

Dukkha, Non-Self, and the Teaching on the Four “Noble Truths”¹

PETER HARVEY

After reflection on the limitations faced by any sentient being as subject to “aging, sickness and death” (MN.I.163), the person who became known as “the Buddha” or “Awakened One” sought that which was in various ways beyond these. After his awakening/enlightenment experience, in which he is seen to have experienced that which is the unborn, unaging, unailing, deathless (Skt *nirvāṇa*; P. *nibbāna*),² he went on to teach others how to experience this. The problem of suffering had prompted his own quest for awakening, and its solution naturally became the focus of his teachings. He sometimes summarized these by saying simply, “Both in the past and now, I set forth just this: *dukkha* and the cessation of *dukkha*” (e.g., MN.I.140). The Pāli word *dukkha* (Skt *duḥkha*) encapsulates many subtleties of meaning, but its application spans pain, suffering, disappointment, frustration, things going badly, hassle, unease, anxiety, stress, dis-ease, unsatisfactoriness, non-reliability of people and things, limitation, imperfection. It sums up the problematic aspects of life: its mental and physical pains, obvious or subtle, and also the painful, stressful, unsatisfactory aspects of life that engender these.

The Pāli term for the Buddha’s teachings is *Dhamma* (Skt *Dharma*), though this term also refers to the *basis* of his teachings – the nature of reality as known by him, the path of practice which he taught, and its culmination in *nirvāṇa*. *Dhamma* is a difficult word to translate, but may be understood as the “Basic Pattern” of things. The term is also used in the plural (and in Roman script without an initial capital letter) for the basic patterns or processes of reality found within this overall Basic Pattern.

In what is portrayed as his first sermon (Vin.I.10–12),³ the *Dhamma-cakka-ppavātana Sutta* (DCPS),⁴ the Buddha highlighted four key aspects or dimensions of existence to which one needs to become attuned so as to become deeply spiritually transformed and end *dukkha*: (i) the features of life which exemplify *dukkha*; (ii) the key cause for why we experience such pains; (iii) the reality of an end to *dukkha* by ending what causes it; and (iv) a path of practice leading to this. He referred to each of these four as an

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“*ariya-sacca*” (Skt *ārya-satyā*), which has generally come to be translated as “Noble Truth.” While the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition later came to see the *ariya-saccas* as preliminary to higher teachings, as found in the early *sutta* (Skt *sūtra*) collections known as the Pāli Nikāyas of the Theravāda school or the Āgamas (Chinese translations of similar early texts), they are subjects of an advanced teaching intended for those who have been spiritually prepared to have them pointed out. When teaching lay persons, the Buddha frequently began with a “step-by-step discourse”:

that is, i) talk on giving (*dāna*), talk on moral virtue (*sīla*; Skt *śīla*), talk on the heaven worlds [positive rebirths as the fruit of generosity and moral restraint]; ii) he made known the danger, the inferior nature of and tendency to defilement in sense-pleasures, and the advantage of renouncing them [by moral discipline, meditative calming, and perhaps ordination]. When the Blessed One knew that the householder Upāli’s mind was ready, open, without hindrances [desire for sense-pleasures, ill-will, dullness and lethargy, restlessness and worry, and vacillation], inspired and confident, then he expounded to him the elevated *Dhamma*-teaching of the Buddhas: *dukkha*, its origin, its cessation, the path.

(MN.I.379–80)⁵

If the mind is not calm and receptive, talk of *dukkha* may be too disturbing, leading to states such as depression, denial, and self-distracting tactics. The Buddha’s own discovery of the *ariya-saccas* was from the fourth *jhāna* (Skt *dhyaṇa*), a state of profound meditative calm (MN.I.249), after he had first used this state as a basis for remembering many of his past lives and for seeing how beings were reborn according to the ethical quality of their actions (*karma*). These first two insights can be seen to have prepared the way for the third, as an overview of wandering for countless lives in the various realms of rebirth according to karma would naturally lead to an enhanced awareness both of the forces leading to repeated rebirths and of their attendant *dukkha*. While rebirths in the (long-lasting but not eternal) hell-realms, or as a frustrated ghost or as some kind of animal/bird/fish/insect, are more obviously unpleasant, the relatively pleasant human realm and various heavenly rebirths are also seen to end in death and have their various pains.

Pāli and Sanskrit make a fair use of compound expressions – perhaps not as much as in German, but more than in English. In such compounds, words other than the last one have no indication of whether they are singular or plural, or how exactly they relate to the last word, as the component words relate in different ways according to compound type. Nevertheless, context is usually a good guide to “unpacking” compounds, just as in English we know how to make sense of compound words such as doorway, red-eyed, lamplight, etc. The translation of the compound expression “*ariya-sacca*” as “Noble Truth” (e.g., Anderson 1999), while well established in English-language literature on Buddhism, is the “least likely” of the possible meanings (Norman 1997, 16). To unpack and translate “*ariya-sacca*,” one needs to look first at the meanings of each word and then how they are most plausibly related. The term *sacca* (Skt *satya*) is regularly used in the sense of “truth,” but, just as its adjectival use can mean either “true” or “real,” so its noun meaning can be either “truth” or “reality” – a genuinely real existent. The Sanskrit word *satya* is related to the word *sat*, “existence/being,” and both can have religious connotations. In the pre-Buddhist *Upaniṣads*, *Sat* (Being) is equated with *Ātman*/Self and *Brahman*, seen respectively as the unchanging essence of

a person and the world, and in the twentieth century Mahātma Gandhi called his method of non-violent social change *Satyāgraha*, “holding onto Truth.”

In “*ariya-sacca*,” *sacca* is a noun, and there are three reasons why its meaning here cannot be “truth.” Firstly, it is said that the second *ariya-sacca* (the origination of *dukkha*) is to be abandoned (SN.V.422): surely, one would not want to abandon a “truth,” but one might well want to abandon a problematic “reality.” Secondly, it is said that the Buddha understood “‘This is the *dukkha ariya-sacca*,’” not “The *ariya-sacca* ‘This is *dukkha*’” (SN.V.422), which would be the case if *sacca* here meant a *truth* whose content was expressed in the words in quote marks. Thirdly, in some *suttas* (e.g. SN.V.425), the first *ariya-sacca* is explained by identifying it with a kind of existent (the bundles of grasping-fuel – see below), not by asserting a form of words that could be seen as a “truth.” In normal English usage, the only things that can be “truths” are propositions – i.e., something that is expressed in words (spoken, written, thought). It seems odd to describe an item in the world, whether physical or mental, as itself a “truth.” “Truth” (and falsity) potentially comes into it only when we try to give a correct description of what there is. Something *said* about *dukkha*, even just “this is *dukkha*,” can be a “truth,” but *dukkha* itself can only be a true, genuine *reality*.⁶ Hence “true reality” is here best for “*sacca*,” which still keeps a clear connection to “truth” as the other meaning of *sacca*.

What of the term *ariya*? As a noun, this means “noble one.” In Brahmanism (which evolved into Hinduism), the term referred to members of the top three of the four social classes, denoting purity of descent and social superiority. In Buddhism it is used in a spiritual sense: the Buddha is “the Noble one” (SN.V.435), and other “Noble ones” are those who are partially or fully awakened and those well established on the path to these states:

- Stream-enterers: the first of those with direct experiential insight into all four *ariya-saccas*, so that they have uprooted certain spiritual fetters (Self-identity view (see below), clinging to practices and vows, and vacillation), cannot be reborn at less than a human level, and will become fully enlightened within seven lives at most (AN.I.235).
- Once-returners: those whose insight has weakened the fetters of desire for sense-pleasures and ill-will, whose future rebirths can only include one in the sense-desire realms of humans and the lower heavens.
- Non-returners: those who have ended the latter two fetters, and can only be reborn in the higher heavens, where they in time become fully enlightened.
- *Arahats* (Skt *arhat*): those who are fully enlightened, having ended the final fetters of attachment to any heavenly realms or experiences, restlessness, conceit and ignorance. They have experienced *nirvāṇa* in life, brought *dukkha* to an end, and cannot be reborn in any form. Their state “in” *nirvāṇa* beyond death is beyond description.
- In each of the above cases, there are also those whose insight places them as definitely set to attain the relevant state.

To make clear the spiritual sense of the term *ariya*, and that being a “Noble one” is something one attains rather than something to which one is born,⁷ the translation “the Spiritually Ennobled” seems most apposite: a person who has been uplifted and purified by deep insight into reality. As an adjective, *ariya* means “noble,” hence the

Buddhist path, the practice of which makes ordinary people into Noble ones, is itself clearly said to be “noble.”

While a “truth” might be “noble” or, for those who have insight into it, “ennobling,” the case is different when *sacca* means a “true reality.” Insofar as one of the *ariya-saccas*, the origin of *dukkha*, is to be abandoned, this is hardly “noble” or “ennobling.” In this context, *ariya* must mean “the spiritually ennobled,” and the compound “*ariya-sacca*” must mean “true reality for the spiritually ennobled.”⁸ The *ariya-saccas* are the most significant categories of existence, and only the spiritually ennobled recognize their full import. Correct identification of them, and deep insight into their nature, is what makes a person spiritually ennobled. Of course, teachings about these true realities are still seen as truths, but such teachings are not themselves the “*ariya-saccas*.”

The Four True Realities for the Spiritually Ennobled (more briefly, Realities for the Noble Ones), and statements which point to these realities, such as “This is *dukkha*,” form the structural framework for all higher teachings of early Buddhism. They are: (i) *dukkha*, “the painful,” encompassing the various forms of “pain,” gross or subtle, physical or mental, to which we are all subject, along with painful things that engender these; (ii) the origination (*samudaya*, i.e., cause) of *dukkha*, namely craving (*taṇhā*; Skt *trṣṇā*); (iii) the cessation (*nirodha*) of *dukkha* by the cessation of craving (this cessation being equivalent to *nirvāṇa*); and (iv) the Noble Eight-Factored Path (*magga*; Skt *mārga*) that leads to this cessation. The DCPS says that the first of the four is “to be fully understood”; the second is “to be abandoned”; the third is “to be personally experienced”; the fourth is “to be developed/cultivated” (*bhāvitabba*). To “believe in” the *ariya-saccas* may play a part, but not the most important part. At the end of the DCPS, one of the Buddha’s hearers, Kondañña, becomes a Stream-enterer, yet he responds not with belief in the *ariya-saccas* but with a kind of transformed vision: the “stainless *Dhamma-eye*” arises, and he has insight into the nature of these four crucial realities and their relationship: that, as *dukkha* has an identifiable cause, it can be ended.

The same fourfold structure of ideas (x, origination of x, its cessation, path to its cessation) is also applied to a range of other phenomena, such as the experienced world (*loka*; SN.I.62). This structure may also have been influenced by, or itself influenced, the practice of early Indian doctors: (i) diagnose an illness, (ii) identify its cause, (iii) determine whether it is curable, and (iv) outline a course of treatment to cure it. The first True Reality is the metaphorical “illness” of *dukkha* (Vibh-a.88), and the Buddha is seen as fulfilling the role of a spiritual physician. Having “cured” himself of *dukkha*, he worked to help others to do likewise.

Dukkha as the First True Reality for the Spiritually Ennobled: The Painful

Let us now examine what is said on this first True Reality, for without understanding the central concept of *dukkha* one is hindered from understanding the others. In the DCPS, the Buddha said:

Now *this*, monks, for the spiritually ennobled, is the painful (*dukkha*) true reality (*ariya-sacca*): [i] birth [i.e., being born] is painful, aging is painful, illness is painful, death is

painful; [ii] sorrow, lamentation, (physical) pain, unhappiness and distress are painful; [iii] union with what is disliked is painful; separation from what is liked is painful; not to get what one wants is painful; [iv] in brief, the five bundles of grasping-fuel are painful.

(SN.V.421)

The *Atthasālinī*, a Theravādin commentary, says that the word *dukkha* is used in a variety of senses, such as: painful feeling (*dukkha-vedanā*-); basis of pain (*dukkha-vatthu*-), as in “birth is *dukkha*”; painful object (*dukkhāramaṇa*-), as in “material form is *dukkha*” (SN.III.69); condition for *dukkha* (*dukkha-paccaya*-), as in “*dukkha* is the accumulation of evil (*dukkho pāpassa uccayo*)” (Dhp.117); place (*-tṭhānā*) of *dukkha*, as in “how *dukkha* are the hells (*dukkhā nirayyā*)” (MN.III.169).

The word *dukkha* has been translated in many ways, with “suffering” as the most common, so that the above passage is generally translated, “Now this, monks, is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering . . .” but “suffering” is an appropriate translation only in a general, inexact sense. The English word “suffering” is a noun (as in “his suffering is intense”), a present participle (as in “he is suffering from malaria”), or an adjective (as in “the suffering refugees”). If one translates “birth is suffering,” it does not make sense to take “suffering” as a noun, as it is not the case that birth, etc., are themselves *forms of suffering* – they can only be occasions for the arising of the experience of suffering, things which often entail it. Nor can “suffering” be here meant as a present participle – it is not something that birth *is doing*; and as an adjective “suffering” applies only to people. However, in the passage on the first True Reality, *dukkha* in “birth is *dukkha* . . .” is an adjective – as shown by the fact that the grammatical gender changes according to the word it qualifies – but is not applied to a person or to people. The best translation here is by the English adjective “painful,” which can apply to a range of things.

In fact, the basic everyday meaning of “*dukkha*” as a noun is “pain” as opposed to “pleasure” (*sukha*). These, with neither-*dukkha*-nor-*sukha*, are the three kinds of feeling (*vedanā*), with *dukkha* explained as covering both physical pain – *dukkha* in the narrowest sense (DN.II.306) – and unhappiness (*domanassa*), mental pain (SN.V.209–10). Similarly, in English, “pain” refers not just to physical pain but also to mental distress, both of these being covered by the second part of the phrase the “pleasures and pains of life.” One also talks of difficult situations or persons as “a pain” – clearly in the sense of a mental pain, not a physical one. In the DCPS, something to which the adjective *dukkha* is applied is “painful” in the sense of being in some way troublesome or problematic, either obviously (e.g., physical pain, not getting what one wants) or only on investigation (e.g., being born). It applies to all those things which are unpleasant, stressful, unsatisfactory, imperfect, and which we would like to be otherwise. Those things that have these qualities can then be described as “the painful,” which seems to be the meaning of the “*dukkha*” that is then explained above as “birth is painful . . .” Here “the painful” means both mental or physical pains and the aspects of life that engender these.

The first features described as “painful” in the above DCPS quote, (i), are basic biological aspects of being alive, each of which can be traumatic (BW.20–36). The *dukkha* of these is compounded by the rebirth perspective of Buddhism, for this involves repeated re-birth, re-aging, re-sickness, and re-death. The second set of features refer

to physical or mental pains that arise from the vicissitudes of life. The third set of features point to the fact that we can never wholly succeed in keeping away things, people, and situations that we dislike, in holding on to those we do like, and in getting what we want. The changing, unstable nature of life is such that we are led to experience dissatisfaction, loss, and disappointment: in a word, frustration. The fourth feature will be discussed below.

Is Buddhism “pessimistic” in emphasizing the unpleasant aspects of life? Buddhism teaches that transcending the stress of life requires a fully realistic assessment of its pervasive presence. One must accept that one is “ill” if a cure is to be possible: ignoring the problem only makes it worse. It is certainly acknowledged that what is “painful” is not exclusively so (SN.III.68–70). The pleasant aspects of life are not denied, but it is emphasized that ignoring painful aspects leads to attachment, while calmly acknowledging the painful aspects have a purifying, liberating effect. Thus the Buddha says in respect of each of the five aspects of body and mind:

The pleasure and gladness that arise in dependence on it: this is its attraction. That it is impermanent, painful (*dukkha*), and subject to change: this is its danger. The removal and abandonment of desire and attachment for it: this is its transcending.

(ANI.258–9; BW.192)

Happiness is real enough, and the calm and joy engendered by the Buddhist path help effectively to increase it, but Buddhism emphasizes that all forms of happiness (bar that of *nirvāṇa*) are fleeting. Sooner or later, they slip through one’s fingers and can leave an aftertaste of loss and longing. In this way, even happiness is to be seen as *dukkha*. This can be more clearly seen when one considers another classification of forms of *dukkha*: the painfulness of (physical and mental) pain (*dukkha-dukkhatā*), the painfulness of conditioned phenomena (*saṅkhāra-dukkhatā*), and the painfulness of change (*viparanāma-dukkhatā*; SN.IV.259, SN.V.57, DN.III.216). The Theravādin commentator Buddhaghosa explains the first as “bodily and mental painful feeling,” the third as “(bodily and mental) pleasant feeling, because they are a cause for the arising of *dukkha* when they change,” and the second as “equanimous feeling and the remaining conditioned phenomena of three planes (of existence) because they are oppressed by rise and fall” (Vism.499). Hence, at SN.II.53, Sāriputta says: “Friend, there are these three feelings. What three? Pleasant feeling, painful feeling (*dukkhā vedanā*), neither-painful-nor-painful feeling. These three feelings are impermanent; whatever is impermanent is *dukkha*,” and the Buddha says, “This is another method of explaining in brief that same point: ‘Whatever is felt is (included) within *dukkha*.’” When a happy feeling passes, it often leads to mental pain due to change, and, even while it is occurring, the wise recognize it as subtly painful in the sense of being a limited, conditioned, imperfect state, one which is not truly satisfactory. This most subtle sense of *dukkha* is sometimes experienced in feelings of a vague unease at the fragility, transitoriness, and unsatisfactoriness of life.

Nevertheless, if *dukkha* is perceived in the right way, it is said to lead to “faith” or “trustful confidence” (*saddhā*; Skt *śraddhā*) in the Buddha’s teachings (SN.II.30). From faith, other states successively arise which are part of the path to the end of *dukkha*: gladness, joy, happiness, meditative concentration, and deepening states of insight and

detachment. This suggests that some initial understanding of *dukkha* supports a spiritual practice that leads to greater insight into it and ultimately liberation from it.

To what extent is “this is *dukkha*” a *description*, and to what extent is it a *judgment*? Many words have aspects of both. For example, “liar” is a description which also contains an implicit judgment. When something is said to be “*dukkha*” as it is a physical or mental pain, the descriptive aspect of its meaning is predominant, though there is an implied “this is unfortunate.” When something is said to be “*dukkha*” due to being conditioned, limited, and imperfect, the judgmental aspect is to the fore, for that which is *dukkha* is here clearly being unfavorably compared to what is unconditioned and unlimited, namely *nirvāṇa*. The clear message is: if something is *dukkha*, do not be attached to it. At this level, *dukkha* is whatever is not *nirvāṇa*, and *nirvāṇa* is that which is not *dukkha*. This does not lead to a useless circular definition of the two terms, for *dukkha* is that which is conditioned, arising from other changing factors in the flow of time, and *nirvāṇa* is that which is unconditioned.

The Five Bundles of Grasping-Fuel: The Factors of Personality

When the DCPS summarizes its outline of *dukkha* by saying, (iv) “in brief, the five bundles of grasping-fuel are painful,” it is referring to what is *dukkha* in the subtlest sense. The five “bundles of grasping-fuel” (*upādāna-kkhandha*; Skt *upādāna-skandha*) are the five factors which make up a “person.” Buddhism holds, then, that none of the phenomena which comprise personal existence is free from some kind of painfulness. Each factor is a “group,” “aggregate,” or “bundle” (*-(k)khandha*) of related states, and each is an object of “grasping” (*upādāna*) so as to be identified as “me”, “I,” “myself.” They are also just referred to as the *khandhas*.

The translation of *upādāna-kkhandha* as “groups of grasping” is often found, but it can be misleading. Grasping, *upādāna*, is a specific mental state which would best be classified as an aspect of the fourth *khandha* (the constructing activities: see below); so there are not five groups that are each *types* of grasping. Thus “groups (as objects of grasping)” is better. Nevertheless, there are hidden nuances in the word *upādāna*. Its derivation indicates that its root meaning is “taking up.” While it often has the abstract meaning of “grasping,” it also has a concrete meaning as “fuel”: the “taking up” of which sustains a process such as fire. Richard Gombrich comments that the *suttas* are rich in fire-related metaphors due to the importance of fire in Brahmanism, and then argues that the term *upādāna-kkhandha* is also part of this fire imagery (Gombrich 1996, 66–8). The *upādāna-kkhandhas*, then, can each be seen as a “bundle of fuel” (*ibid.*, 67) which “burn” with the “fires” of *dukkha* and its causes (SN.II.19–20). They are each sustaining objects of, or fuel *for*, grasping (cf. Thanissaro 1999, ch. 2). The translation “bundles of grasping-fuel” captures these nuances.

That the spiritually ennobled see even the factors making up a person as *dukkha* shows that their understanding of reality is rather different from that of ordinary people (who are also unlikely to see being born as *dukkha*). Hence it is said that, while the world sees the flow of agreeable sense-objects as pleasurable, and the ending of this as *dukkha*, the spiritually ennobled see the transcending of the *khandhas* and sense-

objects as what is truly pleasurable (Sn.759–62 and SN.IV.127): *nirvāṇa* as the blissful state beyond all conditioned phenomena of the round of rebirths.

To aid understanding of *dukkha*, Buddhism gives details of each of the five factors in its analysis of personality (Hamilton 1996). All but the first of these “bundles” are mental in nature, for they lack any physical “form”:

- 1 *rūpa*, “(material) form”: This refers to the material aspect of existence, whether in the outer world or in the body of a living being. It is said to be comprised of four basic elements or forces – solidity (literally, “earth”), cohesion (“water”), heat (“fire”), and motion (“wind”) – and forms of subtle, sensitive matter derived from these (e.g., the visual sensitivity of the eye). From the interaction of these, the body of flesh, blood, bones, etc., is composed.
- 2 *vedanā*, or “feeling”: This is the hedonic tone or “taste” of any experience – pleasant, painful (*dukkha*), or neutral. It includes both sensations arising from the body and mental feelings of happiness, unhappiness, or indifference.
- 3 *saññā* (Skt *saṃjñā*), which processes sensory and mental objects, so as to classify and label them, for example, as “yellow,” “a man,” or “fear.” It is “perception,” “cognition,” mental labeling, recognition, and interpretation – including misinterpretation – of objects. Without it, a person might be conscious but would be unable to know *what* he was conscious of.
- 4 the *saṅkhāras* (Skt *saṃskāra*), or “constructing activities” (also rendered “volitional formations,” “mental formations,” and “karmic activities”): These comprise a number of processes which initiate action or direct, mould, and give shape to character. The most characteristic one is *cetanā*, “will” or “volition,” which is identified with karma (AN.III.415), literally, “action,” that which brings later karmic results. There are processes which are ingredients of all mind-states, such as sensory stimulation and attention, ones which intensify such states, such as energy, joy, or desire-to-do, ones which are ethically “skillful” or “wholesome” (*kusala*; Skt *kuśala*), such as mindfulness and a sense of moral integrity, and “unskillful” ones, such as greed, hatred, and delusion.
- 5 *viññāṇa* (Skt *vijñāna*), “(discriminative) consciousness”: This includes both the basic awareness of a sensory or mental object and the discrimination of its aspects or parts, which are actually recognized by *saññā*. One might thus also see it as perceptual “discernment.” There are six types according to whether it is conditioned by eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, or mind-organ. It is also known as *citta*, the central focus of personality which can be seen as “mind,” “heart,” or “thought.” This is essentially a “mind set” or “mentality,” some aspects of which alter from moment to moment, but others recur and are equivalent to a person’s character. Its form at any moment is set up by the other mental *khandhas*, but in turn it goes on to determine their pattern of arising, in a process of constant interaction.

Much Buddhist practice is concerned with the purification, development, and harmonious integration of the five “bundles” that make up a “person,” through the cultivation of virtue and meditation. In time, however, the fivefold analysis is used to enable a meditator gradually to transcend the naïve perception – with respect to “himself” or

“another” – of a unitary “person” or “self.” In place of this, there is set up the contemplation of a person as a cluster of changing physical and mental processes, or *dhammas* (Skt *dharma*), thus undermining grasping and attachment, which are key causes of suffering.

*Phenomena as Impermanent and Non-Self*⁹

Though the DCPS emphasizes *dukkha*, this is in fact only one of three related characteristics or “marks” of the five *khandhas*. These “three marks” (*ti-lakkhaṇa*; Skt *tri-lakṣaṇa*) of all conditioned phenomena are that they are impermanent (*anicca*; Skt *anitya*), painful (*dukkha*; Skt *duḥkha*), and non-Self (*anattā*; Skt *anātman*).¹⁰ Buddhism emphasizes that change and impermanence are fundamental features of *everything*, bar *nirvāṇa*. Mountains wear down, material goods wear out or are lost or stolen, and all beings, even gods, age and die (MN.II.65–82; BW.207–13). The gross form of the body changes relatively slowly, but the matter which composes it is replaced as one eats, excretes, and sheds skin cells. As regards the mind, character patterns may be relatively persistent, but feelings, moods, ideas, etc., can be observed to change constantly. The ephemeral and deceptive nature of the *khandhas* is expressed in a passage which says that they are “void, hollow”: “Material form is like a lump of foam, and feeling is like a bubble; perception is like a mirage, and the constructing activities are like a banana tree [lacking a core, like an onion]; consciousness is like a (magician’s) illusion” (SN. III.142; BW.343–5).

It is because things are impermanent that they are also *dukkha*. Because they are impermanent and in some sense painful, moreover, they are to be seen as *anattā*, non-Self. When something is said to be *anattā*, the kind of “self” it is seen not to be is clearly one that would be permanent and free from all pain, however subtle – so as to be happy, self-secure, independent. While Pāli and Sanskrit do not have capital letters, in English it is useful to signal such a concept with a capital: Self.

The term *anattā* is a noun, in the form of the word for Self, *attā* (Skt *ātman*), prefaced by the negative prefix *an*, meaning that what is *anattā* has nothing to do with “self” in a certain sense: it is neither a Self, nor what pertains or belongs to such a thing (*attaniya*, SN.III.33–4; SN.IV.54), as “mine,” or what contains Self or is contained in it (MN.I.300; SN.III.127–32). It is “empty (*suñña*; Skt *sūnyā*) of Self or what pertains to Self” (SN.IV.54; BW.347). While *anattā* is often rendered simply as “not-Self,” this translation captures only part of its meaning, as it misses out the aspect of not being anything that pertains to a Self, which “non-Self” includes.

This important teaching was introduced by the Buddha in his “second sermon,” the *Anatta-lakkhaṇa Sutta* (Vin.I.13–14; SN.III.66–8; BW.341–2). Here he explained, with respect to each of the five *khandhas*, that, if it were truly Self, it would not “tend to sickness,” and it would be totally controllable at will, which it is not. Moreover, as each *khandha* is impermanent, *dukkha*, and of a nature to change, it is inappropriate to consider it as “This is mine, this am I, this is my Self” – and doing so will lead to *dukkha*, due to the gap between how things are and how one is struggling to portray them.

The spiritual quest was seen by the Buddha’s contemporaries largely as the search for identifying and liberating a person’s true Self. Such an entity was postulated as a

person’s permanent inner nature, the source of true happiness, and the autonomous “inner controller” (Skt *antaryamin*) of a person’s actions and inner elements and faculties. It would also need to be in full control of itself. In Brahmanism, this Self was seen as a universal Self (*Ātman*) identical with *Brahman*, the ground and essence of the world, while in Jainism, for example, it was seen as the individual “Life principle” (*Jīva*). The Buddha argued that anything subject to change, anything not autonomous and totally controllable by its own wishes, anything involved with the disharmony of mental pain, could not be such a perfect true Self or what pertained to it. Moreover, to take anything as being such is to lay the basis for much suffering; for what one fondly takes as one’s permanent, essential Self, or its secure possession, actually changes in undesired ways. While the *Upaniṣads* recognized many things as being not-Self, they felt that a real, true Self could be found. They held that when it was found, and known to be identical to *Brahman*, the basis of everything, this would bring liberation. In the Buddhist *suttas*, though, literally *everything* is seen as non-Self, even *nirvāṇa*. When this is known, then liberation – *nirvāṇa* – is attained by total non-attachment. Thus both the *Upaniṣads* and the Buddhist *suttas* see many things as not-Self, but the *suttas* apply it, indeed non-Self, to *everything*.

The teaching on phenomena as non-Self is intended to undermine not only the Brahmanical or Jain concepts of Self but also much more commonly held conceptions and deep-rooted feelings of I-ness. To feel that, however much one changes in life from childhood onwards, some essential part remains constant and unchanged as the “real me,” is to have a belief in a permanent Self. To act as if only *other* people die, and to ignore the inevitability of one’s own death, is to act as if one had a permanent Self. To relate changing mental phenomena to a substantial self which “owns” them: “I am worried . . . happy . . . angry,” is to have such a Self-concept. To build an identity based on one’s bodily appearance or abilities, or on one’s sensitivities, ideas and beliefs, actions or intelligence, etc., is to take them as part of an “I.”

The non-Self teaching can easily be misunderstood and misdescribed, so it is important to see what it is saying. The Buddha accepted many conventional usages of the word “self” (also “*attā*”), as in “yourself” and “myself.” These he saw as simply a convenient way of referring to a particular collection of mental and physical states. But, within such a conventional, empirical self, he taught that no permanent, substantial, independent, metaphysical Self could be found. This is well explained by an early nun, Vajirā:¹¹ just as the word “chariot” is used to denote a collection of items in functional relationship, but not a special part of a chariot, so the conventional term “a being” is properly used to refer to the five *khandhas* relating together. None of the *khandhas* is a “being” or “Self”; these are simply conventional labels used to denote the collection of functioning *khandhas*.

The non-Self teaching does not deny that there is continuity of character in life, and to some extent from life to life. But persistent character traits are due merely to the repeated occurrence of certain *cittas*, or “mind-sets.” The *citta* as a whole is sometimes talked of as an (empirical) “self” (e.g., Dh.p.160; cf. 35), but while such character traits may be long-lasting, they can and do change, and are thus impermanent, and so “non-Self,” insubstantial. A “person” is a collection of rapidly changing and interacting mental and physical processes, with character patterns reoccurring over time. Only partial control can be exercised over these processes; so they often change in undesired

ways, leading to suffering. Impermanent, they cannot be a permanent Self. Being “painful,” they cannot be a true, autonomous “I,” which would contain nothing that was out of harmony with itself.

While *nirvāṇa* is beyond impermanence and *dukkha*, it is still non-Self. This is made clear in a recurring passage (e.g., at AN.I.286–7), which says that all *saṅkhāras*, here meaning conditioned phenomena, are impermanent and *dukkha*, but that “all *dharmas*” are non-Self. “*Dhamma*” (Skt *dharma*) is a word with many meanings in Buddhism, but here it refers to any basic component of reality. Most are conditioned, but *nirvāṇa* is the unconditioned *dhamma*; both conditioned and unconditioned *dharmas* are non-Self. While *nirvāṇa* is beyond change and suffering, it has nothing in it which could support the feeling of I-ness; for this can arise only with respect to the *khandhas*, and it is not even a truly valid feeling here (DN.II.66–8; Harvey 1995, 31–3).

That said, it should be noted that, while “all *dharmas* are *anattā*” – “everything is non-Self” – clearly implies that there is no Self, the word *anattā* does not *itself* mean “no-Self” – i.e., does not itself mean “there is no Self.” It simply means that what it applies to is not a Self or what pertains to it. Moreover, the non-Self teaching is not in *itself* a denial of the existence of a permanent self; it is primarily a practical teaching aimed at the overcoming of grasping. Indeed, when asked directly if “self” (in an unspecified sense) exists or not, the Buddha was silent, as he did not want either to affirm a permanent Self or to confuse his questioner by not accepting self in any sense (SN.IV.400–1). A philosophical denial of “Self” is just a view, a theory, which may be agreed with or not. It does not necessarily get one actually to examine all the things with which one actually *does* identify, consciously or unconsciously, as Self or essentially “mine.” This examination, in a calm, meditative context, is what the “non-Self” teaching aims at. It is not so much a conceptual idea as something to be *done*, applied to actual experience, so that the meditator actually *sees* that “all *dharmas* are non-Self.” A mere philosophical denial does not encourage this, and may actually mean that a person sees no need for it.

While the *suttas* have no place for a metaphysical Self, seeing things as *non-Self* is clearly regarded as playing a vital soteriological role. The concept of “Self” and the associated deep-rooted feeling of “I am” are utilized for a spiritual end. The non-Self teaching can in fact be seen as a brilliant device which uses a deep-seated human aspiration, ultimately *illusory*, to overcome the negative products of such an illusion. Identification, whether conscious or unconscious, with something as “what I truly and permanently am,” or as inherently “mine,” is a source of grasping or attachment; such attachment leads to frustration and a sense of loss when what one identifies with changes and becomes other than what one desires. The deep-rooted idea of “Self,” though, is not to be attacked, but used as a measuring-rod against which all phenomena should be compared, so as to see them as falling short of the perfections implied in the idea of Self. This is to be done through a rigorous experiential examination of the phenomena that we *do* identify with as “Self,” “I,” or “mine”: as each of these is examined, but is seen actually to be non-Self, falling short of the ideal, the intended result is that one should let go of any attachment to such a thing. In doing this, a person finally comes to see *everything* as non-Self, thereby destroying all attachment and attaining *nirvāṇa*. In this process, it is not necessary to give any philosophical “denial” of Self; the

idea simply withers away, as it is seen that no actual instance of such a thing can be found anywhere (MN.I.138; SB.161–5).

Overall, it can be said that: (i) in the changing, empirical self, no permanent Self can be found; (ii) yet one of the constructing activities is the “I am conceit” (*asmi-māna*) – the gut feeling or attitude that one is or has a real Self, a substantial I, expressed in self-preoccupation, self-importance, and ego-feelings; (iii) as a person develops spiritually, their empirical self becomes stronger as they become more centered, calm, aware, and open; (iv) in this process, awareness of all the factors of personality as non-Self undermines grasping, and so makes a person calmer and stronger; (v) at the pinnacle of spiritual development, the liberated person is free of all the causes of *dukkha*, and thus lacks any “I am” conceit, yet has a *mahattā*, “great (empirical) self” (It.28–9; Harvey 1995, 55–8): they are strong, spiritually developed people.

Sensitivity to the above variation in self-language should help one avoid incoherence in presenting ideas relating to the non-Self doctrine. Students sometimes say odd things such as: “Buddhism teaches that there is no self. . . . The self is the five *khandhas* . . . but these are to be seen as not-self.” Again, while Pāli and Sanskrit lack capital letters, the use of them helps signal the difference, clearly implicit in the *suttas*, between an accepted empirical self and a metaphysical Self which is never accepted.¹²

Buddhism sees no need to postulate a permanent Self, and it accounts for the functioning of personality, in life and from life to life, in terms of a stream of changing, conditioned processes. As explained in chapter 23, THE CONDITIONED CO-ARISING OF MENTAL AND BODILY PROCESSES, rebirth does not require a permanent Self or substantial “I,” but *belief* in such a thing is one of the things that causes rebirth.

The Second True Reality for the Spiritually Ennobled: The Origin of the Painful

In the DCPS, the Buddha talks of the second True Reality thus:

Now *this*, monks, for the spiritually ennobled, is the originating-of-the-painful (*dukkha-samudaya*) true reality. It is this craving (*taṇhā*; Skt *tṛṣṇā*) which leads to renewed being, accompanied by delight and attachment, seeking delight now here, now there; that is, craving for sense-pleasures, craving for being, craving for non-existence.

So the key origin or cause of *dukkha* is “*taṇhā*.” This literally means “thirst” and clearly refers to demanding, clinging desires which are ever on the lookout for gratification, “now here, now there,” in the changing, unreliable world, demanding that things be like this . . . and not like that. . . . It contains an element of psychological compulsion, a driven restlessness ever on the lookout for new objects on which to focus: *I want, I want more, I want different*. This propels people into situations which open them to pain, disquiet, and upset. We like things to be permanent, lasting, reliable, happy, controllable, and belonging to us. Because of such longings, we tend to look on the world as if it were like this, in spite of the fact that we are repeatedly reminded it is not. We are good at ignoring realities: spiritual ignorance. Thus arise what are called the

“inversions” (*vipallāsa*; Skt *viparyāsa*) of mind, of perception or view: looking on what is impermanent as if it were permanent; looking on what is *dukkha* as if it were happiness, or happiness-inducing; looking on what is not a permanent I/Self or its possession as if it were one (AN.II.52). Such a distorted outlook means that we continue to grasp at things which, by their nature, cannot *actually* satisfy our longings. Thus we continue to experience frustration.

Taṇhā, then, is not just any “desire,” but a driven desire rooted in delusion. Desire, though, can be also be wise, wholesome, and for good things (Webster 2005b). *Chanda*, or desire-to-act, can be either unwholesome, like *taṇhā*, or wholesome, and it is a key ingredient of one of the four *iddhi-pādas*, or “bases of success,” which aid spiritual development (Gethin 2001, 81–103).

The stronger a person *craves*, though, the greater the frustration when the demand for lasting and wholly satisfying fulfilment is perpetually disappointed by a changing and unsatisfactory world. Also, the *more things* a person craves, the more opportunities for frustration, *dukkha*. Craving also brings pain as it leads to quarrels, strife, and conflict between individuals and groups (DN.II.59–61) and motivates people to perform various actions with karmic results shaping further rebirths, with their attendant *dukkha*.

The DCPS identifies three types of craving: craving for sensual pleasures (*kāma-taṇhā*), craving for being (*bhava-taṇhā*), and craving for non-existence (*vibhava-taṇhā*). The second type refers to the drive for ego-enhancement based on a certain identity and for some mode of eternal life after death as *me*. The third is the drive to get rid of unpleasant situations, things, and people. In a strong form, it may lead to the impulse for suicide, in the hope of annihilation. Such a craving, ironically, helps cause a further rebirth, whose problems will be as bad as, or worse than, the present ones. In order to overcome *dukkha*, the Buddhist path aims not only to limit the expression of craving but ultimately to use calm and wisdom to uproot it completely from the psyche.

Besides craving, another important cause of *dukkha* is “views” (*diṭṭhi*; Skt *dr̥ṣṭi*). The Buddha focused much critical attention on views concerning “Self,” which he saw as leading to attachment and thus suffering. Such views can take many forms, but he felt that many of them locate a substantial Self somewhere in the five *khandhas*, regarding any one of them as being Self, owned by Self, within Self, or having Self within it, leading to 20 such views in all (SN.III.1–5; SB.216–20). Each of these is known as a “view on the existing group” (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*; Skt *satkāya-dr̥ṣṭi*), sometimes also translated as “personality view.” However, as the meaning is a view which sees a Self-essence as somehow related to the “existing group” – the five *upādāna-kkhandhas* (MN.I.299) – perhaps the best gloss is “Self-identity view.” The non-acceptance of any of these views in the *suttas* means, for example, that, with regard to material form, the body, it is not truly appropriate to say “I am body,” “the body is mine,” “body is part of my Self,” “I am in the body.” Indeed, it is said that the body does not “belong” to anyone: it simply arises due to past karma (SN.II.64–5). Its associated mental states do not “own” it.

Even when specific views regarding “Self” have been transcended, a subtle kind of “conceit” (*māna*) still remains as a vague and non-specific feeling of I-ness with respect to the *khandhas* (SN.III.127–32; BW.402–6). “Conceit” is the basic attitude of “I am”:

deep-rooted self-centeredness, self-importance, or egoism, which is concerned about how “I” measure up to “others” as “superior,” “inferior,” or “equal” – another key cause of *dukkha*.

A further summary of the causes of *dukkha* is “attachment (*rāga*: sensual and other forms of lust), hatred (P. *dosa*; Skt *dveṣa*) and delusion (*moha*),” with attachment and hatred equivalent to craving for and craving to be rid of something, and delusion equivalent to spiritual ignorance (P. *avijjā*; Skt *avidyā*). This ignorance is an ingrained misperception of reality that fails to see and understand the True Realities for the Spiritually Ennobled (MN.I.54), and which sustains a series of conditions, including craving and grasping, that lead to *dukkha*: the conditioned co-arising sequence.

The Third and Fourth True Realities for the Spiritually Ennobled: The Cessation of the Painful, and the Path to This

The third True Reality is described in the DCPS as follows:

Now *this*, monks, for the spiritually ennobled, is the ceasing-of-the-painful true reality. It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it.

That is: the ending of thirst for the “next thing,” so as to give full attention to what is here, now; abandoning attachments to past, present, or future; freedom that comes from contentment; not relying on craving so that the mind does not fixate on anything, adhering to it, roosting there. When craving and other related causes thus come to an end, *dukkha* ceases. This is equivalent to *nirvāṇa* (P. *nibbāna*), also known as the “unconditioned” or “unconstructed” (*asaṅkhata*; Skt *asaṃskṛta*; SN.IV.360–73), the ultimate goal of Buddhism (Collins 1982). As an initial spur to striving for *nirvāṇa*, craving for it may play a role (AN.II.145; Webster 2005b, 134–5), but this helps in the overcoming of other cravings, is generally replaced by a wholesome aspiration, and is completely eradicated in the full experience of *nirvāṇa*: *nirvāṇa* is attained only when there is total non-attachment and letting go.

Nirvāṇa literally means “extinction” or “quenching,” being the word used for the “extinction” of a fire. The “fires” of which *nirvāṇa* is the extinction are described in the “Fire sermon” (SN.IV.19–20; BW.346; SB.222–4). This teaches that everything internal and external to a person is “burning” with the “fires” of attachment, hatred, and delusion and of birth, aging, and death. Here the “fires” refer both to the causes of *dukkha* and to *dukkha* itself. *Nirvāṇa* during life is frequently defined as the destruction of the three “fires” or defilements (e.g., SN.IV.251; BW.364). When one who has destroyed these dies, he or she cannot be reborn and so is totally beyond the remaining “fires” of birth, aging, and death, having attained final *nirvāṇa*. When the Buddha was asked if an enlightened person, after death, “is,” “is not,” both or neither of these, he set the questions aside as irrelevant to the spiritual quest, and as all infected with the idea of Self. There has been much speculation on what the Buddha’s silence on this matter might imply (Harvey 1995, 208–10, 239–45; 2013, 78–80).

The fourth True Reality is described thus:

Now *this*, monks, for the spiritually ennobled, is the true reality which is the way leading to the cessation of the painful. It is this noble eight-factored path, that is to say, [1] right view, [2] right resolve, [3] right speech, [4] right action, [5] right livelihood, [6] right effort, [7] right mindfulness, [8] right mental unification.

The DCPS also describes this path as a “middle way” (*majjhimā paṭipadā*; Skt *madhyama pratipad*) that avoids two extremes: the pursuit of sensual pleasures and self-mortification. The path involves wisdom (factors 1 and 2), moral virtue (3–5), and meditative training (6–8) (MN.I.301). It works on both a cognitive and an affective level, with both inward and external aspects. It is also practiced initially at an ordinary level, with benefits in this and future lives, and then at a “transcendent” (*lokuttara*; Skt *laukottara*) level, which leads to the noble states, culminating in arahatship (MN.III.71–8; Gethin 2001, 190–226; Harvey 2013, 81–7).

The Cessation of *Dukkha*

Both during life and beyond death, *nirvāṇa* pertains to the *arahat*, who has overcome the “disease” of *dukkha* and attained complete mental health (AN.II.143). But in what sense has an *arahat* attained the “cessation” of *dukkha*? To address this question, it is useful to remind ourselves of the key aspects of *dukkha*:

- i birth – i.e., being born – which inevitably leads to:
- ii aging, illness, death: features of life that entail physical and mental pain;
- iii sorrow, lamentation, (physical) pain, unhappiness, and distress: mental and physical pains;
- iv union with what is disliked, separation from what is liked, not to get what one wants: various frustrations;
- v the five bundles of grasping-fuel: the conditioned, impermanent, and non-Self factors of personality.

These can then be grouped thus:

- a physical pain and features of life entailing this;
- b mental pains and frustration;
- c impermanent, conditioned factors of personality, mental and physical.

Now an *arahat* or buddha will be free of (a) once their present, final rebirth ends, but until then they are still embodied beings who periodically experience physical pain: “the five (sense-) faculties still remain, through which . . . he undergoes the pleasant and the unpleasant, he experiences pleasure and *dukkha*” (It.38).

However, they are in the main free of (b). It is said that the Buddha remained mindful and clearly comprehending in the face of intense pain from a foot injury, and so did not become distressed (SN.I.27). The balanced detachment of the *arahat*’s mind is such that

he and the almost enlightened Non-returner are free of aversion (*paṭigha*) to physical pain, and so add no mental pain in response to it: “he does not sorrow, grieve or lament, he does not weep . . . and become distraught.” One who adds mental pain in response to physical pain is said to be like a person shot with one arrow then being shot with a second arrow (SN.IV.208–9). Indeed, any Noble person, from a Stream-enterer upwards, is not “afflicted in mind” when “afflicted in body.” This is because they are free of Self-identity view – they do not relate to any of the *khandhas* as Self or as related to Self – so undesired change in any of the *khandhas* (whether bodily or mental ones) does not lead to experiencing “sorrow, lamentation, pain, unhappiness and distress” (SN.III.2–4). An ordinary person (not yet a Noble person) lusts after pleasant feelings and grieves over unpleasant ones; in that a pleasant feeling “invades his mind and remains,” this is because his “body (*kāya*)” is not developed; in that the painful feeling “invades his mind and remains,” this is because his mind (*citta*) is not developed (MN.I.239–40). Here the commentary explains that “development of the body” refers to insight (*vipassanā*) into pleasant feeling as impermanent, subtly painful (unsatisfactory), and non-Self, while “development of the mind” refers to the development of calm (*samatha*) by deep meditative concentration. This illustrates how the Buddhist path works on both cognitive and affective roots of suffering, insofar as both delusion and craving, and their mutual supporting, need to be undone. The *arahat* remains ever calm and does not identify with pain or pleasure as “mine,” but sees them simply as non-Self passing phenomena, as well as withdrawing from physical pain in meditative concentration. As is said in the second century CE *Avadāna-śataka* (II.384; Dayal 1970 [1932], 15), “the sky and the palm of his hand were the same to his mind.” Even faced with the threat of death, the *arahat* is unruffled. In this situation, the *arahat* Adhimutta disconcerted a potential assailant by fearlessly asking why he should be perturbed at the prospect of the end of the constituents of “his” personality: he had no thought of an “I” being here, but just saw a stream of changing phenomena (Thag.715–16). Indeed, anyone who shows any hint of fear, conceit, anger, or any other negative states cannot be an *arahat* (MN.I.317; cf. Miln.207–8, 186–8; Vism.634–5).

The *arahat* Sāriputta says that “There is nothing in the world through the change and alteration of which sorrow, lamentation, pain, unhappiness and distress might arise in me,” even if such change was the death of his teacher, the Buddha – though he would acknowledge the loss of a source of welfare for the world (SN.II.274). Accordingly, it is said that, when the Buddha died, those disciples who were not *arahats* grieved, while the *arahats* “endured mindfully and clearly aware, saying, ‘All conditioned things are impermanent – what is the use of this?’ ” (DN.II.158). Sāriputta also taught that, for one who is discontented (*anabhirati*), wherever he goes and whatever posture he is in, he does not experience happiness (*sukha*) and pleasure – unlike one who is contented (AN.V.121).

That said, enlightened ones are not seen as indifferent to their physical needs. In his final illness, the Buddha could be insistent about these. At one time he becomes extremely thirsty, and asks Ānanda three times for some water to drink after the latter delays bringing some as the available water is muddy – though Ānanda then finds it unmuddy, the implication being that this is by the Buddha’s power (DN.II.128–9).

Perhaps more surprising is that the Buddha is occasionally described in a way implying he experienced mental pain – not in response to physical pain, but in response to

an actual or potential situation. In his final year, he was once asked by Ānanda about the rebirth destiny of 12 local people. Having given answers in each case, the Buddha then says, “Ānanda, it is not remarkable that one who has attained a human state should die, but that you should come to the *Tathāgata* to ask the destiny of each of these who have died, that is a *viheṣā* to him” (hence he tells Ānanda a way to work out the answer to such questions for himself; DN.II.93). The Pali Text Society *Pali-English Dictionary* defines *viheṣā* as “vexation, annoyance, injury, worry” and says it is related to the word *vihiṃsā*, “hurting, injuring, cruelty, injury.” In this context, though, it probably means something like a tiring, troublesome thing – that the Buddha had not experienced *annoyance* is shown by the fact that he had actually answered the 12 questions just put to him; but, for an old man, many such questions would indeed be tiring. Indeed the commentary (DN-a.II.544) here explains that what is meant is that answering such questions would be “a weariness for the body (*kāya-kilamatha*).”

Elsewhere, the Buddha says that, just as a doctor whose medicine had failed to cure the blindness of a man would experience “weariness (*kilamatha-*) and distress (*vighāta*),” so would it be a “weariness (*kilamatho*) and trouble (*viheṣā*)” for him (MN.I.510) if he taught his disciples how to attain the “health” of *nirvāṇa*, but none of them did so. Indeed, soon after his enlightenment, when he was considering teaching others what he had discovered, he initially hesitated to do so, as he thought that people were so wrapped up in their worldly concerns that they would not understand the profound, subtle, and hard to understand realities he had experienced, such that teaching people would be a “weariness and trouble” for him (MN.I.168; Webster 2005a). In such a case, physical tiredness would no doubt be involved, but were *everyone* genuinely unable to understand the Buddha (something the Buddha then saw was not the case), then his teaching them would be a pointless exercise, like hitting one’s head against a brick wall. Such an action would clearly be not the act of a wise person, or, indeed, the act of one with compassion for all beings, including himself. This does imply, though, that an enlightened person can experience not only physical pain but at least some mental pains: the pain involved in doing a pointless task or one that taxed their resources of physical and mental energy, especially if these were low as a result of age and/or illness.

The *arahat* is free of any “distress (*vighāta*)” from other sources: “the distresses and fevers that arise from sense-desire [or ill-will, cruelty, visible forms, or the existing group (*sakkāya*: the *khandhas* (MN.I.299)], and he does not feel that feeling” (DN. III.240). Yet the *Milindapañha* slightly overstates the case when it says that the *arahat* feels bodily painful feelings but not mental painful feelings (Miln.445). Here, though, its later explanation shows that it has in mind only mental pain in response to physical pain:

An *Arahat*'s mind is developed, sire, well developed, it is tamed, well tamed, it is docile and obedient. On his being assailed by a painful feeling he grasps it firmly thinking that it is not permanent; he fastens his mind to the post of concentration, and when his mind is fastened to the post of concentration it does not quiver or shake, but is steadfast and composed, although his body, owing to the diffusion of the perturbation of the feeling, bends, contorts itself and rolls about.

(Miln.254)

Arahats can, then, like non-enlightened experienced meditators, periodically experience deep meditative states, the *jhānas*, which are free of physical pain and can be very joyful or peaceful. These states are still conditioned and impermanent, though, and so come under type (c) *dukkha*. Moreover, intense physical pain may prevent a person being able to attain *jhāna* or to remain in *jhāna* (cf. SN.I.120–4).

The Buddha, when he had suffered a bout of intense pain that he had endured while mindful and clearly aware, without becoming distressed (*avihaññamāno*; DN.II.99), goes on to say that, he, in his eightieth year, is now:

old, worn out . . . Just as an old cart is made to go by being held together with straps, so the *Tathāgata*'s body is kept going by being strapped up. It is only when the *Tathāgata*, from not attending to any perceptual signs (*nimitta*), from the cessation of certain feelings, having attained the signless (*animitta*) mental concentration, dwells there, that the *Tathāgata*'s body (*kāya*) knows comfort (*phāsukato*).

(DN.II.100)

The signless state is one where the mind of a Noble person attends to *nirvāṇa* as itself “signless” (Harvey 1986; 1995, 193–7), and it may be this state to which the Buddha alludes when he says that he is able, without moving his body, to “stay experiencing nothing but happiness (*sukha*-) for up to seven days and nights” (MN.I.94). The later Theravāda tradition certainly sees the attainment of the “fruit” states which know *nirvāṇa* as attained by Noble ones “for the purpose of abiding in happiness here and now” (Vism.700).

As for type (c) *dukkha*, this ends when the conditioned *khandhas* end at death. The *khandhas* are impermanent and, “whatever is impermanent, that is painful (*dukkha*)” (SN.II.53), so, when an *arahat* dies, it should be seen that the *khandhas* have simply ended, and that these were impermanent and *dukkha* (SN.III.112). In addition, when an *arahat* first experiences *nirvāṇa* during life, or later returns to this experience, there is also access to a state beyond type (c) *dukkha*. For the developed Theravāda tradition, this is explained as a direct *seeing and knowing* of *nirvāṇa* as a signless, timeless, and unconditioned realm, though the consciousness of the *arahat* that knows this is still conditioned. There are various suggestions in the Pāli *suttas*, though, that the *arahat*'s full experience of *nirvāṇa* in life is one where consciousness, free of attachment to any object, is able to become entirely objectless and unconditioned, and to itself *be nirvāṇa*, the timeless unborn, the deathless (Harvey 2013, 79–80; 1995, 180–226).

So, we have seen how, in the early Buddhist texts, *dukkha* in its various senses is brought to an end for an enlightened person. Their ending of craving, and the ignorance by which it is conditioned, mean that the ups and downs of life do not upset their calm equanimity, as they are no longer tied to these variable states by grasping and aversion. They also have access to blissful meditative states. Yet they still experience physical pain and can become physically tired and mentally weary at draining repeated questions or the prospect of a fruitless task. Such final limitations and their painfulness end, though, with the end of rebirth – that no longer has craving to cause it – as well as being periodically experienced in life.

This then raises the question of whether saying that something is *dukkha* means that it is: (i) *by its very nature* “painful” or (ii) “painful” *when reacted to with grasping or*

aversion. Both seem to be implied in the *suttas* of the Pāli Nikāyas: grasping at anything leads to psychological pain (as what one grasps at does not remain as one wants it to), and aversion makes pain worse, but also conditioned things are to be seen, in themselves, as *dukkha* in the sense of being impermanent and conditioned, hence limited and imperfect. They may also, in a straightforward sense, be forms of physical or mental pain.

The path of early Buddhism and the Theravāda school aims initially at lessening the mental pain that the vicissitudes and stresses of life can produce, then at ending the great majority of mental pain, but ultimately at ending the round of rebirths, conditioned existence, and both its physical pains and its more subtly painful nature. The Mahāyāna tradition, though, does not see things of the world as painful *by their very nature*, for when truly understood with wisdom they are seen as non-different from *nirvāṇa*. Hence the idea developed in the Mahāyāna that a buddha, and those advanced on the bodhisattva path leading to buddhahood, could remain in, or in contact with, the world in what is known as “non-abiding” (*apratiṣṭhita*) *nirvāṇa*, clinging neither to the world of rebirths nor to *nirvāṇa* as something supposedly separate from this (Nagao 1991; Williams 2009, 60, 185–6).

Notes

- 1 Note that two-thirds of this chapter overlaps with part of chapter 3 in the author’s *Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices*. Second edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. This material is included here with permission.
- 2 On the whole, Pali versions of terms are given first in this chapter, except in the case of *nirvāṇa*, as this is well known in English.
- 3 Whether or not this was historically so.
- 4 SN.V.420–4 (BW.75–8; SB.243–6; Harvey 2007); Skt *Dharma-cakra-pravartana Sūtra*.
- 5 Translations are the author’s own, in some cases as modifications of published translations.
- 6 In a few contexts, such as “in truth, in reality,” “truth” and “reality” can be synonyms, but in general they are not, and it aids clarity to translate *sacca* as “reality” in contexts where this is the force of its meaning.
- 7 Unless one had already become, e.g., a Stream-enterer in a past life.
- 8 Harvey (2007, 2009a); and Karl Brunnholz (2010, 680–1) argues for “realities of the noble ones” from Sanskrit and Tibetan sources.
- 9 See Collins (1982); Harvey (1995, 17–108; 2009b, 265–74); Siderits (2003).
- 10 E.g., SN.III.44–5 (BW.342–3); SN.IV.46–7 (SB.224–5); SN.IV.133–5 (BW.346–7).
- 11 SN.I.135; cf. Miln.25–8.
- 12 Though the Mahāyāna contains some flirting with “Self” language in relation to the Buddha-nature (Williams 2009, 103–28).

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