

# Dukkha — A Hard Place

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 11:22

---

*Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa.* Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed, Noble and Fully Self-Enlightened One.

Just looking at this word *dukkha*, it's not new to the Buddha. It was fairly common coinage really, goes back a long way in the spiritual-religious history of India. The word is actually made up of two parts, *dukkha*, which just means a hard place. I don't think anybody would dispute that being a human being on this earth is a hard place. Even in our own mythology, Adam and Eve get chucked out of the garden, have to start working and come across sickness, old age and death.

So he starts off with that. That's what really drives him to seek spiritual, or to join the spiritual life of his time, because this *dukkha*, and it's in the air, it's in the air of his society. It's a society which is dislocated because there's a lot of political change going on, moving from the old pastoral more democratic societies to monarchical and big cities were arriving and wars were getting worse. So in that sort of dislocation of time people tend to seek some sort of spiritual relief.

We can say that around about the age of middle 20, which I think is fairly common, there's a sort of awakening up to the fact that youth has come to an end or is coming to an end and one looks forward to sickness, old age and death. So with that there comes a sort of crisis in him. These days I suppose we call it an existential crisis. And off he goes on his search.

Eventually through his awakening he discerns three types of *dukkha*. The first one is called *dukkha-dukkha*, which translates to just ordinary miserable suffering. So if you say to somebody, do you suffer? They say, they don't suffer. Well, there's something wrong with them. Because everybody has some form of suffering.

But even though physical pain is included in that, it's not really included in the end of suffering because physical pain is part of our nature. It's not something that the liberation gets rid of. The Buddha himself, as you know, died of some form of gastroenteritis which was rather unpleasant. So it's not as though he got rid of physical pain. So this *dukkha-dukkha* really refers to the emotional stuff that we go through. But it also includes the pain that comes from indulgence, from getting attached to things.

And the second one is *vipariṇāma-dukkha*, which is the *dukkha*, the suffering we feel when we come across transience, when we come across impermanence. Whenever we get to a place where we feel comfortable, the right job, right relationship and all that sort of stuff, there's always this sort of clinging to

it, sort of holding it, and it makes us blind to the fact that it's changing, it's in a process of flux.

And so not being aware of that we tend not to want to change things that are pleasant for us. On the other hand we crave for things to change when they're not right, when we're in a rotten situation, when the job goes wrong, when the relationship goes awry and when the body starts messing us about. Then we get this desire to escape from it.

So we're always working against the present moment, the self, this position we take towards life. It's always about trying to find happiness within this situation, within the sensual world, within the thought world, within the heart world. And therefore in doing that we find ourselves always in conflict. There's always a subtle conflict going on. Either we want to get rid of something or we want to hold on to it.

And then there's a more subtle suffering that comes that's known as *saṅkhāra-dukkha*, and that's a suffering that comes from the delusion of being a self. And what we mean by that is that we experience ourselves as an integer, as something fairly solid, as the agent, as the person in control. I do my own thing in my own way, my own time, a self-made person. And this idea of a self obviously comes across certain problems.

So, like the body, we know intellectually that the body isn't me and not mine because it dies. We've got plenty of proof of that. Even so, when something goes wrong with the body, then we get really upset, and if something really terrible goes wrong with the body, it's a real shock, it's a problem for us, and death itself is still a horrible thing, even though intellectually we know these things are going to happen.

So that peculiar way that we relate to the body, of identifying with it, even though we say we don't, and of somehow possessing it, you know, we have a language such as, I have a big nose, see? I have big ears, I have got big ears, but I am sick, the body is sick, but I am sick, but I have a headache. It's a dualistic relationship that we have to this body.

And of course the sudden realisation that we don't control the body in any real sense. We can't stop it growing old, we can't stop it falling sick and so on. This brings a lot of fear and that fear is the undermining of the idea that the body is me and mine.

And it's the same with emotions. You don't go to bed making a determination to wake up depressed. You just wake up depressed. And it's these sorts of recognitions that there are things going on inside us, both at the physical and mental level, over which we don't have this control. And it's these sorts of little insights that begin to undermine this idea of, well, who am I? Who am I?

So these three qualities that the Buddha called *dukkha* turn out to be really the three characteristics of existence, which is the sense of impermanence, the unsatisfactory nature that we can never really find real deep contentment by seeking happiness in the world, if only because it arises and passes away. And this deeper delusion about who we are, or what we are.

So that's really a definition of *dukkha* according to the Buddha. And this term is at the root of his teaching. He actually says that all he teaches is *dukkha*, *dukkha-nirodha*, suffering and the end of it. It's in three words in the Pali. So it's something that he builds the whole of his teaching on. And the Four Noble Truths are centered on that *dukkha*. It's the fact of suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the path leading to the end of suffering. So it's something to just contemplate.

Now, when we're in our meditation, you see, we can normally see these things to a point. We can see it fairly clearly. But it's really taking that out into our daily practice where it has good effect. Simple things like recognising little attachments to cups of tea and TV programmes and just seeing how actually that can cause a lot of suffering. You know, a TV breaking down when you want to watch a football match, things like that, horrible things.

So it's recognising that when somebody comes to you and they say something and you feel irritation or disappointment, where's that coming from? And it's awakening to the fact that the suffering that we're actually experiencing is all self-created. And that puts you in charge. That makes you responsible for your own mental states. And what the Buddha is saying is that once you take full responsibility for your mental states, for your unsatisfactoriness, for your suffering, then that's the path out of it because then you'll try and do something about it rather than blame the world, blame society, blame this and blame that.

So it's really contemplating this whole area of *dukkha* and how we create suffering for ourselves and taking it into our daily lives which is the practice.

So my usual hope is that my words are of some assistance and that you are fully liberated from all suffering sooner.

---

*Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.*