'Bending Low with Load of Life': Meaning of Human Suffering

> Suffering is one of the most profound and disturbing of human experiences. The very word suffering has a resonance that relates to our sense of life's meaning and the threat suffering poses to our hopes of happiness. It does not refer just to maladies, pains, and difficulties with which we can and should cope. It involves *crises and threats that constitute a degradation or alienation of our being*.[1]

Sankhya Karika, a classical work of Sankhya philosophy, says that the three kinds of misery in one's life leads to the enquiry into the means of terminating them.[2] The three kinds of pain or suffering are: *Ādhyātmika*, one's physical and mental afflictions; *Ādhibhautika*, pain caused by other living beings; and *Ādhidaivika*, pain caused by natural calamities and supernatural agencies. This ancient verse is significant as it underscores the utility of religion or philosophy (combinedly referred to as *Darshana* from the Vedic perspective) in removing pain, and thus becoming the media of deliberation on the nature of things around us. Religion vouches for the removal of pain and sufferings of the believers, whereas philosophy aims at solving the problem of suffering through analytical means.

Western Understanding of Suffering

What is the fundamental nature of suffering? According to Aristotle, it is not just the physical aspect of our self that is implicated in suffering; rather, *suffering is a spiritual phenomenon*. According to Stan Van Hooft, in the Western thought, from earlier times, suffering has been associated with the concept of justice. 'Suffering would result either from a human violation of the supernatural order or a divine response to such a violation.'[3] Suffering must be seen as a part of the Divine Order. Though it is inevitable and necessary, suffering is ultimately positive as it is from a Divine Origin.

Some ancient Stoic philosophers and Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher, embraced the tragic sense of life. They held the view that there was no plan, purpose, or meaning to existence. The world is just a dynamic system of change and becoming. Whatever happens is without purpose and motive. There is no transcendent meaning to it. Some other Stoic philosophers thought that we should live the life in accor-dance with nature and that suffering is not an evil, as Seneca puts it: 'Pain and poverty do not make a man worse; therefore, they are not evil.'[4] Epictetus, another Stoic philosopher, says that those people who accept everything that befalls them in the physical world will live with equanimity. It is because, physical events like illness, lameness, and other forms of suffering affect the body but *not the will* or *moral being* of a person.

The Greek philosopher Plato developed a worldview that explains the rationale of suffering in one's life. According to him, there are two contrasting worlds: one of divinely constituted perfection and the other of worldly change and corruption. This metaphysical system, the scholars say, was a response to the fragility, danger, and sorrow of worldly existence.[5] Socrates, on the eve of his death, welcomes his fate as it takes him out of this world of suffering, change, and obfuscation, into a realm of clarity and light which will guarantee one's knowledge of Beauty, Truth, and Goodness. This description of Socrates in Plato's Dialogues is an illustration of his metaphysical system.

Plato's ideas paved the way for the Christian notion of original sin in which the worldly existence is corrupt and this primordial condition of humanity requires *reparation*. In this view, suffering is the price one has to pay for one's sin. Christians relate their suffering to the story of Christ to give it a positive meaning. They believe that they contribute to the salvific plan of God by suffering. Through this interpretation, the negative character of suffering is given a transcendent, positive meaning. This makes way for the Christian belief that salvation is achieved through suffering.

As for the moral aspect of suffering, Stanley Hauerwas, an American theologian, says that suffering is an intrinsic part of our moral lives. No human life will be complete without accepting suffering as a part of one's being. We should prepare to accept suffering as it brings value to our life. Frustration, pain, or any negative experience is for the sake of something better or worthier.[6] Kahlil Gibran says: 'Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding.'[7]

Suffering—A Consequence of Ignorance

Isha Upanishad says: '*Tatra ko mohaḥ kaḥ śoka ekatvam anupaśyataḥ*; what sorrow can there be for that seer of oneness.'[8] The idea is that sorrow and delusion come to the ignorant person who does not perceive the oneness of existence. All kinds of suffering happen in the state of diversity, which is caused due to the ignorance of one's real nature.

The fundamental aspect of sorrow is transmigration from one body to another commonly known as *samsāra*. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* graphically describes the transmigration. It can be summarised as follows: What is meant by birth? The individual soul, when it is born, is connected with the body and organs, which are termed as *pāpma*, evils, since they are the sources of evils that lead to suffering. What is meant by death? When the individual self leaves the body discarding the organs, it is called death. How does it happen? Just as a heavily loaded cart goes on rumbling, the individual self leaves the body making choking noises as the breathing becomes difficult. The body becomes thin and emaciated as a result of old age or diseases. Just as a mango, fig, or peepul fruit is detached from the stalk, so does the individual self completely detach from all parts of the body and go out in the same way in which it had entered the body.[9] Sri Shankaracharya observes that the self with the subtle body goes on making noises at the time of death afflicted by pain as the vital parts are slashed. Then the person gasps for breath. Besides, the memory will also be lost. He will be in a helpless state of mind.

The Bhagavadgita says that misery and impermanence constitute the very nature of this world: '*Anityam asukhaṁ lokam imaṁ prāpya bhajasva mām*; having come to this ephemeral and miserable world, you worship Me.'[10] Sri Krishna also teaches where to find the marks of suffering: '*Janma-mṛityu-jarā-vyādhi-duḥkha-doṣānudarśanam*; seeing the evil, in birth, death, old age, diseases, and misery.'[11] Sri Shankaracharya explains that the evil in birth consists in lying in the womb and coming out of it; evil in old age is in the form of deprivation of intelligence, strength, and vigour, and becoming an object of contempt.

Dukkha—The Unsatisfactory Nature of Existence

No other religion has given so much importance to the idea of 'suffering' as Buddhism has done. The original Pali word '*Dukkha*' is often translated as 'suffering', 'anxiety', 'stress', and 'unsatisfactoriness'. Lord Buddha emphatically says in his teaching: 'I have taught one thing and one thing only, *dukkha* and the cessation of *dukkha*.'[12] *Dukkha* is not just the physical or mental affliction suffered by human beings. According to the Buddhist scholar Piyadassi Thera, *dukkha* is the unsatisfactory nature of all phenomenal existence. He says that to the Buddha, the entire Buddhist teaching is just an understanding of *dukkha* and the way out of this state of unsatisfactoriness. However, Buddhistic philosophy is neither pessimistic nor optimistic, but realistic. *Dukkha* is simply a basic fact of life. It is but the clinging to temporary things, which is inherently unsatisfying. In all, *dukkha* is a realistic view of life and the world.

Lama Surya Das, another scholar, emphasises the matter of fact nature of *dukkha*. He says that Buddhism does not say that everything is suffering. What Buddhism does say is that life, by its nature, is difficult and imperfect. That is the very nature of life. Buddhism does not deny happiness in the world; but it teaches that this happiness, being impermanent, is subject to change. Due to this unstable, impermanent nature of all things, everything we experience has an ingredient of *dukkha* or unsatisfactoriness. What Buddhism insists on is that even in the state of happiness, *dukkha* or the experience of dissatisfaction persists.

Three Patterns of Dukkha

There are three levels or ways of *dukkha* a human being suffers from. They are:

1. *Dukkha-dukkha* (*dukkha* as ordinary suffering): This level includes physical and mental sufferings like birth, ageing, illness, and dying, and also anxiety or frustration towards what is not desirable. Joseph Goldstein, a Buddhist scholar, states that these are the very real situations people face involving obvious suffering caused by war, violence, hunger, natural diseases, and the like. This kind of suffering is not an aberration but it is just nature at work.

2. *Vipariṇāma-dukkha* (*dukkha* of the changing nature of all things): This level denotes difficulties caused by changing circumstances. This includes the anxiety or stress of trying to hold onto what is desirable and the frustration of not getting what we want. According to Joseph Goldstein, at this level, we experience the unsatisfying, unreliable nature of things through the direct and increasingly refined perception of their changing nature.

This level of *dukkha* is related to the Buddhistic concept of impermanence. We need to understand and reflect on the impermanence, that is, how things come into existence, remain, and then cease. It does not mean that we should not enjoy different pleasant experiences. It only means that we should contemplate and realise the transitory nature of that happiness. This kind of reflection shows that things are independent of our hopes and fears, and brings freshness and vivid clarity in our seeing of things.

3. *Sankhara-dukkha* (*dukkha* of conditioned experience): This is the subtlest level of *dukkha*, a basic unsatisfactoriness pervading all existence and all forms of life due to their changing or evanescent nature. Prema Chodron, a Buddhist scholar, explains this as the *suffering of clinging to our ego*. Another scholar, Phillip Moffit, relating this level of *dukkha* with existential anger, says that this kind of suffering is an experience of an underlying unease, worry, and anxiety pervading the whole existence. The Buddha says that the inherent unsatisfactoriness in life is because of the conditioned and transitory nature of every moment that we experience. Geshe Tashi Tsering, a Tibetan Lama, says that it is the unavoidable pervasive suffering that is present wherever we are born in cyclic existence.[13]

Vedantic Solution to Suffering

The suffering is not limited to day-to-day problems. It is the state of dissatisfaction that we experience every moment due to the impermanent nature of the things we cling to. This is a big takeaway from the above discussion. Vedanta says that the impermanent nature of things around us is due to our failure to distinguish the eternal Reality from them. It is the eternal conscious principle that appears as myriad impermanent things around us. One will never be able to attain eternity holding on to the impermanent things. Hence, it is our foremost duty to seek the eternal principle appearing in the guise of material entities.

A wise man thoroughly examines this ephemeral world and comes to a conclusion as stated in the *Mundaka Upanishad*: '*Parīkṣya lokān-karmacitān-brāhmaṇo nirvedamāyān nāstyakṛtaḥ kṛtena*; let a Brahmin having examined the worlds produced by *karma* be free from desires, thinking, "there is nothing eternal produced by *karma*".'[14] All the worlds, which are the abodes of enjoyment, are produced by karma. Such actions can never lead us to the eternal, since they themselves are produced and hence temporary.

The Upanishad here indicates that all-pervasive *Duhkha*, dissatisfaction, is due to the non-attainment of the eternal, which can never be attained by temporary things including any kind of action. As such, one should resort to an enlightened master who imparts the knowledge by which one realises the true and imperishable Brahman.[15] Vedanta calls the whole of humanity to strive for the highest spiritual truth giving up the craving for worldly objects, which, by nature, are impermanent and hence, cause nothing but dissatisfaction and suffering. Also, it affirms that there is no other path for the annihilation of suffering. An enlightened mystic

declares in *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*: 'I know this great Person who is resplendent like the sun and is beyond the darkness. By knowing Him alone one transcends death; there is no other path to go by.'[16]

An eager aspirant, afflicted by worldly existence, approaches the teacher with a yearning for Self-knowledge. This has been graphically illustrated by Sri Shankaracharya in his *Vivekachudamani*: 'Save me from death, afflicted as I am by the unquenchable fire of this world-forest, and shaken violently by the winds of an untoward lot, terrified and (so) seeking refuge in thee, for I do not know of any other person with whom to seek shelter.'[17]

Buddhist Approach to Suffering

The entire Buddhistic teaching is centred on the four noble truths taught by Lord Buddha. Once the Buddha was living at Kosambi (near Prayagraj) in a grove. He addressed the monks:

> Even so, monks, many are the things I have fully realized, but not declared unto you; few are the things I have declared unto you. … And what is it, monks, that I have declared?
>
> This is suffering—this have I declared.
>
> This is the arising of suffering—this have I declared.
>
> This is the cessation of suffering—this have I declared.
>
> This is the path leading to the cessation of suffering—this have I declared.
>
> And why, monks, have I declared these truths? They are indeed useful, are essential to the life of purity, they lead to disgust, to dispassion, to cessation, to tranquillity, to full understanding, to enlightenment, to Nibbana. That is why, monks, they are declared by me.[18]

Buddhist tradition compares the Buddha to *bhisakko*, a great physician, who would treat the lingering disease of *dukkha.* His teaching of the Four Truths is compared to the method followed by a physician. In the first sutra, he diagnosed the illness and finds out that *dukkha* is the disease. Next, he discovered that the root cause of *dukkha* is *tanha*, craving. Then he suggested *nirodha*, the removal of craving as an effective remedy.

We should never fail to notice the all-pervasiveness of *dukkha* in our life. We should be fully aware of it. Hence *dukkha* is *abhinneya*, to be known because it is a terrible illness. As a permanent cure to this disease, the cause, *tanha* or craving, is to be removed. Hence the craving is *pahatabba*, to be abandoned. What is to be cultivated is *Atthangika-magga*, Eightfold Path as the remedy. Then only the *saccikatabba*, realisation in the form of *nibbana* or nirvana, a state of complete release from craving, will be ensured.

The eightfold path includes—1.*Right View*: The true understanding of the Reality and suffering; 2. *Right Resolve*: Aspiration with rightful intention; 3. *Right Speech*: Abstaining from lying and abusive speech; 4. *Right Action*: Good actions like not harming others, not stealing, and the like; 5. *Right Livelihood*: Living an honest and ethical life; 6. *Right Effort*: Efficient undertaking of all works with skilful efforts; 7. *Right Mindfulness*: Awareness of body, feelings, and the mind; 8. *Right Concentration*: Practising meditation with a focussed mind.

The state of *Nirvana* is beautifully described in a verse of the *Sutta Nipata*, a Buddhist scripture:

> Who is free from sense perceptions,
>
> In him no more bonds exist;
>
> Who by Insight freedom gains
>
> All delusions cease in him;
>
> But who clings to dense perceptions
>
> And to view-points wrong and false

He lives wrangling in this world (ibid.).

Buddha taught the above teaching from his own experience. When a Brahmin called Sela, doubted his enlightenment, he replied:

I know what should be known,

What should be cultivated I have cultivated,

What should be abandoned that have I let go,

Hence, O brahmin, I am Buddha—*the Awakened One* (ibid.).

A Message of Hope to the Modern World

As we have seen, suffering has an imperative place and meaning in our life. We need not have a dreadful idea about life, as Nietzsche had, but should develop a realistic view of life, as the Upanishadic sages and the Buddha lived with and preached. Swami Vivekananda concisely captures the essence of these past masters in the following memorable words, which are not only philosophical but also brimming with sublime sentiments:

> 'Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither; the Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.' Thus said the old Jewish saint when suffering the greatest calamities that could befall man, and he erred not. Herein lies the whole secret of Existence. Waves may roll over the surface and tempest rage, but *deep down there is the stratum of infinite calmness*, *infinite peace*, *and infinite bliss*. 'Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.' And why? Because it is during these moments of visitations when the heart is wrung by hands which never stop for the father's cries or the mother's wail, when under the load of sorrow, dejection, and despair, the world seems to be cut off from under our feet, and when the whole horizon seems to be nothing but an impenetrable sheet of misery and utter despair—that the internal eyes open, light flashes all of a sudden, the dream vanishes, and intuitively *we come face to face with the grandest mystery in nature—Existence*.[19] (*Italics added for emphasis*)

Swamiji always saw a ray of hope in the dense darkness of tribulations of life. Being a prodigious poet, he sings in one of his poems '*Angels Unawares*' written on 1 September 1898:

> *One bending low with load of life—*
> That meant no joy,
> but suffering harsh and hard—
> And wending on his way
> through dark and dismal paths
> Without a flash of light from brain or heart
> To give a moment's cheer, till the line
> That marks out pain from pleasure,
> death from life,
> And good from what is evil was
> well-nigh wiped from sight,
> Saw, *one blessed night*, *a faint but*
> *beautiful ray of light*
> *Descend to him*. He knew not
> what or wherefrom,
> But called it God and worshipped.[20]
> (*Italics added for emphasis*)

References

[1] Stan van Hooft, 'The Meanings of Suffering', Hastings Center Report 28, no. 5 (1998), 13; <http://www.its.caltech.edu/~squartz/HOOFT-1998-Hastings_Center_Report.pdf>.

[2] *Sankhya Karika*, 1.

[3] 'The Meanings of Suffering', 14.

[4] Ibid., 17.

[5] See Martha C Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[6] For a detailed analysis of the theme, see 'The Meanings of Suffering'.

[7] Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* (New York: Ixia Press, 2019), 63.

[8] *Isha Upanishad*, 7.

[9] See *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 4.3.8, 4.3.35, and 4.3.36.

[10] Gita, 9.33.

[11] Gita, 13.8.

[12] See <https://encyclopediaofbuddhism.org/wiki/Dukkha>.

[13] For details, see <https://encyclopediaofbuddhism.org/wiki/Dukkha>.

[14] *Mundaka Upanishad*, 1.2.12.

[15] See *Mundaka Upanishad*, 1.2.13.

[16] *Shvestashvatara Upanishad*, 3.8.

[17] *Vivekachudmani*, 36.

[18] <https://www.dhammatalks.net/Books3/Piyadassi_Thera_The_Buddhas_Ancient_Path.htm#CHAPTER%203>.

[19] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 4.354.

[20] Ibid., 4.385.