The Concept of Dukkha in Early Buddhism

'Dukkha' is the First Noble Truth. Dukkha has been used in Buddhist teaching to convey the totality of experiences of a normal human being in the world. It has been translated into English in numerous ways. The common rendering being 'suffering', but many different English words are being used by different Buddhist scholars to convey the meaning of the original Pali term. Among them, the words 'ill' , 'pain', 'sorrow', 'insecurity', 'unpleasantness' 'anguish' 'anxiety' 'unhappiness' 'conflict' and 'unsatisfactoriness' are found. Today most commonly used words in Buddhist writings for the term 'dukkha', are 'suffering' and 'unsatisfactoriness'.

In these lessons, wherever necessary we will also use these two words. The antonym of 'dukkha is sukha, which is translated often as 'bliss', 'pleasure' or 'happiness'. In Buddhist usage it is not merely sensual pleasure, it is the happy feeling in ordinary sense. But it is also used to convey an ethical import of doctrinal significance.

In Pali many other words are used to bring out the import of suffering.

Sorrow (soka), lamentation (pariyesa), pain (dukkha), grief (domanassa), and despair (upayasa). Dukkha is the most popularly used. The concept of suffering necessarily includes the general insecurity of the whole of our experience.

The Truth of the First Noble Truth.

The truth of existence and the second fundamental characteristic of existence.

**The Etymological Definition and the Exegesis**

Buddhaghosa explaining the derivation of the term in the Visuddhimagga says: ''the word 'du' ('bad') is met within the sense of vile (kucchita); for they call a vile child a 'duputta' (bad child). The word game ('-ness'), however, is met within the sense of empty (tuccha), for they call empty space. And the first truth is vile because it is the haunt of many dangers, and empty because it is devoid of the lastingness, beauty, pleasure arid self, conceived by rash people. So it is called 'dukkham' (badness= suffering, pains) And further it has been classified into three for better vileness and emptiness .

**Understanding Dukkha:**

1. Intrinsic suffering (dukkha-dukkha)

2. Suffering in change (viparinama-dukkha)

3. Suffering due to formation (sankhara-dukkha).

Bodily and mental painful feeling are called intrinsic painfulness.

Bodily and mental pleasant feeling are called suffering in change because they are a cause for the arising of pain when they change.

Equanimous feeling and the remaining formations in the three planes are called suffering due to formation because, they are oppressed by rise and fall.

Such bodily and mental affliction as earache, toothache, fever born of lust, fever born of hate, etc., is called concealed suffering because it can only be known by questioning and because the infliction is not openly evident.

It is also called resident suffering. The affliction produced by the thirty-two tortures etc., is called exposed suffering because it can be known without questioning and because the infliction is openly evident; it is also called evident suffering. Except intrinsic suffering, all are given in the exposition of the truth of suffering (in the Vibhanga, 99) beginning with birth are also called indirect suffering because they are the basis for one kind of suffering or other. But intrinsic suffering is called direct suffering because of their essence, their name and individual suffering.

Physiological, Psychological and Doctrinal applications of the term Suffering or unsatisfactoriness (dukkha) as described in the scriptures has a wider connotation.

It has been used to denote a narrow physical meaning as well as a psychological meaning side by side with a usage of doctrinal import. All these three applications of the meaning of the term is quite clearly seen in the analysis of suffering found in the first discourse of the Buddha addressed to the first five Converts at Isipatana, Benares.

Explaining the First Noble Truth; which is named as the Noble Truth of Suffering, the Buddha continued to preach:

( ''And this, monk, is the Noble Truth of Suffering: birth is suffering, old age is a suffering, disease is suffering and dying is suffering, association with what is not dear is suffering, separation from what is dear is suffering, not getting what one wants is suffering-in short the five aggregates of grasping (panca-upadanakkhandha) are suffering (Vin. 1, 10).

This is a very precise statement of meaning covering all spheres of human life, which delineates the influence of suffering in many aspects. Firstly, birth, old age, disease and death have been mentioned to illustrate the physiological aspect of the issue. Secondly, the psychological aspect has been brought to light by the facts of association of what is not dear, separation from what is dear and not getting what one wants and thirdly the doctrinal aspect is stated by the fact of the five aggregates of grasping.

What Buddhaghosa explained in the Visuddhimagga as intrinsic suffering (dukkha-dukkha), suffering in change (viparinama-dukkha), and suffering due to formation (sankhara-dukkha) are found implicit in this description. Therefore in a broader sense all aspects of suffering brought to light in the discourse in question are mutually exclusive. Therefore it is expressed as a unitary concept in Buddhism exhausting every facet of human existence. Concealed suffering, exposed suffering or evident suffering, direct suffering and indirect suffering described by Buddhaghosa are exegetical elaborations of the original concept of the teaching on doctrinal grounds.

The first two aspects called the physiological and the psychological aspects of suffering are quite clear. The doctrinal aspect of suffering is stated in brief in the discourse referring to five aggregates of grasping; namely: i. grasping of materiality (rupa upadana), ii. grasping of feeling (vedana upadana), iii. grasping of perception (sanna upadana), iv. grasping of mental formation (sankhara upadana) and v. grasping of consciousness (vinnana upadana). In other words, holding on to any of the five constituent factors of empiric individuality, whether they are internal or external cause suffering. By the five terms, the aspects of materiality or corporeality, sensation, perception, conation and cognition are to be understood. In fact, the classification of five aggregates covers the entire phenomenal existence. How they cause proliferation ultimately leading to suffering is described graphically in the Buddhist theory of perception found in early Buddhism as well as in the later Abhidhammma philosophy in a much more elaborated form.

It is to be noted, however, that which leads to suffering are not the five aggregates but the mental process of grasping (upadana). Suffering that one has to experience in one's wanderings in the cycle of existence has to be understood in this doctrinal basis and not on the constituent factors of individuality. Now let us examine how these sufferings are described with some more additional items in the Saccavibhanga-sutta of the Majjhima-nikaya. The discourse gives the following description describing each item which contributes to suffering:

1 . Birth (jati) = The birth of beings into the various orders of beings, their coming to birth, precipitation in a womb, generation, the manifestation of the aggregates, Obtaining the means for contact.

2. Aging (jara) = The aging of beings in the various orders of beings, their old age,

brokenness of teeth, greyness of hair, wrinkling of skin, decline of life, weakness of faculties

3. Death (marana) = The passing of beings out of the various orders of beings, their passing away, dissolution, disappearance, dying, completion of time, dissolution of aggregates, laying down of the body.

4. Sorrow (soka) = The sorrow, sorrowing, sorrowfulness, inner sorrow, inner sorrowness of one who has encountered some misfortune or is affected by some painful state. ..

5. Lamentation (parideva) = The wail and lament, wailing and lamenting, bewailing and lamentation of one who has encountered some misfortune or is affected by some painful state.

6. Pain (dukkha) = Bodily pain, bodily discomfort, painful, uncomfortable, feeling born of bodily contact. .

7. Grief (domanassa) = Mental pain, mental discomfort, painful, uncomfortable feeling born of mental contact.

8. Despair (upayasa) = The trouble and despair, the tribulation and desperation of one who has encountered some misfortune or is affected by some painful state.

9. Not to obtain what one wants is suffering (yam pi iccham na labhati) = The fact that the above situations cannot be averted by wishing.

10. Five aggregates of grasping (panca upadanakkhandha) = Material form, feeling, perception, thought formation and consciousness affected by clinging, in short, are suffering. (M.iii, 249)

Three kinds of Feelings

In a broader sense, Buddhism identifies three kinds of feelings: Happy (sukha), Sorrowful (dukkha) and Equanimous (upekkha). Happy feelings that one experiences in one's life may change to unhappy feelings later. Sorrowful feelings may change to happiness due to some reason or other. A person who is hungry is happy when he is fed. But he is not able to retain that happiness forever. Again he will be hungry and he has to be fed. Same is the procedure with regard to change of postures. A person who has stood for a long time finds happiness in sitting down comfortably. But it is not possible for him to keep on sitting all the time. Soon he finds that it is comfortable for him to change the posture which means that these feelings are transitory and superficial. There is the universal truth of suffering underlying all these feelings. So it is clear that suffering (dukkha) has been used in a narrow, superficial sense as well as in a broad philosophical sense, which is nothing but impermanence (yam aniccam tam dukkham). Each of the aggregates of individuality is in a constant flux and there is no one's 'own-ness' in any of them. Therefore the Buddhist dictum 'that which is impermanent is suffering' is to be considered as a universal truth. Suffering that one has to encounter throughout one's life is self-evident for the most part, and needs no elaboration. In other words, one is overwhelmed by unsatisfactory and conflicting situations that one experiences in one's day to day life and needs no comments. Because of the internal and external conflicts that one has to face throughout one's life are signified by the concept of suffering in Buddhism, some are of the opinion that 'conflict' is the best English word that carries the import of the Pali word.

To a greater extent, the cultivation of right attitude to life will ease some of the sufferings that one has to encounter, because it is obvious that wrong attitude to life contributes to many of the sufferings. Feeling of something lacking looms large in our lives. Until it is filled, it keeps on giving pain. But when it is filled, a new void is created and produces another suffering until it is satisfied. Pleasure we anticipated vanishes, no sooner than it is produced, and new expectations then arise contributing to mental pain again. New acquisitions, which produce happiness and pleasure for a certain period of time, give rise to disappointment, despair and frustration.

**Different Kinds of Happiness**

Buddhism speaks of different kinds of happiness.

Monks' happiness (pabbajjasukha) is contrasted with laymen's happiness (gihi-sukha),

happiness of sensual enjoyment (kama-sukha) is contrasted with happiness of renunciation (nekkhamma-sukha),

happiness of acquisition (upadhisukha) is contrasted with happiness of non-acquisition (anupadhi-sukha),

happiness of having influxes (sasava-sukha) is contrasted with happiness of freedom from influxes (anasava-sukha)

physical happiness (kayika-sukha) is contrasted with mental happiness (cetasika-sukha).

**Recommended Reading:**

\* Wijesekara, H. D. A. - The Three Signata: Anicca, Dukkha, Anatta, BPS, Kandy.

\* Ven. Narada - The Buddha and His Teaching, Chap. 16, pp.313-322

\* Ven. Piyadassi - The Buddha's Ancient Path, Chap. 3, pp. 37- 53

(This chapter provides a very comprehensive account on the topic)