
Building Bridges Seminar 2015
“Human Suffering, Spiritual Renewal and Common Action”

Suffering – Understanding and Transcending it
A Summary of Human Suffering at Three Levels

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Introduction

Suffering. It is said that without suffering, one cannot really know what happiness is. In this Building Bridges Programme, we looked at what suffering is, what it means to Islam and Buddhism, and also learnt from each other what both faiths had to offer to end suffering.

There were three aspects of human suffering that we explored. Firstly, suffering of an individual; secondly, suffering at the social level; lastly, suffering on a global ecological scale.

This paper is a summary and review of the three presentations on suffering from the Buddhist point of view.

A Buddhist View of Human Suffering - The Individual Level

Human suffering can be broadly grouped into physical and mental suffering.

From pain due to hunger to that arising from illnesses, from birth to death, our physical body in nature has to deal with various circumstances that can bring much pain. Ranging from subtle itch to severe migraine, our physical suffering motivates us to seek creative solutions to reduce their impact on us. As a result, we invented new tools, new methods and new organizational skills to make life easier for ourselves. We have relegated much physical labour to machines, and through them, virtually eradicated scarcity of food, less for artificial constraints due to geopolitical and economical factors. On the medical front, many diseases have been cured, and

we have found better ways to manage our physical pain. However, suffering for the individual does not seem to have necessarily declined. Instead, it seems to have transformed and shifted from one form to another, from physical to mental suffering.

In recent decades, mental well-being has gained prominence and has overshadowed physical illnesses as a growing concern. While we may have achieved huge degrees of success in containing our physical pain, we have made lesser headway in reducing our insatiable mental thirst or finding complete solutions to deal with growing mental health issues.

Buddhism's focus on suffering is sometimes perceived as a pessimistic view of life. While some try to paint it in a more cheerful, positive optimistic outlook, Buddhism simply offers a realistic perspective at our human existence, that there is suffering and what is suffering. This is the First Enlightened (Noble) Truth¹.

At the root of all suffering, is our incomplete understanding and realisation of how things really are. That as long as we are born, we have to go through aging, sickness and death, there is no exception. And throughout our life, while no one wishes to be separated from our love ones or be in contact with unpleasant or painful experiences, we do not always get what we want, and as a result, we suffer.

What we experience and in fact our very existence is all impermanent and subject to change. If we cling onto them and insist for them to go according to our absolute whims and fancy, we suffer. This applies to all and is a fact of our life, and is hence known as the Second Enlightened (Noble) Truth of Suffering.

Through the teachings on the Second Enlightened (Noble) Truth, we come to observe for ourselves, how suffering arises from craving, desires, ego, self-attachment, and also from negative emotions like aversions, anger, resentment, hatred etc, all of which are impermanent and transient.

Beyond caring for our own mental well-being, Buddhist teachings brings in a further dimension with Karma² being focused on taking responsibility for our actions and

¹Samyutta Nikaya 56.11: Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in motion - Discourse on the Four Enlightened (Noble) Truth. The first paper quoted Master Yin Shun, The Way To Buddhahood, p. 118, which in turn has its source from the tripitaka.

² Literally "action". There are three forms of karma, namely bodily, verbal and mental.

recognising that we are responsible for the welfare and happiness of ourselves and others³. We will see how these teachings can help us think about human suffering and our roles in it at the societal and ecological level as well.

Buddhist View of Human Suffering - The Societal Level

The interdependent nature of all things is a key concept in Buddhism. On a social level, because each person has limited time and abilities to perform all the different tasks required to meet the needs of a person, each person takes on a different role in society and perform a different task. This illustrates the interdependency of human beings and the need for a society⁴.

The interdependence nature of people in a society creates a set of problems which exist only in a group. We attribute much of today's social problems to capitalism but human society has always been plagued with resource struggle and contention. Capitalism has provided individuals the necessary incentives to provide creative solutions for our daily lives, but at the same time it has led to the development of the parasitic paradigm of materialism.

To be fair, our physical existence means that we cannot escape from our dependence on material things. Hence, there is no shame in acknowledging the benefits of material things. However, problems arise because in our pursuit to reduce and remove physical suffering, some have come to believe that we can only be happy or at least be happier through material consumption, culminating in sensory gratification⁵. Yet, it is neither the material things nor our senses that is the problem, "whatever desire & passion arises in dependence on the two of them: That is the fetter there"⁶.

³ Majjhima Nikaya 135: Cula-kammavibhanga Sutta: The Shorter Analysis of Action

"Student, beings are owners of kamma, heir to kamma, born of kamma, related through kamma, and have kamma as their arbitrator. Kamma is what creates distinctions among beings in terms of coarseness & refinement."

⁴ Digha Nikaya 31, Sigalovada Sutta: The Discourse to Sigala (Roles of individuals)

⁵大正藏: 經集部: 八大人覺經 Chinese Tripitaka: Sutrānīpata: Sutra of the Eight Realisation of the Great Beings, Chinese Tripitaka T17n0779_p0715b10(00) 第二覺知: 多欲為苦, 生死疲勞, 從貪欲起; Second Realisation: With much desire is there suffering, birth and death is wearisome, and all arises from greed and desire.

T17n0779_p0715b11(01) 少欲無為, 身心自在。With lesser desire and no preoccupation, one's mind and body is at ease.

⁶ Samyutta Nikaya 35.191: Kotthita Sutta: To Kotthita

At first, this belief that we can only be happy through material consumption may be thought to at best, contribute to individual suffering. However, the pursuit of happiness through material consumption is often reinforced and justified through social comparison, creating a contagious web of suffering between those who compare and those who are compared to. When an individual pursues material consumption, he believes that he does not have enough. When he compares with others, he believes he has too little.

With advancement in technology, this web of suffering now extends its reach through new media. We no longer just compare with our neighbours and colleagues, but also with everyone else on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. No man is an island. And today, this statement is nowhere better illustrated.

New media not only promulgates the wrong view of happiness, it has also increasingly become a tool for promoting wrong values such as narcissism, and the ego. From the latter, it has led to aggressive anti-social behaviour such as online-bullying and sharing of hate speech and videos. The result is not only suffering by those who are subject to the anti-social behaviours but also suffering by those engaging in anti-social behaviour.

At the social level, the interdependence nature of things means one's beliefs and actions affect another's well-being. Hence, apart from playing one's role to contribute to the group's well-being, one must also refrain from engaging in actions which causes harm to others. Seeing how our actions affect ourselves and others, Buddhism encourages the observance of precepts. Observance of precepts trains us to develop right views as well as awareness of the interdependence of our relationships with others, both of which in turn motivates us to play our societal roles responsibly.

With deeper appreciation of the interdependence nature of things, we will also come to understand that all phenomena, sentient and things alike, depend on conditions and factors to arise and exist. As the conditions change, the resultant phenomena will inevitably change, and cease to exist. Nothing has any inherent nature or characteristics. As such, hinging our happiness on material consumption is not the solution to suffering and may lead to more suffering.

Contentment is ever more so, the antidote for our current state of endless pursuit of more, of newer stuffs, and upgrades. Contentment, is espoused by the Buddha as “the greatest wealth”⁷ and as a “highest blessing”⁸ and is practised as a virtue within Buddhism.

In the next section, we will see how a lack of contentment on our part, has not only brought suffering to ourselves or to humankind, but also the environment and in turn, our fellow earth-bound sentient beings.

Buddhist View of Human Suffering – The Ecological Level

Apart from interconnectedness between people, each person is also interconnected to other sentient beings as well as to the environment that is shared by all. Hence, not only does one’s action have an impact on another human being, one’s action may also affect other sentient beings as well as the environment. The effect of one’s action on others eventually affects oneself. Cause and effect; what goes around comes around. The intricate relationship of mutual interaction and the theory of cause and effect is explained by the Buddha Sakyamuni in the *Cakkavattisihanādā Sutta*⁹.

While the consequences of our actions may not always be immediate, we do unfortunately live to see and experience these consequences in many circumstances. For example, recent studies show that bees were dying off in part due to the kind of insecticides used by corn farms. Our insensitivity to the suffering of other sentient beings has a price. The decline in the bee colonies not only affected the bees, it hurts us in return through the drop in harvest from crops which the bees are responsible for pollinating. It is estimated that the bees were responsible for pollinating plants that produce about a quarter of the food consumed by Americans¹⁰.

Another example closer to home is the annual haze we experience. Every year, Southeast Asia countries contend with haze produced by forest fire started in slash-and-burn farming in Indonesia. We dislike haze and pointed our fingers at those who were directly responsible for the haze. Yet very few of us reflected on the reasons

⁷ Khuddaka Nikaya: Dhammapada XV: Sukhavagga: Happiness

⁸ Khuddaka: Sutta Nipata 2.4: Maha-mangala Sutta - Blessings

⁹ Digha Nikaya 26: Cakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta - The Lion's Roar on the Turning the Wheel

¹⁰ See <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/15/us-usda-honeybees-report-idUSKBN0DV12120140515>

which led to the haze. Ironically, we played an important role in the production of haze. Many of the forest fires were started by companies that provide timber for use in Singapore and Malaysia¹¹.

These examples illustrate how the degradation of the environment stems from the degradation of people's morality. The focus of material consumption has diverted our attention from the suffering of all sentient beings including those in the present as well as those in the future generation. To regenerate the environment, we need to regenerate people's morality through cultivating wisdom, compassionate and generosity¹².

The Buddha explains that suffering, at the individual level, the societal level and the ecological level, arises because of our primary misunderstanding of ourselves and our relations with others. Hence, the first step to reverse our environmental demise is to have the right understanding of the interconnectedness between the environment and the sentient beings on the individual level as well as the societal level. That is, to correctly understand our impact on the environment could be direct through unwholesome actions such as intentional killing, pollution and destruction as well as indirect, through our insatiable demand for goods, triggering the unwholesome actions undertaken by the producers.

Knowing that every sentient being experiences suffering, we should be more sensitive to the suffering of others even if we do not consider the indirect impact of our actions on ourselves eventually¹³. Finally, we need to learn to really share the common environment with others, those in the present and those in future generations, and not mindlessly pursue material consumption which does not necessarily make us better off but will surely make others worse off. Otherwise, we are on a path that will not just kill off other species, but our own as well. In fact, research has found that climate change is accelerating the sixth mass extinction on earth¹⁴.

¹¹ See <http://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Transboundary-Haze.pdf>

¹² Digha Nikaya 26, Cakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta: The Lion's Roar on the Turning the Wheel

¹³ Sutta Nipata, Khuddaka Nikaya, Karaniya Metta Sutta: Good Will

¹⁴ See <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/climate-change-will-accelerate-earths-sixth-mass-extinction-180955138>

On a more positive note, some nations, societies and even individuals are beginning to develop the right understanding of the interconnectedness between the environment and the sentient beings and have undertaken actions to restore the environment. Countries like China started a massive "Great Green Wall" project from wayback in 1978, covering an area of 4.06 million km², to shelter against the dust storms in the north while reintroducing vegetation into the fringes of what was thought to be a barren desert¹⁵. Another green wall project by the same name is a pan-African proposal to "green" the continent from west to east in order to battle desertification¹⁶. Here in our own backyard, in 2009, CNN even cited 12 reasons why Singapore, is the greenest city on earth¹⁷. Individuals, such as Microsoft founder, Bill Gates, is also pushing for a more sustainable economy of food that does not involve meat, as producing it takes up great deal of land and water, and has a substantial environmental impact¹⁸.

As much as these efforts are important and valuable, we cannot forget that a problem has to be solved at its roots. For the benefit of our environment, our society and our individual self, we have to abandon the culture built on material consumption and social comparison. Instead, we should embrace a culture of sufficiency. Sufficiency at the individual level means abiding to the normative goal that man can make legitimate use of nature only insofar that he can help save this world using his innate spiritual potential, like the bee which harms neither the fragrance nor the beauty of the flower, but gathers nectar to turn it into sweet honey¹⁹. From endless consuming to consuming only when necessary, from focusing on the self to the others, sufficiency will paint a different picture of interconnectedness between individuals and the environment, one which is sustainable and is filled with wisdom, compassion and gratitude²⁰.

¹⁵ Science Direct: "Does the Green Great Wall effectively decrease dust storm intensity in China? A study based on NOAA NDVI and weather station data"

See <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0264837714002348> & <http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg22429994.900-great-wall-of-trees-keeps-chinas-deserts-at-bay.html>

¹⁶ Global Environment Facility, "The Great Green Wall Initiative" - See <https://www.thegef.org/gef/great-green-wall>

¹⁷ See <http://travel.cnn.com/singapore/none/12-reasons-why-singapore-greenest-city-914640>

¹⁸ See <http://www.gatesnotes.com/About-Bill-Gates/Future-of-Food>

¹⁹ Narada Thera (trans.) (1996). *DN 31, Sigalovada Sutta: The Discourse to Sigala, The Layperson's Code of Discipline*

²⁰ 四弘誓愿 The Four Great Vows in Buddhism

众生无边誓愿度 I vow to liberate the boundless sentient beings.

烦恼无尽誓愿断 I vow to cut off the inexhaustible defilements.

法门无量誓愿学 I vow to learn the immeasurable Dharma practices.

佛道无上誓愿成 I vow to attain the unsurpassed Way of the Buddhas.