
The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering

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Chapter I - The Way to the End of Suffering

The Range of Suffering

The Buddha does not merely touch the problem of suffering tangentially; he makes it, rather, the very cornerstone of his teaching. He starts the Four Noble Truths that sum up his message with the announcement that life is inseparably tied to something he calls *dukkha*. The Pali word is often translated as suffering, but it means something deeper than pain and misery. It refers to a basic unsatisfactoriness running through our lives, the lives of all but the enlightened. Sometimes this unsatisfactoriness erupts into the open as sorrow, grief, disappointment, or despair; but usually it hovers at the edge of our awareness as a vague unlocalized sense that things are never quite perfect, never fully adequate to our expectations of what they should be. This fact of *dukkha*, the Buddha says, is the only real spiritual problem. The other problems — the theological and metaphysical questions that have taunted religious thinkers through the centuries — he gently waves aside as "matters not tending to liberation." What he teaches, he says, is just suffering and the ending of suffering, *dukkha* and its cessation.

The Buddha does not stop with generalities. He goes on to expose the different forms that *dukkha* takes, both the evident and the subtle. He starts with what is close at hand, with the suffering inherent in the physical process of life itself. Here *dukkha* shows up in the events of birth, aging, and death, in our susceptibility to sickness, accidents, and injuries, even in hunger and thirst. It appears again in our inner reactions to disagreeable situations and events: in the sorrow, anger, frustration, and fear aroused by painful separations, by unpleasant encounters, by the failure to get what we want. Even our pleasures, the Buddha says, are not immune from *dukkha*. They give us happiness while they last, but they do not last forever; eventually they must pass away, and when they go the loss leaves us feeling deprived. Our lives, for the most part, are strung out between the thirst for pleasure and the fear of pain. We pass our days running after the one and running away from the other, seldom enjoying the peace of contentment; real satisfaction seems somehow always out of reach, just beyond the next horizon. Then in the end we have to die: to give up the identity we spent our whole life building, to leave behind everything and everyone we love.

But even death, the Buddha teaches, does not bring us to the end of *dukkha*, for the life process does not stop with death. When life ends in one place, with one body, the "mental continuum," the individual stream of consciousness, springs up again elsewhere with a new body as its physical support. Thus the cycle goes on over and over — birth, aging, and death — driven by the thirst for more existence. The Buddha declares that this round of rebirths — called *samsara*, "the wandering" — has been turning through beginningless time. It is without a first point, without temporal origin. No matter how far back in time we go we always find living beings — ourselves in previous lives — wandering from one state of existence to another. The Buddha describes various realms where rebirth can take place: realms of torment, the animal realm, the human realm, realms of celestial bliss. But none of these realms can offer a final refuge. Life in any plane must come to an end. It is impermanent and thus marked with that insecurity which is the deepest meaning of *dukkha*. For this reason one aspiring to the complete end of *dukkha* cannot rest content with any

mundane achievement, with any status, but must win emancipation from the entire unstable whirl.

The Causes of Suffering

A teaching proposing to lead to the end of suffering must, as we said, give a reliable account of its causal origination. For if we want to put a stop to suffering, we have to stop it where it begins, with its causes. To stop the causes requires a thorough knowledge of what they are and how they work; thus the Buddha devotes a sizeable section of his teaching to laying bare "the truth of the origin of *dukkha*." The origin he locates within ourselves, in a fundamental malady that permeates our being, causing disorder in our own minds and vitiating our relationships with others and with the world. The sign of this malady can be seen in our proclivity to certain unwholesome mental states called in Pali *kilesas*, usually translated "defilements." The most basic defilements are the triad of greed, aversion, and delusion. Greed (*lobha*) is self-centered desire: the desire for pleasure and possessions, the drive for survival, the urge to bolster the sense of ego with power, status, and prestige. Aversion (*dosa*) signifies the response of negation, expressed as rejection, irritation, condemnation, hatred, enmity, anger, and violence. Delusion (*moha*) means mental darkness: the thick coat of insensitivity which blocks out clear understanding.

From these three roots emerge the various other defilements — conceit, jealousy, ambition, lethargy, arrogance, and the rest — and from all these defilements together, the roots and the branches, comes *dukkha* in its diverse forms: as pain and sorrow, as fear and discontent, as the aimless drifting through the round of birth and death. To gain freedom from suffering, therefore, we have to eliminate the defilements. But the work of removing the defilements has to proceed in a methodical way. It cannot be accomplished simply by an act of will, by wanting them to go away. The work must be guided by investigation. We have to find out what the defilements depend upon and then see how it lies within our power to remove their support.

The Buddha teaches that there is one defilement which gives rise to all the others, one root which holds them all in place. This root is ignorance (*avijja*).¹ Ignorance is not mere absence of knowledge, a lack of knowing particular pieces of information. Ignorance can co-exist with a vast accumulation of itemized knowledge, and in its own way it can be tremendously shrewd and resourceful. As the basic root of *dukkha*, ignorance is a fundamental darkness shrouding the mind. Sometimes this ignorance operates in a passive manner, merely obscuring correct understanding. At other times it takes on an active role: it becomes the great deceiver, conjuring up a mass of distorted perceptions and conceptions which the mind grasps as attributes of the world, unaware that they are its own deluded constructs.

In these erroneous perceptions and ideas we find the soil that nurtures the defilements. The mind catches sight of some possibility of pleasure, accepts it at face value, and the result is greed. Our hunger for gratification is thwarted, obstacles appear, and up spring anger and aversion. Or we struggle over ambiguities, our sight clouds, and we become lost in delusion. With this we discover the breeding ground of *dukkha*: ignorance issuing in the defilements, the defilements issuing in suffering. As long as this causal matrix stands we are not yet beyond danger. We might still find pleasure and enjoyment — sense pleasures, social pleasures, pleasures of the mind and heart. But no matter how much pleasure we might experience, no matter how successful we might be at dodging pain, the basic problem remains at the core of our being and we continue to move within the bounds of *dukkha*.

Cutting Off the Causes of Suffering

To free ourselves from suffering fully and finally we have to eliminate it by the root, and that means to eliminate ignorance. But how does one go about eliminating ignorance? The answer follows clearly from the nature of the adversary. Since ignorance is a state of not knowing things as they really are, what is needed is knowledge of things as they really are. Not merely conceptual knowledge, knowledge as idea, but perceptual knowledge, a knowing which is also a seeing. This kind of knowing is called wisdom (*pañña*). Wisdom helps to correct the distorting work of ignorance. It enables us to grasp things as they are in actuality, directly and immediately, free from the screen of ideas, views, and assumptions our minds ordinarily set up between themselves and the real.

To eliminate ignorance we need wisdom, but how is wisdom to be acquired? As indubitable knowledge of the ultimate nature of things, wisdom cannot be gained by mere learning, by gathering and accumulating a battery of facts. However, the Buddha says, wisdom can be cultivated. It comes into being through a set of conditions, conditions which we have the power to develop. These conditions are actually mental factors, components of consciousness, which fit together into a systematic structure that can be called a path in the word's essential meaning: a courseway for movement leading to a goal. The goal here is the end of suffering, and the path leading to it is the Noble Eightfold Path with its eight factors: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

The Buddha calls this path the middle way (*majjhima patipada*). It is the middle way because it steers clear of two extremes, two misguided attempts to gain release from suffering. One is the extreme of indulgence in sense pleasures, the attempt to extinguish dissatisfaction by gratifying desire. This approach gives pleasure, but the enjoyment won is gross, transitory, and devoid of deep contentment. The Buddha recognized that sensual desire can exercise a tight grip over the minds of human beings, and he was keenly aware of how ardently attached people become to the pleasures of the senses. But he also knew that this pleasure is far inferior to the happiness that arises from renunciation, and therefore he repeatedly taught that the way to the Ultimate eventually requires the relinquishment of sensual desire. Thus the Buddha describes the indulgence in sense pleasures as "low, common, worldly, ignoble, not leading to the goal."

The other extreme is the practice of self-mortification, the attempt to gain liberation by afflicting the body. This approach may stem from a genuine aspiration for deliverance, but it works within the compass of a wrong assumption that renders the energy expended barren of results. The error is taking the body to be the cause of bondage, when the real source of trouble lies in the mind — the mind obsessed by greed, aversion, and delusion. To rid the mind of these defilements the affliction of the body is not only useless but self-defeating, for it is the impairment of a necessary instrument. Thus the Buddha describes this second extreme as "painful, ignoble, not leading to the goal."²

Aloof from these two extreme approaches is the Noble Eightfold Path, called the middle way, not in the sense that it effects a compromise between the extremes, but in the sense that it transcends them both by avoiding the errors that each involves. The path avoids the extreme of sense indulgence by its recognition of the futility of desire and its stress on renunciation. Desire and sensuality, far from being means to happiness, are springs of suffering to be abandoned as the requisite of deliverance. But the practice of renunciation does not entail the

tormenting of the body. It consists in mental training, and for this the body must be fit, a sturdy support for the inward work. Thus the body is to be looked after well, kept in good health, while the mental faculties are trained to generate the liberating wisdom. That is the middle way, the Noble Eightfold Path, which "gives rise to vision, gives rise to knowledge, and leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbana."[3](#)
