

Suffering as a State-of-Mind

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Abstract

This theoretical paper is an attempt at exploring and understanding the convoluted concept of “suffering” according to the Indian philosophy, including Buddha, Patanjali, Sivananda, the Gita & Jainism. However, the three predominant schools of thought on suffering discussed in detail in the paper are Buddhism, Samkhya and Yoga, along with the concepts of *dukha*, *purusha* and *prakriti*, and the five afflictions mentioned in Patanjali’s Yoga sutras. Drawing from these theories of suffering the author has generated a concept map to facilitate one’s understanding about suffering, and finally, a pertinent conclusion has been drawn describing suffering as a state of mind that is free from the attachment of the transient and is just a fleeting thought of the human mind.

Key words : Suffering, Buddhism, Dukha, Pleasure, Samkhya and Yoga

The common thread among Indian Philosophy is the aim to transcend the human body and the ‘suffering’ inflicted in the embodied state. In this paper researcher analyses suffering as a ‘state-of-mind’ through theories born out of Indian Philosophy. *Duḥkha* is closely related to suffering, but is beyond just the physical realm of suffering. *Duḥkha* is an overwhelming complete body experience that can result in bodily, mental or transcendental inflictions. It affects the whole body but is not necessarily a form of physical pain. Through the eyes of Indian philosophy this state of ‘suffering’ results from the instability of the mind and senses. Suffering is a mental oppression which hinders one’s capability to reach their full potential. It inhibits them from express their individuality and attempt to overcome any individual, societal, or spiritual burdens they may be afflicted with. It is derived from the philosophical understanding that attachment to the transience of nature is the primary source suffering; an attachment which is a mere illusion in the mind. One is required to transcend this attachment to the physical in order to overcome this self-inflicted oppression.

Suffering in Buddhism

The universal truth according to Buddhism is “that which is impermanent is suffering” (Gnanarama, 2000, p.37). Thus, in a world where the Buddha considers all things impermanent, everything is considered suffering. “Are we not helpless in our attempt to stop something from passing away due to disease, decay and death? Is it just a matter of a moment for ordinary pleasure to turn into pain?” (Ganeri, 2002, p.372)

The Buddha imparted that within all pleasure is pain, that is, within all loss of pleasure there is pain. This is become whatever we consider pleasurable we attach ourselves to it, and eventually when will be lost we experience pain (Maehle, 2006, p.198). Hence, the pain is not inherent in the object of pleasure; the pain is inherent in our illusion of ‘attachment’ we have to that object. This concept applies for all things we consider pleasurable be it: inter-personal relationships, personal-identities, material objects, and all situations of enjoyment. Nobody enjoys saying goodbye is the underlying theory, because, when we say goodbye, we are often painfully letting go of something that we enjoyed.

In order to better understand Buddha’s theory of attachment I have attempted to depict the

concept into a picture (see ‘Figure (1): Buddha’s theory of attachment). It depicts that attachment equals happiness. When the attachment breaks the person and the object still remain, through this is disputable that the object remains, but that is not the point that I am attempting to convey, the point I’m trying to make is that regardless of fact that object remains or not, it is the abstract notion of attachment that we project onto the object which is

the cause of pleasure. Hence, when this attachment is broken, this notion of attachment reflects back on our own self causing the suffering. The causation of suffering actually has nothing to do with the object, but with the one projecting the emotion i.e. *you*. Hence, this notion in the mind is what Buddha considers as the fundamental cause of suffering. This is the essence of *duḥkha*.

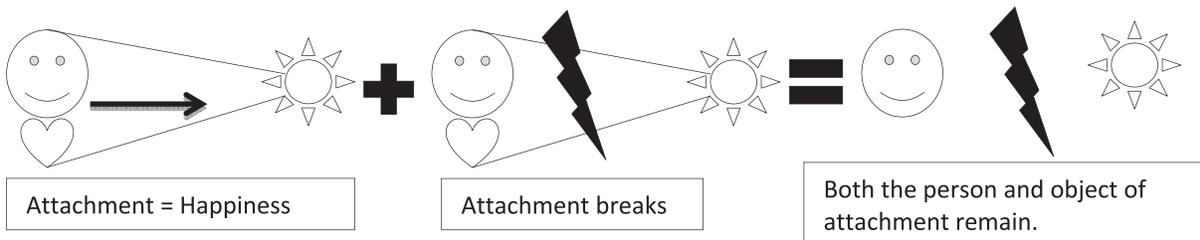


Figure 1: Buddha's theory of attachment

Duḥkha exists in the first four noble truths of Buddhism. The word originates in the Pali language and infers suffering as a complete general experience; a state of emptiness. *Duḥkha* is the opposite of *suhkha* which is happiness beyond a sensual context (Gnanarama, 2000, p.30). *Duḥkha* in the philosophy of Buddhism does not denote to physical suffering, but to the mental instability that is born out of the impermanence of objects of desire. Buddha posits that the mental frustration due to the obsession with our desires will outlive the object of desire long after it is gone. Hence, we are the objects of our minds desire binding us the material world destroying our capacity as agents of free will (Ganeri,2002, p.371). Matilal (2004) explains that in Buddhism it is known that every moment of pleasure is not everlasting, but pleasurable experiences are merely momentarily covering up the pain. According to the Buddha there is no such thing as ‘being’, only becoming. Everything in its own nature ‘becomes’ through a dynamic process, and consequently everything dynamically ceases to exist. This according to the Buddhist philosophy is the ‘law of impermanence’ (Wijesekera 2008,

p.4). Or what could be considered as the ‘law of nature’. This law of impermanence is what causes attachment to break, and the consequential pain.

All three concepts are interrelated and are all analysed through the theory of *duḥkha*. Gnanarama (2000, p.31) explains that *duḥkha* has been classified under three aspects. *Duḥkha-duḥkha* (intrinsic suffering) is the innate suffering due to the essence of the individual bodily and mental sensations of pain. *Viparināma-duḥkha* (suffering in change) is considered the suffering caused from pleasure. That is, the pain that comes secondary to pleasure; when pleasure ceases suffering is the consequence of the change. *Sankhāra-duḥkha* (suffering due to formation) is caused by the feeling of equanimity due to the fluctuations that occur in life; powerful stable emotions cause instability, for example fever born out of lust or hatred. *Duḥkha-duḥkha* is the only form of direct suffering as it is without the influence of any environmental factors but is purely a subject of the self (Gnanarama, 2000, p.31-2). In essence, this theory covers every factor in life; there is nothing in life that is not

considered as suffering in the Buddhist thought (Gnanarama, 2000, p.33).

Anattā is the concept of ‘non-self’ in Buddhism i.e. derived from the transience of all things individual, such as feelings, perception, cognitions and consciousness; all things that determine us as ‘individuals’. Hence, with attachment to the identity of the impermanent self, *duḥkha* will, again, always prevail (Wijesekera 2008, p.8-9). This concept of self is ‘self-consciousness’ and ‘I-ness’ and is considered within the transient concept of *ātman*, or the individual soul. ‘I-consciousness’ is considered as a state of illusion by Buddha (Wijesekera 2008, p.9).

Although the philosophy of Buddhism appears as a theory of pessimism, it suggests that the ‘middle-path’ between the extremes of indulgence and austerities is required in order to attain *nirvāṇa* (King, 1999, p.78). Gnanarama (2000) explains cultivation of the correct attitude as a means to overcome suffering, however, too often when expectations are fulfilled and pleasure subsides we fall back into a state of suffering again longing for a new pleasure (p.37). *Nirvāṇa* is when all cravings have ceased and enlightenment prevails (King 1999, p.79).

Suffering in Samkhya

In philosophy of Śāṅkhya however, suffering is reflected from a dualist perspective opposed to the monism of Buddhism (Saksena, 1970, p.82). *Prakṛti* is the ever changing world of natural causes overseen by the *puruṣa*, the spirit element or consciousness in Śāṅkhya. All of life is controlled by the natural function of nature with *puruṣa* as the witness of nature (Ranganathan, 2008, p.45). *Mokṣa* is attained when one is aware of this separation and becomes a witness of *prakṛti*, united with the *puruṣa*. This aligns with the notion that we are spectators in our lives as we have no control over the transience of nature; therefore it is nature that is liberated when one

becomes realised (Ranganathan, 2008, p.52). The *buddhi*, that is, intelligence, is the “[...] mirror-reflection of the consciousness of the *puruṣa*” (King 1999, p.67). Under the influence of the *buddhi* with *prakṛti* and *puruṣa*, *ahaṁkāra* is formed, the identity principle or the ego. The aim in Śāṅkhya is to transcend the transience of nature through the discriminative intelligence of the *buddhi* in order to overcome *ahaṁkāra* and the subsequent *duḥkha* (King, 1999, p.67).

The Śāṅkhya-Kārikā begins with the ‘three-fold’ of misery, *Sarvaṃ duḥkham* (Matilal 2004, p.13). The three types of causal sufferings are ‘bodily or physical’, ‘environmental’ and ‘mental’. Hence, considering they are caused, if the cause is removed, the suffering can also be removed (Ganeri, 2002, p.381). The first Śāṅkhya-Kārikā, believed to have been written in fourth to fifth century C.E. implies that when we experience pain we have a tendency to find the source of the pain and eradicate it, when the birthplace of suffering is within the mind.

Suffering in the school of Yoga

Closely related to Śāṅkhya philosophy is the school of Yoga with its practice based philosophy in order to attain knowledge of the self and union with the Divine. ‘Yoga’ means to ‘bind or yoke together’ (King, 1999, p.69). The school of Yoga is predominately derived from the school of Śāṅkhya and adopts the dualist differentiation between the *puruṣa* as consciousness and *prakṛti* as nature (King, 1999, p.70). The final goal of Yoga is to attain *mokṣa* which is when *saṁskāras*, the subliminal impressions in the mind, and *karma*, the vicious cause and effect cycle of rebirth, has been overcome through the attainment of *jñāna*, pure knowledge. When *mokṣa* is realised, *kaivalya*, or isolation, is attained. This is when the yogi is completely free and isolated from the transient effects of the qualities of nature. This is the ultimate goal of Yoga. The liberated yogi becomes a ‘witness consciousness’ of nature in

‘union’ with the *puruṣa* and isolated from the inflictions of *prakṛti* (King, 1999, p.73). Yoga advocates a neutral existence similar to Buddhism, where pain and pleasure both are present and should be viewed free of attachment; neither can be avoided but through the practice of Yoga the afflictions on the mind can be reduced. In the canonical text of Yoga, ‘Pātañjali’s Yoga Sūtras’ (*sūtra* 3) explains the central causes of suffering in Yoga as, “*avidyā asmitā rāga dveṣā abhiniveśaḥ kleśāḥ*”. Translated by B. K. S. Iyengar in ‘Light on the Yoga Sūtras of Pātañjali’ it states,

“The five afflictions which disturb the equilibrium of consciousness are: ignorance or lack of wisdom, ego, pride of the ego or the sense of ‘I’, attachment to pleasure, aversion to pain, fear of death and clinging to life” (Iyengar, 2014, p.105).

According to the commentary by Iyengar (2014, p.105) of the five afflictions, that is, the five *kleśāḥ*, are the foundational causes of thoughts and behaviours. In Yoga devotion is given to *Īśvara*, the God consciousness according to Pātañjali, hence, *avidyā*, i.e. ignorance, is considered the supreme cause of suffering by some commentators. When one does not surrender to *Īśvara*, one does not understand and surrender to nature, or *prakṛti*, and this is primarily in account of the unawareness of how *prakṛti* operates (Ranganathan, 2008, p.139). *Avidyā* for Pātañjali is considered the misapprehension of reality, when one considers the transient to be permanent, the impure to be pure, the painful to be the pleasant and the non-self to be the self, one is considered to be in a state of *avidyā* (Ranganathan, 2008, p.140). The opposite of *avidyā* is *vidyā* which translates to highest knowledge (Iyengar, 2014, p.108).

The next obstacle to a stable mind is *asmitā*, that is, egotism. The ‘I-ness’ that misleads people to think they are somebody that they are not, or considering their capabilities above, or below, their natural potential (Ranganathan, 2008,

p.152). As highlighted by Maehle (2006), the goal of Yoga is to endeavour to consider ourselves as part of the *puruṣa* and treat all others as if they are also *puruṣa*, this is freedom from *asmitā* (p.186). This is opposed to the ‘non-self’ of ‘*anātman*’ in Buddhism. In Yoga there is *ātman* which is the pure form of self, the pure soul, which is free of an identity surrendered to *prakṛti*, and united with the *puruṣa* and *Īśvara*.

Attachment is called *rāgaḥ* by Pātañjali and is the result of pleasant experiences when one remains ‘attached’ to themselves even after their existence; what Pātañjali calls ‘a residue of experience’, and a cause of suffering. Dwelling on experiences of pleasure generate greed and lust, which in turn compounds attachment and craving. Hence, one can get caught in the spiral of sense pleasure and lose sight of their ‘chosen path’ (Iyengar, 2014, p.109). The next affliction is *dveṣaḥ*, that is, aversion, and is also considered a cause of *duḥkha*. According to Pātañjali when we have negative experiences *dveṣaḥ* is the result. This propensity to enmity towards people or things is a form of *avidyā* (Ranganathan 2008, p.143). *Duḥkaḥ* can result in a ‘chain’ of aversion; Yoga is about attaining a balance between *duḥkha* and *sukha*; suffering and happiness (Iyengar, 2014, p.110). Pātañjali does not consider *dveṣaḥ* and *avidyā* to be completely passive responses to events, but are the consequence of confusion and mental instability (Ranganathan, 2008, p.143-4); subsequently, resulting in *duḥkha*. The final of the five afflictions is *abhiniveśāḥ*, known as the fear of death (Ranganathan, 2008, p.144). *Abhiniveśāḥ* is the attachment to life resulting in fear, and consequential suffering (Iyengar, 2014, p.110-1). Pātañjali endorses that through the practice of meditation and reflecting on ones’ past experiences, that is, *samskāras*, the five afflictions can be understood, and consequently *karma* will begin to dissipate resulting in eventual liberation (Ranganathan, 2008, p.146-9). Of the five afflictions both *rāgaḥ* and *dveṣaḥ* are afflictions of

the mind recognised by Buddha (Maehle, 2006, p.186). The notion of *avidyā* and *asmitā* are also found within Buddhism.

After discussing the five afflictions in depth from *sūtra* three to fifteen, Patañjali proceeds to discuss the foundation of these afflictions *karma*. *Sūtra* fifteen defines the belief of *duḥkha* in the philosophy of Yoga and how the state-of-mind can turn *duḥkha* into an experience of *sukha*.

“*Pariṇāmatāpasamṣkāraduḥkhiḥ guṇavṛttivirodhātcaduḥkhamevasarvaṃ vivekinaḥ*” is translated by B. K. S. Iyengar in ‘Light on the Yoga Sūtras of Pātañjali’ where it reads as:

“The wise man knows that owing to fluctuations, the qualities of nature, and subliminal impressions, even pleasant experiences are tinged with sorrow, and he keeps aloof from them” (Iyengar, 2014, p.116).

This *sūtra* depicts the triad of pain giving by Pātañjali: the attachment to the transient, the fluctuating qualities of nature and the past subliminal impressions (Maehle, 2006, p.198). The *sūtra* indicates that the ‘wise man’, the *vivekinaḥ*, who is absorbed in the practice of Yoga, is aware that pleasure leads to pain. Hence, the *vivekinaḥ* can remain detached from instances of pleasure, aware that soon they will diminish. Through right knowledge one can overcome the afflictions of pain and pleasure (Iyengar, 2014, p.116). Hence, through the conflict of the transience of nature, anguish is caused through change, and the pain from subliminal impressions, that is, *saṃskār* as, is the cause of all suffering (Maehle, 2006, p.197). Ranganathan (2008) states all experiences should be considered as tools to learning and barriers that are to be overcome. By viewing these painful experiences as a stage of progression, pain becomes a learning tool which one can appreciate to learn from and let them go. Attachment for the yogi is similar to that in Buddhism and is considered the primary cause of

duḥkha (p.150). Overcoming suffering in Yoga is when the person recognises the separation between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, similar to Śāṃkhya, when this is attained the person attains a state of *kaivalya*, or isolation (Ranganathan, 2008, p.152).

DISCUSSION

In order to better understand the theories of suffering I have generated a concept map out of the three predominant schools of Indian philosophy on suffering I have discussed, namely Buddhism, Śāṃkhya and Yoga. The concept map enables connections to be made between the schools. It is evident that the key trends between the three schools that result in suffering are impermanence, attachment and ego. As discussed above, all these three concepts are co-related and depend on each other leading to *duḥkha* as a result (See ‘Figure (2) Key to suffering in Buddhism, Śāṃkhya and Yoga’ at the end of this paper).

Some other Schools of Thoughts on Suffering

The notion of suffering in Indian philosophy is not limited to these three schools however. Nor is it limited to only impermanence, attachment and the ego. Another derivation from Śāṃkhya philosophy is the philosophy of the *Naiyāyikas*. On the pain-thesis in the *Nyāyasūtra* it is claimed that all experiences are *duḥkha* by nature, and that all forms of happiness, joy and pleasure are not free from pain. Hence, there cannot be any ‘pure’ moments of happiness as all joyful moments are within a shadow of suffering (Matilal, 2004, p.17).

Jainism on the other hand has an extreme approach to pain and pleasure (Ganeri, 2002, p.373). Never do they consider pleasure satisfied, as the more pleasure that is experienced the more the desires will grow, until one is overwhelmed with so much pleasure that it causes pain. If we eat too much we feel unwell, too much love-making is like continual scratching of an itch and eventually causes discomfort, and wealth only causes anxiety in protecting one's fortune (Ganeri, 2002, p.373).

All action results in *karma* according to the Jains, therefore to attain liberation one must fast unto death; the liberation from suffering is death in Jainism (Ranganathan, 2008, p.46).

Alternative to the schools pertaining to pain, suffering and asceticism is the materialist school of the *Cārvākas*. *Cārvākas* believe in no rebirth or karma or anything beyond physical perception, but rather to live a life filled with pleasure and to attempt to fulfil all desires. A truly hedonistic approach where seeking pleasure is the only goal of life (King, 1999, p.18-19). This state of their mind is a debatable topic for a paper on its own. Chapter two of the ‘Bhagavad-Gītā’ analyses the ‘man of steady wisdom’ alluding to suffering being a delusion in the mind. The commentary by Swami Tapasyananda describes that the man of a stable mind is “[...] unperturbed in misery and happiness alike” (p.39). The man of the stable mind has control over his senses and is not burdened by attachments, fear and anger. Like a turtle with his limbs, when objects of desire arise, the one with a steady mind can withdraw his senses into his body and not get lost to his senses. Attachments are products of sensual desires, and it is these attachments that cause delusions, and pain when the desire is not fulfilled (Tapasyananda, p.39-40). Without control over the senses, man is a slave to the desires within his mind and the cause of his own suffering.

In comparison to the different schools of suffering, Sivananda (1998) discusses pleasure and pain to be a subject of the mind in Indian philosophy in his book ‘Mind – Its Mysteries and Control’ (p.96). He considers pain and pleasure as two emotions that pertain to the mind; the mind expands during pleasure and withdraws during pain. The excessive inclination to objects is the cause of these emotions (Sivananda, 1998, p.96). Pleasure and pain, as with beauty and ugliness are mere products of the imagination according to Sivananda (1998, 97). Sense pleasure is a fleeting deception of the mind (Sivananda, 1998, p.97).

Sivananda (1998) states the illusion of the attachment of the mind is the cause of agitation within the body. Attachment is the source of illusion of happiness and pleasure for the mind to keep it entertained. Sivananda deduces that external objects are not the source of true happiness; true happiness comes from within (Sivananda, 1998, p.61). The mind is always in a state of preoccupation, this is evidenced through art – artwork is the mind in its physical form, the preconceptions in the mind materialised (Sivananda 1998, p.62).

“When the mind ceases to think, the world vanishes and there is bliss indescribable. When the mind begins to think, immediately the world reappears and there is suffering” (Sivananda, 1998, p.62).

Sivananda (1998) explains we are swimming in a vast ocean of thought: creativity is the formation of thoughts; good health is the product of good thoughts; positive thoughts create positive characters; thoughts create good habits, along with the bad; like thoughts attract like-minded people; thoughts are contagious; thoughts are telepathic. Having good thoughts is infected into the universal matter; similarly, evil thoughts are the product of universal pollution (p.70-75).

Sivananda (1998) considers the power of thought to have to capacity to modulate the mind. Hence, when man is overtaken by thoughts it inhibits the inability of the individual to exercise their ‘free will’ resulting in suffering (p.70). If the opposite of *duḥkha* is freedom, is ‘freedom’ also a state-of-mind? (Ganeri, 2002, p.371). Ganeri (2002) explains *nirvāṇa* is a state of conditioned freedom (p.371). However, Matilal (2004) argues it is this suffering of man discussed throughout these pages that gives rise to the meaning of *nirvāṇa*, that is, freedom (p.32). Matilal (2004) argues that it is the ‘non-factual’ *duḥkha* that alienates man from his own nature resulting in him seeking *nirvāṇa* (p.22).

This would be considered especially true in the ‘all things *duḥkha*’ philosophy within Buddhism. Matilal (2004) questions the irony of the Buddhist philosophy. He notes that if one is engaged in the present moment they should not be concerned about the expectation of pain, but relishing in the pleasure of the moment. Realising this, it is inferred that without *nirvāna*, pain has no meaning (p.23). Matilal (2004) argues if we are not concerned with attaining *nirvāna* we can relish in the pleasures of life (p.23). Matilal (2004) states that despite the ever presence of *duḥkha* in religious doctrines and philosophy, it is only through the presence of these doctrines that *duḥkha* is brought to the forefront of reality. These dogmas are what bring the binary of pain and liberation into existence. Only when one is the subject of suffering does one seek liberation and realise the influence of *duḥkha*. Therefore, where there is not ‘suffering’ to transcend, there is not *duḥkha*, nor is there *nirvāṇa* (p.32).

Ganeri (2002) analyses that *duḥkha* in Indian philosophy can be a subject of delusion; a justification for the pessimist and the depressed. If we believe that we unconditionally suffer, then we are blind to the happiness that can be experienced in life. The rhetorical question some people ask in the midst of suffering, ‘what is the meaning of life?’ is a predicament unique to the volition of human nature causing us to question and attempt to determine the life meaning. Is it essential that as humans we detach ourselves from the reality and analyse our lives? (p.382-385). The self-conscious awareness that made Buddha famous, takes the rational individual to detach themselves from their current state-of-mind of suffering, or *duḥkha* and transcend the current situation. Buddha’s cure to humanity lies in the realisation of self-conscious awareness. But then there are the individuals who do not question the meaning of life and live in a state of detachment, dismissing such questions when they arise. These individuals unconditionally continue to work towards the greater good of

humanity, or the greater evil. This diverse array of individuals is what creates the binary within Indian thought, the path of the aesthetic who seeks liberation, and the path of action, the one who works to the greater good of humanity (Ganeri, 2002, p.385). But in a world of impermanence, who is to claim that one has to choose one path, or when the road splits, the opposing path can be undertaken. But what has this to do with suffering?

CONCLUSION

It does not matter what path one chooses if suffering is a mere state-of-mind. But is the state-of-mind of suffering dependant on what doctrine one chooses to follow, or do the doctrines depend on ones predetermined state-of-mind if one is given a choice, if they choose one at all. If pain and suffering is a state-of-mind, it could be argued that the notions of pleasure, freedom, liberation, *nirvāṇa*, and *mokṣa* are also a state-of-mind. Without the experience of such suffering does one question the ‘meaning of life’ and seek to attain subsequent eternal bliss? Possibly, this all boils down to *karma* and *saṃskāras* inherent in the determination of our destiny and the pain and pleasure we receive. However, regardless of our ‘life’s path’, or if there is a destiny, we know that where one must experience pleasure, one must also experience pain. Life is never free of either.

Consequently, if this is understood then there is no medicine required for pain as we know it will come and eventually will be overcome. Similarly, we know that nothing lasts forever, no pleasure is everlasting. The most we can do is let go and say goodbye, and know that one day we will meet this pleasure again. In conclusion, when the causation of suffering is realised one does not become attached to pleasure, nor do they become attached to pain. This is a state-of-mind, free from attachment of the transient, where no change is a surprise; a state-of-mind which cannot be faltered. A state-of-mind where suffering is only a fleeting

thought. It is through these Indian philosophical doctrines such as Buddhism, Śāṅkhya and Yoga that one can arrive at such realisations and relegate suffering to a mere state within the mind.

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Figure (2): Key to suffering in Buddhism, Samkhya and Yoga

