

Week 7 and 8 Reflections - Mark Nunberg

Tonight and also week eight we'll look at Sankhara dukkha - the unsatisfactoriness inherent in all experience. I like to reflect on this most subtle and pervasive experience of dukkha. This dukkha arises when the mind expects that experience can quench the stress of desiring. The mind interprets experience as being personal, and like a promise that is never kept, sense experience never completely satisfies. This is not just because things are always changing, but also because experience doesn't refer back to anyone/anything. Sankhara dukkha is the ongoing suffering of wrong (self) view. The very deep habit of presuming that there is someone to whom experience belongs, causes sankhara dukkha.

Many of you read Toni Bernhard's article earlier in the course. This is her section on Sankhara Dukkha:

Sankhara refers to the intentional formation of thoughts (often translated as "mental formations"). Sankhara dukkha arises when we take that step beyond simple aversion to an unpleasant physical or mental experience and engage in stressful mental activity, such as concocting "shoulds" and "shouldn'ts," judgments, and anxiety-filled thoughts and questions. Sankhara dukkha has its origin in tanha (craving) because that mental activity reflects a craving for things to be how we want them to be.

Returning to the examples I used earlier, I broke my ankle and it hurt. When I could mindfully acknowledge the unpleasantness of the pain, dukkha dukkha did not arise. It arose only when I reacted with aversion to this circumstance of my life (craving for the pain to stop). And then, sankhara dukkha was not far behind. "It's not fair that I broke my ankle." "What if it doesn't heal correctly?" "I can't bear being sick and injured at the same time." Sankhara dukkha was in the anxiety-filled stories I would spin about my ankle.

When my best friend died, dukkha dukkha arose in those moments when I felt aversion to the grief. When I then added mental formations such as, "I shouldn't feel this much grief," and even "I should never get over this grief," I was in the throes of sankhara dukkha. (Note how I'd managed to conjure two contradictory scenarios regarding the circumstances of my life and found both to be unsatisfactory. Sankhara dukkha in abundance!)

We can alleviate sankhara dukkha by bringing these mental formations into conscious awareness. In mindfulness practice (inside or outside of meditation), we become aware of whatever sensations or feelings have arisen. They could be from outside stimuli (someone honking a car horn), body stimuli (that painful broken ankle), or from our mental reaction to these stimuli. If that stimulus is unpleasant, our mental reaction can range from a simple craving for it to stop (dukkha dukkha) to the mental formations of sankhara dukkha, such as "If he doesn't stop honking that horn right now, I'm going to start screaming."

As we get more skilled at maintaining mindfulness, we're better able to shift our focus from the pleasantness or unpleasantness of our experience to its impermanent nature. This insight into impermanence enables us see that trying to control our experience to make it only pleasant just

increases the presence of suffering in our lives. This can be the first step in letting go of craving or longing for our life to be other than it is in the present moment.

Cultivating mindfulness can also help us question the validity of our thoughts. Was it true that breaking an ankle when I was already sick wasn't "fair"? (Living in parts of Haiti or Japan right now seems much more unfair, doesn't it?) Was it true that I shouldn't feel so much grief over my friend's death... or that I should never stop grieving it? (Neither assertion is constructive.) Learning to question the credibility of these mental formations can free us from thought patterns that perpetuate suffering.

We can also alleviate such suffering by cultivating more skillful mental states, such as Buddhism's Four Immeasurable Attitudes: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. "Take care, my dear broken ankle, hurting, hurting, hurting." "Grieving is painful but this is what my life is about right now."

Peace,

Mark