

Beginner's Course - 5

Suffering and Impermanence



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Lesson 5: Suffering and Impermanence

At the heart of Buddhism is the three marks of existence: dukkha, annica and anatta, often translated as sufferings (dissatisfaction), impermanence and non-self. Dukkha (sufferings) is a central in Buddhist teachings, and understanding it is crucial to understanding Buddhism's view to life and the world. We will discuss in-depth the concept of dukkha, the eight factors that makeup Dukkha, and how they relate to Annica (impermanence) in Buddhism.

The Reality of Dukkha

Dukkha is seen as a fundamental reality of life as seen by the Buddha, and it is often translated as suffering, satisfactoriness, or dissatisfaction. The Buddha taught that dukkha is an inherent part of human existence, and that it arises from the three poisons: craving, attachment, and ignorance. Dukkha is not physical or mental pain but the experience of bearing that pain. Suffering encompasses mental and emotional suffering, including anxiety, depression, and despair but goes well beyond the “clinical classification” of modern psychology or what people considers normally as sufferings. Dukkha is an essential teaching in Buddhism because it highlights the need to seek relief or liberation from suffering and experience Nibbana, the end of sufferings.

The Eight Factors of Dukkha

The Buddha identified eight factors that make up dukkha. These eight factors are:

1. **Birth:** Birth is the first factor of dukkha. The Buddha taught that birth is a form of suffering because it leads to aging, illness, and death. Birth also creates the conditions for attachment and craving. In the mental realm, birth gives rise to this illusory sense of “self” at every moment of existence, arising and passing away very quickly without human being noticing it, which forms the experience of delusion and not knowing that this fragility of ego state is the reason for our experience of dissatisfaction, for experience of fear and insecurity with life. Birth is a casual result of the naturally occurring process of dependent arising (paṭiccasamuppāda) in every sentient being. Dependent arising is what the Buddha sees as being the process responsible for all human sufferings. To directly witness this process grants a person insights to liberation.
2. **Aging:** Aging is the second factor of dukkha. The Buddha taught that aging is a form of suffering because it leads to physical and mental decline. Aging brings about stages of change and growth or decline which causes challenges and disharmony in our lives. Growing older and losing our skills and former strengths isn't something we enjoy.
3. **Illness:** Illness is the third factor of dukkha. The Buddha taught that illness is a form of suffering because it causes physical and mental pain, which before we have a true understanding of the path of practice, we bear them and it causes sufferings. Illness brings about many vulnerabilities and unplanned challenges that we prefer not to have.

4. **Death:** Death is the fourth factor of dukkha. The Buddha taught that death is a form of suffering because it marks the end of life and the beginning of a new cycle of birth, aging, and death. Human beings are inherently fearful of death. It is the ultimate end where none of us can escape from, but we avoid talking about and avoid ever having to address it in our normal life.
5. **Separation:** Separation is the fifth factor of dukkha. The Buddha taught that separation is a form of suffering because it creates the conditions for attachment and craving. To be separated from a love one, we long for them. The longing for what is lost or something we hold dear but is separated from is suffering. It is the stuff that dramas are made of, but we are addicted to this uncomfortable heart wrenching feeling.
6. **Association with the unpleasant:** Association with the unpleasant is the sixth factor of dukkha. The Buddha taught that association with the unpleasant is a form of suffering because it causes physical and mental pain. When we are turning away from the unpleasant or things we don't like or desire, having aversion in our mind, we are creating our own sufferings.
7. **Not getting what one wants:** Not getting what one wants is the seventh factor of dukkha. The Buddha taught that not getting what one wants is a form of suffering because it creates the conditions for attachment and craving. Not getting what one wants is irritating. Desire not fulfilled, or fulfilled and never sated create a yearning, a state of non-peace.
8. **Clinging to existence:** Clinging to existence is the eighth factor of dukkha. The Buddha taught that clinging to existence is a form of suffering because it creates the conditions for attachment and craving. I will discuss this detail in the next lesson on non-self.

Annica (Impermanence) and Dukkha

Annica, or impermanence, is another central teaching in Buddhism. Annica refers to the idea that all things are impermanent and constantly changing. The Buddha taught that the realization of impermanence is essential for attaining enlightenment and liberation from suffering.

The eight factors of dukkha are related to Annica because they all arise from the impermanent nature of existence. Birth, aging, illness, death, separation, association with the unpleasant, not getting what one wants, and clinging to existence are all manifestations of the impermanent nature of existence. Because all things are impermanent, the Buddha taught that attachment and craving are ultimately futile and lead to suffering.

The relationship between Annica and dukkha is complex because Annica is both an external reality and an internal reality of human experience. Externally, Annica refers to the impermanence of all things in the world, including living. Internally, Annica refers to changing mental state, experiences of sensations, thoughts, perception, feelings (moods) and attention. Nothing internally remains the same upon observation with clear meditative lens. Yet, human beings continually grasp upon these constantly fluctuating states, experiences of the five aggregates (sensation, thoughts, perception, feelings, attention/ consciousness) to create their own dissatisfaction internally.