

Introduction to Tending The Fire: An Introspective Guide to Zen Awakening

I will provide an introduction and a little background on the material, offer the definition of key terms within the context of this study, and try to place the subject in relation to traditional Zen practice. In the next two talks, Dale will provide more detail on the content of the book. At the last one of the day, we'll discuss a summary chart of the process and we'll both be available for questions and discussion. Please bear in mind that the totality of the information given today is just a brief outline of the themes and process of the material.

The subject of *Tending the Fire* is focused on one aspect of dukkha – dukkha as conditioned states.

The Buddha is purported to have said, “I teach only one thing. I teach the nature of dukkha and its cessation.” I teach the nature of suffering and the cessation of suffering. It is taught that Dukkha is comprised of three elements: dukkha ordinary pain, dukkha as impermanence, and dukkha as conditioned states. The first two are well explained in Buddhist literature.

1] Dukkha as Ordinary Pain encompasses all the things any of us would consider painful and that understandably cause suffering – It includes birth, illness or physical disability, old age and death, any situation that causes distress or grief, as well as the many other forms of mental suffering.

2] Dukkha as Impermanence is the truth that everything changes. Impermanence is the nature of reality and entails the nuances of insubstantiality, and uncertainty.

Buddha taught that whatever is impermanent is dukkha. If impermanence is the nature of reality and whatever is impermanent is dukkha, than we arrive at the First Noble Truth “life is dukkha.” Individuals first encountering this teaching may prematurely decide that Buddhism is pessimistic. We don't like to hear that life is suffering. Buddha didn't deny that there is happiness or pleasant experiences in life. But because everything changes, when the conditions that support our agreeable circumstances wane, we tend to suffer.

3] The third aspect dukkha as conditioned states, however, is not as easily understood. Conditioned states are considered the subtlest level of dukkha. Being born as a human being, or a being of any form for that matter, is itself a conditioned state. Within Buddhist philosophy what we refer to as “I” or “me” is just an ever-changing combination of mental and physical energies made up of five aggregates – form, sensation, perception, volitional activity, and consciousness, nothing that is not insubstantial or does not change.

Many sources briefly define conditioned states as ego clinging - or attachment to self. I've always found that simplification unhelpful. In fact, I feel it does a disservice. It sets up “ego” as an enemy and leaves one feeling narcissistically shallow. Then we get into a struggle with attributes of ourselves we don't fully understand. It's fruitless, really.

Ego is a function of mind that develops in a human being beyond our will. It is an inherent part of our make-up and within this study is considered the source of our “sense of self,” the holder of our personal narrative and continuity of experience.

It also contributes to a fundamental misperception that is innate to human beings that we call the Natural Koan. The fundamental misperception is what leads us to experience ourselves as independent, permanent entities separate from the world. Although the Natural Koan of the fundamental misperception is common to everyone, each person manifests the problem it presents idiosyncratically, based on the unique circumstances of that individual’s life.

The fundamental misperception is what hinders our understanding of the Buddha’s teaching of anatta or no-self nature. Buddhism teaches that in order for a being, thing or phenomenon to be said to have a “self” it must be permanent and unchanging. As there is nothing that is permanent and unchanging, Buddha taught the doctrine of anatta. The Buddha’s teaching of no-self nature is derived from his deep understanding of impermanence and the interdependent co-arising of all phenomena.

Philosophically we may understand and accept this truth but experientially it is difficult to go beyond the sticky wicket of self. Ironically, to experience no-self nature one needs a healthy “sense of self.” So, is “ego” something we need to explore, understand, and have a mature attitude toward? Most certainly yes! But not in a self hating – deprecating way

For this discussion I’d like to refer to the “sense of self” we experience as the Personal aspect of our nature. It exists and so is true from a relative perspective. No-self nature is the truth from the ultimate perception of reality and is the Universal aspect of our nature.

Ajahn Chah said

*“You should know both the Universal and the Personal,
the realm of forms, and the freedom to not cling to them.
The forms of the world have their place, but in another way there is nothing there.
To be free we need to respect both of these truths.
From The Wise Heart – J. Kornfield p. 79*

I think this is totally in line with Master Dogen’s radical nonduality – where no aspect of human experience is left out of wholeness. And wholeness is the medicinal necessary for ameliorating suffering.

So the question is – how do we perceive the truth of the Universal aspect of our nature – a requisite for the cessation of suffering, when the Personal aspect of our nature, our “sense of self” tends to obscure or hinder the intimacy required for a deep understanding of the Universal? More will be said later on the importance of the interplay between the Personal and Universal aspects of our make-up.

It is the contention of this study that working with Dukkha as Conditioned States plays a significant role in the resolution of the Natural Koan or fundamental misperception. When we reflect on the 3 elements of Dukkha, it is the most beneficial place to exert our energy when working toward freedom from suffering.

When the Dukkha of Ordinary Pain arises we don't have the option of not experiencing it. We can and should respond skillfully, but when we get a toothache even though we call our dentist, we still have to deal with the toothache.

Dukkha as Impermanence is the nature of reality. We can't change the nature of reality, not that we don't try. By that I mean, how much more suffering do we create when we are unable to accept how things have changed? By "accept" I don't mean a passive giving up, either.

Dukkha as conditioned states is where we can really work toward freeing ourselves. Conditioned states serve to reify our sense of self in limiting and detrimental ways. Working with our idiosyncratic conditioned states clears what obstructs our view of the Universal aspect of our nature, about which the Buddha said is essentially pure.

While I was working as a psychotherapist, I encountered the work of a man named David Grove. It was primarily through the study of his work that I began to grasp the depth of the problem regarding Dukkha as Conditioned States. Grove provided a cogent framework for understanding the origin, operation, and possible resolution of conditioned states, although he never referred to them as such.

Dale and I had been practicing Zen for 20 years before coming in contact with Grove's work. The main emphasis of our training was on maintaining a consistent meditation practice, attending sesshin, listening to Dharma talks, and studying a variety of Buddhist texts. Neither of us could imagine our life without it.

As valuable as our practice had been, we still found ourselves confined by the same boundary of limitations that we had when we first encountered Zen. There were, of course, some changes. We did manage grow up a bit. But there were core issues, a wide variety of insecurities, propensities, and anxieties that persisted. Our practice helped us cope with them better. But their continued existence prevented us from living as freely in the world as we might have otherwise enjoyed.

We began using Grove's methods with these identified limitations. Surprisingly, and I'm not sure why we were surprised, we found that we not only experienced increased personal freedom from the conditioned states we worked on, but we also realized a deepening of our meditation practice and our understanding of basic Buddhist teachings.

Within this study, conditioned states are seen as the limiting tendencies we struggle against within ourselves. Conditioned states are frustrating because no amount of intellectual understanding about why we are the way we are seems to lessen their impact.

Conditioned states are further defined as deeply rooted psychophysical formations predicated by negative events. A conditioned state is how we store the negative learning of an unresolved experience, and it is held somewhere in the body as a symptom. A complex of afflictive emotions, thought patterns, and behaviors accompanies them. These psychophysical formations and the symptoms they generate replicate themselves over and over when the conditioned state is triggered in subsequent life events. And they persist until they are resolved. Because conditioned states are the record of unresolved experiences they are negatively charged. But really they are just containers of information.

It is important when working with a conditioned state to reframe from judging it or feeling shame for experiencing it. Like the development of our sense of self, it arises naturally by the nature of our design. It is not wrong or bad. In fact, at the time that it originated it was the most appropriate response available to us. The problem with a conditioned state is that it continues to influence our thoughts, feelings, and responses to new situations that we tend to find very limiting or even debilitating.

Regarding the limitations of a conditioned state, they are how we know we have what we have. I offer this example for clarification. Right now I'm a bit nervous discussing this with you. How do I know I'm nervous? Well, there is a little fluttery feeling right here while I'm talking about it as if it were very risky to be sharing this information. This is the geography of my "public speaking nervousness." Is it a conditioned state? Oh yes! I know this because I've worked on it over the years and it is much better than it used to be. It used to occupy the space from here to here, and it was not a "little fluttery feeling" to begin with.

What is the origin of it? Probably, the way fear of public speaking arises in any of us. By being embarrassed as a child for sharing some innocent belief, or being criticized in the past for something we've said, or frequently getting the message that we should just be quiet. Don't you think it's interesting that so many of us get really nervous at the thought of just speaking to a group of people? Why should that be so scary? Maybe it's deeper than the examples I've just listed. Maybe we carry it in our genes. In view of the full spectrum of human experience, how many people have been exiled, imprisoned, tortured, or killed because of something they said?

On the scale of life stressors, fear of public speaking often rates higher than the fear of death. Jerry Seinfeld said, this means that at a funeral most of us would rather be the one in the coffin than the person giving the eulogy. Just this past weekend I was reading a book by Lewis Richmond, *Aging as Spiritual Practice*. Yes! I am there, surprisingly, and I can't say why I am surprised. He related that there is a teaching from Buddhism I'd never encountered called the "Five Great Fears" – they are: fear of death, fear of illness, fear of losing one's mind, fear of loss of livelihood, and fear of public speaking... so it's deep.

Have you ever heard anyone say of their experience, "I don't know what happened to me. All of sudden I felt like I was five years old and had no idea how to deal with the situation?" When that happens, rest assured, the person has succumbed to the spell of a conditioned state.

Some years ago I had a consultation with a man who couldn't understand what happened to him every time he had a conversation with his boss if it took place in the boss's office. If they met in the hall, he had no problem. If the boss came to his workstation, again not a problem, meetings in the conference room, no problem. But in the boss's office he felt cut off from his ability to problem solve. He said, "I just go blank." Eventually, he figured out that where he sat when conversing with his boss in his office replicated the angle – line of sight – he had with his authoritarian and abusive father at the family dinner table. The next time he went into the office he sat in another chair, with a different line of sight, and retained his ability to think clearly. That was a nice fix for that circumstance but it doesn't alleviate the root of the problem. Other events in his life will likely trigger that conditioned state.

To work on conditioned states, we have to recognize them for what they are. And that's not easy because they most often operate outside our level of awareness. In this study that defines ignorance. By ignorance we simply mean being unaware.

Even when we begin to recognize the dynamics of a conditioned state or have a thorough understanding of why we react the way we do in particular situations ... it's often not enough to eliminate the root cause and its manifesting symptoms.

That is why I stated earlier that defining Dukkha as Conditioned States as ego clinging or attachment to self is simplistic and a disservice. We don't cling to it. I think we try mightily to "let go" and have a sincere willingness to change. It clings to us. And the IT that clings is the psychophysical formation that constitutes a conditioned state.

How does one identify a conditioned state? Conditioned states are the tendencies we find most limiting to living our life. As many of them arise in childhood, they have been in place for most of one's life, and we accept them as, *that's just the way I am*.

There are degrees of conditioned states. They result from a subjectively experienced negative event. It doesn't have to be something extreme like a serious illness, surgery, accident, or natural disaster. It can be a look in a parent's eye or the tone of a teacher's comment. The operation of an intense conditioned state leaves an individual cut off from their usual coping mechanisms.

Not all negative experiences result in a conditioned state. Conditioned States are differentiated from other types of learning we may consider conditioning by the negative charge they exert. I'm conditioned in many ways that I don't mind... they serve me ... like my ability to drive a car. But if I get into a minor car accident and then every time I ride in a car I experience panic about being in an accident and if this doesn't pass in a reasonable amount of time, then I would be dealing with a conditioned state.

We can place the operation of a conditioned state on the Buddha's teaching of the 12 links in the chain of causation. The first link is Ignorance. We are unaware that our response to a situation is resulting from a conditioned state. The 2nd link is activity. If we don't interject our awareness at the 2nd link, the dynamic will repeat itself over and over. It takes some effort on our part to change the pattern determined by a conditioned state. This study offers one way that effort can be applied. Dale will be outlining the specifics in the next two presentations.

A two-year course on this material was studied with the Madison sangha, and that eventually led to the book. All this developed from a unique occurrence. I like to think of it as a very Zen experience, actually. I had been re-reading *Eihei Dogen Mystical Realist* by Hee-Jin Kim. On page 88 I came across a statement that had a profound effect on me, two turning words in particular. Those two words were "existential metabolism," and to me they perfectly described the work we had been doing in our study of conditioned states.

We use the term existential to mean "experiential" and metabolism to mean "the process of." Understanding the process of an experience. At first we called the process that developed from this study the 'existential metabolism of conditioned states.' Later it was renamed the 'existential metabolism of awakening' because resolving a conditioned state issues the practitioner into a new state of being. It dramatically changes our relationship to our sense of self, and thereby our relationship to the world. All the years we had been studying and

discussing this process totally coalesced with the words “existential metabolism.” Jokingly I said to Dale, “we need a symbol that expresses all this. Why don’t you create one for us?” And he did...

Tending the Fire is the outcome of our experiential research of working directly with conditioned states over the last 20 years. It is the description of a process we developed that we call Zazen Introspection and the Resolution Sequence. With it, working on conditioned states becomes a meditative practice. What makes it meditative is the orientation we take toward the issue we want to work on. The requirements are clarity of intention and nonjudgmental attention. The very skills honed in Shikantaza.

We offer this study as a skillful means and adjunct to traditional Zen practice.