

# DUKKHA: ORIGIN, MEANING AND END

AN ESSAY

by

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Explain, with illustrative examples, the range of meanings encompassed in the word '*dukkha*', and assess whether things are *dukkha* in themselves, or only when craving is directed at them. Explain how each of craving, grasping, spiritual ignorance, views and conceit are said to contribute to the arising of *dukkha*, and assess the extent, if any, to which Buddhism is a form of 'pessimism'.

[NOTE: I have followed the convention of italicising Pali and Sanskrit terms. The majority of such terms are from Pali, but Sanskrit terms are indicated, where they occur, by '(Sanskrit)' after the term, with the exception of words which have become part of the English language.]

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## 0.0 Introduction:

***“Both formerly and now, it is only dukkha that I describe, and the cessation of dukkha.”***

**SN XXII.86**

**0.1** Indian philosophy and Buddhist religious philosophy in particular, was motivated, not by armchair speculative theorising, but was formulated, rather, in response to the real and gritty constituents of daily life, the problems of human suffering and dissatisfaction, the pervasiveness of despair, frustration and stress, common amongst rich and poor, prince and pauper alike. The urgent soteriological imperative behind the Buddha's analysis of the human condition, points to the primary need to understand, eliminate and transcend suffering, unsatisfactoriness and pain in all its guises.<sup>1</sup>

**0.2** Buddhism, as an applied religious philosophy of life, starts with a description of the human condition, as one of malaise. Compared, often, to a spiritual doctor, the Buddha not only offers the diagnosis of *dukkha*, but points the way out of this malady, through the remedy of the eightfold noble path, leading to an ultimately blissful prognosis of *Nibbana* for those who follow the path. The Buddha also offers an account of the 'pathogenesis' of *dukkha*, linking it to spiritual ignorance and to craving. The cure, then, ultimately neutralises this pathogen of *dukkha* by overcoming spiritual ignorance through cultivating wisdom and also seeks to eliminate craving, by following the prescriptive and proscriptive noble eightfold path. The noble eightfold path consists of : Right View (*Samma Ditthi*), Right Intention (*Samma Sankappa*), Right Speech (*Samma Vaca*), Right Action (*Samma Kammanta*), and Right Livelihood (*Samma Ajiva*). Right view especially helps to avoid the production of *dukkha* because seeing things as they really are very much lessens or eliminates the desire to attach oneself to things, people and experiences which are ultimately transient, insubstantial and impermanent.

**0.3** So the statements, “all things are *dukkha*” or “life is *dukkha*” should be interpreted not primarily as ontological affirmations<sup>2</sup>, but as existential responses to, amongst other things, the realities of the ‘four sights’ of old age, sickness, death and renunciation, witnessed by the privileged prince Siddhartha and evoking a response of puzzlement, conjoined with compassion. A response which ultimately has primary soteriological rather than ontological significance, because the whole Buddhist project of seeking and attaining enlightenment is to attain liberation from *dukkha* and *samsara* (the cyclical wheel of becoming) and to get off, as it were, the samsaric wheel of rebirth and *karma*, the wheel which is maintained by and in turn creates further *dukkha*. Such an emphasis is also true when *dukkha* is referred to as meaning ‘the world’, for, as Hamilton points out<sup>3</sup>, such a world is the world of the experiencer and therefore the world of experience, rather than the world understood cosmologically.

**0.4** This distinction between ontological and soteriological emphasis is significant, because some Christian writers seem to misunderstand the role and scope of the Buddhist description of life as *dukkha*, seeing it as an ontological or even moral evaluative statement about the world – that the world is fundamentally bad or evil, when, by contrast and from a theistic and biblical perspective, the world is described by the Christian creator deity as fundamentally ‘good’.<sup>4</sup> Such a comparison is unwarranted and is misleading, because one is juxtaposing statements of different categories; one an evaluative, moral and theological statement (‘good’) with a statement that ‘all this is *dukkha*’ which is descriptive, primarily non-evaluative and even strictly non-theological (in the sense that Buddhism does not posit a creator deity). Furthermore, a correct translation of ‘all is *dukkha*’ should include the demonstrative ‘this’, as in ‘all this is *dukkha*’. In using the term ‘all’ the Buddha is not making a universal metaphysical or ontological statement, but is referring to all experience, as picked out by the demonstrative term ‘this’ and is using ‘*dukkha*’ as an adjectival, rather than a noun phrase.

**0.5** For a more complete understanding of *dukkha*, one needs to see it in the context of the doctrines of *anicca* (impermanence) and *anatta* (not self), together understood as the three marks or characteristics of all existence. *Anicca* is impermanence and transience. *Anatta* is the doctrine of not-self, that there is not an essential, permanent metaphysical self. Through *anicca*, we get a conception of the world as process, or of things in constant flux, as it were. All there is is change and process, when what the unenlightened mind seeks, stability, security and constancy are never actually available, or at least are not available on that basis, with such attachments. Hence, there is frustration. Hence, there is *dukkha*. Furthermore, such flux applies not only to things in the phenomenal world but to us as well, as sentient beings. There is nothing permanent or metaphysically secure or stable about us either, no big Self to which experiences are attached, no enduring Self through time, no *atman*, no soul, no eternal personhood. For, according to the doctrine of *anatta* or not-self, we

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are 'in process' just like everything else. We are formed by the five *khandas* (or aggregates). The *khandas* comprise : *Rûpa*, *Vedanâ*, *Saññâ*, the *sankhâras*, and *Viññâ.na*.

**0.6** In addition, the starting situation we find ourselves in or our '*sitzen liben*' in life may be as a result of *karma* from a previous life or lives. This may include the afflictions of physical and mental disability, or other challenges. All such can be *karmic* fruits of the *samsaric* cycle of existence. So, together with spiritual ignorance and craving, another source of *dukkha* may be the ripening of past seeds of *dukkha*. Indeed, unskilful actions in this life may well be storing up *karma* for future lives which will manifest as *dukkha* in those lives, so unskilful actions are yet another cause of *dukkha*.<sup>5</sup>

**0.7** But why is *dukkha* at the heart of Buddhism? The first obvious and sympathetic answer is that it is central to life itself as lived and experienced. Other social-psychological explanations are also offered. Torkel Brekke concentrates on the role of fear in all religions and how such fear motivates religious engagement.<sup>6</sup> Brekke argues that, while suffering is a key feature of life, the concept of *dukkha* is so all encompassing and so pervasive as to instil fear and religious fervour in the hearer. A lively idea of sin and hell fulfils the same function in Christianity, according to such an analysis. Both *dukkha* and sin/hell then may be seen then as missionary tools in Buddhism and Christianity respectively to generate a real sense of religious need in those proselytised. Furthermore, and this is my own additional analysis, such missionary tools, like those employed by the salesperson, -- and missionaries have the onerous task of selling that most intangible product -- religion -- serve the role of making implicit needs explicit, explicit needs which are then met comprehensively by the religion. People are not going to buy a product, however wonderful its features, unless they realise that they have an important and urgent need which the product fulfils. Hardly a competing explanation I'd say, but it does perhaps offer some additional insight.

**0.8** The doctrinal emphasis on *dukkha* also needs to be situated historically and socio-economically in a milieu where agrarian peasant lifestyles were being transformed by the move to towns and urban life, with all the upheaval, stress and re-evaluation that such relocation involves, together with a situation where there were many public health and medical problems<sup>7</sup>. What better concept to capture that social and economic angst, that sense of dislocation, that feeling of transience and impermanence, than *dukkha*, a concept which neatly encapsulates all these myriad conceptions. In saying this, one needs to guard against the unsupported claim that the teachings of the Buddha were just or merely the result of a response to culture and context-specific social, medical and economic phenomena. It is clear that the concerns which Buddhist teachings address, especially through the concept of *dukkha*, meet not only the immediate needs of the people, but have a universal, timeless and trans-cultural appeal, which goes far beyond the specific social-historical milieu of their 'apparent' genesis. I say

apparent, because the Buddhist claim is that such truths are indeed timeless and that the Buddha was merely reiterating timeless truths and not inventing new ideas as such. Evidently the concept of *dukkha* was not new in Buddhism, for it has a long history in the various strands of Hinduism and in the Jain religion. But the Buddha, made it his own, changed it significantly and made it central to his religious philosophy. His religious genius, turned it from a narrow and negative conception of suffering and 'badness' to a much broader and soteriologically significant doctrine of dissatisfaction and pain, mirroring not only the dislocation and existential angst of his wandering people, but pregnant also with religious and metaphysical possibilities, grounded in everyday experience and in a profound understanding of human psychology, aspirations, wants and desires.

## 1. The range of meanings, with illustrative examples:

**1.0** A difficulty arises in translating the term '*dukkha*' into English, as there is no exact equivalent. Translators sometimes translate *dukkha* as 'suffering' but that does not truly capture the rich range of meanings which '*dukkha*' denotes. As well as sometimes meaning 'suffering', the range of possible meanings extends to and beyond the following principal meanings: pain, sadness, unsatisfactoriness, transitoriness, angst, stress, the world and frustration.<sup>8</sup> Although not an exhaustive list, the meanings cited are delineated below, followed by illustrative examples of usage, nuance and meaning, together with linkage to other key Buddhist concepts.

### 1a Suffering,

Only sentient beings suffer, or at least that is how we use language. For our language community it just doesn't make sense to say that a stone or a blade of grass suffers. This restriction limits the meaning of *dukkha* in a way that is not intended by the concept itself. While suffering in all its guises is a manifestation of *dukkha*, such a translation fails to communicate the fact that pleasant and enjoyable experiences can also be *dukkha*, by virtue of their transitoriness, impermanence and insubstantiality. Indeed, suffering arises in part from the dissonance which emerges from attributing permanence, substantiality or solidity to things and experiences which are never permanent, substantial or secure. While the aim of the eightfold path is to achieve *nirvana* (Sanskrit) by eliminating *dukkha* and thereby also eliminating suffering, Christianity has a different view of suffering, sharing with Buddhism the desire to transform and eliminate it where possible, but also seeing it as something to bear with patience and love and to offer up to God, partly as a penance for sin, but also as something, which like the Buddhist store of merit, can benefit others and bring about the conversion of sinners. Suffering is also at the heart of Christianity in the person of Jesus, who as innocent Lamb of God and Paschal sacrifice is seen as taking upon himself the sins of the world and suffering in a way in Gethsemane and Calvary that is redemptive and victorious.

While some kinds of suffering can be character building and ultimately produce good moral results, a huge problem for both Christianity and for Buddhism to understand is that of dysteleological surd evil<sup>9</sup>. For Christianity, this poses the so called theological problem of evil, but for Buddhism, the questions and issues posed are more subtle, though also, alas, outside the scope of this paper.

### **1b Pain,**

Physical and mental pain obviously cause human suffering and are also unsatisfactory. Harvey's preferred translation of *dukkha* also includes the variant 'is a pain'<sup>10</sup>, referring to the element of frustration, annoyance, irritation, stress and nuisance, though common usage often emphasises the trivial sense, Harvey intends this to have a wider application.

Pain includes purposive and dysteleological variants, but both are *dukkha*, both are unsatisfactory, because they cause suffering. Purposive pain is often disproportionate to the danger it signals, but it is also unsatisfactory because one can conceive of other non-hurting signals which could be transmitted. But , while it is quite straightforward to understand how the 'a pain' kind of mental annoyance and frustration can be eliminated or moderated by mental training, it is perhaps less obvious that the *dukkha* of physical pain can itself be moderated by certain yogic practices which have been incorporated into Buddhist meditation. How such pain is neutralised is quite fascinating and is perhaps similar in some ways to how pain is managed by hypnosis.

Pain is an interesting meaning of *dukkha*, for it encapsulates its physical and psychological dimensions. Although we describe pain as being both physical and mental, ultimately all pain is mental, for all of it, whether caused through sensory excitation or through cogitation, is eventually mediated through the brain. Therefore, it is necessary to add the phrase 'a pain' to describe things and people, not just experience.

### **1c Sadness,**

Sadness is often a response to hurt or loss. Loss, in particular, whether actual or symbolic, derives its painfulness as a by-product of attachment. We only feel loss and sadness for those people and things to which or to whom we are attached. Attachment itself is a form of craving, one of the two primary causes of *dukkha* (along with spiritual ignorance). We attach ourselves to people or things we believe to be permanent or substantial and that will last forever. Loss in life is inevitable.<sup>11</sup> How we eliminate the suffering caused by such loss is perhaps to make the love less clinging, less attached, less idealised. Love and relationships then become perhaps less romanticised and more realistic, less about dependence and more about interdependence.

**1d Unsatisfactoriness,**

Nothing in life is perfect, nothing is permanent or lasts forever. As with the writer of Ecclesiastes, we can say that 'all is vanity'. Now this has psychological as well as metaphysical implications. Psychologically, we seem to be so constructed so as to have human needs, many of which can never be fulfilled. As human beings, we rarely or ever are satisfied for long. We always want more, or better or bigger or faster objects of desire. Our greed inevitably expands beyond our need and is cultivated by the media, by advertising, by public relations and marketing. Now, despite popular misunderstanding, Buddhism is not really caught in a paradox of desire<sup>12</sup>. That is because desire to meet our real needs is legitimate, healthy and congruous with the spiritual path and with enlightenment. So 'desiring to eliminate our desire' is not the kind of recursive and impossible paradoxical labyrinth that it first seems to be. Effectively, we are to work on eliminating our greed, our perceived needs for things, people and experiences that are neither necessary, nor sufficient for our happiness. The recipe for a happy life is one of 'simple living and high thinking'.

Buddhism sees dissatisfaction as arising from seeing the world and things in the world and experiences in the world as permanent or substantial or 'essential' to an enduring self. So, dissatisfaction is fuelled by setting up unrealistic needs, based on misperception of reality – needs which inevitably will be frustrated. One solution to this is to increase spiritual wisdom, to eliminate spiritual ignorance, so that one sees things as they really are and for what they are. The second part of the solution is the training of the eightfold path.

**1e Transitoriness,**

Everything is in flux. That makes it difficult to base our need for security on transient realities. When we do base our security on such ephemera, we are building on a sandy foundation which can only crumble, resulting in suffering, loss, frustration and pain. Transitoriness is also another way of describing change, one of the three types of *dukkha* which the Buddha elucidated. Things are in flux because they are conditioned and, in the case of human experience, because they can be identified with the five khandas. Transitoriness means that attachment is never forever, despite our ardent desire for it to be so, especially in the case of profound love.

**1h Angst,**

Fear and anxiety are a modern plague. People often reach for the bottle or for drugs to anaesthetise themselves from such anxiety. More prescriptions are written for anxiolytic pharmaceuticals than for any other class of prescription drug. Such anxiety is *dukkha*. Indeed, angst has been described as a kind of existential anxiety, a form of generalised anxiety, a non-specific though pervasive form of 'fear and trembling'<sup>13</sup>. Perhaps such angst is really a subconscious recognition that all things are *dukkha*, but not knowing what to do with or about that

realisation. The adept who trains her mind in <sup>7</sup>calming or insight meditation will gradually reduce the *dukkha* of such angst as they also follow the eightfold noble path to liberation.

### **1j Stress.**

Stress is the bane of modern living, or at least it has come into its own as a recognised phenomenon in modern times. One way of looking at stress is to see it in terms of pressures and conflicting/competing interests pulling us in so many mutually contradictory directions. The demands made upon us by work, home, family and society seem for most people to outweigh the personal resources available to meet these demands. If we take the example of stress on materials, we see that prolonged, unremitting stress, leads eventually to fracture and to breaking down. But though this indeed causes suffering, how does it relate to the spiritual path and how is it eliminated?

Stress causes worry and anxiety, both painful psychological states. Stress is also often converted into physical symptoms such as hypertension, palpitations and possibly into heart disease and some cancers. Such painful symptoms would indeed impede a person on their spiritual journey, at the very least by taking energy away from spiritual growth and development and by reducing stamina and endurance.

The great Buddhist 'stress-buster' is meditation, especially in its *samatha* (calming), but also in its *vipassana* (insight) modes. *Samatha* meditation is usually the stress-buster of first recourse, almost immediately bringing about calm and relief of stress-related symptoms – in this way it might be compared with brief, focused, problem-centred therapy. *Vipassana* meditation goes deeper and enables one to recognise the profound roots of stress and to eliminate them – in this way it might usefully be compared with long term psychotherapy or perhaps even with psychoanalysis.

### **1k The World**

In its primary application, 'the world' is meant as the world of the experiencer rather than as the cosmological or astronomical world. In this sense, developed at length by Sue Hamilton, it is saying that the whole of our experience, the full range of our experiencing is *dukkha*, including the pleasant bits, because they do not last and are fleeting and ephemeral. But, 'the world' can also mean all things in the cosmological world, since all these things are *anicca*, impermanent.

Pleasant things and pleasant experiences in the world are also *dukkha* because they are transitory, impermanent and always subject to change. Such a meaning might be missed if we looked upon *dukkha* as suffering, and only suffering. Life is more than suffering and *dukkha* is more than suffering too, for it embraces all conditioned things

and experiences, including the pleasurable ones. Now, the antonym of *dukkha* is *sukha*, meaning pleasure, but that is only true at a very superficial level. While pleasure may well be the opposite of pain in a commonsense context, the 'pain' of *dukkha* is so pervasive that the only permanent and significant antonym is actually *nirvana*, for all other pleasure states are temporary and transient and unsatisfactory. Only nirvana satisfies completely by blowing out the candle of craving, fuelling *dukkha*.

### **1m Frustration**

Frustration occurs when we do not get what we want (as in the Buddha's own formula: "not getting what is wanted is *dukkha*"). So, in this sense, frustration is clearly and closely related to craving. It is also related to setting perfectionistic standards that experience and the world can never live up to. Frustration arises from wanting the world to be other than it is and refusing to accept that things are *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*. The mainstream solution is to eliminate such spiritual ignorance and to follow the eightfold noble path.

From a Mahayana perspective, frustration also arises from perceiving the world in terms of dualities: likes and dislikes, even in terms of *dukkha* and *sukha*. The Mahayana solution to such frustration which causes *dukkha* is to transcend the dualities and to see the emptiness (*sunyata*) in all things, including the emptiness of arbitrary, mind-constructed dualities.

### **2.0 Further illustrative examples of *Dukkha***

**2.1** The Buddha offered the following illustrative examples of *dukkha*:

"Birth is *dukkha*, aging is *dukkha*, death is *dukkha*; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are *dukkha*; association with the unloved is *dukkha*; separation from the loved is *dukkha*; not getting what is wanted is *dukkha*. In short, the five clinging-aggregates are *dukkha*." [SN L VI.11]

He points out that the process of birth, from conception, through gestation, eventuating in labour and delivery, is all of it a *dukkha*-laden process, both for the developing foetus and for the mother. Aging also is *dukkha* because one loses faculties, strength and capabilities. Death itself is a painful process. It is not easy to die. There is the anticipation and the worry, both for the sufferer and for her loved ones, together with the process of dying itself and the subsequent loss and bereavement for those left behind.



**2.2** A modern writer, Francis Story, offers the following impressive list of meanings for *dukkha*:

“Disturbance, irritation, dejection, worry, despair, fear, dread, anguish, anxiety; vulnerability, injury, inability, inferiority; sickness, aging, decay of body and faculties, senility,; pain/pleasure; excitement/boredom; deprivation/excess; desire/frustration, suppression; longing/aimlessness; hope/hopelessness; effort, activity, striving/repression; loss, want, insufficiency/satiety; love/lovelessness, friendlessness; dislike, aversion/attraction; parenthood/childlessness; submission/rebellion; decision/indecisiveness, vacillation, uncertainty.”

[Francis Story in *Suffering* from Vol 2 of The Three Basic Facts of Existence (Kandy, BPS, 1983.)]

Story certainly brings out the important points that, what would usually be regarded as pleasurable experiences, are actually also *dukkha*, because of their impermanence. Amongst such he mentions pleasure, excitement, excess, parenthood, attraction, hope, effort, activity, striving and love, all of which are viewed positively through Western mores, but which in actual fact keep us bound to the samsaric world.

### **3.0 Three categories or types of Dukkha**

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The Pali scriptures indicate that there are three types of *dukkha*: (a) *dukkha* due to pain (mental and physical), (b) *dukkha* due to the painfulness of conditioned things and (c) *dukkha* due to change. Let us take each of these in turn:

(a) **Dukkha due to pain.**

We have already seen how pain or ‘a pain’ is Harvey’s preferred translation for *dukkha*. Pain can be physical or mental and it can also be ‘a pain’, that is, frustration, nuisance, annoyance, disappointment. The fact that the Buddha suggests that pain is just one of three types of *dukkha*, suggests that Harvey’s translation of *dukkha* as ‘pain’ is, like other putative translations, somewhat lacking or incomplete, for it does not seemingly incorporate the sense of *dukkha* as due to conditioned things or of *dukkha* as due to change.

(b) **Dukkha due to conditioned things.**

All things except for Nirvana are conditioned or caused. Buddhism posits multiple causative factors, unlike the single cause-effect proposed linkage in Western philosophical accounts of actions, events and experiences. Such conditioning is summed up in the teaching of ‘conditioned arising’ or ‘dependent origination’ (*paticca samuppāda*), which is illustrated in [Figure 1](#), below. Beginning with spiritual ignorance, the twelve links of conditioned arising inevitably lead to the *dukkha* of becoming and old age, sickness and death, which is then recycled through karma. Conditioned Arising, however, can only operate fully when a person is ignorant of it. Once a person fully understands it, it can be stopped<sup>14</sup>.

(c) **Dukkha due to change.**

Change implies transience and impermanence, both of which are seen as vitiating lasting security. But is that kind of security a realistic prospect to start with anyway? We could not exist in a static world. Biological organisms change in order to live. If they did not change they would die! We need to breathe and to take in nutrients, at the very least. So, maybe not all kinds of change are *dukkha*. Life as an unchanging statue wouldn't be much of a life. But even statues oxidise and deteriorate. We need a certain amount of change not only to function but to be happy. A constant state of pleasure would also be not much of a life. This was illustrated most amusingly by Woody Allen's comic cinematic invention of the 'orgasmatron' machine, a machine which titillated all its incumbents with constant pleasure analogous to sexual orgasm. At first, people were very eager to try the machine, but as time went on, they became exhausted, worn out and bored! So maybe it is not change per se that we need to eliminate but too much or too little change, both of which can be equally stressful, but for different reasons. Too much change places too many demands on our psychological coping resources and we experience stress through over-commitment. Too little change and we are not sufficiently stimulated or challenged and we atrophy through boredom! So, maybe not all psychological change is *dukkha*.

In saying this, we need to balance it against the reality of change in nature as normally implying deterioration. In nature, change means survival, sure, but ultimately it means death of cells and death of organs and of organisms and of us. So, in a very real sense change equals death, a very sure kind of *dukkha*.

**3.0 How CRAVING contributes to the arising of Dukkha**

Craving (*tanha*, literally 'thirst') fosters attachment. Such attachment is to things, people and experiences which are insubstantial, impermanent and unsatisfactory. Such experience of dissatisfaction only serves to fuel the fire of craving, for other things, people and experiences which might yet be satisfying, but none such are to be had. So craving is like a fire, as indeed is the mind itself<sup>15</sup>, self-consuming and keeping one locked into the *samsaric* wheel of becoming. Craving is like an addiction, which fuels a fire for things which can never be satisfied.

**3.1 Are things Dukkha in themselves or only when craving is directed at them?**

Things are both *dukkha* in themselves and when craving is directed at them. They are *dukkha* in themselves principally because all conditioned things are characterised by *anicca* or impermanence. Such intrinsic *dukkha* is compounded when craving is directed towards them, for the reasons given above. That is certainly the mainstream Buddhist view.

However, there is some evolution in meaning between the different vehicles of Buddhism with respect to what *dukkha* is seen as applying to. In the Theravada, the understanding is as stated above, but the Mahaayaana places greater emphasis on the mind as the creator of *dukkha* and sees spiritual ignorance and craving as the primary cause of *dukkha*, rather than things as having *dukkha*-in-themselves, apart from impermanence. The Vajrayana tradition probably goes further in its opposition to all constructed dualities. For this tradition of Buddhism, *dukkha* is not different to *sukha* (pleasure, satisfaction), just as *samsara* is seen as not different to *nirvana*. Some things, normally seen as prohibited and as *dukkha*-laden by the precepts, are reinterpreted in a way that seems paradoxical, even extending to antinomian practices and sexual yoga. All of which seems to be saying, “don’t get hung up on *dukkha* or on restrictions arising from *dukkha*! Don’t make *dukkha* another way to compartmentalise and to form dualities. Don’t become attached to avoiding *dukkha*!” Indeed, this is borne out by the fact that the scriptures affirm that, while a firm and resolute desire to achieve *nirvana* is required throughout the spiritual path, even this desire must be abandoned at the end, on the brink of *nirvana*<sup>16</sup>.

### **3.2 How GRASPING contributes to the arising of Dukkha**

Grasping is another way for describing clinging, the situation which arises when craving for an object is realised by the possession of that object and when one then clings to that object, believing it to be permanent and substantial. Here, one is reminded of the acquisitiveness that characterises many people who hoard things, as well as trying to ‘possess’ other people. Such clinging or grasping indeed results in the arising of *dukkha*, for the objects one tries to keep cannot ultimately be kept because they are impermanent, transient, and insubstantial as well as being characterised by *anicca*.

In a more detailed way, each of the five khandas or personality factors are themselves objects of grasping which result in *anatta*-denying concepts of ‘me, myself and I’. Such grasping is a form of attachment and such attachment to impermanent, transient objects is bound to involve loss and *dukkha* when such objects, the objects of sensory and cognitive perception, change.

### **4.0 How SPIRITUAL IGNORANCE contributes to the arising of Dukkha.**

Buddhism sees all conditioned things as originating with spiritual ignorance. That is the beginning of the cyclical chain of dependent origination, of which there are twelve links or *nidanas*:

**Figure 1****The Cycle of Dependent Origination** (*Paticca Samuppada*)

1. **Spiritual Ignorance** ←----- Starting point  
(Changeable)
  2. Karmic actions (intentional acts);
  3. Consciousness;
  4. Body and Mind;
  5. The Senses;
  6. Sense impressions;
  7. Feelings ;
  8. **Craving**; ←----- Changeable link
  9. Clinging ;
  10. Becoming;
  11. Rebirth
  12. Old Age and Death. [Dukkha]
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Spiritual ignorance means effectively that one does not see things as they really are and as a result one forms attachment to such fantasy objects. One confers permanence, satisfaction and substantiveness onto such objects of desire. If one truly saw things for what they are: *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*, then one would never crave for these things in a greedy way beyond bare need. Together with craving (*tanha*), spiritual ignorance is seen as the primary cause of dukkha.

But is this a convincing account? It suggests that spiritual knowledge is sufficient to remedy or eliminate *dukkha*. This is true only if we have a concept of knowledge which goes far beyond the Western narrow confines of knowledge as a set of justified true beliefs. Spiritual knowledge, in the Buddhist context, also incorporates a kind of moral and conative wisdom and transformation. Some have described it as more of a perceptual, rather than a conceptual affair, quite rightly, but it also has that power to move to action, to motivate and energise the human will, a kind of knowledge with power if you like. Christian theology tends to separate the intellect (or cognitive aspects) from the will (or conative aspects)<sup>17</sup> of spiritual wisdom in a way that Buddhism does not, but ultimately both approaches converge because the Buddhist emphasis on *sila* (morality), concurrent with wisdom, includes training and moral application of the volition.

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## **5.0 How VIEWS contribute to the arising of Dukkha.**

'Views' refer to how one sees things. 'Wrong views' involve not seeing things as they really are, bounded by *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*. Such misperception contributes to desire and craving for objects which are ultimately unsatisfactory and which thereby generates *dukkha*. The elimination of such *dukkha* is achieved by following the eightfold path, part of which involves cultivating right views.

## **6.0 How CONCEIT contributes to the arising of Dukkha**

Conceit is a kind of entrenched wrong view which becomes part of the basic conceptual apparatus of the experiencing subject. It is so deeply embedded in the psyche as to remain even when wrong views are eliminated. Conceit is a form of self-deception at its most fundamental and pervasive level, linked inevitably to the khandas of experience. One example of such a conceit is the 'I am' conceit, which, flying in the face of *anatta*, insists that one is substantial and has an essential selfhood. This results in pride, envy and conflict, for one seeks to develop, protect, enhance and defend such a 'self' against others. Such projects inevitably generate pain, suffering and frustration, based as they are upon a false self/other duality which is conflict-laden.

So, we can say that conceit arises from not recognising, accepting or applying the teaching of *Anatta* or 'not self'. As well as the direct 'I am' conceit, there are other, derivative conceits based upon the 'I am' conceit. Examples include, 'I am inferior', 'I am superior', 'I am intelligent', 'I am depressive'. These derivative conceits compound the *anatta*-denying error of the primary 'I am' conceit by further limiting one's identity to a single attribute or descriptor. So, a truly aware Buddhist psychologist might well challenge a client who says 'I am depressive' to reframe that as 'I sometimes do depressive behaviour'. The former description is fixed, immutable and denies *anicca* and *anatta*, whereas the latter description uses 'I' only in the conventional sense, thus affirming the truth of *anatta*, and stresses the reality of change and variability. The first description results in *dukkha* and despair, the second in hope, realistic hope clearly founded on core Buddhist principles which challenge the 'I am' and derivative conceits.

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## **7.0 Is Buddhism Pessimistic?**

Certainly, in the popular imagination, there is a view that Buddhism teaches that all is woe and suffering and that the only escape from this, Nirvana, is a kind of annihilation. Through popular misinterpretation of the philosopher Schopenhauer<sup>18</sup>, this attitude has also filtered through to cultural and intellectual life. But such a cognitive or attitudinal characterisation of Buddhism as fundamentally pessimistic is greatly mistaken.

There are at least two senses to pessimism, the cognitive, rational sense, which can be represented in propositions of a certain type which claim to describe the world as it actually is and the non-cognitive, attitudinal sense, often a matter of temperament, which looks at a glass as half empty rather than as half full. Buddhism, per se, is not pessimistic in either of these senses, though there is a recognition and warning within the scriptures that untoward or untimely meditation on *dukkha*, *anicca* and *anatta* can indeed lead to depression and needs to be approached responsibly, maturely and under proper conditions.

### **8.1 The cognitive sense of pessimism.**

The cognitive basis of pessimism is a bit like the negative cognitive triad underlying depression and one can see how a cursory glance or comparison might suggest that Buddhism has the potential for cognitive pessimism.

However, we need to take a closer look at the so called negative cognitive triad described by Aaron Beck<sup>19</sup>, as follows:

- a. Negative view of oneself. Buddhism only denies the metaphysical self and affirms that the underlying stratum or Buddha nature is bright, pure and shining. Buddhism has a realistic view of the self, a view that is in accord with neuroscience and psychology.
- b. Negative view of the world. Buddhism sees the world as realistically limited but it also offers coping mechanisms via meditative techniques and following the noble eightfold path.
- c. Negative view of the future. Buddhism offers the prospect of Nirvana which is a wonderful future for those who strive to attain it. Buddhism does not foster a sense of hopelessness or helplessness regarding one's path in life and one's destiny, but rather provides the tools to overcome *dukkha* and achieve full liberation.

### **8.2 The attitudinal sense of pessimism.**

Too much focusing or emphasis upon *dukkha* can bring about a pessimistic mood. The Buddha was well aware of that and urged great caution in contemplating *dukkha* and related concepts in meditation. A pessimistic attitude sees things not only as bad but also as hopeless, whereas the Buddha clearly offered real and practical hope by pointing towards the path leading away from *dukkha* and towards complete bliss and liberation/emancipation in nirvana.

### **9.0 Finally, what *dukkha* is not!**

*Dukkha* is patently not a judgment that the world is bad or evil. Nor is *dukkha* a despairing cry that all is woe! There is still joy in life. There is still the possibility of happiness. We each possess the shining bright and pure

Buddha-nature, which, if nurtured and developed in accordance with the disciplines of the eightfold path, promises to gradually reduce and eventually eliminate *dukkha* and all forms of limitation completely. Realisation of *dukkha* is just the first step in helping us to avoid suffering, pain and unsatisfactoriness in life. Three quarters of the four noble truths are about the fact that *dukkha* can be conquered and how this can be achieved, to be replaced eventually by transcendent, everlasting, bliss, a goal worth waiting, striving and working for – the end of *dukkha*!

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## E. REFERENCES/ END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This issue of motivation is discussed from a social-psychological standpoint in **Brekke, 2002**.

<sup>2</sup> **Hamilton, 1996 + 2000** multiple entries – see subject indices.

<sup>3</sup> see **Hamilton, 1996** op cit.

<sup>4</sup> Some have accused John Paul II of such a mistake in his ‘Crossing the threshold of hope’, but his remarks are more specific to soteriology proper, seen by him in negative terms as negating the world in some senses or in disengaging from the world. This might be borne out by the relatively recent phenomenon of ‘engaged Buddhism’, a movement which might be regarded by some as adding to or replacing a ‘disengaged’ form.

<sup>5</sup> Unskillful actions play an analogous role to sin in Judeo Christian religions. Just as sin keeps us from heaven, unskillful actions keep us from *nirvana* (Sanskrit) but there is not the sense of offending against a deity in the Buddhist conception.

<sup>6</sup> See **Brekke, 2002** op cit.

<sup>7</sup> See **Gombrich, 1997**.

<sup>8</sup> Difficulty with the translation of ‘*dukkha*’ is discussed by Charles Prebish in **Prebish, 1995**.

<sup>9</sup> Non-purposeful remainder after all purposive suffering has been accounted for. Evil that doesn’t seem to fulfil any higher good or end.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Harvey, BUDDM01 Session 7 notes, section 2.

<sup>11</sup> John Bowlby’s ‘Attachment and Loss’ is normative for an object relations psychological understanding of healthy human psychic development. He argues that failure to make proper attachments can lead in fact to psychopathic disturbance in later life, a matter which Buddhist psychology needs to answer and address.

<sup>12</sup> The paradox of desire is that, in order to eliminate desire and craving, one seemingly needs to desire this aim itself, which is a kind of self-defeating recursion. See the journal article **Herman, 1979**.

<sup>13</sup> The phrase ‘fear and trembling’ is a common motif used to describe existential angst and comes from the book of the same title by the existentialist philosopher Søren Kierkegaard.

<sup>14</sup> **Grimm, 1958**, The doctrine of the Buddha, p59 ff

<sup>15</sup> The Buddha develops this theme in the so called ‘Fire Sermon’.

<sup>16</sup> The need to abandon desire on the brink of Nirvana is found at .....

<sup>17</sup> As was the understanding of St Thomas Aquinas, who systematized this distinction between intellect and will.

<sup>18</sup> Schopenhauer was dependent upon less than objective translations of the Buddhist canon, many of which included theosophically-inspired translations which tended to translate *dukkha* as suffering and to convey a meaning of *dukkha* that was more in keeping with Advaita Vedanta, rather than with the authentic Buddhist sense. He therefore places undue influence on suffering and on the volition, as sources of *dukkha*.

<sup>19</sup> Aaron Beck is the psychologist responsible for describing the negative cognitive triad of depression and he went on to develop a form of therapy, cognitive therapy, based on this model.