

Introduction

Human beings encounter many problems, which affect their happiness and involve moral issues. The situation can be summed up in one word: suffering (*dukkha*). Saying that the purpose of life is to pursue happiness implies suffering: the very search for happiness reveals an inner deficiency that drives people to seek fulfilment. This suffering has many consequences. The search for happiness gives rise to conflicts of interest and to social problems. What begins as a personal problem is magnified and spreads outwards.

By attending to suffering incorrectly, the inherent stress which is part and parcel of the conditioned nature of life is neglected rather than addressed.¹ With their singular ingenuity people concoct a whole host of problems, until the basic predicament of life (of inherent stress) is virtually forgotten. People may even delude themselves by thinking that happiness results from turning a blind eye to suffering.² To make matters worse, that inherent stress, which has been avoided, covertly incites people to search for and indulge in ever more passionate and restless forms of pleasure, depriving them of confidence and contentment. As a result, moral integrity is compromised in increasingly serious ways and suffering is exacerbated. As long as people are unable to come to terms with this fundamental aspect of life—unable to reconcile themselves to the universal characteristic of *dukkha*—they will not succeed in resolving their problems. They will not escape the oppression of *dukkha*, no matter how much happiness they find, and they will not meet with true happiness, which is intrinsically complete and fully satisfying.

Human life involves solving problems and seeking release from suffering. But if we do not know the correct way leading to freedom, our attempted solutions to these problems only bring about increased suffering. The greater the effort, the greater the affliction, becoming an ever more complex cycle: a whirlpool of suffering. [224] This state of affairs is *samsāra-vatṭa*, the ‘wandering around’ or round of rebirth, which the Buddha explained in the teaching of Dependent Origination (*paṭīccasamuppāda*) under the cycle of origination (*samudaya-vāra*) and the forward sequence (*anuloma-paṭīccasamuppāda*). There it is revealed how human suffering arises according to cause and effect.

¹ There are many English translations for *dukkha*, including: Suffering, unsatisfactoriness, stress, pain and misery. The Buddha used this word in different contexts, most notably in: A) The Three (universal) Characteristics, referring to the stress and pressure inherent in conditioned phenomena; B) the Four Noble Truths, referring to human suffering caused by ignorance and craving; and C) the three kinds of feeling (*vedanā*), referring to ‘painful sensation’. The author here is highlighting the overlap and connection between contexts A and B. In this sentence the terms ‘suffering’ and ‘inherent stress’ are both defined by the Pali word ‘*dukkha*’ (or the Thai word *took* – ทูกข์). See ‘The Three Signs’ (pub. 2007), a translation of chapter 3 of *Buddhadhamma* on the Three Characteristics (*anicca, dukkha, anattā*).

² ‘Ignorance is bliss.’

When the Buddha taught Dependent Origination, he did not end with the origin of suffering. He also taught the cycle of cessation (*paṭiccasamuppāda-nirodhavāra*), which is the process of turning back, or turning away (*vivaṭṭa*): the end of suffering. Human suffering can be remedied and there are ways to achieve this. The Buddha went on to reveal the supreme state, in which humans are able to live noble lives, enjoy genuine happiness, and bring true benefit and meaning to life. They become free, without having to rely on external factors or depend on the happiness determined by conditioned phenomena. Conditioned phenomena cannot sustain themselves, let alone sustain our happiness. Happiness dependent on external things offers no true support, since it continually relies on these things. Seeking meaning in this insecure form of happiness results in losing freedom and independence.

One may not fully attain the state of ‘turning away’ at first, but to the extent that one correctly attends to problems—reducing the force of the origination cycle and increasing the force of the cessation cycle—suffering will gradually abate and one’s life will be enhanced. One will be able to experience the pleasures of the world with wisdom, not enslaved to them or harmed by their fluctuating currents. Worldly pleasures will not be a source of trouble to oneself or others, and this healthy relationship to pleasure will promote well-being within society.

The discussion here focuses on the cessation cycle and the end of suffering, which directly opposes the origination cycle with its resultant suffering.³ [225]

³ For further information on Dependent Origination see Bruce Evans’s translation of Chapter 4 of *Buddhadhamma*: ‘Dependent Origination: The Buddhist Law of Conditionality’.