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Four Truths

The Disease, the Cause, the Cure, the Medicine

The orientation of the Buddha's teaching

What did the Buddha teach? The early sūtras present the Buddha's teaching as the solution to a problem. This problem is the fundamental problem of life. In Sanskrit and Pali the problem is termed *duḥkha/dukkha*, which can be approximately translated as 'suffering'. In a Nikāya passage the Buddha thus states that he has always made known just two things, namely suffering and the cessation of suffering.[1] This statement can be regarded as expressing the basic orientation of Buddhism for all times and all places. Its classic formulation is by way of 'four noble truths': the truth of the nature of suffering, the truth of the nature of its cause, the truth of the nature of its cessation, and the truth of the nature of the path leading to its cessation. One of the earliest summary statements of the truths is as follows:

> This is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, ageing is suffering, sickness is suffering, dying is suffering, sorrow, grief, pain, unhappiness, and unease are suffering; being united with what is not liked is suffering, separation from what is liked is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in short, the five aggregates of grasping are suffering.
>
> This is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: the thirst for repeated existence which, associated with delight and greed, delights in this and that, namely the thirst for the objects of sense desire, the thirst for existence, and the thirst for non-existence.
>
> This is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: the complete fading away and cessation of this very thirst—its abandoning, relinquishing, releasing, letting go.
>
> This is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering: the noble eightfold path, namely right view, right intention, right

speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.[2]

The temptation to understand these four 'truths' as functioning as a kind of Buddhist creed should be resisted; they do not represent 'truth claims' that one must intellectually assent to on becoming a Buddhist. Part of the problem here is the word 'truth'. The word *satya* (Pali *sacca*) can certainly mean truth, but it might equally be rendered as 'real' or 'actual thing'. That is, we are not dealing here with propositional truths with which we must either agree or disagree, but with four 'true things' or 'realities' whose nature, we are told, the Buddha finally understood on the night of his awakening. 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'. The 'Buddhist' is simply one committed to trying to follow the Buddha's prescriptions for coming to see these realities as they are. This is not to say that the Buddha's discourses do not contain theoretical statements of the nature of suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation, but these descriptions function not so much as dogmas of the Buddhist faith as a convenient conceptual framework for making sense of Buddhist thought.[3] Thus from one point of view any piece of Buddhist theory can be considered as to do with the analysis of one or other of the four truths.

The disease of suffering

The starting point of the Buddha's teachings is, then, the reality of suffering. Yet the summary statement of the first truth quoted above should not be seen as seeking to persuade a world of otherwise perfectly contented beings that life is in fact unpleasant. Rather it addresses a basic fact of existence: sooner or later, in some form or another, no matter what they do, beings are confronted by and have to deal with *duḥkha*. This is, of course, precisely the moral of the tale of the Buddha's early life in Kapilavastu: even with everything one could possibly wish for, he had not found

true happiness as long as he and those dearest to him were prey to disease, old age, and death. This is the actuality of *duḥkha*.

Rich in meaning and nuance, the word *duḥkha* is one of the basic terms of Buddhist and other Indian religious discourse. Literally 'pain' or 'anguish', in its religious and philosophical contexts *duḥkha* is, however, suggestive of an underlying sense of 'unsatisfactoriness' or 'unease' that must ultimately mar even our experience of happiness. Since any pleasant experience, whatever its basis, is ultimately unreliable and subject to loss, if we rest our hopes of final happiness in it we are bound to be disappointed. Thus *duḥkha* can be analysed in Buddhist thought by way of three kinds: suffering as pain, as change, and as conditions.[4]

The first is self-evident suffering: when we are in mental or physical pain there is no question that there is *duḥkha*. Yet when we are enjoying something, or even when there is nothing that is causing us particular unhappiness, things are always liable to change: what we were enjoying may be removed from us or something unpleasant may manifest itself—this is *duḥkha* as change. In fact everything in the world, everything we experience, is changing moment by moment. Some things may change very rapidly, some things extremely slowly, but still everything changes, everything is impermanent (*anitya/anicca*). When we begin to be affected by the reality of this state of affairs we may find the things that previously gave us great pleasure are tainted and no longer please us in the way they once did. The world becomes a place of uncertainty in which we can never be sure what is going to happen next, a place of shifting and unstable conditions whose very nature is such that we can never feel entirely at ease in it. Here we are confronted with *duḥkha* in a form that seems to be inherent in the nature of our existence itself—*duḥkha* as conditions. To put it another way, I may be relaxing in a comfortable armchair after a long, tiring day, but part of the reason I am enjoying it so much is precisely because I had such a long, tiring day. How long will it be before I am longing to get up and do something again—half an hour, an hour, two hours? Or again, I may feel myself perfectly happy and content; the suffering I hear about is a long way away, in another

town, in another country, on another continent. But how close does it have to come before it in some sense impinges on my own sense of well-being—the next street, the house next door, the next room? That is, we are part of a world compounded of unstable and unreliable conditions, a world in which pain and pleasure, happiness and suffering are in all sorts of ways bound up together. It is the reality of this state of affairs that the teachings of the Buddha suggest we each must understand if we are ever to be free of suffering.

On the basis of its analysis of the problem of suffering, some have concluded that Buddhism must be judged a bleak, pessimistic and world-denying philosophy. From a Buddhist perspective, such a judgement may reflect a deep-seated refusal to accept the reality of *duḥkha* itself, and it certainly reflects a particular misunderstanding of the Buddha's teaching. The Buddha taught *four* truths and, by his own standards, the cessation of suffering and the path leading to its cessation are as much true realities as suffering and its cause.

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by Rupert Gethin