its global onslaught threatened to eradicate **religion**) created Suan Mokkh International as an experimental facility; where people from around the world could learn

about *origination of conditioning*; and verify it by repeating the experiment; and comprehend the essence of *their own* religion; and *pursue* the *way* of liberation from *conditioning*.

As I promised in Introduction, I now invite you to *federate* the Buddhadasa *meme* together.

And by doing that foster a general-purpose *science* or *transdiscipline* that will give voice to culture-transformative *memes*; and empower the deserving ones; and make *cultural revival* possible.

We primed this process by creating a *prototype* of such a *science*; I'll tell you about it in the second half of this book; so let me here only remind you of its *main point*—which I shared in Introduction and called *phenomenology*:

Experience has precedence over theory.

We do not simply ignore experience when it clashes with our worldview; especially not when it is shared by entire traditions; on the contrary—we use experience to *broaden and correct* our comprehension of ourselves and the world, by *connecting the dots*; and create *insights* that help us evolve culturally.

The *phenomenology* of *origination of conditioning*, as I pointed out in Introduction, *has* already been verified; first by Buddhadasa, and then by the monks who joined him and formed the Suan Mokkh forest monastery; and they furthermore made it *verifiable* by creating Suan Mokkh International.

I too have been practicing *mindfulness* at the point of *contact*; and I too can testify that it works.

The *federation* work that remains to be done is entirely in the *realm of ideas*; I am about to offer you some dots or *points* to connect; which I'll once again do by sharing *vignettes*.