

The Causes of Relational Suffering and their Cessation according to Theravāda Buddhism

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Bhikkhus, this samsāra [cycle of rebirths] is without discoverable beginning. A first point is not discerned of beings roaming and wandering on hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving. . . . For a long time, bhikkhus, you have experienced the death of a father . . . the death of a brother . . . the death of a sister . . . the death of a son . . . the death of a daughter . . . the loss of relatives . . . the loss of wealth . . . loss through illness; as you have experienced this, weeping and wailing because of being united with the disagreeable and separated from the agreeable, the stream

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of tears that you have shed is more than the water in the four great oceans.¹

Just as a drop of water does not cling to a lotus [leaf], as water does not cling to a lotus, so a sage does not cling to what is seen or heard or thought.²

Introduction

The Buddha of Theravāda Buddhism is concerned primarily about one thing: how suffering comes to be and how it is possible to be rid of it. All other topics in his teachings relate in some way to this concern about suffering. The Buddha sets aside all topics not related in some way to this concern—for example, speculative philosophical questions—as not worth consideration.

This essay is divided into four parts. The first considers the Four Noble Truths, which constitute the Buddha’s teaching about how suffering in general comes to be and how to get rid of it. The second part concerns Dependent Origination, a detailed explanation of the second and third of the Noble Truths regarding the origin of suffering and the way to get rid of it. Relational suffering as such is discussed in the third part. Its origin is viewed from two aspects: in terms of the feeling of displeasure and in terms of clinging to someone who is dear. The fourth part, then, presents the Buddha’s simple teaching, the teaching “in brief,” according to which suffering, including relational suffering between persons, arises insofar

1. *Samyutta Nikāya*, 15.5. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya*, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 654.
2. *Sutta-Nipāta*, 812. *The Group of Discourses*, trans. K. R. Norman, (Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 2001), 108

as something of the self is added to the simple experiences of the senses. If we take our experiences just as they are and do not add anything of a self to them, we do not experience suffering in any of its forms.

The Four Noble Truths

The Buddha's teaching about suffering is contained in the Four Noble Truths. They describe how suffering comes to be, its cause, and how suffering can be gotten rid of:

- The Noble Truth of suffering (*dukkha*): suffering in many forms occurs in human lives because of the unsatisfactory and changing character of existence.
- The Noble Truth of the origin of suffering: craving, desire, thirst (*tanhā*) is the origin of suffering.
- The Noble Truth of the end of suffering: getting rid of craving is getting rid of suffering.
- The Noble Truth of the way leading to the end of suffering: the Noble Eightfold Path is the Middle Way that leads to the end of suffering. The Eightfold Path is made up of right speech, right action, right livelihood (morality group); right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration (concentration group); right understanding, and right thought (wisdom group).

Suffering is understood by the Buddha to mean the unsatisfactoriness of life in all its many forms. Suffering includes all those things that worry a human being: for example, getting old, becoming sick, dying, experiencing what is not pleasurable, experiencing the end of something pleasurable, and not getting what

one desires. It comprises anxiety, boredom, worry, sadness, grief, disappointment, guilt, regret, and so on. Suffering comes from the unsatisfactory and changing character of everything in human experience. Anything in sense experience to which we attach ourselves brings suffering.

Dependent Origination

Dependent origination (*paticcasamuppāda*) is the Buddha's teaching about the conditions under which suffering enters the world and the conditions under which it is possible to get rid of it. In this way the teaching is the full explanation of the second and third of the Noble Truths.

Dependent origination, then, can be stated in the following eleven sentences about conditionality: (1) ignorance (*avijjā*) is a condition for mental formations (*sankhāra*); (2) mental formations are a condition for consciousness (*viññāna*); (3) consciousness is a condition for name and form (mind and body—*nāma-rūpa*); (4) name and form are a condition for the six (personal) bases of perceptions (*āyatana*); (5) the six bases are a condition for impression, or contact (*phassa*); (6) impression is a condition for feeling (*vedanā*); (7) feeling is a condition for craving (*tanhā*); (8) craving is a condition for clinging (*upādāna*); (9) clinging is a condition for the process of becoming (*bhava*); (10) becoming is a condition for rebirth (*jāti*); and (11) rebirth is a condition for old age and death (*jarā-marana*). And so the whole repeating cycle of suffering continues.

This is a complicated process to explain the arising of the various kinds of suffering. In discussing relational suffering, we will focus on three links in this chain: feelings, craving (desire, *tanhā*), and clinging.

Relational Suffering between Persons

Many times suffering arises in our lives in terms of the relationships we have with one another. This kind of suffering that we can call relational suffering can arise in many ways. We will look at two ways. Relational suffering between persons can arise because of a “feeling” of displeasure that comes about because of what someone said or did. In terms of dependent origination, the feeling conditions “craving” (desire), which conditions “clinging.” In other words, relational suffering can arise because we relate to someone who is dear to us in a way that is clinging, which is dependent upon craving. Let us see what this means in real life.

First, feelings can be pleasant, painful, or neither pleasant nor painful. Feelings (*vedanā*) or “sensations” may be further divided into five groups:

- Pleasant mental feeling
- Unpleasant mental feeling
- Pleasant bodily feeling
- Unpleasant bodily feeling
- Neutral feeling (a feeling that is neither pleasant nor unpleasant)

We will look specifically at “unpleasant mental feelings” that arise in our personal relationships.³ An example from the Pāli Canon is the displeasure of a brahmin named Akkosaka Bhāradvāja:

3. The Thai Theravāda Buddhist forest monk, Buddhadhāsa Bhikkhu, shows how important feeling is for the arising of suffering in our lives, and how putting a stop to feeling can prevent suffering from arising. See his *Heart-Wood of the Bodhi Tree*, trans. Dhammavicayo, ed. Santikaro Bhikkhu (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2014).

On one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling at Rājagaha in the Bamboo Grove, the Squirrel Sanctuary. The brahmin Akkosaka Bhāradvāja, Bhāradvāja the Abusive, heard: “It is said that a brahmin of the Bhāradvāja clan [a certain one, the husband of Dhanañjāni] has gone forth from the household life into homelessness under the ascetic Gotama.” Angry and displeased, he approached the Blessed One and abused and reviled him with rude, harsh words.⁴

The Buddha does not get displeased at the abusive language of Akkosaka Bhāradvāja. He says to the brahmin:

So . . . brahmin, we—who do not abuse anyone, who do not scold anyone, who do not rail against anyone—refuse to accept from you the abuse and scolding and tirade you let loose at us. It still belongs to you, Brahmin! It still belongs to you, brahmin!”⁵

Because the abuse still belongs to the brahmin and not to the Buddha, the brahmin suffers but the Buddha does not.

Examples of relational suffering in everyday life arise from unpleasant mental feelings. In this case, the brahmin experienced displeasure because a fellow brahmin left the community to become a follower of the Buddha. We may have such displeasure because we have to wait for someone who is late. And like the brahmin, our displeasure may evolve into anger and harsh words

4. *Samyutta Nikāya*, 7.2, in *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya*, 255–56.

5. *Ibid.*, 256.

that strain or break relationships. So relational suffering between persons arises in our lives when we let unpleasant mental feelings get the better of us.

Turning now to clinging, relational suffering between persons often arises because we cling to someone who is dear to us. We should not cling to anything or anyone in life, not even to a loved one—especially not to a loved one, and especially not to the death of a loved one. It is not that we should not love another person such as our spouse or our children. But clinging desire or attachment directed to that person in every case brings suffering. Here is an example from the Pāli Canon. In a short Sutta in the *Samyutta Nikāya* for example, Bhadraka, speaking about the people in his hometown, says to the Buddha regarding the origin of suffering:

Those people in Uruvelakappa, venerable sir, in relation to whom sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair would arise in me if they were executed, imprisoned, fined, or censured—these are the ones for whom I have desire and attachment. But those people in Uruvelakappa in relation to whom no sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair would arise in me—these are the ones for whom I have no desire and attachment.⁶

Bhadraka comes to understand that suffering arises when there is clinging or attachment to loved ones.⁷ Similarly, relational

suffering in everyday life arises because we cling to someone who is dear to us. Someone who is dear to us moves away. One of our close relatives or friends dies, a mother dies too young of cancer, a young son dies, a brother is killed in a work accident, or a good friend at work dies young. Or our love interest leaves us for somebody else, leaving us hurt, disappointed, and lonely—or even angry because we have been rejected for someone else. These are sad situations for sure. But relational suffering arises in our lives when we cling to a dear one. Our outlook to all—self, loved one, one toward whom we are neutral, and an “enemy”—should be the same: that of loving kindness that is non-clinging. In this way relational suffering will not arise for us.

Avoiding Relational Suffering: The Teaching Made Simple

In Theravāda Buddhism, one way to overcome relational suffering between persons—a way easy to understand but difficult to put into practice—is to follow a simple teaching. How do we look at the world in a simple way according to the Buddha so that relational suffering—or any form of suffering—does not arise? We have to take experience simply as it comes and not add anything of ourselves to it, not add our feelings and desires and views. If we do add something of our self, suffering arises. This is true about all the forms of suffering, of dissatisfaction, in life including the relational suffering that arises between persons.

seeing those that are dear and seeing those that are not dear, are both painful [bring *dukkha*]. / Hence hold nothing dear, for separation from those that are dear is bad; bonds do not exist for those for whom naught is dear or not dear.” *The Dhammapada*, trans. Narada Thera (Taipei, Taiwan: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 1993), 181–82. Compare verse 5 (grief coming from affection), 183, and verse 7 (grief coming from lust), 184.

6. Ibid., 1348–49.

7. Consider, too, Chapter 16 of *The Dhammapada*, which is devoted to the subject of affection. In verses 210 and 211, for example, we are advised to not associate with someone who is dear to us or beloved by us (*piyo*) and someone who is not dear to us: “Consort not with those that are dear, never with those that are not dear; not

On more than one occasion in the scriptures someone comes to the Buddha to ask him for a simple explanation of the teaching, for the teaching “in brief.” There is, for instance, the famous example of the ascetic Bāhiya. When the ascetic asks to be taught the *Dhamma* (Teaching) in brief, the Buddha says to him,

Herein, Bāhiya, you should train yourself thus: “In the seen there will be merely what is seen [without adding one’s own views, opinions, concepts, personal likes and dislikes, etc.]; in the heard will be merely what is heard, in the sensed will be merely what is sensed, in the cognized will be merely what is cognized.” In this way you should train yourself, Bāhiya.

When, Bāhiya, for you in the seen is merely what is seen . . . in the cognized is merely what is cognized, then, Bāhiya, you will not be “with that” [bound by that view, by attraction or repulsion, etc.]. When, Bāhiya, you are not “with that,” then, Bāhiya, you will not be “in that” [situation of being deluded and led astray by views and emotions]. When, Bāhiya, you are not “in that,” then, Bāhiya, you will be neither here nor beyond nor in between the two [neither in this world nor another world; that is, you will experience [Enlightenment]. Just this is the end of suffering.⁸

8. *Udāna*, 1.10, in *The Udāna and the Itivuttaka*, trans. John D. Ireland (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1997), 20. The additions in brackets, based on the Commentary, are from the translator’s footnote #21, 196.

Conclusion

This essay considered the Buddha’s teaching about the cause of suffering, specifically the way in which relational suffering between persons can arise due to negative feelings leading to clinging. It also looked at the simple teaching, the teaching in brief, in this regard. But there are many other considerations that provide positive ways to overcome causes of relational suffering:

- How loving kindness (*mettā*) can bring about non-anger (*avera*, non-anger) and freedom from hatred and hurtful acts or words
- How loving kindness spread in all directions can overcome discrimination and intolerance that may hurt others
- How patience (*khantī*) can overcome oppressing and harming others for whom we have negative feelings
- How sympathetic joy (*muditā*) can overcome envy and jealousy
- How equanimity (*upekkhā*) keeps us from being upset because someone blames us and being flattered when someone praises us since both states condition craving which brings suffering
- How beneficial ways of speaking (*samā vācā*) can overcome gossip and slander that may hurt others and talk that serves no good purpose

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