



Dukkha: the nature of things is suffering

Although change is a fact of life, all too often we resist going with the flow; there are certain things we don't want to change. We cannot let go of our desire and craving for them. We fail to see the transitory nature of the things and people we are attached to most, and when they do change we experience pain and suffering. *Dukkha* (Sanskrit *duhkha*) is the first Noble Truth as well as one of the three Marks of Existence; it is usually translated as 'suffering' in English but this word does not fully convey the meaning of what Buddhists mean by *dukkha*. Walpola Rahula explains:

It is true that the Pali word dukkha (or Sanskrit duhkha) in ordinary usage means 'suffering', 'pain', 'sorrow' or 'misery', as opposed to the word sukha meaning 'happiness', 'comfort' or 'ease'. But the term dukkha as the first Noble Truth, which represents the Buddha's view of life and the world, has a deeper philosophical meaning and connotes enormously wider senses. It is admitted that the term dukkha in the first Noble Truth contains, quite obviously, the ordinary meaning of 'suffering', but in addition it also includes deeper ideas such as 'imperfection', 'impermanence', 'emptiness', 'insubstantiality'. It is difficult therefore to find one word to embrace the whole conception of the term.ⁱ

Buddhists distinguish three broad types of *dukkha*.

Ordinary suffering

The first type of suffering includes experiences that human beings universally identify as obvious forms of suffering, regardless of whether they follow a religion or not: experiences such as giving birth and being born, illness and disease, old age and dying. The quality these experiences have in common is that they are all painful. This type of suffering also includes the grief of being separated from those we love or from places where we feel at home; the distress of not getting what we want; and the pain of witnessing the suffering of people we love.

The suffering of change

The second type of suffering includes the many types of distress, anxiety and stress that result from changes in our life situation. Everything in the world is impermanent and because either we don't realise this fact or don't want to accept it, we suffer when things change beyond our control. Happy feelings or happy situations do not last for ever, even though we wish they would, so when they change they bring about suffering and disappointment. Examples of this are marriage break-ups and divorce; bereavement; losing one's job; having to move house or leave one's country.

Sometimes it is we who change rather than our circumstances: for instance, the music you love at one time you might later find rather boring, and then you look for something new to bring you pleasure in an endless cycle of frustration and lack of contentment. Consumerism and advertising are successful because of the



impermanence of our likes and dislikes, and indeed they feed the cycle. One reason why people who seem to have everything can still feel bored and unhappy is that their feelings about things fluctuate.

The suffering of conditioned existence

The suffering of conditioned existence, or conditioned states, refers to the background dissatisfaction we have with life, a latent anguish or *angst* which arises from a sense of insecurity. It is the frustration we feel at our own limitations and at our powerlessness to control our life and our world. We often find we don't fully understand why things are the way they are, we don't know where our actions will lead or what the future holds in store. And when we consider that whatever we achieve it all ends with our death anyway, life itself can feel pointless. This is not a dramatic form of suffering or one that is sparked by any event in particular, rather it is a more fundamental and more subtle background feeling of unease.

This third type of suffering may be more difficult to relate to than the first two because it is based on analysis. While the first two types are self-evident, the third type is unique to the Buddhist understanding of *dukkha*. According to Buddhism, everything and everyone in the world exists only in dependence on other things, which means that there is absolutely nothing that has independent and permanent existence. It is for this reason that we sometimes feel that things are insubstantial, that life is like a dream, and that even the things we value most – like love, for example – are not ultimately real. More to the point, perhaps, is the fact that we ourselves are constantly changing, and the identities we create for ourselves are not who we really are. This line of reflection and analysis leads to a big question: is there anything at all in the world that *is* real?

One Buddhist answer to this question is that none of the things or people of our everyday experience is ultimately real. To understand what is meant by this we need to look at the other two Marks of Existence, the other two factors that describe what our world is actually like.

In brief, *dukkha* covers pain, suffering, grief, frustration, dissatisfaction, unease and anguish. This characteristic of existence implies that everything can at some point become a cause of suffering. Even happiness is seen as a cause of suffering because when it comes to an end it will bring pain and misery. However, this does not mean that Buddhism is gloomy and pessimistic, or that the Buddha did not value life and the pleasures it can bring. Sometimes Buddhism is misunderstood as a religion that sees 'all life as suffering.' The Buddha acknowledged that there are both material and spiritual forms of happiness. For example, in one Theravada sutta he lists several types of happiness such as that of family life and that of monastic life; the happiness of sense pleasures and that of renouncing sense pleasures; the happiness of being attached to what you love and that of being detached; and physical happiness and mental happiness. It is important to note that all such states of happiness are included in *dukkha* from the Buddhist point of view. Even very high states of meditation are included in *dukkha*. This is simply because they are all subject to change and, as the Buddha said, 'whatever is impermanent is *dukkha*.'ⁱⁱ

This view is not pessimistic since the Buddha went on to tell us that there is an alternative to the life of suffering. He said that true happiness – the lasting happiness we are all looking for – is *nibbana* (*nirvana*) or enlightenment, a state free of suffering and the causes of suffering. It is a state that is not conditioned by anything else and that is therefore beyond change since it is beyond time. Until we reach this state, however, our experience will invariably be marked by suffering, change and the insubstantiality of things.

From Discovering Buddhism by Dominique Side



Questions and Discussion

1. What are the three types of suffering in Buddhist thought? Is this a comprehensive analysis in your view?
2. Do you accept the Buddha's classification of ordinary happiness as a form of suffering?
3. Do you agree that the human wish to be free of suffering is what leads people to religion and spirituality?



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ⁱ Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, p. 17.

ⁱⁱ Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, p.18.