

# Relational Suffering

## Causes and Liberation According to Buddhism

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### Introduction

The earth where we live is a small world among other worlds in the universe. Based on extrasensory perception, the Buddha described a conception of the universe where innumerable, diverse worlds are located:

As far as these suns and moons revolve shedding their light in space, so far extends the thousand-fold universe. In it there are thousands of suns (*sahassasam suriyānaṃ*), thousands of moons, thousands of inhabited worlds of varying sorts . . . thousands of heavenly worlds of varying grades. This is the thousand-fold minor world system (*cūḷāṇikā lokadhātu*). Thousands of times the size of the thousand-fold

minor world system is the twice-a-thousand middling world system (*majjhimika lokadhātu*). Thousands of times the size of the middling world system is the thrice-a-thousand great cosmos (*mahālokadhātu*).<sup>1</sup>

In our world, there are so many religions. What kind of attitude should one take to get along with followers of other religions? One cannot say his or her own religion is the best. The Buddha recommended the following attitude:

There are certain religious teachers who speak very highly of their own theories, but oppose, condemn and ridicule the theories of others. At the same time there are yet other religious teachers who in turn speak highly of their own theories, opposing, condemning and ridiculing the theories of these others. We are now in a state of doubt and perplexity as to whom out of these venerable recluses spoke the truth and who spoke falsehood. O Kālāmas, you have a right to doubt or feel uncertain, for you have raised a doubt in a situation in which you ought to suspend your judgment. Come now, Kālāmas, do not accept anything on the grounds of revelation, tradition or report or because it is a product of mere reasoning or because it is true from a standpoint or because of a superficial assessment of the facts or because it conforms with one's preconceived notions or because it is authoritative or because of the prestige of your teacher. When you, Kālāmas, realize for yourselves that these doctrines are evil and unjustified, that they are condemned by the wise,

1. *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, 1. 227, 1.228.

and that when they are accepted and lived by they conduce to ill and sorrow, then you should reject them.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the recommended attitude toward other religions, the Buddha recommended a critical attitude toward Buddhism:

If anyone were to speak ill of me, my doctrine or my Order, do not bear any ill will towards him, be upset or perturbed at heart; for if you were to do so, it would only cause you harm. If, on the other hand, anyone were to speak well of me, my doctrine and my Order, do not be overjoyed, thrilled or elated at heart; for if you were to do so, it would only be an obstacle in the way of forming a realistic judgment as to whether the qualities praised in us are real and actually found in us.<sup>3</sup>

### Suffering in Relationships

With this in mind, let us look at the Buddha's teaching about suffering—especially relational suffering. The word “suffering” is translated from Pāli *dukkha*. However, the translation cannot capture the full depth, range, and subtlety of the crucial Pāli term. Other words are used in the translation, such as “dissatisfaction” and “stress.” The definition of *dukkha* is as follows:

Birth is *dukkha*; aging is *dukkha*; illness is *dukkha*; death is *dukkha*; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are

*dukkha*; association with the unbeloved is *dukkha*; separation from the loved is *dukkha*; not getting what is wanted is *dukkha*. In short, the five clinging-aggregates are *dukkha*.<sup>4</sup>

The twelve kinds of *dukkha* enumerated above affect each individual and consequently each relation among individuals. In a relation, each individual is the main actor who can make the relation a happy one or a sorry one. As a Buddhist, the individual must understand the true law of living. First, he or she must believe in the enlightenment of the Buddha who provided the Fourfold Noble Truth: life is suffering; the cause of suffering is greed; suffering can be ceased by the elimination of greed; and the Eightfold Noble Path of living is indicated as medicine to eliminate the greed. The Eightfold Noble Path, also called the Middle Path of living, includes: right view, right intention, right action, right speech, right livelihood, right efforts, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Also, each individual should believe in the awakening of the Buddha, who indicated the three characteristics of life: life is suffering, life is impermanent, and life is no self. Thus, he or she should not cling to the five aggregates of life: form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness.<sup>5</sup>

Another important concept in Buddhism is *kamma*. *Kamma* is defined as action with volition. Each action produces a consequence. If good *kamma* is committed, a good consequence is obtained. If bad *kamma* is committed, a bad consequence is obtained. The consequence of *kamma* can be immediate, delayed, or appear in the next life. Individuals should be careful with their actions

2. Ibid., 1. 189.

3. *Dīgha Nikāya*, 1.5.

4. *Samyutta Nikāya*, 56.11.

5. Ibid., 22.48.

because their past *kamma* and present *kamma* will determine the status of their rebirth: “Beings are the owners of their *kamma*, heir to their *kamma*, born of their *kamma*, related through their *kamma*, and have their *kamma* as their arbitrator. *Kamma* is what creates distinctions among beings in terms of coarseness and refinement.”<sup>6</sup>

Understanding of the Fourfold Noble Truth and the characteristics of life and careful undertaking of actions directs individuals to the principles of Buddhism: to do good, not to do bad, and to train their mind. Thus, their relations with others in life will be beneficial with no suffering.

### Causes of Suffering in Relationships

The sole purpose of the Buddha’s teaching is to lead all beings to freedom from suffering. In a relation, elimination of suffering depends on the individuals involved. If those individuals are Buddhists as explained above, they possess all the background needed to end suffering in a Buddhist way. However, the cause of the relational suffering should be spelled out before suffering can be eliminated.

Among our defilements, the Buddha named three “roots of evil”: “Monks, these three are causes for the origination of actions. Which three? Greed is a cause for the origination of actions. Aversion is a cause for the origination of actions. Delusion is a cause for the origination of actions.”<sup>7</sup> From the three roots of evil emerge their numerous offshoots, such as anger, cruelty, avarice, envy, conceit, arrogance, hypocrisy, vanity, and other erroneous views.

6. *Majjhima Nikāya*, 135.

7. *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, 3.33.

The third noble truth indicated by the Buddha is that the cause of suffering is greed, sometimes translated as “craving” or “desire.” Our greed may inflict harm on our fellow beings, who become passive objects of our harmful actions. Our greed impoverishes their wealth, robs their well-being, deprives their life of enjoyment, detracts from their livelihood, and violates their pursuit of happiness. Our delusion conceals these processes of greed, which lead to *dukkha*. Aversion deriving from our greed can kill and destroy our fellow beings, hurt and cause pain, and rouse fear. In a relationship, our actions generate reactions from others. Our greed may increase the competitive greed of others. Our own aversion may produce a feeling of repugnance in others. Our own delusion may instill in others a persistent false belief regarding themselves or other persons or objects.

In dealing with other people, we bring along our emotions. With our own negative emotions, we might encounter a friend or be brought into association with an enemy and thus may cause pain through lack of fulfillment of the friendship or harm of the person we consider an enemy. So, even though virtually all human beings want to live happy lives, we sometimes find ourselves embroiled in conflicts. These conflicts cause tension, distrust, and hostility among people, and thus relationships suffer harm. Or relationships may not even arise, because people belong to a certain ethnic group, to a different political group, or to a social class.

There are many other actions not enumerated here that can cause others to suffer due to our own imperfections. Every action that one takes may affect others in many ways. Therefore, we have to be *mindful* of every action for our own sake and for the sake of other beings. The Buddha gave advice to his son Rahula as follows:

After reflecting again and again, actions by deed, word, and thought should be done. . . . Before doing such actions by deed, word, and thought, while doing them and after doing them, one should reflect this: “Does this action lead to the harm of myself, to the harm of others?” After reflecting again and again, one should purify one’s actions by deed, word, and thought. Thus, O Rahula, should you train yourself.<sup>8</sup>

### Liberation

We have seen various actions that can afflict others in a relationship or in the society as a whole. The Buddha indicated many ways to end relational suffering. How to live happy as a layperson? Lay Buddhists take the five precepts or the five faultless gifts. They are called the true law of living or the permanent law of living. In most Buddhist services, there is a part for taking the five precepts bestowed by Buddhist monks and after reciting taking refuge in the Buddha, *Dhamma* (his teaching), and *Saṅgha* (his community). The Five Precepts consist of abstinence: (1) from killing, (2) from stealing, (3) from sexual misconduct, (4) from false speech, (5) from intoxicants.<sup>9</sup> Each of these points to the positive virtues that build positive relationships. Instead of killing, one should show compassion and concern for the welfare of others; instead of stealing, one should practice generosity and charity; instead of sexual misconduct, one should practice self-control; instead of false speech, one

should be sincere and honest; and instead of using intoxicants, one should cultivate freedom and mindfulness.

The Buddha also taught the social virtues, the Four Sublime States of mind that provide the proper attitudes in all social situations. They are known under the name of *Brahma-Vihara* and are the ideal way to conduct oneself toward all living beings:

- Loving kindness (*mettā*)
- Compassion (*karuṇā*)
- Sympathetic Joy (*muditā*)
- Equanimity (*upekkhā*)<sup>10</sup>

### Dhammapada

The *Dhammapada* provides many verses that we can follow to end suffering in relationships. Advice on how to guard against anger is found in verses 231–234:

*Guard against anger erupting in body; in body,  
be restrained.*

*Having abandoned bodily misconduct,  
live conducting yourself well in body.*

*Guard against anger erupting in speech; in speech,  
be restrained.*

*Having abandoned verbal misconduct,  
live conducting yourself well in speech.*

*Guard against anger erupting in mind; in mind,  
be restrained.*

8. *Majjhima Nikāya*, 61.

9. *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, 8.39.

10. *Ibid.*, 10.208.

*Having abandoned mental misconduct,  
live conducting yourself well in mind.  
Those restrained in body—the enlightened—  
restrained in speech & in mind—the enlightened—  
are the ones whose restraint is secure.*

- Abstain from doing anything in thought, word, or deed considered to be evil or destructive to cause suffering in ourselves and in others;
- Develop and maintain our virtuous qualities to do good; and
- Engage in sincere activities to promote the well-being of ourselves and of others.

Advice on preventing violence is found in verses 129–132:

*All tremble at violence; all fear death.  
Putting oneself in the place of another,  
one should not kill nor cause another to kill.  
All tremble at violence; life is dear to all.  
Putting oneself in the place of another,  
one should not kill nor cause another to kill.  
One who, while himself seeking happiness,  
oppresses with violence other beings,  
who also desire happiness,  
will not attain happiness hereafter.  
One who, while himself seeking happiness,  
does not oppress with violence other beings,  
who also desire happiness,  
will find happiness hereafter.*

May all beings be well and happy.  
May all beings be free from hunger and diseases.  
May all beings be free from greed, aversion, and delusion.

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## Conclusion

As a Buddhist, we take a path indicated by the Buddha, who is considered the supreme teacher who found the Noble Truth. The path will lead all beings to the cessation of suffering. In relation to others, we should: