

*Bodhi Leaf Publication No. 26*

# Our Reactions to Dukkha

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*Dr. Elizabeth Ashby*



**BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY**

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by

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**Buddhist Publication Society  
Kandy • Sri Lanka**

## **Bodhi Leaves No: 26**

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# Our Reactions to Dukkha

“Now this, monks, is the Noble Truth about Ill. Birth is Ill, Ageing is Ill, Sickness is Ill, Death is Ill, likewise Sorrow and Grief, Woe, Lamentation and Despair. To be conjoined with things we dislike, to be separated from things which we like — that also is Ill. Not to get what one wants, that also is Ill, In a word, this Body, this fivefold mass which is based on grasping, that is Ill.”

— SN 5



ere, bleak and uncompromising, is the First Noble Truth. To understand it “according to reality” is the hard-won privilege of the Stream Winner, the result of earnest contemplation. But it seems possible that we can condition our minds intellectually in such a way that, when the right time comes, the Truth will reveal itself. The more we know about Ill, the more clearly shall we see the unsatisfactory state of “being” in which we find ourselves, and the “dry method” of

approach will perhaps enable us to face up to Ill in all its myriad manifestations.

There is no English word that will render all the meanings of the Pali *dukkha*. “Ill” serves the purpose pretty well, so to a certain extent do the terms “suffering” and “anguish.” There remains a deeper, more general meaning, given by Evola, as “a state of agitation, of restlessness or commotion rather than suffering...it is the antithesis of unshakable calm.”

There are three different angles from which we can consider the way that impinges on the senses.

1. *Generalised dukkha*. The mass suffering due to war, famine, and pestilence that overwhelms large groups of humanity at the same time, and the less appreciated concealed *dukkha*, common to all, dependent on our underlying restlessness and discontent — the rubs and frustrations of everyday life, and the moods and emotions that interfere with the inner life, which, for want to a better word, we call “spiritual.” As St. Paul put it: “We know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth together in pain until now.”

2. *Adventitious dukkha*. By this is meant *dukkha* that comes under our immediate observation, but which does not primarily involve ourselves; street accidents, the sick neighbour, the live thrush caught in a strawberry net.

3. *Dukkha that is Private and Personal.* This is the Ill that affects each and all of us according to our kamma, and as such it is of the first importance to our own poor little egos. It will be dealt with more fully later on, but first let us consider some of the reactions that are evoked by dukkha in general.

## **Types of Reactions**

1. *“Blinkers.”* Many people find the thought of suffering very unpleasant, and they try to shut it out as far as possible. “I’m so sensitive I can’t *bear* to hear about it,” or, more callously, “It’s not my funeral.” Those who are “born lucky” or in fortunate circumstances are prone to wear blinkers. These, when they first contact Buddhism, are repelled by the idea that life is fundamentally unsatisfactory; they think of their pleasures past, present, and future, and ignore the minor frustrations of everyday life. An extension of the “blinkers” is that of the “rose-coloured spectacles,” the wearers of which think that “all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.” Voltaire’s *Candide* is a bitter satire founded on this theme.

2. *Blind Acceptance.* This is characteristic of animals and some primitive races which accept the miseries of an uncomfortable situation, or the hazards of existence, because such things are part and parcel of

their ordinary life.

3. *Prayer*. The reaction of the “faithful” is to look for supernatural aid. This, performed in a somewhat perfunctory fashion, may be a day set apart for nationwide prayer in the advent of some calamity, or the prayers of an individual in distress. From the Buddhist standpoint this reaction is useless if there be no God, and a gross impertinence if there is one. Psychologically the individual may feel comforted by the thought that he has shifted his responsibility on to a higher power.

4. *Lamentation*. This is very usual when a valued treasure has been lost, or in the case of bereavement (“Where are you, little only son? Where are you, little only son?” — MN 87). A frequent form of lamentation in the West is “Why should this happen to ME?” When shouldn’t it? Have we never heard of Kamma?

5. *Grumbling*. A useless proceeding; moreover it is likely to create fresh dukkha. The confirmed grumbler is disliked, and is consequently avoided by his acquaintances who leave him “to stew in his own juice.”

6. *Worry and Flurry (Agitation)*. This, one of the Five Hindrances, is destructive of Calm. Work is badly performed, and the unfortunate sufferer may in time wear himself to a shadow. “We worry because we

want to do so." This is a hard saying, but worth some wise reflection.

7. *Look for a Quick Remedy.* "I've got a headache. Where's the aspirin?"

8. *Drink and Drugs.* "He drowned his sorrows in drink, and got a helluva hangover!" "She's taken to chain-smoking, and it ain't 'alf done 'er cough good!" The Welfare State has had sad repercussions in the way of addiction to "Tranquillizers" and "Pep Pills," and the smuggling of cocaine and heroin. "Drugging" may take a mental or intellectual form, such as the incessant use of radio and television. The constant reading of sensational literature, space-fiction or who-dun-its is another example. This sort of thing, especially when read in the small hours, is likely to exacerbate rather than relieve nervous strain.

9. *Hate and Ill will.* Another Hindrance, and very liable to crop up when one has suffered a real, or supposed, injury by somebody else. A common example is the "slanging match" that ensues when two motor cars have been in collision. The injured party lets off at the other fool, who immediately retaliates, and so, probably because both are suffering from shock, they increase each other's dukkha. On a lesser scale is the ill will that is engendered when one encounters a rude shop-assistant, or is pushed about

in a queue. The tendency is to shove back, or be sarcastic, and these minor frets linger in the memory for a long time afterwards.

*Revenge* is a deadly extension of the Hate reaction. "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." The worst results are individual murders, and the age-old blood feud, or vendetta. For the Buddha's advice on this subject see "The Parable of the Saw" (MN 21).

10. *Envy*. "I've been ploughed in my finals," but that blighter X has pulled off an honours degree!" And so on, in every walk of life. There is one form of envy which we, as Dhamma farers, must be especially careful to avoid. This arises when our own practice is going badly, and we hear of someone else who has "made gains." If we are not careful we fret, and lose heart, with disastrous results. Does somebody whisper "*Mudita* — sympathetic joy?" That ought to be the reaction.

11. *Hysterical Outbursts*. This type of reaction is very interesting. Floods of tears, outbursts of profanity, and the smashing of crockery are frowned upon by society, but in actual fact they have a cathartic effect; a vast accumulation of emotion is worked off in a very short time, and when the sufferers come to their senses they feel much better for having given way.

12. *Enjoyment of Suffering*. The worst manifestation is

sadism, which is fortunately rare. There is, however, a delight in spectacles that involve suffering to others, such as the gladiatorial combats in ancient Rome, the Spanish bullfights, and sports that frequently involve serious accidents. These things provide thrills for the spectators who thereby satisfy their craving for sensation.

The Tragic Drama of ancient Greece was designed for a different purpose, that of arousing Pity and Terror in the audience. The effect was intended to be cathartic: by witnessing dukkha on an Olympian scale the spectators gained a sense of proportion, and were purged of their own emotions. The effect can be quite terrifying; on one occasion a translation of "The Trojan Women" of Euripides, acted on an English stage, reduced the whole audience to tears. The reaction was a strange mixture of pain and exaltation.

In a more subtle form there is enjoyment of one's personal dukkha — the sensation of being a martyr. And it is possible to feel that, because one is capable of great suffering, this faculty raises one above the insensitive herd. This appears to be a superiority conceit.

13. *Capitalization of misfortune*, as in the case of midgets, "armless wonders," and Siamese twins who earn their living by exposing their deformities to the

public gaze. A degrading example of gain from another's misfortune is the case of the Spanish beggar who displays the distorted legs of his own little boy. A minor example of this is the desire to make the most of one's own affliction as when a blind man or a cripple hurls himself into a stream of traffic because he knows that everything will give way to him. And have not many of us been tempted to prolong a period of convalescence?

14. *Relapse into Dullness (Moha)*. Sometimes it seems that the ego can no longer contend with life; it throws in the sponge, so to speak, and the sufferer becomes mentally deranged. Any form of mental disorder may occur; and the patient has the doubtful blessing of being freed from his responsibilities. Another type of this reaction occurs in people who, tired out with the hardships and monotony of life, refuse to get out of bed after an illness. There they will lie, year after year, content to spend the rest of their lives as social parasites.

15. *Physical*. Dukkha, which is always associated with some kind of emotion, shows out physically in a number of ways. Sudden bad news has the effect of a blow in the stomach, and in times of stress there is a general feeling of weight in the abdomen; continued worry frequently produces gastric troubles of an organic nature. Shock can turn the hair white in the

course of a few hours, and fear, now, as in the Buddha's time, can make the hair stand on end (Dig. Nik. I.2.). Sweating is another phenomenon associated with fear and nervousness, so is palpitation. "My heart went into my boots!" is a common expression signifying a state of alarm. When anger arises as a result of some unpleasant happening circulatory changes are very common: the red, or even purple, face; and there is a "white anger" that is still more devastating.

16. *Suicide*: the last resort of the anguished. In the eyes of the Western Church it is a "mortal sin"; the law regards it as a crime, and the public believes that it is due to either cowardice or lunacy. The Stoics thought otherwise: "Remember that the door stands open. Be not more fearful than children; but as they, when weary of the game, cry 'I will play no more.' Even so, when thou art in like case, cry 'I will play no more' and depart. But if thou stayest, make no lamentation" (Epictetus). For the Buddhist, suicide is a grievous mistake because it is a kamma-producing act, and on account of its violence will produce some violent form of kamma in a future life. The only exception is the Arahant, a perfected one whose kamma is no longer operative; he may end his life how and when he will.

This is a formidable list, though incomplete; the

most obvious reaction has been left out. Can readers supply it for themselves? On looking through this unedifying catalogue the writer was horrified to find how many of our reactions to dukkha stem from the Three Roots of Evil: Greed, Hate, and Delusion. There remain, however, several reactions that are, in the main, healthy.

## Positive Reactions

1. *Endurance*. “The Lord gave and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the Lord.” That is the endurance of the “faithful,” and it is dangerously near blind acceptance. In Buddhism endurance is a positive virtue which eliminates some of the cankers (*asavas*). Uncomfortable physical conditions, minor pains and injuries, “irritating talk” are things to be taken in one’s stride, without complaint and without ill will, and without even the wish for a more comfortable situation (MN 2).

2. *The Heroic*. “Curse God and Die!” That is defiance of Fate in the person of Omnipotence,

“Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.”

Pride, “stinking pride,” but there is nothing craven in it. A very different heroism is that with which the

blind and the disabled fight their way back again into a useful existence and the unrecognised courage of the women who cope with the *res angusta domi* — the littleness and bitterness that domestic life so often involves. It can be said that the heroic reaction is needful to all of us; only those disciples who possess the Ariyan, or heroic spirit will be able to remain steadfast.

3. *The Philosophic.* “There are worse things happen at sea!” “It’ll be all the same in a hundred years.” On a somewhat higher level, Lady Mary Wortley Montague wrote to Pope: “Let us then, which is the only true philosophy, be contented with our chance of being born in this vile planet, where we shall find however, God be thanked, much to laugh at, though little to approve.” For “chance” read kamma, but let us keep the laughter (it is one of the “selling points” of Zen). Humour, because it is aware of the incongruities of existence, is in reality a sense of proportion. It ought to be possible to see oneself as of less importance in the general scheme of things than is a solitary louse, crawling down Piccadilly, compared with the rest of London.

4. *The Creative.* Poets, in company with artists and musicians, often find that their best work is done when they are suffering from some stress. Dukkha is then kept under control, and actually serves a useful

purpose. This reaction occurs in less exalted people who, instead of moping, have the will to get up and do something. This is the beginning, in a very modest form, of the virtue of Energy.

5. *Compassion*. This age is usually referred to as money-grubbing and self-centred. But when obvious dukkha, of the adventitious order, arises there is a quick response. A bad railway accident or a motor smash brings out the fundamental decency of humanity; help is proffered quite regardless of reward, or even of thanks. The infirm and the blind are surprised by the number of helping hands held out to them. On the contrary, the less obvious signs of ill are overlooked. Who has compassion on the grumblers, the bores, and the poor fools whom we imagine to be inferior to ourselves. These people, for whom we have an aversion, are equally in need of compassion. We are under no obligation to seek them out for the purpose of doing them good, but, when they cross our path, we can at least deal gently with them. Lastly, there are occasions when we should have compassion on ourselves, particularly our body, *rupa-kkhandha*, “Brother Ass,” who has to carry the weight of all the other *khandhas*.

## **Personal Dukkha**

*Personal dukkha*, “wherein the heart knoweth his own bitterness,” is our inescapable heritage. From earliest childhood we have been occupied with “I-making and minemaking” until we have persuaded ourselves that “I” am the pivot around which the whole universe, that is to say the *samsara*, revolves; our sense of proportion is completely lost. Does it matter to the beings on Mars, if any, that Miss A. has been jilted? “But it matters to ME!” is the instant reply of poor Miss A. And for practical purpose it does matter to Miss A.’s immediate associates how the unfortunate girl will react. She might, for instance, (a) drown herself, (b) go into a convent, (c) get on with her job and stop lamenting, or (d) take to writing poetry.

There are several aspects of personal “ill” that hit us all sooner or later. The most conspicuous of these are:

1. *Pain and Illness*. “Not death or pain is to be feared, but the *fear* of death and pain” (Epictetus). Pain itself is an extraordinary problem. We know that in many cases it is a danger signal indicating that some part of the body is out of order, and we think that pain is felt at the site of the injury or disease. This is not the case, for pain is an affair of consciousness, and is felt in the *mind* where it produces an emotional reaction. This is so deep-seated that we do not recognise its emotional nature, and consequently do not label it. Personally I think it is a mixture of self-pity, resentment and fear,

all of which arise from *dosa*, the Evil Root of Hate. Certainly we know from experience than an agonising pain produces a mental state of sheer, blind misery.

A strong argument that pain is emotional is to be found by watching the results of an injection of morphia. The patient who has had a “shot” frequently notices a queer phenomenon: the pain is *still there*, but he doesn’t care a tinker’s curse about it! The morphia has acted on the emotional centre in the brain, and damped it down to such an extent that the self-pity, resentment and fear have vanished.

This emotional element explains the very different way in which people react to pain. An apparently trivial injury can lay out someone of the emotional type, while those whose temperaments are phlegmatic or philosophic merely yelp or swear. The intensity of the pain experienced clearly depends upon the consciousness of each individual. The perfected consciousness of the Arahant is above both pain and pleasure; the emotional life is so controlled that he is aware of both feelings, but does not “mind” either of them. This suggests that an objective approach to our own pains will diminish our suffering. The analysis of the whole thing from start to finish helps to draw off the mind from the actual feeling, and thereby lessens the emotional reactions. The odd idea of the soldier “biting on the bullet” is no idle fancy, for if he

concentrates on the bullet he cannot at the same time concentrate on the pain. What probably happens is that his mind flickers with incredible rapidity between the two ideas; the pain is still there but may be reduced to bearable dimensions.

The same objective attitude applies to illness. As is also the case with pain, illness impairs the mental functions. The practice of Dhamma is hindered, and the sick man becomes dejected and ashamed. “Wherefore, house-father, thus should you train yourself; ‘Though my body is sick, my mind shall not be sick.’ Thus, house-father, must you train yourself”). The right reactions, therefore, to both pain and illness are Endurance and Courage — heroism.

2. *Attachments.* Though attachments to things can constitute a menace, attachment to persons produces greater woe than all the rest of our misfortunes put together. There is a very important sutta “Born of the Affections” (MN 87) that emphasises the dukkha due to personal relationships. We grow up believing that in human love lies our greatest happiness. And for ordinary people it is so. Then, why all this fuss about grief, sorrow, suffering, lamentation, and despair? The answer brings us up against one of the basic facts of existence: *anicca*, impermanence. Love is a conditioned thing — because it arises it must also cease. It is hard to realise that love, even in its most idealistic form, is

in reality a manifestation of *tanha*, craving. We grasp at it hoping for security, for understanding, for fulfilment — for the assuaging of our “primordial anguish.” And for a fraction of time we may experience all these, and deludedly believe that the riddle of the Sphinx has been answered. This is not so.

Two things are to be apprehended in respect of all attachments, the first of which is Death. The sword of Yama sweeps away pets, children, friends, and lovers, and we are left — left to grow old. That, in human terms, is a tragedy, but it is a *clean* ending. Secondly, Disillusion sets in when the glamour of the contact has worn off. We notice “alteration and otherness” in the beloved object, and a blight comes over the relationship. This may be so serious that the attachment may be broken off, leaving in many instances heartache and bitterness, frequently accompanied by a sense of shame. In extreme cases love turns to hate. This arises when the hater thinks he has been cheated or deceived; he hates himself for being a fool, and it is this self-hatred which is projected on to the erstwhile loved one.

Some form of “alteration and otherness” *must* occur in every case because we ourselves are altering all the time. Enduring friendships and life-long loves do occur because the partners consciously or unconsciously adapt their behaviour to the altering

circumstances, and by so doing alter themselves in the right direction.

The cynic will ask: Why love at all if the end-result is always dukkha? Because, while we are unenlightened, we are impelled into it by the driving force of our own kamma; it is a necessary experience. We shall never understand what *metta* really is unless, in this or former lives, we have lived through heights and depths of human love. Metta, which is love on a self-transcending plane, irradiates the whole world, whereas human love can only glorify two bundles of khandhas for a limited period. “Whenever, wherever, whatever happiness is found it belongs to happiness” (MN 59). The Buddha, though he emphasised dukkha, never forbade nor denied happiness. His teaching noted the happiness of the sensory world, and led on to the happiness to be derived from the practice of Dhamma. Beyond this is a happiness “that is more excellent and exquisite,” known only in the transcendental states.

3. *Ageing*. Strictly speaking ageing begins at the very moment of conception. A baby in the throes of teething experiences suffering due to ageing, and so too do teenagers at the time of puberty. But the ills of old age are the most obvious. The bodily changes bear hardest on those who were once good-looking, less hardly on the “homely” or the ugly. There is an

irksome slowing down of one's physical activities; one can only move in second gear. There is the boredom of too much leisure occupied by too few interests. These things arouse in many people a wild rebellion — "I hate old age!" This is a useless reaction; it only intensifies the suffering.

Old age is a time of limitation, but it could be, indeed ought to be, a time of opportunity. Late nights, motoring, continental journeys, and even gardening are gone forever. These, and similar pleasures, are material things; they belong to *samsaric* existence. They must go, but now we have the chance to let them go willingly, with knowledge, but without repining. This is the time to break old habits, to realise that living is just another habit and prepare ourselves to break with that too. Furthermore, it is an opportunity to notice, and to break up clinging, a time to stop accumulating, and to begin disposing of superfluous possessions.

4. *Death*. It is impossible while we are still alive to react to death itself; we can only react to the thought of it. At the moment of writing it is still a future event that may happen twenty years hence, or it might occur within the next twenty minutes. One's thought leaps to the other side of death: What happens afterwards? Here we encounter ideas that vary according to our upbringing and our later studies.

Rest after toil,  
Port after stormy seas,  
Death after life  
Do greatly please.

Very pretty; very pretty indeed, but probably wrong. As long as “I” want to be *I* (and a long time after), “I” shall plunge back into the samsara, the essentially restless state in which “I” am now living. An animal birth? A birth in one of the purgatories, or in a deva world? We do not know. Nor do we know how long it will be, according to time-as-we-know it, before that rebirth takes place. Can consciousness, having provided itself with a mental body, or “body of craving,” still function in the interval between death and rebirth? The Tibetan Book of the Dead has much to say about the Bardo, the Intermediate State, but the Pali canon gives no hint of it; such speculations were put aside as “wriggling, scuffling and speculative views, the wilds of speculative views.” The Buddha would have nothing to do with views.

“Let be the future.” Our concern is with the Here-Now. Death is ill because it puts an end to the opportunities we now have, as human beings, for the study and practice of Dhamma. It behoves us, therefore, to cultivate a sense of urgency with regard to death. Paradoxically, at

the age of seventy, death seems as far away or even further than it did at seventeen. The old have the habit of living so strongly developed that they cannot conceive the idea of doing anything else. They dislike being disturbed; death will not only disturb them, it will tear them away from their rightful background. They resent this: the "I" without its conventional attire will feel so naked. The Christian heaven has scant attraction for the average Christian because it equates with the Unknown.

Many young people respond to the thought of death in an entirely different fashion: "To die will be a great adventure." That is the Heroic Reaction of the young — and the young in heart.

Erasmus, the greatest scholar that the Reformation produced, wrote a treatise on *The Art of Good Dying, or How to Achieve a Good Death*. He held that a deathbed repentance and the Rite of Holy Church availed nothing. In order to die well a man must live well in the highest sense of the word. That is sound doctrine. For us it means Morality, Concentration, and Intuitive Wisdom coupled with the sense of urgency.

"Now this, monks, is the Noble Truth about the ceasing of Ill. Verily it is this Noble Eightfold

Path, that is: Right View... *Right Mindfulness*,  
Right Contemplation.”

Students who are well-trained in Mindfulness cope with dukkha in a very different fashion from the rest of us whose minds are still at the “drunken monkey” stage. Our personal “Ills” sizzle around us like virulent mosquitoes. If the suffering is severe, our own Mindfulness is completely overwhelmed by *self-pity*, which is both a “muddy” and a muddling reaction. Our sense of proportion is lost, and we make matters worse for ourselves by imagining a host of unpleasant developments that might arise in the future. If, when we are in this state of woe, we pause and sort out our reactions — they are usually mixed — to the situation, naming each in turn, whether they are healthy or otherwise, we shall be practising Mindfulness with regard to Mental States, a very important branch of Right Mindfulness. This is a very helpful practice because the mind is drawn away from the dukkha itself, and is switched on to something that is really worthwhile.

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