

The Three Basic Facts of Existence II: Suffering (*Dukkha*)

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I. Dukkha

No creature so miserable as man, so generally molested, in miseries of body, in miseries of mind, miseries of heart, in miseries asleep, in miseries awake, in miseries wheresoever he turns, as Bernard found. A mere temptation is our life, on this earth, ever fettered of sorrow. Who can endure the miseries of it? In prosperity we are insolent and intolerable, dejected in adversity, in all fortunes foolish and miserable. In adversity I wish for prosperity, and in prosperity I am afraid of adversity. What mediocrity may be found? Where is no temptation? What condition of life is free? Wisdom has labour annexed to it. Glory & envy, riches & cares, children & encumbrances, pleasure & diseases, rest & beggary go together; as if a man were therefore born (as the Platonists hold), to be punished in this life for some precedent sins; or that, as Pliny complains, nature may be rather accounted a stepmother than a mother unto us, all things considered. No creature's life so brittle, so full of fear, so mad, so furious; only man is plagued with envy, discontent, grief, covetousness, ambition, superstition. Our whole life is an Irish Sea, wherein there is naught to be expected but tempestuous storms and troublesome waves, and those infinite:

So great a sea of troubles do I see,
that to swim out from it does seem impossible.¹

... no Halcyonian times, wherein a man can hold himself secure, or agree with his present estate: but, as Boethius infers, there is something in every one of us, which before trial we seek, and having tried abhor: we earnestly wish, and eagerly covet, and are oft soon weary of it. Thus betwixt hope and fear, suspicions, angers, betwixt falling in, falling out, etc., we bangle away our beat days, befool out our times, we lead a contentious, discontent, tumultuous, melancholic, miserable life; insomuch, that if we could foretell what was to come, and it put to our choice, we should rather refuse than accept of this painful life. In a word, the world itself is a maze, a labyrinth of errors, a desert, a wilderness, a den of thieves, cheaters etc., full of filthy puddles, horrid rocks, precipices, an ocean of adversity, a heavy yoke, wherein infirmities and calamities overtake and follow one another, as the sea waves; and if we escape Scylla, we fall foul on Charybdis, and so, in perpetual fear, labour, anguish, we run from one plague, one mischief, one burden, to another. Serving a hard servitude, and you may as well separate weight from lead, heat from fire, moistness from water, brightness from the sun, as misery, discontent, care, calamity, danger, from a man."

—Robert Burton,
The Anatomy of Melancholy, 1621.

¹ Euripides.

II. Dukkha

Dukkha is:

Disturbance, irritation, dejection, worry, despair; fear, dread, anguish, anxiety; vulnerability, injury, inability, inferiority; sickness, ageing, decay of body and faculties, senility; Pain/pleasure; excitement/boredom; deprivation/excess; desire/frustration, suppression; longing/aimlessness; hope/hopelessness; effort, activity, striving/repression; loss, want, insufficiency/satiety; love/lovelessness, friendlessness; dislike, aversion/attraction; parenthood/childlessness; submission/rebellion; decision/indecisiveness, vacillation, uncertainty.

—Francis Story

III. A Description of Dukkha

All living beings have at all times sought for what may be called “happiness.” In the past their search was for the same goal—happiness, while in the present we can observe ourselves and other beings and see that it is happiness—the satisfaction of desires and pleasant feelings, that we seek. In the future who can doubt that we shall go on searching for that most elusive possession—happiness.

This continual seeking is the most fundamental search of all. Living beings, not men alone, hope to experience only what is pleasing, while at the same time wishing to avoid the unpleasant and disagreeable. What they and we hope to experience for as long as possible is called *sukha*, here translated “happiness,” which is basically pleasant feelings of mind and body. And what all beings try to avoid are all sorts of painful, undesired experiences which may be either mental or physical, called dukkha. As this word covers such a wide range of our experience in life, all of it unsatisfactory in some way or other, it will be left in Pali so that its meaning may emerge from the description below of dukkha’s many aspects. Dukkha is a word that all Buddhists should know and understand.

When one wishes to avoid or overcome an enemy, it is needful to know what he is like, what his characteristics are. Similarly with dukkha, the enemy, it seems, of our happiness, which we may either try to avoid as much as we can, or strive to overcome, according to our aspiration and the amount of hard work that we are prepared to do on ourselves. So we should take a good look at this dukkha to find out what it means and then to see its force in our own lives. It is no use pretending to ourselves or to others that dukkha does not exist, or that it never troubles us. That is the ostrich way of avoiding enemies, and very ineffective it is. We have to open our own eyes and understand why we suffer in various ways. When we have admitted to ourselves the weariness of carrying this great burden of pain and sorrow, then we shall be prepared to try to put it down, to go on our way burdenless and happy.

First, let us consider whether the way of the world is likely to lead us away from our burden and towards the happiness we seek. In the ordinary way of things people assume, led on by economic pressure, through advertising, etc., that by the complete satisfaction of their desires, through the possession of this or that object or experience, they will reach that peaceful and blissful state, continuous happiness. Of course, this is just a carrot in front of the donkey. So they are always struggling after this or that but even if attained it provides only transient pleasure. If not attained—dukkha! The way of materialism then does not promise an end of dukkha, only an increase of it. The formula is “increase sensual desire, increase dukkha.”

But one would have thought that men, generally being regarded as intelligent, would have greater abilities to realise their own happiness than do the less fortunate beings, that is, if one did not know human history. In it are found all the terrible sufferings brought on by upset of the elements such as earthquakes, floods, fires, typhoons and disease, augmented a thousand times by the rapacity, cruelty, callousness and stupidity of men, human beings like ourselves. One might argue the other side, that there have been many good and noble men, even great teachers, who would all show to men ways out of their dukkha. But what has happened to them? They have had to contend all the time with the evil-minded, to suffer persecution by them, forced into flight and hiding, and even been killed. Then men have been responsible for making innumerable wars—the world has never been without a few in progress, as we see from the present. Besides this, there is torture and all the other hatred-rooted actions, down to the slighting word and look of contempt. Yet people still look for happiness! Too many here are intent still not only upon making others suffer, but in creating suffering for themselves. We find

that there are people who kill for “sport” and excitement, steal in order that they may enjoy themselves, in the name of pleasure indulge themselves sexually in unwholesome ways, lie and slander to gain happiness, and to achieve the highest bliss get drunk or take drugs to attain altered feelings and perceptions. But surely these ways of action, opposed to the five precepts, make up the path to unhappiness!

Now let us take a close look at dukkha and the various ways in which we come up against it. In the texts which record the words of the Buddha, we find one passage many times repeated which describes the range of dukkha. Here it is, first in Pali then in an English translation:

“jātipi dukkhā, jarāpi dukkhā, byādhi pi dukkhā, maraṇaṃ pi dukkhaṃ; soka-parideva—dukkha-domanass-upāyāsā pi dukkhā, appiyehi sampayogo dukkho, piyehi vippayogo dukkho, yam-p’icchaṃ na labbhati tampi dukkhaṃ; saṅkhittena pañcupadānakkhandhā dukkhā,

Birth is dukkhā, decay is dukkha, disease is dukkha,² death is dukkha; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are dukkha, association with the disliked is dukkha, separation from the liked is dukkhā, not getting what one wants is dukkhā, in brief, the five grasped-at-groups are dukkhā.”

Here, we are not concerned at all with theory, but with the basic experience of our lives. One might think that such well-known facts need no stressing, were it not for the mind’s tendency to avoid considering them if possible. As this is so, each of these phrases will be described below so as to bring them into sharp focus. There is an advantage in this, for a certain amount of happiness arises from knowledge about life as it really is. Rather than deceiving oneself about life, which is indeed the way to more misery, one should be fearless and face up to dukkha. Though it may seem strange to some people, this is the path to happiness. How many times have we seen the Buddhasāna called “gloomy and pessimistic” because it emphasises that one should look straight at the dukkhā, in oneself? But how this contradicts reports about Buddhist people—their happiness and imperturbability which is remarked upon by to many visitors to Buddhist lands!

Some time in the past we were born. Now, birth (*jāti*), has special meanings from a Buddhist point of view. Generally it refers to parturition but when the Buddha says that “birth is dukkha,” He refers to the whole period from conception to extrusion from the womb. The whole process of nine months or so is continuous experience of dukkha.

Some people are under the impression that the womb is a cosy little home where a being is well sheltered and comfortable; even that it is a place to which we desire in life to return as a retreat from problems and difficulties. But Buddhist texts give a very different picture. The classic description is in “The Path of Purification,” Ch. XVI paras. 37–40, where the womb is pictured as anything but pleasant. As Venerable Buddhaghosa Thera says: “ ... when this being is born in the mother’s womb, he is not born inside a blue, red or white lotus, etc. ... ” but surrounded by all the unattractive collection of tubes and lumpish organs with which the skin is stuffed. Even then there are more attractive parts of the body than the belly where digestion and excretion are also taking place.

The womb might be considered a pleasant place if the being to be born had never lived before. If, as western religion theorises, a man begins life in the womb with the soul implanted there by God and the material inheritance from parents as the only causes, or as western psychology assumes that the material inheritance alone is sufficient cause, then the womb might seem bearable. But none of such views will suit a Buddhist. We understand that beings are reborn in accordance with their past kamma. Now, take the case of a man, intelligent and

² Not all lists include this phrase “disease is dukkha,” since there are some people, like the Venerable Bakkula, in whom bodily disease does not occur.

cultured, who suddenly dies and whose mental continuum guided by past kamma takes “birth,” is conceived in a womb. If memories of the past life persist, as seems to be the case at least sometimes, how cramped will seem the tiny prison into which he has put himself! How helpless he will feel! If we consider the case of a being born from one of the realms of existence purer than the human world then how much worse will seem his predicament. Accustomed for ages to a subtle body, radiance, the convenience of immediate travel upon thought, purity and pleasant sense-experience, how will a former deva feel upon being confined to gross flesh, darkness, inability to move, impurity and painful sensations?

After nine months (Buddhist works usually speak of ten) imprisonment during which “he undergoes excessive suffering being cooked like a pudding in a bag by the heat produced in the mother’s womb,” escape comes and the baby is ejected into the world. Never comfortable for the mother, the time of parturition is agonising for the child, as Ācariya Buddhaghosa again says, “that most fearful passage from the womb, like an infernal chasm, and lugged out through the extremely narrow mouth of the womb, like an elephant through a keyhole ...”

When newly born it is not surprising that the first sounds made by the baby are cries of pain. Newborn children are not seen to laugh or even smile, something which they learn to do much more slowly but they are very ready to wail—and with good reason too. “The Path of Purification” notes that “The pain that arises in him after he is born, and his body which is as delicate as a tender wound, is taken into the hands, bathed, washed, rubbed with cloths, etc., and which pain is like being pricked with needle points and gashed with razor blades—this is the suffering rooted in venturing outside the mother’s womb.” To this must be added these days the doctor’s or midwife’s slap (to ensure inspiration) as further introduction to this painful world. So it is not surprising that babies cry, especially if we think about it in the clear light of dhamma, for in being born inevitably they must suffer all the rest of the formula which just begins with “Birth is dukkha.” Of course, not all suffer in the same ways or in the same proportions. But it is certain that wherever one gets birth, some kinds of suffering are sure to follow. As men, we must count ourselves fortunate (by having made good kamma) to have been born in a sphere which is called a “good born” (*sugati*) where there is, or can be, a fair amount of happiness.

Everyone forgets being born—the memory of course is quickly overlaid—but then no one wishes to remember it. It is an event too painful physically and too distressing mentally, altogether too much fraught with dukkha.

Having been born, one must decay. What a platitude this sounds! Yet those who are still young try not to think of the various aspects of old age which would be disturbing to the search for pleasure, while those who are already in the clutches of old age usually find its embrace unwelcome in some ways.

The word “*jarā*” does not only mean old age but has the wider meaning of ageing or decaying. It has been said that decay begins at birth and this is true though the process of growth and renewal at that time disguises the process of decay. The latter is readily seen only when it becomes the dominant process, usually when growing old but decay may also set in (due to disease or other factors) before a person is old in years, so we speak of premature ageing.

But whenever or however it comes: “decay is dukkha.” Decay is that unwelcome change also called deterioration, and deterioration is the running down and falling apart which must take place in everything which is put together. All the compounded things of this world must decay and come eventually to destruction. Particularly, this body made up of various bits and pieces is sure to deteriorate: this is dukkha for one who grasps at the body as “me” and “mine.” This

dukkha can be looked at in three ways. First, one's body does not work as well as one would like. The limbs no longer function strongly, or one's internal organs break down so that food cannot be digested, or urine excreted ... or a hundred and one other symptoms of decay. The second aspect of decay is the failing of the five senses, especially of sight and hearing. Third is the decline of the mind, memory falters, thoughts wander, or the mind no longer understands things clearly. In the first case with the decay of limbs and organs, and even with the failure of the senses, though there may be physical pain it does not follow that the person affected becomes miserable. But with the decay of the mental functions ability to choose the ways of Dhamma which lead away from dukkha are limited and with a lack of understanding, dukkha cannot be avoided. So no proof is necessary that "decay is dukkha" since this is common knowledge and readily seen all around ourselves, if not in ourselves.

So why has this aspect of dukkha to be mentioned? The answer is that although it lies in wait for most of us (unless we die before ageing is manifest), we do not consider it enough. We may even try to forget it and while young one's pride in youth can manage to do this. So "decay is dukkha" is listed here by the Buddha just to remind all of us, since our ordinary, deluded minds tend to overlook it. We wish to gloss over the time to which it is the prelude, for how many of us contemplate our deaths with equanimity?

Born already, and now, whether young or old or somewhere between, we should be ready to meet with disease. Any form of disease must be dukkha whether it afflicts the body or the mind.³ The Buddha says that we may pass a whole lifetime even to the age of one hundred years without bodily disease but that it is rare indeed to find a person who is free from mental disease even for an instant. So although the innumerable diseases of the body are common enough, the diseases of the mind—springing from the evil roots of greed, aversion and delusion, are common to everyone all the time, unless we have seen completely the Dhamma in ourselves. Our Teacher has praised health, saying, "health is the highest gain,"⁴ and if one takes this also to refer to freedom from all tendencies to mental disease, how true is this praise! Even if it refers only to bodily disease, still good health is an excellent "gain," one that will be enjoyed if one has made much good kamma by not harming beings and other compassionate actions. But so common are diseases, and the Pāli word "*byādhi*" includes slight ailments as well, that in a lifetime it will be very unusual to escape without some experience of this dukkha.

Here again, the emphasis given to "disease is dukkha" is for the same purpose that we have noted above—our minds tend to shy away from considering disease. Our good health (and sometimes our minor ailments!) are the subject for amiable conversation but we find many people who loathe to talk about disease when personally they may be subject to it. This is a part of rejection of the unliked, the opposite of happily grasping at what is liked. Other examples can be seen in the favour bestowed on birth (babies are kissed and admired) and youth, with opposite reactions to death (who is keen on corpses?) and decay. Drifting on in this way we can only make more dukkha for ourselves. Disease is not an aspect of dukkha to hide from: it is something to consider. "Now I am healthy in body and able to practise Dhamma in many ways. When disease comes I may not be able to do so, therefore Dhamma must be practised by me now and to the best of my ability."

The course of dukkha running throughout life—birth, decay and disease, made bearable by the pleasure of the senses and of the mind, runs on to death. To many people this threatens to be the greatest dukkha though this is because we think of it in the wrong way. Really, instead of an ogre who lies in wait for all who have set their feet on the trail of life, death is just a rather

³ It seems that the Commentaries understand only bodily disease here but our description should be comprehensive since mental ills have been called a disease by the Buddha.

⁴ Dhp 204.

greater manifestation of impermanence than we experience normally within the stream of mind and body. While we persist in believing that mind and body *belong* to someone, my self or my soul, who sits inside them like an owner who sits in a shop, we are bound to experience much dukkha. But if there could be a relaxation of the craving for mind and body, a realisation that they are a stream of inter-related processes, why then the fear (mental *dukkha*) of death is conquered even though physical pains may still have to be experienced.

We have the idea that birth is at the beginning of life, death at the end of it. Usually we do not see that birth and death go on all the time in both mind and body. The mind is a succession of momentary experiences arising and passing away, with later moments dependent on and conditioned in various ways by former moments. Those who have very keen mindfulness are recommended to use this for the observation of death (and birth) in the mind. Birth and death are also never absent from the body, and when the former is stronger then the body grows and renews worn-out parts but when the latter is stronger then decay shows itself. It is important to learn to see the process of decay in the body for in this way the attitude of non-attachment is cultivated. And non-attachment, even if not perfected, will be very helpful at the time of death.

But as used in the ordinary way the word “death” refers to the cessation of the life-processes in the body. From one point of view we are two interdependent streams (or continua, *santāna*), the mental stream (*citta-santāna*) and the bodily stream (*kāya-santāna*). It is the latter which ceases to flow along with the mental stream at the time of death, it goes its own way, the way of the four elements. The mental stream flows on in accordance with the Kamma made already. So what do we fear? That which is certainly not one-self, the body, ceases to function. That by which one may discover enlightenment, the mind, goes on. It is rather the pain of dying that we fear, not death itself.

Still, the Buddha has to say “death is dukkha” just because, obsessed by the desire to live, obsessed with greed, with craving for sensual pleasures, people have always been unwilling to admit that death must follow birth. Death is to be disguised if possible and made to look pleasant, at any rate, after the event. Corpses should be put in decorated and expensive containers where either they are artificially preserved (shades of “the loved one!”), or one cannot see them. Then lots of sweet-smelling flowers should lie placed on top and round about (perhaps subconsciously with the idea that these will disguise the stench of decay beneath) and then, after suitably expensive ceremonies, it should be disposed of in some dignified fashion. This is the way that the richer city-dwellers in the present time tend to do things. The common method of disposal in the Buddha-time—leaving corpses to decay in some special piece of forest and the simple peasant’s methods up to the present day, do not obscure the unpleasant truth. Though in some cases the reason for display and grandeur is respect and love for the dead person, in the background there is usually the fear of seeing death with its unlovely details. But we should in life be willing to see the whole picture, not only the part of it which we find pleasing.

Therefore the Buddha has encouraged “woman and man, householder and one gone forth (to homelessness)” to contemplate often five subjects, the first three of which correspond to these three aspects of dukkha: decay, disease and death. They are to be contemplated as inevitable so as to make them easier to accept. Here is the text and translation of the first three items in this contemplation:

“Jarādhamm’omhi: I am of the nature to decay; Jaraṃ anatīto: I have not gone beyond decay. Byādhidhamm’omhi: I am of the nature to be diseased; byāधिṃ anatīto: I have not gone beyond disease. Maraṇa-dhamm’omhi: I am of the nature to die; maraṇaṃ anatīto: I have not gone beyond death.”

The five subjects for frequent recollection continue in a different way,⁵ but their daily recital will certainly help to lessen the force of these sorts of dukkha.

The aspects of dukkha dealt with above, birth, decay, disease and death, are what one might call “occasional dukkha,” for we experience them only once, or at specific times during life. It is true of course, that some people from kamma or other causes, have to experience incurable diseases, sometimes throughout their lives but for most people disease is “occasional.” These four major causes of dukkha are followed by five other expressions of it, also occasional.

“Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are dukkha” and all are common enough in the world.

“*Sorrow* is burning in the mind ... its function is completely to consume the mind.” This is the silent sorrow of those who have lost parents, relatives, friends, or it may also be felt when possessions or money are lost. The mind consumed by it cannot be comforted. One must *let go* of the object of the sorrow before comfort can be felt. In the Dhamma there is no virtue, in this kind of repressed sorrow, for a mind which is overwhelmed by dukkha cannot practise Dhamma.

Lamentation follows when that sorrow becomes too strong to bear inside oneself and emotion bursts forth as weeping and wailing. At this time also a person may proclaim the virtues of the dead person, sometimes crying out the truth, sometimes falsehood. But our Dhamma teaches restraint of grief, which, if indulged in too much, can in some cases unhinge the mind. Lamenting does no one any good and should be stopped and replaced by peaceful, balanced mental states.⁶

Pain is bodily dukkha, that is, anything from the slight irritation of a mosquito bite round to the greatest physical agony accompanying disease or injury. *Grief* is mental dukkha, as when we grieve over a disease already contracted, or we are pained at the advance of old age, or we resent the coming of death. The Pali word for grief—*domanassa*, shows that this aspect of dukkha should be got rid of as soon as possible. *Domanassa* means literally “badmindedness,” so to indulge in grief, as some do, is to cultivate unwholesome mental states. Decay, disease and death are unavoidable—even the best-among-men, the Buddha had to experience them. They are surely painful enough without making them more painful still by piling up thoughts of grief. Then we have to bear not only the physical dukkha but the mental dukkha too. It is the latter which we need not experience if we practise Dhamma rightly.

Despair arises when sorrow, pain and grief become too heavy to bear and then, crushed by it, people commit suicide because they can no longer see any way out. Even if despair does not lead to suicide it may give rise to dejection, a lack of energy so that one’s woes cannot be cured. The Visuddhimagga perceptively remarks: “Sorrow is like the cooking (of oil, etc.) in a pot over a slow fire. Lamentation is like its boiling over from the pot when cooking over a quick fire.

⁵ The five subjects continue as follows: “*Sabbehi me piyehi manāpehi nānābhāvo vinābhāvo*, All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, may become separated from me. *Kammassakomhi kammadāyādo kammayoni kammabandhu kammaṇṇisaraṇo*, I am the owner of my kamma, the heir to my kamma, born of my kamma, related to my kamma, abide supported by my kamma, *yaṃ kammam karissāmi* whatever kamma I shall do, *kalyāṇam vā pāpakam vā* for good or for evil, *tassa dāyādo bhavissāmi* of that I shall be the heir.” Many Buddhists in Siam recite this every day in Pali and Thai and its use among Buddhists elsewhere in Pāli and English (or just English) is recommended.

⁶ Contrast the restrained attitude of mourners in Theravāda Buddhist countries with the uncontrolled wailing and self-torment often seen at Hindu funerals. Or there are the professional wailers still employed to weep and lament at Chinese death ceremonies. But the Buddha and the Teachers down to the present day have so often taught “transient indeed are all conditioned things” that good Buddhists do not tend to extremes of grief.

Despair is like what remains in the pot after it has boiled over and is unable to do so any more, going on cooking in the pot till it dries up."

Everyone must taste something of the bitter brew of dukkha as they go through life, either the occasional sorts described above or the three aspects of frequent dukkha which are described below. These are: "Association with the disliked is dukkha, separation from the liked is dukkha, not getting what one wants is dukkha." While it may be said (from the point of view of ordinary truth) that birth and death come round only once in a lifetime, that old age is restricted to one time of life, and that disease for most people is only occasional, it must be admitted that these three are experienced by ourselves every day. So they may be called "everyday" or "frequent dukkha." A lot may be learnt about oneself and one's relations with dukkha just by observing these three as they are known by oneself. "Association with the disliked" refers either to meeting with unwished-for people (or animals), or it can refer to disagreeable things with which one comes into contact, including doing work which does not please one, or having to endure weather which is not pleasant. This unwelcome contact with what is unloved is liable to stimulate in us a range of emotion from the slightest dislike round to the fiercest anger. If we do not have sufficient mindfulness then the mind is likely to be afflicted by these unwholesome states. It is those which must be avoided, for however carefully we plan our lives we shall never be able to exclude "association with the disliked."

The same applies to "separation from the liked is dukkha" —it can never be avoided in this life. If, in the previous case, we are liable to be wounded by the arrows of aversion, here we are likely to suffer from the wounds made by greed. We covet and desire certain people, animals and things and when our greed is not fulfilled then we must suffer this form of dukkha. In a world where lust, attachment and desire rule and where separation is so common, how shall we escape this kind of dukkha? We swim in a sea of impermanence, we are impermanence, so it is inevitable that we must feel this dukkha frequently.

So, in one way or another, we are certain to experience "not getting what one wants," and unless we train ourselves in Dhamma this is sure to be dukkha. The Buddha has shown the very wide scope of this phrase, "not getting what one wants is dukkha." He explained it as follows: "In beings subject to birth there arises the wish: 'O that we were not subject to birth, that birth might never come to us!' But this cannot be got by wishing. And not to get what one wants, that is dukkha." The same passage is then repeated for each of the types of the dukkha described here as "occasional." If these passages were abbreviated, it would run like this: "In beings subject to decay, disease, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair, there arises the wish: 'O that we were not subject to decay, disease, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair, that they might never come to us!' But this cannot be got by wishing. And not to get what one wants is dukkha." The Buddha has emphasised by these repetitions that if we do not want to experience the many sides to dukkha, mere wishes will not be enough to protect us. Only Dhamma practise and penetration can do this. The Visuddhimagga further explains by saying that this is "the want of some unobtainable object," and certainly more wishes for no-birth, no-decay, etc., are for unobtainable objects. This side of dukkha is not defined as referring to material objects though certainly it is very true in that case as well. How much we suffer when we do not get what we want! And how much suffering our miserable desires, whether fulfilled or not, often bring on others!

This, in brief, is the frequent dukkha that we are sure to encounter. If we consider the range of meaning covered here we can see that to translate dukkha as "suffering" may be misleading in some cases. This becomes even clearer when we look at the last clause in dukkha's description, "the five grasped-at groups are dukkha." This is the most subtle aspect of dukkha. Yet it is also the most constant aspect and the one "nearest" to ourselves. These grasped-at groups are the

component parts of the personality and they are constant dukkha because they cannot be left behind anywhere. In the case of occasional or frequent forms of dukkha, the objects producing it can often be turned away from and that dukkha escaped, at least temporarily. But this cannot be done with the five groups—body, feeling, perception (or memory),⁷ volition and consciousness. At birth we grasped at them because of kamma made in past lives, while in the present life we continue to make kamma either by desiring or rejecting and so ensure that we go on grasping. But these groups at which we have grasped are inherently unstable, they arise and pass away and our grasping is like grabbing at a handful of water or dry sand. We are bound to disappointment. So besides being anicca (impermanent, unstable), they are dukkha (unsatisfactory, etc.). And their nature is void of self or soul, they have really no owner sitting inside them, they are *anattā*. Now when we regard these grasped-at groups in the exactly opposite way: that they are stable, the basis for happiness and the abode of some divine and permanent self, then we make trouble (*dukkha*) for ourselves.

These groups sum up all the other sorts of dukkha for it is said after listing them, “in brief, the five grasped-at groups are dukkha.” *They* are born, *they* decay, *they* become diseased and *they* die; because of *them* one sorrows, laments, one is pained by the first of them, and one grieves because of the rest—and one despairs for them all; *they* are separated from what is liked, *they* are associated with what is liked and *they* do not get what they want. By grasping at them we make sure for ourselves a plentiful supply of dukkha. One would think that with the constant dukkha of the five grasped-at groups to be experienced we should be aware of the fact that they are dukkha. We manage to juggle with our experience so that we do not see this dukkha clearly, though anyone who has tried seriously to meditate will know something of it. When the mind is hard at work with much stimulation the fact that the four mental groups are dukkha is not so plain. Likewise, when the body is active it is not so easy to know the dukkha inherent in the body.

Let us take the case of the body first. It has four basic positions: walking, standing, sitting and lying down (other postures are only variations of these four). Each of these positions becomes painful if the body is compelled to remain in it for a long time. One goes on a walking tour (or a cross-country run) and after some miles, or tonnes of miles, it becomes necessary to rest the body (=to change bodily posture to sitting, say) because the body aches (=bodily *dukkha*). Or perhaps one has to stand for a long time in a queue at a station or for a bus. After half an hour, standing will become less comfortable and after an hour or so it is necessary to sit down because of the bodily dukkha. Or one sits in meditation with no movement at all. For the first half or three quarters of an hour one may feel quite comfortable. But then after an hour has gone by, if one has not unified the mind on one’s subject of meditation, it is certain that bodily pain will become more and more noticeable. Eventually a move is needed, to walking practise perhaps, or to lying down, But if one lies down for too long—as may be unavoidable in a hospital, this position becomes uncomfortable as well. Even lying down one has to change position from side to side to avoid the dukkha which becomes manifest in the body. When we jig around all day, frequently changing bodily positions, then we can avoid seeing all this dukkha—a fact that does not make the dukkha less, or less “real.” It is just ignored by us.

This is ignorance of the First Noble Truth. It is also the first factor in the round of Dependent Origination. When we ignore dukkha, we ignore the causes from which the greater part of our troubles spring, so how shall we have happiness?

The meditator who strives every day to sit for an hour or more, is sure to get to know about dukkha in the body, for he has to try to face it and go beyond it. We will also know directly about dukkha in the mind. When it is said that feeling, perception (or memory), volitions and

⁷ In this context *saññā* is always translated in Thai as “memory,” never as “perception.”

consciousness, as the four mental groups, are dukkha, a little introspection is needed to show whether this is so, or not. A person who just drifts mentally (as most people who undertake no mental spiritual training do), has a distracted and confused mind. His mind is not very clear to him as it is more or less blanketed by delusion (*moha*), so he does not see dukkha. But one who is prepared to do something about his mind, realising the need for control and cultivation, will soon know dukkha. None of the mental groups are even as stable as the body. Feelings, memories, thoughts and the sense-consciousnesses arise and pass away with extraordinary rapidity and “what is impermanent, that is dukkha.” Moreover, the meditator strives for one-pointedness of mind but the mind is usually the scattered arising and passing of these four groups—not at all concentrated. He will soon learn the dukkha inherent in a scattered mind.

The examination in ourselves that “the five grasped at groups are dukkha” is the best way to get near to seeing *dukkham ariyasaccam*—the Noble Truth of dukkha. A Buddhist who hopes to get something done during this life on the Dhamma-path should strive at least to see this truth. When dukkha is “in-seen” then one has the best of motives for the practise of Dhamma. With the in-seeing of dukkha one will want to see the causes for its arising and therefore be prepared to loosen one’s grip on the pleasurable things of this world. When one has gone so far, practising the Noble Eightfold Path, its the causal way of Dhamma, then Cessation of dukkha, or Nibbāna, will come within ones sight.

As Prince Mahā Mongkut wrote when he was Lord Abbot of Wat Bovoranives:

Dukkha is this fivefold group,
craving for being its arising;
Of it cessation is Nibbāna,
the Noble Path to it eightfold.

This brief survey of dukkha may be concluded by a review of what can be done to cope with it. Birth, in the ordinary sense of this word, is a past event in this life, but one should aim that future births (if one is not going to finish the job in this life) should not be such great dukkha that one cannot practise the Dhamma. This can be ensured by making good kamma now. Decay is mostly physical dukkha (pain) and must be accepted but it will be very helpful to do this if the mind has been cultivated so that mental dukkha (grief) does not arise. The same is true of disease, for a person with a cultivated mind will not add to the dukkha he feels by indulgence in self-pity, blaming others, or in bitterness. Death loses its sting when it is accepted as natural. “Whatever has the nature to arise, all that has the nature to cease,” a concise Dhamma-teaching found many times in the Suttas and one to be realised in oneself. Mental dukkha—fear and worry about death is more painful for some people than the body’s actual death. The mind can be trained and developed to that dukkha does not arise there even though bodily pain becomes very great. Sorrow can be cut off entirely by mental development in Dhamma and if this is done, one will have no cause for lamentation either. Physical pain is inherent in the body and must be borne when it cannot be cured; but one will be unperturbed if the mind does not grasp at it as “belonging to me.” Mental grief pertains to the untrained mind but is lessened to the extent that one makes efforts to train in the way of Dhamma, while it is abolished by the Arahants who have seen the falsity of grasping at selfhood. Despair, also a mental condition, will be left behind with craving and unknowing, for no despair can arise for those who have developed energetic mental striving in themselves. Association with the disliked, separation from the liked, and not getting what one wants, are all bound up with desires. Lessen desires and these aspects of dukkha become less. Get rid of desires and they are got rid of. The five grasped-at groups are both physical and mental dukkha for people who grasp at them. When grasping ceases, the mental dukkha associated with this ceases and they become then the five pure groups which continue to operate from the time of the Arahant’s Enlightenment until his

death. But as all the Arahants, including the Buddha, had bodies of flesh during their last lives, just the same as our own, so they will continue to suffer the pains to which the flesh is subject. Even the Buddha was sick several times in his last birth but neither he, nor the Arahants down to the present day, suffer grief at their bodily condition.

Our experience now of this world (or any other) depends on what we have done in the past. If we have much dukkha now we can learn from this that in the past we made much evil kamma and strengthened in ourselves the evil roots of greed, aversion and delusion. Dukkha which arises now and cannot be cured we have to learn to accept. But in the present we are making kamma which will bear fruit in the future. If it is kamma associated with the defilements then we must expect to get more dukkha. The intelligent person understands this and makes an effort to train himself towards the lessening and the end of dukkha. By the practise of Dhamma he constructs happiness for himself and others.

—Bhikkhu Khantipālo

IV. Anguish—the Mark of Man

“The existentialist says at once that man is anguish.”⁸

Man’s nature is the nature of dukkha—his life marked by unease, his mind a restlessness oscillating between the discomfort of pain and “that unrest which men miscall delight.”⁹ *Yaṃ kiñci vedayitaṃ tam dukkhasmin’ti*, said the Buddha—“Whatever is felt is included in dukkha.”¹⁰ This is echoed today by our leading thinkers—“Human reality therefore is by nature an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of surpassing its unhappy state.”¹¹

It is a reality that many seek to avoid seeing,¹² but let us instead look closer: Man’s physical survival alone requires the sorrow of ceaseless labour. A Hebrew poet three thousand years ago knew the grief of the labouring man “for all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief, yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night.”¹³ Modern man sometimes has other choices but the cynical would see little relief: “The lot of man is ceaseless labour, or ceaseless idleness, which is still harder. Or irregular labour, which is not pleasant.”¹⁴ Yet his labour comes to nought “for what profit hath a man of all his labour?”¹⁵ Few gain real joy from leaving the fruits of their labour to a posterity we shall not see—“what has posterity ever done for us,” this is the thought of most. So his labour is tainted with futility:

“Between the idea and the reality,
between the motion and the act,
falls the shadow.”¹⁶

He knows the truth of *aniccatā* (change) that all will fade “and leave not a rack behind,”¹⁷ for “all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death.”¹⁸ And so the tragic tale ends with death, the final absurdity for the materialist, and his haunting fear: “I will show you fear in a handful of dust.”¹⁹ The body that requires so much labour to attend must end as dust that remains like Yorik’s skull a dumb testimony to fools that grasp at life.—“The history of a life, whatever it may be, is the history of a failure.”²⁰

And what of the kingdom of the mind? It is a kingdom ill at ease. A ceaseless want, a negative, seeking to ingest life: this characterises the mental structure of man. It’s nutriment is sense-contact, intention and awareness;²¹ nothing so well describes man’s being as that of an insatiate digestive system. This ceaseless want (*taṇhā*) is the “irritant” that motivates man,²² it goads him into the agitation, the burning and subtle “pain” of “pleasure” to lead only to the

⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L’Existentialisme est un humanisme*, 1946.

⁹ Shelley: *Adonis*.

¹⁰ SN 35:11.

¹¹ J.P. Sartre: “*L’Etre et le Neant*” p.66 (this and further refs. to the English translation of Hazel Barnes: Citadel Press).

¹² “Human kind cannot bear very much reality”, T. S. Eliot: *Burnt Norton*.

¹³ Ecclesiastes II, v. 23.

¹⁴ T. S. Eliot: *Choruses from the Rock*.

¹⁵ Ecclesiastes I, v. 3.

¹⁶ T. S. Eliot: *The Hollow Men*.

¹⁷ Shakespeare: *The Tempest*, 1, iv, 156.

¹⁸ Shakespeare: *Macbeth*, 5, v, 20.

¹⁹ T. S. Eliot: *The Waste Land*.

²⁰ Sartre: op. cit., p. 457.

²¹ Nutriment or sustaining factors of life (*āhāra*) were defined by the Buddha as material food (*kabalīṅkārahāra*) and the mental needs sense-contact (*phassa*), volition (*manosañcetanā*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*).

cold sorrow of its fading; or if this burning is kept aflame it leads to that worst state, the featureless desert of boredom—*ennui* that subtle curse that more and more is the dominant mode of present life. The more sensitive and refined is man’s aesthetic nature, the more it is led to these doldrums, a Sargasso sea of sullen lethargy, the “white melancholy” of Gray, and the terrible power of *accidie* that the Christian ascetics knew as the companion of their solitude. “Life swings like a pendulum backwards and forwards between pain and boredom”²³—and the comfortable emptiness of present civilization tends more and more to the latter mode of dukkha. Most men live in small worlds, constricted and suffocated by the narrow borders of their conditioning, too often caught in a vicious feedback-loop of stultifying repetitiveness. Their condition gives us a subjective re-definition of the physicists law of entropy, that “any given closed system gets more and more boring.”²⁴

The phenomenon dukkha was defined *sub specie aeternitatis* by the Buddha’s reduction: *saṅkhittena pañcupādānakkhandhā dukkhā*.²⁵ “in short the five constituents of being-as-attachment,²⁶ are dukkha.” From this we see that dukkha does not depend upon an external environment but is a built-in structure of our being—in fact the basic mode of existence: “... misery is an essential part of the human landscape and dread the fundamental mood of existence, *the only mood uncontaminated by direction to outside objects*.”²⁷ This fundamental “dread” or “anguish” manifests through a number of modes, the most basic of these is that termed “nausea:” “A dull and inescapable nausea perpetually reveals my body to my consciousness. Sometimes we look for the pleasant or for physical pain to free ourselves from this nausea; but as soon as the pain and the pleasure are existed by consciousness, they in turn manifest its facticity and its contingency; and it is on the ground of this nausea that they are revealed.”²⁸ By introspection we invariably come upon this mood as the stable background to whatever other moods are present, that is to say feeling in itself is nausea—dukkha—whether it appears through the modes of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—the neutral mode in fact being nausea or boredom as essence.

Dukkha is fundamental to existence because it is precisely an awareness of the lack or incompleteness of existence itself: “Human reality by which lack appears in the world must be itself a lack ... The existence of desire as a human fact is sufficient to prove that human reality is a lack.”²⁹ *Taṇhā* thus continually seeks in vain to fill itself or gain completeness, an attempt at affirmation of being when being is by nature itself lack. Our anguish in face of choice is the

²² cf. “For the most part the stimulus awakens in the organism merely a want, which the reaction of the organism endeavours to supply. Hence it appears that want or lack alone is able to bring about such reactions.”—Nageli: *Theory of Organic Evolution*.

²³ Schopenhauer.

²⁴ Ñāṇavīra Thera: Letters 1955–60; the process of *samsāra* is itself such a closed system manifesting as repetitiveness (*vaṭṭa*).

²⁵ Dhammacakkappavattana sutta—Sam. N. (*Sacca Saṃyutta*).

²⁶ These five factors which manifest as “living being,” in all but the arahat, exist through the mode of attachment (affirmation) to life (*upādāna*). The arahat is just these five (purified) factors minus attachment, and such being has no basis for dukkha which is the product of *upādāna* not the factors in themselves.

²⁷ J.T. Fraser: “*The concept of Time in Western Thought*”—*Main Currents in Modern Thought* vol. 28 No. 4 (the italics are mine)—written in reference to the *Philosophy of Martin Heidegger*. The various aspects of “dread” (*Angst*) are the most central features revealed by Heidegger’s ontology: “Heidegger considers the human condition coldly and announces that existence is humiliated. The only reality is “anxiety” in the whole chain of beings. To the man lost in the world and its diversions this anxiety is a brief, fleeting fear. But if that fear becomes conscious of itself, it becomes anguish, the perpetual climate of the lucid man “in whom existence is concentrated” ... He enumerates its aspects: boredom when the ordinary man strives to quash it in him and benumb it; terror when the mind contemplates death.”—Albert Camus: *Myth de Sisyphe*, p. 40.

²⁸ Sartre: op. cit., p. 314.

²⁹ Sartre: *ibid.*, p. 63.

same awareness of lack—choice implies lack, and as intrinsically lack we are condemned to choose. This choice also implies another facet of our being—as contingent: “In anguish we do not simply apprehend the fact that the possibles which we project are perpetually eaten away by our freedom-to-come; in addition we apprehend our choice—i.e., ourselves—as unjustifiable.”³⁰ Dukkha, that is existence experienced, thus gives us its final definition—that which gives us the possibility of its negation: “The essential thing is contingency. I mean that by definition existence is not necessity.”³¹ thus in dukkha we have the “absurd”—it has no necessity to be and we are Sartre’s term “too-much” (*de trop*)—superfluous, for we are existed towards an unattainable goal that of filling lack. Sartre’s famous conclusion might have been spoken by the Buddha—“man is a useless passion.”

We usually try to avoid the anguish of our freedom by the self-deceit of “bad-faith” (*mauvaise foi*) or the spirit of “seriousness”—both an escape to the role, an attempt to assume a static and thus “complete” being; or the myth of destiny or other evasion of free choice. This playing of roles gives us the alienated (or in Camus term “estranged”) individual—alienated that is from reality, from authentic being. The alienated individual is not a new concept, this was spoken in the 6th Century B.C.: “Man is estranged from that with which he is most familiar”³²—but today it is our norm. Individuals are too isolated—there is always that gulf that cannot be bridged: “The heart knoweth his own bitterness; and a stranger doth not intermeddle with his joy.”³³ And there is no better image of isolation, significance and meaninglessness than this line: “Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind.”³⁴ Modern poetry often expresses very clearly this terrible emptiness and the tedium of alienated existence: “I have known the inexorable sadness of pencils, neat in their boxes, dolour of pad and paper-weight, all the misery of manilla folders and mucilage, desolation in immaculate public places ... Endless duplication of lives and objects...”³⁵ And that this sickness not only eats away life but becomes pathological as neurosis is seen from C.G. Jung’s observation: “About one-third of my patients are suffering from no clinically definable neurosis, but from the senselessness and emptiness of their lives.”³⁶

It is this senselessness that is our tragedy—the superficial round, we endlessly repeat the same silly tasks because we see them as necessary. Great suffering can be endured—it has a meaning, tragedy has a “moral,” a *reason*; our suffering has no saving reason, it teaches us nothing. “Great men have great suffering” Nietzsche wrote, their suffering has a meaning: it was the mark of their greatness. This is why he too saw a repetition, a round of “eternal recurrence,” and gloried in it—only the “overman” would joyously grasp a majestic suffering repeated for ever, the defining of his existence. But we are all trapped in eternal recurrence but with a load far more crushing than Nietzsche’s heroes—our suffering has no necessity and no purpose. We are not Promethean heroes crushed by suffering but still defying heaven and the fates—suffering is negated by such defiance, such scorn: “There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn.”³⁷ We are rather Dostoevsky’s “Underground Man,” puny, insignificant,—we are not warrior heroes but court jesters. We are not crushed by adversity but smothered in the futility and pettiness of our drab existence. We are not destroyed in a blaze of glory but fade out in commonplace insignificance. We have no terrible destiny to lament, no cruel fate to rail against, we have only our own freedom to take part in the drab and dreary comedy of life, where stale jokes are repeated for ever. We are in Kierkegaard’s phrase “mocked by existence.”

³⁰ Sartre. *ibid.*, p. 440.

³¹ Sartre: *Nausee*.

³² Heraclitus: *Fragment*.

³³ *Proverbs*.

³⁴ T. S. Eliot: *Burnt Norton*.

³⁵ Theodore Roethke: *Dolour*.

³⁶ C.G. Jung: *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*.

³⁷ Camus: *Myth de Sisyphe*.

Man tries in many ways to escape from himself. T.S. Eliot spoke of “the pain of living and the drug of dreams” but dreams and fantasy are but a temporary sedative, unless, as with the diseased mind, they become an addictive narcotic, and then the dreams are nightmares. But there is a way out, a way to understanding, and an awareness of the depth of suffering is the beginning of its overcoming: “every man who has not tasted the bitterness of despair has missed the significance of life.”³⁸ How does this dukkha arise?the Buddha’s answer is admirably spoken by Kirillov: “Life is pain, life is fear, and man is unhappy. Now man loves life. And that’s how it comes about.”³⁹ This love of life is *bhavataṇhā*, the will-to-live, the burning flame that knows no satisfaction, for “the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing”⁴⁰ and there is no end to wanting, and no end to dukkha if that is what we chose. For we have a choice, the Buddha has pointed out a way, the way of understanding existence as it is —as dukkha, and the development of estrangement (*nibbidā*) from it that will lead on to extinction (*Nibbāna*).

“When one sees with wisdom that all constituent elements are painful, then one becomes disgusted with pain; this is the way to purity.”⁴¹

—Bhikkhu Saddhājīva

³⁸ Kierkegaard: *Either/Or* vol. II.

³⁹ Dostoevsky: *The Possessed*.

⁴⁰ Ecclesiastes: I. v. 8.

⁴¹ Dhṛ 278.

V. Dukkha, a Basic Concept in Buddhism

The term *dukkha*, derived from an adjective *dukkha* (Skr. *dukkhā*), analogically formed after *sukha*, has the primary meaning of pain. All that is unpleasant, painful, resulting in misery, or in other words, what is opposed to *sukha* is denoted by the term *dukkha*, as may be seen from oft-recurring phrases as *dukkhadomanass'-upāyāsa* (pain, sorrow and despair). In its primary meaning (so also in the specialised technical usage in the Buddha's Teachings, as may be noted later), *dukkha* corresponds more to the physical aspect of pain though the mental aspect is also included, while *domanassa* expresses exclusively the mental. Physical ease is denoted by the term *sukha*, both in general and specific connotations, while *somanassa* expresses the mental attitude. It is *dukkha* that leads to *domanassa*; and *soka* "grief" is more or less synonymous with it, and the opposite holds good with *sukha* and *somanassa*. Apart from the specialised meaning in which the term is employed in Buddhist psychological ethics, the general meaning may be seen in simple descriptions such as *sukha vedanā dukkhā vedanā adukkhamasukhā vedanā* "pleasant sensations, unpleasant sensations and neither pleasant nor unpleasant sensations," or even in the description of one of the two extremes (*antā*) in the opening words of the Buddha's first discourse. In the *Dhammacakkappavattana* the Buddha speaks of the two extremes a recluse should avoid (i) self-indulgence which is base, vulgar, pertaining to the common man, ignoble and serving no purpose, and (ii) self-mortification, which is painful (*dukkha*) ignoble and equally serving no purpose. Everything associated with pain or unpleasantness entailing sorrow and hardship and involving any type of difficulty is described as *dukkha*, in the wider meaning of the term.

Before coming to the special connotation of the term in the Buddha's Teachings, a word of caution is necessary regarding the translation of the term. Whether we translate it as pain, or ill or misery, we should bear in mind that it is used as a philosophical concept. Or else, we would fall into the error of making all manner of vague generalisations about the Buddha's Teachings which are far from what it is. One such instance is the allegation that Buddhism is pessimistic because it recognises the presence of *dukkha*. If the disciple remains inactive and resigns himself to his fate saying that he is overcome by *dukkha*, this allegation would be justified. But he does not stop with it. He says: *dukkh'otinno' mhi dukkha-pareto, api nu imassa kevalassa dukkhakkhandhassa antakiriyā paññāyetha*—"I am steeped in ill, subject to ill, but perhaps the destruction of this entire aggregate of ill will make itself manifest to me." In the formulation of the Four Noble Truths the Buddha's main concern is the elimination of *dukkha*—and the cessation and the path leading to the cessation of *dukkha*—are the most significant features. The discovery of *dukkha* would be of no significance if its elimination played no part in the Teachings. If *dukkha* has to be eliminated and if the Buddha has shown the path to do so, the recognition of the prevalence of *dukkha* in no way justifies the allegation of pessimism.

Coming back to the term *dukkha*, as pointed out by Rhys Davids and Stede,⁴² "there is no word in English covering the same ground as *dukkha* does in Pali. Our modern words are too specialised, too limited, and usually too strong. *Sukha* and *dukkha* are ease and dis-ease (but we use disease in another sense); or wealth and illth from well and ill (but we have now lost illth); or well-being and ill-ness (but illness means something else in English). We are forced, therefore, in translation to use half synonyms, no one of which is exact. *Dukkha* is equally mental and physical. Pain too is predominantly physical, sorrow too exclusively mental, but in some connections they have to be used in default of any more exact rendering. Discomfort, suffering, ill and trouble can occasionally be used in certain connections. Misery, distress, agony, affliction

⁴² *P.T.S. Dictionary*, s. v.

and woe are never right (as they are nearer the concept *soka* [grief, sorrow] than *dukkha*). In this connection reference may be made to Mrs. Rhys Davids: *Buddhist Psychology*, pp. 83, ff.”

Some idea of this concept may be formed by referring to the Buddha’s first discourse, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta. After mentioning that the Noble Eightfold Path is the Middle Path—*majjhimā paṭipadā*—leading to knowledge and insight, tranquillity, wisdom, enlightenment and Nibbāna, which the Tathāgata has realised having avoided the two extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification, he proceeds to explain the Four Noble Truths of *dukkha*, *samudaya*, *nirodha* and *magga*. The explanation given there covers a wide field of conditions resulting in *dukkha*. Birth, old-age, disease, death, union with those who are disliked by one, separation from those who are liked by one, inability to fulfil one’s wishes, and in brief, the five aggregates of grasping, are *dukkha*. The five aggregates (body, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness), which make up an individual entity are accompanied by *dukkha*, as those groups are found in conjunction with *āsava* (taints) and *upādāna* (grasping). It is when we come to the second Noble Truth, the origin of *dukkha*, that we are given a clearer picture of the concept of *dukkha*. *Taṇhā*, the thirst or fever of unsatisfied longing, a state of mind that leads to rebirth, involving attachment to lustful enjoyment is mentioned as the cause of *dukkha*. In other words, this thirst or yearning for sensual enjoyment, generally unfulfilled, is the cause for the prevalence of *dukkha*. If *dukkha* was mere pain or misery, the enjoyment of worldly pleasures, not all of which are spiritually harmful, would certainly not give rise to it unless, of course, the enjoyment itself is carried to excesses. Elsewhere, the Buddha mentions four truisms (*dhammuddesā*) the fourth of which is *ūno loko atitto taṇhādāso*—“The world is deficient, never contended and a slave to thirst.”⁴³ This statement sheds much light on the meaning of the term *dukkha*. The deficiency and discontent are the direct results of the subjection to *taṇhā*, they are impelled by *taṇhā*, the root cause of all *dukkha*. Hence *dukkha* is the general discomfort (or dis-ease) or the unsatisfactory nature of the world. And this has been brought about by the instability of the world. The world is in a state of flux and is unstable: *upanīyati loko addhuvo*. This is the first of the four *dhammuddesā* just referred to. *Taṇhā*, which is the cause of *dukkha*, is threefold: *kāmatāṇhā*, *bhavataṇhā*, *vibhavataṇhā*, the thirst for sensual enjoyment, for existence and for annihilation, respectively. Any one or more of these three can bring about *dukkha*. The elimination or the complete abandonment of *taṇhā* is the cessation of *dukkha*. Hence there is no *dukkha* in the absence of *taṇhā*, and the path leading to the cessation of *dukkha* is the Noble Eightfold Path.

Thus *dukkha* is not mere pain or misery but a concept of widest range, and it is of the highest significance in the Buddhist Teachings. It is the recognition of *dukkha* that makes Nibbāna possible. Ignorance of the prevalence of *dukkha* is the ignorance of the most fundamental nature of the world. Ignorance (*avijjā*) is the starting point as it were of the continuity in *saṃsāra*. *Dukkha* may be compared to a disease. The ignorance of the prevalence of the disease makes no cure possible let alone its diagnosis and method of treatment. This simple analogy from medical science holds good as regards the formulation of the Four Noble Truths. It requires the unique physician in the person of the Tathāgata to discover the prevalence of this disease. The first truth has been discovered by the Buddha, but this alone serves no purpose, just as the knowledge of the prevalence of a disease is of no great help unless and until the administration of the cure is effected. To effect a cure the symptoms have to be studied and the cause of the disease has to be found out. From the known symptoms such as “birth is suffering” etc. the cause of the disease is diagnosed as *taṇhā*, craving. In the so-called “chain” of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, *vedanā*, (sensations) give rise to *taṇhā* (craving). The next step is *upādāna*, (grasping) resulting in *bhava*, (becoming) and its concomitant, *dukkha*. Once the causes are known a cure has to be

⁴³ Ratṭhapāla Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya (M II 68).

found and the administration of the medicine to bring about the cure is the final step. The Path leading to the cessation of dukkha, i.e. the Noble Eightfold Path is the cure to this disease.

Besides of being assigned the position of the first Noble Truth, dukkha also stands as one of the three characteristics (*tilakkhaṇa*) the basic premises as it were, of the Buddhist Teachings. Unlike most propositions in outside systems of philosophy, the three characteristics are formulated by inductive reasoning based on observable facts. The five aggregates are seen to be impermanent (*anicca*) and that which is impermanent is dukkha and subject to change. That which is dukkha and subject to change cannot be identified as one's own and is lacking in a permanent entity. This is discussed fully in the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, ⁴⁴that followed the Buddha's First Sermon.

The foregoing remarks, though discursive and somewhat superficial when the whole subject is taken into account, are meant to serve as an introduction to our study of this all-important concept. As pointed out earlier, the aim of the true Buddhist is to overcome dukkha and surmount the ills that flesh is heir to. The problem before the disciple of the Buddha is to make an end of dukkha. The destruction of dukkha, i.e. *dukkhakkhaya*, consists of *nirodha* or Nibbāna. All the efforts of the disciple are to be directed to this end. The Noble Eightfold Path divided into morality, concentration and wisdom, and the complex system of training (*sikkhā*) are designed for this purpose. It is of the person who has achieved this end that one is able to say: "Birth is exhausted, the Holy Life has been lived out, what was to be done is done, there is no more of this to come."

—Prof. N. A Jayawickrama

⁴⁴ See Wheel No. 17.

VI. Dukkha of Childhood

A Fragment

When a child is born the first thing it does is to cry. It cries because of the violence of its expulsion from the womb, which is frightening, and the shock of cold air upon its body simultaneously with the glare of light on its unaccustomed and unfocussed eyes. The new environment irritates its body, and uncertainty, the first shadow of fear, has invaded its consciousness. It is slapped, and gasps for air, and the first cold intake of its lungs is painful. Its cry becomes a howl. It has made its first contact with a hard, unaccommodating world.

Some infants cry even before their entry into separate existence. They whimper and struggle while still in the womb. Nobody has been able to explain this satisfactorily except those who hold that the unborn child has lived before.

Its next sensation is of hunger. Its body cries out for nutriment. When this does not come immediately, it feels its helplessness and dependence, a consciousness which remains with it thereafter throughout childhood. It is fed, and for a time feels replete. It sleeps; and if it dreams it is of the womb, the only other life it knows. In its sleep it feels an inner disturbance; the digested food irritates its bowels, demanding expulsion. Messages of pain, signals of distress, come from its irritated bladder. The necessary mechanism works, and it feels relieved. But almost immediately the sensation of hunger reasserts itself, and the cycle starts over again.

The infant begins to be aware of its surroundings. Its mother is the source of food, but sometimes she slaps it, and its attitude towards her begins to be ambivalent. Among its other sensations it starts to include the remoter objects of the external world. Some of these please it, and it reaches out to grasp them. If it succeeds, it places them in its mouth, because all its desires are centred there at present. But more often the object is withdrawn from it, and the child cries from frustration. Some contacts are unpleasant; the napkin chafes its skin, loud noises alarm it. Living between desire and gratification it begins to separate the objects of its consciousness into the pleasant, or what is desired, and the unpleasant, that which is repugnant. Both are a source of dukkha: the pleasant when it is unobtainable, or when it has been enjoyed to excess, and the unpleasant because of its inherent unpleasantness. Some objects are both pleasant and unpleasant, or partake of those characters alternately, and towards these the child's attitude remains unresolved. They are ambiguous objects, and thus sources of fear, because the infant can never feel certain about them, i.e., in what manner they are going to affect it. It forms its first value judgments entirely upon this subjective standard of discrimination, and when responses are not immediate and spontaneous the infant experiences mental disturbance in deciding to which category of experience they belong. Its cries and kicks are the only means it has of expressing disapproval of its environment. When its mother is present it enjoys a sense of security, because she provides warmth, food and soothing contacts. But all these are negative sources of happiness; they mean only the temporary removal of what is unpleasant and feared. When the mother is absent a sense of desolation and of being abandoned comes over the infant. Its feeling of helplessness and dependence becomes intensified the more it becomes capable of understanding its situation with respect to others. Sometimes it is scolded, and does not know why. Then its misery becomes acute.

The child grows stronger and begins to move about on its own. When it sees a desirable object it crawls towards it and tries to clutch it. Its desires start to take more concrete form, to widen their range and to agitate its mind with more varied and complex responses. Its eyes

begin to focus, and it can distinguish things more clearly. Colours attract it. Something brightly coloured claims its attention; it grasps the desirable object and puts it to its mouth. The taste is bitter, and it cries. More often, it is prevented from taking the object in its hands, and then a range of frustration seizes the child. It begins to be aware of the conflict between its will and that of others, and even between its will and the nature of inanimate things, which will not always obey it. There is the beginning of a love-hate relationship towards its parents. Vaguely, the child wishes to be more independent, to assert its will against that of its mother and of others who stand between it and its desires. At the same time, it is experiencing the pains of tooth-cutting, frequent bowel disturbances of a more or less acute kind, and feverishness.

This stage gradually becomes blended into the next, when the child begins to stand upright for brief moments, and to take a few uncertain, stumbling steps. If it is a robust and healthy child, it feels an excess of energy activating its body; its limbs become restless, it requires constant movement to satisfy its urges and to work off the surplus energy which like an electric current plays up and down its nerve fibres. But often, for reasons it cannot understand, its movements are curbed. When it kicks off the bedclothes to give its restless limbs more freedom, loving and tender hands promptly put them back again. The child at that moment hates the loving and tender hands. If this treatment is persisted in too long, the child will eventually come to loathe all ministrations and its feelings of ambivalence will be firmly established. It may seem that hate is too strong a word to apply to the feelings of an infant, but what the infant feels is certainly the equivalent of hatred in an adult, perhaps even intensified by the limitations of a child's world, which makes the very frustration of desire an event of major and destructive importance.

The child is a boy and it begins to walk. With its growth, its vital energy increases. It is now attempting feats beyond its strength and muscular control, following the irrepressible urge to work off the surplus energy that is making its body an instrument with its own automatism. But the child is often told to keep quiet, to sit still, to lie down. Its sense of helplessness and consequently of frustration, increases. It takes outward expression in breaking objects. Its destructiveness is a protest against the world that is hostile to its desires. In extreme cases of suppression the child flies into violent rages. Given toys, it does not desire them. It craves only for what is out of reach or forbidden. Only in the possession of such objects can it find a brief cessation of the desires that torment it. Assailed by a crowd of sensory impressions, of light, colour, shape, taste, smell, hearing and touch, it is struggling to learn what the world consists of. That is, it is trying to group all the objects presented to it according to its primary classification of pleasant and unpleasant. In most cases it succeeds, but there are some impressions that elude classification. To these its attitude remains ambiguous and fluctuating.

The physical urge towards movement and freedom makes clothes restrictive and unpleasant. Sometimes their pressure against the body, as when growth has made them tight, is even painful. But the child is compelled to wear them. Having plenty of natural heat, generated by its rapid metabolism and constant movement, the child no longer feels cold as a pain, as it did when it first came into the world. Its vitality and natural resistance are sufficient protection for it, but nevertheless the same kind, loving hands which studiously replaced the bedclothes when it wanted to kick them off, compel the child to cover up its body with garments.

The child begins to suspect that the world of adults has laws of its own which his intelligence cannot penetrate, and which nobody is willing to explain to him. This gives him a sense of inferiority. He chafes against it. His urge to assert himself against this enigmatic world becomes aggressiveness. He loves his parents because they represent safety and the satisfaction of his desires; but they often stand in his way and their attitude towards him is not always predictable, so that he cannot feel entirely secure with them. On the whole, he prefers his

mother to his father, simply because his mother grants him the satisfaction of his wishes, whereas his father is more often punitive, forbidding him to do this and that, without compensating for it by giving him his food and soothing him to sleep.

(Unfinished manuscript from posthumous papers.)

—Francis Story

VII. The pursuit of Happiness and the Fact of Suffering

In his *Religions of man*, Prof. Huston-Smith defines man as “the animal that wonders.” This very apt description automatically implies that within every individual of the genus homo sapiens is a built-in mechanism which impels him to seek knowledge. He wants to know. This urge begins to assert itself at a very early age, in very young children, who begin to ask questions about everything they see and touch and sense. Kipling has expressed this in the lines:

I keep six honest serving men,
they taught me all I knew.
Their names are What, and Why, and When,
and How, and Where, and Who.

This in turn means that man is the only member of the animal kingdom who is capable of asking questions and of reasoning. The salient point in this process is to ask the right questions, and even more important is the order in which the questions are asked. The question that has intrigued man the most (probably before the dawn of history), and that still intrigues him, is, how did everything begin? Various answers to this question are to be found within the religions and philosophies of the world. Greek philosophy—commenced with the question of trying to find out whether there was any kind of primordial substance of which the world was made. The Greeks made surprising progress working on this line of thought, culminating in the school of the atomists, Leucippus and Democritus, who anticipated the discoveries of modern times by more than two thousand years.

The various religions approached the subject in an entirely different manner. The Greeks, in the beginning, at least, were concerned solely with the physical universe.

The idea of a first cause was not introduced until the advent of the Socratic school (Socrates, Plato and Aristotle) and was seized upon with eagerness by the early fathers of the Christian church because it dovetailed so neatly with their own concept of a divine originator, God the father, Jehovah, whom the Christians took over from the ancient Hebrews. However, Brahma of the Indian systems and Ahura Mazda of the Zoroastrians are very similar concepts into which was breathed the wishful thinking of their adherents. This First Cause, this Supreme Being, this God the Creator, was endowed with omnipotence and omniscience, with being all-merciful, all-wise, all-just and absolute in every sense. He is, in fact, often referred to as The Absolute. And, as we read in the first chapter of Genesis, having created everything, the Lord God was very pleased:

“And God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very good.”

This appraisal was made somewhat prematurely, and turned out to be not entirely correct. The authors of Genesis found to their dismay that they had struck more than they had bargained for. If everything were so good, how to account for all the suffering in the world? Surely all the terrible things that the flesh was heir to, and all the multifarious evils that befell living creatures, could not be attributed to a Just All Good, All Merciful, and All Wise Being! So, to overcome the contradiction, the Devil had to be invented, Lucifer, “son of the morning,” who has exercised a fascination, not only over some of our finest writers and poets, to wit, Milton, Goethe, Dante, and more recently, D. H. Lawrence, but also on by no means an insignificant number of otherwise quite ordinary people whom one would not have expected to have been given to flights of fancy. D. H. Lawrence was inspired by his satanic majesty to write the poem, “Lucifer”:

Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell.
But tell me, how do you know
he lost any of his brightness in the falling?
In the dark-blue depths, under layers and layers of darkness

I see him more like the ruby,
a gleam from within his own magnificence
coming, like the ruby in the invisible dark,
glowing with his own annunciation towards us.

⁴⁵This concept of a division of power became solidified into a dualism of good as opposed to evil, of light as opposed to darkness, leading to the development of a system called Manichaeism, in which God was to be worshipped and the Devil to be propitiated by rite and ceremonial deemed appropriate to the occasion. This was indeed an ingenious method devised for playing it safe. Many of the trials for witchcraft were based on suspicion of participation in the rites of giving the evil his due, and though the witches were disgusting, their persecutors and tormentors were even more so. However, this awakening of interest and pre-occupation with the Devil is not as outrageous as it first appears. The God that man creates is always in his own image, and Jehovah, a product of the ancient Hebrews still in a stage of barbarism, was capricious, jealous, vindictive, and given to tantrums, so it is not altogether surprising that some people should turn to the opposition, unconsciously making an anti-hero of the Devil.

To pinpoint a large measure of guilt on to man himself, the Christian church thought up the dogma of original sin, into which, after the fall of Adam, all men were automatically born. Superimposed on this theory is the Christian doctrine of atonement, which does nothing to resolve the contradictions. Why the almighty God had to send Jesus down to be killed, just because Adam had broken a taboo, is beyond the understanding of normally intelligent mortals. Why could not the almighty simply have forgiven and forgotten all about it, without keeping up the grudge for thousands of years? Even the most imperfect human being would find it an intolerable burden to keep up a grudge for a whole life-time—let alone for thousands of years.

The fact remains that dukkha, or the omnipresence of suffering, remains the bane of all theistic religions. The embarrassing questions continue to be asked: "Did not God know, right from the start, that Adam must fall?" And, "Since eating the forbidden fruit is universally interpreted as meaning indulging in sexual intercourse, why were Adam and Eve provided with the necessary equipment for so doing, if the almighty did not intend it ever to be used but kept in perpetual cold storage?" "Did God not know beforehand that the Devil would rebel against him, and having once rebelled, why did he allow him to run a hell?" If he did not know, then he is not omniscient. He either can or cannot put an end to dukkha (suffering). If he can, then he does not do so, and is therefore not good. If he would like to do so but has not the power, then he is not omnipotent. To all these queries the theologians are forced to fall back on the stereotyped reply: "Inscrutable are the workings of providence!," which, in this day and age, is just not good enough.

The house of thought built up so laboriously by the theologians has had its day—a surprisingly long day. It has had a rich past, but the present is shaky and the future looks very dim. Scepticism is undoubtedly the order of the day due to a variety of reasons, but mainly owing to the development of science, the diffusion of education, and to the changing structures of society itself. Indifference to religion and scepticism can and do break out into explosive hatred in urban ghettos where large sections of humanity live in poverty and squalor and under conditions of extreme duress. All that religion stands for seems to many people to be utterly unconnected with the problems of life as they know it. The drift away from the old

⁴⁵ D. H. Lawrence, *Last Poems*.

dogmas continues and is reflected in the spiritual wasteland that many people are living in, particularly the youth of today.

The Buddha undoubtedly went through a period of wondering, as we all do. That he was well acquainted with every shade of religious and philosophical thought we know from the Brahmajāla Sutta which outlines them all—some sixty-two theories. The dominant religion of Brahmanism he discarded outright for the reason that it too perishes on the rock of dukkha.

The Bhūridatta Jātaka No. 543, attributes these words to the Buddha on the subject of Brahma:

He who has eyes can see the sickening sight;
why does not Brahma set his creatures right?
If his wide power no limit can restrain,
why is his hand so rarely spread to bless?
Why are his creatures all condemned to pain?
Why does he not give happiness to all?
Why do fraud, lies, and ignorance prevail?
I count your Brahma one-among the unjust,
Who made the world in which to shelter wrong.

The Buddha was adamant in his opposition to all kinds of metaphysical speculation, regarding it futile, calling such questions “the jungle, the desert, the puppet show, the writhing, the entanglement of speculation” (Dialogues II). He cared nothing about ritual or worship or metaphysics. He was not only non-theological but antitheological. Sir Edwin Arnold summarises this attitude when he makes the Buddha say:

Measure not with word
the immeasurable;
Nor sink the string of thought
into the Fathomless.”⁴⁶

How wise the Buddha was we are better able to appreciate now, some 2511 years later, and can only mourn for the many men who wasted so much time and energy, even to the extent of laying down their lives in defence of absurdities. Mankind is very slow in learning and realising that a negative is also an affirmative. The Buddha negated that saintliness and contentment lay in knowledge of God and the origin of the universe, and affirmed that these desirable states of mind were simply the result of selfless and beneficent living. The Buddha was a naturally logical thinker, and although it has been greatly soft-pedalled by many of the commentators, a great intellectual. In his reflections he came to realise that the inbuilt desire to know was not the major urge within the human being. The greatest inbuilt urge in man is the drive for the pursuit of happiness. His desire to know is only a part of this greatest urge. Therefore he concentrated on the greatest, thereby putting first things first. As he himself has said time and time again, “One thing and only one thing do I teach, dukkha and the end of dukkha.” He had realised that all the metaphysical speculations were of no help whatsoever in the search for happiness and the avoidance of pain. In many of the articles written by Buddhist writers we are warned about thinking in concepts. However, they never come quite clean, they do not give any practical examples of what these concepts to be avoided are. In actual fact, these concepts are that everything must have a beginning. The concept in this case is the concept of First Cause or God the Creator, and the concepts that arise in dependence on this one.

The Buddha was nonetheless a realist. He accepted the fact that every human being is primarily concerned with what he considers to be conducive to his own interest and well-being.

⁴⁶ Sir Edwin Arnold *Light of Asia*.

Come, let us face it, just as honestly and as realistically as the Buddha did and admit that in all the world we love ourselves the best. This verse occurs both in Saṃyutta-Nikāya I and in the Udāna:

I visited all quarters with my mind,
nor found I any dearer than myself;
Likewise to self is every other dear;
Who loves himself will never harm another.

There is a great deal of somewhat futile argumentation on the question of selfishness; whether the desire for Nibbāna is a selfish desire; whether the Arahat ideal is also selfish. The crucial point is that our motivations are always the same. Whatever we do—whether a man robs a bank, or commits murder, or gives his life in defence of a principle, or becomes a monk and gives up the world—behind each and every one of these actions is the belief that it tends to promote the happiness of the individual so involved.

This may appear shocking to some people who might well ask: “Is the teaching of the Buddha based on self-interest?” The answer is that it is. The most important aspect of the Buddha’s teaching is that it is based on enlightened self-interest. The search for happiness itself is not wrong—only the delusion springing from ignorance as to how this happiness is to be obtained. To obtain happiness, or freedom from dukkha, is the seeming paradox of Buddhism. No one can be happy who still cherishes and hugs to himself the idea of separateness, of grasping at a personal private fulfilment.

No one has given the subject of dukkha such profound thought, and no one has analysed it so thoroughly as the Buddha. There have been others who have realised that life is in essence suffering; the author of Ecclesiastes summed it up as being, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” The philosopher Schopenhauer also expounded dukkha with great insight. The modern existentialists, too, are very thorough-going in their expositions of life being primarily unsatisfactory and miserable. But none of these have offered any solution. The author of Ecclesiastes offers conflicting advice. In one place he tells the people, “Remember now thy creator in the days of thy youth,” and elsewhere he says, “Be not righteous overmuch; neither make thyself overwise. Why shouldst thou destroy thyself? Be not overmuch wicked, neither be thou foolish. Why shouldst thou die before thy time?” Throughout this harangue he modestly claims that “my wisdom remained with me.” A few paragraphs later he adds: “Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun, because I leave it unto the man that shall be after me.” Apparently he was incapable of deriving any pleasure from the thought that someone would benefit from his exertions, therefore we can very much doubt the extent of his vaunted wisdom. Neither Schopenhauer nor the existentialists counsel any line of action that is helpful. The Buddha however did not content himself with the bare statement that life was dukkha—he also offered a way out of dukkha.

Everyone who comes to a Buddhist Society, consciously or unconsciously, comes with the unspoken question: “What can Buddhism do for me?” We can tell you definitely, and it is better to do so right from the beginning, that it cannot satisfy all your curiosity and all your wonderings about the metaphysical questions about the baffling riddles of the universe. To some slight degree some of the questions can be answered by science. But science limits itself to the study of phenomena, how they operate, and this knowledge enables the human race to use the forces of nature to further our material welfare, thus making life more comfortable, and to some extent, more secure. However, science cannot and does not attempt to find out the *deus ex machina*, the noumenon behind the phenomenon, nor can it define what man’s aspirations should be or provide him with a blueprint for happiness. It deals purely with the objective world. The subjective world of man’s inner being is completely outside the sphere of science.

Dukkha is of three categories:

1. The dukkha inherent in an imperfect world in which there are all kinds of cataclysms, earthquakes, tidal-waves, floods; in which there is constant flux, change, motion, impermanence, instability, disease, and death, and in which life preys on life.
2. The dukkha that is prevalent by reason of the inadequacies and injustices of social and economic systems.
3. The dukkha or suffering that comes about through man's wrong thinking and his spiritual ignorance, which cause the blemishes and defects in his character.

The most fundamental of these is the third, because this is the one that we can do most about. To some slight degree we can minimise or prevent some of the dire happenings mentioned in the first category, such as floods, bush-fires, etc. We can find cures for disease and prolong life, but we have to accept the inevitability of impermanence and death. In regard to economic and social systems, it is within our power to change these entirely. As Omar Khayyam said:

Oh love, couldst thou and I with fate conspire,
to wreck this sorry scheme of things entire,
and shatter it to bits—and then,
remould it nearer to the heart's desire.

Admittedly, this at present is a somewhat Utopian dream, but at least it is within the realm of possibility, if not of probability. The third category of dukkha is the most important because all changes have to be made by men themselves. In that lies the greatness of the Buddha. He showed the way by which a man can overcome his own ignorance which makes him seek happiness in the wrong way and in the wrong directions. He showed him a positive way to achieve an abiding happiness not of an ephemeral nature. So we revert to the question, what can Buddhism do for you? If you recognise dukkha, it can help you to understand it, and understanding dukkha, to transcend it. Thus, we only aim to offer the Teaching of the Buddha to those who have need of it. Those are the people who, at least, have some glimmering that life is dukkha. The man who has not suffered, and who is not capable of recognising or experiencing any kind of suffering is incapable of growth. If he is still satisfied with orthodox beliefs that assure him that this is the "best of all possible worlds," that "God's in his heaven and all's right with the world," and who is content to go after the mirage of boundless pleasure on the ever-receding horizon of time, mistaking the shadow for the substance, quite candidly and obviously, Buddhism is not for such a man. Thus we have been mildly rebuked about the fact that we do not try "to sell" Buddhism to anyone, that our attitude is "take it or leave it." We must concede that, in essence, these charges are quite true. In the first place, Buddhism is only suitable for those who are sufficiently mature to be able to dispense with the props provided by the orthodox beliefs. It is for those who wish to lead a life more meaningful for themselves and others, for those who wish to avoid suffering, both in respect of themselves and others. As regards the "take it or leave it" attitude, we know very well that that is what you are going to do anyway, and we do not wish to employ any form of pressure or coercion whatever. However, our attitude is not one of bland indifference. We think inwardly that the world would be a much better place if it were to follow the teachings of the Buddha sincerely and pragmatically. There would be no wars, no exploitation, no rat-race, no "keeping up with the Jones," and it would even go beyond all this, for the final goal stated by the Buddha is Nibbāna.

It is not through knowledge alone, but through experience of the world that we are brought into relation with it. The Buddha's essential teaching was Nibbāna, the end of suffering. The way to Nibbāna is the Noble Eightfold Path, the goal of which is to stand out of objective existence altogether. But, to be ready for this, an individual must experience a sense of

crucifixion, a sense of agonising annihilation, a sense of the bitter nothingness of all empirical existence which is subject to the law of change and death.

It was this initial realisation of the hollowness of life that drove the Buddha out of his palace to seek for a beyond, and it is the same initial realisation that impels us to accept his way, and to follow in his footsteps leading to the beyond, to the great peace, where there is neither birth nor death, no sorrow, no grief, no pain, and no lamentation.

That is the enlightened self-interest to which I have referred. On which side their bread is buttered many people cannot see because of the jam, but even jam in the end acquires a bitter taste, which is something each must find out and experience for himself.

How then, can we urge anyone to accept Buddhism, the choice of which is like Bassanio's choice of the leaden casket, in preference to the silver and the gold? On the leaden casket was the warning:

Who chooseth me must give
and hazard all he has.

—Natasha Jackson

VIII. Craving and Dukkha Permeates All Life

Life is a self-supporting, self-developing process. In terms of this planet, scientific studies have traced a three billion year history of slow development, from lowly beginnings, reaching up at last to humankind. Man is unique in being the first of all creatures to theorise upon and finally comprehend this.

From the simplest, lowliest virus to such developed animal minds as apes, whales, and elephants, no creature is free of craving. Animals first of all desire food. All creatures must eat, and eat continually to support life. Even the very lowest creatures, such as amoeba, paramecium, and bacteria, must search for food. To find food they must adapt and specialise.

An amoeba, a single-celled creature, hunts for and preys on creatures yet smaller than itself. It extends itself, forming pseudopods, reaching out, grasping, over-reaching and enfolding its victim.

A paramecium has a different method. Smooth and streamlined, propelled by rhythmically beating cilia, it darts about sensing its prey, then pounces and swallows its meal through the gaping gullet in the contra of its back.

Bacteria are more sedentary. They do not hunt for prey, but rather feed on dead, or sometimes parasitize living, matter, plant or animal, breeding enormously when food is available, and lying dormant at other times. Yet another specialisation is the volvox. This small creature is composed of many cells. Some are specialised for swimming, some for seeing and directing operations, yet others for reproduction. Each one of these cells is capable of living a separate animal existence of its own, catching its own food, and reproducing itself by cell division, as they are sometimes found to do.

Here indeed is specialisation, four distinct forms and four ways of life all within living creatures composed of but a single cell. Each grasps after food, and each, conditioned by need and environment, of its own free choice repeated by generations through evolutionary time, has resulted in these varied solutions. It may be that each type had no choice but to adapt or starve, but still it was a choice, a volition.

So the amoeba chose to move slowly and developed pseudopodia; it doubtlessly did not actually intend to develop pseudopodia, these came as a necessary result of a slow-moving system, plus the need to catch food as slow-moving as amoeba itself, and so unable to escape its protruded engulfing masses.

Paramecium chose to chase its prey, to dart, to pounce, to swallow. Hence it leaps about, chasing prey as agile and nimble as itself.

Likewise lazy bacteria preferred to consume dead organic matter which demands a minimum of effort, and no particular ability of movement. It also demands ability to withstand times of scarcity, and these developed. Other bacteria became parasitic, and had to learn to deal with bodily defence systems, while others learned to synthesise their own food in a similar way to plants. Volvox, in co-operation, builds a bigger creature from their own individual bodies, accepting specialisation as a price for the advantages of co-operation in hunting larger prey, and trapping larger amounts of sunlight, for volvox is one of those curious creatures which are part plant and part animal.

Later on, with increasing complexity and specialisation arose new needs and pleasures, reproduction and conscious pleasure and displeasure in surrounding conditions. However marginal these senses may be, once experienced a tremendous force for change is set up, and

through change evolution takes place. The desire for food brings a conscious volition to search, locomotion is developed, and ways of obtaining it are devised. Hence some small reptile-like creature developed a taste for a kind of berry which grew far out along the branches of a tall tree. To satisfy its desire it perilously climbed out on the swaying limbs. Many may have tumbled to death, but over the generations they became more agile and learned to jump from limb to limb. Others, perhaps, were pursued by some climbing carnivore from whose cruel fangs they naturally desired to escape. Their jumps became longer and more perilous, but now a strange thing happened. Their front limbs became broad and flattened, and their reptilian scales gradually lengthened. So, purely in response to desire, whether for tasty and inaccessible food, or to escape greedy jaws and preserve life, some reptiles evolved into birds. In response to the action of flying, their keel muscles developed, their lungs expanded, their bones became hollow for lightness, and their sight became more keen to prevent them crashing into obstacles at speed, and to see their food at greater distances. Different colours developed, partly for camouflage to hide from enemies, and partly as a signal to the opposite sex. So it is that from desire, even the most simple of desires, arises all change and evolution.

As animal life increases in complexity, so it finds ever more opportunities to feel both attraction and aversion, till with increasingly developed brain and senses at last the human stage is reached, and the pattern of desire for food, sex, and physical ease is established. Such was Indian civilization at the time of Siddhartha Gautama, but man with his endless discoveries and inventions has increased to infinity the directions in which individual desire can lead. Being completely free from "instinct," man can undertake, or seek to undertake, whatever he will. His pleasures are endless, and capable of infinite refinement and elaboration. He is no longer primarily a food producer and jack of all trades, and as the opportunities for pleasure increase, so does man's desire and craving for them if they may be earned, bought, or grasped illegally. Eternal pleasure, without effort or fear, has ever been the goal of all life, from the humblest single-celled creature up to man. He has dreamed of a heaven of ease and pleasure, free from endless work, free from illness, free from old age and death, and this is still his goal. Only the wise have realised that endless, insatiable desire will lead to boredom if the object is attained, and to obsession if not attained. It is desire that has driven man to conquer nations and enslave populations. To this end are man's endless, scientific aspirations that led to the invention of the motor engine, the telephone, the computer, the splitting of the atom, the reaching out to the moon and the planets. The modern ascetic in his frustration turns his back on pleasure and comfort and ease, and takes up climbing some hitherto unconquered mountain, sailing the oceans singlehanded, or breaking sporting records, and these are admired as a minority, as were the naked ascetics of the Buddha's time.

As the Buddha said, desire is endless, grasping is endless. But the Tathâgata, who in his youth had every pleasure which a rich and powerful father, a devoted royal court, and a beautiful wife could bestow, likewise found that life was just not good enough, even at its most ideal. So today, no amount of money, not all the pleasures possible, nor the results of medical and scientific progress have abolished birth, sickness, old age and death. True, many more women and babies survive the birth process today than in former centuries. True, many sicknesses are conquered or moderated. True, more people live to a greater age, but there is no ultimate conquest. Nor is Karma abolished. We must still suffer in this or future lives for all evil or stupid actions, and medical man and scientist still shake their heads over illnesses, pain and woe arising from bad karma.

Life is still unsatisfactory and devoid of real happiness and contentment. If natural woes have abated, man-made woes, such as wars, hard and unrewarding work, dirty, noisy cities, poverty and overpopulation ever increase.

Such is the reward of clinging and craving. It is not easy to give up. In many countries it is not even permitted to turn away from life in the world. Even where this is permitted for religious reasons, begging is forbidden by law, and in some countries the homeless are liable to arrest for vagrancy. The constant demands and distractions of the world of today make any systematic meditation impossible. Life and living for pleasure is lauded, and so craving goes on. Clinging is inevitable, and cessation not be thought of, except in terms of a single life followed by an eternal death, which is increasingly being accepted as mere extinction.

Hence hope is lost, and the activities of the world become even more frenetic. The sick, if well looked after, are at the same time out of sight and out of mind, the old are shunted aside, the dead buried or cremated quietly and discreetly.

In all this science shows clearly the correctness of the Buddha's insight into the illusory nature of things. The human body is after all only a colony of single celled creatures in co-operation, in essence not much different from the volvox. These cells, by division of labour, form co-operating body parts, or *skandhas*. These change continually, are utterly impermanent, for ultimately even bones decay. They are revolting to the eye, loathsome to smell and unpleasant to touch. Composed of chemicals, molecules and atomic elements, these basic atoms, themselves mostly emptiness and greatly divisible, are impersonal and uncaring for whatever forms they construct. They can be likened to dancers, the forms they make to the steps of a dance. One dancer can take part in very many dances, and may easily break off in the middle of one, or do it badly. Karma may be likened to the choreographer, and infinite space to the dancing stage. Stars, galaxies, planets, stones, rivers, mountains, amoebas, all living things, including mankind, and all things made by human hands are all dances and steps in dances. On the stage of infinite space and in timeless eternity, the dance of the atoms is performed.

Karma is the law of balance. Itself unconscious, it serves to hold order and to correct unbalance and exaggeration. Machine-like, it is automatic, impersonal, efficient, and an ultimate law like gravity, centrifugal force, or magnetic attraction and repulsion. It is inexorable and inescapable.

—Rosemary Taplin

IX. The Growth of Dukkha in the World of Today— Wealth or Wisdom?

Whoso in this world grows in wealth and store,
in sons and wives and in four-footed beasts,
has fame and worship, as a man of means,
from relatives and friends and those who rule.

But whoso in this world in faith and virtue,
in wisdom, generosity and lore
alike makes growth—a very man like this,
keen-eyed, in this life grows alike in

both.⁴⁷When man first emerged as a species distinct from his cousins, the apes, physically he was at a disadvantage. He lacked their strength of limb and agility, and compared with the other animals in the battle for survival, he had neither tooth, claw, fang, nor nail with which to protect himself. He seemed foredoomed to early extinction but for one characteristic the rest of his contemporaries lacked. His brain was equipped not only to think, but to reason—to think out logical conclusions from observation, and to deal with abstract ideas for weal or woe.

For defence and offensive survival he armed himself with a club. Finding it insufficient for his needs at times, he loaded its head with a stone, and later with the metal he had learned to work. He made for himself a spear to lengthen his reach beyond that of his enemies. He invented the bow to project a small spear still further beyond the striking distance of the predators and to bring down game for food at a distance. He also learned to use these weapons against his fellowman.

From those primitive days and ways man has progressed to gunpowder, and to guided missiles capable of carrying the products of atomic research, and of orbiting the earth every few hours to discharge their lethal loads on a pin-pointed target. The weapons of survival have become those of domination.

In the long progression from the primitive hunter to the modern technician there has been successive periods of stagnation shattered eventually by new inventions. The invention of the wheel is still acclaimed as one of the major breakthroughs, followed by steam-power, and then the internal combustion engine, with the harnessing and exploitation of electricity in its many uses. It is less than 200 years since Watt conceived the idea of the high-pressure steam-engine, and introduced the industrial era. A hundred years later Rudolf Diesel invented the internal combustion engine and mechanical transport leaped ahead, making aeronautics possible. About 50 years later—in 1945—the atomic bomb was first tested in New Mexico in July, and further tests were carried out on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the following month, and we entered the atomic age. Though roughly 60 pounds of uranium will release the equivalent energy of 20,000 tonnes of T.N.T., there is a limit to the size that can be manufactured, so now we have the hydrogen bomb, which releases several times the energy of a uranium bomb, with no severe limitation on the size that can be manufactured, and the cobalt bomb is top secret, which is said to be as a cannon to a cracker when compared with its forerunners.

Certainly man's capacity to think and reason has brought him a long way from his primitive ancestors, but has it brought him any peace, contentment, or happiness?

⁴⁷ A V 137.

In the earlier days the worst calamities he faced were what the insurance companies termed “acts of God,” against which they refused cover, such as earthquakes, storm and tempest. These with floods and famines, plagues and epidemics, were accounted as major disasters beyond man’s control or connivance. At times personal injury occurred while hunting, or more serious numerically in tribal wars which were usually fought on an economic or social basis—for food or wives. However, while to a great extent we have relieved God of the responsibility for the aftermath of natural catastrophes, by earthquake-proof buildings, flood prevention, storm forecasting, food distribution, and the greater control of plagues and epidemics through hygiene and medical science, man dies more frequently, and in greater numbers, due to accident and wars. The numbers killed in plane, train, and traffic accidents annually is ever increasing. Wars are no longer economic or social, or even territorial. They have become ideological, or racial, if pogroms and genocide may be classed as wars, seeing that they appear to be a feature of modern warfare. Nothing short of extermination satisfies if there is opposition to the ideologists with the more destructive weapons and manpower, and war casualties are counted by millions.

Nor has the animal kingdom been more fortunate at man’s hands. It is not likely that primitive man was responsible for the extermination of the pre-historic animals whose fossilised remains have been reconstructed by the scientists, but since the Christian era began more than 200 species of mammals and birds have disappeared off the face of the earth. At present some 60 species are in grave danger of extinction unless urgent action for their protection is taken—which seems unlikely. Not only the ever-pressing need for more space to live and land to till is responsible for this, though the destruction of the natural habitats of wildlife to supply the needs of man is a major contributing factor. Man’s greed for wealth and sheer love of slaughter is to be greatly blamed. Another cause of wholesale slaughter upsetting the balance of nature is the widespread use of poisonous insecticides with a chain reaction, and the introduction of foreign pests to combat local pests, which also at times has resulted in wiping out more of the useful fauna than the pest they were imported to control.

Even the natural forests have suffered, and introduced orchards are suffering by man’s insatiable need for room and food through a misuse of his thought-processes. Thousands of acres and millions of feet of valuable timber were felled and burnt to make stock pastures, plant vineyards, and orchards, or for the cultivation of food crops. Today many of the orchards are being torn out where the excessive use of insecticides has so poisoned the ground that the trees have absorbed the poison through their roots and via the sap veins have poisoned the fruits they bear.

All this makes one wonder what has happened to man’s ability to *think* and reason to a logical conclusion. As an unused muscle or organ will atrophy and become vestigial, so it would appear man’s reasoning power has become atrophied and lopsided. The initial balance between his needs and their satisfaction has been destroyed. His creative powers have outrun his reason. What he has gained by knowledge is now jeopardised by his lack of wisdom. Theoretical knowledge alone will not dispel the darkness of “ignorance” in its Buddhist sense and meaning. Man has and is applying his theoretical knowledge very largely to add fuel to the fires of greed and hatred, which summed up is dukkha.

This is what might be termed objective dukkha—generalized dukkha external to our own consciousness and mental reactions. We have allowed ourselves to become conditioned to dangerous living till we accept it as the norm, for modern man is daily in greater danger of death than ever were his primitive forefathers.

One of the results of developing man’s creative powers, while neglecting the development of his wisdom, is another widespread form of dukkha—an increase in adventitious unease and

distress, the reaction of the individual to collateral effects, themselves the result of the preceding causes mentioned above.

While medical science has to a great extent brought many diseases and endemic plagues under control or eliminated them, a fresh crop of “modern” diseases and illnesses have arisen that threaten to be comparable in their effects. One of the results of “lopsided thinking” has been to produce quantity rather than quality, and as a consequence, while the amount of food available to those who can afford it has increased, the scientists tell of malnutrition on a large scale even amongst the upper brackets of our so-called “affluent society.” Life expectancy has been prolonged, but stamina has decreased, and there is a corresponding increase in the psychosomatic malfunctioning of the organic system. Nervous tension, mental ill-health, blood pressure, heart failure, ulcers, and many other distressing illnesses are attributed to “modern living.” Life is no longer a matter of the survival of the fittest, but the survival of those who can afford to be mended, patched, or pickled by the medical practitioner.

This brings us to personal dukkha and the modern reaction to it. There seems to be an almost unconscious, or at least inarticulate, realisation of this build-up of dukkha that exists today. Apart from individual and personal reaction, there appears to be an inclination for those vaguely conscious of it to drift into groups and or express themselves as “schools” or “movements.” It is the seeking for solace in companionship with others similarly distressed, and the search for a palliative. This mental distress finds expression in many ways, as do the methods used to overcome it.

In the field of the arts—painting, sculpture, music, dancing, etc.—all definition, natural beauty, realism, and perspective is fading. The artist fills his canvas with vague or forceful confusion the purpose of which he alone can see. The sculptor rakes over the rubbish dumps and from the discarded junk of a city builds or welds a conglomeration of scrap that to him visualises his inspiration or despair. The musician can no longer find expression in the tonal spectrum of orthodox instruments, and so introduces sounds produced by the jack-hammer, electric static, or by the perversion of playing the score backwards. Under its influence the dancers convulsively jerk and contort their bodies as though standing on a hot-plate in inescapable anguish. The “beats,” the “hippies,” the “flower children,” have turned their backs on society and conventional behaviour and dress, and make their protest in a form of inverted hedonism that holds no pleasure, other than drowning their confusion in the coma of drugs and eroticism. The less extreme or expressive person finds, or seeks, relief in alternating between sedatives and “pep pills” that are being consumed literally in tonnes annually.

It may be said that this is but one side of the picture. It may be asked, “What of the benefits accruing from modern science and the mechanisation of industry?” The hours of labour have been shortened, and the methods improved from the simple task of beating eggs in the kitchen to the erection of sky-scrapers and interplanetary communications. Never has man had so much for so little effort.

Therein lies the crux of the whole matter. We spoke of mental atrophy, and certainly there is little wisdom in modern living. The gift of self-sufficiency has become vestigial. Generalising, man has ceased to think for himself, ceased to entertain himself, and ceased to exert himself. His two main objectives is to become affluent without having to work for affluence, and to be entertained by the few professional entertainers in their various fields. Greater leisure and higher standards of living have not brought him happiness. The excess of spending money and easy credit over the justified requirements for security and comfort is reflected in the millions invested day by day in legalised gambling, state lotteries, horse racing, poker machines, etc. In the field of entertainment sportsmen are bought and sold like cattle. The world is combed for

entertainers and the hysterics of the juvenile crowds in the balls are only equalled by their parents in the clubs or around the sports arenas.

It is told of the Buddha that he likened mankind to fish in a fast drying pool, whose frantic struggles to escape only churned up the mud and choked them. "What he would have thought of modern society is beyond words! Where in this picture can you find "faith and virtue, wisdom, generosity and lore?"

In her introduction to the Sigâlovâda Sutta, Mrs. C.A.F. Rhys-Davids intersperses her comment with quotations from Buddhaghosa, who wrote in the 5th century AD, and has this to say of the code of ethics for the layman as therein set out:

"The Buddha's doctrine of love and goodwill between man and man is here set forth in a system of domestic and social ethics with more comprehensive detail than elsewhere. Nothing in the duties of housemen is left unmentioned. So fundamental are the human interests involved, so sane and wide is the wisdom that envisages them, that the utterances are as fresh and practically as binding today and here as they were then at Râjagaha. Happy would have been the village or the clan on the banks of the Ganges, where the people were full of the kindly spirit of fellow feeling, the noble spirit of justice, which breathes through these naive and simple sayings. Not less happy would be the village or family on the banks of the Thames of which this could be said."

And to up-date Mrs. Rhys-Davids, the same applies to any city, town or village on river, shore, or hinterland in 1967.

To find a solution to any problem it is first necessary to understand the problem itself. Why then, or how, has man so degenerated "spiritually" (for want of a better word) when he has made such phenomenal strides scientifically?

Until two centuries ago, much of the world beyond the Euro-Asian continents and the Mediterranean fringe of Africa was comparatively unknown territory, and the aboriginal population of the Americas, Australia, Oceania, and most of Africa, were primitive peoples finding food, clothing, and shelter by local hunting or agriculture. Today every last mile of the continents, and island of the oceans, has been brought within the ambit of so-called civilization, and willy-nilly tied to the "wheels of progress" with their accompanying evils.

"How can progress be evil?" you may ask, and the fact that the question is raised indicates that "lopsided thinking" to which we have referred.

The Indians of South, Central, and North America today are less happy as "second-class citizens" than were their ancestors. The aborigines of Australia are struggling for recognition as "people," and still lack the amenities of full citizenship. The inhabitants of the South Seas have little to thank the white man for when compared with the introduced epidemics and disease he brought them. Africa is in turmoil as the natives strive to emulate the "processes of civilization," and determine right by might. Tibet is being "liberated" from feudalism and "civilised" by bloodshed and oppression. This is the "progress" of which we are so proud!

The great incentive in life is the search for happiness at whatever level of development man may stand. All religions, all political ideologies, all avenues of sensual pleasures, are based on satisfying that search. The hope of Heaven, Paradise, Sukhavati or Nibbâna is to escape from suffering and find final happiness with its cessation.

In politics, one ideology sees happiness in freedom from want under state ownership, and control of the distribution of commodities. Another sees happiness in free enterprise, and a government of the people, by the people, for the people. Unfortunately, both fail in two ways. First, it is impossible to regiment personal thinking as apart from action, with the result that in

both political systems there are minority groups who dissent from the will of the majority. This is a prominent feature of modern politics, and though all reforms and lasting revolutionary movements have been born of, and activated by, minorities, they have been, and are being accused of being “unpatriotic” and troublemakers. Their minority rights are suppressed by majority legislation, enforced if necessary with armed might. The other point on which both fail is that of imagining that happiness can be bought with material well-being. One ideology seeks that objective openly as a part and indivisible content of its manifesto. The other, having discreetly relegated “heaven” to the limbo of fairy tales, substitutes the welfare state here and now.

And dukkha grows apace!

To the Buddhist student the cause is not hard to find. What is the cause, the arising of dukkha? Craving is the cause, the arising of dukkha. What is the causal origin of craving? Ignorance, manifested through delusion, greed, and hatred, is the cause, the arising of craving.

It is delusion first that has caused knowledge to outrun wisdom. Obviously, it would be absurd to say ignorance was born of the industrial age, but equally obvious is the fact that paradoxically the growth of ignorance has paralleled the growth of knowledge! There has been a corresponding decrease in wisdom with the increase in knowledge, and wisdom, not knowledge, is the antonym of ignorance. Without the profit motive, the primitive people adjusted the satisfaction of their needs to the requirements of the moment. There was no indiscriminate slaughter for “sport” or profit, no stockpiling of resources for gain or domination. Delusion manifested itself in the worship of knowledge, as distinct from wisdom, and knowledge has led us to the stars—and to the brink of total annihilation! Where is the wisdom in this?

Born of delusion and fathered by ignorance is that misbegotten child—greed. It has been greed that oppressed nations and racial minorities; that has caused castes and class distinctions; that has caused, and is still causing, wars, pogroms, genocide, and racial strife; that is the true incentive of the space race, for he who controls space, controls mankind. The conquest of space, of a lesser nation, or establishing the supremacy of an ideology, is a means to power, and the possession of power, whether spatial, territorial, technical, or ideological, is a means to the end of greedy satisfaction. The problem of the industrial world is the ever-spiralling high cost of living. The worker demands and gets shorter hours and more wages. The employer grants it grudgingly while adding the increased cost to the basic cost of his product. He then further adds his percentage to the higher cost, so that the more it costs to produce and distribute, the greater his profit on the turnover. The result may be read in the annual reports of big business where ever-increasing record profits are reported annually. On the other hand, no longer can the worker earn food, clothing, and shelter, and provide the higher standard of education for his children that is demanded today, so he “moonlights” (takes a second job) and sends his wife out to work also. Greed is again the incentive of big business, and of the worker alike, and a delinquent generation of bad-mannered, and neglected children the result.

It is not hard to follow the family-tree of these evils. Delusion, begotten by ignorance, begets greed, whose child is hatred. In both victor and the vanquished, hatred smoulders ready to flare into violent action at the first opportunity. The gloating of the victor, his pride in his accomplishments, his sense of superiority, is hatred feeding the fires of greed while being heated by them. Each new victory spurs him on in search of further achievements. The vanquished bides his time, with rancour in his heart, ready to make a bid for freedom. His hatred is as greed-based as the victors. It is mere force of circumstance that finds him conquered, and the will to conquer has not died within him. His very defeat has strengthened it.

And so we come to craving. None but the Arahat, the perfected one, is free from craving in one form or another. Internationally, it is the basic cause of wars—craving for supremacy, for the permanency of established systems and ideologies, or the overthrow of existing ones and the establishment of a new one. On the personal level, the pursuit of sensual pleasures, of the happiness that wealth may bring temporarily, the “escape routes” of the “hippies” and the “flower children,” all these are manifestations of craving that cannot ever be satisfied. The craving for fame and worship by men as one of the “successful ones” who has accrued “wealth and store” cannot bring peace of mind, even though this ambition be achieved. As one cynic has said: “At least one can be miserable in comfort!” and that is the most that can be expected. Knowledge has made such an existence possible to more people over the last 200 years than ever before, but it has not brought them happiness. Never in the history of the world has there been such widespread unhappiness, uncertainty, unease, and unrest.

To preach, teach, talk, or write of faith and virtue, of wisdom, generosity and love, is as a voice crying in the wilderness, but who knows, someone somewhere may hear, and yet find the true happiness known only to those in whom craving has been extinguished, and the fires of delusion, greed and hatred have died for want of fuel.

—C. F. Knight

X. Dukkha According to the Theravāda⁴⁸

Dukkha is the second of the “three characteristics” (*ti-lakkhaṇa*). It is sometimes treated in its own right, though more usually based upon the first (*anicca*) as a consequence of that.⁴⁹

There is no single completely adequate or even generally accepted English rendering of *dukkha* (adj. and n.). The most usual are “pain” (mostly for painful feeling), and “suffering” (in the wider sense of what is described by the first Noble Truth, covering potential as well as actual pain). Other alternatives are “ill,” “unsatisfactoriness,” “insecurity,” “anguish,” “unpleasantness,” and so on.

Derivations

In modern etymology *dukkha* is derived either from the prefix *du(r)* plus the termination *-ka* (cf. derivation of Sanskrit equivalent *duhka* from *duh* plus *-ka*) or on the analogy of its opposite *sukha* (cf. Vedic Sanskrit). Ācariya Buddhaghosa gives two alternative derivations. (1) An etymological one for the Truth of *dukkha*: “The word *du* (“difficult”) is met with in the sense of vile (*kucchita*); for they call a vile child a “*dupputta*” (difficult child); the word *kham* (“-ness”) is met with in the sense of “empty” (*tuccha*), since they call empty space “*kham*”; and the (material of the) first Truth is “vile” because it is the haunt of many dangers, and it is “empty” because it is devoid of the lastingness, beauty, pleasure, and self, conceived of it by uncritical people.”⁵⁰ As one of the kinds of feeling he derives it semantically: “It gives suffering (*dukkhayati*), thus it is suffering (*dukkha*); or else it consumes (*khaṇati*) in two ways (*dvēdhā*; by means of the two sub-moments (*khaṇa*) of arising and presence), thus it is suffering.”⁵¹ This is a play on the words *khaṇati* glossed by *avadāriyati*, to break down or dig, and *khaṇa*, the moment which possesses the three sub-moments (*khaṇa*) of arising, presence and dissolution. The *Vibhāvīnī-ṭīkā* (One of the commentaries to the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*) puts forward the last-mentioned derivation and also another semantic derivation: “It is difficult to bear (*dukkhamam*), thus it is suffering; but others say also “It makes difficulty, in the giving of an opportunity, thus it is suffering: *dukkharam okāsadāne etassā ti dukkham*.”

Various kinds of dukkha

The concern of the Buddha’s teaching is with the problem of *dukkha* and its purpose is the ending of *dukkha*. “Formerly, Anurādha, as now, what I describe is suffering and the cessation of suffering.”⁵² If *aniccatā* (impermanence) is taken as the radical characteristic upon which the Buddha bases his liberating doctrine, still it is *dukkhatā*, as insecurity from actual pain, that he takes for the measure in developing that doctrine; for pain, unlike pleasure, is always and unfailingly ready to hand. The commentary discriminates as follows: “There are many kinds of suffering, namely, intrinsic suffering (*dukkha-dukkha*), suffering in change (*vipariṇāma-dukkha*), and suffering in formations (*saṅkhāra-dukkha*),⁵³ and also concealed suffering, exposed suffering, indirect suffering, and direct suffering. Herein, bodily and mental unpleasant feelings are called *intrinsic suffering* because of their individual essence (*sabhāva*), their name, and their unpleasantness. Bodily and mental pleasant feeling are called “suffering in change” because

⁴⁸ Reproduced with the kind permission of the Editor, *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, and the Department of Cultural Affairs, Sri Lanka.

⁴⁹ see also the articles on *Anicca* and *Anattā*.

⁵⁰ *Vism* Ch. 16, p. 494.

⁵¹ *Vism* Ch. 17, p. 527; cf. Ch. IV, p. 145 under *sukha* and *Dhs-a* 92.

⁵² SN 22:86/S III 119; cf. MN 22/M I 140.

⁵³ For these three see SN 38:14/S IV 259.

they are a cause for the arising of suffering when they change.⁵⁴ The (neutral) feeling of onlooking-equanimity (*upekkhā*) and (all) remaining formations belonging to the three planes are called “suffering in formations” because they are oppressed by rise and fall. Such ... affliction as earache ... is called “concealed suffering” because it can be known (in another) only by questioning, the affliction not being openly evident. Affliction produced by ... torture, for example, is called exposed suffering because it can be known without questioning, the affliction being openly evident; it is also called “evident suffering.” Except for what is “intrinsic suffering” all given under the Truth of Suffering beginning with “birth” (see below) is also called *indirect suffering* because it is the basis for one or other kind of suffering. What is called *direct suffering* is “intrinsic suffering.”⁵⁵

Now all these kinds of suffering fall under two main heads: “suffering in formations” (the general “unsatisfactoriness” of existence stated as the “characteristic of suffering” and as the “Truth of Suffering”) and “unpleasant feeling” (the particular kind of feeling that is bodily or mental pain, unpleasant affect). In what follows we shall first define the characteristic and then see how this is handled descriptively in the *Tiṭṭhaka* and its commentaries, after which we shall touch upon the general aspect of suffering as a Noble Truth and its relation to the particular mode of unpleasant feeling. However, the subjects of Truth and feeling (*sacca* and *vedanā*) are properly outside the scope of this article: suffering is only one of the four truths and one of the three principal divisions of feeling. Lastly, we shall see how suffering is treated as a basis for meditation and judgment. As in the case of anicca we shall be concerned mainly with quotations, leaving discussion to the article on *Tilakkhaṇa*.⁵⁶

Definitions of the Characteristic of Dukkha

The general characteristic of suffering is most usually based on that of impermanence: “What is impermanent is suffering”⁵⁷ or “Is what is impermanent pleasant or unpleasant? Unpleasant, Lord.”⁵⁸ Or else it is defined in its own right: “‘Suffering, suffering’ is said, Lord; what is suffering? Materiality (*rūpa*) is suffering, *Rādha*, and so are feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness,”⁵⁹ and “all is suffering. And what is the all that is suffering? The eye is suffering ...”⁶⁰ or more summarily “All formations are suffering”⁶¹ To these the Canonical commentary, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, adds: “Materiality (etc.) is suffering in the sense of fear (that its impermanence inspires).”⁶²

This general characteristic, like those of impermanence and not-self, is not a part of the Abhidhamma system proper, but is rather a summary statement of that. The strict Abhidhamma treatment, in fact, forms the detailed “analysis and synthesis” of the whole process of existence, which the three characteristics sum up. In the Abhidhamma, however, it should be noted that unpleasant bodily feeling (*dukkha*) is regarded as only associated with body-consciousness (*kāya-viññāṇa*) and unpleasant mental feeling (*domanassa*) only with mind-consciousness (*mano-viññāṇa*). The impermanence of all possible heavenly existences stated in the *Dhammahadaya-Vibhaṅga* brings these within the range of “suffering in formations” without exception.

⁵⁴ See MN 44 cited below.

⁵⁵ *Vism* Ch. 16, p. 499.

⁵⁶ This article remained unwritten by the late author (Editor).

⁵⁷ SN 35:1/S IV 1.

⁵⁸ E.g. SN 22:59/ S III 66.

⁵⁹ SN 23:15/S III 196.

⁶⁰ SN 35:44/S IV 28. See the article on Anicca for parallel quotation “all is impermanent.”

⁶¹ *Dhp*-a 20, 6/V 278.

⁶² *Nānakathā*, *Paṭis* I 37.

Ācariya Buddhaghosa distinguishes between “The suffering and the characteristic of suffering ... (The) five categories (*khandha*) are suffering because of the words ‘What is impermanent is suffering.’⁶³ Why? Because of continuous oppression. The mode of being continuously oppressed is the characteristic of suffering.”⁶⁴ Again “The eye (etc., while impermanent,) can (also) be known as suffering in the sense of oppression; and it is suffering for four reasons as well; for since it reaches presence when arisen and in presence is undermined by ageing and on arrival at ageing must inevitably dissolve, it is therefore suffering because it is continuously oppressed, because (the oppression is) difficult to bear, because it is the basis for (intrinsic) suffering, and because it denies pleasure.”⁶⁵

Treatment in Suttas and Commentaries

“The eye is suffering. The cause and condition for the arising of the eye are suffering, so how could the eye, which is brought to being by what is suffering, be pleasure? The ear ... nose ... tongue ... body ... mind⁶⁶ ... and the five categories affected by clinging (*upādānakkhandha*) are treated analogously.”⁶⁷ “Whoever relishes the eye (etc.) relishes suffering, and he will not be freed from suffering, I say,”⁶⁸ and “I see no single kind of materiality, Ānanda, which will not cause, with the change and alteration of that materiality, the arising of sorrow and lamentation, suffering, grief and despair in him who relishes it.”⁶⁹ In ignorance of this “gods and human beings love visible objects and enjoy them, but with the change, fading and ceasing of those objects they abide in suffering. They love sounds ... odours ... flavours ... tangibles ... ideas.”⁷⁰ “What is the ripening of suffering? When someone is overcome, and his mind obsessed, by suffering, either he sorrows, grieves and laments, and beating his breast, he weeps and becomes distraught, or else he undertakes a search externally: ‘Who is there that knows one word, two words, for the cessation of this suffering?’ I say that suffering either ripens as confusion or ripens as search.”⁷¹ In the Canonical commentary suffering is equated with “arising (of categories at rebirth), occurrence (of them during life), accumulation (of action due to ripen), relinking (of death with birth in the renewal of being)” and with ten other synonyms for these five.⁷²

Philosophical thought mostly does not escape bias a priori by craving and preoccupation with ideas of the value of being versus non-being as intrinsically good, and to some extent it therefore tends to neglect mindful observation of what actually happens in favour of pure logical deduction. In a Sutta (difficult to translate) containing an utterance of the Buddha’s made soon after his enlightenment we find this: “This world suffers (*santāpajāta*), being exposed to contact. Even what the world calls self (*attā*) is in fact ill; for no matter upon what it conceives its conceits (*maññati* see the article on *Anattā*), the fact is ever other than that (which it conceives). The world whose being is to become other (*aññathābhāvī*), is committed to being, has exposed itself to being; it relishes only being, yet what it relishes brings fear, and what it fears is pain (suffering).”⁷³ Later, in answer to a question “What is right view?” the Buddha said “Usually, Kaccāyana, this world depends upon the dualism of existence and non-existence (*atthitā*,

⁶³ SN 35:1/S IV 1.

⁶⁴ Vism Ch. 21, p. 640.

⁶⁵ Āyatana-Vibhaṅga-Commentary, Vibh-a 48; cf. M-a II 113.

⁶⁶ SN 35:140/S IV 130 f.

⁶⁷ SN 22:19/S III 23.

⁶⁸ SN 35:19/S IV 13.

⁶⁹ MN 122/M III 111.

⁷⁰ SN 35:136/S IV 126.

⁷¹ AN 6:63/A III 416.

⁷² *Nāṇakathā*, Paṭi I 11, discussed at Vism Ch 21, p. 648f.

⁷³ Ud 3.10; P.T.S text is faulty.

natthitā). But when a man sees the world's origin as it actually is with right understanding there is for him none of (what is called) in the world "non-existence"; and when he sees the world's cessation as it actually is with right understanding, there is for him none of (what is called) in the world "existence." Usually the world is shackled by bias, clinging and insistence; but one such as this (who has right view,) instead of allowing bias, instead of clinging, instead of deciding about "my self" with such bias, such clinging, and such mental decision in the guise of underlying tendency to insist, has no doubt or uncertainty that what arises is only arising of suffering, and that what ceases is only ceasing of suffering; and his knowledge herein is independent of others. "Right view" refers to this. "(An) all exists" (*sabbam atthi*) is one extreme; "(An) all does not exist" (*sabbam natthi*) is the other extreme. Instead of resorting to either extreme, a Tathāgata expounds the Teaching (*dhamma*) by the middle way (of dependent origination)."⁷⁴

Now, as in the case of impermanence, so too the characteristic of suffering is not always evident unless looked for. "The characteristic of suffering does not become apparent because, when continuous oppression (by rise and fall) is not given attention it is concealed by the postures ... However, when the postures are exposed by attention to continuous oppression, the characteristic of suffering becomes apparent in its true nature;⁷⁵ "When the postures are exposed" means when the concealment of the suffering that is actually inherent in the (four) postures (of walking, standing, sitting, and lying down) is exposed. For when suffering (pain) arises in a posture, the next posture adopted removes the suffering, as it were, concealing it. But once it is known, according as it actually is, how the suffering in any posture is shifted by substituting another posture for that one, then the concealment of the suffering that is in them is exposed because it has become evident that formations are being incessantly crushed out by suffering."⁷⁶

Whether this general state, defined as suffering here, is taken as suffering *per se*, or conceived as being (*bhava*), or equated with some other generalisation, it has always to be regarded as destitute of aseity; for nothing, general or particular, can arise without an origin and it ceases with the cessation of its origin. A number of origins of suffering are given in one Sutta, namely, the "essentials of existence" (*upadhi*; i.e. craving and what is craved for), ignorance (*avijjā*; particularly of the four Truths), formations, consciousness, contact (*phassa*), feeling, craving (*taṇhā*), clinging (as a condition for being), "initiative" (*ārambha*; i.e. if misdirected), nutriment (*āhāra*), and perturbation (*iñjita*).⁷⁷

Suffering as a Noble Truth

The general aspect of suffering (insecurity, threat of pain) is otherwise described by the Buddha in his first discourse, given at Benares, as the first of the four Noble Truths (*ariyasacca*). "The Noble Truth of Suffering is this: birth is suffering, ageing is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering, sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering, association with the loathed is suffering, dissociation from the loved is suffering, not to get what one wants is suffering: in brief the five categories affected by clinging are suffering."⁷⁸ Elsewhere it is described as follows: "What is the Noble Truth of Suffering? It can be termed the five categories affected by clinging, namely, the materiality category affected by clinging, the feeling ... perception ... formations ... consciousness category affected by clinging"⁷⁹ and "What is the

⁷⁴ SN 12:15/S II 17.

⁷⁵ Vism Ch. 21, p. 640.

⁷⁶ Vism-ṭ 824.

⁷⁷ Sn p. 139ff, Ch. III.12.

⁷⁸ SN 56:11/S V 421.

⁷⁹ SN 56:13/S V 425.

Noble Truth of Suffering? It can be termed the six bases in oneself for contact (*ajjhakkhāni āyatanāni*). What six? The eye-base, ear-, nose-, tongue-, body-, and mind-base."⁸⁰ More details are given at DN 22 and in the Sacca-Vibhaṅga. That this Truth is at the same time profound and comprehensive is stated in another Sutta: "In this Noble Truth of Suffering described by me immeasurable are the shades and details, immeasurable the implications, of this term "Noble Truth of Suffering,"⁸¹ and "It is impossible that anyone should say "I shall completely make an end to suffering without penetrating to the Noble Truth of Suffering according as it actually is,"⁸² and again "It is impossible that any *samaṇa* or *brāhmaṇa* should say thus: "That is not the first Noble Truth of Suffering taught by the *samaṇa* Gotama; ignoring that first Noble Truth of Suffering, I shall describe another first Noble Truth of Suffering."⁸³ To this the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* adds "Suffering has for its meanings of reality (*tathatta*: "undeceptiveness," or "suchness") the meaning of oppressing, meaning of being formed, meaning of burning (tormenting), meaning of changing."⁸⁴ Ācariya Buddhaghosa states it formalistically thus: "(The Truth of Suffering) has the characteristic of afflicting. Its nature is to burn (torment). It is manifested as occurrence ... It also has the characteristic of occurrence ... and of being formed."⁸⁵

Unpleasant Feeling (Pain)

General suffering, stated as the characteristic or as the Truth, is approachable also from the empirical subjective fact of pain, as in the case of a boil on the body or the pricking of a thorn.⁸⁶ Feeling is divided into the three main classes of pleasure (*sukha*), suffering (*dukkha*) and neither-suffering-nor-pleasure (*adukkhamasukha* or "neutral feeling"), though it is also classed and subdivided in many other ways too.⁸⁷ In one mode or another it is inseparable from all perception and consciousness, being the way in which consciousness perceives its object affectively. It has contact for its principal condition and is itself the principal condition for craving (ignorance of the four truths being present). Craving may be regarded as the dynamic element that, when supported by ignorance, resists suffering and lusts after pleasure. But all feeling is impermanent, and so craving has constantly to renew its search for pleasure and flight from suffering. "Pleasant feeling is pleasant in virtue of presence and unpleasant in virtue of change; unpleasant feeling is unpleasant in virtue of presence and pleasant in virtue of change; neutral feeling is pleasant in virtue of knowledge and unpleasant in virtue of non-knowledge ..."⁸⁸ In order to understand this passage we must have recourse to the subcommentary. "Pleasant feeling is pleasant owing to presence as persistence, not merely owing to the presence-sub-moment (*thiti-kkhaṇa*) ... and it is unpleasant owing to its change as its having gone away, not merely owing to the cessation-sub-moment (*nirodha-kkhaṇa*); ... for the stopping of pleasant feeling seems unpleasant to those who do not fully know the facts ... Similarly with the change of unpleasant feeling; ... for the stopping of unpleasant feeling seems pleasant to creatures since they say "What a pleasure to be cured of that sickness!" Then "knowledge" (in the case of neutral feeling) is awareness (*avabodha*) according to true individual essence; for when someone knows neutral feeling he has pleasure because of its subtleness, just as awareness, according to

⁸⁰ SN 56:14/S V 426.

⁸¹ SN 56:19/S V 430.

⁸² SN 56:44/S V 452.

⁸³ SN 56:16/S V 428.

⁸⁴ Saccakathā, Paṭis II 104.

⁸⁵ Vism Ch. 16, p. 495–6.

⁸⁶ Vibh-a 49. It may be noted that the word *vedanā* is one of the derivatives of the root *vid*—to know—here in the sense of affective knowledge.

⁸⁷ see e.g. SN 36:19, 22, and 29.

⁸⁸ MN 44/M I 303.

specific and general characteristics, of Dhammas other than this is the highest form of pleasure, of which it is said “Whenever a man comprehends the categories rise and fall, he finds there happiness and bliss: that knowledge is of deathlessness.”⁸⁹ The “non-knowledge” should be understood in the opposite sense; for abiding in confusion is suffering. An alternative explanation is that “knowledge” means the knowledge’s actual presence (*sabhāva*); for the neutral (subjective conascent) feeling associated with the knowledge, and that which is the knowledge’s supporting object (which the knowledge of neutral feeling is considering), is pleasant in its agreeable mode, according as it is called “agreeable and giving agreeable fruit.” “Non-knowledge” can then be understood in the opposite sense.”⁹⁰

Pleasure as gratification or as relief from pain is real while it lasts

“Were there no gratification in the case of the eye (etc.), creatures would not lust in connection with the eye: it is because there is gratification in the case of the eye (etc.), that creatures lust in connection with the eye (etc.). Were there no inadequacy in the case of the eye, creatures would not become dispassionate (disgusted) in connection with the eye ... Were there no escape in the case of the eye, creatures would not find an escape in connection with the eye ...”⁹¹ “It is any pleasure or joy (*somanassa*) that arises dependent on feeling that is the gratification in the case of feeling. That this feeling is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change is the inadequacy (danger) in the case of feeling. The disciplining and abandoning of desire and lust for feeling is the escape in the case of feeling.”⁹² But neutral feeling is ignored while the pleasure accompanying knowledge is lacking, and so “the untaught ordinary man understands no escape from unpleasant feeling other than sensual pleasure (*kāma-sukha*).”⁹³

The impermanence of all feeling makes it impossible to find any enduring refuge from the undesirable unpleasant feeling within the range of feeling, and so ultimately “pleasant feeling has to be seen as suffering, unpleasant feeling as a dart, and neutral feeling as impermanent;”⁹⁴ for “while three kinds of feeling have been stated by me, namely, pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral, still it has been also said by me that ‘Whatever is felt, all comes under suffering.’ That, however, was spoken by me with reference to the impermanence of formations.”⁹⁵

Now, while “Gratification in the case of feeling is, in its highest aspect, freedom from affliction,”⁹⁶ nevertheless, since feeling of some sort accompanies all experience whatever as one of its necessary components, if that freedom is to be lasting it has to be sought not in feeling, not even in formations, which are inseparable from feeling, but rather in the exhaustion of craving (*taṇhākkhaya*) and the stilling of all formations (*sabbasaṅkhārasamatha*). And just as the onlooking-equanimity of the fourth jhāna is called a “pleasant abiding”⁹⁷ so too Nibbāna (extinction of craving) is called the “ultimate pleasure.”⁹⁸ While “suffering” is thus extended beyond feeling to all that is formed (*saṅkhata*), “pleasure” in the highest mode—that “beyond spiritual bliss” (*nirāmisā nirāmisataraṃ sukhaṃ*)—is withdrawn from the formed, including feeling, and equated with the unformed (*asaṅkhata*), which is Nibbāna. “The Blessed One describes pleasure with reference not only to pleasant feeling; rather, friends, a Tathāgata describes as pleasure any kind

⁸⁹ DhP-a 25:16/V 374.

⁹⁰ *Ṭikā ad MN 44/M II 294–5.*

⁹¹ SN 35:17/S IV 10.

⁹² SN 36:15/S IV 220.

⁹³ SN 36:6/S IV 208.

⁹⁴ SN 36:5/S IV 207.

⁹⁵ SN 36:11/S IV 216.

⁹⁶ MN 13/M I 90.

⁹⁷ MN 8/M I 41.

⁹⁸ MN 74/M I 508.

of pleasure wherever it is found."⁹⁹ It is from this standpoint that the formula of the Four Noble Truths is propounded.

Before leaving the subject of feeling, however, Ācariya Buddhaghosa's definition of unpleasant feeling must be noted. Under the feeling category he says: "(Bodily) suffering (*dukkha*) has the characteristic of experiencing an undesirable tangible (*phoṭṭhabba*). Its nature is to wither associated dhammas. It is manifested as bodily affliction. Its footing is the body faculty. (Mental) grief (*domanassa*) has the characteristic of experiencing an undesirable object of consciousness (*ārammaṇa*). Its nature is to exploit in one way or another the undesirable aspect. It is manifested as mental affliction. Its footing is invariably the heartbase (*hadaya-vatthu*)."¹⁰⁰ But in his exegesis of the "pain" and "grief" in the statement of the First Truth (see above) he says "pain is bodily suffering. Its characteristic is oppression of the body. Its nature is to cause grief in the foolish. It is manifested as bodily affliction. It is suffering because of its intrinsic suffering and because it induces mental suffering. Grief is mental suffering. Its characteristic is mental oppression. Its nature is to distress the mind. It is manifested as mental affliction. It is suffering because it is intrinsic suffering and because it induces bodily suffering (through self-torture provoked by grief)."¹⁰¹

Relation to Action

Another subject, action (*kamma*), is directly associated with *dukkha*.¹⁰² Though action is a subject properly outside the scope of this article, too, nevertheless some mention of it can hardly be avoided here. First, present action is one of the influences which, as action's ripening (*kamma-vipāka*), affect subsequent experience, and past action is, in its ripening, affecting experience now; in other words, all action, according to its kind, is experienceable later as pleasure or suffering or neither-suffering-nor-pleasure, and that may be in the same life, the life immediately next, or some life beyond,¹⁰³ though certain kinds lapse without ripening (*Paṭis: Kammakathā*). However, not all feeling is due to past action's ripening, which is only one of eight influences, including sorts of sickness, over-exertion, and climate, mentioned as sources of unpleasant feeling:¹⁰⁴ the pool of suffering has action as one of its affluents. But action is also more broadly regardable as the manifestation of craving's work on the five categories, and, in that capacity, it is the Truth of the Origin of Suffering.

Action's ripening was denied outright by several of the teachers contemporary with the Buddha, though not by the orthodox Brahmans. Its relation in ripening to what is felt was one of the principal points of difference between the Buddha and the Nigaṇthas, whose views on this subject seem to have been rather rigid.¹⁰⁵ They hold that past evil actions constituted a debt which could be paid off by present pain inflicted through self-torture, and that purification consisted in paying off old evil actions in this way while doing no new evil. The Buddha rejected this theory. In the pattern of the four Noble Truths, action (in the form of dependent origination) provides the movement and direction of suffering in all its forms.¹⁰⁶ But evil action cannot be calculated and amortised like a loan or a fine, and suffering in general can be ended only by the removal of the craving which originates it. Self-mortification, being an indulgence that tends to displace and foster rather than remove craving, is condemned, along with

⁹⁹ MN 5/M I 400.

¹⁰⁰ Vism Ch. 14, p. 461.

¹⁰¹ Vism Ch. 16, p. 503.

¹⁰² See also the article on Anicca.

¹⁰³ See e.g. MN 135 and 136; AN 3:33; 6:63.

¹⁰⁴ SN 36:21/S IV 230–1.

¹⁰⁵ See e.g. MN 14 and 101.

¹⁰⁶ See A III 61.

indulgence in sensuality, as productive of a state of conflict (*sa-raṇa*),¹⁰⁷ The pretence of craving, whether for sensuality (*kāma*) or for being (*bhava* as eternal permanence) or for non-being (*vibhava* as annihilation of the existent), produces always some kind of renewal of being (*punabbhava*).¹⁰⁸ The ending of craving is the ending of action and of suffering (the Third Truth), while the way leading to that is the control of action (the Eight-fold Path or Fourth Truth).

In the Suttas the Buddha describes how he had himself tried out before his enlightenment the extremes of self-mortification¹⁰⁹ and found them fruitless. When Māra tried to tempt him after his enlightenment with the suggestion that he had forsaken the true ascetic path, he replied “I know these penances to gain the Deathless—whatever kind they are—to be as vain as a ship’s oars and rudder on dry land.”¹¹⁰

Suffering as a subject for Contemplation and Basis for Judgment.

“In creatures subject to birth, sickness, ageing and death, sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair there arises the wish ‘Oh that we were not subject to these things! And that these things might never overtake us!’ But that is not to be had by wishing.”¹¹¹

Suffering, as intended here, must be kept distinct from unpleasant feeling, which is part of the contemplation of feeling (*vedanānupassanā*),¹¹² and also from contemplation of the four Truths.¹¹³ It is properly the contemplation in all formations, of the unsatisfactoriness due to their universal impermanence, which makes them a source of fear and anxiety. Inseparable from impermanence, it also implies not-self. How is it practised? “A Bhikkhu understands as it actually is that ‘Such is suffering, such its origin, such its cessation, such the way leading to its cessation.’”¹¹⁴ “When a Bhikkhu abides much with his mind fortified by perception of suffering in what is impermanent, there is established in him keen perception of fear of laxity, idleness, indolence, negligence, non-devotion and non-reviewing, as though of a murderer with raised weapon,”¹¹⁵ and “when a Bhikkhu sees six rewards, it should be enough for him to establish unlimitedly perception of suffering in all formations. What six? ‘Keen perception of fear of formations will be established in me, as of a murderer with raised weapon; my mind will emerge from the world of all (from all the world); and I shall come to see peace in extinction (*Nibbāna*); and my underlying tendencies will come to be abolished; and I shall perform my task; and I shall repay the teacher with loving kindness.’”¹¹⁶ “That anyone should see any formation as pleasure ... or extinction as suffering, and have a liking that is in conformity (with truth) is not possible. (But the opposite) is possible.”¹¹⁷

Suffering arises through failure to guard the doors of the faculties: “These six bases for contact, when uncontrolled, unguarded, unprotected and unrestrained, give admission to suffering.”¹¹⁸ “When a Bhikkhu lives with the eye faculty ... ear ... nose ... tongue ... body ... mind faculty unrestrained, his consciousness gets dissipated among visible objects ... sounds ... odours ... flavours ... tangibles ... ideas. When his consciousness is dissipated he has no

¹⁰⁷ MN 139.

¹⁰⁸ See e.g. MN 141; Ud 3.10; It 2:48.

¹⁰⁹ MN 12 and 36.

¹¹⁰ SN 4:1/S I 103.

¹¹¹ DN 22/D II 307.

¹¹² See e.g. MN 10, 12, 38, 74, and 137.

¹¹³ See e.g. DN 22.

¹¹⁴ MN 10/M I 62.

¹¹⁵ AN 7:46/A IV 52,

¹¹⁶ AN 6:103/A III 443.

¹¹⁷ AN 6:99 and 101/A III 442.

¹¹⁸ SN 35:94/S IV 70.

gladness; without gladness he has no happiness (*pīti*); without happiness he has no tranquillity; without tranquillity he abides in suffering; and consciousness affected by suffering does not become concentrated; when that is so, true ideas (*dhamma*) remain unclear; and with that he is reckoned as one who abides in negligence."¹¹⁹ "An untaught ordinary man, when touched by (bodily) unpleasant feeling, sorrows and laments, beating his breast, he weeps and becomes distraught. He thus feels two kinds of (unpleasant) feeling: the bodily and the mental as well ... But a well-taught disciple of the Ariyas, when touched by (bodily) unpleasant feeling, does not sorrow ... and become distraught. He thus feels only the bodily (unpleasant) feeling, not the mental."¹²⁰

Not all grief is unprofitable (*akusala*), however, since "here a Bhikkhu considers thus 'When shall I enter upon and abide in that base which the Ariyas enter upon and abide in?' and as he builds up love for the supreme liberation in this way, grief arises in him with that love as condition; yet through that he comes to abandon resistance (*paṭigha*) and no tendency to resistance underlies that."¹²¹ Such grief, like the desire (*chanda*) to terminate it, is a spur to progress; but the actual perfection of understanding has no grief at all. "I do not say of the four Noble Truths that there is penetration to them together with suffering and grief; on the contrary I say that there is penetration to them together with pleasure and joy."¹²²

The perception of suffering is the second of the "eighteen principal insights (*mahā-vipassanā*: see the article on Anicca). According to the *Visuddhimagga* "One who maintains the contemplation of suffering abandons perception of pleasure (in what is unpleasant)" and "contemplation of suffering and contemplation of the desireless (*appaṇihitānupassanā*) are "one in meaning and different only in the letter,"¹²³ since "one who maintains in being the contemplation of the desireless abandons desire (*paṇidhi*)." The development of contemplation of suffering based on rise and fall is given in the *Visuddhimagga*.¹²⁴

In the Canonical commentary, the Paṭisambhidāmagga, suffering appears as specially connected with concentration, and as the second of the three alternative "gateways to liberation." "When one gives attention to suffering the concentration faculty is outstanding just as in the cases of attention given to impermanence and not-self the respective faculties of faith and understanding are outstanding."¹²⁵

—Ñāṇamoli Thera

¹¹⁹ SN 35:97/S IV 78.

¹²⁰ SN 36: 6/S IV 208–9.

¹²¹ MN 44/M I 303–4.

¹²² SN 56:35/S V 441.

¹²³ Vism Ch. 20, p. 628.

¹²⁴ Vism Ch. 21.

¹²⁵ See Vism Ch. 21, p. 657ff, quoting Vimokkhakathā, Paṭis II 58, etc. See also the article on Anicca.

Epilogue

The Enlightened One said:

“I went in search of enjoyment in the world, O monks. What there is of enjoyment in the world, that I have found; and in how far there is enjoyment in the world, that I have clearly seen by wisdom.

I went in search of misery in the world, O monks. What there is of misery in the world, that I have found; and in how far there is misery in the world, that I have clearly seen by wisdom.

I went in search of an escape from the world, O monks. That escape from the world I have found; and in how far there is an escape from the world, that I have clearly seen by wisdom.”

If, O monks, there were no enjoyment in the world; beings would not become attached to the world. But as there is enjoyment in the world, beings become attached to it.

If there were no misery in the world, beings would not be disgusted with the world, But as there is misery in the world, beings become disgusted with it.

If there were no escape from the world, beings could not make their escape from the world. But as there is an escape from the world, beings can escape from it.”¹²⁶

Sources

Dīgha Nikāya (DN), Majjhima Nikāya (MN), Saṃyutta Nikāya (SN), Aṅguttara Nikāya (AN), Udāna (Ud), Suttanipāta (Sn), Dhammapada (Dhp), Paṭisambhidāmagga (Paṭis), *Visuddhimagga* (Vism). *Sammohavinodanī* (Vibh-a), *Paramatthamañjūsā = Mahā-ṭīkā* (Vism-a: Sinhalese Vidyodaya ed. pp. 1–647, Burmese ed. pp. 774–910), *Majjhima-nikāya-ṭīkā* (M-ṭ Burmese ed.), *Mūla-ṭīkā* (Dhs-ṭ), *Vibhāvinī-ṭīkā* (commentary on *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*). Page refs. to Pali Text Society’s Pali editions unless otherwise stated. All quotations specially translated for this article.

¹²⁶ AN 3:101–102.

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