

THE BUDDHA'S DIAGNOSIS OF THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT

Y. KARUNADASA

1. The Buddha's diagnosis of the human predicament is based on the notion of "dukkha". The rendering of this term into English as "suffering," does not bring out the full implications of the term. It has a comprehensive philosophical vision. What Buddhism means by "dukkha" is any kind of "conditioned experience", an experience dependent on impermanent conditions. Conditioned experience could be extremely pleasant or extremely unpleasant. Nevertheless, it is subsumed under "dukkha". Even non-sensuous Jhana-experience, representing higher levels of mind's unification and higher levels of happiness are brought under "dukkha, because they are brought about by causes and conditions. In other words, any kind of experience, other than the "unconditioned" Nibbanic experience, is "dukkha".

2. The Buddha says that as a religious teacher, it is suffering and cessation of suffering that he proclaims. The Buddha's teachings are concerned with a comprehensive diagnosis of the human condition, and its final solution. It is on this theme that early Buddhist teachings converge on, and it is in relation to this theme that they assume their significance.

3. In this connection, Buddhist Discourses refer to two kinds of teaching: The first is called "gradual talk" (anupubbi katha). "Talk on charity, talk on morality and talk on heaven as a reward for virtuous living," constitute the gradual talk. It is these topics that Buddhism shared with other religions. The second kind of teaching is called "the all-exalting discourse" (samukkamsika-desana). It consists of the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha's diagnosis of the human condition and its final solution. If the first is called "gradual talk", this could be understood in two ways. One is that it prepares the background necessary for the deliverance of the "all-exalting discourse." The other is that it gradually prepares the mind of the listener as a proper receptacle for a correct understanding of the second kind of teaching (Dighanikaya, PTS, 1, 110; Majjhimanikaya, PTS, I 379).

4. It is through four propositions that the Buddha presents his teaching on "suffering and emancipation" from suffering:

(a) There is suffering

(b) There is a cause for this suffering

© There is cessation of suffering through the removal of the cause of suffering

(d) There is a way which leads to the removal of the cause of suffering, resulting in the cessation of suffering.

5. When the Buddha proclaims the presence of suffering, he proclaims something real and factual. He does not express his personal feelings or emotions.

6. From the Buddhist perspective, suffering is not due to our being ignorant of some kind of metaphysical reality – God, Godhead, Cosmic Soul—or of our relation to it. Nor is it due to our identifying our true self with what is not the true self. There is neither a true self, nor a false self. There is only the false notion of the self. According to Buddhism, the cause of suffering is self-centred desire. Obviously it is a cause that is within us. Therefore we ourselves can liberate ourselves from all suffering.

7. When suffering arises, it arises within us. When it ceases, it ceases within us. Both Samsara and Nibbana are within us. As the Buddha says:

“Within this very body, mortal as it is and only a fathom high, but conscious and endowed with mind is the world and the waxing thereof and the waning thereof and the way that leads to the passing away thereof” (Dialogues of the Buddha I, 273; Samyuttanikaya, PTS I, 62; Anguttaranikaya, PTS II, 48).

8. Cessation of suffering is higher (better) than suffering. Yet, “the truth of the cessation of suffering” is not higher than “the truth of suffering”. As four propositions, the four truths are co-ordinate. They are all introduced as Noble Truths. They are equally true and therefore equally noble.

9. Each truth assumes its significance in relation to the other three. If, for example, the truth of suffering is sought to be understood in isolation from the other three truths, such an understanding will necessarily lead to the conclusion that Buddhism advocates a pessimistic view of life.

10. As maintained in the Buddhist discourses “when the first Noble Truth is comprehended, the second suggests itself; when the second is comprehended, the third suggests itself; when the third is comprehended, the fourth suggests itself.”

11. The progressive sequence of the Four Noble Truths becomes the basis for actual practice of religious life: (a) The fact of suffering is to be understood (*parinneyya*), (b) the cause of suffering is to be removed (*pahatabba*), (c) the cessation of suffering is to be realized (*sacchikatabba*), and (d) the path that leads to the cessation of suffering is to be developed (*bhavetabba*) (Vinaya, Buddha Jayanti Edition III, 22). If the second (the need to remove) and the fourth (the need to develop) are two aspects relating to practice, then we have the three

dimensions of Buddhism as a religion, namely, (a) understanding, (b) practice, and (c) realization. It is under these three aspects that all Buddhist teachings are presented.

12. The Buddhist teaching on suffering is presented against the background of similar theories current at the time. There were four theories as to why human beings suffer. The first says suffering is self-caused. The second says suffering is other-caused. The third says suffering is both self-caused and other-caused. The fourth says suffering is entirely due to fortuitous circumstances (Samyuttanikaya, Buddha Jayanti Edition II, 32). For Buddhism, suffering is a case of dependent arising. The twelve-linked formula of “dependent arising” shows that causes of suffering are not outside our individual existence. They can be identified by ourselves and removed by ourselves.

13. When Buddhism refers to suffering, does it mean (1) that there is suffering in life, or (2) that life is suffering? The answer to this question will depend on the Buddhist definition of suffering.

13. The Buddhist definition of suffering has three levels. The first level identifies four concrete occasions of suffering: “the trauma of birth” (jati), “the morbidity of decrepitude” (jara), “the pathology of sickness” (vyadhi), “the phobia of death” (marana). The second level is more comprehensive, it defines suffering in three ways: “to be dissociated from what is pleasant” (piyehi vippayoga), “to be associated with what is unpleasant” (appiyehi sampayoga), and “not to get what one expects” i.e., unfulfilled expectations, or impeded will (yam p’iccham na labhati). The last level of the definition is the most comprehensive; it is a comprehensive summing up of what suffering is: “In brief, the five Aggregates of Grasping are suffering” (Vinaya, Buddha-Jayanti Edition III, 22).

14. The five Aggregates of Grasping, namely, materiality (rupa), feelings (vedana), perceptions, (sanna), mental formations (sankhara), and consciousness (vinnana) themselves constitute individual existence. The very fact that they are described as suffering shows that from the Buddhist perspective, it is not correct to say that “there is suffering in life”. The correct saying should be, “life is suffering”.

15. Buddhism does not deny the actuality and possibility of pleasures in life. Is there, then, a contradiction between the assertion that life itself is suffering, and the actuality and possibility of pleasures. The answer to this question is that what Buddhism means by suffering is any kind of “conditioned experience”, an experience brought about by causes and conditions. “Conditioned experience”, could be extremely pleasurable, or extremely painful.

16. It is not the Five Aggregates (khandha), but the Five Aggregates of Grasping (upadanakkhandha), that are described as suffering. The individual in samsara means the one who grasps, appropriates, and clings to the Five Aggregates. It is this process of grasping and clinging to the Five Aggregates, that Buddhism describes as suffering.

17. Experience of suffering is sometimes described as “real and objective” (tatha, avitatha) Samyuttanikaya, PTS, V 430, 435; Patisambhidamagga, PTS II 104). The reason seems to be that although suffering is a subjective experience, it is presented as an objective fact in order to stress its universality.

18. If Buddhism stresses the universality of suffering, this could be understood from another point of view, from the point of view of the cause of suffering. The cause of suffering is self-centred desire. Hence the universality of suffering means, the universality of the cause of suffering, that is, self centred desire. Therefore, when we say, “we suffer”, this means that “we are motivated by self-centred desire”. The two statements are mutually convertible; the first is by way of effect; the second is by way of cause. Understood in this way, the whole purpose of the Four Noble Truths is to bring imperfect human beings to perfection.

19. “Cessation of suffering” is “Happiness”. “All living beings”, says the Buddha, “desire happiness and recoil from suffering”. (Sabbe satta sukhakama dukkha-patikkula, Majjhimanikaya, PTS. I, p. 342). Indeed, the pursuit of happiness is what is common to Buddhism and the other two world-views, from which it keeps equally aloof. If Spiritual Eternalism advocates self-mortification, it is precisely in order to obtain eternal happiness in the distant future. If Annihilationist Materialism advocates sensual indulgence, it is precisely in order to experience happiness in the immediate now.

20. There are many degrees and levels of happiness: First come sensual pleasures, the pleasure that we experience by gratifying our five-fold sensuality. Then come, in gradual sequence, higher levels of non-sensuous happiness, as for example, happiness one experiences, when one unifies and concentrates one’s mind in higher levels of Jhana experience.

21. It was believed by some ascetics during the time of the Buddha that happiness could be realized only through suffering. Even the Buddha-to-be, before his Enlightenment, accepted this widespread belief and underwent ascetic practices, only to realize that they were “fraught with suffering, ignoble, and not leading to the goal”.

22. The path discovered by the Buddha for the realization of the Highest Happiness is the Fourth Noble Truth, the Noble Eightfold Path (ariyo atthangiko maggo). It avoids not only sensual indulgence, but also self-mortification. Therefore the Buddhist path to the Highest Happiness is certainly not through suffering. “It does not involve suffering, vexation, despair, and anguish.” Accordingly, the Buddha describes the Noble Eightfold Path as **“the safe and good path to be trodden joyfully”** (Majjhimanikaya PTS I, 118).

23. It is not through suffering, but through happiness, that the Buddha realized the Truth of Suffering. In this connection, the Buddha says:

"I do not say that the breakthrough to the Four Noble Truths is accompanied by suffering, or displeasure. Rather, the breakthrough to the Four Noble Truths is accompanied only by happiness and joy," (The Connected Discourses of the Buddha, tr. of Samyuttanikaya, Bhikkhu Bodhi, p. 1860).

24. "Through happiness to the highest happiness" is the theme of some spontaneous poetic utterances of some Arahants, as recorded in the Psalms of the Elders (Theragatha). They proclaim: "Happiness has been attained through happiness".

25. Alexandra David-Neel refers to four possible attitudes in respect of suffering. The first is the denial of suffering. This is naïve optimism. The second is passive resignation. This is out-and-out pessimism. The third is camouflage of suffering by attaching to it spiritual aims to diminish its bitterness. This is rationalization of suffering. The fourth is "to declare war against suffering". This is the Buddhist attitude. Buddhism does not attempt to "interpret" suffering, because it is an attempt to rationalize suffering (Alexander David-Neel, Buddhism, Its Doctrines and Its Methods, p. 82 ff).

26. Buddhism stresses the urgency of the need for a solution to the problem of suffering. Our existentialist predicament is compared to a person who has been pierced with a poisoned arrow. This simile draws attention not only to our present predicament, but also to the urgency of solving it. In such a situation one must not waste one's time by asking such silly questions as to who shot the arrow, what his name and caste is. To raise such questions, is to create more questions. The patient could die before he could receive answers to his irrelevant questions.

27. It is in the light of this illustration that the Buddha's attitude to the problem of suffering and to the solution of metaphysical questions should be understood. When Malunkya-putta, a Buddhist monk, asked the Buddha whether the world is eternal or non-eternal, in terms of time, or whether the world is finite or infinite, in terms of space, the Buddha refused to answer the questions. The Buddha tells Malunkya-putta: "The religious life, O Malunkya-putta, does not depend on the dogma that the world is eternal or not, nor does it depend on the dogma that the world is finite or not. Whether the world is eternal or not, whether the world is finite or not, there is birth, there is death, there are grief, sorrow, pain, lamentation and despair, and it is for their extinction in this very life itself, that I preach the doctrine" (Majjhimanikaya, PTS, 431).

28. What is most significant to note here is that immediately after saying so, the Buddha goes on to explain the Four Noble Truths, which is the Buddha's formulation of the problem of suffering and its solution. Addressing Anuradha, a Buddhist monk, the Buddha says: "Both formerly and now also, Anuradha, it is just suffering and the cessation of suffering that I proclaim" (Connected Discourses of the Buddha, tr. Samyuttanikaya, tr. Bhikkhu Bodhi, p. 938)

29. As shown in a dialogue between the Buddha and a headman called Bhadraka, the fact of suffering can be penetrated in this very life, even without a direct knowledge of re-becoming/rebirth (punabbhava). The headman wanted to know how he could understand the origin and the passing away of suffering. Then the Buddha said:

“If headman, I were to teach you about the origin and the passing away of suffering with reference to the past, saying “So it was in the past”, perplexity and uncertainty about that might arise in you. And if I were to teach you about the origin and passing away of suffering with reference to the future, saying, “So it will be in the future”, perplexity and uncertainty about that might arise in you. Instead, headman, while I am sitting right here, and you are sitting right there, I will teach you about the origin and passing away of suffering.”

Then the Buddha explained to the headman, with many examples, how all suffering arises with self-centered desire as its cause, and how all suffering ceases with the cessation of its cause. The Buddha asked the headman to apply this principle, which he has seen here and now, which he has fathomed immediately, to the past and the future as well (Samyuttanikaya, tr. Bhikkhu Bodhi, Connected Discourses of the Buddha, pp. 1348 ff.)

30. Here we find an instance of inferential (inductive) knowledge (anvaye-nana), one of the means of knowledge recognized in Buddhist epistemology. Having first understood the fact of suffering and its cause, one draws an inference (nayam net) with regard to the past and to the future as well: “Whatever suffering arose in the past, all that arose rooted in desire, with desire as its source; for desire is the root of suffering. Whatever suffering will arise in the future, all that will arise rooted in desire, with desire as its source, for desire is the root of suffering.” (Dighanikaya, PTS, III 226; Samyuttanikaya, PTS, II 58).

31. From the Buddhist perspective, what motivates one to spiritual life is not fear (bhaya), but suffering (dukkha). Fear of God, for example, is the motivating factor in theistic religions. As the Dhammapada, an Anthology of Buddhist Ethical Verses, says, “Driven by fear, people go for refuge ... to (holy) hills, woods, groves, trees and shrines. This indeed is no safe refuge; this is not the refuge supreme. Not by resorting to such refuge is one released from all suffering” (Dhammapada, verses 188-89).

32. Buddhism is an existentialist philosophy: it is totally concerned with our existentialist predicament. The main thrust of the Buddha’s teachings is not on a search for metaphysical first principles, e.g. God, God-head, and Cosmic Soul. Nor is it a search for final consummations. It is a search for the meaning of Human Life. As a religion Buddhism begins with what is immediately given, our immediate experience or the conscious reality, which nobody can deny. The first Noble Truth of Suffering refers to our immediate indubitable experience. In conquering

suffering, we have to fall back upon our own resources, without depending on grace or divine intervention.

33. Seek not rebirth afar in future states.

Pray, what could heaven itself advantage you!

Now, in this present world, and in the state,

In which you find yourselves, be conquerors

(A verse attributed to the Buddha in Milindapanha, Questions of King Milinda.)