

Is Buddhism without rebirth ‘nihilism with a happy face’?

Penultimate version; final forthcoming in *Analysis*. Kindly cite published version.

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Abstract

I argue against pessimistic readings of the Buddhist tradition on which unawakened beings invariably have lives not worth living due to a preponderance of suffering (*duḥkha*) over well-being.

Keywords: Buddhism, pessimism, *duḥkha*, suffering

1. Introduction

One day while I was staying at a Buddhist monastery, a monk remarked to me that “without belief in rebirth, Buddhism is nihilism with a happy face.”¹ Writing in a similar vein, Westerhoff (2017) contends that “the endeavor of naturalizing Buddhism...is fundamentally flawed” because, on naturalist assumptions—which rule out rebirth—one can achieve the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice—the cessation of suffering (*duḥkha-nirodha*)—by killing oneself. The thought behind these and similar worries appears to be the following: Buddhism is—in some sense to be precisified—pessimistic about our existence.² Moreover, if there is no round of rebirth from which to free anyone (including oneself), then we lack the chief instrumental reason identified in the Buddhist tradition to remain alive (not to mention to live virtuously): that doing so is necessary to secure liberation. Things are looking bleak: if life is suffering and we don’t have future rebirths to worry about, why carry on living—let alone perpetuate humanity?

¹ To preserve the monk’s anonymity, as was his desire, I shall leave the monastery unnamed.

² I’ve put the discussion throughout in terms that will be amenable to most Buddhists. I cannot however guarantee that it will be amenable to *all* Buddhists, given the diversity of the tradition.

One way to cash out the thought that Buddhism is pessimistic is to read it as wedded to the view that any mental state characterized by *duḥkha* (unsatisfactoriness, dissatisfaction, unease, suffering) is on-balance bad. Call this the *Pessimistic Assumption*. Alternatively, one might read Buddhism as committed to the claim that the *duḥkha* in unawakened lives invariably outweighs whatever goods are also present, so that all unawakened lives are bad for the beings who lead them. Call this the *Pessimistic Conclusion*. I argue that Buddhists need not accept either the Pessimistic Assumption or the Pessimistic Conclusion. The paper proceeds as follows: §2 motivates the worry that Buddhism is pessimistic. §3 tackles the Pessimistic Assumption and the Pessimistic Conclusion in turn. The argument will be that the negation of each is consistent with core Buddhist evaluative commitments, including the First Noble Truth.

2. The specter of pessimism

Why worry that Buddhism is pessimistic? First and foremost, the First Noble Truth of Buddhism states that the experience of unawakened beings—beings who haven’t attained awakening (*bodhi*, alt. trans. ‘enlightenment’)—is shot through with dissatisfaction (*duḥkha*) (SN 56:11, in Bodhi 2005: 75-78). This is the foundational starting point for the entire Buddhist tradition. Indeed, *duḥkha* is one of the so-called *three characteristics of conditioned phenomena* (*trilakṣaṇa*, on which more below); and conditioned phenomena comprise more-or-less our entire world.³ Second, canonical Buddhist discourses are replete with dour assessments of unawakened existence. For instance, in the Fire Discourse, the Buddha declares,

“monks, all is burning...The mind is burning...whatever feeling arises...whether pleasant or painful or [neutral]—that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of [craving], with the fire of hatred, with the fire of delusion; burning with birth, aging, and death; with sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair, I say” (SN 35:28, in Bodhi 2005: 346).

To take another example, the phrase ‘this whole mass of suffering’ is used repeatedly throughout early discourses to refer to unawakened existence (e.g. MN 75, in Bodhi 2005: 202-05); and humanity is elsewhere described as being “engulfed in sorrow” (MN 26, in Bodhi 2005: 71). Third, we find apparently pessimistic assessments of unawakened existence from major Buddhist philosophers. Buddhaghosa, the most influential Theravāda Buddhist philosopher, urges us to have compassion even for the apparently well-off person, for “In reality he is unhappy,’ because he is not exempt from the

³ *Nirvāṇa* and, in some Buddhist ontologies, space are unconditioned.

suffering” of existence in the realm of causes and conditions (*Visuddhimagga* 9.81, in Ñāṇamoli 2010: 309). For his part, Śāntideva, the most important Mahāyāna Buddhist moral philosopher, writes, “Happiness is scarce. Suffering persists with no effort”; and “misery is abundant, whereas enjoyment is paltry, like snatches at bits of grass made by a beast as it draws a cart” (*Bodhicaryāvatāra* 6.12 and 8.80, in Crosby and Skilton 2008: 51 and 95, respectively). Finally, we find across many Buddhist sources the idea that from a (more) awakened perspective, our familiar human world is in fact a sort of hellscape, to which disgusted rejection is a fitting reaction. One sutta warns of “the danger, degradation, and corruption of conditioned phenomena” (DN 14, in Walshe 1987: 216). Correspondingly, one often finds the admonition that it is not “proper for one to seek enjoyment” in our world (DN 15, in Bodhi 1984: 56). Instead,

“the stream of tears that we have shed as we roamed and wandered through [*samsāra*, the round of rebirth]...is more than the water in the four great oceans’...‘It is enough to experience revulsion toward all formations, enough to become dispassionate toward them, enough to be liberated from them’” (SN 15:3, in Bodhi 2005: 218-19).

Perhaps most vividly, Śāntideva challenges us, “you were horrified when you saw a few corpses in the charnel ground. Yet you delight in your village, which is a charnel ground thronging with moving corpses” (*Bodhicaryāvatāra* 8.70, in Crosby and Skilton 2008: 94). Thus the specter of Buddhist pessimism looms (as it did for Nietzsche; see e.g. *On the Genealogy of Morality* II: §21).⁴

3. Against Buddhist pessimism

3.1 Against the Pessimistic Assumption

According to the

Pessimistic Assumption, if a mental state is *duḥkha*, then it is on-balance bad.

By ‘on-balance bad’ I mean that it is worth not having, other things equal—it detracts from our welfare (which is to say, it makes our lives go worse). It’s bad news for us if the Pessimistic Assumption is true,

⁴ One might hold that a philosophical position is pessimistic only if it conjoins a bleak assessment of the human condition with the claim that this condition is *inescapable*. One might consequently find it obvious that Buddhism is *not* pessimistic, for Buddhism teaches that one can attain the cessation of suffering by cultivating the Eightfold Path. However, since the overwhelming majority of humans have failed to attain awakening, the Pessimistic Assumption implies that almost all human experience has been bad, and the Pessimistic Conclusion implies that the lives of all but a few humans have been bad for them. These implications strike me as pessimistic in a philosophically interesting—and existentially disturbing—sense.

for, per the First Noble Truth, all unawakened experience is *duḥkha* to some extent. To assess the Pessimistic Assumption, then, we need a clear understanding of what Buddhists mean by ‘*duḥkha*’.

There are three canonical varieties of *duḥkha*. I draw heavily on Harris (2014: 243-52) and Garfield (2021: 71-77) for exposition. The first type of *duḥkha*, suffering due to pain (*duḥkha-duḥkhatā*), occurs when we react to a painful sensation with aversion (*dveṣā*).⁵ This is familiar to us all: we usually want to make pain stop or to otherwise escape it. The second type of *duḥkha*, dissatisfaction due to change (*vipariṇāma-duḥkhatā*), arises when something that we like, or are attached to, changes in a way that we don’t like—including by ceasing to exist. This can happen in trivial cases, as when we finish the last bite of a tasty meal, or in serious cases, as when a loved one passes away. Sometimes the dissatisfaction due to change is also associated with the ostensibly unsatisfiable nature of the craving/thirsting (*trṣṇā*) that, according to Buddhist psychology, burns at the heart of the unawakened mind—on which more below (Harris 2014: 247-48). Finally, the third type of *duḥkha*, unsatisfactoriness due to being conditioned (*saṃskāra-duḥkhatā*), pertains to the fact that our entire existence, along with everything we care about, is subject to a host of causal factors over which we have relatively little agential control (Carpenter 2014: 15-19). In particular, we—alongside everyone we know and love—will eventually succumb to old age, sickness, and death; and (as a modern addition to the list) our entire universe will succumb to a high-entropy heat death. That we know all this, and know further that there’s not a damn thing we can do about it, is held to give rise to a pervasive background sense of frustration and despair (even if these sentiments aren’t always at the forefronts of our minds; see again Carpenter 2014: 15-19), or, at minimum, to establish that final and lasting happiness cannot be located in our world, dependent as it is on causes and conditions outside of our control.

What the First Noble Truth says, then, is that these three types of *duḥkha*—in widely varying degrees of subtlety—permeate our mental lives. Notice—and here is a crucial claim—that this does not entail that our lives are on-balance bad, that it would have been better for us never to have been born, or anything else in this vicinity. That’s because the fact that a given discrete experience is tainted by some form of *duḥkha* to some nonzero degree does not entail anything about whether that experience is good or bad for us. Rather, it simply tells us that the experience is, in some way, non-ideal. The inference from ‘experience *e* is subject to some form of *duḥkha*’ to ‘*e* is all-things-considered *bad*’ is a *further* axiological inference that—I claim—is not forced on us by anything in Buddhism, including the First Noble Truth.

⁵ See Baker (2024: §3.1) for defense of the interpretation that *bona fide suffering* due to pain involves aversion rather than pain (unpleasant *vedanā*) *simpliciter*.

Allow me to elaborate. It is plausible—and I grant—that episodes of suffering due to pain (*duḥkha-duḥkhatā*) and grosser episodes of dissatisfaction due to change (*vipariṇāma-duḥkhatā*) are bad. To reiterate, by ‘bad’ I mean that it is better not to have these experiences, other things equal—i.e., screening off any salutary *instrumental* effects they may have, and considering them in and of themselves. But consider

Lake Walk: you are walking along a forest path next to a lake. Looking up, you see sunlight streaming down to the water through a break in the clouds. As you take in the view, you feel aesthetically uplifted and grateful to be alive.

On the Buddhist view of things, during Lake Walk, *duḥkha* may be in play in one way and is definitely in play in another. Firstly, on a subtle level—possibly one that you are not consciously attending to, as you enjoy the view—your mind may crave something more—something even better (couldn’t the colors be a little brighter, or the birdsong a little sweeter?). This is the unsatisfiable nature of craving alluded to above (again, see Harris 2014: 247-48): no matter how much you enjoy the view, some part of you may be left unsatisfied. Secondly, this discrete experience—and, of course, your existential situation as a whole—remains out of your control. You can’t make the view last; you can’t get more aesthetic or hedonic value from it through an act of will; and sadly, no matter how sublime the view, it remains that everything you love and care about is going to die or otherwise cease to exist one day. In these respects, your experience is ultimately unsatisfying—i.e., it is *duḥkha*. What’s more, it bears the other two characteristics of conditioned phenomena as well: it is marked by impermanence (*anitya*) and devoid of self (*anātman*).⁶

Decisive question: does the fact that the Lake Walk experience is impermanent, not had by a self (*ātman*), and ultimately unsatisfying in the manner just described mean that it’s *bad*? I submit that the answer is No—and that Buddhists may answer in the negative as well. I’ll argue for these claims in order, beginning with the mundane observation that the fact that something is bad *in some respect* does not imply that it is bad *overall*. To illustrate, consider a book that is hailed as a literary masterpiece but that contains one (and only one) typo. The typo is a bad-making feature of the book, but the book is still aesthetically good overall. The corresponding thought when it comes to *duḥkha* is that the fact that an experience is tainted to *some* degree by *some* form of *duḥkha* does not imply that it is bad overall. We can agree that *duḥkha* is a bad-making feature of experience, but also hold that experiences can have good-making features, such as their being pleasurable, subjectively meaningful, and so on. It will then be left open whether the good-making features of an experience outweigh its bad-making

⁶ That there is no self (*ātman*) qua enduring, substantial subject-agent is a foundational Buddhist commitment.

features, such that the experience is on-balance good. This brings to light an important further point, namely that the Pessimistic Assumption depends on one of two claims: either that there simply *aren't* any good-making features of experience, or that whatever good-making features there may be can never outweigh *duḥkha*. To the extent that we can be confident in any of our evaluative judgments, we can be confident that both of these claims are false. It is clear from our everyday experience that some aspects of experience are good and that these aspects sometimes outweigh the bad ones. (As a sanity check: imagine whatever you think is the best experience any unawakened human being has ever had. This experience is on-balance good—even granting to the Buddhist that it contains subtle traces of *vipariṇāma-duḥkhatā* and *saṃskāra-duḥkhatā*.)

Since the Pessimistic Assumption is both strong and implausible on reflection, the principle of charity gives us *pro tanto* reason to avoid imputing it to the Buddhist. So, unless there is even greater interpretive force pushing us in the opposite direction, we should favor a reading on which Buddhism is not committed to the Pessimistic Assumption. I'll now consider two possible grounds for suspecting that Buddhists would reject the preceding reasoning about good- and bad-making features of experience and argue that each is spurious.

Firstly, one might point out that Buddhists are skeptical of certain common-sense philosophical judgments, both metaphysical and value-theoretic. Such skepticism arises from the Buddhist view that each of us starts out in a position of massive delusion (*avidyā*) regarding the nature of reality and the way to achieve well-being (*sukha*).⁷ Why, then, should we think that the claim that there are good-making features of experience—which are sometimes sufficiently powerful to outweigh its bad-making features—will find much purchase on the Buddhist? Mightn't the Buddhist reply that this 'confident evaluative judgment' is simply the output of a deluded mind, tragically caught up in the misapprehension that it can find lasting happiness in the impermanent, impersonal, and unsatisfying cycle of *saṃsāra*? No. Evidence for a more measured perspective can be found in the Kālāma Sutta (AN 3.65). Here, the Buddha clearly presupposes that his unawakened interlocutors are not entirely in the dark when it comes to value: “when you know for yourselves, ‘These things are

⁷ In particular, we tend to believe that we are substantial selves (*ātman-s*) and that the way to achieve happiness is to get what we want and avoid getting what we don't want. Buddhists distinctively deny both of these claims. As Śāntideva writes, “The world is a confusion of insane people striving to delude themselves” (*Bodhicaryāvatāra* 8.69); “Hoping to escape suffering, it is to suffering that they run. In the desire for happiness, out of delusion, they destroy their own happiness” (*Bodhicaryāvatāra* 1.28). Further evidence of skepticism regarding certain common-sense starting points can be found in Śāntideva's contention that “the world-view of the undeveloped is invalidated by the world-view of the spiritually developed” (*Bodhicaryāvatāra* 9.3) and in the Buddha's statement that “People for the most part live in [delusion], are blinded by [delusion]” (AN 4:128, in Bodhi 2005: 191). Skepticism about certain elements of common sense is consistent with the view that we can reliably obtain knowledge under the right conditions—a premise that underlies the Buddhist epistemological tradition of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti.

unwholesome’...then you should abandon them”]; “‘when you know for yourselves, ‘These things are wholesome...these things...lead to welfare and happiness,’ then you should engage in them” (Bodhi 2005: 89-90). These instructions make sense only on the assumption that unawakened persons can sometimes accurately track facts about value. If so, then the claim ‘Buddhists think we’re massively deluded, so we shouldn’t trust our evaluative intuitions’ overgeneralizes. There is no internal pressure from Buddhism to abandon our evaluative outlook wholesale. Therefore, unless we are presented with a specific reason to doubt it, we can, consistently with Buddhism, retain our belief that certain unawakened experiences are good and worth having for their own sakes.

One such reason for doubt may be thought to be found in the Māgandiya Sutta (MN 75). There, the Buddha likens the unawakened person who is pursuing sense pleasure to

“‘a leper with sores and blisters on his limbs...cauterizing his body over a burning charcoal pit” (Bodhi 2005: 204). Just as the leper, “‘though the fire was actually painful to touch...acquired a mistaken perception of it as pleasant,” the unawakened person, whose “‘faculties...are impaired,” “‘acquire[s] a mistaken perception of [sense pleasures] as pleasant,” even “‘though sensual pleasures are actually painful to touch” (Bodhi 2005: 205).

On a straightforward reading of this passage—which is inconsistent with my view—the Buddha is saying that the unawakened are in such an impoverished epistemic state that they mistake painful experiences for pleasurable experiences. On this reading, Lake Walk is actually an experience of suffering, and you just don’t see it that way owing to the great extent of your delusion! On my preferred reading, in contrast, the Buddha is not making the apparently self-contradictory statement that pleasure is pain. Rather, he is making two related points.⁸ First, to the extent that one’s mind is infected with craving, one will never derive *full* satisfaction from any discrete experience. For deep down one will always be thirsting for something more, and so there will always be a (subtle) element of bitterness even in the sweetest experiences. Second, attempting to secure happiness by chasing sense pleasures is *duḥkha* because it results in a cycle of pursuing and experiencing pleasure that never generates any deep or lasting well-being (see also MN 54, in Bodhi 2005: 199-202 and cf. Sidgwick 1962: 136, 403 on the paradox of hedonism). Importantly, each of these points is consistent with the claim that pleasure in itself is good. Defeasible textual evidence for this claim can be found in the same sutta in the Buddha’s description of “divine sensual pleasures [as] *more* excellent and sublime than human sensual pleasures” (italics added)—suggesting that human sensual pleasures are to some extent

⁸ In this interpretation I draw variously on Bodhi (2005: 437, n.9), Harris (2014: 248-49), Davis (2017: 226), and personal correspondence with Jonathan Gold. I do not claim that any of these authors would (fully) agree with my analysis of the sutta.

excellent and sublime, or at any rate, good—and in his concession that unawakened beings who pursue sense pleasure “find a certain measure of satisfaction and enjoyment” in it (Bodhi 2005: 203-05).⁹ (In another sutta, moreover, the Buddha admits that “there is gratification in the world” (AN 3:102, in Bodhi 2005: 193).) Dialectically, though, I don’t need to establish that the Māgandiya Sutta says that pleasure is good. I just need to establish that it does *not* say that each experience we have is on-balance bad. I believe I have done so by offering an interpretation of the sutta on which pleasurable experience has certain bad-making features that often go un(der)appreciated in the unawakened mind. This leaves it open whether pleasurable experiences are, on the whole, bad, or whether, instead, they are flawed but sometimes good.

3.2 Against the Pessimistic Conclusion

Perhaps, however, the critique of pleasure(-seeking) in the Māgandiya Sutta clues us in to a different pessimistic claim. According to the

Pessimistic Conclusion, *duḥkha* will always outweigh the good over the course of an unawakened life.

The Pessimistic Conclusion is weaker than the Pessimistic Assumption because, on the former but not the latter, it is possible for a discrete unawakened experience to be good overall. So, someone who affirms the Pessimistic Conclusion can agree that Lake Walk is good overall, but will caution that *duḥkha* will come out ahead when we sum up all the *duḥkha* and all the good that one accrues over an unawakened lifetime. The Pessimistic Conclusion will thus preserve the core worry at issue, namely that even if an esoteric liberation (i.e., *nirvāṇa*) is available to a select few who manage to attain it, life as *we*—the unawakened—know it is not worth living.

Before arguing against the Pessimistic Conclusion, let me say something in its favor. So far, the thrust of my argument has been this: the First Noble Truth tells us that our experience has certain bad-making features that present systematically, due to our delusion and consequent craving. But this entails neither that each discrete experience we have is on-balance bad nor that our lives on the whole are on-balance bad, for the fact that something is bad in some way does not entail that it is bad on

⁹ See also the Sāmaññaphala Sutta (DN 2, in Gethin 2008: 6-36), in which various things, including the ease of a guiltless conscience and the rapture of certain meditative absorptions (*jhānas*), appear to be marked out as good in virtue of being pleasant. For further discussion, see Hidalgo (2021), who argues that Abhidharma Buddhism is committed to hedonism; and Baker (2023) and (2024: §3.1), where I argue that subjective well-being in Buddhism is a matter of higher-order equanimity.

balance. Someone who believes that Buddhism is committed to the Pessimistic Conclusion might respond as follows: the point you make is all well and good as a matter of logic, but it misses the fact that Buddhism is a *soteriology*. The message of Buddhism is not, ‘your life is ok, but we can make it even better!’. That underestimates the gravity of our situation, as it is seen by the Buddhist. The Buddhist holds that suffering and dissatisfaction *pervade* our lives. That’s why we’re in need of *salvation*, as opposed to a little self-help.

In responding to this objection, let me begin by making a concessive remark. I am happy to grant, from a Buddhist perspective, that the sum total of human welfare, from the beginning of our species through the present, has been negative. I am even willing to suppose, again from a Buddhist perspective, that total human welfare in the present is negative. The thought behind these concessions is that Buddhism may place a very high bar on what it takes to lead a life worth living. These claims, together with the ever-looming inevitability of death and prospect of bad rebirth, account for the urgency of Buddhist soteriology—which I agree is a datum relevant for exegetical purposes.¹⁰ Importantly, though, each of these claims is consistent with the negation of the Pessimistic Conclusion. For notice that the Pessimistic Conclusion remains extremely strong, despite being weaker than the Pessimistic Assumption: it says that in *any* unawakened (human) life, *duḥkha* will outweigh the good. It scopes not only over all past and present unawakened (human) lives, but over all *possible* unawakened (human) lives. Once we have given up the Pessimistic Assumption, however, it is very difficult to endorse this claim. For denying the Pessimistic Assumption straightforwardly opens the door to accepting that discrete experiences can be on-balance good. And as Buddhists are wont to remind us, whatever arises in experience is dependent on causes and conditions. Given the right causes and conditions, therefore, it is possible for a lifetime of experience to come out on-balance good—even if it will necessarily contain a nontrivial amount of *duḥkha*, in virtue of being unawakened.¹¹

¹⁰ See e.g. SN 3:25 (in Bodhi 2005: 26-28) and *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 2.58.

¹¹ Further support for this claim can be found in the traditional Buddhist attitude towards rebirth as a god (*deva*) in a heavenly realm: “They rejoice after death in the deva-world / Enjoying abundant happiness” (AN 4:55, in Bodhi 2005: 122). Life as a god is good, except that it eventually comes to an end. In fact, the godly rebirth is sometimes critiqued for being too enjoyable—you’ll be having such a good time that you’ll forget to cultivate the Eightfold Path! In contrast, rebirth as a human is traditionally regarded as the best outcome, on the ground that humans suffer enough to be sufficiently motivated to pursue awakening, but not so much that they cannot effectively do so. (Cf. the unfortunate beings in the hell, hungry ghost (preta), and animal realms, whose lives are so full of suffering that their opportunities to progress along the path to awakening are severely limited.)

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Rupert Gethin, Jonathan Gold, Sebastian Liu, Jake Nebel, Karl Schafer, and two anonymous referees for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article and an audience at Princeton University for helpful discussion.

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