

Dukkha: Unable to Bring Lasting Satisfaction

We may feel that a way of looking that highlights how all phenomena are unsatisfactory is rather joyless or severe. It will be surprising, then, to find these lenses supporting a letting go that invites lightness and a kind of deeply sustaining satisfaction.

We may notice that other practices, such as seeing all phenomena as inconstant, or staying at vedanā gave some release from the contraction of dukkha. Because, whenever there are desire demands or aversive attitudes there is contraction, any letting go of the taṇhā demands that establish dukkha supports more ease and a certain happiness. A dukkha way of looking recognises that no thing or state can bring lasting satisfaction. This insightful way of looking stops the activity feeding contraction for an immediate relief.

A first application of noting “Dukkha” or “Unsatisfactory” can have a silent “because they are impermanent”. Building on noting phenomena as “Anicca” this way of looking aids letting go and releasing patterns of taṇhā (craving).

This practice is an invitation into the freedom of holding phenomena in, what the Christian mystics called “holy disinterest”. A mode that is not a lack of intimacy with appearances, yet, does not reify nor fabricate an essence to things. This guides the heart towards a happiness in keeping with both experience, and the teachings: When we get what we want there is a relief—felt as happiness. Generally we associate that ease with ‘getting’ rather than the opening of grasping and struggle. Taṇhā is dukkha, thus by directly easing taṇhā’s contraction we can find happiness and relief.

When craving fades, even a little, the sense of body and awareness become more spacious. Body-heart-mind reflect each other in a dependent way; as body relaxes we can notice a correlative opening in the heart-mind as taṇhā fades, and vice versa. A second expression of “Dukkha” or “Unsatisfactory” can have a silent “because of the contraction”. Gross contraction in the body, or a subtle contraction in the bodily energetics is an expression of dukkha. Often contraction in the sense of body or awareness is more reliable than trying to notice taṇhā in the thinking—an indicator of grosser forms of craving.

Many times we will find a relief from a dukkha way of looking, yet sometimes it doesn’t seem to be having much effect. This can be due to a more subtle not yet acknowledged aversion to the phenomena. It can be helpful to engender a little more metta into the practice: Welcoming the phenomena to arise, be present, and go, all with holy disinterest. A third mode of noting “Dukkha” or “Unsatisfactory” can have a silent “because it is pushed and pulled”. When we really welcome things to appear, quietening taṇhā demands of getting or rejecting, a profound kindness for all things opens us into something more liberated and lovely.

As you can see there are many ways to experiment with when regarding phenomena as ‘Dukkha’. Maybe you’ll find another way yourself. Until then we recommend slowly exploring these approaches one at a time over many meditation sessions alongside samādhi practice. Not forgetting to linger in any relief this insightful way of looking may bring.