

HOMEWORK

- dailiness of your meditation practice

- **10% less suffering:** In a quiet moment, review moments of stress you experience. Notice what perceptions and beliefs you brought to that experience that caused extra suffering. See if you can separate out circumstance (facts) and perception (story about it).

Like all practice, this takes time and repetition to see. Don't think in black or white. See if noticing that the stress came from the inside story more than the outside situation changes your reaction. Go for 10% less suffering.

Start with the really small stuff. Being late. Can't find your keys. Missing a call. The person that triggers you.

We began looking at the Four Noble Truths. The reading from Thich Nat Hanh brought up some good background points:

THUS I HAVE HEARD

These teachings were orally transmitted for 450 years before they were written down. We cannot know how much has been lost and distorted. If something seems 'off' to you, go with your instinct instead. From the Kalama sutta, always be a light until yourself, trust your own inner compass.

If someone presents them in a way that doesn't ring true; doesn't have heart, trust yourself. Or if the translation seems off, it probably is.

Don't try to fit yourself into something because it is a 'teaching', because you hear it is true or the Buddha supposedly said it.

EVERYTHING IS SUFFERING?

Hanh cites how different suttas contradict themselves, have to be read in comparison. "Everything is suffering", is better understood as "all conditioned objects share the three marks of existence (three dharma seals). These are:

1) all conditioned objects are impermanent

2) because of this, they are all unsatisfactory, i.e. none of them can be a permanent 'fix' for unhappiness. What Hanh's tradition labels 'suffering' we phrase as 'unsatisfactoriness' - i.e. no conditioned object brings lasting peace and happiness.

3) all conditioned objects are 'non-self'. We are not the conditioned objects we experience, like thoughts, feelings, sensations, etc. They come and go, but our clear field of awareness remains constant.

ALL SUFFERING IS CAUSED BY CRAVING?

Hanh also disagrees with the concept that all suffering is caused by craving. He enlarges the list to ignorance, ill will, wrong views, etc. We might rephrase this to say all suffering is caused by resistance, resistance to what life is putting on our plate.

In general, it is easy for these teachings to become just words; our work is to bring it alive into our own life experience

FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

This path is about the end of suffering. It's fundamental to understand these 4 truths. On the surface, they seem deceptively simple:

- First NT: truth of suffering - life is inherently painful and contains suffering.
 - 2NT: the causes of suffering
 - 3NT: the cessation of suffering. With realization and by refraining from the things that cause us suffering, healing is possible
 - 4NT: the operator manual, how to refrain from the things that cause us suffering,.
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Yet are often misunderstood. Detachment is confused for non attachment, we aren't sure what cessation of suffering truly means and is is really accessible to us.

Here are two versions of the first and second NT that work for me:

- 1) we experience suffering in life
- 2) we suffer because of what we bring to life experience: our beliefs, perceptions, preferences and biases.

OR

1) Life is inherently painful, it is bumpy and unpredictable and not in our control. Its nature is dukka, or the way an off center wheel jerks around the cart.

2) we suffer because we resist what is, the ways we say 'no' to our experience.

(Epictetus famously said: "We do not suffer because of life, we suffer because of our thoughts.")

We suffer because we resist life. This is second arrow territory.

There are a number of viewpoints to express this: it's because we are stuck in the seemingly separate, ego-identified mind. Or because of the three defilements: anger greed and delusion. Another way of how we experience the world from the seemingly separate self.

When realization is mature with awakening to our true nature, separation dissolves and suffering dissolves with it. However, we don't have to wait for enlightenment to greatly reduce our suffering and stress in life. We can start with this right in our dualist (me/other) conditioning.

START WITH 10% LESS SUFFERING

Several comments in our meeting reminded me that we tend to think in black or white, all or none. When talking about how suffering is what we bring to life, all the ways we say 'no', extreme examples come up in the mind to fight back. What about war? Murder? Injustice?

Actually, in maturity, it does get down to this extreme level. The Heart Sutra states that with awakening, suffering for all beings ended. That seems mind boggling. Let's leave that for a moment, put it on the back shelf for now. We are just dipping our toes in this water. Let's start with seeing if it's true that much of our stress comes from our own minds and beliefs, not from life.

In the first Noble Truth, notice it is not saying: life is suffering. If that were the, the third noble truth would not be possible.

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In the second Noble Truth, notice that suffering does not come from the outside, from circumstance. It is an inside job. This is radical and good news. It means we can 'do' something about it..

Reflect on this. If you were present for whatever arose, if you met every situation with acceptance, how much suffering would there still be?

Would this not lead us to the third Noble Truth: that healing and well-being are possible?

Lets unpack that a bit. The claim here is:

PAIN: is inevitable

SUFFERING: is optional

Can we find that in our own lives, and can that understanding make our lives more peaceful?

Here's where we started:

ANY LIFE SITUATION: has two distinct aspects:

CIRCUMSTANCE: actual objective facts any group of reasonable people would agree with.

PERCEPTION / THOUGHTS / STORY: this is our subjective interpretation. Not everyone might agree with or experience subjectively the same way - there's more than one option. This is where suffering resides.

Examples from my life:

SITUATION: my kids visit and leave stuff laying around the house

CIRCUMSTANCE: There's coffee cups on the end tables, wrappers on the floor.

PERCEPTION / THOUGHTS / STORY: They are slob, inconsiderate guests. If they loved me more, they would pick up.

There is no inherent suffering in a coffee cup on the end table. The stress comes from my story that they 'should' be different. Here's where seeing the perception/story is just that: a tale. Being able to separate out the two gives us choices for how we want to see life.

Another possibility: actually, my kids do a lot for me. My grateful heart at having loving children is overjoyed to pick up the coffee cups. If I need to, I can mention it to them to pick up for next time.

SITUATION: my birth family does not reach out when they hear we are about to become grandparents.

CIRCUMSTANCE: They know that Marshall and Kate are expecting. They have not contacted me.

PERCEPTION / THOUGHTS / STORY: They are not supportive, not loving to me. They should at least drop a text. The result of the story is that I feel distant from them and do not like it. Again, seeing this as a perception, not the truth, gives me more options to not buy into stress.

Another possibility: they have a lot on their plates. My sister is taking care of our aged mother. My brother has serious health problems. My perception may be completely unfounded.

SITUATION: Drive across the state to visit with an ill friend, she had forgotten the date. She was depressed and not responding well. She has had several major surgeries and is exhausted.

CIRCUMSTANCE: I am with my friend. We are talking, we are driving around in her golf cart, we have lunch. The day is beautiful.

PERCEPTION / THOUGHTS / STORY: Disappointed. I wish she was feeling better. Wish it was more fun for me.

Another possibility: No suffering inherent in this situation, it is what happens with illness. Again, seeing the story as not a 'fact' allows for stress to release. This visit was probably good for her, pulled her out of her depression a bit. I can see that. The day was actually quite pleasant, just did not meet my hopes and expectations. And that is OK.

IMPORTANT: As Michael mentioned, it does not really even matter if there's a more peaceful possibility. On the bottom of it, just accepting that this is how things ware, who people are, allows for that rest and peace.

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The bulk of our suffering does not come from life. It is, rather, the perception that does that.

THIS IS GOOD NEWS. Doing this investigation of our everyday stresses leads to the direct experience of how suffering truly is optional, because it is not so much from external circumstance, but happens from the skin in, where there's only 'me'. Let's start here, going for 10% less stress for starters.

We did a writing exercise to help bring this into focus. Make this a part of your practice off the cushion.

Again, start with the really small stuff. Being late. Can't find your keys. Missing a call. Otherwise, your mind will start to argue with you, which is the way back into suffering. Like starting a new workout at the gym, begin with the smaller weights, work your way up.

When you can experience small everyday things more freely, move to things that have more emotional confusion around them. Eventually, more and more situations become freer.

As you start to explore this, it will become more and more clear that life itself does not cause most suffering. It is something inside, that resists, that does.