

Buddhism's View On Suffering & How It Can Be Overcome

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Abstract:

Buddhism is among the most widely followed religions in the world. The core teachings of Buddhism center around the four noble truths. Buddha's deep knowledge about the nature and cure of suffering resembles Psychotherapy. Buddhist thought is pretty systematic and scientific, some even argue that it's more of a science than a religion. The paper explores the theory of dependent origination and its twelve links, explaining how everything has a cause for its existence. It then examines the concept of 'Trishna' or 'Tanha' which translates to 'Thirst', giving birth to 'Dukkha', and how this concept is similar to the drives theory of Freud and Schopenhauer's Will. Everything that we consider to be a 'self' can be explained through the 'Five Skandhas' in Buddhism. A conceptual framework model has been presented linking the doctrines of 'Pratityasamutpada', 'Anitya', and 'Anatta' and how they explain the different types of 'Dukkha'. Finally, we have explored the path that could lead one to a path of bliss and happiness. The different techniques to attain 'Sukha' have also been explored.

Keywords — Buddhism, Trishna, Duhkha.

BACKGROUND

It is still debatable whether Buddhism is a religion or a philosophy. It has over 520 million followers making it the fourth most followed religion. Buddhism has its roots in India, originating in the 6th century. It's a non-theistic religion, in the way that the teachings or the revelations didn't come from some 'higher power' such as God. The spiritual concepts, truths, and teachings were discovered by Buddha through his own efforts. Siddhartha Gautama was a human, a Hindu prince born into a royal family at Kapilavastu which is present-day Nepal, who after gaining enlightenment became Buddha. Buddhism is developed based on his teachings with the goal of teaching others to escape 'Samsara', the endless cycle of birth & death. (Wilson 2010).

Siddhartha became an ascetic after renouncing the world, searching for a solution to all the sufferings of life such as disease, pain, and death. He studied Yoga, learned meditation, practiced under Alara Kalama & Udraka Ramaputhra, and many other great scholars and religious teachers to find the 'way', but it didn't help him. Eventually, he sat at the Bodhi Tree, performed deep meditation, and developed a strong mind & iron will that

freed him from the 'Maya'. His enlightenment led him to find the true nature of all the suffering in the world. Buddha after attaining knowledge decided to share it with the world in order to help others break the bondage of 'samsara'. Buddhism is practical because it is not concerned with metaphysical concepts & pondering. It is directed towards effective and realistic solutions that could improve one's well-being especially the well-being of ordinary people. Buddha didn't write any book or passed his teachings in text. He taught through conversation which was then recorded by his disciples and followers. Buddhism's teachings are based on the scripture known as the "Tripitaka" which translates to Three Traditions or Three Baskets. These baskets are Sutta (Discourse), Vinaya (Discipline), and Abhidharma which is the elaboration of the doctrine that contains the integrated philosophical and psychological framework that could transform an individual. The idea is that Siddhartha who became Buddha was a human who achieved Enlightenment through his own efforts. He didn't attribute his enlightenment to some supernatural power, it was his rigorous meditation and disciplined life that caused this transformation. This gives the hope that every ordinary individual has the potential to become a 'Buddha' if one follows the right path.

CORE TEACHINGS OF BUDDHISM

The teachings of Buddhism are still relevant even after 2500 years. The central and core teachings of Buddhism are contained in the 'Four Noble Truths' which was recorded in 'Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta', the first record of the first sermon that Buddha delivered. Philosopher Alan Watts commented that if one looks deeply into Buddhism, one won't find either it as religion or philosophy as how the Western World sees it, one would find something that resembles Psychotherapy. It could be argued that Buddha was a Psychotherapist who helped millions of people with his therapeutic methods. He identified the true nature of mental and emotional suffering and offered a cure for it.

The first noble truth is there is suffering. There is 'Dukkha'. Dukkha - The term translates to Suffering, but the word 'suffering' alone cannot communicate the full implication of 'Dukkha'. The word suffering is limited to express the full extent of 'Dukkha', it refers to not only the physical and emotional pain but also the dissatisfaction, uneasiness, annoyance, and discontentment. The word also relates to words such as misery, sorrow, imperfection, impermanence, and pain.

The second noble truth is 'Trishna' or Desire which is the root cause of suffering. Trishna can be best explained by Causality. Desire is born out of ignorance which leads to Action, resulting in the perpetuating cycle of birth and death i.e. Samsara.

The dependent origination doctrine explains the 'Trishna' or cause of suffering. Buddhism believes that everything has a cause or reason. It holds the view of 'Pratityasamutpada' meaning that things and entities do have an existence, but they are not eternal and also cannot be destroyed completely. The word 'Trishna' can be translated to desire, thirst, or craving which gives birth to clinging and attachment. There is another aspect of Trishna which means hatred or avoidance. Trishna has raga (desire) and Dvesha (aversion). All these lead to Dukkha.

- Ignorance (Avidya) - Arising when mistaken Skandhas as self, rejecting the fundamental truth and nature of things
- Predisposition (Samskara) - Predispositions means the existence of a disposition preceding

to an activity. The aptitude and attitude of the past Karma. It is caused by Ignorance.

- Consciousness (Vijnana) - Predispositions cause consciousness. The body dies but the collection of mental skandhas moves from one life to the next.
- Name & Form (Namarupa) - The Psycho-Physical body in the mother's womb caused by consciousness.
- Sense Organs (Sadayatana) - Sense organs develop and become active. They are caused by 'Namarurpa'. The six sense organs are the eyes, ears, tongue, nose, skin, and mind.
- Contact (Sparsa) - The sense organs cause contact. Any sense organ including the mind thinking, the contact leads to experience or sensation.
- Sensation (Vedana) - The contact results in a feeling or sensation. It can be an intellectual sensation such as thought or a tactile sensation such as when skin touches an object. The sensation can be pleasant or unpleasant.
- Craving (Trishna) - The actual experience or sensation causes a craving for the experience. The person wants to experience that enjoyment again. The cravings have six forms related to the sense organs (forms, tastes, sounds, smells, ideas, and touch)
- Attachment (Upadana) - Now the craving causes a clinging or attachment to that sensory enjoyment.
- Becoming (Bhava) - As the cravings cannot be satiated, but the person holds on to the attachment. This causes a will to take birth again due to that attachment. The person wants to keep experiencing sensory enjoyment. The residues of his consciousness accompany him to his next birth.
- Birth (Jati) - The will to birth or Bhava causes a birth. The organism (jiva) is caused into the cycle of life and death, it keeps perpetuating until it achieves Nirvana.
- Old Age & Death (Jaramarana) - Birth causes death. The cycle of suffering continues. The man is caught up in the wheel of life, disease, old age, suffering, and death.

The third noble truth is that this suffering can be extinguished, one can attain liberation 'Nirodh' or

'Nirvana'. It is the extinction of the thirst when one becomes unconditioned or uncompounded, 'Asamkhata'.

The fourth noble truth is 'Magga' or the path. One can break free from the bondage of suffering by following the eightfold path which eliminates all the miseries. The eightfold path comprises of the Right View, Right Aspirations, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Awareness, and Right Concentration.

Concept Explained

Trishna

Tañhā in Pali and Tṛṣṇā in Sanskrit refers to a thirst, desire, or longing for something. It could be related to either the mental or physical aspects. In four noble truths, Trishna is what causes 'Dukkha'. Trishna is of three types Kama-Trishna (craving or desire for sensual pleasures), Bhava-Trishna (craving for existence), and Vibhava Trishna (craving or desire for non-existence). Kama & Bhava Trishna is equivalent to 'Raga' (attachment) whereas Vibhava Trishna is equivalent to Doshā (Dvesha). Trishna gives birth to attachment and clinging, leading to the will to be born or live again to experience the favorable sensations again. However, these favorable sensations or pleasures can never be satiated, it will lead to an endless cycle where a person would seek the favorable and avoid the unfavorable.

As the first noble truth of Buddhism explained the truth of suffering. Buddhism would be pessimistic if it had stopped there, but instead, it goes further explaining the truth of suffering. 'Trishna' or the thirst gives birth to clinging and attachment which is the root cause of our sufferings. But we have to understand the truth of 'Trishna' in the context of 'Pratityasamutpada' or the natural causation which states that everything in this world is conditional, the existence of every event or state (including our mental states) depends on some conditions. Therefore there is something that gives birth to this suffering and misery. Even 'Trishna' has a cause, it cannot just happen independently, in a vacuum. The sufferings of life such as illness, death, old age, and grief (Jara-Marana) happen due to the birth or rebirth (Jati).

Had we not taken birth then we wouldn't be subjected to the harsh aspects of life. Birth happens due to a will (*Bhava*) which is a predisposition or a blind force to take

birth. Of course, there must be some cause for this tendency or impulse, it comes into existence due to our grasping or clinging (*Upadana*) to worldly objects. This clinging is caused by 'Trishna' which is the continuous, never-ending thirst or craving to experience sensory pleasures and relationships. Again, this thirst or desire for objects would have never come into existence had we not experienced them. The cause of 'Trishna' is the sensory experience (*Vedana*). Favorable experiences give birth to the thirst for experiencing them again which leads to clinging. However, sensory experiences are a result of the contact of the sensory organs (*Sadayatana*) with worldly objects. So had there been no sensory organs (including the mind) we wouldn't have experienced anything. The six organs of knowledge are a result of the mind-body connection of the embryonic organism (*Namarupa*), it is this which constitutes the perceptible being of a human. But this organism would not have developed in its mother's womb if it was devoid of any consciousness (*Vijnana*). There's an initial consciousness of the embryo which develops the organism. This initial consciousness comes into the embryo as a result of its impressions of past experiences (*Samskara*). And these impressions are a result of the ignorance (*Avidya*) which forces a person to be endlessly trapped in the cycle of birth and death, not realizing the ultimate truth of his being, and endlessly repeating the cycle. These are the 12 links in the Causation Chain. Although, their order has varied in different sermons of Buddha. The twelve links of dependent origination can be classified into the levels of past (Ignorance & predisposition), present (consciousness, name & form, sense organs, contact, sensation, craving, attachment), and future (birth, old age & death).

Arthur Schopenhauer gave the concept of will in his famous work *The World as Will and Representation* (1819), He defined the will as something irrational and blind incessant impulsive devoid of knowledge which is responsible for driving instinctive behaviors, resulting in an endless striving which can never be satiated. Schopenhauer also talked about one must achieve the mental state of denying this will because life is suffering as one comes to experience it at some stage. Existence results in various anxieties and one confronts with the terrible aspects of life. There is a constant desire and a constant struggle because of the desire not being met. Schopenhauer said the will has no final satisfaction or not. Schopenhauer's will is similar to Trishna.

Buddhism sees the life phenomenon or the living being coming into existence due to an internal force of desire which could be unconscious or conscious. Although modern biologists including the anti-Darwinians explain life through material conditions, environmental, and inherited. For them, the appearance of a tail on a dog, or the formation of five fingers in humans, is nothing more than an accidental variation that could be quick or slow. Henri Bergson, a French Philosopher viewed the conception of life through a lens similar to Buddhism. He believed life is an outward manifestation of an internal urge. The '*Élan vital*' which is the vital life impulse is the outward expression of an internal desire or urge, he closely linked it with consciousness and claimed it to be responsible for evolution. Buddhism explains life through 'Bhava' which is the tendency to be or the internal predisposition caused due to Trishna. Also, Buddha explained how the initial consciousness which is Vijnana leads to the development of the embryo in the mother's womb. So a human being isn't random matter put together, but there's a meaningful construction due to volition.

Freud conceived the personality to be made up of Id, Ego & Supr-Ego. ID comprises Eros and Thanatos. In 'Beyond The Pleasure Principle', Freud classified all instincts to come under the category of Life' and 'Death' drives. Life instincts are also called 'Sex Instincts' it has mainly to do with pleasure, survival, and life-sustaining behaviors, all of which promote the existence. The basic idea is to avoid pain, thirst, and hunger. This instinct compels a person to engage in life-sustaining activities. This is the basic idea of Bhava-Trishna and Kama-Trishna which compels a person to engage in sensually pleasurable activities, anything that promotes life. The attachment to live, or we can also say 'the will to live'.

There is another drive called the 'Death Drive' when expressed inwardly, it results in the behaviors of self-harm and suicide whereas expressing outward causes the behaviors of hatred, aggression, and violence. Freud suggested there was something more primitive and rudimentary that compelled people to engage in such behaviors that would lead toward non-existence. This is similar to the Vibhava Trishna which is a thirst to not exist. Note that when Schopenhauer talked about negating the will, it's still in a way willing to not exist.

Reality is constructed, it cannot exist independently of other minds, and it will always remain embedded in a

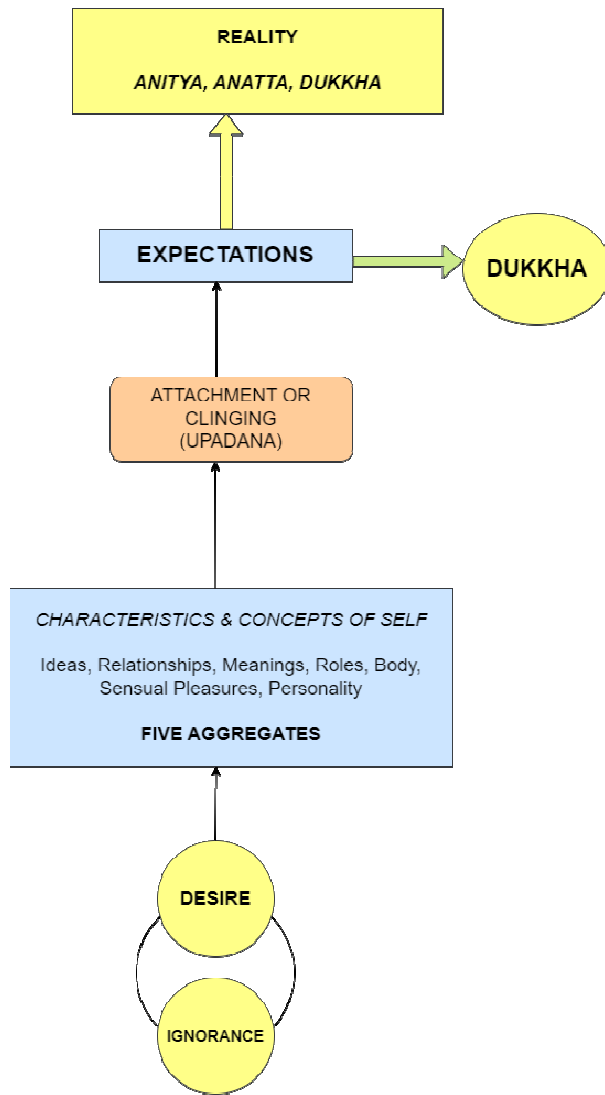
certain context. We construct meaning or a narrative through our interactions and experiences with others. Suffering arises when one's individual experience is constructed in a less-than-ideal fashion which is also influenced by previous or early conflicts in relationships (Renik, 2007)

Skandhas

Five Aggregates or the Five Skandhas are the components that come together to give rise to clinging. These five mental and material factors could explain the being of a human. Suffering happens when one identifies with the Skandhas. The term means 'aggregates', bundles, or collections. Here we again reiterate that the term 'Dukkha' means the conditioned or the impermanent, Skandhas do not have an independent existence. These Skandhas come together to constitute an anti-realistic view of everything whether it's our own 'self' or some other object. These Skandhas could explain the individual's experience of the world. These components are closely related and bind us to the Maya & Samsara.

Form (*Rupa*) refers to the form or matter, it is what can be sensed. The faculties of the eye, ear, tongue, nose, and skin, and their corresponding objects. Sensation (*Vedana*) It is the mental or physical sensation or feeling we experience when our six senses (including the mind) interact with the outside world. Buddhism sees the mind as a sense object. Perception (*Samjna*) refers to the knowledge put together. We are able to recognize and conceptualize things through association. Samjna refers to what we call thinking or understanding. Mental Formation (*Samskara*) encompasses all our thoughts and concepts, it includes even our actions too. As Buddhism believed it's the mind that precedes all mental states. And finally, Consciousness (*Vinnana*) which is a reaction, arises when any of the six faculties contact with its corresponding object. When the ear meets the sound, it results in aural consciousness. So consciousness is not independent, it depends on other skandhas, and it does not exist on its own. This consciousness is an awareness, not a sensation (*Vedana*).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



- There is ignorance that leads to craving or Trishna. This Trishna further increases ignorance in a cyclical fashion. A longing or craving for favorable and pleasurable while avoiding the unfavorable.
- Everything that we experience or perceive isn't independent. The individual experience can be explained through Five Aggregates through which he comes to develop his identity, personality, and mental constructs.
- Due to a desire, there is a clinging or attachment to a specific mental concept or physical object

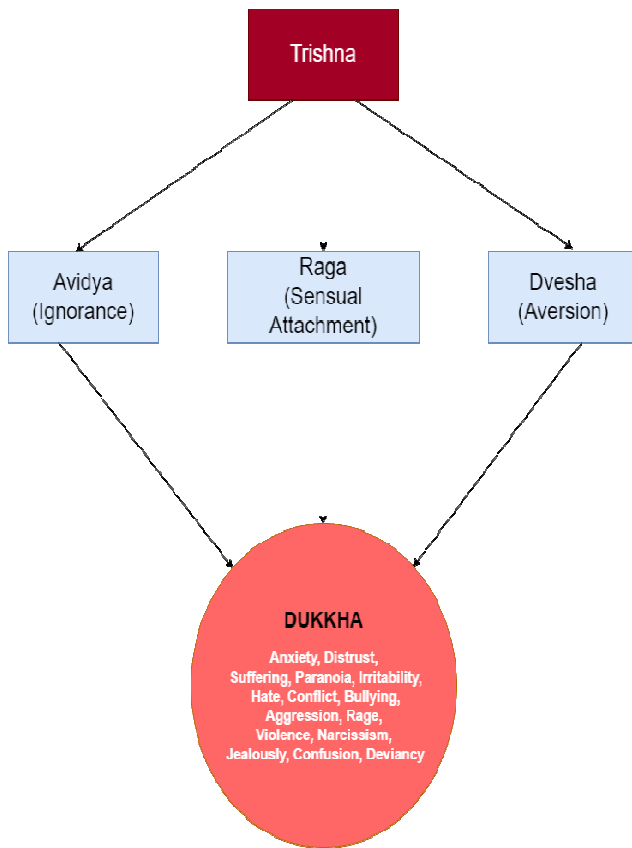
which brings satisfaction or pleasure to a person. Due to the ignorance that all of it is transitory, a person develops a rigidity with the physical and mental objects that are favorable to him. The attachment could be to a certain role, bodily physique, a relationship, and so on. The person did not realize that it is impermanent and is subjected to change.

- The person develops expectations that the object that is providing him pleasure and bringing him satisfaction will continue to do so. Not realizing the illusory nature of the object and the fact that his experience, perception, and consciousness are not independent. What he considers to be the static identity is dynamic, always changing. The mental and emotional states, bodily processes, experiences & perceptions are always in a state of flux. The expectation that they will remain the same way leads to Dukkha.
- Expectations that events and things should satisfy our needs. Expectations that people and their feelings should remain the same towards us. Expectations that what makes us happy today should keep making us happy tomorrow. All these expectations lead to Dukkha. A person is dissatisfied and displeased when his expectations are not fulfilled. Due to the discrepancy between his internally constructed reality based on false beliefs and the actual reality causing the suffering.
- The cure to Dukkha is Nirvana. Realizing the Anitya (Impermanence), Anatta (Non-Self), and true nature of Dukkha (Suffering) leads to liberation.
- The path of Nirvana is the eight-fold path which involves having the Right View, Right Determination, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

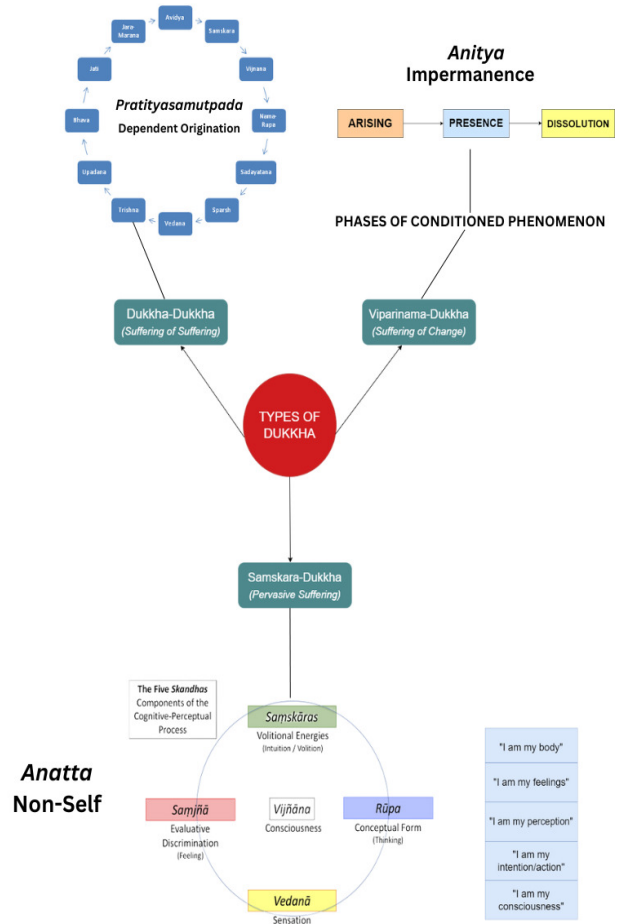
Understanding Dukkha

Buddhism emphasizes that our mental state depends less on the situation, but more on how we 'relate' to it. While suffering is inevitable for our existence, humans suffer more due to their tendency to try to control things and resist change. When a human engages in an experience that is unpleasant or uncomfortable, they will try to push or avert it away. From Buddhism's perspective, the root cause of all behavioral and

emotional problems is Trishna which we could further divide into Avidya (Ignorance), Raga (attachment) & Dosa (aversion). Note that while Trishna causes ignorance, it itself is caused by ignorance or Avidya which is explained in the theory of dependent origination. The three poisons; Moh, Raga, and Dvesha are caused by Trishna and they lead to Dukkha. Moh is the delusion born due to ignorance. Raga is the attachment which contains Kama-Trishna (craving for sensual pleasures) and Bhava-Trishna (craving for existence) which is the desire to keep experiencing pleasant feelings and pleasures. It is also the attachment to ideas, views, and opinions. The desire to exist to experience it over and over. Whereas Dvesha is the hate or aversion which is equivalent to the Vibhava Trishna which means the desire to not experience the unpleasant leading one to move towards self-annihilating behaviors.



Categories of Dukkha



There are different levels of suffering such as Dukkha-Dukkha, it means 'suffering' here is suffering. We all living beings experience mental, emotional, and physical suffering as long as we are alive. Although there are cures, they are temporary. This suffering refers to all suffering arising from birth, old age, disease, death, grief, distress, anxiety, and separation. The sorrow and misery that all living beings go through including animals, insects, and plants. We, humans, have a higher dimension of consciousness, but it also offers us mental and emotional pain such as anxiety, depression, and fear. There are mundane cures for this kind of suffering such as if you are ill then you can take medicine, if you are bored then you have Netflix, but these cures are temporary as the suffering may return again.

Viperinama-Dukkha means the suffering that is caused due to change. It is a deeper level of suffering. It arises due to our inability to accept the truth of impermanence. A pleasant or happy feeling eventually becomes

unpleasant. What brought us satisfaction no longer provides us the same satisfaction and it causes frustration & dissatisfaction when it is not able to provide us with what it once did. We could see this in our life in the form of relationships and objects. A phone that we enjoyed became outdated with new technology and we feel dissatisfied with the same phone which one brought us 'pleasant feelings'. A job that made us happy eventually starts causing frustration. So it's not just the objects that change, but our minds also change as our expectations change with respect to people and objects. Change is pervasive. The reason such change causes unhappiness is that every entity is made up of components that depend on something else, it is not the cause in itself, but an effect of something else, and at times causes something else in the chain. Everything, therefore, changes including our minds; emotions, and feelings which again are based on something, not independent. So it's actually not change that is directly causing the suffering, but our unenlightened mind which isn't aware of the true reality and nature of things.

The constant succession of discrete feelings or cognitions appears to us as one indivisible event similar to how individual pictures when played in a sequence fashion give us the impression of continuous video playing. Physics has given us evidence that the subatomic particles are constantly changing, but since we cannot view this change through our ordinary sense perception, it appears to us as a stable physical object. Our perception is not sharp to capture the subtle change which gives us the false idea that everything is static including our body and mental events. It is through mindfulness and concentration that we can realize that all physical and mental phenomena are momentary, they are always happening and passing.

Even the bodily processes are dynamic and they are changing and are in a state of flux every moment. Everything that 'Arises' makes its 'Presence' felt, but even in that momentary presence it is changing and progressing towards 'Dissolution'. The pleasure feeling (Vedana) that we experience through some object (including people) always depends on the object, contact with the object through our sense faculty (Nama Rupa) which results in the perception (Samjana) of the object, eventually leading to the Consciousness (Vijnana) where we experience the feeling of knowing a feeling. The doctrine of 'Anitya' (Impermanence) is closely related to Anatta (Non-Self).

Samkaara-dukkha is the pervasive suffering that we suffer due to the failure of realizing the true nature of our existence. We confuse the body-mind as 'I' or 'Me'. It is the unenlightened grasping of the body-mind as ourselves that causes the suffering. As long as we limit ourselves to this body & mind, we keep suffering. It's not the body & mind that is the root cause of the suffering, but our ignorance and clinging to it is the suffering. Once a person has attained enlightenment, the same body-mind will no longer cause suffering as Buddha stayed in the body-mind after attaining enlightenment.

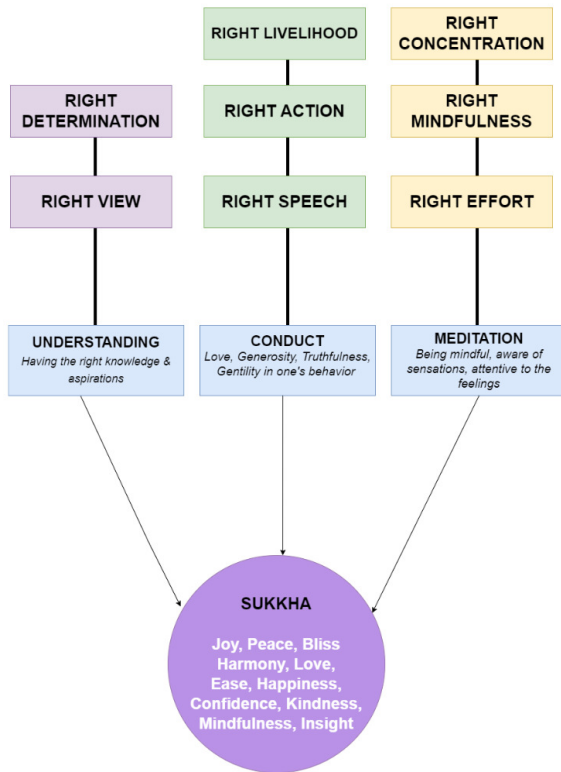
Path to Sukkha

The Dukkha is the negative mental state whereas Sukha is the peaceful state that one could achieve through having the right understanding, following the right conduct, and meditation. There's an end to the suffering, one can experience 'Sukha' which is bliss, peace, and equanimity through the Astangika Margya or the Eight-Fold path. Even though the word 'Right' is used for the translation of 'Samyag', but it actually means whole or complete.

Right View (*Samyagdrsti*) - When we have the wrong view or 'Mithyadrsti' about the existence of ourselves and the world then it can cause us plenty of problems. A child who has built a sandcastle starts crying when the waves wash away his castle, but an adult does not lose his heart as he is aware of the impermanence and insubstantiality of the castle. Likewise, we must have a complete understanding about our self and the world. Having the correct knowledge of the four noble truths reveals the true nature of things including our suffering which is born out of clinging, ignorance, and hate.

Right Resolve (*Samyaksankalpa*) - Having knowledge about the truth isn't enough, we must apply it in our lives. Knowing the causes of what leads to suffering isn't enough, we must free ourselves from the evils of ignorance, hatred, and attachment. Buddha told us 2500 years old ago that it's the client who must take the first step by aspiring to do better, to improve, and to change. A therapist can only make the client aware of his dysfunctional beliefs and the incorrect realities that he has shaped which cause him unhappiness and suffering. But it's the client who must act towards the improvement and must confront their fears, insecurities,

and repressed issues which dominate different aspects of their life.



such as eating simple, using a simple bed, avoiding entertainment and using money, and so on.

Right Livelihood (*Samyagajiva*) - When one renounces bad speech and bad actions, they move towards living an honest and non-hurtful way of living. It emphasizes living life with the good determination that follows the right view. Not resorting to forbidden means just for sake of maintaining life. Not becoming lost in the competition of the world and turning to dishonesty means to get ahead in life. However, it also doesn't mean that we should renounce everything and become monks. But what it means is that we should be absolutely honest, true, and sincere in any profession or job that we do.

Right Effort (*Samyagvyayama*) - When a person tries changing his life and attempts to live a reformed life by following the right speech, action, and livelihood then he faces resistance due to his deeply rooted old ideas and beliefs. One must maintain a constant effort to ward off bad thoughts and ideas. Since the mind cannot be empty, it should be continuously fed with good ideas. One must constantly develop good habits. The bad impulses should be abandoned at all costs. One must do this without any attachments. When we use a defense mechanism such as repression or denial then we are attaching it with us. But we must see and recognize it for what it is and then let it pass.

Right Speech (*Samyagvak*) - Right determination should be put into action and it shouldn't remain a mere wish. Our speech should be guided and controlled by the right determination which prevents one from lying, gossiping, and using unkind and hurtful words. Through speech, we manifest the internal so if speech isn't controlled, it manifests and promotes ignorance which could harm others. Psychologists emphasize the importance of being true to oneself and stopping lying. Buddhism advocates that when one is true to others then naturally they would be true to themselves and would have no need to lie to themselves.

Right Mindfulness (*Samyaksmti*) - The learner should always remember what he has learned. One must always be vigilant and must remember and see his mind as mind, body as body, sensation as sensation, and mental states as mental states. He must not confuse it with 'This is Me'. It is quite a difficult practice especially when false beliefs and ideas are deeply rooted within us and our behaviors are based upon them. We must be mindful by having an acceptance of them without any attachment. Buddhism does not ask one to reject the mind, body, or mental states, but actually acknowledge them with full consciousness and see them for what they truly are, be aware of their transitory and impermanent nature. Such acceptance and understanding will result in a rich awareness and an awakening. Buddhism also asks one to avoid consuming any drugs or substances that could alter one's consciousness or senses as it could lead to ignorance instead of awakening. While not just drugs, there are other distractions such as sexuality, materialistic things, and mindless rituals that one uses to

Right Action (*Samyakkarmanta*) - The right determination should be translated into not just right speech, but also right conduct. Right action or conduct comprises Pancasila which are the five views that prevent one from stealing, lying, killing, sensuality, and intoxication. Although these are five main moral percepts, some Buddhists have added additional uses

find an escape and disappear which steers us from the path of discovery of the truth.

Right Concentration (*Samyaksamadhi*) - When a person has guided his life in the light of the above-mentioned rules, he has freed his life from all the bad thoughts and impulses, and he enters into the four deeper stages of concentration. First, he concentrates his pure mind on investigation and reasoning regarding the truths which allows him to experience the joy born out of detachment. In the second stage, all doubts are dispelled, making the investigation and reasoning unnecessary, allowing him to experience peace, joy, and inner tranquillity which is born out of intense contemplation. In the third stage, the person becomes indifferent, detaches himself from joy, and experiences perfect equanimity. And finally, he is able to break free from all attachments and ignorance, when one overcomes all the obstacles, he achieves the ultimate wisdom and achieves Nirvana.

Meditating on the Principle of Non-Self

Buddha stressed the importance of having an 'empty' self, one must abstain from identifying things or events as 'self'. By doing so, one could stop taking unnecessary steps that will cause more suffering. The five Skandhas should be seen as a tool to practice the 'not-self', confusing not-self with having no self (or soul). Every aspect of human experience can be explained through the five Skandhas. It's the body (senses), the feelings which are positive or negative responses to stimuli, Perception which is the process of identifying, recognizing, and labeling things, and Mental formations that give birth to attitudes, prejudices, and interests. It's a sort of conditioning that compels the person to engage in an action, and Consciousness is the awareness of the objects perceived by our senses.

1. You are not your body. You have a body. But it's not you. The body is always changing. New cells replace old ones. The physique changes with age.
2. You are not your feelings. They are a result of your senses contacting the respective sense objects which produce them. Feelings or sensations are a result of the stimulation. It's not you.
3. You are not your perception. It's a result of the mental and sensory processes of labeling,

identifying, and recognizing things. It's something you do, but not you.

4. You are not your actions. You are also not the mental formations or the mental processes that result in conditioning, compelling you to engage in action.
5. You are not your consciousness. Consciousness is changing every minute. This awareness depends on other skandhas.

Now after understanding what skandhas are, it's time to use them practically to better understand oneself and escape the neurosis. Every narrative that we tell ourselves is a result of these Skandhas. It's possible to break free of the narrative that keeps us miserable and stuck in the repeated cycle.

We might not realize it, but all of our experiences can be explained through them. For example, you are telling your friend about something interesting that happened to you, but your friend starts yawning. The moment your eyes see his face yawning, you experience a negative feeling or sensation (arising due to eyes making contact with the sense object). You might have a pre-existing concept or mental formation in your mind that tells you that yawning indicates a lack of interest. Now there's an evaluation through your perception that what you are saying isn't deemed important by your friend based on him yawning while you are speaking. This eventually leads to consciousness where you become aware of this 'narrative' and you start reflecting on your experience that happened in a split second, but you are going to be bothered by it for the remainder of your day. Once you become conscious and aware of the experience, you are trapped in it. Now you try distracting yourself by coming up with reasonable excuses or start worrying and questioning if you are a boring friend. The idea is not to identify the skandhas with oneself. Experience them firsthand and then let them go. Return to the current moment instead of being drifted away by the combined product of the Skandhas.

BUDDHISM & CBT

It's not necessary that we explicitly categorize our personal experience into any of the categories of Skandhas. But what is important is that we let them guide us in achieving an understanding of ourselves. Notice which aspects of our minds, bodies, or hearts we identify as 'Me' or 'I'. Is it our body? Or maybe

something to do with our intellect or maybe achievement or maybe some plan. Buddhism's core idea is that anything whether it's external or internal that we label as 'Me' or 'Mine' has the potential to bring us unhappiness, anxiety, stress, and dissatisfaction. The idea of non-self in Buddhism tells us that a human person is an amalgamation of skandhas, he experiences the world through these aggregates, and mistakes it for being 'himself'. This also asserts that one could change their 'self' by changing the way one engages with these aggregates; perception, mental formation, and consciousness. This philosophy is very similar to CBT. Both CBT & Buddhism sees the self or the 'Me' component as something constituted from interrelated pieces. So the self or 'I' here is something that has to do with thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Both approaches do agree that there's a conditionality, cause & effect. Skandhas do not operate in a vacuum, there have to be some stimuli that become the cause. Therefore the self is always changing and is fluid. When we say 'not-self', it means there is nothing to hold on to permanently. Even in CBT, we have learned that the core beliefs formed due to early formative experiences are rigid, but not permanent, they can also be changed with effort.

Both CBT & Buddhism aim towards reducing the misery and suffering of the person, but they take different routes to it. For eg, if one is afraid of snakes then Buddhism would attribute this effect due to the mental formation of the concept of the snakes being scary, our feelings being an effect of it. So if we let go of this mental fabrication and the associated feelings, we will not suffer whereas CBT focuses on identifying the thought that a snake is scary and then replacing it with a different thought which is not frightening. Changing the thought results in changing the feeling associated with it. Thus even the maladaptive thoughts that bring us suffering also fall under the banner of 'Dukkha'. Definitely, Buddhism can be integrated into the CBT & REBT framework to provide more effective therapy. Buddhism aims to educate human people to be aware of their thoughts, feelings, and emotions because one would stay in conflict forever if one is not able to understand this never-ending chain of cause and effect. The word 'Mindfulness' that is advertised and used excessively in incorrect ways today in the name of therapy is nothing, but acquiring awareness and acceptance of the impermanence of things. The moment we start living in the moment and become aware of our moment-to-moment experiences, we will see the link between our thoughts, emotions, and experiences.

Becoming mindful of whether our thoughts and feelings are helpful, do they serve a good purpose? Or do they simply create unnecessary suffering for us.

CONCLUSION

The entire teachings of Buddhism can be summed up in three points. (1) Change, nothing in this world is permanent, change is pervasive, and everything is continuously changing. Even we ourselves aren't the same people that we were last year. We are continuously undergoing a change on a mental and physical level. So holding on to a specific aspect of ourselves, other objects, or this world is like trying to squeeze the sand tightly in your hand with the hopes of keeping it there forever, but it only causes it to trickle through. (2) Suffering, regardless of who we are, where the place we come from, or what job we do, we humans will forever 'Suffer' due to the imperfect and unsatisfactory nature of life and existence. We discussed different levels of suffering and investigated the causes of suffering. Even if we can attain happiness it would be impermanent and subjected to the law of change. Therefore to attain peace and equanimity, we must meditate on the four noble truths and walk the eightfold path to get clarity and attain liberation from the bondage of what causes suffering. (3) Non-Self, instead of speculating about whether a soul exists or not, we should try interpreting the doctrine of 'Anatta' in a different light. It means there is no 'I' or 'Me', what we label as an I is a temporary bundled collection of elements that are put together which gives the impression of having a stable self. A cart is made up of wheels, axles, shafts, and other parts. But a cart cannot be identified by its parts, a cart is not wheels or axles. Similarly, the 'I' is constituted of the Skandhas which give the impression of something stable and static. But again these elements are interdependent and subject to the law of change.

So we started with suffering. Before we could find an end to this suffering, we must understand its root cause which is the deeply rooted desire giving birth to clinging & attaching to 'I'. We want things and people to conform to this 'I', we want conditions to be according to this 'I', this expectation due to the deeply rooted desire of experiencing pleasure and avoiding pain through 'I' is what causes the suffering. When we are able to transcend the strong sense of 'I' we can find harmony with all the beings in the world, and we can experience bliss and equanimity. This can be attained by following the eightfold path.

The eightfold path can provide us with ‘Sukkha’ which means bliss or joy. Following the path helps us in cultivating good virtues such as compassion, love, patience, kindness, and wisdom. A compassionate state of existence where we are in harmony with all the beings in the world including plants and animals. Buddha told his disciples not to believe anything blindly, we must reason and test before believing anything. The awakening of Buddha can be attained by us ordinary beings too if we have the determination to walk the path of enlightenment. Note that ‘Sukkha’ is not the same as ‘Nirvana’. Sukkha is joy, bliss, or happiness arising when one focuses their pure mind on the truths and experiences the joy born out of detachment. As one goes deeper in meditation and concentration, they are able to further detach themselves from the joy born out of concentrating the pure and ruffled mind on the truths. Nirvana is when one is able to transcend beyond all the sense of bliss, elation, and joy, without any ease or pain, the perfect state of equanimity which causes the cessation of suffering.

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