



The Doctrine of *Dukkha* (Suffering) in Buddhism

Dr. Manish Meshram

Assistant Professor

School of Buddhist Studies & Civilization

Gautam Buddha University

Greater Noida, U.P., India

Abstract

The spiritual journey of Skyamuni, the historical Buddha (ca.565 BCE- 486 BCE), began with the question of human suffering. The pressing reality of suffering prompted him to search for the Dharma, a spiritual truth through which he would transcend suffering. After his enlightenment, it was the recognition of the suffering of others that inspired the Buddha to formulate the Four Noble Truths. *Dukkha* (Suffering) as a feature of life on this earth is too obvious and familiar to need description. Suffering is but universal. A great deal of human suffering is what we term roughly physical pain as well as mental and moral. In all ages the pressure of this problem of pain has been felt. It may even be said to be the driving force in all philosophy and in every religion. The classical example of the solution of the problem of pain is the doctrine of the Buddha. 'Suffering I teach, the way of out of suffering' the Buddha declared. Thus his root-focus is on the down-to-earth fact of human existence and not on any metaphysical questions. The aim of this paper is to discuss the Buddhist conception of *Dukkha* (Suffering).

Key-Words: Four Noble Truths, *Dukkha*, Suffering; *Anatta* (No-self), *Pancakkhanda* (five aggregates)

Introduction

We have the Buddha's teachings in the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths, which was the subject matter of the first sermon that he preached to his original core of disciples in the *Dear Park at Isipatana*. These Four Noble Truths are nothing else but the cardinal articles of Indian Medical Science applied to spiritual healing. That the Buddhist themselves were not ignorant of this fact is clear from their calling the Buddha 'The Great Healer, the Healer of the entire universe (*Sabbalokatikicchako, Mahabhisakko*). It is a significant fact also that *Vagbhata*, the famous Indian writer on Indian Medicine, salutes Buddha as the Primeval Doctor in the opening stanza of *Astanghrdaya*. Vasubandhu, the commentator of *Abhidharmakosha*, recognizes this fact. Now when we speak of *Dukkha Ariyasacca*, this very epithet of the Buddha is very relevant. He was indeed a spiritual healer who discovered the melody of suffering, sought for its cause; having resolved upon its cure sought for the good medicine of Nirvana.

Meaning of *Dukkha* (Suffering)

Dukkha in Pali or *Dukkha* in Sanskrit is a compound of two words. 'DU' and 'KHA' the prefix 'DU' is used in the sense of 'vile' (*kucchita*). It signifies something bad, disagreeable, uncomfortable or unfavorable. The suffix 'KHA' is used in the sense of 'empty' (*tuccha*), it signifies emptiness or unreality. Therefore *Dukkha* stands for something that is vile and imaginary. Buddhaghosa is of the opinion that things that are impermanent, harmful and devoid of substantiality are characterized otherwise by ignorant people and this leads to pain and misery. Hence, these are called *Dukkha*. In the ordinary sense *Dukkha* means suffering, pain, misery or discomfort. It is something which opposed to happiness, comfort or ease. *Dukkha* according to the Buddha does not merely refer to the ordinary corporeal suffering of man. Rhyds Davids has rightly remarked that it is difficult to find one word which could embrace the whole concept of the term *Dukkha* as used by the Buddha his teachings. The words in English are too specialized, limited and strong. The words



such as ill, illness, disease are not exact but only half synonyms in this connotation. *Dukkha* is equally mental and physical pain. It refers more to mental than physical plane, sorrow to the mental plane. But they have been used even in default. Wherein, more rendering was not possible. The words disease, illness, suffering, trouble, misery, distress, agony, affliction, woe, etc. have been used in certain connection though they are never fully right. Rahula is of the opinion that it would be better to leave it untranslated than to give an incomplete and wrong idea by conveniently rendering it as pain or suffering. Stcherbatsky stressing the philosophical implications of *Dukkha* observes that the Buddha's statements like 'The vision is *dukkha*' or 'all the elements influenced by *rago*, *doso* and *moho* are *dukkha*' can be properly understood, if their philosophical sense is taken into consideration. The elements of the world influenced by passions are constantly in a state of flux (*sasravah*). This agitated state of the elements has to be gradually appeased and finally extinguished from the influences of the passions. A state of uniform motion or rest of the elements (*asasravah*) has to be attained.

The cessation of suffering can be brought about by the noble eight-fold path. When the Buddha teaches that craving is at the root of man's suffering, it must be noted that he only suggests that man should liberate himself from craving, and grasping and not of his need. The entire Buddhist philosophy is nothing but an attempt at understanding human suffering and redeeming man from the same. The mind subjected to ignorance is conditioned by the five-fold defilements (*nivrans*) like the sensual desire (*kamacchanda*), malevolence (*vyapada*), inactivity and drowsiness (*thinamidda*), flurry and worry (*Unddhacca kukkuccha*) doubt and wavering (*vicikiccha*). The Buddha observes that to attain freedom from *Dukkha*, one has to overcome the five-fold defilements

(*nivaranas*) which have made the mind conditioned and unstable. One attains liberation when one perceives things 'as they really are' and not as they appear to be'.

The Existence of *Dukkha* (Suffering)

Suffering is the lot of all human beings. The main concern of religion is removal of suffering and the Buddha confined himself to root out this main problem. He said that one thing he taught was sorrow and the end of sorrow. Suffering is ubiquitous. Unless one knows that right way of living, his life would be an unending stream of suffering, relieved by brief intervals of pleasure which also inevitably end in suffering and boredom. He said, "Birth is suffering, old age is suffering, death is suffering, association with the unpleasant is suffering, separation from the pleasant is suffering and not to get what one wants is suffering. In brief, those factors of the five fold clinging to existence are suffering. The term suffering includes all kinds of evils and dissatisfactions, which affect the life of an average human being. It should not be understood that all beings are equally subject to the same measure of suffering or that all kinds of sufferings are self-inflicted suffering. There is no doubt that some sufferings are caused by physical causes or by other living beings and they fall upon saints and sinners alike. If there is an earthquake all are seemingly liable to suffer without any discrimination and all men irrespective of being good or bad are liable to be attacked by wild beasts or by wild men. Undoubtedly, as saint has a greater power of endurance and patience than a common man; so when he is faced with troubles, he can bear them with calm heroism and unperturbed forbearance. But it is fact that most of the troubles from which people suffer are the creation of their own minds. They arise from worry and anxiety, from anger, malice and envy, from avarice, pride and other undesirable mental status or, as the Buddha used to say, from the cravings,



hatreds and infatuations of life. In modern times, it is often assumed that with the betterment of social and economic conditions, the cause of the unhappiness of man would disappear. The idea behind this thinking is that we are unhappy because we are poor. If mankind were provided with all comforts and amenities of life, it would achieve happiness. But the fact is that many persons, in spite of being rich, are not happy. It means the assumption of happiness on the basis of wealth is wrong. Apart from a sense of economic security, that a thorough transformation in human nature is also essential in order to achieve happiness is a truth which every person should accept. True religion aims at the radical transformation of man.

According to Buddhist lore, the Buddha spoke of the Four Truths in his first sermon. As noted in the *Vimuttimaggā*, the Buddha detailed the various types of suffering which were evident to the ancients. Spiritual suffering, through the most serious, was just one of many ills. The *Vimuttimaggā* relates the Four Noble Truths in a question and answer format.

Q. What is the Noble Truth of Suffering?

Ans.. Birth is suffering; old age is suffering; death is suffering; sorrow is suffering; lamentation and misery are suffering grief and despair are suffering; association with those one does not like is suffering; separation from those one likes is suffering; the not getting of what is wished for is suffering.

Q.. What is the Noble Truth of the Origin of suffering?

Ans. Even this craving, causing new rebirths, accompanied by delight and passion, finding gratification now here now there, the craving for

pleasure, the craving for existence and the craving for annihilation.

Q. What is the Noble Truth of the Cession of Suffering?

Ans The utter fading away and cessation of that craving, leaving it, giving it up, being delivered from, the doing away with it... The ending of the origin (of suffering) is the ending of suffering.

Q. What is the Noble path leading to the cessation of Suffering?

Ans. It is the Eightfold Path of Right View, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Exertion, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

Except for the last sentence in the First Truth, which I shall explain presently, the Noble Truth of Suffering offers little difficulty. In explaining the First Truth, the Buddha enumerated several representative facets of life that are replete with suffering. Besides the categories of aging and death, the Buddha enumerated other species of suffering. These are sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, despair, separation from loved ones, and not getting what one wants. Understanding *dukkha*, however, is critical to understanding the Four Noble Truths. And the Four Noble Truths are the foundation of Buddhism. Because there is not single English word that neatly and tidily contains the same range of meaning of connotation as "*dukkha*". So through out "suffering," "stress," "dissatisfaction," or whatever other English word is standing in for it, and go back to "*dukkha*." Do this even if especially if – we don't understand what "*dukkha*" means. Think of it an algebraic "X" or value trying to discover.

Nature of *Dukkha* (Suffering)

The Buddha taught there are three main categories of *dukkha*. These are



1 Suffering or pain (*dukkha-dukkha*)

2 Impermanence or change (*viparinama-dukkha*)

3 Conditioned states (*samkhara-dukkha*)

Suffering or Pain (*Dukkha-dukkha*)

Ordinary suffering, as defined by the English word, is one form of *dukkha*. This includes physical, emotional and mental pain

Impermanence or change (*Viparinama-dukkha*). Anything that is not permanent, that is subject to change, is *dukkha*. Thus, happiness is *dukkha*, because it is not permanent. Great success, which fades with the passing of time, is *dukkha*. Even the purest state of bliss experienced in spiritual practice is *dukkha*. This doesn't mean that happiness, success and bliss are bad, or that it's wrong to enjoy them. If you feel happy, then enjoy feeling happy. Just don't cling to it.

Conditioned States (*Samkhara-dukkha*)

To be conditioned is to be dependent on or affected by something else. According to the teaching of dependent origination, all phenomena are conditioned. Everything affects everything else. This is the most difficult part of the teachings on *dukkha* to understand, but it is critical to understanding Buddhism.

What is the *Anatta* (No-Self) and *Pancakkhanda*?

This takes us to the Buddha's teachings on the self. According to the doctrine of *anatman* (or *anatta*) there is no "self" in the sense of a permanent, integral, autonomous being within an individual existence. What we think of as our self, our personality and ego, are temporary creations of the *skandha*. Most of the early sermons are for in purpose of dispelling this wrong belief in the existence of an Atman. Thus, after preaching his introductory sermon the "*Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*" which gives the broad parameters of the teaching of the Buddha, and convincing the *Pancavaggiyas* (five ascetic monks) about the fruitfulness of following the path he presents, the Buddha preached to them about the falsity of the belief in *Atman*. This is the *Anattalakkhana Sutta*", found recorded in the "*Mahavagga*" of the *Vinayapitaka*. If we accept the tradition which says that this

is the second of the sutta preached by the Buddha as correct, then this Sutta reveals two important facts. One is that this is the first time that Buddha presented *Pancakkhanda* (five aggregates) analysis of phenomena, which analysis serves as the most fundamental analysis of phenomena in Buddhism. The other is that the proper grasping and inter realization of the fact that all things are compounded by five aggregates and all things are completely devoid of an Atman, as claimed by other religious teachers, gives the liberating knowledge.

This shows how important this teaching about the absence of an atman is in the teaching of the Buddha, and how important its understanding is for the eradication of *Dukkha* (Suffering). In this sum the Buddha takes up the empiric individuality and analysis it into five aggregates namely *Rupa* (form) *Vedana* (feeling or sensitive) *Sanna* (perception) *Sankhara* (mental formation and Consciousness (*Vinnana*)). The Buddha using a very simple form of practical logic say: "*Monks, this form is no-self, if form happened to be the self, this form would not be subject to illness. Had it been so it would have been possible to command, may my form be in this, may it not be otherwise and so on. But as the form is no-self, therefore, there is no way to get form to behave in the way one wants may it be like this; may it not be like this.*" This same is repeated with regard to the other four aggregates namely, *Vedana*, *Sanna*, *Sankhara* and *Vinnana*. Then the Buddha raises the question whether any of these aggregates are permanent (*Nicca*). The *Pancavaggiyas* (five ascetic monks) answer saying they are impermanent (*Aniccam*). Then the Buddha asked them where anything that is impermanent is non-satisfactory (*Dukkham*) or satisfactory (*Sukham*). In chorus they answer that they are non-satisfactory (*Dukkham*).

It is then that the Buddha puts to them the more specific question, whether what is impermanent non-satisfactory and subject to change could be considered thus: 'this is mine', 'this I am' 'this is my self'. The *Pancavaggiya* (five ascetic monks) say, it is not possible it is not possible to consider so. From this the Buddha extends his discussion to things outside the individual, to



aggregates related to past present and future, internal and external, gross and subtle, low and high, really and far-away and posses the same question whether one could consider any of them as 'This is in mine' 'This I am' and 'This is myself'. The *Pancavaggiya* gives the same reply. This is explained as "seein things with perfect wisdom (*Sammappannaya*), in their true nature (*Yathabhutam*), This vision brings about emancipation, for it leads to detachment (*Viraga*) and release (*Vimuti*). *Pancakkhanda* (five aggregates) analysis of the individual is not the only analysis presented in the early suttas to bring nature of phenomena, especially to demonstrate the absence of any thing that could be labeled the individual soul, the *Atman* or *Pudgala-atma*. There four other such analyses these are:

1 Nama-Rupa analysis – the analysis of the individual into name and form or mind and matter.

2 Six elements (*Dhatu*) analysis. That is the analysis of the individual into four primary elements namely, earth (*Pathavi*), water (*Apo*), heat (*Tejo*) and wind (*Vayo*), space (*Akasa*) and consciousness (*Vinnana*).

3 Twelve base or *Ayatanas*. That is six sense organs and six sense subjects,

4 Eighteen elements. This is constituted of the six sense faculties and the six sense objects consciousness arising depending on the contact between the objects. For example- eye-consciousness (*Cakkhu-vinnana*), ear-consciousness (*Sota-vinnana*) etc. These along with the analysis into five aggregates constitute the five types of analyses. Though these analyses are done for different purposes, one of the main objectives of these analyses is to bring into focus that there is no soul, a self in the individual.

This shows that how fundamental this no-soul teaching (the *Anatta* doctrine) to Buddhism is.

Perhaps, Buddhism is the only teaching that categorically denies the existence of such an entity.

However, this denial does not amount to a sort nihilism. As shown earlier, the Buddha's admonition is to steer clear of the two extremes of eternalism (*Sassatavada*) and annihilationism (*Ucchedavada*). It is important to note that the doctrine preached avoiding the two extremes that is the extremes' of eternalism the teaching which posits the existence of an eternal self and the external doctrine of annihilationism, that is the doctrine which posts a soul or a self that get completely annihilated at death, is called the doctrine preached by the middle *Majjhena dhammam deseti*. This is other word, is another way of expressing the Buddha's *Anatta* doctrine. Thus, *Anatta* doctrine is a via media, a middle teaching which avoids both eternaism and annihilationism.

Hence, *Anatta* is not the opposite of *atta* identified as five aggregates. It is wrong to take 'Anatta' as the opposite of 'Atta', for such a meaning would make one consider *Anatta* as denoting 'nothingness' it merely denotes the absence of an *Atta*. Buddha's *Anatta* teaching is not about nothingness. The Buddha accepts the presence of aggregates, what he denies is their permanency. He explains the rising of these according to a causal process. They do not get annihilated, but ceased to be when causes that produce them are absent. Thus, when the Buddha speaks of *Anatta*, he does not deny the existence of a person. What he says is that there is no person existing in the ultimate (*Paramattha*) sense. There are only aggregates, which are also always in flux, subject to change. The *skandhas*, or "five aggregates," or "five heaps", are a combination of five properties or energies that make what we think of an individual being. Theravada scholar Walpola Rahula said, "What we call a 'being', or an 'individual', or 'I', is only a convenient name or a label given to the combination of these five groups. They are all impermanent, all constantly changing. 'Whatever is impermanent is *dukkha*' (*Yad aniccam tam dukkham*). This is the true meaning of the Buddha's words: 'In brief the Five



Aggregates of Attachment are *dukkha*. They are not the same for two consecutive moments. Here A is not equal to A. They are in a flux of momentary arising and disappearing."

Vasubandhu's Views of Dukkha (Sarvastivada view)

Thus the *Buddhavachana* of sixth century B.C. were preserved and endured with philosophical anthropological significance by his followers- the Buddhist philosopher of 5th Century A.D. like Asanga, Vasubandhu, Dinnaga and Dharmakirti. Although each one of them sought to reinterpret the Buddha's thoughts yet each retained the basic principle. When Vasubandhu tried to reinterpret the Buddha's thoughts, he stressed the point to solve human problems hence instead of advocating and formulating any methodology, he interpreted human nature and his action in the light of the Buddha's teaching. While solving problems of human suffering the Buddha advocated the above four Noble Truths. Vasubandhu in his *Abhidharmakosa* and *Kosabhasya* related these truths with man and his action and tried to give practical acceptability to the Buddha's teaching.

One may understand the term *dukkha* as grief or pain but however it leads to the experience of suffering only. Now I quote Vasubandhu's view. Can I refer to him as the view of Sarvastivada? The sixth *Kosasthana* beings with the discussion that the defilements are abandoned through seeing the truths and through meditation. in this contest Vasubandhu mentions the four truths the order of these truths so as to be comprehended (i) Why are they to be comprehended in this order? Because, in the period preparatory to the path proper, that is, the period examination, the ascetic first creates an idea of that to which he is attached, of that by which he is tormented, of that from which he seeks to be delivered, namely suffering. "Then he asks what its cause is, and he created an idea of the

origin. Then he asks what does extinction consist of, and he creates an idea of extinction. Then he asks what is the path of extinction, one search out its origin, its disappearance, and its remedy."

Before going into the details on the discussion of these 'Four Noble Truths', *Abhidharmakosa* begins with the question as to why the term 'Arya' is used for these four Truths. Because they are the truth of the *Aryans*. Does this mean that they are false for the non-*Aryans*? Not being erroneous, they are true for everyone. But the *Aryans* see them as they are, that is to say-they see suffering- the *upadhanaskandha* as suffering, impermanent etc....other do not. Therefore the truths are called "Truths of the *Aryans*" and not truths of others because the seeing of these latter is incorrect- "What the *Aryans* call happy (i.e. *Nirvana*) other call painful; what others call happy, the *Aryans* call painful". To sum up, Vasubandhu quoting the Buddha's view accepts '*Dukkha*' as the first in the order of the 'Four *Aryasatya*' because we experience '*Dukkha*' first, then we think about its causes; hence '*Dukkha Karana*' comes second. After understanding the cause of suffering, we attempt to overcome this suffering and then realize that '*Dukkha Nirodha*' is possible. And by following '*Dukkha Nirodhamarga*', we attain the *Nirvana*'. In this way Vasubandhu justifies the sequence of the order and the reason for using the term "*Aryas* in *Arya Satyas*". This shows that, according to Vasubandhu, the sequence of realization of the 'Four *Aryastyas*' is determined by the experience of an individual on the one hand, and his capacity or reasoning on the other.

According to Vasubandhu *Trsna*, *Avidya* and *Karma* are the three causes of suffering. Generally it is the tendency or desire of man to do certain things or to perform an action in order to get more and more pleasure. It is this desire which can roughly be called as



Trsna. It is only thirst or desire or greed that is the origin of suffering. From the fact a person free from desire is not re-born. When a person endowed with desire and a person free from desire die, we know that the first is reborn and the second is not reborn. Thus there is no rebirth where is no desire, we know that desire is the cause of re-existence. Vasubandhu refers to three types of greed of desire viz, *Kama trsna*, *Rupa trsna* and *Arupa trsna*. This kind of *Trsna* gives rise to three kind of *Dukkha*; viz., *Dukkhadukkhata*, *Samskara Dukkata*, *Viparinama Dukkata*.

What is this *Dukkha Dukkata*? All types of mental and physical suffering are named as *Dukkhadukkhata* (eg) old age, diseases, etc.

What is *Samskara Dukkata*? According to Vasubandhu everything in the world is momentary and constantly changing. Human being is not an exception to this. He is also momentary. However due to avidya or ignorance man cannot realize this and attempts to indulge himself and becomes unhappy. Hence, the structure of human being which is called as *upadana skandha* is *dukkhakaraka*. This types of suffering which arises due to *upadana skanda* is named *samskara Dukkata*.

What is *Viparinama Dukkata*? According to Vasubandhu everything in the world is changing and momentary so also pleasure is also changing. But man having ignorance fails to realize this and becomes unhappy after achieving the pleasure sought by him. This typ of suffering which is the result of instability of man is *Viparinama dukkhata*.

If we go through the perceptive of Vasubandhu on human suffering. We will find that Vasubandhu attempts to relate human suffering and its emancipation to the nature of man and his action. He believes that, if man realizes that he has certain

qualities and capacities, then he can easily control his qualities and action and thereby eradicate suffering.

Conclusion

Every human being in this world wants peace, harmony and happiness. He does not want any kind of suffering. It is clear from the past till now. If we examine the present day situations in the family, society, nation and the world, then we will find the same situation. Each person is struggling hard to exploit the other. Each nation is also eager to dominate the weaker one. All these are the results of bloodshed, turmoil and distress all over the world. The peace of each individual and the nation is disturbed. If we try to examine the main causes of all this carefully it will be revealed that ignorance and craving are the root causes of all this. Ignorance (*Avijja*) is the non-comprehension of the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha discovered the theory of the Four Noble Truths more than 2500 years ago. He arrived in this world with his messages compassion (*Karuna*), Loving-kindness (*Metta*), and attitude to all mankind as of equal value, a castles society and service to humanity. So the greatness of the Buddha is for his two-fold attitude, one for his leading man to eradicate sorrow by living an ideal life in accordance with the middle path, and the other for his ahimsa non-Violence, friendliness (*Metta*) *Karuna* sympathy which are conducive to bring about world peace and harmony. But this can be avoided by understanding the true nature of life in the light of knowledge of the first Noble Truth of *Dukkha* which is the corner-stone of Buddhism.

“*Sabbe Sankhara dukkhata yada pannaya passati
Atha Nibbindati dukkhe, esa maggo visuddhiya*” (*Dhammapada-278*)

References:



- 1 Ambedkar, B.R. *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Buddhabhumi Publication, Nagpur, 1997.
- 2 Boyd, Jams W. 'Suffering in Theravada Buddhism' in *Suffering: Indian Perspectives*, edited by K.N. Tiwari, Motilal Banarridas, Delhi 1986.
- 3 Dash, Narendra Kumar, Ed., *Concept of Suffering in Buddhism*, Kaveri Books, New Delhi, 2005.
- 4 Dhamma, Rewata, *The First Discourse of the Buddha*, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 1997.
- 5 Kashyap, Bhikkhu J, *Mahavagga(Ed.)* Nalanda, 1956.
- 6 Kashyap, Bhikkhu J., *Dighnikaya, Vol.II*, Nalanda Edition, 1956.
- 7 L.B. Horner(tr) *The book of the Discipline (Vinaya-Pitaka) Vol.5, cullavagga.*
- 8 Narada, *The Buddha and his teachings*, Buddhist Missionary Society, Kuala-Lamp Malaysia, 1988.
- 9 Nyanamohi Bhikkhu, *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga in Eng. Translation,)* Colombo, 1964.
- 10 Rhyds Davids, *Buddhist Psychology.*
- 11 Sangharakshita, *A survey of Buddhism.*
- 12 Sangharaksita, *Eternal Legacy*, London, 1985
- 13 Stcherbatsky Th, *The Central conception of Buddhism.*
- 14 *Vasubandhu on Abhidharmakosa commentary* chap. VII.
- 15 Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, Taiwan, 1978