# Craving and *dukkha*

by Bhikkhu Anālayo

*In what follows I examine an aspect of the standard exposition of dependent arising*, paṭicca samuppāda*, namely the relationship between craving and* dukkha. *After an initial assessment of the significance of* dukkha *in the light of its standard translation as "suffering," I turn to the relationship between craving and* dukkha *from the viewpoint of dependent arising and set against the background of the medical scheme of diagnosis underlying the four noble truths. In the final part of this article, I apply the relationship between craving and* dukkha *to the case of the overeating King Pasenadi.*

## *Dukkha*

The term *dukkha* is regularly translated as "suffering." This translation does not do justice to the different dimensions of this Pāli term (or of its Sanskrit counterpart *duḥkha*) in its early Buddhist usage.

One of these dimensions is the experience of pain, where *dukkha* stands for one of the three feeling tones, *vedanā*. Yet, the experience of pain does not invariably result in suffering. The famous simile of the two darts illustrates this well. According to the Discourse on the Dart, the *Sallasutta* (SN 36.6), the first dart of physical pain need not be followed by the additional dart of mental suffering. Through training in mindfulness, it becomes possible to face the challenge of pain with a balanced mind. In this way, one learns to avoid reacting to it with craving for the pain to disappear and then with suffering when this does not hap-

Bhikkhu Anālayo 2019: "Craving and *dukkha*," *Insight Journal*, 45: 35–42.

pen in accordance with one's wishes. Hence *dukkha* as one of the three feeling tones refers to "pain" or what is "unpleasant," but this does not invariably result in "suffering."

Another dimension of the same Pāli term concerns all conditioned phenomena. Such conditioned phenomena can without exception be qualified as *dukkha*. This usage thereby covers all three feeling tones, as conditioned phenomena can be experienced as pleasant, painful, or neither of the two.

Now pleasant experiences could hardly be considered "suffering." Of course, pleasant experiences eventually change, but so do painful experiences and in that case a change can be experienced as positive. Therefore, the fact of change cannot unequivocally be considered as productive of suffering.

Pleasant experiences are pleasant, but they fail to give lasting satisfaction. Hence *dukkha*, when applied to all conditioned phenomena and therewith to any feeling tone, could better be rendered as "unsatisfactory." Whatever feeling tone we experience, it cannot yield lasting satisfaction, simply by dint of its changing nature. For this reason, anything that is conditioned (and therefore changing) is indeed unsatisfactory.

In contrast, "suffering" is not a quality shared by all conditioned phenomena. Instead, it is only a reaction of an untrained mind. For this reason, it fails to make sense to use the term "suffering" as a qualification applied to all conditioned phenomena.

Our ability to understand early Buddhist thought *suffers* from the inadequate translation of *dukkha* as "suffering." Although in general it is preferable to translate Buddhist doctrinal terminology, in this case it might be better just to use the Pāli term. When translation appears to be required, "painful" or "unpleasant" could be employed if the context concerns one of the three feeling tones; "unsatisfactory" would be the appropriate choice if the term *dukkha* applies to all conditioned phenomena. In this way,

the import of the early teachings could be more adequately conveyed and misunderstandings be avoided.

## Craving is Not Only a Response to *dukkha*

The standard formulation of the second noble truth presents craving as the culprit responsible for the arising of *dukkha*. An alternative perspective, however, would be to conceive of craving as a response to *dukkha*.[1]

This alternative perspective can be examined from the viewpoint of the two types of *dukkha*, mentioned above. If *dukkha* stands for all that is conditioned and hence refers to experiences that can in principle involve all three feeling tones, the alternative interpretation would imply either that craving *might* arise from conditioned phenomena or that it *certainly* arises from them.

The first option would simply imply that any type of experience might lead to craving. This much is obvious anyway and would therefore hardly be offering an alternative perspective. The second option would risk positing craving as an inevitable part of human experience. This would be in direct conflict with the third noble truth, which envisages the complete removal of craving. Such removal does not require the elimination of the world of conditioned phenomena. Instead, the Buddha and his arahant disciples were free from craving while still living in the world. Hence, at least from an early Buddhist perspective, craving is not an inevitable part of human experience

The second possibility of taking *dukkha* to stand for one of the three feeling tones would reflect the self-evident fact that the untrained mind will react with craving when experiencing pain. The Discourse on the Dart, mentioned above, provides a good example for craving as a reaction to pain. As this discourse shows, the untrained mind tends to react to pain not only with craving for the pain to go away, but also with craving for sensual indulgence in order to be

distracted from the painful condition. In this way, craving can indeed be a reaction to *dukkha*.

Yet, the arising of craving in dependence on the experience of pain fails to do full justice to the second noble truth. The problem is that in this way the potential of pleasant and neutral experiences to trigger craving is no longer taken into account. Reacting with craving is not limited to times when something unwanted happens and painful feeling tones are experienced. It can also happen in relation to pleasant and neutral feeling tones, as long as the tendency to crave has not been removed from the mind.

Once that has been achieved, however, craving will no longer arise in relation to any of these three feelings tones. This is why the traditional teaching emphasizes craving as the condition for *dukkha*, as it is with the removal of craving that freedom from *dukkha* becomes possible.

Placing this within the broader perspective of the standard presentation of dependent arising, the first link of ignorance serves as the root cause of craving. As long as ignorance holds sway, craving leads on to birth, old age, and death, which the first noble truth explicitly reckons to be instances of *dukkha*. The description of dependent arising concludes that "in this way this whole mass of *dukkha* arises."[2] There can be little doubt that this indeed intends to show that ignorance leads via craving to *dukkha*.

## Transcendental Dependent Arising

Whereas the standard presentation of dependent arising presents *dukkha* as the final outcome, in one early discourse the same principle is taken further, by going beyond *dukkha* (SN 12.23). This passage is therefore of central importance for ascertaining what arises from *dukkha*.

The presentation in this discourse, often referred to as a teaching on "transcendental dependent arising,"[3] depicts several states that arise from *dukkha*, none of which

correspond to craving. Instead, according to this discourse *dukkha* is the proximate cause for "faith" or "confidence," *saddhā*. Based on *saddhā*, the discourse continues with the conditional arising of gladness, joy, tranquility, happiness, concentration, knowledge and vision of things as they really are, disenchantment, dispassion, liberation, and knowledge of ending.

The conditioned series described in this way compares to rain that falls on a mountain top, resulting in the water flowing down in creeks, ponds, rivers, and eventually reaching the ocean. In the same way, although ignorance leads via craving to *dukkha*, from there the series of conditions continues with the above-mentioned states in such a way as to issue in the arising of liberation rather than the arising of craving.

## The Four Noble Truths

An advantage of the proposal that *dukkha* is the cause for craving is of a sequential type, as in this way the first noble truth states the cause and the second its result. However, the formulation of the four truths appears to be modeled on an ancient Indian scheme of medical diagnosis.[4] This scheme proceeds by first diagnosing the disease, followed by identifying the pathogen responsible for the disease. In the same vein, the potential of recovering health leads on to identifying the required cure. The resultant correlations are:

disease: *dukkha*

pathogen: craving

health: cessation of craving

cure: cultivation of the noble eightfold path

Given this medical precedent, it is quite natural that the first truth mentions the effect and the second its cause (and again

the third the effect and the fourth its cause). This is not something that requires correction by inverting their conditional relationship, so that the cause comes first and the result only after that. Instead of presenting a flowchart-style statement of causality, where the cause should come before the result, the formulation of the four noble truths rather involves the adoption of a medical scheme of diagnosis, where a recognition of the symptoms should indeed come before searching for what is responsible for them.

In fact, without proper identification of the disease, it would hardly be meaningful to set out on a search for what has caused it. Hence, by keeping in mind the medical precedent, it becomes understandable why *dukkha* is mentioned first and craving only subsequently.

## The Case of King Pasenadi

By way of illustration, the instructions on mindful eating, given to King Pasenadi, could be consulted.[5] As discussed in a previous contribution to this journal, on seeing the bodily discomfort of the king, the Buddha gave him an instruction on mindful eating that was successful in countering the king's tendency to overeat, resulting in a reduction of his overweight bodily condition.

When evaluated from the proposal that *dukkha* leads to craving, it is obviously not the case that only food that is *dukkha*, in the sense of not being palatable, causes craving. To the contrary, what tends to arouse our craving is the type of food that we like to eat.

In the case of King Pasenadi, overeating was the cause for his experience of *dukkha* in the form of experiencing physical discomfort when approaching the Buddha. In the actual encounter, the Buddha must have first of all noted Pasenadi's physical condition. This corresponds to the first noble truth of *dukkha*, the diagnosis of the disease. Seeing that condition would have made it plainly evident to the

Buddha that the king's physical *dukkha* was the result of craving. This corresponds to the second truth of identifying craving as what is responsible for *dukkha*.

The next step then would have been the assessment that the king could in principle achieve a healthier bodily condition. Although this falls short of doing full justice to the complete eradication of craving, envisaged in the third noble truth, it does exemplify the same principle. The path to achieve that condition of improved health then was the practice of mindful eating. This, too, does not do full justice to the whole noble eightfold path, but in the present context it still exemplifies the principle standing behind the fourth noble truth.

In this way, the episode involving King Pasenadi can be taken as a convenient illustration of a practical application of the four truths scheme, showing that these follow each other logically and do not require a revision of their sequence. A diagnosis of the king's physical condition (= *dukkha*) as the first and indispensable step forms the foundation for identifying the cause of this condition to be overeating (= craving). The potential of a healthier bodily condition (= freedom from *dukkha*, at least to some extent) in turn naturally leads on to the practice (= path) to be undertaken for achieving that goal, which here in particular involves the cultivation of mindfulness when eating.

## Conclusion

The standard translation of *dukkha* as "suffering" is misleading. Perhaps the best solution would be to leave the term untranslated. If a translation is required, "painful" or "unpleasant" could serve for *dukkha* as one of the three feeling tones and "unsatisfactory" for a qualification of all conditioned phenomena.

The early discourses reckon craving to be the culprit responsible for *dukkha*, rather than the other way around.

The only instance among these texts that pursues conditionality beyond *dukkha* shows it to lead to faith or confidence, and eventually to issue in liberation instead of the arising of craving.

The teaching of the four noble truths reflects a medical scheme of diagnosis, which proceeds from recognition of the disease, *dukkha*, to identifying its cause, craving. Freedom from *dukkha* in the form of the cessation of craving as the supreme health has its corresponding cause in the cultivation of the noble eightfold path.

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[1] John Peacock 2018: "Vedanā, Ethics, and Character: A Prolegomena," *Contemporary Buddhism*, 19.1: 160–184; p. 161. His position appears to be influenced by Batchelor, Stephen 2012: "A Secular Buddhism," *Journal of Global Buddhism*, 13: 87–107; for a brief critical reply see Anālayo 2013: "The Chinese Parallels to the Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta (2)," *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies*, 5: 9–41; p. 30f note 60.

[2] SN 12.1 at SN II 1: *evam etassa kevalassa dukkhakkhandhassa samudayo hoti*.

[3] Bodhi, Bhikkhu 1980: *Transcendental Dependent Arising, A Translation and Exposition of the Upanisa sutta*, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society.

[4] Anālayo 2011: "Right View and the Scheme of the Four Truths in Early Buddhism, The Saṃyukta-āgama Parallel to the Sammādiṭṭhi-sutta and the Simile of the Four Skills of a Physician," *Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies*, 7: 11–44.

[5] Anālayo 2018: "The Influxes and Mindful Eating," *Insight Journal*, 44: 31–42; see also Anālayo 2019: "Food and Insight," *Insight Journal*, 45: 1–10.