Dukkha (suffering)

Our story begins with suffering. This may not sound like a very promising start, but it was one of the things that first interested me in Buddhism. It seems to start with the right questions. Most religions start by asking how we can please some deity, or how we can win eternal life. Straight away we are into questions whose answers we have no way of testing the truth of. Buddhism starts with a very practical question: how does suffering arise in our lives, and is there anything we can do about it? This is a question that we all have an interest in, where the answers have immediate application and can be tested in our lives here and now. And, it turns out, the answers are liberating and ennobling.

The Pali word for suffering is *dukkha*. It is also sometimes translated as unsatisfactoriness, stress, sorrow or pain. Long essays have been written on the precise meaning, but in his day the Buddha was not using a technical term, he was using a common word with lots of shades of meaning. Derived terms are still in use in modern Indian languages, with much the same meaning. So 'suffering' will do perfectly well as an English stand-in.

Dukkha starts our story in two related ways. It comes at the start of any explanation of Buddhism since it is the question that all the rest flows from. It also comes at the start of the life story of the Buddha. More accurately, it comes at the start of the story of the youth who would later become the Buddha. This was Siddhātta Gotama[1].

Siddhātta lived about 2,500 years ago, in what is now Nepal but was then a small tribal republic on the edge of the rapidly expanding Vedic civilisation of the Ganges plain. The young Siddhātta had a very privileged life. Vedic culture divided people into four hereditary 'colours' or classes: warriors, priests, farmers (or merchants) and slaves. Although the priests – guardians of the sacrificial texts called the Vedas – held that their class was the highest, members of the warrior class generally held the positions of power and privilege in society.

Siddhātta was a member of this warrior class. He was also a member of one of the leading families of his republic (if not quite the prince that later tradition made him). He later recalled just how luxurious his childhood and youth were: "I was delicate, most delicate, supremely delicate. Lotus ponds were made for me at my father's house solely for my benefit. Blue lotuses flowered in one, white lotuses in another, red lotuses in a third. I used no sandalwood that was not of Benares. My turban, tunic, lower garments and cloak were all made of Benares cloth. A white sunshade was held over me day and night so that no cold or heat or dust or grit or dew might inconvenience me." [A.I,145. (adapted from Nanamoli, LoB, p.9)] Benares, as you can probably tell, was where all the best things came from!

So the young Siddhātta lived a life of careless luxury, and his future in a prestigious position in society was assured. Despite this, he became preoccupied with the question of suffering, realising that even the most absurdly over-privileged feel dis-satisfaction and cannot escape from old age, sickness or death. His life to this point offered two answers to the question of suffering. One was that suffering came from material want, and that escape from suffering, or happiness, could come through having material possessions. The other was that the route to happiness came from fitting into one's social role. The Vedas held that if a warrior fulfilled the obligations of a warrior, a slave the obligations of a slave or a priest the obligations of a priest, making the correct sacrifices and avoiding pollution from other classes, after death the man's[2] soul would be reborn in a happy place. In the

[1] Siddhārtha Gautama in Sanskrit

[2] Vedic culture was extremely patriarchal, and women were not regarded as having souls.

new doctrine of reincarnation that was gaining ground, they would be reborn back into the human world in a more fortunate role. Siddhātta was convinced by neither of these theories.

Fortunately for him, Indian society at the time had an option for people struggling with big, existential questions. They could renounce their position in society, leave 'householder' life and become a homeless wanderer. While our culture might call them drop-outs, these wanderers were widely respected, and people would support them with food and other necessities, on the understanding that they would share the fruits of their inquiry, or even simply that their quest was one worthy of support. Freed from normal social expectations and from having to make a living, the wanderers were responsible for the huge explosion in Indian thought that occurred around this time, with new ideas ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous. Young Siddhātta took this path, shaving off his hair and heading for the forest.

If the worldly answers to suffering did not convince Siddhātta, the wanderers offered many more. One popular idea was that suffering came from the material world, in which the soul had somehow become ensnared. Various methods of escape were proposed, and various meditation schools had sprung up teaching trance states through which the practitioner could withdraw his (or occasionally her) consciousness from the material world and instead experience states of infinite space and consciousness.

The young Gotama's strongest characteristic seem to have been extreme drive and thoroughness, and he threw himself into these meditation practices with a will. Before very long, he had mastered the teachings of the first school that he joined. These culminated in the 'realm of infinite nothingness', a trance in which all suffering ceased, along with all consciousness of the physical world. His achievement was so impressive that his teacher offered to make him co-leader of the school, but this offer had the opposite effect to what was intended. Siddhātta realised that his teacher had nothing more to teach him and, while he had learned to switch off suffering for a while, at the end of the trance he had to return to the world, unaltered and still subject to suffering.

He quit the school and joined another that offered a still deeper state of dissociation, but here the pattern repeated itself. This time the teacher offered to hand over leadership of the school completely to Gotama, but again he realised that what he had achieved was not the answer that he was looking for.

Sterner measures were clearly called for, and this time Siddhātta joined a group that believed that the way to liberate the soul from the material world was through ascetic practices that punished the physical body. Practitioners would fast to extremes, hold their breath until they fainted, stare at the sun or hold up a limb until it withered. The idea was that by showing contempt for even the basics of material survival, consciousness would become freed from the material entanglements that weighed it down and would eventually float up to the spiritual realm of bliss at the top of the universe. Such ideas live on to this day in Jainism and some branches of Hinduism.

Again, Gotama was nothing if not committed. He drew a following for the extremity of his austerities and brought himself to the edge of death. He later gave a graphic description of the state of his body: "My body became extremely emaciated. Simply from my eating so little, my limbs became like the jointed segments of vine stems or bamboo stems... My backside became like a camel's hoof... My spine stood out like a string of beads... My ribs jutted out like the jutting rafters of an old, run-down barn... The gleam of my eyes appeared to be sunk deep in my eye sockets like the gleam of water deep in a well... My scalp shrivelled & withered like a green bitter gourd, shrivelled & withered in the heat & the wind... The skin of my belly became so stuck to my spine that when I thought of

touching my belly, I grabbed hold of my spine as well; and when I thought of touching my spine, I grabbed hold of the skin of my belly as well... If I urinated or defecated, I fell over on my face right there... Simply from my eating so little, if I tried to ease my body by rubbing my limbs with my hands, the hair — rotted at its roots — fell from my body as I rubbed, simply from eating so little. [MN36]

Eventually he became convinced that no-one could have practiced austerities more extreme than his, yet he had come no closer to finding the way beyond suffering. All he had done was to pile suffering upon suffering. He gave up his austerities and his followers left him in disgust. What could he do now?

Ehipassiko (come-and-see)

This was a crucial point in Gotama's life. He had exhausted all the answers offered by his society, from the worldly to the spiritual. He had neither family, nor friends, nor teacher, nor followers. He was left completely on his own. In this situation, he decided to look for the origin of suffering in the only thing left to him: his own experience. His meditation and austerities had not revealed the source of suffering to him, but they had left him with unrivalled abilities to look within, concentrate, ignore distractions and live on little. He took a little food, regained his strength and embarked on an exhaustive examination of his own mind, asking of every thought and experience: does this lead to suffering or away from it?

His later teachings on the origin of suffering and its cure grew out of this examination. The result is that those teachings have a strong anti-speculative or empirical streak. This is worth emphasising because later Buddhism, like all religions, grew a thick crust of beliefs and doctrines. This can obscure the fact that the essentials of the original teachings of the Buddha are all based on things that we can put into practice ourselves and test in our own experience. When he listed the characteristics of his teachings, one of them was that it was *ehipassiko*, meaning come-and-see. The Buddha's invitation is not to come and believe, but to come and see.

The Buddha illustrated this attitude in a number of similes and teachings. One concerns a monk called Māluṅkyaputta. Indian philosophy at the time had a list of speculative questions, which teachers were expected to take a position in relation to. 'The cosmos is eternal,' 'The cosmos is not eternal,' 'The cosmos is finite,' 'The cosmos is infinite,' 'The soul and the body are the same,' 'The soul is one thing and the body another,' 'After death a Tathagata[3] exists,' 'After death a Tathagata does not exist,' 'After death a Tathagata both exists & does not exist,' 'After death a Tathagata neither exists nor does not exist'. In the Western tradition we might add the question of whether God exists or not. [MN 63 Cula-Malunkyovada Sutta: The Shorter Instructions to Malunkya trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu] Māluṅkyaputta became dissatisfied that the Buddha habitually refused to answer these questions and went to him with an ultimatum: give me the answers or I'm off!

The Buddha replied that Māluṅkyaputta was like a man who had been shot with an arrow. A doctor is brought to the man, but just as the doctor is about to remove the arrow he cries 'Stop!' He refuses to have the arrow removed until he knows the name, clan and class of man who shot him, his height, skin colour and home town, what style of bow he was shot with, what wood the arrow shaft was made from and what bird supplied its feathers. By the time the doctor had told the man all these things, the Buddha observed, he would be dead and it would be too late to remove the arrow.

In this metaphor, the arrow is the existence of suffering, the physician is the Buddha and the questions about the bow and the archer are the speculative dogmas. If you believe that the cosmos

[3] One who has gone beyond suffering.

is infinite and I believe that it is finite, or if you believe that God exists and I believe that He doesn't, we could argue about it forever since neither of us has any evidence that would convince the other. The Buddha's point is not just that this is futile, but that it prevents us from engaging with the issue that we really can resolve and which really does demand attention: suffering.

Another time, the Buddha passed through a town called Kesaputta, belonging to a clan called the Kālāmas [AN 3.65 Kalama Sutta]. This being long before cinemas or televisions, the visit of a renowned wanderer was an opportunity for enlightenment or at least entertainment, so the whole town tended to turn out to hear whatever he had to say. The world of the Buddha had a lot in common with that of the Ancient Greeks that did so much to shape our Western tradition, and the scene at Kesaputta is reminiscent of Pythagoras being asked to speak at Croton or St Paul at the Rock of Ares in Athens. In this case, the people of the town had a specific question for the Buddha. They had noticed that one wanderer would turn up and say "This is the truth! Believe this!" Then the next one would appear and say "That is nonsense. *This* is the truth. Believe this!". And then the next one… What they wanted from the Buddha was not another version of the truth, but a means by which they could decide for themselves which claims to accept and which to reject.

The Buddha started his reply with a long list of reasons for accepting a teaching which were *not* valid. People should not accept something on the basis of tradition, authority or scripture, or out of respect for a teacher. They should not accept a teaching simply because it appeals to them or fits with what they already think. They shouldn't accept something just because it is what 'everyone knows' or seems like common sense. Nor should they accept something only because it is logically consistent, since logic will produce false conclusions from false assumptions.

Instead, he said, we should test a teaching by putting it into practice in our own lives and looking at the results – or by looking at the results in the lives of others who have already put it into practice. If the outcome is that the teaching leads to harm and suffering, it should be abandoned and rejected. If, on the other hand, it leads to an increase in long-term welfare and happiness, it should be accepted and practiced. This is not a one-off method of choosing a body of dogma and belief to cling to blindly thereafter, but a lifelong, continuing commitment to testing the claims of one's own and others' beliefs against the results of practice.

This way of doing things has a lot in common with modern science's empirical approach, particularly the idea of using logic to think about the results of experiments but not to come to conclusions based on armchair reasoning divorced from experience. However, this isn't to say that everything in the Pali Canon passes the test of modern science. Far from it! The texts are saturated with the supernatural and with a pre-scientific world view that includes a flat earth and discredited medical theories. It is not this background but the essentials of the Buddha's insights into human nature and the human mind that stand the tests of time and practice so remarkably well. Disentangling the two is not always an easy job, but the Buddha has given us the tools with which to test even his own words.

Part 2

But what was the Buddha's insight? See part 2!