

o6 Unsatisfactoriness

In this talk we come on to the second characteristic of conditioned existence, the second lakshana, which in the original Pali language is called 'dukkha' (duhkha in Sanskrit).

As we shall see 'duhkha' is often translated as 'suffering'. I hope to show you though that a much better translation is 'unsatisfactory' (adjective) or 'the unsatisfactory' or 'unsatisfactoriness' (noun).

Or perhaps sometimes we are better just referring to 'duhkha', choosing not to translate it. This, I think we can do, but only once we understand its full range of meanings!

In the Dhammapada the second lakshana is summarised as follows:

*sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā'ti
yadā paññāya passati
atha nibbindati dukkhe
esa maggo visuddhiyā.*

'All conditioned things are unsatisfactory' –
seeing this with understanding
one turns away from the unsatisfactory.
This is the path to purity.'

From Dhammapada v.278 in [https://
dhivanthomasjones.wordpress.com/2019/10/15/translation-issues-
duhkha-and-suffering/](https://dhivanthomasjones.wordpress.com/2019/10/15/translation-issues-duhkha-and-suffering/)

'Duhkha' is very prominent in Buddhism. It is after all the critical part of what is presented as the Buddha's very first teaching, in the Deer Park at Sarnath, on the Four Noble Truths.

The first Noble Truth tells us that we must understand that in life there is no escaping duhkha. Without that understanding we cannot engage with the path to awakening.

This emphasis on duhkha, especially when it is translated as suffering, can sometimes lead to a perception that Buddhism is depressingly negative in its approach to life.

I would argue though that there is a contrasting side to Buddhism, which is its emphasis on happiness, fulfilment, and even joy.

When the Buddha teaches about becoming absorbed in meditation the second and third factors are 'piti' (Pali) or priti (Sanskrit) and

‘sukha’ (same in Pali and Sanskrit), which can be translated as ‘joy’ (priti) and ‘happiness’ (sukha).

How to explain the difference between priti and sukha?

Priti has a more physical side, as is instanced by the use of the word ‘rapture’ to translate ‘priti’. This emphasises the physical feeling in the body of rising energy. ‘Sukha’ has more of a sense of mental ease and contentment, a subtler form of happiness.

The difference between priti and sukha can be illustrated by a simile.

You are crossing a desert and feeling tired and thirsty. Then you come across an oasis with a cool pond of water, in which you swim and drink with delight. That sense of physically energizing pleasure is priti.

Afterwards you sit back under the shade of the trees feeling calm and contented with a clear mind. That’s sukha.

Priti has a stimulating, exciting and energising quality, whereas sukha has the quality of clarity and calmness and contentment.

There’s another very important teaching by the Buddha called the seven awakening factors, qualities that if cultivated, lead to awakening and the peace and fulfilment of nirvana.

Priti or joy is the fourth and pivotal factor in the list of seven. And sukha plays an important part in the fifth factor of tranquillity.

Sukha is the opposite of dukkha.

Sukha – the opposite of Dukkha – means “happiness”, “ease” or “comfort”.

Both sukha and dukkha are words that originated with the ancient Aryans who brought the Sanskrit language to India. The Aryans were a nomadic people who travelled by horse- or ox-drawn carts.

The two words literally mean “having a bad (or good) axle”. Was it a bumpy ride (dukkha) or a smooth ride (sukha)?

Here we have a very apt metaphor for life. Are you having a smooth (sukha) or bumpy (dukkha) ride today?

(Thanks for this idea to Karen Ball of <https://academyofancientreflexology.com/duhkha-sukha-choice/>)

So, yes it's important to fully understand that duhkha or unsatisfactoriness is a fundamental feature of human life but it's important to understand that joy and happiness are equally a fundamental part of the Buddhist path to awakening.

I want now to take a deeper look at the Buddha's teachings on duhkha. Let's take a look at exactly what the Buddha says about the first Noble Truth. I'm going to use Bhikkha Bodhi's translation, even though he translates duhkha as 'suffering'.

“Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering.”

Bodhi, Bhikkhu. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya (Teachings of the Buddha)* (Kindle Locations 33789-33792). Wisdom Publications. Kindle Edition.

When we examine and reflect upon the first Noble Truth we can uncover several different layers of meaning.

The first layer is the duhkha of physical and emotional pain... the pain caused by physical discomfort, for example, from the minor pain of banging your elbow, to the physical and emotional pain of hunger, or lack of sleep, or the agony of chronic disease.

It is also the emotional duhkha that arises when you become frustrated that things don't go your way, when you are forced to spend time with people you don't particularly like, or you are separated from the people you like and love, or from what brings you pleasure and satisfaction, or when you are upset about life's injustices, or worried about money or meeting others' expectations.

The second layer is the suffering caused by the fact that life is constantly changing. Maybe the happiness you have found slips away like sand

through your fingers. It's as if no moment is reliable because the next moment is always coming along fast on its heels. There's a constant bombardment of change.

Furthermore, every day, even during the pleasant moments, we can experience an underlying unease or fear about the future. This worry and anxiety is a manifestation of the third type of dukkha the Buddha identified—life's inherent dukkha due to its intrinsic instability.

And, I think, there's a fourth layer of dukkha. A sense maybe that even when life is going very well and all material and emotional needs are being met, something is missing. Is this fulfilling all my deepest needs? A question arises "Is this all there is?" A deep existential questioning.

Life is imperfect.

When we reflect on these different layers or aspects of dukkha, we can see physical and emotional pain, genuine suffering, a sense of unease, a yearning for something more, a sense that something important is missing.

If we are to have a single term that tries to encompass all these possible meanings of dukkha then I think that 'unsatisfactoriness' is more suitable than other terms. I think this gets over well the fact that life contains unavoidable sources of painful feeling and existential unsatisfactoriness.

As Dhivan says, "This is not pessimism so much as turning towards the situation with open eyes."

<https://dhivanthomasjones.wordpress.com/2019/10/15/translation-issues-dukkha-and-suffering/>

Andrew Olendzki offers us interesting observations on the possibility of experiencing both sukha (happiness or emotional well-being) and dukkha (emotional or physical pain) at the same time.

He reminds us, for example, that the Buddha experienced wracking bodily pains in the final days of his life. But, as he says, presumably these did not give rise to unhappiness or diminish his awakening and his sense of peace and fulfilment in any way.

You could express it in this way. Pain is inevitable, emotional suffering is optional.

The Buddha felt pain but he did not experience suffering.

Olendzki refers to the simile of the two arrows (*Samyutta Nikaya* 36:6), which tells us that weeping and wailing upon being struck with one arrow is like being struck again with a second arrow, the first being a physical feeling and the second a mental feeling.

An enlightened being does not experience the second arrow.

I am reminded of an event in the Buddha's life, just before his death, when he learned of the death of two of his most senior and closest friends and disciples Maudgalyayana and Śāriputra.

<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/nyanaponika/wheel090.html#ukkacela>

That evening he addressed the assembly of monks, saying, "Monks, the assembly seems empty tonight". The Buddha felt 'the poignant sorrow of the loss of a loved one' (Olendzki's words), an expression of mental pain, while at the same time feeling emotionally whole and well. The Buddha missed his friends.

For all of us it is possible to experience mental pleasure or happiness while experiencing a certain amount of physical discomfort. Olendzki gives an example of a beautiful day hiking in the forest that need not be entirely ruined by a blister on one's foot, even though it makes itself known with every step.

Olendzki also reminds us that stringing together moments of physical pleasure does not assure us mental happiness. In fact, it is often true that physical pleasure is a direct cause of mental unhappiness, as in the case of addiction.

<https://tricycle.org/magazine/pleasure-and-pain/>

Let me try and summarise where we are, and address what we might do ourselves over the next week to help absorb these teachings.

The first lakshana of impermanence is approached through clarity of perception, through the quality of clarity of mind.

The second lakshana of unsatisfactoriness is approached through the heart. Through our responsiveness or through the quality of sensitivity of mind.

We all want to be happy which can be expressed in many ways:

I want love

I want money

I want sex

I want pleasure

I want security

Our lives are a constant search for happiness. But our usual ways of looking for happiness either don't last or we get tired of them, wishing to seek after something else.

But if we look closely enough, we all experience an underlying, frustrated heart wish.

Maybe we have an inkling that true happiness is not found in external things but is found in re-educating the heart. It's found within.

How to re-educate the heart?

By practicing the five precepts in their positive form; loving kindness, generosity, contentment, truthfulness, and mindfulness; and by cultivating and developing the positive emotions of kindness (metta), compassion (karuna), sympathetic joy (mudita), and equanimity (upekkha).

Ultimately we may discover that 'nirvana alone is peace', and satisfies the deep heart wish for fulfilment and happiness.

During the next week I'd like you to pay particular attention to how your mood affects or biases your experience.

And I'd like you to explore what makes you genuinely happy in experience, maybe contrasted with what you *think* makes you happy, what you grasp after.

Try to explore whether there's a difference between ideas of what brings happiness and what actually brings happiness in experience.

(Thanks to Maitreyabandhu for ideas on working with the lakshanas and gateways.)