

Relinquishing Struggle with the Present Moment

There is a way to avoid feeling anxious and fearful. Based on science and spiritual teachings we know why we feel such things, and how to end it. We have these difficult feelings because we struggle with life. Accepting life in each moment transforms this. When we accept what is happening two things occur: we no longer feel anxious and fearful, and we are poised to respond wisely to life. It can also open access to portals for seeing your true nature.

The Buddha discovered how struggling with the present moment creates Dukkha or suffering. Recent neuroscience research and evolutionary knowledge have confirmed this. Craving (Taṇhā) and aversion (dveṣa) is struggle. This is the heart of the Buddha's First Noble Truth and is the opposite of accepting the present moment.

We have all had the experience of non-struggle or acceptance of the moment. It might be a moment of awe when you see a sunset or a moment when you are focused on playing an instrument or playing a sport. It could be when you behold your newborn baby. In these moments of total acceptance there is peace, and it opens a portal to seeing reality as it is.

Why do we struggle?

There are psychological, neurological and evolutionary reasons for why we struggle. The Buddha didn't have the science and brain scanning tools to examine the neurological and evolutionary aspects. He was able to study the psychological aspects. Recent neuroscientists such as Richard Davidson, Rick Hanson, Sharon Begley and Sara Lazar have researched the neurological and evolutionary aspects of why we struggle, and even how to address it through mindfulness.

We are wired for survival and reproduction, and this requires desire and aversion. Sometimes struggle gives us a hit of pleasure so it is reinforced. Our economy encourages struggle to get more things with the promise of happiness.

We all have evolved mechanisms for survival and reproduction which cause us to struggle. Our brains have a built-in "negativity bias" that leads to suffering as we

are constantly scanning our environment for threats creating a background of anxiety. The brain also has a bias toward negative implicit or unconscious memories, even though most of our memories are positive. Further, our brains continually create simulations about what could go wrong, and this creates mind-made suffering. We have a brain network called the default mode network (DMN) which produces self-referential thoughts and a sense of a separate self. All these fundamental aspects of the brain/mind have evolved to survive and reproduce, but they cause us to struggle and suffer.

Psychologically speaking, the Buddha would say that we struggle because of ignorance - it is an ignorance or misunderstanding of the nature of reality including the nature of self. It is an innocent mistake about the nature of reality and self.

Upadana is the Pali word that's generally translated as attachment or clinging. Clinging occurs when the illusory separate self creates the illusion of need through its craving. For example, thinking that I will be happy if I have \$100,000 is clinging. Also, thinking that if I didn't have this big nose, I would be happy is clinging. It is both the pushing away and the grasping that are the two sides of clinging. This clinging is what I am calling struggle, and it's based on a belief system as follows: I am a separate independent self that finds happiness by getting what it wants, and avoiding what it does not want, and I am fully capable of doing this. It is all about beliefs.

We know that we struggle, and we know how this causes suffering. We will engage in a variety of distractions to prevent ourselves from struggling such as drinking and drugs, eating too much, talking too much, meditating too much, spiraling down whitewater rivers, or watching TV. We basically want a sustained experience of not struggling and will do almost anything for it. Even though we know that we struggle and suffering, we still do it. Struggling just happens even if we want to stop. In fact, trying to stop struggling is just more struggling. Given this, what is way forward?

How To Relate to Our Inevitable Struggling?

In my practice, I stopped being so concerned about the fact that I struggle, and just began to accept that I struggle. This way I found that I did not get caught up in denying struggle or judging myself for struggling. I continuously noticed struggle taking place and accepted that it was occurring. And guess what happened? Remember the saying, “what you resist persists, and even grows”? this saying kicked-in and because I was not resisting struggle, it faded away.

Then I started to wonder why I struggle at all. Especially when I saw that my struggling made me feel miserable or uneasy. I noticed that when I felt really good, that I wasn't struggling. But it would not last long, and I would start to struggle again. Even when I got what I wanted, struggle would quickly start up again.

I began to explore why I struggle. I noticed that I had moments when non-struggle happened on its own. Remember the examples of sunset, sports and a baby. I then noticed that I was not thinking about myself in these moments. Instead of the ego being the centre of attention, the awe, or delight or connection was centre stage.

This is not a philosophical exploration. It is directly seeing that in that moment, that your thoughts are not of an “I” or a “me”. The awe, delight or love is centre stage. You have all had many moments like this, and yet during these moments you will likely quickly begin to struggle again. Human beings cannot dwell in these moments for very long. We bring the “I” or “me” back into the picture and struggle again? The ego deeply fears its own demise and quickly goes back to its old, habituated ways of struggling.

The Buddha taught that we do this because we misperceive the nature of self. We think that there is an independent permanent thing called a self. The misperception is the cause of suffering. We are back around to this core mistaken belief again – that there is a separate self.

Our meditation practice is an invitation to not struggle and to connect with our true nature. As Jon Kabat-Zinn likes to say, “there is nothing to do, and nowhere

to go”. At times, you may find that during meditation, it is a struggle to not do anything, or you find yourself struggling not to struggle. We are so conditioned to struggle, that even when we are sitting with nothing to do, we still struggle. You could be sitting in meditation in a quiet environment at the ideal temperature, with the perfect meditation cushion or chair, and still create a struggle in your mind. You may find yourself rehashing old stories or judging yourself for having a busy mind.

The solution isn't to try to stop doing this. This is just more struggle. The answer is to see how we are misperceiving things. We are not perceiving reality as it actually is. We do not want to insert new beliefs. In a way, the answer is to have no answer. We suspend our beliefs and ask what if the way I see myself and the world is not be true? When we suspend our beliefs, anything is possible.

Relinquishing Struggling: The End of Struggle

To relinquish struggle you must recognize that most of your suffering is created by you. It is created in the mind and has nothing to do with circumstances. When you truly see this, the mind made perception of a struggling self can dissolve. You will realize that painful situations and difficult people are your greatest teachers. This is the path to awakening.

Without difficulties and pain, I would not be here. Without suffering you would not be here. Without difficulties and suffering no one would be interested in what I am saying here.

We can release the energetic hold that our struggling has on the mind with observation, acceptance and wise reflection or investigation. The practice is to be aware of any attachment to a worldly desire. We can ask ourselves, “what are the effects of struggling – is it causing suffering or happiness”? We see this over and over again. We see that struggle causes suffering and doesn't help us attain our goals.

How do we go about seeing and abandoning struggling? From my practice I have devised a 7-step process that can evoke non-clinging.

1. Separate the desire from the attachment to what is desired.
2. Examine the desire and see how it is related to the arising of feelings tones of pleasant (wanting/liking), unpleasant (not wanting/disliking), or neutral.
3. Look for signals that you are caught in struggling such as tension in body, feelings of unease or run-away thoughts.
4. Investigate the story that accompanies the struggling. Is it narrow, repetitive, and a drain on energy.
5. Notice that your awareness of the struggling is separate from the actual struggling.
6. Accept that struggle has occurred and let it be. Noticing if there is any aversion to the struggling and accepting that too.
7. Step back from the struggling and sense into awareness or that which knows that struggling occurred, and rest there.