

Dukkha

By: Professor Angraj Chaudhary

Dukkha (suffering) is the first of the Four Noble Truths and the second of the three characteristics of all phenomena. The three characteristics are *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (suffering) and *anattā* (no-self).

The Buddha defines suffering in the following words: -

*Jātipi dukkhā, jarāpi dukkhā, maraṇampi dukkhaṃ,
sokaparidevadukkhadomanassupāyāsāpi dukkhā, appiyehi sampayogopi dukkho,
piyehi vippayogopi dukkho, yampicchaṃ na labhati tampi dukkhaṃ, saṃkhittena
pañcupādānakkhandhā.*

Birth is suffering, old age is suffering, disease is suffering, death is suffering, to be united to one that you do not like is suffering, to be separated from the one that you like is suffering, not to get what you desire is suffering. In short, the five groups of grasping (*pañcakkhandha*) are suffering. The five *khandhas* are *rūpa* (corporeality group), *vedanā* (feeling group), *saññā* (perception group), *saṅkhāra* (group of mental formations) and *viññāṇa* (consciousness group).

The first four sufferings i.e., birth, old age, disease and death are physical sufferings, the second three i.e., union with one undesirable person, separation from desirable one and not getting what one wants are mental suffering. Besides these two, there is a third kind of suffering which is the source of the first two sufferings enumerated above. This may be called the “cosmic suffering” because of which, one moves in the cycle of birth and death (i.e., is born again and again) and suffers.

One’s suffering can come to an end when he has no cravings left in him because craving causes suffering. As long as he keeps on moving in the cycle of birth and death, he suffers because he still has cravings. Birth is unfailingly accompanied by death which is *dukkha*.

Dukkha, as has been clearly shown by the Buddha, is caused by cravings or desires. The Law of Dependent Origin explains that sensations produce desire (*vedanā paccayā taṇhā*). When one has pleasant sensations, he likes to have more of them and when he has unpleasant sensations, he does not like to have

them. In both the cases he has desire, to have more and more of pleasant sensations and less or none of unpleasant ones. And desire produces grasping (*upādāna*) which are responsible for *bhava* (birth). Desires are insatiable. Unless one's desires are annihilated, he is bound to suffer. He will be born again and again and move in the cycle of birth and death.

Desires, therefore, can be said to be the source of all kinds of suffering. Suffering does not mean only physical and mental but it includes deeper ideas such as impermanence, emptiness, insubstantiality and imperfection.

In order to understand *dukkha* thoroughly, one should understand it from three viewpoints. The first viewpoint is that it is ordinary suffering (*dukkha dukkha*) realized by common people. The second view point is to understand it as change (*vipariṇāma dukkha*) and the third viewpoint is to understand it as conditioned states (*saṅkhāra dukkha*).

Physical and mental sufferings are *dukkha-dukkha*, universally accepted suffering.

Many a time in life, one has pleasant sensations and he feels happy. But these pleasant sensations do not last forever. They change. The happy conditions of life also change and produce pain. All these can be grouped under *vipariṇāma dukkha* (suffering caused by change).

But the third type of *dukkha* called *saṅkhāra dukkha* is a little difficult to understand. And this is where the philosophy of the Buddha comes in. One suffers from the above mentioned *dukkhas* because he is born again and again. One is born with five *khandhas* (aggregates) viz, *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṅkhāra* and *viññāṇa*. These aggregates constitute what is called a 'being'. An individual consists of these aggregates. Out of the five aggregates, one is matter (*rūpa*) and the other four (*viññāṇa*, *saññā*, *vedanā*, *saṅkhāra*) are mind (*nāma*). So as long as one has strong attachment to these aggregates, he will be born again and again and is likely to suffer greatly.

The Buddha says that the five aggregates and *dukkha* are not two different things. 'O, bhikkhus, what is *dukkha*? It should be said that it is the five aggregates of attachment.' It will be good if one goes a little deeper to understand why these five *khandhas* (aggregates) are *dukkha*.

Why are the five aggregates called *dukkha*? Because they are in a constant state of flux. *Rūpa* (form) changes, *vedanā* (sensation) changes, *saññā* (perception) changes, *saṅkhāra* (formation) changes and *viññāṇa* (consciousness) changes. They are not the same for two consecutive moments. So, the Buddha says, "Whatever is impermanent is suffering (*yad aniccaṃ taṃ dukkhaṃ*)." (*Samyutta Nikāya*, 2.21) This is what he means when he says in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* that, 'in short, the five aggregates of attachment are *dukkha*.'

To understand that there is inescapable *dukkha* in life is *sacca ñāṇa*. To understand different kinds of *dukkha* is *kicca ñāṇa*. This is called the *pariññeya* (to be understood accurately) aspect of the first Noble Truth. When one has thoroughly understood all kinds of *dukkha* at the experiential level, he has comprehended (*pariññātamaṃ*) it. This is the third aspect of the first Noble Truth and is known as *kata ñāṇa*. *Sacca ñāṇa* can be attained by *sutamayā* and *cintāmayā paññā* but *kicca ñāṇa* and *kata ñāṇa* can be attained exclusively by *bhāvanāmayā paññā*.

Sutamayā paññā is wisdom gained from listening to others, *cintāmayā paññā* is wisdom gained by intellectual analysis, and *bhāvanāmayā paññā* is wisdom gained from direct personal experience.

Because one is born with five aggregates which are impermanent, so he is bound to suffer.

To a *vipassanā* meditator, this becomes very clear. The pleasant sensations that he feels do not last forever. They change. Unpleasant sensations also do not last forever. They become pleasant and one may think that they will last forever but they also change. Even neutral sensations keep on changing. So, the conclusion is that everything changes. What gives one happiness, lasts just for a while. What changes, therefore, is *dukkha*. This is why it is said by the Buddha that what is impermanent is suffering—*yadaniccaṃ taṃ dukkhaṃ*. (*Samyutta Nikāya*, 2.21.)

Saṅkhāra dukkhatā is suffering caused by change. All compound things change; therefore, they are never the same for two consecutive moments. So, they cause suffering. One likes something thinking it is permanent but when he sees it changing, he is sorry. He suffers. And all that is subject to change causes *vipariṇāma dukkhatā*.

The realization of change at the experiential level goes a long way in making one free from desire. He does away with the craving for it. Why? Because he has realized its true nature.

Realization of change again and again at the experiential level makes one unattached to the things of the world and enables him to develop non-attachment (*nirveda*), which extirpates all his attachments and desires.

This kind of *dukkha* (*sankhāra dukkhatā*), therefore, is a great help for realizing *nibbāna*.

Birth, old age, disease and death are physical sufferings as has been said in the beginning. Association with persons one does not like, separation from near and dear ones and not getting what one desires etc. is mental suffering. They are *dukkha-dukkha*, universally accepted suffering.

In the same way, the second Noble Truth should be understood. That *taṇhā* (craving) is the cause of *dukkha* is *sacca ñāṇa*. Broadly speaking, there are three types of *taṇhā* viz. *kāma taṇhā*, *bhava taṇhā* and *vibhava taṇhā*. If one thoroughly understands why and where cravings arise, he will thoroughly understand the second aspect of the second Noble Truth. This is *pahātabbaṃ* i.e., the cause of craving should be eliminated. And when one has eliminated the cause of craving, that aspect of the second Noble Truth is called *pahīnaṃ* (eliminated).

The first aspect of the third Noble Truth is that *dukkha* can cease to be. The Buddha saw it clearly. He explained through the law of *paṭiccasamuppāda* that cause gives rise to effect and he also explained it very clearly that if the cause is removed, no effect can come into being. *Dukkha nirodha* is *sacca ñāṇa*. The end of *dukkha* must to be realized (*sacchikātabbaṃ*). This is the second aspect of this truth. And when one has realized that suffering or *dukkha* has come to an end then this realization is the third aspect of this truth. This is *sacchikataṃ*. The first aspect of this truth can be known by *sutamayā paññā* and *cintāmayā paññā* but the last two aspects can be known by *bhāvanāmayā paññā*.

The fourth Noble Truth also, like others, has three aspects. That there is a path leading to the cessation of *dukkha* is what is called the *sacca ñāṇa* of the fourth Noble Truth. In order to end suffering, one has to walk on this path. This aspect of the truth is called *bhāvetabbaṃ*. It means that one has to walk on this

path again and again, time and time again (*bhāvetabbam*) because without walking on the path one cannot end *dukkha*. The Buddha said in the Dhammapada --*Tumhehi kiccāmā tappam akkhātāro tathāgatā* (Walk on the path and work out your salvation). One who has walked on the path of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* and extirpated *dukkha* is said to have developed the path (*bhāvitam*). Here also, the first aspect of this truth can be understood by *sutamayā* and *cintāmayā paññā* but the second and third aspects can be realized by *bhāvanāmayā paññā*.

The way the four Noble Truths have been arranged is very scientific and reminds us of the method adopted by Āyurveda. This branch of science talks of disease, its cause, its cure and its medicine. Unless a physician puts his finger on the cause of the disease, how can he cure it?

The Buddha had a very comprehensive understanding of suffering. He does not only talk of physical and mental suffering which are obvious to many but he also talks of the root cause of these two types of suffering. These two types of suffering occur to one who is born. So, one who is subject to birth is subject to suffering. Birth and suffering go hand in hand. One who is born is not free from suffering. And one is born with five *khandhas* (aggregates). So as long as one has these constituents, one is bound to suffer. In other words, so long as one moves in the cycle of birth and death, one suffers. This may be termed as cosmic suffering as somebody felicitously puts it.

The second Noble Truth is *dukkhasamudaya* i.e., *dukkha* has a cause.

Why is one born again and again and suffer? The Buddha saw its cause at the experiential level. One is born because of his desire. A desireless person ceases to be born but one with desire is bound to be born. Desire in Pali is called *taṇhā*. *Taṇhā* has been variedly defined. It is *duppūrā* (difficult to satisfy), *uparivisāla* (extended on top), and *visaṭagamiṇi* (covering a great area) (*Uparivisālā duppūrā, icchā visaṭagāmiṇi*, see Mittavinda Jātaka no 369).

Taṇhā is craving for the various objects of the world. All our six sense organs have their respective objects in the outside world, which we crave for. We see beautiful objects of the world with our eyes, hear melodious sound with our ears, smell good perfumes with our nose, taste dainty dishes with our tongue, touch soft things with our body and think of good thoughts with our mind. We like them because we have pleasant sensations and we want to have more and more of them without knowing that they do not last forever. Because we are

ignorant of the real nature of things, we have inordinate attachment and passionate clinging for them. When different objects of the world come in contact with their respective sense organs and they do not produce pleasant sensations we develop aversion for them and desire to get rid of them. In both the cases, we either crave for or develop aversion for things. This, in short, is *taṇhā* (desire).

Where *taṇhā* arises has been very clearly explained in the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta.

Wherever in the world of mind and matter there is something enticing and pleasurable, there this craving arises and gets established.

Yaṃ loke piyarūpaṃ sātārupaṃ etthesā taṇhā uppajjamānā uppajjati, ettha nivisamānā nivisati Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta.

But what in the world of mind and matter is enticing and pleasurable? All sense organs, their respective objects, their consciousnesses, their contact with their respective objects, the sensations arising from the contact, their perception, the mental reactions, the cravings, thought conceptions of different objects, rolling in thoughts of them are enticing and pleasurable. It is there that *taṇhā* arises and gets established (see Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta).

This realization at the experiential level must have been a sort of ‘eureka’ for the Buddha. He saw where *taṇhā* arises. It must not have taken him long to conclude how *taṇhā* could be eliminated. It is *vedanā* which causes *taṇhā*. When you like it or when you don’t like it, in both the cases *vedanā* produces *taṇhā*. If at this point one does not react to sensations but remains equanimous, one will be able to not allow *taṇhā* to arise and multiply. One creates desires by reacting. If, on the other hand, one does not react then desires are not produced. How this process works can be understood with the help of a simile. When a black-smith hones a knife against a moving whetstone so many sparks arise. If somebody keeps oil and wick ready there to catch a spark each spark can become a conflagration. But in their absence sparks die out. If we do not react, desires do not multiply but they are exhausted. This is what is expressed in the statement made by the Buddha.

Khīnaṃ purāṇaṃ navaṃ natthi sambhavaṃ, virattacittā āyatike bhavasmim/ (see Ratana Sutta in the Suttanipāta).

Taṇhā accompanied by pleasure and lust, finding its delight here and there leads to re-birth. *Yāyāṃ taṇhā ponobbhavika nandirāgasahagatā tatrataṭṭrābhinandini.*

Craving is threefold: craving for sensual pleasure (*kāma taṇhā*), craving for existence (*bhava taṇhā*) and craving for non-existence or for life to end (*vibhava taṇhā*) as said above. In short, it is craving of one kind or another which causes suffering. *Taṇhā* is the fetter that binds us to the wheel of birth and death. The Buddha aptly compares it to a seamstress who brings two ends together i.e., who joins two existences. *Phasso Kho, āvuso, eko anto, phassasamudayo dutiyo anto, phassa nirodho majjhe, taṇhā sabbini, taṇhā hi naṇ sabbati tassa tasseva bhavassa abhinibbattiyā.* (A. Chakka Nipāta, 2.105.). *Taṇhā* supplies oil which keeps the lamp of life burning.

By realizing the law of Dependent Origination, the Buddha knew the cause of suffering. By realizing the same law, he also knew that if *taṇhā* is removed, suffering will end (*imasmim sati idaṃ hoti, imasmim asati idaṃ na hoti*) (see Mahānidāna Sutta in the Dīgha Nikāya).

This realization made him say confidently that suffering can be ended. The third Noble Truth (*dukkha nirodha*) is related to this.

We must go a little deeper to understand whether *taṇhā* is the first cause of *dukkha* and how it is responsible for someone being born again and again and his sufferings. If we just look at the law of Dependent Origination, it becomes clear that *taṇhā* is not the first cause of *dukkha*. *Taṇhā* is caused by *vedanā* (sensation) and *vedanā* is caused by *phassa* (contact). In this way the cycle goes on. But it is clear, however, that although *taṇhā* is not the first cause, it is the most palpable and immediate cause. Why palpable and immediate? Because as it is said in the Abhidharma samuccaya, it is the principal cause (*pradhānyārth*) and it is ubiquitous (*sarvatragārtha*). In the Pali Vibhaṅga, therefore, *taṇhā* comes first in the list of other defilements such as *kilesā* and *sāsava dhammā* that cause *dukkha*.

Taṇhā is a very comprehensive term. It is ‘not only desire for and attachment to sense pleasures, wealth and power’ as lucidly explained by Walpola Rahula, ‘but also desire for and attachment to ideas and ideals, views, opinions, theories, conceptions and beliefs.’ As said in the Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya. This is called *dhamma taṇhā*. All quarrels and battles between individuals or the nations have their roots in this selfish kind of desire.

It will not take one long to see that selfish attitude causes tremendous suffering, be it a quarrel between two brothers, two families or two nations.

So far, I think, it is easy to understand. But what is not easily grasped is how this *taṇhā* causes one's rebirth.

Questions:

- 1 What is *dukkha*? Explain
- 2 How many kinds of *dukkha* are there according to the Buddha? Describe each of them in detail.
- 3 How is *dukkha* caused? How can it be ended?
- 4 It is easy to understand that old age and disease are suffering but how is 'birth' suffering? Explain.
- 5 What are the three aspects of *dukkha nirodha* (cessation of suffering)?
- 6 How can the first aspect of the first Noble Truth be understood?
- 7 What are the three aspects of each Noble Truth and how can they be understood?
- 8 What does it mean when one says that the fourth Noble Truth is to be developed (*bhāvetabbaṃ*)?
- 9 Define *taṇhā* (desire) and describe its nature in detail.
- 10 Why is *taṇhā* described as *duppūrā* (difficult to satisfy)?
- 11 Where does *taṇhā* arise and where it can be eliminated?
- 12 Explain -- *imasmim̐ sati idaṃ hoti, imasmim̐ asati idaṃ na hoti.*
- 13 What is Dhamma *taṇhā*?
- 14 '*Taṇhā* supplies oil which keeps the lamp of life burning.' Elaborate.