
The First Noble Truth

From “The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering”

By Bhikkhu Bodhi

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Suffering (*dukkha*)

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.