

No pain is really worth suffering

Source: SD 51.14 (3.2.3)

What is the difference between “pain” and “suffering,” especially as we use and understand them in early Buddhism? **Pain** is simply a feeling we often experience, both bodily and mentally. The suttas call this “**pain as suffering**” or, literally, the “pain of pain” (*dukkha, dukkha*), which, in modern terms can be called “affective suffering”¹. It is something we feel negatively *affecting* our body or our mind.

Pain is natural

What does the first half of the saying—“pain is natural”—mean? This refers to the most common feeling that we face: we basically call it “**pain**” that occurs *naturally*: it is the nature of things: our body being composed of the 4 elements—earth, water, fire and wind (respectively solid, liquid, heat/decay and wind/motion)—which interact with one another. As long as they are in harmonious co-existence, we feel fine.

When one element preponderates or overwhelms the rest, we do not feel comfortable; we even fall sick. Then, our 4-element body interacts with the 4 elements outside of ourself—when matter come into contact with matter, there is also attrition, and we feel its effects as pain.

Suffering is optional

In the saying, “pain is natural, suffering is optional,” the second sentence, “**suffering is optional**” refers to how the mind reacts to natural pain of the body or the mind. When the mind makes a big fuss of it, making the pain bigger than it really is, we call it *suffering*. We turn pain into suffering by adding to it our beliefs or judgements, or darkening it with greed, hate, delusion or fear. The pain hurts—that’s what pain does—but don’t let it hate: that’s suffering. Pain hurts but don’t let it hate.

When the mind sees pain for what is really is, then, it will pass away even as it arises—that is the nature of *pain*. When we train our mind *not* to react or overact towards the feelings that we experience, then we have the “option” of cutting down the pain or even leaving the pain on the body level, so to speak. Our mind is thus untouched by that pain.²

The 2 arrows

Imagine feeling pain or hurt like being **pierced by an arrow**: this arrow is pain. When we get angry with this arrow, or plan revenge, then, we are pierced by a **second arrow**! The first arrow hurts the body: we skillfully remove it, and the wound heals, the pain is gone.

¹ **Dhammacakkha Pavattana Sutta** (S 56.22,5) + [SD 1.1](#) (6.1.1).

² See [SD 48.9](#) (6.2.5).

But the second arrow hurts the mind: we remember the pain, and it stays in our mind hurting us every time we recall it. Even when we do not recall it, it begins to negatively affect us. This “second arrow” is suffering.³

Between stimulus and response, we get the **option** of preventing the second arrow from hitting us. We can choose to “value-add” the pain or to “value-free” it. When we learn to see pain just as it is, we learn to grow and be free emotionally.

When we do not let the second arrow hit us, the first wound will let in light by which we learn, grow and be free from suffering. In other words, we simply take things as they are, and work our way from there without rocking the boat, as it were. With or without pain, it is plain sailing.

The path to awakening

Another option we have in dealing with pain is an important one—important because such an observation and reflection can bring us streamwinning in this life itself⁴. Streamwinning means our boat goes upstream heading for nirvana. This is our very first step on the path of awakening which we can and must make in this very life.

Here, we make it a habit of noticing and reflecting any or all such changes as these, as explained in **the Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta** (M 44), thus:

pleasant feeling is *pleasant* when it persists, *painful* when it changes;
painful feeling is *painful* when it persists, *pleasant* when it changes;
neutral feeling is *pleasant* when there is knowledge of it, *painful* when there is no knowledge of it.⁵

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³ On the 2 arrows, see **Sall’atthana Sutta** (S 36.6) [SD 5.5](#).

⁴ **(Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1), [SD 16.7](#) or any of the other 9 suttas of **Okkanta Vagga** (S 25).

⁵ **Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta** (M 44,24), [SD 40a.9](#).