

“Life Is Suffering.” Love, Buddha

**Essay #1 for “Buddhism and Modern Psychology” - by Dr. Tyler Wasson, Psy.D.
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Question: The Buddha offers a specific diagnosis of the suffering that is part of human existence. Explain the Buddha's diagnosis. Does this diagnosis ring true to you, or has the Buddha ignored some aspect of human life, or made some other mistake? Offer two specific reasons or experiences that support your answer, and explain how they support it.

This essay will seek to explain the Buddha's diagnosis of the suffering that is part of human existence. It will do so by describing and explaining the Buddha's diagnosis, as well as providing two personal examples/reflections that will support this diagnosis as a complete and comprehensive diagnosis both conceptually and experientially.¹

In his first discourse following his enlightenment experience, the Buddha sought to share the core principles of his discoveries in what has become known as “The Four Noble Truths.” This systematic set of observations is interesting in its arrangement in that it follows a very thoughtful progression that anyone who has ever been to a doctor for treatment of an illness can appreciate. Far from being only a pessimistic proclamation of what's *wrong* with human existence (the diagnosis) and then sending one on one's way, the four noble truths proceed to provide a complete understanding leading to eventual cure: from “diagnosis” of the human condition; to “etiology,” the cause for the diagnosis (the Second Noble Truth); then the “prognosis,” or “possibility of a cure” of the diagnosis (the Third Noble Truth); and finally (and most relieving of the four) the “remedy” or “treatment to remove the disease,” or diagnosis (the Fourth Noble Truth).²

So here one not only finds out what is wrong with them, they are led systematically to more fully understand the root cause of their sickness and what they can do about it. So ultimately, the four noble truths, beginning with a dire-sounding diagnosis, is actually a message of hope for ultimate “enlightenment” or freedom (from suffering, unsatisfactoriness, etc.). Stated another way, human beings *begin* their lives already diagnosed, however this diagnosis is reversible, and therefore “...is not inherent in the phenomena of the world, only in the way in which the unawakened mind experiences them. This is indeed the underlying theme of the four noble truths as whole: the [diagnosis] can be overcome by awakening.”³

¹ A note about the confines of this essay: Firstly, this essay will not seek to define every possible term or concept relevant to the topic, and will assume a basic knowledge and acceptance of the existence of the Four Noble Truths as taught by the Buddha. Secondly, this essay will specifically explore the Buddha's diagnosis of the human condition (dukkha, suffering, unsatisfactoriness, etc.), and only incidentally refer to the cause of this diagnosis (i.e. *tanha*, craving, desire, etc.), inasmuch as is needed for clarity of examining and explaining the former.

² Bhikkhu Bhodi

³ Analayo in Goldstein

So what is the diagnosis put forth in the first of these Four Noble Truths?

Now this, bhikkhus, is the Noble Truth of dukkha: birth is dukkha, aging is dukkha, illness is dukkha, death is dukkha, union with what is displeasing is dukkha, separation from what is pleasing is dukkha, not to get what one wants is dukkha; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are dukkha.⁴

The term *dukkha* is often simply translated as “suffering.” At first glance, some of the items from the above list would seem to obviously fit within that definition: aging often involves loss of faculties and abilities, increased susceptibility to illness and disease, and especially in American culture, is often (though not always) seen as a gradual loss of status and power, as well as physical ability and comfort. Death can be a form of obvious suffering, as can “not getting what one wants.” But what about the five aggregates? What makes them inherently “suffering,” and is there possibly another way to understand *dukkha* in as it relates to the five aggregates?

A brief explanation of the five aggregates seems in order. As Robert Wright states in his seminal work *Why Buddhism Is True*, the five aggregates “constitute a human being and that human’s experience,” and they encompass the entirety of human existence thus:

(1) the physical body (called “form” in this discourse, including such sense organs as eyes and ears; (2) basic feelings; (3) perceptions (of, say, identifiable sights or sounds; (4) “mental formations” (a big category that includes complex emotions, thoughts, inclinations, habits, decisions); and (5) “consciousness,” or awareness--notably awareness of the contents of the other four aggregates.⁵

The Venerable Bikkhu Bodhi describes these five aggregates as “conditioned formation,” and that they are subject to “the deepest level of dukkha,” and that everything we know and experience is the result of these five aggregates, over which we have no control. They are suffering because they are impermanent and always changing, hence there is “nothing to hold to...as a basis for lasting happiness.”⁶

It is precisely this last point, that there can be no “lasting happiness” any part of human existence or experience, that supports the more nuanced definition of *dukkha* to include words such as “*unsatisfying, unreliable, uneasyful, and stressful,*”⁷ or “unsatisfactoriness.”⁸

⁴ Goldstein

⁵ Wright

⁶ Bhikkhu Bodhi

⁷ Goldstein

⁸ Wright

The above assertion, that human existence is characterized as unsatisfactory, may seem a bit bold, pessimistic, and possibly even an overgeneralization to some. In my experience, however, whereas this assertion is not always presently at the forefront of my awareness, upon reflection it does seem to be the most accurate diagnosis of every experience that I can recall and place under the microscope of reflection, as well as intent observation in the midst of experiences I would typically deem pleasurable.

The diagnosis of “unsatisfactoriness” does not necessarily mean that life does not have its momentary pleasures and enjoyments. The Buddha does not assert anywhere in the four noble truths that pleasure is non-existent. His point may be better understood to mean not that life is *only* pain and suffering, but that even in the midst of pleasure, there is at least a tinge of unsatisfactoriness--that there is no *unadulterated* or *pure* happiness and enjoyment of experience. The argument here could be understood as similar to the shameful “one drop rule” in American history (and still very much alive today) which asserted that “...anyone with even one drop of Black blood in their ancestry were to be considered Black.”⁹ As such, the assertion that even a joyous event or pleasurable experience that has even a single “drop” of “desire” or “clinging,” wanting to hold onto, wanting more of the pleasurable thing, wanting the pleasurable thing to last longer, etc., is considered by the Buddha to then be not entirely a pleasurable experience, and therefore unsatisfactory. Far from being a judgement of the human condition (as was the “one drop rule” regarding racial makeup and the value of the person), the Buddha’s diagnosis is only a an observation of fact: that pleasurable thing that you are experiencing is not 100 percent pure pleasure--if you are observant of the entire range of your experience of that thing, you will notice “clinging” to it and desiring more of it (or maybe even regret that you’ve had too much of the thing), which means there is at least a small part of you that is not experiencing pleasure, but is rather dissatisfied with things as they are in this moment. This is the unsatisfactoriness of human experience. This is our diagnosis.

How do I, as the author of this essay experience this “diagnosis” of my own experience? I can think of two examples from a typical life, which I’m almost certain will be somewhat relatable to nearly any reader of this essay: sitting on a chair, and being on vacation, the former being considered generally neutral, and the latter generally positive or pleasurable. The reason for choosing neutral and pleasurable experiences is that these are the types of experiences that would seem to be the most debatable kinds of human experiences to diagnose as being “suffering” or “unsatisfactory.”

Firstly, how can sitting in a chair be unsatisfactory? Well, when I sit in a chair that is comfortable, and in which I am content to continue sitting, I become aware that while I am sitting, I still have an essay to write for this class. And when I convince myself that I’m sitting in the chair in order to provide reflective material for my essay, I start wondering how I’m going to accurately describe my experience in order to prove my point, and then I begin to notice that it is sunny outside and that I would rather be outside taking a walk, but that in order to take a walk I

⁹ http://www.uky.edu/~lbarr2/eng264fall10_files/Page1862.htm

have to either stop writing the essay (and fail the class), or get the essay done first, and therefore delay going outside. I'm also aware upon reflection that sitting in a chair, writing an essay, going outside for a walk--these are all temporary events. I'm glad to think of the essay as a temporary event, but somewhat saddened to think of the sunny day as a temporary event. And all of these thoughts and emotions and perceptive experiences are also temporary. And they all influence each other, and I'm left here sitting in the chair completely subject to all of this frenzy, and all only because I'm conscious that it is happening *to* me and also *by* or *because of* me (or at least the processes that the unenlightened identify with as the self). So no, I cannot even sit in a chair without some level of unsatisfactoriness bursting into my awareness. And any attempts to numb it are equally unfulfilling and do not last, therefore rendering even the numbing of awareness unsatisfactory, or not fully and enduringly satisfying. Dukkha.

Secondly, I can recall vacations as a child, and the excitement before the vacation began, anticipating the wondrous events about to unfold (as my mind imagined them), and this anticipatory excitement was pleasurable. However when anticipating the vacation, if there was a delay or cancellation of the event, sadness and a sense of loss would ensue, so the anticipation itself was not enough to sustain pleasure without some kind of culmination of the anticipated plan. If the disaster of disruption did not happen and the vacation was permitted to begin, then there were admittedly enjoyable moments, often with higher frequency and intensity than during non-vacation life. Yet in the midst of this enjoyment I was aware, as I am even today, that somehow it felt like it *could* be better, that it was possible to have even *more* fun, if only such and such could also happen, or so-and-so could be here too (or *not* be here), or if I hadn't gotten that mosquito bite that was still a lingering itch in the background while resting in the back of the speedboat on the reservoir or lying in the sun on the beach or next to the pool or any other seemingly glorious paradise. And then the realization that the vacation was half over, then only two days left, then the last day, and the growing sinking feeling in the stomach that this amazing experience was about to end and normal life was about to creep back in and take over, and I would have to go back to merely sitting in a chair for relaxation. Again, even in the midst of pleasure, the goal of obtaining a satisfying, pleasurable experience was and is a near hit, but as a *near* hit, it is a miss--again, unsatisfactory, or not fully and enduringly satisfying. Dukkha.

Both of these types of human experiences, both neutral and pleasurable, highlight my own experience of an underlying sense of dissatisfaction, simultaneous to experiencing things that do not seem on the surface to be inflicting suffering in and of themselves. Rather it was, and is to this day, the nature of my own mind and instinctive drives for pleasure (second noble truth) that give rise to the Buddha's diagnosis that, in my own experience, life in an unenlightened, attached, not fully awakened state, is inherently unsatisfactory to some degree at all times, even if just subtly below the surface, though more often than not is very much within my conscious awareness.

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