

A collection of quotes on The first Noble Truth – dukkha (Suffering, Disharmony, etc.)

Now this, monks, for the spiritually ennobled, is the painful (dukkha) true reality (ariya-sacca): birth is painful, ageing is painful, illness is painful, death is painful; sorrow, lamentation, (physical) pain, unhappiness and distress are painful; union with what is disliked is painful; separation from what is liked is painful; not to get what one wants is painful; in brief, the five bundles [form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness] of grasping-fuel are painful.

– Samyutta Nikaya 56.11 Peter Harvey trans.

In the First Noble Truth, the Buddha proclaimed that 'there is dukkha (suffering).' It is put into the context of a 'Noble Truth' rather than a dismal reality. If we look at it as a dismal reality, what happens? 'Life is just suffering, it's all just suffering. You get old, you get sick and then die. You have to lose all your friends: "All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise, will become separated from me." That's all it's about; it's just dukkha from beginning to end'. There's nothing noble in that, is there? It's just pessimistic and depressing seeing it in terms of, 'I don't like it. I don't want suffering. What a bad joke God played on us creating this mess. And me being born in this mess, to live just to get old. What am I living for? Just to get old, get sick and die'. Of course, that's very depressing. That's not a Noble Truth. You're creating a problem around the way things are. With the Noble Truth, 'there is suffering,' the advice to deal with this suffering is to welcome it, to understand it, to open to it, to admit it, to begin to notice it and accept it. It's a willingness to embrace and learn from that which we don't like and don't want - the pain and the irritation, whether it's physical, mental or emotional.

– Ajahn Sumedho

Dukkha is often translated as "suffering". Suffering, however, represents only one aspect of dukkha, a term whose range of implications is difficult to capture with a single English word. Dukkha can be derived from the Sanskrit kha, one meaning of which is "the axle-hole of a wheel", and the antithetic prefix duh (=dus), which stands for "difficulty" or "badness". The complete term then evokes the image of an axle not fitting properly into its hole. According to this image, dukkha suggests "disharmony" or "friction". Alternatively dukkha can be related to the Sanskrit stha, "standing" or "abiding", combined with the same antithetic prefix duh. Dukkha in the sense of "standing badly" then conveys nuances of "uneasiness" or of being "uncomfortable". In order to catch the various nuances of "dukkha", the most convenient translation is "unsatisfactoriness", though it might be best to leave the term untranslated.

–Bhikkhu Analayo

The Buddha says that he teaches only Dukkha and the cessation of Dukkha, that is, suffering and the end of suffering. The First Noble Truth deals with the problem of suffering. However, the truth of suffering is not the final word of the Buddha's teaching. It is only the starting point. The Buddha starts with suffering, because his teaching is designed for a particular end: it is designed to lead to liberation. In order to do this he must give us a reason for seeking liberation. If a man does not know that his house is on fire, he lives there enjoying himself, playing and laughing. To get him to come out we first have to make him understand that his house is on fire. In the same way the Buddha announces that our lives are burning with old age, sickness and death. Our minds are flaming with greed, hatred and delusion. It is only when we become aware of the peril that we are ready to seek a way to release.

– Bhikkhu Bodhi

As beginners, we need only hold to the basic principle that "developing life" means "causing life to

progress to the highest level," that is, beyond all problems and dukkha, beyond all the possible meanings and gradations of these two terms. For those unfamiliar with the word dukkha, we can tentatively translate it as "stress, unsatisfactoriness, conflict, agitation—all the things that disturb life." Dukkha is what we are running from all the time. Dukkha interferes with a life of calm and ease as well as with spiritual perfection. When life is developed beyond all dukkha, it reaches its highest possible level.

Now, some people do not know about their own problems. They do not understand dukkha, neither in general terms nor in their own lives. They look at themselves and say, "Oh! I don't have any problems; everything is okay." They accept all their difficulties and sorrow as normal and ordinary. Are we like this? We need to take a serious, detailed look into our own lives to see if there is anything that we can call "a problem." Is there any dukkha? Is there anything unsatisfactory or disturbing about life? Such questions are necessary when we choose to study Dhamma. If you have not looked inside, if you are unaware of your problems, if you feel no dukkha, then you cannot know why you are on retreat, why you have come to a meditation center, or why you are studying Dhamma. Please, take a good, clear look at your problems and dukkha before proceeding any further.

– Ajahn Buddhadasa

Dukkha is a word notoriously hard to translate into English. In the Pali canon, it applies both to physical and to mental pain and dis-ease, ranging from intense anguish to the subtlest sense of being burdened or confined. The Pali commentaries explain dukkha as "that which is hard to bear." Ajaan Maha Boowa, a Thai forest master, translates it as "whatever puts a squeeze on the heart." Although no single English term covers all of these meanings, the word "stress" — as a strain on body or mind — seems as close as English can get to the Pali term; "suffering" can be used in places where "stress" seems too mild.

– Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Many people have charged Buddhism with being pessimistic because the four truths start out with stress and suffering, but this charge misses the fact that the first truth is part of a strategy of diagnosis and therapy focusing on the basic problem in life so as to offer a solution to it. Thus the Buddha was like a doctor, focusing on the disease he wanted to cure. Charging him with pessimism is like charging a doctor with pessimism when he asks, "Where does it hurt?" The total cure the Buddha promised as a result of his course of therapy shows that, in actuality, he was much less pessimistic than the vast majority of the world, for whom wisdom means accepting the bad things in life with the good, assuming that there is no chance in this life for unalloyed happiness. The Buddha was an extremely demanding person, unwilling to bend to this supposed wisdom or to rest with anything less than absolute happiness. His course of therapy points to the fact that such a happiness is possible, and can be attained through our own efforts.

– Thanissaro Bhikkhu