

# The First Noble Truth of Suffering: Dukkha

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Bhante's Essays · 14 min read

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## THE FIRST NOBLE TRUTH OF SUFFERING : DUKKHA

### ◆ Ordinary Suffering◆◆◆

( dukkhadukkha)

Questions to Ask Oneself

What is my normal inclination towards life?◆

Is it over optimistic?◆ Is it pessimistic?◆ Or is it realistic?

How would you answer the following:

1. How do I cope with physical pain?
2. How do I cope with◆mental pain e.g. boredom, anxiety, anger, depression and so on
3. How do I cope with others in these moods?
4. When something unfortunate last happened to me, how did I react?

Dukkha literally means hard (du) to bear or difficult to endure (kha). So Dukkha is variously translated as pain, suffering, misery, discontent, discomfort, unhappiness, frustration, unsatisfactoriness and such like. It is very difficult to translate into English since it has so many shades of meaning much as our word has.◆ But we need to know these meanings because Dukkha is a central concept of the Buddha's teachings. In fact, it's the starting point of his whole doctrine. The First Noble Truth states that life itself is suffering, is unsatisfactory.◆ Because of this bold statement Buddhism is accused of being life negating, of being negative and pessimistic.◆ And it would be so, were it not for the Third Noble Truth◆ which states in equally bold fashion that there is an end to suffering.◆ The Buddha summed up his whole teaching, saying that he only taught two things: the truth of suffering and the end of suffering.◆

It was his experience of life as unsatisfactory that led the Buddha to leave home and follow the hard ascetic life.◆ The Buddha was born into the Khshatriya caste who were the rulers, governors, 'landed gentry' of those times.◆ The other castes◆ were and still are in Hinduism: the Brahmins, the highest caste, who were the 'priests' of the society.◆ Beneath them the Khshatriya, then the Vaisya who were the merchants and tradesmen, and finally the Suddra who were the artisans and workers.◆ All other peoples such as the slaves were outside the cast system - the Pariahs, the Untouchables. The Buddha's father was the leader of a small group of Khshatriya families known as the Sakya, their clan name, who ruled in an area of North India on the border of present day Nepal.◆ Life for the young Siddhatta Gotama was, we can believe, easy and pleasant, and may even have been luxurious. It

seems, however, that this courtly upbringing did not hide from him the suffering inherent in life and a legend tells how he came to face this. While out riding and hunting on various days, he first saw a sick man, then a dying man and finally a corpse. Here is a passage from one of the discourses, where the Buddha explains his experience.

First he tells us how luxurious his life was: I was delicate, most delicate, extremely delicate. ♦ Lily pools were made at my father's house solely for my benefit. ♦ Blue lilies flowered in one, white lilies in another, red lilies in a third. ♦ I used no sandalwood that was not of Benares. My turban, tunic, lower garments and cloak were all made of Benares cloth. A white sunshade was held over me day and night, so no cold or heat or dust or grit or dew might inconvenience me.

So now we have an idea of his courtly life style, but he continues: Whilst I had such power and good fortune, yet I thought: When an ordinary, untaught person, who is subject to sickness, not safe from sickness, sees another who is sick, they are shocked, humiliated and disgusted, for they have forgotten that they themselves are no exception. ♦ But I too am subject to sickness, not safe from sickness and so it cannot be right for me to be shocked, humiliated and disgusted when I see another who is sick. When I considered this, the vanity of health completely left me. I thought: When an ordinary untaught person, who is subject

to ageing, not safe from ageing, sees another who has aged, they are shocked, humiliated and disgusted, for they have forgotten that they themselves are no exception. ♦ But I too am subject to ageing, not safe from ageing and so it cannot be right for me to be shocked, humiliated and disgusted when I see another who has aged. ♦ When I considered this the vanity of my youth completely left me. I thought: When an ordinary untaught person, who is subject to death, not safe from death, sees another who is dead, he is shocked, humiliated and disgusted, for they have forgotten that they themselves are no exception. But I too am subject to death, not safe from death and so it cannot be right for me to be shocked, humiliated and disgusted when I see another who is dead. ♦ When I considered this the vanity of life completely left me.

Given the additions of an oral tradition for the scriptures were not actually written down for 500 years after the Buddha's death, what we can accept as fact is that the whole problem of suffering had become a major concern for the young nobleman. ♦ The last straw, it seems, was when he woke up in the early morning after a night of revelry and saw about him bodies lying about in ungainly and disgusting positions, the air foul with the smell of alcohol and vomit. ♦ His sense of disgust, coupled with the growing weariness of trying to find any real or meaningful happiness in a life geared to sensual pleasure, finally caused him to leave home. That morning he left early on his favourite horse, Kanthaka, and with his faithful servant, Channa, rode beyond three kingdoms and crossed the River Anoma. ♦ He cut off his hair as a sign of renouncing the life devoted to sensual pleasure. ♦ He then gave his

ornaments and jewellery to Channa and went in search of a teacher. ❖ It is said that such was the distress of his horse, Kanthaka, that he died of a heart attack! In other discourses, reasons of a more philosophical nature ❖ are given by the Buddha to explain how he came to this momentous decision, known as the Great Renunciation.

In this way, before I was enlightened ... because I was subject to birth, I wanted to find out the nature of birth ... So I thought to myself, since I am subject to birth what if I were to find out what birth really is and discover the unsatisfactoriness of the nature of birth. So I set out to discover the unborn, the supreme of Nibbana. And he says the same of sickness, old age and death. ❖ In other words, he left the court, confident there was an end to suffering, which, by the way, is not annihilation. So what constitutes this Dukkha? ❖ Suffering or unsatisfactoriness is divided into three categories. ❖ The first is called ordinary suffering (Dukkha Dukkha); the second is called the suffering caused by the changing nature of life (Viparanama Dukkha); and the third is that caused by our conditioning or conditioned states (Sankhara Dukkha). Here we shall concern ourselves with the first category.

This is how the Buddha expounds the basic teachings of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Noble Path in his first discourse after his enlightenment. It is called the 'Discourse on the Turning of the Wheel of the Law'.

"This is the First Noble Truth of Suffering : birth is suffering, decay is suffering, death is suffering; ❖ sorrow, grief, lamentation, physical and mental pain, despair are all suffering. ❖ To be with what we dislike is suffering, to be separated from what we like is suffering. Here it is important to grasp that the Buddha is talking about those things people normally associate with suffering and pain: the whole birth process, teething, acne, hormonal changes, middle age crises, the aches and pains of growing old and the final agony of death. ❖ He also means the emotional pains of frustration, anxiety, depression, despair and so on. ❖ He is also saying that this is part and parcel of life itself. ❖ We are subject to this suffering. ❖ It's the package we accept when we're born. When we really contemplate this, really think about it, it's depressing! Yes, it's true. ❖ The only thing I can say with absolute certainty about my life is that I will die. My life will end whether I like it or not. But it is only when we find the courage to face this hard fact, rather than avoid it, that there can be any possibility of discovering if there is anything beyond this cycle of birth and death. ❖

That is what the Buddha did as a young man. ❖ He decided to face the facts and it led him to discover that which is beyond birth and death, Nibbana. Much of our suffering lies in the fact that we find it hard to face this sort of reality. ❖ It is a good exercise to look over the past and see how we have approached and tackled problems, upsets, catastrophes and traumas. ❖ One way we deal with the painful is to avoid it, to shun it, to try to escape from it. We prefer to do anything but feel the pain, physical or mental. ❖ On a physical

level, as soon as even a small ache is felt in the head, we reach for the bottle of pills. ❖ Sometimes if we get a slight pain in the body, we'll ignore it. ❖ We'll pretend it's nothing. ❖ But underneath the apparent easygoing attitude is the fear we daren't face that it may be a cancer or a dangerous illness. ❖ On the emotional level, if we feel depressed, we'll try and drown it out with a drink. If we feel bored, we'll try to escape by turning on the TV. ❖ If we feel lonely or anxious, we'll phone a friend. ❖ Anything not to feel the boredom, the depression, the anxiety, the loneliness and so on. ❖ We don't want to feel them. Why should we! If these escape routes are blocked, if we can't use my usual means of pushing these negative feelings away, we'll talk 'about' them. ❖ We'll spend hours groaning, complaining, whingeing and whining to family, friends, colleagues, doctors - anyone who will listen. Even the cat gets an earful!

For instance, very few people will face up to the fact of death. ❖ You can joke about it, but you can't talk about it seriously. ❖ That can get too close to the feelings of terror and horror it arouses. ❖ Some will have long conversations 'about' death. ❖ What is death? ❖ What is it to die? ❖ To be or not to be. ❖ Wonderful questions, but all intellectualisations, all rationalisations. ❖ It makes you feel good to talk 'about' or 'around' death. ❖ But it's still escapism. ❖ It's just a mental exercise. ❖ It separates us from the real feelings we have about death. ❖❖ If we really want to know what it is to die, we should visit mortuaries and look upon actual corpses! ❖ Not for ghoulish fancies, but to arouse our subconscious fears. This is what the monks in Buddha's time used to do. ❖ They would visit the charnel grounds and gaze upon dead bodies in different states of decay. Some do it even to this day. By such an exercise, we come to know not what death is but rather how we relate to it. ❖ We can never know death as it really is, till we actually die. So what's the point of a talking about it! It's just another way of escaping ❖ our painful feelings, our suffering. The peculiar thing is that this sort of attitude, constantly turning away from what is painful, blocking it, rationalising it, always escaping, causes the mind to dwell on the good side of life, the pleasures, the excitements, the 'bright future'. ❖ It produces an unreal optimism. Things always turn out all right. ❖ Life's great. ❖ I'm happy! Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die. ❖ Not now! Anyway it won't happen to me, not in the foreseeable future. ❖ So what's all this talk of ❖ This sort of optimism is obviously false, leading to false beliefs and false hopes. ❖ And beneath it all sit a lot of repressed fears and anxieties. ❖ Such a person is not prepared for the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'. ❖ When the Buddha states that life is unsatisfactory, he is asking us to see life as it really is and not to shy away from its inbuilt suffering.

The opposite of this approach to life is when we submit passively to suffering and misfortune. ❖ 'Life's hard and then you die!' ❖ A helplessness. A loss of reason for living. ❖ What's the point? ❖ It's all work, work, work. ❖ Why bother, we're all going to die anyway. ❖ At first sight, compared to the optimist, this might seem a little more realistic. At least the

pessimist is accepting totally the one fact of life of which we can be certain. Indeed in the face of ❖ overwhelming evidence that life does end, what is the point of effort, of success? Death mocks all our ambitions and achievements. ❖ The logical conclusion of such an understanding is despair and suicide, or a brave stoicism where life just has to be suffered and you may as well make the best of a bad job. ❖ For such people, living can take on a certain desperation, and sometimes, quite paradoxically, a compulsiveness to achieve, to win, to fly in the face of despair. No doubt we have all faced certain events in our lives in these two ways to some degree or another. ❖ But is there another way of seeing life which neither leads us down the garden path of foolish hopes nor drags us into tunnels of despair, despondency and gloom?

The Buddha would have us investigate life impartially, to see it as it really is, accepting the situation totally. ❖ Within that clarity of view it is easier for us to act. ❖ That is what he called the Middle Path, and it is often the name given to his teachings. His teachings were very clear on this point. Seeking happiness in the pleasures of the senses suffering because such things don't last. ❖ The person who concentrates his life on the next exciting thing to do, is doing exactly this. ❖ Forever seeking enjoyment, distraction and pleasure. Such persons are blind to the suffering that surrounds them. ❖ On the other hand, people who try to deny all pleasure and happiness and are overcome by the sufferings of life, have become blinded to the possibility of the real peace and joy to be found in living. What is worse is that both are blinded to the higher reality that transcends both the pleasure and the tribulations of life. ❖

The Buddha asked us to take a realistic approach, not to pin our hopes on the transient pleasures of life, nor to be overcome by suffering and death, but to accept this dual situation totally, work within it and try to discover what lies beyond it. ❖ This realistic approach can be experienced at first hand in our meditation. ❖ What is it we are doing but facing and accepting all the negativity that arises, observing all the pleasurable and joyful feelings and thoughts, and seeing all of this for what it really is, just passing phenomena, momentary mental objects. ❖ Realising the passing nature of things undercuts false hopes. Seeing the arising of things, the birth of every moment, undercuts despair.

Let us take the threat of nuclear war. ❖ Not so long ago, many people felt the threat of a nuclear holocaust as an ever-present reality. ❖ They were fearful and anxious, angry and frustrated, depressed and despairing. Others didn't seem to see the danger at all. ❖ They felt secure under the nuclear umbrella, the deterrent. ❖ Anyway, they say, a nuclear war is unthinkable. What's the point of fighting it? ❖ No one would win. ❖ Humans wouldn't be so mad. ❖ Here we have two opposite reactions to a given situation, the pessimistic and the optimistic. ❖ Contemplating the possibility of a nuclear holocaust, even if it were to happen by mistake, might awaken these never-will-happen believers to the potential harm and

motivate them to support disarmament. Accepting the possibility of nuclear holocaust with all that that means, especially to ourselves personally (for a lot of our fear of nuclear war is a fear of our own death), both fear and anxiety may be lessened. ♦ Once they are, we are much more capable of positive action. ♦ Anxiety and fear drain our energy, bring about panic and confusion. ♦ With a clearer mind, a more firm direction can be found. ♦ But we can only do what we can do. For some it may mean joining a march, for others influencing heads of state. We have to accept our limitations. ♦ If we don't, we will suffer from anger, frustration, depression and despair. ♦ This polarity of pessimism and false optimism needs to be steadied towards a calm grasp of reality - seeing the situation just as it is. ♦ We need to be very much aware of how our emotions colour a situation.

Here lies the importance of meditation practice, Insight Vipassana Meditation. This was the Buddha's great discovery in his Enlightenment. He discovered that by just developing awareness, we are able to heal all our negativities and slowly purify the heart. ♦ When we sit, this is an opportunity to observe, really experience our moods and emotions, our states of mind. ♦ But investigate here does not mean to analyse, to ask questions, to wonder about the causes. It means simply to experience, to feel the emotions and moods as they really are. ♦ Equally important is to observe also our feelings about them, our reactions to them. ♦ When I feel depressed, how do I feel about it? Do I get angry? ♦ Do I get

fearful and anxious? ♦ Do I get depressed about being depressed? ♦ The first step in the meditation is to begin to lose our fears and aversion towards states of mind. ♦ This is the first step in purifying the mind. Having established some concentration on the breath, we observe any state of mind that arises, any mood or emotion that comes to our attention. ♦ Observe them as bodily feelings. ♦ There may be feelings of heaviness from depression, heat from anger, wobbliness from fear and tightness from anxiety. ♦ These feelings manifest in different parts of the body, sometimes in the chest, or stomach or abdomen for instance. We just watch it all calmly, noticing, observing. ♦ We see that everything is changing, everything is arising and passing away. What is it we are achieving here? ♦ By this simple observation, we are losing our fears of and ♦ aversion to negative states of mind as they arise. ♦ By not repressing these negative states of mind, they display themselves and to our amazement pass away. ♦ We are healing our hearts. We are purifying our minds. We must also be equally aware of pleasant feelings, observing them just as keenly, but this time observing how mind grasps for them, longs to indulge in them. ♦ Of course, they pass away too. ♦ Observing the passing of pleasant states of mind stops us being falsely optimistic. ♦ Observing the passing away of painful states of mind stops us being pessimistic. Seeing both as passing phenomena leads to a realistic view of life. When the mind is realistic - knowing things as they really are - it is equanimous, peaceful. ♦ To win a million or to lose a million does not ruffle this inner calm. ♦ This is the joy of the Middle

Path. ♦ This is what the Buddha wanted us to do - to know ourselves as we really are.  
Meditation helps us to realise this. ♦ But it shouldn't stop there. ♦ We should keep this  
frame of mind, this understanding throughout the day. Everyday.

May the Teachings of the Buddha shed light into your life!

May you quickly attain the Supreme Goal!

## 1. THE FIRST NOBLE TRUTH OF SUFFERING

Notes : ORDINARY SUFFERING dukkhadukkha

DUKKHA : ♦ pain, sorrow, misery, discontent, suffering, unsatisfactoriness

THE BUDDHA:

experienced suffering as a young man

The Three Heavenly Messengers:

the sick, the dying, the dead

The Great Renunciation

The First Noble Truth of Suffering:

ordinary suffering

suffering of change

suffering of conditioned states

Our Usual Reactions to Suffering:

Aversion : escapism : rationalization : false optimism

Submission (passive) : pessimism (despair)

Acceptance ♦♦ and ♦♦♦ pro-reaction ♦♦♦♦ realism ♦ (equanimity)

Daily Life:

Coping with physical pain

Coping with mental pain

Coping with this in others

Reaction to fortune and misfortune

Meditation:

Observing pleasant and unpleasant feelings, both physical and mental (emotions)

Observing reactions to pain and pleasure

Observing them all as passing and unstable.

Using these notes can you write a small essay or give a small talk ♦ (into a cassette perhaps?), using examples from your own life.

Finding a way of thinking about Dhamma makes for a deeper, more personal understanding.