

## REVISITING THE UNDERSTANDING OF SUFFERING IN BUDDHISM THROUGH THE NOBLE TRUTHS

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### Abstract:

The present paper makes an attempt to closely analyze some of the key doctrines of Buddhism, and raise certain pertinent questions that seemed to remain unanswered. The Buddha through his Four Noble truth had established suffering to be an unavoidable truth of human life which causes wide-spread misery and distress. Also, the cause of human suffering has been elaborated upon in Buddhism in great details. However, is suffering really what it is understood to be? Is the cause of suffering really that which has been advocated throughout? There seems to be certain lapses in the way suffering and its cause has been explained and looked upon. This paper makes an attempt to bring to the fore front those lapses by re-visiting the notion of suffering through the first two Noble Truths.

“Buddhism is a process ontology according to which the world is a complex web of interconnected events in a state of flux; all phenomena are impermanent and arise by dependent origination (*pratityasamutpada*), meaning that they are caused rather than autonomous” (Meister and Copan: 2007: 16).

Human beings according to Buddhism are a large corporation of physical and mental events that perpetually change either in a subtle manner, or at times, in a very explicit and dramatic manner, and have no permanent fixed essence around which these changes coalesce. Buddhism, as evident from the *Pali Nikayas*, is a system founded entirely on ethical principles. Humans can attain salvation not by prayers, rituals, rites or worshipping but by their actions and efforts and wisdom. The central philosophy of Buddha's teaching is the theory of 'Dependent Origination', according to which the continuous existence of beings is like a chain of causes and effects. Highlighting the importance of the Theory of Dependant Origination Pathak states, “Just as the immediate past is conditioning the present so the present life too was conditioned by the past life and the future life will be conditioned by the present life.” (Pathak: 1988: 1)

The Buddha also outlined the four Noble Truths which forms the central part of the Buddhist Doctrine. The Four Noble Truths clearly expound Buddha's teachings and His vision. It deals with suffering and tries to explain the causes that lead to suffering, which drastically affects human life.

In this paper, I will mainly deal with the notion of suffering, its causes and how it influences human life. For that purpose I would make use of the Four Noble Truths with a greater emphasis on the first two, as the last two mainly deal with the ways to end suffering and the path that one needs to follow in order to overcome suffering. Since the aim of this paper is to deal with the notion of suffering and show how human life is full of suffering and misery, which is caused by our own actions and due to our ignorance, it shall strictly associate with the first two truths, and not detailing about the last two truths. Also, for this work I would mainly make use of the *Digha Nikaya* text, translated by Maurice Walshe. However, I shall occasionally make use of certain secondary works for throwing some light on the concept of suffering, its understanding and the role played by it in influencing human life. The primary focus shall however be on the *Digha Nikaya* text, in which sutra 22, *Mahasatipatthana Sutta* clearly deals with the notion of suffering in the Four Noble Truths that it explains.

The Four Noble Truths as explained by the Buddha are: (King: 1999: 76)

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- “1. Birth, old age, sickness and death are unsatisfactory (*dukkha*).
2. The cause of unsatisfactoriness is craving (*trsnā*).
3. There is an end to unsatisfactoriness and craving, and it is known as nirvana.
4. The way to achieve nirvana is to follow the middle path between all extremes. This path has eight steps and involves the development of:
  - a) Appropriate view
  - b) Appropriate intention
  - c) Appropriate speech
  - d) Appropriate action
  - e) Appropriate livelihood
  - f) Appropriate effect
  - g) Appropriate mindfulness
  - h) Appropriate meditative concentration.”

The explanation offered by the Buddhists about the human condition focuses mainly on the concept of suffering (*dukkha*). Buddha tried to find out the ultimate cause of human suffering, and found ignorance to be the root cause. He explained that it is ignorance that produces desires, which in turn is the cause of rebirth. He emphasized that one must realize that the more desires we have, the more shall be the cause of our suffering. When we have greater desires we go beyond our parameters and cross our limits. And when we do so, we cause suffering, both to ourselves and to others around us. Desires harm our health, and cause us to become angry and envious. It lures and attracts us to lie, cheat and deceit others, and ultimately our own self and soul. Buddha also asserts that desire is the primary cause of our attachment to the illusory appearances of this world. Desire, together with anger and ignorance, binds us to the cycle of birth and death. Hence, in order to break this cycle of birth and death, ignorance is to be destroyed, which can only be destroyed by the knowledge of the Four Noble Truths. Because suffering is an inevitable fact of life, Buddha, like a good doctor, concerned himself with the treatment of this illness. Acting as a good doctor, Buddha, by giving the Four Noble Truths, has made a very successful attempt to find the cause of sickness, its treatment, the method of its treatment and finally its cessation.

Buddha had seen and experienced it in his own life that liberation from suffering could be attained only through one's own efforts. Buddha also believed that not a single tear, would have been shed by anyone if humans had the knowledge of the Four Noble Truths. But the widespread ignorance has led to misery and sorrow of the entire human race. It is ignorance that our desires dominate our lives like a master, and we like slaves listen to its commands and suffer in fulfilling those commands. This urge to fulfill our desires make us forget that it alone is the cause of all our sufferings and the cessation of desires alone can lead to the cessation of our sufferings.

The teachings of the Upanisads also maintain that ignorance is the cause of bondage and attachment because it is the cause and spring of desire and this can be removed by the knowledge of the relationship of the individual soul with the supreme reality (Brahman). However, on the other hand Buddhism expounds that ignorance is the cause of suffering and bondage because it is the root cause of all human craving (*trsnā*), desire, will and thirst to live. Also, our individuality or the mind body complex is a result of ignorance and craving. So both, Upanisads and Buddhism regard ignorance as the root cause of all human suffering. The various sights of pain and despair upset young Gautama a great deal. But after enlightenment, Buddha realized that not only death, old age, sickness etc are suffering, but the very fact of human life appeared sad and full of misery without exception. The very essence of human existence is suffering.

For the Buddhist there are certain kinds and forms of sufferings that are obvious, self evident and indisputable and are found always associated with feelings that are not pleasant. Also, there are certain concealed forms of suffering, which at the first sight seem to be linked to experiences that are pleasant and enjoyable. But such pleasant experiences turn out to be equally unpleasant when scrutinized deeply and

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carefully. Thus, according to the Buddhists, there are three categories of suffering namely (Pandit: 2004: 62)

- 1) Obvious, unquestionable and self-evident forms of suffering
- 2) Suffering that depends on conditional status
- 3) Suffering arising due to change and impermanence

The first form of suffering is visible to us all the time and can be experienced by anyone in their daily lives. Pandit thus asserts, “Birth, old age, sickness, death, separation from the wanted, union with the unwanted are the most obvious forms of suffering.” (2004: 63). The second category of suffering i.e. those dependent on a conditional status have a metaphysical basis or structure, which arises due to the law of causation. By the application of this law it is maintained that when the five aggregates come together it results in the arising of an individual. In other words, according to them, the birth of any individual is directly related to the assembling of the five aggregates and hence birth for the Buddhists means both sickness and destruction. Finally, the third kind of suffering, that is dependent on change, arises due to the fact that change is an inevitable truth and hence the experiences too that we have are all momentary and bound to change; which always terminates in suffering. Such momentary experiences can be compared to the experiences that we have in our dream state while sleeping. As the latter have zero degree of reality, similarly the experiences that we have in this world are also unreal. Also, it has been further stated that any sort of pleasurable experience does not come for free, for it always comes to exist at the cost of others i.e. by causing pain and unhappiness to others. In this same line Pandit thus asserts that, “The eating of a roast duck, for example, may produce in us an experience that is pleasant, but the fact remains that such an experience occurs when someone is made to pay a heavy price.” (2004: 64). This reflects our selfish and indifferent attitude towards the pain of other beings for the sake of our own happiness, pleasure and satisfaction. We always totally are aware of the fact that everything in this world is transitory and nothing lasts forever. So any form of pleasure, whatsoever, is also transitory and can never satisfy the desires and wishes of our heart. Having said so, and things being momentary and impermanent, it is foolish of us to attach ourselves or cling to such things that are bound to decay. Pandit thus explains that, “Such grief is bound up with short lived experience, so it is bound to happen that sensory experience will never satisfy the mind. It is the unsatisfactory character of such experiences that terminates in discontent.” (2004:65). And whenever there is discontent, suffering will automatically arise. And in such a scenario there is just no possibility for any kind of inner calm to emerge, a calm that comes when all desires are destroyed and we are totally free from the grip of attachment.

Also, in the *Mahasatipatthana Sutta* of the *Digha Nikaya* text it has been clearly discussed as to what is the Noble Truth of suffering? To which it has been answered that birth, ageing, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, sadness and distress are a few forms of suffering. It has also been clearly stated that the five aggregates of grasping are suffering because they create desire in us. The aggregates of grasping that is form, feeling, perception, mental formation and consciousness together cause desires in us, which in turn cause suffering. And this has been explained as suffering to the monks by the Buddha. The Sutta then goes on to explain the Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering. It clearly states that it is craving which gives rise to rebirth, bound up with pleasure and lust finding fresh delight now here, now there: that is to say sensual craving for existence and craving for non-existence. This craving arises whenever there is anything pleasurable and agreeable to the five aggregates of grasping.

### **The First Noble Truth**

Since suffering emerges as a universal fact of life, we shall now examine the nature of the four noble truths and concentrate our attention towards their teaching. The **First Noble Truth** is concerned with the kinds of suffering, and makes an attempt to make the fact of suffering universal. Since suffering occupies the central position of every life, it is the duty of every Buddhist to clearly understand the seriousness of this problem because it is only upon recognizing this universal nature of suffering that one can be empowered to overcome it, to arise out of it, thus realizing the cessation of suffering, and the path leading to the cessation of suffering. According to the Buddhists there are three marks of ill – insubstantiality, impermanence and

destruction, and suffering arises when one fails to see and recognize these three marks of ill. Everything in this world is insubstantial, which implies that it is impermanent, because it is always subject to change and becoming, which further means that in no two moments of time it is the same or identical. This means it is continuously undergoing a process of emergence and submergence and hence becomes caused. A caused entity must always have an end and end is the signifier of death. When we stick to our ignorance, consider insubstantial objects to be substantial and impermanent as permanent, suffering arises. This unreasonable and erroneous thinking makes us cling to things, thereby giving rise to attachment for things that are transitory, impermanent and insubstantial. And it is always due to this clinging, craving and attachment that suffering in one or the other form is experienced. Only when one successfully recognizes the three marks of phenomenal entities, that one can clearly understand that the world of becoming is characterized by suffering to the level that one tries to search permanent in the impermanent and substantial in the insubstantial. Such a person clearly knows the nature of suffering, its arising and its cessation. Also, a threefold division of suffering has already been made and as far as the obvious and the self evident sufferings like those of birth, old age, sickness and death are concerned, they require no proof because each one of us undergoes some or the other form of such suffering and hence require no validation for them. With regards to the environmental suffering, it arises on account of mental change and change in the five material factors of existence. Lastly, conditional suffering arises due to the deeds and actions performed by us in our previous as well as present lives. And what bring us to action are our desires or cravings.

However, it is also true that for the Buddha full and complete knowledge of the First Noble Truth can come only with the realization and enlightenment, which is the final goal of the Eightfold Path. Buddha's teachings are holistic in nature and we can fully grasp the First Noble Truth only when we understand the other noble truths along with it. The First Noble Truth talks of the five aggregates of grasping and thus presents and provides an understanding of the nature of suffering arising out of these five aggregates. What is of utmost importance at this juncture is to comprehend the fact that each of these aggregates is impermanent. Furthermore, everything that we experience in our ordinary everyday life is also impermanent. Both, we and the world we live in are in a constant state of flux and keeps changing every moment. And thus the Buddha believes that anything which is impermanent is nothing but suffering.

No matter how much good we have attained or how much bad and evil we have avoided, our constant efforts to maintain a state of wellbeing is ultimately a failure because of the impermanence of all things around which will sooner or later overcome us. No matter how good our present lives may seem to be. Life is ultimately unstable and we are always anxious and worried about what our future holds for us, and this is the most fundamental reason why the Buddha thought that suffering is pervasive in our lives. Because of the impermanent nature of things, no enduring happiness or an everlasting state of peace and satisfaction can be developed.

However, at this point an objection can be raised regarding an inconsistency in the thoughts of the Buddha. According to the Doctrine of Karma, a person's morally right and good actions can bring about happiness and peace for that person, and it is always possible for a person to perform good actions, and hence control his or her happiness. And this being the case our happiness need not be impermanent, so far as we live an ethical and moral life because the fruits of morally right actions shall always result in the happiness of the doer. So, if the doer chooses to act morally all through his/her life, he/she can continue to live in a state of utter bliss and happiness which might disturb the dominating presence of suffering in human life. To this the Buddhists respond by saying that morally good actions indeed bring about happiness, but of temporary nature which is nothing but a lesser form of happiness. They are not the enduring, true and everlasting state of happiness as is attained in Nirvana. Aging and death still remain inescapable and beyond our control. Thus, suffering remains a true feature of every human life caught within the cycle of birth and death.

### **The Second Noble Truth**

The Second Noble Truth tells us what causes suffering and clearly states that craving is the main cause for

suffering. We crave to either permanently possess something or to avoid something for ever which are by their very nature impermanent, and hence the result is suffering. However, though the Buddha believes craving to be of central importance, he does not consider it to be the only cause of suffering. In addition to this cause, he also expounds the twelve-fold formula or the chain of Dependent Origination, which clearly explains craving to be only a part of the cause of suffering. This formula aims to explain the origin and cause of suffering, but does not consider craving to be the only cause for the origin of suffering. Rather, craving is included in the long list of conditions which begins with ignorance. The primary way in which ignorance causes suffering is that we are ignorant of the Four Noble Truth. "Ignorance thus is, not knowing suffering, not knowing the origin of suffering, not knowing the cessation of suffering, and finally not knowing the way leading to the cessation of suffering. The false belief according to which we consider ourselves to be substance-selves is the crucial reason why we crave for things. Since very feature around us is in a constant state of flux, the permanent and an everlasting state of happiness and contentment can never be achieved. And due to this reason life becomes frustrating and doomed. Thus maintains Gowens (2003: 67)

"From craving grief arises,  
From craving arises fear,  
For him who is craving free, there is no grief.  
Thence whence comes fear."

Since the second noble truth deals with the cause of suffering, so it will be highly beneficial for us to take up the Buddhist causation at this point. The essence of the Buddhist theory of causation is contained in: "This being so, that happens." This makes it clear for us that everything in this world is interdependent and causation is not a linear affair. Since causation is interdependent, what originates must not be considered self-caused. The theory of causation has been generally interpreted in terms of a chain that has many links wherein each link is caused by a previous link.

Further Buddhism maintains that there is birth because there is existence, and existence in turn is dependent on survival for grasping. The cause of grasping is craving and sensation is seen as the cause of craving. Sensations arise due to contact and contact is further dependent on the six sense organs. The six sense organs are taken care of by the mind and the body which exists due to the consciousness. The five aggregates combine together to give rise to consciousness and the five aggregates are born due to our ignorance. This process of causation is repeated both in forward and reverse orders. Whatever is the order of it, it mainly differs on two points:

- 1) The theory explains the various stages through which an individual undergoes till the question of becoming is concerned, or
- 2) It either tries to explain the arising or passing away of this universe.

However, on a closer scrutiny it becomes evident that the theory of causation tries to explain the knowledge with regard to origin and cessation of pain that is attained by an Arhant after successfully destroying the impurities. When one attains perfect control over one's passions and constantly contemplates over truth, one no longer remains under the influence of worldly attachments. He or she successfully breaks the fetters that bound him or her to this world and gets liberated. It is a state of extinction of desires and passions and thus brings about a total cessation of misery. However, we should remind ourselves that it is not a state of inactivity as it is generally understood to be. Once complete wisdom is attained, the Arhant should neither be wrapped in meditation all day long nor should he wholly withdraw from his active life.

Further, it will also be correct on our part to remind ourselves that craving which is the root cause of all sufferings must not be considered the 'first cause.' It will be futile to talk about any kind of first cause since the process of becoming is a circular process and any talk of any kind of 'first cause' is inconsistent with Buddha's own Theory of Dependent Origination. According to the Buddhists, anything which is itself an 'originate' is not caused by any kind of uncaused cause or God. Since Buddha did not believe in any

transcendent God, so it becomes totally futile and hollow to bring in God as being the cause of any origination. If we accept an originator, then that originator should also in turn have a cause, since there is absolutely nothing in this world that comes into existence without a cause, and thus this chain of causation would extend to *ad infinitum*. So, there is no 'first cause' in Buddhism. Buddha interprets causation in terms of interdependence with neither a beginning nor an end because he accepted the reality of becoming alone. This world of various phenomena is governed by its own causation and since Buddha advocated the theory of phenomenal causation, the origination of things can never be left to chance or coincidence.

We see things coming into existence everyday only to perish later. It is only out of sheer ignorance that we cling to and crave for things that are impermanent, and are bound to get destroyed. The desire for anything initiates action, and such action is responsible for our endless cycle of births and deaths. This cycle of rebirth is, according to Buddha, a great trouble and distress, which constitutes suffering in every human life. Thus, it is upon the eradication of ignorance, and thereby of craving that a Buddhist attains the goal of Nirvana, which is a state of complete peace and tranquility. According to Buddhism, rebirth constitutes *Samsara* which is the playground of suffering. Further, they also make a claim that ignorance exists because of impressions which are immaterial possibilities that keep on passing from one existence to other. These impressions in the form of latent potencies function in this world of names and forms. This world of names and forms continue to exist to that extent wherein the consciousness continues to function because it is our consciousness that makes us aware of this world by receiving and unifying the data it receives through the sense organs. It also happens at certain times that consciousness gives rise to new forms of existence by engaging itself in the integration of experience gained by the empirical world. This causal formula according to the Buddhists continues to repeat itself, irrespective of the order in which it is applied. Pandit (2004: 71) in the same line has thus claimed that, "The repetition is made by asserting that the human being is brought into existence twice – first under the name of consciousness and name and form, and by means of ignorance and karman; the second time in birth and by means of desire and karman; this time called existence."

However, it might be reasonable to believe that rebirth is caused due to causation, which becomes operative by ignorance and craving. However, the explanation of rebirth totally loses its force when viewed in relation with another important doctrine called the 'Doctrine of Insubstantiality'. If there is no permanent self as is held by Buddha, then what is it in the absence of the self that migrates from one life to another? No satisfactory answer has been given to this question till date and Buddha maintained his famous "metaphysical silence" concerning the ontological status of the self. It is also very difficult to say as to whether by observing silence over such questions the Buddha wanted to speak of the non-existence of an empirical self or of a transcendental self?

The question remains as to who is it that actually transmigrates from one self to another, if there is no self. This question has been answered using the metaphors of light, when one candle lights the flame of another candle, there is no light that is transferred from one candle to another. There is just an ignition, i.e. to say that there is simply an ignition in the other candle and nothing else. Similarly, in the case of human birth also, there is no transference of soul from one body to the other. Rejecting the self Buddha accepted a causal link between our present and past lives which is explained by making use of the analogy of a person's growth from childhood to old age. An adult person is not the same as a child and also the child is not the same as an adult person, yet there is something common in both these forms of existences; and this common element according to the Buddhist is the causal link. And it is this same reasoning that is applied by the Buddhists to the process of rebirth. Here also there is both continuity and discontinuity in the existence of one and that of another. In spite of the name and the form born in the next existence is in all respects different from the names and forms which the person has at the time of death, but yet it has arisen from it. Thus, Buddha presents the phenomenal reality as a flux and totally rejects the self.

Being a practical person, Buddha did not concern himself much with the questions pertaining to the existence of the self or its non-existence, for the answer to these questions do not help one in the attainment of Nirvana. For him it was knowledge alone that must be given importance and should be taken into account

that terminates in the release from all pain and misery. Instead of getting himself unnecessarily involved in the question of existence or non-existence of the self, Buddha engaged in analyzing the psychological components that makes up an individual. He reduced every individual to five elements of form, feelings, perceptions, volitional formation and consciousness and found that all these five elements are in a constant state of flux and motion. And if it is so, how can something that is changing every moment be considered the basis of any permanent self? Accordingly declared the Buddha that whether the Buddhas arise or do not arise, it will remain a fact that all elements are lacking an ego.

## Conclusion

Human suffering is a complicated issue primarily because it exists at many levels and is to a large extent subjective, too. However, Buddhism seeks to answer the question of suffering at the level of cause as well as at the level of remedy. And the answer is rather simple: take the cause out and suffering ends. The cause is ignorance and desire. Ignorance of the fact that everything is momentary and nothing lasts, and that to desire things that do not have an essence of their own and cannot last forever is the root cause of suffering. Buddha also prescribes the Eightfold Path to end suffering, and much of what he prescribes reads like a moral code of conduct.

Buddha looks upon human suffering as an ill that needs to be cured. And when a state is reached where a human being is free from suffering, the stage is called Nirvana. Nirvana can be attained by following the Eightfold Path, but we do not have the answer as to for how long one has to follow the Path to attain Nirvana. Since Buddha refused to answer the question as to what Nirvana actually is, the only way to look at Nirvana is to look at it as a stage when all suffering ends.

If suffering is the reason why human beings are led into leading a moral life by following the Eightfold Path, isn't it suffering part of the reward-punishment scheme governed by the Doctrine of Karma? It is not an ill, but comes across as part of a character-building mechanism.

Furthermore, the First Noble Truth holds that birth, ageing, illness and death are suffering (dukka or dukkha) while the Second Noble Truth tells us that 'craving' is the source and cause of it. If the cause is removed, the suffering must automatically disappear. So, if one stops craving and is completely detached from the worldly things with no desire for anything, would he not age or be ill or die? Did Buddha, after his enlightenment, not die? Can Nirvana be achieved during one's lifetime? Apparently, it can be, like Buddha himself attained. But then, he did die. Therefore, Nirvana, does not seem to end suffering. Trusting the word of Buddha, even if we hold that it undoes the cycle of birth and death, the cause of suffering has to be birth and not 'craving'.

If ageing, illness and death are kinds of suffering, the reason why we age, fall ill and die is because we are born in the first place. There is no pain in birth and no great pain in growing up. So, if we are not born, there is no suffering. Therefore, the root cause of suffering is not craving, but the cycle of birth and death because even if one stops craving, one would still get older, would fall ill and will die. Death itself might be or not be a form suffering, but the fear of it is certainly the greatest suffering, but it is not impossible to conquer the fear of death. The fear of death arises from attachment. If there is no attachment, there is no fear of death. Complete detachment from all worldly things is, therefore, capable of getting one rid of suffering. Is, then, 'complete detachment' just another way of referring to the Eightfold Path, or is it an alternative way to Nirvana? But even then, detachment can possibly make one not fear death, it cannot stop ageing or illness. And if Nirvana really liberates one from the cycle of life and death, there is no evidence to even hint to that, let alone prove it.

If Nirvana lies in living life with complete detachment and full knowledge that life is fundamentally meaningless and nothing lasts forever, and knowing that one does everything consciously for the sake of doing, it is not much different from '*Nishkaam Karmayoga*' that Lord Krishna talks about in *Srimad Bhagwad Gita*. And performing one's duties in one's station of life can well fit the Eightfold Path that

Buddha prescribes, for it entails all the 'appropriates' and all kinds of 'right' that Buddha talks of. But then, while *Bhagwad Gita* categorically asserts the existence of an imperishable soul, Buddhism doesn't believe in soul or God or anything imperishable. So, Buddhism doesn't seem to be saying the same thing. But then, if it is not saying the same thing, on the one hand, the Eightfold path does not end suffering at all levels, and on the other hand detachment alone seems to be capable of ridding one of suffering at least at some levels and the Path does not enter the picture unless one sees it implicit in detachment itself.