

The Concept of Duḥkha in Buddhism —A Comparative Study—

(The references are the pages of
the Varanasi Edition of
the Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya
with the Sphūṭārthā)

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1. The discussion of duḥkha (suffering, 苦) is a common feature of all spiritual disciplines. Getting rid of it is the common end. The problem before us is whether sukha (樂), the opposite of duḥkha, exists or not.

2. There are passages in the Sūtra, that mention duḥkha alone as the predominant note of all kinds of feelings. Here we quote some such passages.

- (i) yat kiñcid veditam idam atra duḥkhasyeti.
- (ii) sukhā vedanā duḥkhato draṣṭavyeti. (p.880)
- (iii) duḥkhe sukham iti saṃjñāviparyāsa iti. (p. 880)

duḥkha is the predominant note of the four ārya satyas:

- (iv) iha bhikṣavas tathāgato'rhan samyak-sambuddha idam duḥkham āryasatyam iti yathābhūtaṃ prajānāti, ayam duḥkhasamudayaḥ, ayam duḥkhanirodhaḥ, iyaṃ duḥkhanirodhagāminī pratipadā āryasatyam iti yathābhūtaṃ prajānāti. (p. 874)

Bhadanta Kumāralāta, in his Duḥkhasantati, has explained why the wise consider the sukha as duḥkha in the following verse (p. 878):

- (v) duḥkhasya ca hetuvād duḥkhaiś cānalpakaiḥ samuditatvāt. duḥkhe ca sati tadiṣṭer duḥkham iti sukhaṃ vyavasyanti.

Vasubandhu quotes the following gathā, which is found in the Pāli Sutta-nipāta and the Saṃyutta Nikāya, which says that what is considered as sukha by the ignorant is regarded as duḥkha by the wise (p. 875):

- (vi) yad āryāḥ sukhataḥ prāhus
tat pare duḥkhato viduḥ /
yat pare sukhataḥ prāhus

tadāryā duḥkhato viduh / /

The three varieties of duḥkhatā – namely, duḥkha-duḥkhatā, vipariṇāma-duḥkhatā and saṃskāra-duḥkhatā are explained respectively in the following three Sūtras (p. 876):

- (vii) duḥkhā vedanā utpādaduḥkhā sthitiduḥkhā.
- (viii) sukhā vedanā utpādasukhā sthitisukhā vipariṇāma–duḥkhā.
- (ix) pratyayābhisamskaraṇād yad anityaṃ tad duḥkham.

3. On the testimony of such scriptural texts as have been quoted above and the logical arguments that we shall cite below, Bhadanta Śrīlāta and others have sought to prove that all feelings are absolutely of the nature of duḥkha: nāsty eva sukhā vedanety ekīyā duḥkhaiva tu sarvā. The arguments advanced by them in support of their thesis are (p. 880):

(i) sukhahetvavyavasthānāt. What appears to be the cause of happiness at the moment turns out a condition of suffering in the end, and so it is not possible to determine any thing as the invariable cause of happiness. What turns out suffering at the end must have had suffering at the beginning. In other words, there is no universal concomitance between happiness and its cause.

(ii) evam tṛyāpathavikalpe 'pi. The change of one posture to another appears to cause happiness, but as the new posture also becomes the cause of suffering after some time, it follows that it was a condition of suffering since it's very inception.

(iii) duḥkhapratikāre ca sukhabuddher duḥkhavikalpe ca. Sometimes the remedy for the suffering is mistaken as identical with happiness. Again sometimes an alternate feeling of suffering is identified with a variety of happiness.

(iv) duḥkhavikalpe ca bālāḥ sukhabuddhim utpādayanti, yathā aṃśād aṃśaṃ bhāraṃ sañcārayantaḥ. The ignorant people consider an alternate variety of duḥkha as sukha, for instance, when they transfer a load from one shoulder to other, they identify the relief on the previous shoulder as sukha.

4. The followers of the Abhidharma school (ābhidharmikāḥ) reject the above-mentioned thesis. They make an analysis of the concept of duḥkha in order to show that it is necessarily accompanied with the counter-concept of sukha. This is followed by an examination of the implications and the intended senses of the texts that appear to suggest duḥkhatā as the element common to all varieties of feelings. Lastly, the logical arguments advanced by the proponent of the thesis of duḥkhatā are refuted.

5. Duḥkha is considered as a kind of hindrance (bādhana). But if the hind-

rance was identified with ‘what is ungratifying’ (upaghātaka), then ‘what is gratifying’ (anugrahaka) would be the feeling of sukha (as opposed to duḥkha). If again the hindrance was identified with ‘what is undesirable’ (anabhipreta), then ‘what is desirable’ (abhipreta) would be the feeling of sukha (as opposed to duḥkha). However, if it was argued that for the wise who cultivate non-attachment (detachment), ‘the desirable’ itself radically turns out to be ‘the undesirable’ and therefore the existence of ‘the desirable’ remains unproved. But this is a fallacious argument, because here the intrinsically desirable character of the feeling is not denied, but the feeling is considered ‘undesirable’ in a different context. The wise consider such feeling as the cause of remissness (pramādapada), as achievable only through Herculean effort, as changing, and as transient, and hence ‘undesirable’. The intrinsic ‘joyful’ nature of such feeling is not denied, because had it not been so by nature, nobody would have attachment to it, nor would there be any reason for finding it blameworthy – for the sake of cultivating detachment. (p. 881)

6. (i) As regards the Lord’s utterance yat kiñcid veditam idam atra duḥkhasya iti, that had a purposeful meaning (neyārtha) and was made with an intention (sandhāya bhāṣitam), as the Lord himself had said: saṃskārānityatām ānanda mayā sandhāya bhāṣitam saṃskārā-vipariṇāmatām ca, yat kiñcid veditam idam atra duḥkhasya iti (with the intention to stress the impermanence of conditioned existence and its constant transmutation, did I say, O Ānanda, that whatever feeling there was, it was of suffering.) The utterance therefore was not made with the intention to refer to the duḥkha-duḥkhatā (the feeling of suffering as such). Had all varieties of feeling been of the nature of duḥkha, why did Ānanda ask the Lord: tisra ime vedanā uktā bhagavatā sukhā duḥkhā ’dukhā-sukhā ca, uktam cedam bhagavatā – yat kiñcid veditam idam atra duḥkhasya iti, kim nu sandhāya bhagavatā bhāṣitam – yat kiñcid veditam idam atra duḥkhasya iti. (p. 881) It follows from this that the statement that ‘whatever feeling there is is of suffering’ is conditional (ābhiprāyika) and not unconditional and absolute.

(ii) As regards the statement: sukhā vedanā duḥkheti draṣṭavyā, it should be understood that here sukha is not denied but it is only asserted that the sukha is intrinsically of the nature of sukha, but from another standpoint, that is, on account of its being subject to transmutation and impermanent, it is considered duḥkha (ubhayaṃ tasyāṃ [=sukhāyāyaṃ vedanāyāṃ] asti, sukhatvaṃ ca svabhāvato manāpatvāt, duḥkhatvaṃ ca paryāyato vipariṇāmānityadharmivāt). The feeling of sukha, when looked at as sukha, leads to worldly bondage, but looked

at as duḥkha is conducive to emancipation. The Buddhas advice us to look at the feeling of sukha as one informed with duḥkha in order to lead us to emancipation. (p. 884).

(iii) As regards the standpoint: duḥkha sukham iti samjñā-viparyāsa iti, this was made with a special motive (ābhiprāyika eṣa nirdeśaḥ). People find pleasure in worldly objects of enjoyment and come to regard them as absolute sources of pleasure. This is responsible for the growth of viparyāsa (perverse outlook) in them. The statement was made in order to save people from the perverse outlook, and not to deny the existence of the feeling of sukha (pp. 882–3).

(iv-ix) Vasubandhu quotes the following sūtra in order to prove the reality of five categories of feeling, a proper understanding of which through insight is capable of eliminating the three fetters, viz. satkāyadrṣṭi, śīlavrataparāmarśa and vicikitsā: yac ca sukhendriyaṃ yac ca saumanasyendriyaṃ sukhaiṣā vedanā draṣṭavyā, yac ca duḥkhendriyaṃ yac ca daurmanasyendriyaṃ duḥkhaiṣā vedanā, yad upekṣendriyaṃ aduḥkhāsukhaiṣā vedanā iti vistareṇoktvā, yenemāni pañcendriyaṇy evam yathābhūtaṃ samyak prajñayā drṣṭāni, trīṇi cāsya saṃyojanāni prahīnāni bhavanti. (p. 883, Bhāṣya and Sphuṭārthā).

The proponent of the thesis of duḥkhata now interprets the feelings of sukha, duḥkha and upekṣā as merely the varieties of mild, strong and medium duḥkha respectively. The ignorant mistake the mild duḥkha for sukha, the strong duḥkha for duḥkha proper, and the mild duḥkha for upekṣā. The opponent of the duḥkha doctrine, however, poses a counter-argument by identifying the feelings of sukha, duḥkha and upekṣā with strong, mild and medium sukha. Accordingly what people call mild duḥkha is its reality strong sukha, what they call medium duḥkha is medium sukha, and what they call strong duḥkha is mild sukha.

It is a matter of common experience that we have an unalloyed feeling of sukha produced by special kinds of smell, taste and touch, without the least feeling of suffering called mild duḥkha. Had there been the least touch of the mild duḥkha there would be a feeling of greater sukha before or after the production of the mild duḥkha because there does not obtain any cause of even mild duḥkha in the states that are prior or posterior to the state of mild duḥkha.

Moreover the proponent's thesis of duḥkhata would entail the identification of the sukha, in the first three stages of meditation, with the feeling of mild duḥkha, and the upekṣā, in the fourth stage, with medium duḥkha – an outcome which goes against the established tradition in respect of the constituent factors of meditation.

The AKBh quotes the following sūtra that rejects the association of absolute duḥkhatā with the material bodies: rūpaṃ cen mahānāman ekātantaduḥkham abhaviṣyan na sukhaṃ na sukhānugataṃ na saumanasyaṃ na saumanasyānugataṃ, na sukhavedita hetur api prajñāyate rūpe saṃrāgāya, yasmāt tarhi asti rūpaṃ sukhaṃ sukhagataṃ pūrvavad ato rūpe hetuḥ prajñāyate yad uta saṃrāgāya, (p. 885).

The absolute denial of the feeling of sukha therefore is not capable of being established on the testimony of the scripture.

7. (i) The proponent of the thesis of duḥkhatā has contended that there was no universal concomitance between the sukha and its cause. But his contention is based on an erroneous estimate of causality. An object becomes the cause of sukha or duḥkha, depending on specific conditions, and not depending exclusively on the particular object. It does never fail to produce the effect if all those conditions are perfectly fulfilled. For instance the fire that produces tasty food depending on the particular condition of the material that is cooked, produces food of bad taste when the condition of the material that is cooked is different. But it does never happen that the same fire under the same condition of the material that is cooked would not produce the same kind of tasty food. Besides, there is no reason why the cause that produces the feeling of sukha in the stages of meditation should not be regarded as an invariable and universal condition of sukha. (p. 885). The contention that what turns out suffering at end must have been suffering at the beginning is fallacious. It is common experience that what is sweet in one condition of the body becomes bitter in another condition of the same body (kāyapariṇāma viśeṣān madyādīnām ante mādhyurāśuktatāvat, p. 886).

(ii) The change of one posture to another is the cause of positive happiness, as it gives relief from the fatigue (evaṃ śrāntasyeryāpathavikalpeṣu veditavyam, p. 886).

(iii) The proponent's contention that the remedy for the suffering is mistaken as identical with happiness is also invalid. What kind of remedy for suffering is experienced when a person gets the feeling of sukha produced by special kind of smell and the like? This question has already been discussed in 6 (iii).

(iv) The example of transfer of load from one shoulder to the other is also misunderstood by the proponent. There arises positive sukha on the transfer of the load, which is due to the production of different kind of condition of the shoulder. The feeling of sukha lasts until the end of the new condition of the

shoulder. Had it not been so, there would be a deeper feeling of sukha afterwards (anyathā hi paścād bhūyasī sukha-buddhiḥ syāt, p. 886.).

8. We have now given a brief account of the views of the supporters of absolute duḥkhatā and their opponents who defended the reality of the feeling of sukha beside the feeling of duḥkha. The supporters of absolute duḥkhatā did not distinguish between the literal and the intended meanings of the scriptural texts, between the neyārtha and the nītārtha, between the explicit meaning and the implicit sense. Their opponents however took a comprehensive view which received the approval of Vasubandhu (cf. eṣa eva ca nyāyaḥ. The Sphuṭārthā supplies iti ācāryaḥ, p. 888). In fact, it is only the wise who appreciate the duḥkhatā of all elements, which is beyond the understanding of the ignorant. The following verse quoted by Vasubandhu in this condition (p. 877) clinches the issue:

ūrṇāpakṣma yathaiva hi karatalasaṃsthāṃ na vedyate pumbhiḥ /
akṣigataṃ tu tathaiva hi janayaty aratiṃ ca pīḍāṃ ca / /
karatalasadr̥śo bālo na vetti saṃskāraduḥkhatāpakṣma /
akṣisadr̥śas tu vidvāṃs tenaivod-vejyate gāḍham / /

The controversy moreover appears to derive from the transcendental and empirical standpoints of the proponents and opponents of the doctrine of absolute duḥkhatā. These standpoints are very much similar respectively to the niścaya-naya and vyavahāra naya of the Jaina philosophers.

9. The doctrine of suffering has found place in almost all the major schools of Indian philosophy. Thus in the Vedic philosophy we find the Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad (III. 4. 2) observation: ato'nyad ārtam (Everything other than the Absolute is sorrow and suffering). In the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad (III. 10), we read: Those who thus know (the Absolute) become immortal, but (all) others must only endure suffering. In the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa (XXXIX. 9), Dattātreyā declares 'Knowledge comes about through suffering.' (cf. Buddhist dictum: duḥkhopaniṣac chraddhā, p. 132). The Sāṃkhya philosopher Iśvarakṛṣṇa asserts (Sāṃkhyakārikā, 1): duḥkhatrayābhighātāḥ jijñāsā tadabhighātāke hetau (Through the attacks of the triple suffering, one gets the curiosity about the way to termination of that suffering). In the Yogadarśana of Patañjali, the yogin's aim is defined as simply to avoid all future sorrow and suffering (heyam duḥkam anāgatam, YD, III 16). The Yogabhāṣya (II. 15) emphatically says, like the AKBh quoted above, that the stream of suffering is felt keenly only by the wise yogin who is like an eyeball sensitive to the slightest touch of pain:

evam idam anādi duḥkhasroto viprasṛtam yoginam eva praktikūlātmaka-

tvād udvejayati, kasmāt, akṣipātrakalpo hi vidvān iti, yathorṇātantur akṣipātre nyastah sparśena duḥkhayati nānyeṣu gātrāvayaveṣv evam etāni duḥkhāny akṣipātrakalpaṃ yoginam eva kliśnanti netaraṃ pratipat-tāram.

A similar philosophical appreciation of the problem of duḥkha is found in the following extract of the Nyāyabhāṣya (Calcutta edition, pp. 182–3):

duḥkham iti nedam anukūlavedanīyasya sukhasya pratīteḥ praty-ākhyānam, kiṃ tarhi janmana evedaṃ sasukhasādhanasya duḥkhānuṣāṅ-gād duḥkhena 'viprayogād vivīdhabādhabādhanāyogād duḥkham iti samādhibhāvanam upadiśyate, samāhito bhāvayati, bhāvayan nirvidyate, nirvinnasya vairāgyam, viraktasyā' pavarga iti, janmamaraṇaprabandhoc-chedaḥ sarvaduḥkhaprahāṇam apavarga iti.

Neither Sāṃkhya, nor Yoga, nor Nyāya school denies existence of sukha, but the importance of the feeling of duḥkha is stressed for the purpose of samādhi-bhāvanā, nirveda and vairāgya that lead to apavarga. The Jaina philosopher is also in agreement with these schools in respect of the independent reality of the feeling of sukha.

10. Duḥkha is of course regarded as an element worthy of being taken note of for spiritual advancement. But it would be wrong to think the Indian philosophers had an attitude of life-negation and pessimism. The yogin endeavours to overcome duḥkha, but his attitude is not hostile to life. His point of view is in fact the same as that of Meister Eckehart, who expresses his conviction that the experience of suffering is not destructive but definitely positive in the following way: 'Note well all pensive minds, the most fleet steed carrying you to perfection is suffering'. (Quoted in The Meaning of Suffering in Yoga, chap. 4, of Yoga and Beyond by Feuerstein and Jeanine Miller, Schocken Books – New York, 1972).

Along with their appreciation of the supreme spiritual value of suffering, the Indian philosophers unanimously recognized the necessity of cultivating the spirit of service as superior to all mundane or supramundane ends. Vasubandhu, in his AKBh, quotes an ancient verse that explains the nature of the feeling of compassion in the heart of the best among humans:

hīnaḥ prārthayate svasantatigataṃ yais taiḥ prakāraih sukhaṃ
madhyo duḥkhanivṛttim eva na sukhaṃ duḥkhāspadaṃ tad yataḥ/
śeṣthaḥ prārthayate svasantatigatair duḥkaiḥ pareṣāṃ sukhaṃ
duḥkhātyantanivṛttim eva ca yatas tadduḥkhaduḥkhy eva saḥ/ /

The low class people desire for their own pleasure by whatever means possible; the middle class people desire only for the cessation of suffering, and not for pleasure because the latter is the cause of suffering in the end; the best among humans desire for the pleasure of others at the cost of their own suffering, and also the absolute cessation of the suffering of others, because they are afflicted by the suffering of all people.

The Brahmanical thinkers also expressed the same spirit of compassion and sympathy for the afflicted creatures:

na tv ahaṃ kāmāye rājyaṃ
na svargaṃ nāpunarbhavaṃ/
kāmāye duḥkhataptānāṃ
prāṇināṃ ārtināśanam/ /

I do not desire for kingdom, nor for heaven, nor for cessation of future birth. I only desire for the destruction of the misery of the people to tortured by suffering.

na kāmāye 'haṃ gatim īśvarāṇāṃ
aṣṭardhiyuktāṃ apunarbhavaṃ vā/
ārtiṃ prapadye' khiladehabhājāṃ
hṛdi sthito yena bhavanti aduḥkhāḥ/ /

I do not desire for the status of lords endowed with eightfold superiornal powers, nor do I hanker for the cessation of future birth. I want to take upon myself the misery of all people in the world, seated in their hearts, so that they may be free from suffering.

A comparative study of the ethical speculations of Indian philosophers is bound to bring home to the discerning reader this realistic estimate of worldly life and inculcation of the spirit of compassion for worldly suffering even at the cost of one's own life.