

The Journey Starts Here



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Suffering

TRALEG KYABGON RINPOCHE,
GLENN WALLIS

The Buddhist path begins with the recognition of suffering—not just the pointed suffering of sickness, aging, or death, but the vague feeling of anxiety and dissatisfaction that underlies every moment of our lives. Buddhism calls this *dukkha*, and the bad news is that it's all-pervasive and universal. The good news is that this is where the genuine spiritual journey begins.

Why Knowing this Truth Is Noble

BY TRALEG KYABGON RINPOCHE

BUDDHISM TAKES *DUKKHA*—the Sanskrit word most often translated as suffering—very seriously. But the concept at the root of this word is complex. It does not simply mean suffering as we would normally understand the word. Human beings experience *dukkha* in many forms—certain types of *dukkha* have to do with plain and simple suffering, while other forms of *dukkha* would not really be experienced as suffering at all. They appear more to us in the form of the pleasure of apparent happiness. Some *dukkha* is avoidable and some is unavoidable, and we need to understand the difference.

Many people have heard of Buddhism's four noble truths—about suffering and the end of suffering—but one of the great misconceptions about these truths comes in the title itself. There is nothing that we could really call “noble” about the first two: the truth of suffering and the cause of suffering. The last two truths, the truth of the cessation of suffering and the path that leads to cessation, could be said to be noble. What is in fact noble, though, is the person who fully realizes the four truths altogether. The person who



comes to a full understanding of dukkha, and how to work with it, can be called noble.

Such nobility arises not from escaping suffering but rather from having fully understood the truth of suffering. We first accept the reality of suffering in all its forms—we stop denying it. Then we can come to appreciate what might be called the “redemptive” quality of suffering, for want of a better word. We do not aspire to attain enlightenment *in spite of* suffering. We work to attain enlightenment *because of* suffering.

There is so much we can learn from the experience of dukkha, which describes the full gamut of cyclic conditioned existence, the wheel of samsara caused by our habitual clinging. It might seem like bad news to hear that life is permeated with suffering, but just because we experience dissatisfaction or pain, or that our pleasures do not last, or that our precious dreams turn into nightmares, does not mean that our life is rendered meaningless.

As long as we are caught up or enmeshed in samsaric states,

holding on to a fixed version of reality, we experience many forms of suffering. But we do not need to. They are avoidable. Buddhism teaches us that if we cultivate the right attitude and are able to look simply into ourselves and our perspectives, predilections, and habit patterns, we can reduce and ultimately eliminate the avoidable forms of suffering.

Of course, there are other forms of suffering that we cannot avoid until we attain complete enlightenment, or buddhahood. The sufferings we inflict on ourselves due to our undisciplined mind are avoidable, but other forms of suffering, such as old age, sickness, and death, are unavoidable.

Once we have accepted that we are subject to forms of dukkha that can be avoided, there are two parts to the solution: looking at the causes of dukkha and finding the means of reducing or stopping it. When we look into the causes of dukkha, we do not simply search for the source of palpable, tangible suffering. We also must look closely at the mental states, habits, and attitudes that produce what we consider to be our moments of joy, happiness, or satisfaction. One of the profound insights offered by Buddhism is that we cannot rely on our own immediate experiences to tell us whether we are experiencing well-being or misery. Just because on the surface we feel we are happy or satisfied, or just because everything seems to lead to doom and gloom, these impressions may not necessarily reflect the true state of affairs. We need to look deeper.

We may discover, as the Buddha tells us, that the lack of substantiality or permanence in all that surrounds us gives rise to unhappiness and pain. This does not mean, however, that the experience of impermanence or non-substantiality is *itself* suffering or the direct cause of suffering. We misconstrue the Buddha’s message if we think it is the fact that all things are impermanent or non-substantial or without a solid self that generates suffering. These basic facts are not the truth of the origin of suffering.

Dukkha is produced not by things themselves or by their insubstantial nature. Rather, our mind has been conditioned by ignorance into thinking that eternal happiness can be obtained through things that are ephemeral and transient. That is why we are instructed to seek enlightenment or attain nirvana. We are asked to settle our mind on that which is unchanging. Settling the mind on the unchanging has a calming effect on the mind generally, but it also leads to a state that allows us to relate to what is transient and ephemeral with a mental attitude born of a more enlightened view, one that does not seek permanent joy and happiness from things that are impermanent and non-substantial in nature. In so doing, you can transform yourself into a noble being.

Without the truth of suffering and the truth of the cause of suffering, there would be no truth of cessation, nor would there be the truth of the path. Far from highlighting the negative features of human existence, Buddhism presents a very complete picture of the human condition. It sheds light on both the perils

and promises of human nature. We focus on human life, not because Buddhism does not concern itself with other forms of life, but rather because Buddhism in all its forms, in all its traditions, has singled out human life as the most precious. Human embodiment is seen as the optimal vehicle that we could employ and deploy on the journey toward enlightenment. According to the sublime teachings of the Buddha, our destiny lies in our own hands. That is what we come to see when we truly appreciate the truth of suffering and the truth of the cause of suffering. We can continue to wallow in our own suffering and misery or take some initiative, such as making the practice of dharma, which enables us to see the true nature of our experience, part of our everyday life.

Buddhist teachings make it amply clear that we should not expect samsara to be nirvana. That is denying the first noble truth, and it is the most profound mistake. It is totally irrational. As students of Buddhism, we are instructed to see honestly what is possible and what is not possible. The first lesson we have to learn is that samsara does not deliver all that it promises. We

have to recognize that transient pleasures are simply that and nothing more. So long as we do not recognize that, we do not accept the first noble truth fully, and this non-acceptance of the truth only produces more discontentment and frustration. In fact, we feel that we have failed in our effort to dispel suffering and pain.

Samsara is a bad deal. Suffering pervades and permeates the whole of the samsaric domain. Yet most of our suffering is avoidable. If we can only learn to discipline our mind, we can deal with our physical ailments and mental distress with a greater resolve and fortitude. It is possible not to get upset when people speak ill of us. It is possible to be free of paranoia about what others are thinking of us. When we feel loss and we grieve, we can do so without the emotions overwhelming us, opening the door to despair and depression. We can also learn how not to generate further suffering by accepting the unavoidable suffering of old age, sickness, and death. By trying to look younger, one does not become younger. Pretending one’s illness is not serious does not make the illness





go away. Pretending you are not dying when you are in fact already halfway there will not lead to an endless life. Apart from these existential forms of suffering, there are unavoidable forms of suffering in the environment, such as earthquakes, tsunamis, and floods. There is also suffering from adverse circumstances, such as a plane crash or an auto accident. There are conditions that are beyond our control. Trying to control them leads to suffering.

Pleasures are also frequent causes of suffering. If we enjoy being in the sun, it becomes unpleasurable after a while. It can lead to a painful bout of sunburn and even to skin cancer. We gain pleasure from culinary delights, but eating the same food again and again may stop being pleasurable. And our eating habits may lead to all sorts of physical ailments. We may think that we are addicted to pleasure because we find the object of our addiction pleasurable. But being addicted to something is not in the least bit pleasurable.

Even though we suffer as human beings, we do not have to suffer without purpose or meaning. The first noble truth reveals to us the meaning of suffering. Painful experiences can teach us a lot. Buddhism treats life as a school where we learn from our painful experiences. This is not about the childish approach of going deeper and deeper into our painful experiences and dwelling on them and complaining about them to the point that they become deeply personal emotional concerns. It is about utilizing our painful experiences, the truth of suffering, with fortitude and dignity, and thereby making ourselves stronger and more mature.

The teachings speak of dharma as the medicine that will cure

us of all our maladies. Although dharma is a medicine, it is not a quick fix. It is not like taking Prozac. It works with our chronic illness. It will not prevent old symptoms from recurring from time to time, but with judicious ingestion of the antidotes to our illness provided by the dharma, we are gradually able to overcome our long-term afflictions. Dharma is the antidote to dukkha, but dukkha will not disappear overnight. The fourth noble truth, the truth of the path, makes that very clear.

We need to travel on the path of healing and wholeness. That will take time. We may start out expecting quick relief from samsaric suffering. When that is not forthcoming, we may become disappointed, resentful, or indignant. We may even rail against the dharma or abuse it. We cannot digest the powerful medicine of the dharma in one dose, but as we treat ourselves in a stepwise fashion, our capacity to absorb dharma increases. Then we can take—and ought to take—more and more powerful doses. When we can do that, we soon come to see the dharma's true potency and its healing power. It is the most powerful medicine for counteracting dukkha. □



TRALEG KYABGON RINPOCHE received both the traditional education of an incarnate Tibetan lama (tulku) and a comprehensive Western education, with a particular interest in psychology and comparative religion. He is the president and spiritual director of Kagyu E-Vam Buddhist Institute in Melbourne, Australia, and E-Vam Institute in Upstate New York.

What's Dukkha? (What Isn't?)

BY GLENN WALLIS

THE SUTRA KNOWN AS “Turning the Wheel of the Teaching” (*Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*) seems to give an account of the very first instance that the Buddha communicated his realization to others. It contains the Buddha's descriptions of the realities of dukkha and his prescription for it, usually translated as the four noble truths. What the Buddha refers to as dukkha in this teaching covers life pretty much from beginning to end: birth, aging, illness, and death; having what we don't want, not having what we do.

The most common rendering of the Pali term *dukkha* is “suffering.” So if you have read books on Buddhism before, you have almost certainly encountered the term “suffering.” However, probably very few people would describe their lives as characterized by *suffering*. The notion of pain and anguish connoted by that term does indeed resonate in dukkha, but it

is too drastic for a general and universal application. So the stock statement “Life is suffering,” as a translation of the first statement of the Buddha about reality, while not outright incorrect, is somewhat too drama-queenish.

In getting a better feel for the meaning of dukkha, let's place “suffering” at one extreme of the spectrum. At the other extreme, let's place qualities such as annoyance, tension, nondependence. Dukkha, then, can be understood on one end of the spectrum as a subtle, perhaps barely discernible quality of being, and, on the other, as severe mental or physical anguish.

A further nuance is added to the term *dukkha* when we bear in mind that, in the Buddha's view, even a “happy” moment is tinged by dukkha. That is because neither the moment nor the experience is stable. Since the quality of happiness arises in dependence on external factors, it fades away as those factors

disassemble. And in that gap is felt the trace, however subtle, of underlying dukkha. Since, furthermore, our lives are successions of such moments, dukkha is said to be “pervasive.” But Buddhists would go even further, to the point of what appears to be paradoxical, even contradictory: it is not only in the gap (due to impermanence and insubstantiality) that dukkha is present but even in the very experience of happiness.

Given this view, what should we call dukkha in our language? Our English term would have to have the following colorings (on an increasing scale of intensity):

faint unsettledness, irritation, impatience, annoyance, frustration, disappointment, dissatisfaction, aggravation, tension, stress, anxiety, vexation, pain, desperation, sorrow, sadness, suffering, misery, agony, anguish

Of course, you may add to this list; there is virtually no end to it. And that is precisely the Buddha’s point! It flows through

life like water—each instant of life is colored to some degree by these qualities.

It is obvious that each of these qualities involves some degree of unease, so “unease” is how I translate the term for general usage. The lexical “opposite” of dukkha is *sukha*, and *sukha* straightforwardly means “ease, pleasure, happiness.” Perhaps, then, dukkha can straightforwardly mean “unease, displeasure, unhappiness.” We all know about dukkha, then, as it is glossed by the Buddha. □



GLENN WALLIS is associate professor of religion at the University of Georgia. He teaches applied meditation at the Won Institute of Graduate Studies and is the translator and editor of the Modern Library edition of the Dhammapada. This essay is adapted from his book Basic Teachings of the Buddha: A New Translation and Compilation with a Guide to Reading the Texts. © 2007 by Glenn Wallis. Published by The Modern Library.

