

Origin of Suffering

The Second True Reality for the Spiritually Ennobled: The Origin of the Painful

In the first sermon, the Buddha talks of the second True Reality thus:

Now *this*, monks, for the spiritually ennobled, is the originating-of-the-painful (*dukkha-samudaya*) true reality. It is this craving (*tanha*), which leads to renewed being, accompanied by relishing and attachment, seeking enjoyment now here, now there; that is, craving for sense-pleasures, craving for being, craving for non-existence (*Samyutta Nikāya* v.420-4).

So the key origin or cause of *dukkha* is *tanha*. This literally means 'thirst', and clearly refers to demanding, clinging desires which are ever on the lookout for gratification, 'now here, now there'. It contains an element of psychological compulsion, a driven restlessness ever on the lookout for new objects to focus on: *I want, I want more, I want* different. This propels people into situation after situation which are open to pain, disquiet and upset.

So *tanha* is not just any 'desire' – for desire can be wholesome and for good things. *Chanda*, or desire-to-act, can be either unwholesome, like *tanha*, or wholesome, and it is a key ingredient of one of the four *iddhi-padas*, or 'bases of success', which aid spiritual development.

The more strongly a person *craves*, though, the greater the frustration when the demand for lasting and wholly satisfying fulfilment is perpetually disappointed by a changing and unsatisfactory world. Also, the *more things* a person craves for, the more opportunities for frustration, *dukkha*. Craving also brings pain as it leads to quarrels, strife and conflict between individuals and groups (*D.II.59–61*), and motivates people to perform various actions with karmic results shaping further rebirths, with their attendant *dukkha*.

The first sermon identifies three types of craving: craving for sensual pleasures (*kama-tanha*), craving for being (*bhava-tanha*) and craving for non-existence (*vibhava-tanha*). The second type refers to the drive for ego-enhancement based on a certain identity, and for some kind of eternal life after death as *me*. The third is the drive to get rid of unpleasant situations, things and people.

In a strong form, it may lead to the impulse for suicide, in the hope of annihilation. Such a craving, ironically, helps cause a further rebirth, whose problems will be as bad as, or worse than, the present ones.

In order to overcome *dukkha*, the Buddhist path aims not only to limit the expression of craving, but ultimately to use calm and wisdom to completely uproot it from the psyche.

Besides craving, another important cause of *dukkha* is 'views' (*ditthi*, Skt *drsti*): beliefs, theories, opinions or world-views, especially when they become fixed or dogmatic, so that one identifies fully with a way of looking at something, a way of explaining it. One's attachment is then such that one is wounded if that theory is criticized, and one is willing to be underhand or not fully honest in the theory's defence. One is also limited in one's vision by the theory or belief: it is like a pair of blinkers which only enable one to see certain things, narrowing one's whole outlook on life, like a blind man who mistakes the part of an elephant that he has felt for the whole of what an 'elephant' is (*Ud.67-9; BW.214-15*). It may contain some truth, but one always needs to be open to a deepening of that truth, or a balancing by a complementary one.

The Buddha was clearly very wary of mere theories or 'views', holding that they led to quarrels (*A.I.66*) and conceit (*Sn.842-3*). Such views are seen as hidden forms of self-assertion, which lead to conflict with those of other opinions, be this in the form of verbal wrangling or ideological wars and bloody revolutions. In this context, it is worth noting that the atrocities carried out by Hitler, Stalin, and the Khmer Rouge were initiated by people who were convinced of a theory which demanded and 'justified' their actions.

Indeed, Buddhism holds that wrong view feeds bad behaviour (*A.I.30-2; BW.213-14*) and that the worst way of doing a bad act is if accompanied by a view that perversely sees it as 'right'.

To be sure, there are what might be called 'Buddhist views', such as belief in the goodness of giving and in karma and rebirth. Such beliefs are termed 'ordinary' (*lokiya*) 'right view', and, though they lead in the right direction, they are still associated with clinging (*M.III.72*), as they can be clung to if not tested by wisdom (*M.I.133*). One should not even cling to the view that all views displease one, but get rid of whatever view one has, and not take up any other (*M.I.497-8*). Views, like all else in the conditioned world, are seen to arise according to conditions, to be impermanent, and to bring *dukkha* if clung to (*A.V.187-8*).

Wisdom (*panna*, Skt *prajna*), analytically directed intuitive insight, though, is said to be 'transcendent' (*lokuttara*) 'right view' (M.III.72), and is such that when it knows, for example, that 'all *dhammas* are non-Self', this is 'well seen, as it really is' (A.V.188), in a way that goes beyond all speculative reasoning or acceptance of ideas from others. The true aim, then, is not to have a view or belief, even if it happens to be true, but to have direct knowledge 'not dependent on another' (S.III.135). In other words, to replace a viewpoint with a direct seeing.

The Buddha focused much critical attention on views concerning 'Self', which he saw as leading to attachment and thus suffering. Such views can take many forms, but he felt that many of them locate a substantial Self somewhere in the five *khandhas*, regarding any one of them as being Self, owned by Self, within Self, or having Self within it, leading to twenty such views in all (S.III.1–5; SB.216–20). Each of these is known as a 'view on the existing group' (*sakkaya-ditthi*, Skt *satkaya-drsti*), sometimes also translated as 'personality view'. However, as the meaning is a view which sees a Self-essence as somehow related to the 'existing group' – the five *khandhas* (M.I.299) – perhaps the best gloss is 'Self-identity view'.

The non-acceptance of any of these views in the *Suttas* means, for example, that with regard to material form, the body, it is not truly appropriate to say that 'I am body', 'the body is mine', 'body is part of my Self', 'I am in the body'. Indeed, it is said that the body does not 'belong' to anyone: it simply arises due to past karma (S.II.64–5; BTTA.40). Its associated mental states do not 'own' it.

Even when specific views regarding 'Self' have been transcended, a subtle kind of 'conceit' (*mana*) still remains as a vague and non-specific feeling of I-ness with respect to the *khandhas* (S.III.127–32; BW.402–6).

'Conceit' is the basic attitude of 'I am': deep-rooted self-centredness, self-importance or egoism, which is concerned about how 'I' measure up to 'others' as 'superior', 'inferior' or 'equal': another key cause of *dukkha*.

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