

The Problem of Suffering in Buddhism

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Abstract

The problem of suffering has always been a central point of philosophical and religious discussion throughout human history. Among these, Buddhism provides a unique understanding of the nature of suffering, its origin, its cessation and the path that leads to the cessation of suffering. Buddhism looks at the concept of *dukkha* beyond the physical or mental pain and sheds light on the fact that the changing nature of conditioned existence also leads to suffering. According to Buddhism, Craving (*taṇhā*) and ignorance are the root causes of suffering. There are three kinds of *Dukkha*, namely *Dukkha-Dukkha*, *Vipariṇāma-dukkha* and *Sanḥāra-dukkha*. Buddhism examines the causes of suffering and provides a path towards liberation. It offers a practical approach to end suffering through wisdom, morality, and meditation. This paper studies and examines the understanding of suffering in Buddhist philosophy, with reference to the Four Noble Truths. This study highlights that suffering is more than just physical suffering; and Craving (*taṇhā*) and ignorance are the root causes of suffering. Thus, the Buddhist philosophy about suffering not only discusses the causes of suffering but also provides a practical solution for ending suffering through the Noble Eightfold Path, which is relevant in these modern times where all individuals are dealing with materialistic dissatisfaction and restlessness.

Keywords: Buddhism, *dukkha*, *Dukkha-Dukkha*, *Vipariṇāma-dukkha*, *Sanḥāra-dukkha*, suffering, *taṇhā*, Craving, ignorance, Four Noble Truths.

Introduction

The world is full of evil and misery. If there were no evil and misery, there would have been no need for the struggle for existence. Birth, ageing, diseases, death, separation from near and dear ones, failed or unrequited love, failure in obtaining desired objects and most commonly, the uncertainty of human life; all leads to an unpleasant feelings and suffering. Even the most hardened optimist would be horrified to see the intensity of suffering and pain that surrounds mankind. Although, man is surrounded by misery and sorrow, he does not grow desperate, instead he strives for self-preservation; his salvation and deliverance from pain and suffering. Pleasure and happiness for a man is nothing more than deliverance from pain. Man's natural instinct for self-preservation has caused a desire in him for a changeless and deathless life, a desire to be free from old age and death. This is the problem of every religion. In every religion there is an idea of self-preservation manifesting itself in the form of hope and aspiration for a

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moral life. As Professor Leuba¹ says, "not God, but life, more life; a larger, more satisfying life is, in the last analysis, the end of religion".²

Thousands of years ago, a similar idea to free oneself from the grips of pain and suffering, arose in the mind of Siddhārtha Gautama, famously known as the Buddha, the founder of Buddhism. The four sights – those of a sick man, a corpse, an old man and an ascetic led him to ponder on the reality of human life and this eventually led him to renounce the world in search for a path to free oneself from the holds of suffering and pain. He became an ascetic in search of answers. He sought answers from many religious teachers and learned scholars during his period, but he did not find any satisfaction. He then turned inwards, entered a course of reflection and self-examination, trusting his own reasoning, the light that each one of us carries within us to attain the truth. He understood the mistaken ways of faith; he saw the sources of earthly suffering and the way that led to their annihilation. Siddhārtha became the Buddha or the Enlightened One. His knowledge laid the foundation of both the Buddhist religion and philosophy. But the Buddha never claimed to be more than a human being. He did not say that he would bring a revelation from any supernatural source, nor did he claim himself to be a savior for humankind who would take upon himself the sins of those who follow him. He rather taught that every individual had to bear the burden of his own actions, that an individual needs to free himself through action from the circle of suffering.

The Buddha declared: "Have I promised to reveal to you secrets and mysteries? I have, on the contrary, promised to make known to you suffering, the cause of suffering, and the way to escape from suffering. As the vast ocean is impregnated with one taste, the taste of salt, so also my disciples, this Dharma, this teaching, is impregnated with one taste, the taste of deliverance."³

"Dukkho Addhagū Dukkanupātito"

-Dhammapada, Verse 302

Meaning: "A person who steps into the path of saṃsāra (the worldly round of rebirth) is continually pursued by suffering (dukkha)". (Narasu, 1985, p. 102)

The entire Buddhism is based on the wheel of "suffering". No "Suffering" means no "Buddhism".

Cattāri ariyasaccāni: Dukkham Ariyasaccam

dukkhasamudayo ariyasaccam

dukkhanirodho ariyasaccam

¹ James H. Leuba was an influential American Psychologist of religion. In his statement, he means that religion does not purely focus on the supernatural but serves the practical human purpose-to seek a more abundant, fulfilling and purposeful life.

² Narasu, P. Lakshmi, *The Essence of Buddhism (with an Introduction by Anagarika H. Dharmapala)*, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1985, pp 102.

³ Narasu, P. Lakshmi, *The Essence of Buddhism (with an Introduction by Anagarika H. Dharmapala)*, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1985, pp 102.

dukkhanirodhagāminī paṭipadā ariyasaccam.

There are Four Noble Truths:

The Noble Truth of Suffering

The Noble Truth of the Origination of Suffering

The Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering

The Noble Truth of the Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering

- Dīgha Nikāya, II, 304 (Verdu, 1985, p. 1)

Understanding the meaning of Dukkha through the First Noble Truth

The Pāli word "*dukkha*" is generally and loosely translated as "Suffering", "Pain", "Sorrow", "misery" (Rahula, 2017, p. 17). But the term *Dukkha* as the First Noble Truth of Buddha's view on life and the world, is much deeper philosophically.

The word *Dukkha* maybe understood from the following three aspects in Buddhism: (Rahula, 2017, pp. 19-20)

1. *Dukkha* as the ordinary suffering (*Dukkha-Dukkha*)-This refers to ordinary physical and mental pain. All kinds of suffering in life like birth, death, old age, diseases, association with unpleasant people, separation from loved ones, not getting what one wants, etc-all such kinds of physical and mental pain or suffering are called *dukkha* as the ordinary suffering.
2. *Dukkha* as a product of change (*Vipariṇāma-dukkha*)- The suffering which is associated with the changing nature of pleasant experiences. A feeling of happiness, a happy condition in life, nothing is permanent. Everything changes at some point of time. When it changes, it leads to pain, suffering, unhappiness, and unsatisfactoriness. The changing nature of things leads to *dukkha*.
3. *Dukkha* as conditioned states (*Saṅkhāra-dukkha*)- this form of *dukkha* as conditioned states holds importance philosophically. It is the most important aspect of the First Noble Truth. The term "*Saṅkhāra*" refers to conditioned or constructed phenomena-things that arise dependent on causes and conditions. Things and phenomena arise due to some causes and conditions and when these causes and conditions change, the things and phenomena also change. This ever-changing and conditioned nature of things and phenomena leads to *dukkha*.

These three aspects of *dukkha* or suffering correspond to three of the four sights that the Buddha saw before renouncing the mundane world; that of old age, sickness and death. Humans are subject to desires, thirst and cravings and when life fails to satisfy these desires or even when these are satisfied, we are still full on unsatisfaction. This is the truth about suffering.

"Tattha katamam dukkham ariyasaccam?"

Jāti pi dukkhā, jarā pi dukkhā, maraṇam-pi dukkham

sokaparidevadukkhadomanassupāyāsā pi dukkhā

*Appiyehi samayoga dukkho piyehi vippayogo dukkho yam p'iccham na labhati tam
pi dukkham; saṅkhittena pañcupādānakkhandhā dukkhā.”*

What is the Noble Truth of Suffering?

Birth is suffering; old age is suffering;

Death is suffering, sorrow, lamentation

Grief and despair are suffering; association with that one dislike is suffering;

Not getting what one wishes is suffering;

In summary, the five dharma-aggregates of attachment are suffering.

- Dīgha Nikāya, II, 304; Vibhaṅga 99. (Verdu, 1985, p. 10)

The third form of dukkha as conditioned states (*Saṅkhāra-dukkha*), is the most important aspect of the First Noble Truth, and requires a deep explanation for what is considered to be a 'being', an 'individual' or 'I'. According to Buddhist Philosophy, a 'being', an 'individual' or 'I', is only a combination of ever-changing physical and mental factors, which are called the five aggregates or *Pañca Skandhas*. The Buddha mentioned: “In short these five aggregates of attachment are *dukkha*”. (*saṅkhittena pañcupādānakkhandhā dukkha*-mentioned in *Samyutta Nikāya* (Volume 5, page 421)⁴

1. The Five Aggregates

In Buddhism, the *Pañca Skandhas* (Rahula, 2017) translates to the "Five Aggregates". A sentient being, according to Buddhist Philosophy, is constituted by these five aggregates. According to Buddhist philosophy, there is nothing more to a sentient being, i.e; no soul. The Five Aggregates are as follow:

- **Rūpa** (Form / Matter)- the physical body and the material world, including the five physical sense organs and their objects.
- **Vedanā** (Sensation / Feeling)-the aggregate of sensations. These are of six kinds: the sensations experienced through the contact of the eyes with the visible forms, ear with sounds, nose with odour, tongue with taste, body with tangible objects, and mind with the mind-objects.⁵
- **Saññā** (Perception / Recognition)-They are of six kinds in relation to six internal faculties and their external objects.
- **Saṅkhāra** (Mental Formations / Volition)- The conditioned mental habits, impulses, desires, and volitional actions (karma) that trigger responses.

⁴Rahula, Walpola, *What the Buddha Taught*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, Delhi, pp. 20

⁵ Rahula, Walpola, *What the Buddha Taught*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, Delhi, pp. 21.

- ***Vijñāṇa*** (Consciousness)-The consciousness/awareness of an object through the six sense organs, i.e; eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind.

According to Buddhist philosophy, there is no permanent unchanging entity which can be considered as a 'self', 'soul' or 'ego'. An individual is made up of the *Pañca Skandhas*. These five aggregates are *dukkha* itself. As Buddhaghosa says: (Rahula, 2017)

'Mere suffering exists, but no sufferer is found;

The deeds are, but no doer is found.'⁶

This together sums up the First Noble Truth of Buddhism.

Understanding the origin of Dukkha through the Second Noble Truth

The Second Noble Truth in Buddhism is that the origin of *dukkha* can be known.

Our daily life is full of suffering and the obvious causes are numerous: thirst, pain from injury, loss of a loved one, etc. But the Buddha taught that the root cause of all our suffering is desire or thirst, *taṇhā*. Thirst, *taṇhā* are of three types: (Rahula, 2017, p. 29)

1. Thirst of sense-pleasure – *kama taṇhā*
2. Thirst of existence and becoming – *bhava taṇhā*
3. Thirst of non-existence and annihilation – *vibhava taṇhā*

Buddha taught that thirst or *taṇhā* should not be considered as the first cause as there is no first cause possible for the reason that everything is relative and inter-dependent. The origin of suffering is explained by the Buddha through his concept of natural causation- *Pratītyasamutpāda*.

The thirst or *taṇhā* as the cause of *dukkha* is dependent on sensation (*Vedanā*) for its production and this sensation is dependent on contact (*Sparśa*) and so on. This cycle of dependence is known as the Conditioned Genesis or *Pratītyasamutpāda*. The Buddhist concept of *Pratītyasamutpāda* is as important part of Buddhist metaphysics. It states that all the things come into being together in a mutually interdependent or interconnected web of cause and effect. The concept of *Pratītyasamutpāda* constitutes 12 *Nidānas* or links which show the continuation of the cycle of suffering, birth and rebirth. The 12 links are: (Chatterjee & Datta, 2024, pp. 119-121)

1. *Avidyā* – Ignorance
2. *Samskāra*-the aggregate of disposition of the former life
3. *Vijñāna*-the consciousness acquired at the time when a being enters the womb of the mother

⁶ Ibid, pp. 26.

4. *Nāmarūpa*-the mental (*Nāma*) and the physical (*rūpa*) conditions of the beings in the womb
5. *ṣaḍāyatana*- the 6 senses representing the state of the being when it comes out of the mother's womb
6. *Sparśa*- the contact of the senses with the objects, representing the consciousness resulting from the contact
7. *Vedanā*- feelings
8. *trṣṇā*- the thirst or cravings for the objects of the senses
9. *Upādāna*- the hyper thirst or attachment
10. *Bhava*- existence or becoming
11. *Jāti*- the birth or rebirth
12. *Jarāmaraṇa*- the old age and death

Thus, all the beings suffer the Saṃsāra till they free themselves from the dukkha by attaining nirvāṇa. *Nirvāṇa* can be achieved by cutting-off the “thirst” through knowledge of reality as it is.

Understanding the cessation of suffering through the Third Noble Truth

The Third Noble Truth states that there is emancipation, liberation, freedom from suffering, from the continuous suffering.⁷ The Third Noble Truth is the cessation of *dukkha* which is *nirvāṇa*. The Third Noble truth is deduced from the Second Noble Truth that *dukkha* arises due to some causes and conditions. *Dukkha* will end if the causes and conditions are removed. This is the conception of freedom in Buddhism. *Nirvāṇa* means to ‘blow out’, where the five aggregates are destroyed. When a person attains *nirvāṇa*, he or she is not born anymore as the cause of suffering or *dukkha* is eradicated therefore “becoming” ceases to be.

Understanding the Path leading to the cessation of suffering through the Fourth Noble Truth

The Fourth Noble Truth provides a path which leads to the end of suffering. This path is known as the ‘Middle Path’ as it avoids the two extremes-indulgence in sense-pleasure and ascetic self-mortification. The Buddha unveiled the Middle Path through mediation during his enlightenment. This path is known as the Noble Eightfold Path or *Āryaṣṭāṅgamārga*, as it consists of 8 divisions: (Chatterjee & Datta, 2024, pp. 125-131)

1. Right Understanding (*samyak di*)- Suffering is borne due to ignorance. Gaining right knowledge and understanding is the first step towards liberation.
2. Right Thought (*Samyak saṃkalpa*)-the aspirant of liberation must practice non-violence.

⁷ Rahula, Walpola. *What the Buddha Taught*, New York: Grove Press, 1974

3. Right Speech (*Samyak Vāk*)- one should have control over one's speech and not use foul language or words for anyone.
4. Right Resolve (*Samyak Karmānta*) -the aspirant of liberation must follow right action or resolve. This path consists of five vows or pañca-sīla: no killing, no stealing, not indulging in sexual misconduct, not lying and no intoxication.
5. Right Livelihood (*Samyak ājīva*)- the aspirant of liberation must earn his living through right means and honest ways.
6. Right Effort (*Samyak Vyāyāma*)-maintaining constant efforts.
7. Right Mindfulness (*Samyak Smṛiti*)- bearing in mind the things that has been learnt. Remembering the teachings and to continue on the path.
8. Right Concentration (*Samyak Samādhi*) – By following the above 7 stages of the Eightfold path, the aspirant is ready to enter the four deeper stages of meditation. This would lead to the ultimate end of all the suffering and attainment of *nirvāṇa*. The first stage is *dhyana*, in this stage the mind becomes calm. The second stage is removal of all the doubts. There is peace and joy in this stage. The third stage is the detachment from the very joy or concentration. The fourth stage is the stage of equanimity. There is no pain or suffering. This stage is arhatship or *nirvāṇa*. The 8 stages are grouped into *sīla*, *Samadhi* and *Prajñā*. The Eightfold path is a means to enlightenment, *nirvāṇa*.

The Four Noble Truths are a unique representation of the sufferings that we experience everyday and the path leading to the end of these sufferings. In the present times, when technology and science have advanced to a level that we are able to reach other planets and discover other galaxies. There are various amenities and luxuries for making our lives easy and full of pleasure, still people are both physically and mentally unsatisfied. There is still a feeling of dissatisfaction and suffering prevailing within the entire humankind. As much as we try to hold on to positive experiences, suffering is inevitable. Buddhism provides very simple and very effective methods to combat suffering through the Four Noble Truths.

In a materialistic world driven by where everyone desires instant pleasure or satisfaction, one can find solace in the truth that everything is impermanent. By understanding that the joy, pleasure and the suffering all are impermanent, one can cultivate a mindset which is adaptable, adjustable, resilient and open to the changing world. Learning to let go of all the possessions and attachments can lead a person to experience complete equanimity. Following the philosophy of the Four Noble Path, the world can become a better place ending all wars, sufferings.

Conclusion

The Buddhist viewpoint on suffering presents one of the most systematic analyses of misery of humankind in Indian philosophical thought. Through its concept of *dukkha*, Buddhism identified physical as well as psychological pain. It also identified the suffering caused by the conditioned nature of things and existence. Buddhism did not treat suffering or *dukkha* as the final truth about human life instead it treated the identification of suffering as the beginning of

inquiry about the causes and end of suffering. The Buddha did this through the Four Noble Truths. Suffering plays an important role in motivating individuals in seeking liberation through action. When one recognizes the nature of suffering and its causes, an individual moves towards renouncing the worldly attachments and walks on the spiritual path of the Buddha. The sight of suffering lead Siddhārtha Gautama to renounce the world and seek ways of overcoming suffering. When an individual truly understands the real nature, causes of suffering and that there can be an end to this suffering, then only he understands the circle of life and finally escapes it. Thus, the concept of suffering or dukkha plays a crucial part in the Buddhist Philosophy. “No suffering” means “No Buddhism”.

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