

Learning to Ride the Wheel of Life

Mindfulnessmeditationgroup.com | Steve Lovinger | April 2026

What Is Dukkha?

The word *dukkha* is often translated as “suffering,” but its original meaning is more precise and more physical. *Du* means bad or ill-fitting; *kha* means hole or axle hole — the bearing at the center of a wheel through which the axle turns.

A cart with a bad axle hole doesn't just wobble or list to one side. It grinds. Every rotation of the wheel, the ill-fitting hole creates friction at the center. The cart still moves — life goes on — but every turn costs more than it should.

This is dukkha: not a single catastrophe but a structural friction, built into the interface between living and the conditions of living. And like a bad axle hole, it is most felt not when things are still but when life is turning.

The Axle Hole Analogy

The friction is not primarily in the wheel, not in the road, not in the load — it is at the center, in the fit between the axle and the hole that holds it.

What makes the hole ill-fitting:

- Conditioning and unskillful views — the shape worn into us over time
- Craving, aversion, and clinging — forces that distort the fit further with every turn
- Identification — taking the grinding to be who we are

What serves as grease:

- Mindfulness (*sati*) — knowing what is happening at the point of contact
- Kindness and wisdom — reducing the forces that tighten the fit

“The wheel turns regardless — but how much it grinds depends on what is at the center.”

Contact: Where the Axle Meets the Hole

The Buddha taught that experience begins with *phassa* — contact. At every moment, sense organ meets object, and consciousness arises at that meeting. This is unavoidable and morally neutral. It is simply what happens when a sentient being encounters the world — the axle turning in the hole.

Contact itself is not the problem. What follows contact — automatically, without our knowing — is where friction compounds or eases.

The Automatic Chain: Autopilot as Samsara

The Buddha described a sequence — dependent arising — in which each moment of contact triggers a chain of further events, each conditioning the next:

Contact (phassa) → Feeling tone (vedana: pleasant, unpleasant, neutral) → Craving (tanha) → Clinging (upadana) → Becoming (bhava) → Dukkha

Each link arises **due to conditions**, not by choice or control.

When this chain runs on its own momentum — contact triggering feeling tone, feeling tone automatically pulling craving, craving collapsing into clinging — this is samsara as a living process. Not a place we go after death, but the wheel grinding right now, link by link, without our knowing.

This is autopilot: the tightening, the story, the identification, the reaction — all unfolding before we even know the chain has begun. The Pali term *papanca* points to this proliferation — the mind's runaway story-making, spinning reactions and narratives on its own momentum, pressing the axle harder into the ill-fitting hole.

Sources of Friction

Dukkha often arises not from events themselves, but from how the automatic chain responds to them.

- **Craving** = wanting something different (more pleasant, less painful)
- **Aversion** = pushing away or resisting what is
- **Reactivity** = the tightening, flinching, story-making, or identification that arises automatically
- **Identification** = mistaking the grinding for who we are

These press the axle harder against the hole, compounding the original friction.

Practical Examples

Traffic jam

→ contact with delay → unpleasant feeling tone → craving to be elsewhere → tension in chest, jaw
→ reactivity (yelling or stewing)
→ awareness at contact: noticing tightness, softening breath before the chain runs

Aging body pain

→ contact with sensation → aversion → story of decline → emotional collapse
→ awareness at contact: curiosity toward sensation → less identification

Social rejection

→ contact with words → unpleasant feeling tone → craving for approval → tightening, overthinking → self-judgment
→ awareness at contact: name the feeling, breathe with it, allow it to pass

Awareness as the Grease

Mindfulness — *sati* — is the grease that softens the turning. It works by inserting knowing as early as possible in the chain: ideally right at contact, where the axle meets the hole, before feeling tone has already pulled craving into motion.

This is what the Bahiya Sutta points toward: *in the seen, just the seen*. Contact without the automatic downstream. Not the elimination of feeling tone — that is impossible — but the interruption of the passage from feeling tone to craving that usually happens without our knowing.

In practice, this means training attention to recognize contact and feeling tone as they arise, before they harden into reaction. Feeling tone (*vedanā*) is the earliest and most powerful point of intervention — before craving has formed. But the chain can be interrupted at any link before becoming. Catching craving — noticing 'I want this to be different' — is still upstream of clinging. Catching clinging itself is still upstream of becoming. Any moment of knowing, anywhere in the chain, is *sati* doing its work.

Awareness enhances sensitivity, and sensitivity — when grounded in awareness — softens reactivity and opens the space for wise response.

The River

If you see the river clearly, you are no longer lost in it. Not because you have stepped onto the bank and left experience behind, but because awareness of the stream — knowing that contact has happened, that a feeling tone has arisen, that the chain is beginning — creates the pause.

The small gap between stimulus and automatic reaction in which something wiser becomes possible.

This is not detachment. Even when you see the river, you still feel the pull of the current. The water is cold, the flow is strong, and it moves you. But you are no longer tumbling without knowing it. You are present to the flow without being wholly at its mercy.

The wheel still turns. The friction does not vanish. What changes is your relationship to it.

The Four Noble Truths: One Diagnostic Arc

What we have been exploring is not separate from the Four Noble Truths — it is the Four Noble Truths seen as a single diagnostic arc rather than four separate doctrines.

The **first noble truth (*dukkha*)** is the friction itself — the structural grinding the etymology names. Not a pessimistic claim about life but a precise observation: something is ill-fitting at the center, and every turn of the wheel makes it felt.

The **second noble truth (*samudaya, arising*)** is dependent arising — the chain that shows how the friction compounds. Contact → feeling tone → craving → clinging → becoming. The Buddha is

not just saying life is hard; he is showing the mechanism by which the hole wears worse with every unskillful turn.

The **third noble truth (nirodha, cessation)** follows as logical consequence: if craving is the link that turns contact into compounded suffering, then the interruption of that link — awareness at the point of contact, before craving takes hold — is where the grinding eases. Not the elimination of the wheel or the road, but a better fit at the center.

The **fourth noble truth (magga, the path)** is the grease itself — but unlike grease applied once, it is a sustained practice of cultivation. The Buddha gave this path a specific form: the Noble Eightfold Path, a life of integrated wisdom, ethical conduct, and mental discipline that keeps returning us to that point of contact with knowing rather than blind reaction.

The arc moves from what is wrong → why it compounds → where it can ease → how to work with it. Which is also the arc of this handout — and of practice itself.

Walking the Middle Way: The Noble Eightfold Path

The Buddha identified the Middle Way with the Noble Eightfold Path — a life of balanced wisdom, ethical conduct, and mental cultivation.

Wisdom (Paññā)	Ethical Conduct (Sīla)	Mental Discipline (Samādhi)
Appropriate View	Appropriate Speech	Appropriate Effort
Appropriate Intention	Appropriate Action	Appropriate Mindfulness
	Appropriate Livelihood	Appropriate Concentration

Each factor supports the others: wisdom guides ethics, ethics stabilizes the mind, and a stable mind deepens wisdom.

Reflection Questions

1. Where do you notice friction in daily life — the grinding at the center?
2. Can you trace the chain? What was the contact — the moment the axle engaged?
3. What was the feeling tone — pleasant, unpleasant, neutral? Can you notice how quickly craving or aversion follows — or has already formed?
4. Can you catch the chain at any link — at contact, feeling tone, craving, or clinging — before it runs to becoming?
5. What changes when awareness is present at contact? at feeling tone? at the first sense of craving?
6. When the chain is not seen, what does it feel like from the inside?
When it *is* seen, what is different?