

A CRITIQUE OF THE BUDDHIST NOTION OF DUKKHA: TOWARDS A PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE HUMAN CONDITION OF SUFFERING AND PAIN

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Introduction

This paper is a critical analysis of the Buddhist concept of *dukkha*, which translates as suffering. The primary aim is to provide a philosophical understanding of human suffering and pain. It adopts an expository, analytic, and evaluative method. It makes a comparative assessment of the Buddhist notion of *dukkha*, with the Western philosophical and Christian notion of suffering and pain. It concludes by affirming that, human suffering is real, sometimes human made, and sometimes natural. Therefore, we can overcome and eliminate it, at least, to the extent that it is human made.

This paper uses the terms; suffering and pain interchangeably to mean “an experience of unpleasantness and aversion associated with the perception of harm or threat of harm in an individual.”¹ Suffering is either physical or mental, which includes emotional and psychological pain. It constitutes the basic element that makes up the individual valence of affective phenomena.² By valence, we mean the

intrinsic attractiveness, which is positive, or the intrinsic aversiveness, which is negative, of an event, object, or situation. It is a psychological term used in discussing emotions.

Suffering may be in degrees of intensity as determined by the factors of duration and frequency of its occurrence. Our attitudes to pain or suffering differ. We can classify suffering as avoidable or unavoidable, useful or useless, deserved or undeserved. Since suffering occurs in the lives of sentient beings in various manners, many fields of human activity are involved. To comprehensively appreciate suffering, we need to understand the origin and causes of suffering, its meaning and significance, its remedies and managements, as the case maybe. This is where the Buddhist notion of *dukkha*³ becomes very relevant as it presents us with the most articulate account of suffering.

The Buddhist Notion of *Dukkha*

Dukkha is a Buddhist concept that is rich in meaning and nuances. It is “the unease or unsatisfactoriness, which characterizes existence.”⁴ It is an intrinsic part of human life, an expression of the view that the human condition is fundamentally one of suffering.

The Buddhist formulation of *dukkha* refers to all kinds of suffering. It ranges from the physical and biological, to the emotional and psychological, and the existential. Although, there has been great advancement in medical science, we remain vulnerable to sickness and accidents due to our physical nature. Emotional or psychological form of suffering is summed up in distress, like, the experiences of grief, sorrow, lamentation, and despair. This set of sufferings sometimes presents more intractable problems than the former. Existential suffering includes frustration, disappointment, and disillusionment that we experience when life fails to meet up with we our expectations and things are not as we wish them to be.

The foregoing suggests that the Buddhist theory of suffering is morbidly pessimistic. This is, however, a misunderstanding of the Buddhist notion of *dukkha*. The Buddha is certainly aware of pleasant moments in human life.

The problem is that such moments do not last forever; sooner or later, they fade away or become boring. In this context, it becomes inadequate to translate *dukkha* as pain, because pain does not necessarily include dissatisfaction and unfulfilment. Perhaps, 'unsatisfactoriness' captures more the meaning of *dukkha* better than pain or suffering captures it. Thus, the question is, "Can we overcome this unsatisfactoriness or prevent the fading away or boredom of pleasantness in our lives?"

The Buddha: Buddha means 'awakened one.' It is an honorific title for someone who has attained enlightenment; that is, the path to *nirvana*. *Nirvana* is the path that guarantees cessation of suffering. As a title, Buddha is "reserved for a person who discovers the way to enlightenment by himself rather than hearing from another."⁵ Buddhist teachings claim that, other than Guatama Sidhartha, who is here referred to as "the Buddha", there have been other Buddhas in the past, and there will be more in the future. This paper is concerned with the thoughts of the historical Guatama.

Teachings of the Buddha: His teachings are basically on how to attain liberation from suffering. They consist in a systematic analysis of the nature and causes of suffering and provides several ways by which suffering can be overcome. They form the basis of a philosophical tradition that has developed and defended sophisticated metaphysical and epistemological theories. These teachings are set out in the "Four Noble Truths."

The Four Noble Truths: The 'Four Noble Truths' set out the Buddha's essential teachings on suffering. They do not function as a kind of Buddhist creed; neither do they represent 'truth claims' that demand intellectual assent as propositional truths, in becoming a Buddhist. They refer to the four realities or 'true things' whose nature the Buddha understood on the night of his enlightenment. "They state the nature of suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the way to its cessation, which is the Noble Eightfold Path."⁶ According to Rupert Getin, "the teachings of the Buddha thus state that suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation are realities which we fail to see as they are, and this is as true for the Buddhist as the non-Buddhist."⁷

The First Noble Truth: This is the affirmation of suffering as a basic reality of human existence. It is a basic fact of human existence that sooner or later, in one way or another, no matter how perfectly contented we are, we will be confronted by, and we have to deal with suffering. Suffering here is, “the sort of frustration, alienation and despair that arise out of our experience of transitoriness.”⁸ The fact that we are prey to sickness, old age, and death is certainly, a proof of the actuality of *dukkha*.

The pleasures of one person can be the pains of another, and *vice versa*. It seems that a wealthy person with the goods of society at his disposal should be happy; this may not be the case. If such a person is truly sensitive, the poverty of those around him, which is the direct counterpart of his wealth, may be the bitter dressing that spoils the enjoyment of his wealth. To know that one's wealth is at the expense of another, as it is often the case, brings suffering not only to the other, but also to oneself.

In cases where the latter is not, it is still fraught with sufferings. This is a consequence of the fact that the pleasures that one enjoys bring with them an attachment to the object and activities enjoyed. The anxiety that goes with a possible separation from these objects and activities is a hidden cancer in one's pleasures; therefore, a source of suffering. This is especially true in the case of sexual pleasures, which most people take to be the highest form of pleasure.

Pleasures of life are not only self-perpetuating, they are also self-accelerating. When one derives pleasure from an object or activity, the drive for such pleasure rather than diminished, is strengthened. As a result, one becomes more attached to the conditions that provide one's pleasure as one derives more pleasure from one's activities. Therefore, the more pleasure one derives, the more pleasure one seeks. As this cycle goes on unending, it catches up with one in its increasing tempo such that there seem to be no escape. It is therefore, necessary to separate pleasure from happiness. Although pleasure brings some happiness, it does not bring lasting or complete happiness. As a matter of fact, grasping at pleasure leads one to greater unhappiness. Thus, pleasure should not be confused for, or with happiness.

The drive for pleasure is too shallow and insignificant to fulfil a person and bring true happiness.⁹ All pleasant experiences, irrespective of their basis, are ultimately unreliable and subject to loss and bring disappointment if we put our hopes of final happiness on them. Within this context we have the tripartite analysis of suffering, namely, (i) suffering as pain, (ii) suffering as change, and (iii) suffering as conditions.

As pain, suffering presents itself in mental or physical discomfort. As change, it presents itself in the removal (cessation) of what we are enjoying or the manifestation of something unusual. And as conditions, it is reflected in the effects of particular state of affairs on us. According to Gethin, “we are part of a world compounded of unstable conditions, a world in which pain and pleasure, happiness and suffering, are in all sorts of ways bound up together.”¹⁰

The Second Noble Truth: This truth deals with the origin of suffering. According to Buddhist, “suffering is simply a fact of existence [and it] is created by beings.”¹¹ It originates from our cravings for what we cannot have or the craving to avoid what we cannot avoid.

This truth identifies three forms by which craving manifest itself. The first is thirst for sensual pleasure, which consists in the craving for gratification through sensual objects, like, desire for pleasant taste, sensation, odours, sights and sounds. The second is thirst for existence, which refers to the deep instinctual will to be. This drives us to new lives and new experiences. The third is the desire not to possess, but to destroy. It is manifested in the impulse to negate, deny, and reject things that are unpleasant or not welcomed. This leads to self-denial and self-negation.

The Buddhist term translated as desire or thirst is *tanha*. It refers to a perverted desire that is wrongly directed towards sensory stimulation and pleasure. Not all desires are perverted, therefore, Buddhists use the term *chanda* to describe positive desires, which enhance and liberate us, while *tanha* describes wrong desires that restrict and fetter us.¹²

The point of this truth is that, deep within our minds, we harbour some greed or desire that brings about suffering in the

event that such greed or desire is not satisfied.¹³ Suffering does not originate from the object of our desire, but from the attachment and craving for the object of desire. “It is not the objects of sense desire that cause suffering, but our attachment to those; it is not views, precepts, and vows, and the doctrine of self that in themselves cause suffering but our attachment.”¹⁴ For the Buddhist, certain attachments are more harmful and productive of suffering than others. Thus, they outline in the *samyojana*, the ten 'fetters' or 'bonds' to suffering and the round of rebirth. These include; individuality, doubt, clinging to precepts and vows, sensual desire, aversion, desire for form, desire for the formless, pride, agitation, and ignorance.

The inability to fulfil our craving leads to frustrated attachment. This blurs our vision of reality and therefore, creates an incorrect and confused perception of the world. Suffering lies in this confused perception of reality. Gethin puts this lucidly when he claims that craving leads to suffering as a result of the discrepancy between our craving and the world we live in. This is manifested in the difference between our expectations and the way things really are. More often than not, we want the world to be other than it is.¹⁵

For the Buddhist, therefore, the root causes of suffering are ignorance, craving, and hatred. These constitute fundamental defilements of the mind. They are the “three poisons of the mind.” They combine and are manifested in different ways, which ultimately result in *dukkha*.

The Third Noble Truth: If suffering is caused, as the second noble truth attests, it follows that future suffering can be prevented by eliminating the causes of suffering.¹⁶ Therefore, the Buddha teaches that the utter cessation of *tanha* (craving), which is achieved through withdrawal from, and renunciation of craving brings about the cessation of suffering. This is the third noble truth; the cessation of suffering.

The reality of suffering will continue to be for as long as we are attached to things that are not stable, reliable, impermanent, and always changing. This is because such transitions in reality will never give lasting happiness. Thus, the Buddhist upholds a radical solution to the cessation of

suffering, namely, to let go of everything. For them, “if craving is the cause of suffering, then the cessation of suffering will surely follow from the complete fading away and ceasing of that very craving: its abandoning, relinquishing, releasing, letting go.”¹⁷

Suffering ceases when craving is removed, and we attain *nirvana*. *Nirvana* means 'blowing out' or 'extinguishing.' It is a radical transformation of consciousness to become free of the obsession with 'me' and 'mine.'¹⁸ The attainment of *nirvana* implies that the triple fires of greed, hatred, and delusion, is extinguished. Therefore, it signifies a psychological and ethical reality in which one's personality is transformed. Negative mental states are replaced with positive mental states motivated by generosity, friendliness, and wisdom.

The Fourth Noble Truth: This is the truth concerning the practical means by which *nirvana* is attained. It is referred to as *magga*, meaning 'the path.' It is about developing the wholesome qualities of the mind as outlined in the “Noble Eightfold Path.” This is the 'Middle Way.’’ It sets out the design that leads to the development of virtue and knowledge in which the highest form of life consists. It is steering a course between the life of indulgence and the life of harsh austerity.

Eight factors are involved in the middle way. They are sub-divided into three categories; (i.) wisdom (*prajna*), (ii) morality or conduct (*sila*), and (iii) meditation (*Samadhi*). These define the parameters of human good and point out the scope within which human life flourishes. The intellectual virtues are perfected in the subdivision of wisdom, while the moral virtues are perfected in the subdivision of morality and conduct, and the subdivision of mediation supports the former two. The eight factors of *magga* are not stages to be passed through on the way to *nirvana*, and thereafter, left behind. They are factors that indicate the way wisdom, morality, and mediation are to be cultivated on a continuing basis.

These Eightfold Path are; (i) right view or understanding, which means the acceptance of Buddhist teachings and later, their experiential confirmation, (ii) right resolve, which is

making a commitment to developing right attitudes. These two constitute the division of wisdom. The division of morality consists in the next three; (iii) right speech, which has to do with telling the truth in a thoughtful and sensitive way, (iv) right action, which means abstaining from wrongful bodily behaviour like killing, stealing or wrong sexual behaviour, and (v) right livelihood, which is disengaging from occupations that cause harm to others. The division of mediation consists in; (vi) right effort, which is gaining control of our thoughts and developing positive states of mind, (vii) right mindfulness, which is cultivating constant awareness, and (viii) right meditation, which is developing deep levels of mental calm. This is done through techniques, which help to concentrate the mind and integrate personality.¹⁹

The Eightfold Path is a modelling process that suggests there is a relationship between our understanding, actions, and emotions. It is a path of intellectual, emotional, and moral self-transformation. "It is a restructuring in which a person is re-oriented from selfish limited objectives towards a horizon of possibilities and opportunities for fulfilment."²⁰ The Eightfold Path implies that through the pursuit of knowledge and moral virtue, we overcome ignorance and selfish desires and therefore bring about *nirvana*.

***Dukkha* and the Western Notion of Suffering and Pain**

The Western notion of suffering and pain is closely linked to the philosophical problem of evil in the world. The problem of evil in the world, which is envisioned in human suffering, is in turn associated with the issues relating to a wholly good and omnipotent God credited with the creation of the world. It is primarily a logical problem. According to J. L. Mackie, it is "a problem only for someone who believes that there is a God who is both omnipotent and wholly good ... it is a logical problem, the problem of clarifying and reconciling a number of beliefs: it is not a scientific problem that might be solved by a decision or an action."²¹

We do not easily come across the definition of evil in the discussion of the problem of evil in Western philosophy because it is usually presumed that we understand what evil

is. However, we have some descriptions that summarize the general Western notion of evil. For instance, J. S. Bixler describes evil as a brute negative force on its own account, a force of fragmentary purpose that disregards the eternal vision.²² H. J. McCloskey describes evil as, “the pain and suffering of animals and adult human beings, that is, some beings who are helpless and who do nothing or little to lessen their suffering, and of others who sometimes but more usually not bring their sufferings upon themselves.”²³

The common denominator in these descriptions of evil is that it is the source of pain, suffering, discomfort, and defects, in the normal process of life. Inferring from these descriptions, we note or infer the demarcation of evil into moral evil and natural evil. While moral evil refers to the pain and sufferings caused by our human actions as moral agents, like injustice, oppression, and others, natural evil refers to occurrences and consequences of occurrences from the operations of impersonal natural forces, like earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes.

Over the years Western philosophers tried to resolve this issue of the problem of evil. Some simply explain it away by denying the reality of evil. Some explain evil as the privation of good. Some attempt a logical solution by arguing that it is an ontological issue arising from the concepts used in describing God and evil, which are not connotatively compatible. Some others, agree that the problem is real but a mystery and therefore, we cannot understand it. The rationalist position is that, a proper understanding of the nature of evil will enable us comprehend its compatibility with the attributes of a good God and even understand that evil is part of the consequences of God's goodness.

There is no significant difference between the basic notions of pain or suffering as *dukkha* in Buddhist philosophy and evil in Western Christian philosophy. Both acknowledge the reality of suffering and pain and ascribe its sources to humankind and both humankind and nature respectively. Although more analytic in its presentation, the Buddhist notion of pain and suffering pays more attention to the human sources of pain and proposed definitively how it can be eliminated. Western discussion of pain is still engrossed in

establishing the genuine source of pain and whether it should be, in the first place or it should not have been at all.

Critical Appraisal

The aim of this paper is to expose, analyse, and evaluate the Buddhist notion of *dukkha*, which is suffering. This is geared towards a clearer understanding and appreciation of the reality of suffering and pain in human existence. The schema of the four noble truths analyses the nature of the problem, the cause, the solution, and the way to bring about the solution to the problem of suffering. While the first three truths concern matters of theory, the fourth truth deals with the practice of possibly eliminating suffering. The first three truths therefore, provide the framework for the application of Buddhist solution to the problem of suffering.

On the basis of the Buddhist analysis of the problem of suffering, some have judged Buddhism as bleak, pessimistic, and a world-denying philosophy. In the opinion of Buddhists, such a conclusion reflects a deep-seated refusal to accept the reality of suffering and certainly a particular misunderstanding of the teachings of the Buddha.

Buddhism does not believe in a creator God who controls human destiny as most Western philosophers do. Neither does it seek to define itself by reference to a creed. It views religious activities like devotional practices and rituals, as legitimate and useful, if not even essential part of the practice that helps or brings about the cessation of suffering. Buddhism considers itself as presenting a system of training in conduct, meditation, and understanding that enables one to attain *nirvana*. Every other thing is therefore, subordinated to this goal.

While we may consider Buddhist analysis of the problem, the cause, the solution, and the way to the solution of suffering excellent, the end point provided by Buddhism; *nirvana*, creates a problem. That is, the problem of defining the ontological status of *nirvana*. Related to this problem are some other questions that Buddhism left unanswered. These include; whether the world is eternal or not, whether the world is finite or infinite? Are the soul and body one and the same reality or they are distinct and different from each other?

This is the question of monism or dualism as we understand it in Western philosophy. Does the person who has gained enlightenment exist or not after death? Or he both exists and not exists at the same time? The silence of Buddhism with regard to these unanswered questions suggests that it either does not know the answers to these questions or that the questions are irrelevant to it. It would however, be a deliberate attempt to escape answering these questions if they are considered irrelevant, for they are very relevant to understanding the concept of *nirvana*.

My opinion is that the above questions are unanswerable to Buddhism since it assumes the world, the soul, and the self as absolute categories and concepts. To answer any of the questions above, one would be drawn into accepting the validity of the question and the terms in which they have been couched. So Buddhism considers such questions as ill-informed and misconceived.

It is a given truth that suffering exists and that some of the known causes of suffering includes craving and inordinate desires. Buddhist outline of the causes of suffering seems to limit the causes of suffering to human making only. This is in contrast to the Western notion of suffering, which acknowledges both the human made suffering as moral evil and the sufferings that arise from natural occurrence or the consequences of natural occurrences as natural evil. There are definitely certain conditions and situations that bring about suffering which are not human made. The kind of suffering arising from starvation during a given period of famine is obviously not human made. Natural disasters, like earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, generally lead to suffering. This is a fact we cannot deny. Neither can we say the pains brought by natural disasters should not be regarded as suffering.

While we admit that some sufferings are human creations, we also admit that there are sufferings that are not human made. Eliminating the causes of human made sufferings as proposed by Buddhism only eliminates human made sufferings and not suffering resulting from natural causes. We however, concede to Buddhism that maturity of mind, discipline of character, and moderation in our deeds, provide

us the tranquillity to stoically accept suffering resulting from human creations and nature. Consequently, even in the face of unsatisfactoriness we remain docile and find joy and happiness in our human conditions of existence.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ “Suffering” in www.en.wikipedia.org, (Retrieved on 27/2/14)
- ² “Suffering” in www.en.wikipedia.org.
- ³ *Dukkha* is spelt *Duhkha* in Sanskrit. Sanskrit is a partially reconstructed Indo-Aryan language. It is the primary philosophical language in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism; a scholarly literary language. www.en.wikipedia.org. (Retrieved on 21/12/13)
- ⁴ R. Gethin, (1998), *The Foundations of Buddhism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.320
- ⁵ D. Keown, (1996), *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.25
- ⁶ “Suffering” in www.en.wikipedia.org, (Retrieved on 7/3/14)
- ⁷ R. Gethin, p.60
- ⁸ M. Siderits, “Buddha,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Spring 2011 Edition). Edward N. Zalta (ed.) URL=<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/Buddha/>, (Retrieved on 21/12/13)
- ⁹ J. M. Koller, (1970), *Oriental Philosophies*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, p.110
- ¹⁰ R. Gethin, p.69
- ¹¹ R. Gethin, p.69
- ¹² D. Keown, p. 49
- ¹³ R. Gethin, p. 70
- ¹⁴ R. Gethin, p. 71
- ¹⁵ R. Gethin, p.73
- ¹⁶ M. Siderits, “Buddha”
- ¹⁷ R. Gethin, p. 74
- ¹⁸ D. Keown, p. 51
- ¹⁹ D. Keown, p.81
- ²⁰ D. Keown, p.54
- ²¹ J. L. Mackie, (1970), *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and against the Existence of God*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 7
- ²² J. S. Bixler, (1951), “Whitehead's Philosophy of Religion” in *The Philosophy of A. N. Whitehead*, P. Schlipp, (ed.), LaSalle: Open Court, p. 497
- ²³ H. J. McCloskey, (1974), *God and Evil*, Martinus: The Hague Press, p.13