

Suffering (Dukkha)

The First True Reality for the Spiritually Ennobled: The Painful

In his first sermon, the Buddha said this on the first True Reality:

Now *this*, monks, for the spiritually ennobled, is the painful (*dukkha*) true reality (*ariya-sacca*): [i] birth is painful, ageing is painful, illness is painful, death is painful; [ii] sorrow, lamentation, (physical) pain, unhappiness and distress are painful; [iii] union with what is disliked is painful; separation from what is liked is painful; not to get what one wants is painful; [iv] in brief, the five bundles of grasping-fuel are painful. [numbers added]

The word *dukkha* has been translated in many ways, with 'suffering' as the most common . . .

The first features described as 'painful' in the above quote (i) are basic biological aspects of being alive, each of which can be traumatic. The *dukkha* of these is compounded by the rebirth perspective of Buddhism, for this involves repeated re-birth, re-ageing, re-sickness and re-death.

The second set of features refer to physical or mental pain that arises from the vicissitudes of life.

The third set of features point to the fact that we can never wholly succeed in keeping away things, people and situations that we dislike, in holding on to those we do like, and in getting what we want. The changing, unstable nature of life is such that we are led to experience dissatisfaction, loss and disappointment: in a word, frustration.

The fourth feature – the five bundles of grasping-fuel – are discussed later.

Is Buddhism 'pessimistic' in emphasizing the unpleasant aspects of life? Buddhism teaches that transcending the stress of life requires a fully realistic assessment of its pervasive presence. One must accept one is 'ill' if a cure is to be possible: ignoring the problem only makes it worse. It is certainly acknowledged that what is 'painful' is not exclusively so (S.III.68-70).

The pleasant aspects of life are not denied, but it is emphasized that ignoring painful aspects leads to limiting attachment, while calmly acknowledging them has a purifying, liberating effect. Thus the Buddha says in respect of each of the five aspects of body and mind:

The pleasure and gladness that arise in dependence on it: this is its attraction. That it is impermanent, painful, and subject to change: this is its danger. The removal and abandonment of desire and attachment for it: this is the leaving behind of it. (A.I. 258–9 (*BW.* 192), cf. *BW.* 199–205)

Happiness is real enough, and the calm and joy engendered by the Buddhist path helps effectively increase it, but Buddhism emphasizes that all forms of happiness (bar that of *Nirvana*) do not last. Sooner or later, they slip through one's fingers and can leave an aftertaste of loss and longing. In this way, even happiness is to be seen as *dukkha*.

This can be more clearly seen when one considers another classification of forms of *dukkha*: the painfulness of (physical and mental) pain (*dukkha-dukkhata*), the painfulness of change, and the painfulness of conditioned phenomena (*sankhara-dukkhata*; S.IV.259).

When a happy feeling passes, it often leads to mental pain due to change, and even while it is occurring, the wise recognize it as subtly painful in the sense of being a limited, conditioned, imperfect state, one which is not truly satisfactory. This most subtle sense of *dukkha* is sometimes experienced in feelings of a vague unease at the fragility, transitoriness and unsatisfactoriness of life . . .

The clear message is: if something is *dukkha*, do not be attached to it. At this level, *dukkha* is whatever is not *Nirvana*, and *Nirvana* is that which is not *dukkha*. This does not lead to a useless circular definition of the two terms, for *dukkha* is that which is conditioned, arising from other changing factors in the flow of time, and *Nirvana* is that which is unconditioned.

Does saying that something is *dukkha* mean that it is: (i) *by its very nature* 'painful', or (ii) 'painful' when reacted to with greed or aversion? Both seem to be implied in the Pali *Suttas*: grasping at anything leads to psychological pain (due to the fact that all conditioned things are subject to impermanence), and aversion makes pain worse, but also conditioned things are to be seen, in themselves, as *dukkha* in the sense of being limited and imperfect. They may also, in a straightforward sense, be forms of physical or mental pain.

The Buddhist path aims initially at lessening the mental pain that the vicissitudes and stresses of life can produce, than at ending this mental pain, but ultimately at ending the round of rebirths, conditioned existence, and both its physical pains and more subtly painful nature.

The Five Bundles of Grasping-Fuel: The Factors of Personality

When the first sermon summarizes its outline of *dukkha* by saying, (iv) 'in brief, the five bundles of grasping-fuel are painful', it is referring to what is *dukkha* in the subtlest sense. The five 'bundles of grasping-fuel' (*upadana-kkhandha*, Skt *upadana-skandha*) are the five factors which go to make up a 'person'.

Buddhism holds, then, that none of the phenomena which make up personality is free from some kind of painfulness. Each factor is a 'group', 'aggregate' or 'bundle', of related states, and each is an object of 'grasping' (*upadana*) so as to be identified as 'me', 'I', 'myself'. They are also just referred to as the *khandhas* . . .

To aid understanding of *dukkha*, Buddhism gives details of each of the five factors into which it analyses personality. All but the first of these 'bundles' are mental in nature; for they lack any physical 'form':

1. *Rupa* '(material) form'. This refers to the material aspect of existence, whether in the outer world or in the body of a living being. It is said to be comprised of four basic elements or forces, and forms of subtle, sensitive matter derived from these. The four basics are solidity (literally 'earth'), cohesion ('water'), heat ('fire') and motion ('wind'). From the interaction of these, the body of flesh, blood, bones, etc. is composed.
2. *Vedana* or 'feeling'. This is the hedonic tone or 'taste' of any experience: pleasant, painful (*dukkha*) or neutral. It includes both sensations arising from the body and mental feelings of happiness, unhappiness or indifference.
3. *Sanna* (Skt *samjna*), which processes sensory and mental objects, so as to classify and label them, for example as 'yellow', 'a man' or 'fear'. It is 'perception', 'cognition', mental labelling, recognition and interpretation – including misinterpretation – of objects. Without it, a person might be conscious but would be unable to know *what* he was conscious of.
4. The *sankharas* (Skt *samskara*), or 'constructing activities' (also rendered as 'volitional activities', 'mental formations' and 'karmic activities').

These comprise a number of processes which initiate action or direct, mould and give shape to character. The most characteristic one is *cetana*, 'will' or 'volition', which is identified with karma. There are processes which are ingredients of all mind-states, such as sensory stimulation and attention, ones which intensify such states, such as energy, joy or desire-to-do, ones which are ethically 'skilful', such as mindfulness and a sense of moral integrity, and 'unskilful' ones, such as greed, hatred and delusion.

5. *Vinnana* (Skt *vijnana*), '(discriminative) consciousness'. This includes both the basic awareness of a sensory or mental object, and the discrimination of its aspects or parts, which are actually recognized by *sanna*. One might thus also see it as perceptual 'discernment'. It is of six types according to whether it is conditioned by eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or mind-organ. It is also known as *citta*, the central focus of personality, which can be seen as 'mind', 'heart' or 'thought'. This is essentially a 'mind-set' or 'mentality'; some aspects of which alter from moment to moment, but others recur and are equivalent to a person's character. Its form at any moment is set up by the other mental *khandhas*, but in turn it goes on to determine their pattern of arising, in a process of constant interaction.

Much Buddhist practice is concerned with the purification, development and harmonious integration of the five 'bundles' that make up personality, through the cultivation of virtue and meditation. In time, however, the fivefold analysis is used to enable a meditator to gradually transcend the naïve perception – with respect to 'himself' or 'another' – of a unitary 'person' or 'self'. In place of this, there is set up the contemplation of a person as a cluster of changing physical and mental processes, or *dhammas* (Skt *dharma*), thus undermining grasping and attachment, which are key causes of suffering.

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