

# The Teachings of the Buddha about Relational Suffering

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are causes of *dukkha*, (3) there is release from *dukkha*, and (4) there is a path that leads to the cessation of *dukkha*. In following this path, one comes to a right understanding of *dukkha* that enables us to find true happiness or *Nibbāna* (Nirvāṇa).

## Impermanence

Why is the world established on dissatisfactoriness? We are dissatisfied because we cannot keep things that we want, and we cannot get rid of things we do not want. We desire to have certain things and we desire to be rid of certain things. The first desire we call “greed” and the second we call “hate.” These are two of the root causes of *dukkha*. And “delusion” about what is happening to us due to these two root desires is the third cause of *dukkha*. We are under the delusion that we can achieve happiness and rid ourselves of *dukkha* if we can keep what we want and be rid of what we do not want.

But this is a delusion because everything and every living being including ourselves is subject to change—impermanence (*anicca*). This is similar to what Heraclitus said: “You cannot step twice into the same river.” But the Buddhist notion of impermanence goes beyond that. You cannot step into the same river not only because the river is always changing but also because the person who steps in is subject to change every split second. To understand this is to break the delusion and realize that the world is established on dissatisfactoriness because of the transient or impermanent nature of everything.

## Relational Suffering

Given this impermanence, what is the “dissatisfactory” condition of human relationships? Can we expect two people, who are

## The Nature of the World

The “world is established on *dukkha*”: “*Dukkhe loko patitthito*.”<sup>1</sup> The word “*dukkha*” refers to the main concept in the Buddha’s explanation of the world. So, what is *dukkha*? Many would translate this word as “suffering,” which is a partial meaning of the word. Another English translation found in literature for *dukkha* is “dissatisfactory condition.” That is, the world is based on dissatisfactory conditions.

Given that the world is filled with *dukkha*, does the Buddha want us to be resigned or sad? In fact, it is just the opposite. The Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths: (1) there is *dukkha*, (2) there

1. *Samyutta Nikāya*, I.40.

Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture, Vol. 4, No. 2 (October 2015)  
26–28 © 2015

already changing from moment to moment, to behave the same way all the time? Can we expect the relationship itself to remain the same all the time? Relationships can become dissatisfactory as they change, as the persons change, and as the expectations of each party of the other are not fulfilled. And at the same time, the expectations themselves are impermanent and are evolving all the time.

For example, consider two people who become attracted to each other and decide to start a relationship. Each person's expectations of the other are different. Some of these expectations are socially predetermined. Some are decided by the individuals themselves. And as time passes the expectations themselves change. In their interactions, even a simple thing such as exchanging greetings first thing in the morning can be different from one day to the next. And "for every action there is a reaction." In cause and effect situations, the actions and reactions of the two individuals, *dukkha* can arise.

However, if we understand that the *dukkha* of this impermanent world is explained by causal reactions, if we can reflect on each cause and effect, then we can see the direction in which each action and reaction leads us. Then we have the freedom to make good decisions when reacting to others' actions. We can decide to respond in ways that reduce or eliminate *dukkha*. In this way, impermanence is actually good. It gives us the opportunity to change things for the better and not be caught permanently in bad forms of action and reaction. In other words, impermanence leaves room for positive change. It gives us the freedom to develop relationships in positive ways.

## Relationships are Sacred

The individual does not exist in isolation. I am not existing by myself. I am here in relation to all others. My achievements are possible not only because of my contributions, but also because of the many other people who have contributed to my achievements. I am only "the tip of the iceberg." Recognizing this relational dimension of our lives is very important to overcoming *dukkha*. And Buddhism teaches that in doing so, one discovers something sacred in relationships.<sup>2</sup>

In the *Sigālovāda Sutta*, the Buddha meets a man named Sigāla who is worshiping the six directions.<sup>3</sup> The Buddha instructs him in the correct way of doing so. He says that each direction has a meaning. With respect to the six directions (east, south, west, north, nadir, and zenith) the Buddha says that each represents a relationship:

- East: parents
- South: teachers
- West: family
- North: friends, relatives, and neighbors
- Nadir: servants, workers, and employees
- Zenith: clergy

The Buddha teaches that there are virtues to be lived in each relationship and that living those virtues is true worship of the sacredness in each person rather than in the directions themselves.

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2. Walpola Rāhula, *What the Buddha Taught* (Bedford, England: Gordon Fraser, 1959) 78.

3. *Dīgha Nikāya*, 31.

For example in regard to workers (Nadir), one should assign work according to their ability, supply them with adequate food and wages, treat them when they are sick, share delicacies with them, and grant them leave at proper times. This is to treat them with loving kindness and compassion so they might live well. This kind of action will generate a reciprocal reaction so that all will be happy.

## Conclusion

By taking away the clinging desire which is the cause of *dukkha*, we can root out the hatred and greed, and the self-centered desire to keep only what we want and to get rid of what we do not want. We can begin to live for others, reacting to their actions with the loving kindness and compassion that brings true happiness to ourselves and others. If we cling into our own views and ideas, for example, we do not see the options to act and react in ways that transform situations from negative to positive. When we take away clinging we can have a fresh look at any situation and find the inner freedom to live in positive relations, responding to each change in life in ways that build and support relationships for the happiness of all involved.

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