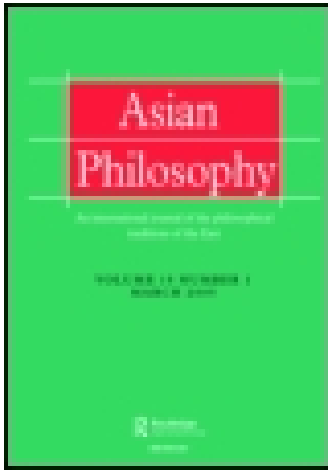


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# Suffering and the Shape of Well-Being in Buddhist Ethics

Stephen E. Harris

*This article explores the defense Indian Buddhist texts make in support of their conceptions of lives that are good for an individual. This defense occurs, largely, through their analysis of ordinary experience as being saturated by subtle forms of suffering (duḥkha). I begin by explicating the most influential of the Buddhist taxonomies of suffering: the threefold division into explicit suffering (duḥkha-duḥkhatā), the suffering of change (vipariṇāma-duḥkhatā), and conditioned suffering (saṃskāra-duḥkhatā). Next, I sketch the three theories of welfare that have been most influential in contemporary ethical theory. I then argue that Buddhist texts underdetermine which of these theories would have been accepted by ancient Indian Buddhists. Nevertheless, Buddhist ideas about suffering narrow the shape any acceptable theory of welfare may take. In my conclusion, I argue that this narrowing process itself is enough to reconstruct a philosophical defense of the forms of life endorsed in Buddhist texts.*

It is probably fair to say that ancient Indian Buddhist conceptions of how lives ought to be lived cut against the grain. Communities of Buddhist monks limit their possessions to essentials like robes, themselves sewn together from rags, and begging bowls and wander without reliable food or shelter. The eighth century Buddhist monk Śāntideva praises the life of the renunciate who lives at the foot of a tree or in a deserted temple, isolated from all human contact (Wallace & Wallace, 1997, p. 92). Even household bodhisattvas are urged to scorn their wives (Nattier, 2003), and the status of ordinary lay practitioners is generally seen as inferior to that of monastics.

In this article, I consider the type of philosophical defense Indian Buddhist texts make for the kinds of lives they endorse. In essence, what the Buddhist claims is that ordinary conceptions of what makes a life go well are massively deluded, so much so that the lives of homeless monastics who have abandoned almost everything ordinarily held to be of value are far superior to that of the householder who appears to flourish. This, in turn, is defended through their analysis of ordinary experience as saturated by subtle forms of suffering (*duḥkha*). A distinctive feature of Buddhist ethics, therefore, is the amount of philosophical work that is done by their careful

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analysis of, challenge to, and narrowing of conceptions of what makes a human life go well.

I proceed as follows. In the first section, I explicate the most influential of the Buddhist taxonomies of suffering: the threefold division into explicit suffering (*duḥkha-duḥkhatā*), the suffering of change (*vipariṇāma-duḥkhatā*), and conditioned suffering (*saṃskāra-duḥkhatā*). In the second, I sketch the three theories of welfare that have been the most influential in contemporary ethical theory. I then argue that Buddhist texts underdetermine which of these theories would have been accepted by ancient Indian Buddhists. Moreover, a modified form of each theory would be compatible with the Buddhist analysis of suffering detailed in the first section. Nevertheless, Buddhist ideas about suffering narrow the shape any acceptable theory of welfare may take. In my conclusion, I argue that this narrowing process itself is enough to reconstruct a philosophical defense of the forms of life endorsed in Buddhist texts. Although Buddhist texts do not offer a theory of welfare, in the sense of explicating at the deepest level what makes a life go well, their analysis of suffering provides justification for their view that the lives of homeless monastics and renunciates are better than those the rest of us lead.

### The Three Kinds of Suffering

The most influential of the Buddhist categorizations of suffering divides unsatisfactory experience into three categories: explicit suffering (*duḥkha-duḥkhatā*), the suffering of change (*vipariṇāma-duḥkhatā*), and the suffering of being conditioned (*saṃskāra-duḥkhatā*). *Duḥkha-duḥkhatā*, or explicit suffering, refers to the sensations we ordinarily identify as being painful, like stubbing my toe and experiencing frustration or embarrassment. Unlike explicit suffering, the second and third forms of suffering arise as a result of ignorance (*avidyā*) and craving (*trṣṇā*) infecting the cognitive and perceptual processing systems of sentient beings. Offering a brief sketch of these mental afflictions (*kleśas*) will help distinguish explicit suffering from these deeper and subtler forms of unsatisfactory experience, and so I turn to this below.

Buddhist texts describe ignorance in a variety of ways, but for our purposes a simplified general formulation will suffice. In dependence upon an object and sense organ, a particular sense consciousness is said to arise. The meeting of these three is called contact (*sparsā*), the event of sensory awareness. For instance, in dependence upon a properly functioning eye organ and the external object, awareness of the sensory properties of the apple, like color and smell, arises. After this sensory event (*sparsā*), hedonic feeling tone (*vedanā*) follows of pleasant, painful, or neutral variety. This pleasure gives rise to the impulse (*cetanā*) to reach out and touch and taste the locus of the color. Sensations of pleasure continue as the apple is grasped and tasted.

What is important to note is that according to the Buddhist, there is neither a unified enduring subject that experiences, nor a unified enduring object that is experienced. Although for convenience Buddhists sometimes talk of persons or apples, what is actually experienced is a stream of momentary impressions: multiple

seeings, touchings, tastes, smells, and physical sensations. For any ordinary sentient being, not far advanced in Buddhist training, these experiences are erroneously reified into a unified object, the apple, possessed by an independent and enduring subject (*ātman*). This is ignorance (*avidyā*), the deeply rooted tendency to superimpose the three marks of permanence, independence, and satisfactoriness upon impermanent (*anitya*), selfless (*anātman*) and unsatisfactory (*duḥkha*) phenomena. As a result of these superimpositions, craving (*trṣṇā*) for the apple arises, followed by an intensified form of desire called clinging (*upādāna*) in which I actively seek out what is wanted. The other mental defilements (*kleśas*), such as anger and jealousy, arise as a result of these root defilements of ignorance and craving. I become resentful or envious when you claim the apple that I want as your own.

Important for our purposes is to recognize that a fully awakened being, an *arhat*, or a Buddha, who has eliminated ignorance and craving from his mindstream, uses the same cognitive and perceptual system as the rest of us. He can see, hear, smell, touch, and taste the apple's sensory properties and even labels this conglomeration of properties for convenience with the concept 'apple.' Unlike ordinary beings, the awakened *arhat* does not erroneously believe sense experience to be caused by a unified enduring independent object. Rather, the name given to the object is used as a convenient designation (*prajñapti*), much as a group of trees might be called a forest without a corresponding error being made that a unitary object called 'forest' existed. Also significantly, the awakened being feels pleasant, painful, and neutral sensations (*vedanā*). Upon seeing and tasting the apple, he experiences enjoyment, but unlike the rest of us, craving (*trṣṇā*) toward the apple does not arise as a result. This is because he views the apple as a conceptual imputation upon radically impermanent phenomena, rather than as a self-subsisting enduring object capable of sustaining satisfaction.

This sketch of the Buddhist understanding of how error enters into our perceptual and cognitive system allows us to distinguish between the first and the deeper second and third forms of suffering. The first of the three forms of suffering, *duḥkha-duḥkhatā*, or explicit suffering, is identified with unpleasant sensation (*vedanā*). This is the kind of sensation we ordinarily call painful: I stub my toe, smell decay, or hear a sharp sound. As just explained, sensation (*vedanā*) arises in awakened as well as afflicted cognitive systems, and therefore, even an awakened being free from ignorance and craving may experience painful sensation. This is attested to in the early Buddhist scriptures by accounts of the historical Buddha experiencing physical pain, such as sickness or a splinter in the toe (Bodhi, 2000, p. 116: S i 27–29; Walshe, 1995, p. 244: D ii 99).<sup>1</sup> Buddhist sources are divided about whether awakened beings experience mental pain, but the psychological suffering of ordinary persons, such as grief and frustration, should also be classified as explicit suffering.<sup>2</sup> Although Buddhist texts identify explicit suffering with unpleasant sensation, by extension it also refers to the external objects that bring displeasure, as well as associated moments of consciousness (Vasubandhu, 1988, p. 899). Not only my pain, but the wasp that stings me and my awareness of the sting may all be classified as explicit suffering.

In contrast to explicit suffering, the second and third forms of suffering arise as a result of ignorance and craving and are therefore not experienced by liberated beings. It is not, however, immediately obvious how to meaningfully distinguish these forms of suffering. The suffering of change (*vipariṇāma-duḥkhatā*) relates to pleasant sensation and is said to refer to the fact that pain will arise when a pleasant sensation ends (Vasubandhu, 1988, p. 899). Strictly speaking, the resulting painful sensation should be a form of explicit suffering (*duḥkha-duḥkhatā*), but Buddhist texts are not consistent on this, and sometimes the painful sensation is itself referred to as the suffering of change.<sup>3</sup> The root problem behind the suffering of change appears to be the impermanence of pleasure. Meanwhile, the suffering of being conditioned (*saṃskāra-duḥkhatā*) refers to the unsatisfactoriness belonging to any moment of experience in virtue of its dependence upon causal conditioning for its existence. The commentaries claim that conditioned things are suffering because they are ‘oppressed by rise and fall,’ that is subject to creation and then dissolution (Buddhagosa, 2003, p. 505). Again, the root difficulty seems to be impermanence. Conditioned suffering has a wider scope, since it afflicts all conditioned entities and experiences, and Buddhists hold everything with the exception of *nirvāṇa* is conditioned. But apart from this, the unsatisfactory aspect of both forms of suffering appears to be impermanence, and it is not immediately apparent why two terms need to be used.

We can begin to disentangle the two by noting that the suffering of change is explicitly identified with and restricted to pleasant sensations, and by extension with the consciousness that experiences pleasant objects as well as the objects of pleasure (Vasubandhu, 1988, p. 899). Conditioned suffering is identified with neutral sensations, and by extension the relevant objects and conscious experience. The commentaries, however, explain that this identification is made only because conditioned suffering is the only kind of suffering afflicting neutral sensations (Vasubandhu, 1988, pp. 899–900). Painful and pleasant sensations, as well as associated objects and consciousness, are also dependent on causes and conditions and therefore are also afflicted by conditioned suffering. This opens up two possible avenues for determining what ‘conditioned suffering’ refers to. We might consider neutral sensations in isolation and determine in what way they are unsatisfactory (Engle, 2009, p. 123). Likewise, we can ask in what way a pleasant sensation is unsatisfactory, specifically in virtue of being pleasant and use this to determine the meaning of the suffering of change. Since the commentaries claim that the suffering of change is easier to understand than conditioned suffering (Vasubandhu, 1988, p. 900), I begin with this latter strategy.

### The Suffering of Change and Related Forms of Suffering

The suffering of change, in the early sutras, is described as afflicting pleasant sensation, and multiple commentaries explain that it refers to the fact that suffering will arise when a pleasant sensation ends. As the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* states, ‘Agreeable sensation is agreeable when it arises, agreeable when it lasts, but suffering

in its change' (Vasubandhu, 1988, p. 899). Early Buddhist texts, however, draw attention to numerous shortcomings of pleasure other than the pain that arises when a pleasant sensation ends. Moreover, the suffering of change is the kind of suffering belonging to sensations (and by extension-related objects and consciousness) in virtue of being pleasant, and all of the drawbacks of pleasure alluded to in Buddhist texts fit this description. Therefore, in this section, I treat together all of these dangers of pleasant sensation, although we should keep in mind that most Buddhist texts only explicitly use the term *vipariṇāma-duḥkhatā* as marking the fact that pleasure turns into pain.

Buddhist texts hold that there is nothing about pleasant sensation itself that inevitably makes suffering arise. This is shown clearly in *The Shorter Discourse on the Mass of Suffering* (*Cūladukkhakkandha Sutta*) in which the Buddha claims to be able to experience more pleasure in deep meditation than a king with unlimited access to sense pleasure (Ñānamoli & Bodhi, 1995, pp. 188–89:M i 94–95). Likewise, we saw above that sensations of pleasure (*sukha-vedanā*) arise even in an awakened being. Pleasant sensation becomes harmful only when it occurs within a cognitive system infected with craving (*trṣṇā*) caused by ignorance (*avidyā*) superimposing permanence and independence upon dependent and transitory phenomena. It is this craving for enduring satisfaction from inherently transitory phenomena which results in the experience of grief when the pleasant experience ends.

Buddhists, therefore, hold that pleasant sensations occurring in the mindstream of a liberated being are not harmful. It is only pleasure arising in a *samsāric* person's cognitive system that is marked as suffering. Here, there are broadly two attitudes.<sup>4</sup> The first, which draws attention to what I will call 'the object-related drawbacks of pleasure,' accepts that even pleasure arising in a mindstream afflicted by craving is, of itself, not harmful, but should be avoided because it will inevitably lead to pain. This strategy is made particularly explicit in a passage from the second century CE poet, Aśvaghōṣa's *Life of the Buddha* (*Buddhacarita*), in which the young prince Gautama, who has recently realized the transience of all phenomena, scorns a roomful of courtesans his father has provided to entice him back to a life of kingship and sensual pleasure.

I do not despise sense objects.  
I know that the world consists of them.  
Having realized the world is impermanent,  
my mind does not delight in it.

If these three did not exist,  
Old age, disease and death,  
Then I would also take delight  
in these objects known by the mind. (Aśvaghōṣa 1995, my translation)<sup>5</sup>

The root problem illustrated in this passage has nothing to do with the nature of pleasure in itself; in fact, the Buddha-to-be claims that he would happily dally with the women if convinced their beauty would not fade. The difficulty with pleasure is that in ordinary minds it is coupled with craving that desires its continuance. Since

pleasure is impermanent, this will lead to pain when it collapses. It is this transformation of pleasure into pain that gives the suffering of change its name. Pleasure, here, is seen as worthy of desire, but dangerous and to be discarded since it is conducive to suffering.

Other Buddhist texts also leave unchallenged the satisfactory nature of pleasure, but draw attention to various difficulties of attaining and protecting it. The *Greater Mass of Craving Sutta*, for instance, emphasizes hardships, such as cold, heat, and insect bites that one must endure to accumulate riches, as well as the inevitable breaking out of quarrels once wealth is achieved (Ñānamoli & Bodhi, 1995, pp. 180–81: M i 86–88). Another frequently emphasized drawback is the anxiety one experiences once the objects that bring pleasure are obtained. This point is made vividly in the story of Bhaddiya Kāḷigodha, a former king who becomes the disciple of the Buddha, and is overheard saying ‘what bliss, what bliss’ repeatedly when meditating. The other monks assume he is fantasizing about his former riches and take him to the Buddha for admonition. Bhaddiya explains that when he was a king, despite the presence of numerous royal guards, he lived in constant paranoid fear of losing his wealth. It is only now as a monk, having renounced all but essential possessions, that his mind is finally at ease (Thanissaro, 2012: Ud 18).

All the passages cited so far do not challenge the assumption that pleasure would be valuable if it lasted, even when it arises within a *saṃsāric* cognitive and perceptual system; for all he has said thus far, king Bhaddiya might have slept soundly had he invincible magical golems directly under his control to protect his wealth. The problem, rather, is with the world, in the impermanence and the fragility of its objects, and in the greed and hatred of its inhabitants. There is, however, a deeper critique of pleasure leveled by certain Buddhist texts where the impoverished nature of pleasure arising in a mind infected by craving is itself emphasized. I refer to this as ‘the subject-related drawbacks of pleasure,’ since it locates the suffering pleasure engenders as arising from the mind of *saṃsāric* persons directly, regardless of what the world is like.

As before, I turn to Āśvaghoṣa’s *Life of the Buddha* for an illustration of this kind of suffering. In this passage, the Buddha speaks of the insatiable nature of desire.

For pleasures are fleeting, robbing wealth and virtue,  
They are empty, like phantoms in this world;  
Even when wished for,  
They delude the minds of men;  
How much more when actually possessed?

For men overwhelmed by pleasures find no relief  
In triple heaven, much less in this mortal world;  
For pleasures do not sate a man full of desires,  
As firewood a fire accompanied by the wind. (Āśvaghoṣa 2008, pp. 304–305)<sup>6</sup>

The contrast between this and the first passage by Āśvaghoṣa is striking. Earlier, the Buddha-to-be had claimed that only the impermanence of women’s beauty restrained him from indulgence. In contrast, now craving is characterized in its nature as incapable of fulfillment, and the pleasures that accompany the pursuit of sense objects are said to merely increase longing without providing satisfaction. Pleasure, arising in

the mind of a *saṃsāric* person, is now seen in itself to be a kind of suffering, regardless of the fragility and vulnerability of the objects from which it arises. The logic of this second passage suggests that a roomful of women bearing eternal beauty would be the ultimate torment for a person afflicted by ignorance and craving.

This insatiability of desire is illustrated by numerous images in Buddhist texts, with perhaps the most provocative belonging to the *Māgandiya Sutta* from the early Pali canon.

Suppose, Māgandiya, there was a leper with sores and blisters on his limbs, being devoured by worms, scratching the scabs off the openings of his wounds with his nails, cauterizing his body over a burning charcoal pit; the more he scratches the scabs and cauterises his body, the fouler, more evil smelling and more infected the openings of his wounds would become, yet he would find a certain measure of satisfaction and enjoyment in scratching the openings of his wounds. So too, Māgandiya, beings who are not free from lust for sensual pleasures, who are devoured by craving for sensual pleasures, who burn with fever for sensual pleasures, still indulge in sensual pleasures; the more such beings indulge in sensual pleasures, the more their craving for sensual pleasures increases and the more they are burned by their fever for sensual pleasures, yet they find a certain measure of satisfaction and enjoyment in dependence on the five cords of sensual pleasure. (Ñānamoli & Bodhi, 1995, pp. 611–12; M i 507–508)

The image of the leper scratching and burning his sores illustrates how a sensation can feel pleasant while being so deeply impoverished that it should itself be viewed as a kind of suffering. To interpret the passage as claiming that the pleasure of scratching the sores is intrinsically good, but outweighed by the pain of infection and so on, is to misread the image. Pleasure *itself* here is suffering, regardless of its future results. Similarly, the *Potaliya Sutta* emphasizes the insatiable nature of craving by using the image of a famished dog gnawing at a meatless bone smeared with blood (Ñānamoli & Bodhi, 1995, p. 469; M i 364). Likewise, Śāntideva compares the pursuit of sense pleasure to licking honey off the edge of a razor (BCA 7:64). The images suggest the cycle of addiction in which pleasure sought by a mind infected with craving merely increases the force of desire without satisfaction.

There are, then, two distinct strands to the early Buddhist critique of the pursuit of pleasure, an external strategy focusing on the limitations of impermanent objects and an internal one emphasizing the insidious nature of craving itself. The two strategies, however, may be brought closer together by observing that both depend, in some sense, upon the cognitive mismatch between our desire for permanence and the impermanence of what is encountered. This is obvious in the object-related drawback strategy: it is because the beauty of women is impermanent, while the young prince desires permanent satisfaction that he turns away from the harem. In apparent contrast, the images given in the subject-related approach seem to treat desire as a brute force that craves insatiably, regardless of the characteristics of the object given to it.

Buddhism, however, does not treat craving as a brute given. Craving is analyzed and given a causal explanation as a grasping that arises when permanence and independence are superimposed upon transient and dependent phenomena. In the



*Māgandiya Sutta*, this is indicated by referencing the distorted mental faculty of the leper, meant to be analogous to the ignorance that superimposes permanence and independence upon conditioned momentary events (Ñānamoli & Bodhi, 1995, pp. 611–612: M i 507). Both subject- and object-related drawbacks of pleasure, then, arise because of a cognitive mismatch between subject and world, in which desire seeks nonexistent permanence.

Where the two strategies differ is the level at which the collision between our expectations and the way the world is occurs. We can characterize this in ‘Abhidharma’ terminology by saying that what I have called the object-related drawbacks of pleasure occur at the level of conventional reality (*saṃvṛtisatya*), in which partite objects, with spatial and temporal extension, appear to endure for a period of time before dissolution. From the standpoint of ordinary life, the beauty of women seems to last, and I do not recognize dissatisfaction from partaking in this pleasure until their beauty, as well as my own virility, has begun to fade. Passages emphasizing the insatiable nature of craving, in contrast, reveal that during this whole stretch in which I appear (even to myself) to be robustly enjoying sensual pleasures, there is a deeper underlying dissatisfaction, which might even be characterized as subtle pain, arising from all this sensual indulgence. This is because at the level of ultimate reality (*paramārthasatya*), in which experience is analyzed into discrete radically impermanent mental and physical events, each instant of engagement with sense pleasure represents a new affective response to cognitive error. Craving, by its very nature, in its moment-by-moment arising, is never capable of any real satisfaction, since it inevitably seeks nonexistent entities. What this means is that the suffering of change is nested. The sensualist experiences moment-by-moment subtle dissatisfaction while indulging in pleasure and then the more obvious pain that is ordinarily recognized as explicit suffering (*duḥkha-duḥkhatā*) when the temporally extended sequence of pleasure comes to a close.

What I have done in this section is to group together a number of strategies present in early Buddhist texts that emphasize the dissatisfactory nature of pleasant experience. Many Buddhist commentaries identify only the pain that arises when pleasure collapses as the suffering of change. This represents one aspect of what I have classified as object-related drawbacks to pleasure. Since *vipariṇāma-duḥkha* is meant to mark the unsatisfactory nature of sensation insofar as it is pleasant, however, I think it helpful to group together under this heading a wider selection of the drawbacks to the pursuit of pleasure represented in early Buddhist texts. These include other object-related drawbacks, such as the difficulty of obtaining and defending pleasurable objects, and the subject-related drawback that pleasure cannot satisfy craving even temporarily and should itself be recognized as a form of subtle pain.

### **Conditioned Suffering (*saṃskāra duḥkhatā*)**

Conditioned suffering (*saṃskāra-duḥkhatā*) is the unsatisfactoriness things possess as a result of arising in dependence on causes and conditions. Above I explained that all conditioned entities possess conditioned suffering, but that neutral sensations are

explicitly identified with it because they are not afflicted by any other kind of suffering. This makes conditioned suffering somewhat puzzling, since it is not immediately clear why a neutral sensation, inasmuch as it is simply neutral, should be a kind of suffering at all.<sup>7</sup>

Traditionally, the Buddha is said to have listed eight forms of suffering in his first sermon, the last of which the fourth century CE philosopher Asaṅga identifies as conditioned suffering (Asaṅga, 2001, p. 85).

[B]irth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering, union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering. (Bodhi, 2000, p. 1844: S v 421)

Item one, birth, is held to be unsatisfactory in being a physically painful event and in being the foundation for future sufferings (Buddhagosa, 2003, pp. 506–507). Items 2–7 are most naturally identified as cases of explicit suffering, although Asaṅga considers separation from what one likes and not getting what one wants as suffering of change, since these sufferings arise as a result of our attachment to pleasure (Asaṅga, 2001, p. 85). The eighth item in the list references the five aggregates or *skandhas*: matter (*rūpa*), sensation (*vedanā*), recognition (*saṃjñā*), consciousness (*vijñāna*), and mental factors such as volitional intent (*saṃskāra*). These five are held by Buddhists to jointly constitute the experience of sentient beings. Indeed, the definitive Buddhist claim is that these five impersonal and impermanent elements alone are sufficient to account for sentient experience and that we err when we identify any or all of them as being or belonging to an enduring self (*ātman*). In the Buddha's sermon, he identifies as suffering the aggregates that are subject to clinging (*upādāna*), itself a stronger form of craving (*trṣṇā*), meaning that any aggregate arising in the cognitive and perceptual system of a being under the influence of craving and ignorance is suffering.

This eighth item in the list of sufferings, then, identified by Asaṅga with conditioned suffering, refers to the entire cognitive and perceptual system of unenlightened beings. It constitutes a value judgment on *saṃsāric* experience as a whole. This suggests a contrast between the suffering of change (*vipariṇāma-duḥkhatā*) and conditioned suffering (*saṃskāra-duḥkhatā*): the suffering of change is atomic, in referencing the drawbacks of a particular instance of pleasure. By contrast, conditioned suffering is holistic, drawing attention to the situatedness of a particular sensation within an impoverished cognitive and perceptual system that functions under the influence of ignorance and craving.

The term '*saṃskāra*,' which I have been translating as conditioned, literally means that which has been caused together, indicating that the thing is dependent on causes and conditions. Aryadeva (c. 300 CE.) suggests that merely an awareness of this causal relatedness of experience should awaken great terror.

You cannot see the initial cause  
Of even a single effect;  
Seeing how vast the causes of even one effect are,  
Who would not be frightened?<sup>8</sup>

There are two reasons that the causal relatedness of our experience should terrify. First, since states arise in a vast causal network beyond our control or even understanding, our present experience can be replaced by suffering at any moment. This instability is marked as *samskāra-duḥkha* because it is itself unsatisfactory, just as working for a company that kept threatening to fire you at any moment would be unsatisfactory. Second, each event is itself a causal condition for many future events. Any present occurrence, therefore, can contribute to the arising of innumerable future sufferings.

The Tibetan commentator Tsong-kha-pa likewise emphasizes that instability and its role of acting as a causal condition for more obvious forms of suffering are what most strongly characterize conditioned suffering.

Though you have occasional moments when painful feeling is absent, because the aggregates are firmly embedded in the dysfunctional tendencies of suffering and the afflictions, the suffering of conditionality is still present, and therefore myriad sufferings are just on the verge of arising in countless ways. Therefore, since the suffering of conditionality pervades all suffering and is the root of the other two types of suffering, meditate on it often in order to become disenchanted with it. (Tsong-Kha-Pa, 2000, p. 291)

In this passage, Tsong-kha-pa characterizes conditioned suffering as the cause of the other kinds of suffering because pleasure and pain both are instances of and arise in dependence upon causally conditioned phenomena. Like Aryadeva, he also draws our attention to the extreme fragility of any moment of respite from the arising of explicit suffering. This is in contrast to the suffering of change, in which pain arises because a specifically pleasant item or experience has been lost. Here, Aryadeva and Tsong-kha-pa draw attention to the fragility that characterizes any conscious event whatsoever.

Asaṅga characterizes conditioned suffering as being ‘accompanied by a state of indisposition’ (*dauṣṭhulyam*), referring to the presence of harmful habitual tendencies (*anuśaya*) and seeds (*vāsanā*) that ripen into eruptions of negative mental states (*kleśas*) such as anger, craving, and jealousy.<sup>9</sup> The point is that as long as a cognitive system is dominated by craving and ignorance, any mental episode, including apparently harmless neutral sensations, may become a contributing factor to the ripening of negative mental states that condition new forms of explicit suffering. A second characteristic of conditioned suffering emphasized by Asaṅga is that ‘one’s welfare is not secure’ (Engle, 2009, p. 123). Asaṅga connects this remark to subtle impermanence, the doctrine that objects and events are not only perishable, but also disintegrate immediately after coming into existence. Except in advanced meditative states, subtle impermanence cannot be directly observed and must be inferred as a condition of anything changing at all (Engle, 2009, pp. 124–130). Engle explains that reflecting on this radical impermanence ‘creates a profound sense of helplessness that represents a realization of the suffering of conditioned existence’ (Engle, 2009, p. 132).

We have already seen that one of the prominent aspects of the Buddhist critique of pleasure is its emphasis on the fear of losing objects of enjoyment. Fear of specific occurrences is also implicit in the analysis of explicit suffering (*duḥkha-duḥkhatā*); I can be afraid of the physical pain of an operation, or the mental torment of an

upcoming divorce proceeding. The holistic nature of conditioned suffering allows us to mark another distinction between it and these other forms of suffering. The anxiety engendered by conditioned suffering is not a fear directed at the loss of any specific object, nor at encountering something unwanted; this follows from the fact that conditioned suffering ranges over neutral feelings as well as objects to which we are indifferent. Conditioned suffering marks the fact that a moment of experience is embedded in a *saṃsāric* cognitive system and is unsatisfactory insofar as it arises from and acts as a causal condition for the furtherance of the entire *saṃsāric* system of pain. The affective state associated with conditioned suffering, then, is not object-directed fear, but anxiety, in something close to Heidegger's sense, as a background free-floating unease about the very conditions of our existence in the world.<sup>10</sup> Conditioned suffering does not make us fear any particular event, but rather makes us feel anxious about being in *saṃsāra* at all.

Drawing together these various characterizations of conditioned suffering allows us to summarize it as referring to the fact that any given moment of experience occurs within a cognitive system under the influence of ignorance and craving. All such experiences are unsatisfactory in that they are unstable and, due to radical impermanence, are liable to be replaced by events of explicit suffering, and that moreover they act as causal conditions for the arising of future states of suffering. In contrast to the suffering of change, conditioned suffering is holistic, in that it draws attention to the entire system of *saṃsāric* experience in which the indicated moment of awareness is causally situated. It results in an intense feeling of helplessness, an anxiety directed not toward any particular item, but rather the entire *saṃsāric* cognitive system as a whole.

We can illustrate the difference between the three types of suffering (*duḥkha*) by considering various arguments we might use to convince a friend to leave an abusive partner. Our friend might point to the periods of relative stability and even enjoyable moments occurring as interludes between emotional and physical abuse as justifying their decision to remain in the relationship. In response, we might remind our friend how awful particular instances of abuse were (*duḥkha-duḥkhatā*) and point out that any joyful periods are merely respites between the inevitable reoccurrence of abuse (*vipariṇāma-duḥkhatā*). It is conceivable that the friend could respond that these relatively enjoyable periods, combined with periods of peace, nevertheless outweigh the occurrences of explicit pain and suffering. We could respond by insisting that these supposedly good times cannot really be enjoyed since anxiety as to when violence will reoccur contaminates any satisfaction taken from them. This is the strategy exemplified by Buddhists in their analysis of *saṃskāra-duḥkhatā*: all *saṃsāric* experience is contaminated by anxiety and is unsatisfactory in being part of an impoverished system of pain.

### Buddhist Suffering and Theories of Welfare

In this section, I consider how the accounts of Buddhist suffering just explored constrain the shape an acceptable theory of well-being can take and thereby provide

a defense of the kinds of lives Buddhist texts endorse. I begin by briefly distinguishing three of the most influential theories of well-being in the Western tradition. I then argue that Buddhist texts are compatible with each of these theories and therefore are not committed to any single theory of well-being. Nevertheless, the Buddhist analysis of suffering explored in the last section constrains the shape any theory of well-being acceptable to the Buddhist can take. I argue that this narrowing of these accounts of well-being is enough to provide a defense of the kinds of lives Buddhist texts affirm.

A theory of well-being explains what is in an individual's best interest, in the sense of explicating at the deepest level what makes her life go as well as possible. A mental state theory claims that welfare consists solely in experiencing certain psychological states. The most prominent historical example of a mental state theory is hedonism, the position that welfare consists in pleasure and the absence of pain. One influential critique of hedonism points out that most of us care about more than our own mental experience. Nozick famously makes this point through his experience machine thought experiment. We are asked to imagine a machine that stimulates our neurons to give us experiences qualitatively identical to those had in ordinary life. Nozick claims that most of us would not choose to hook ourselves up permanently to an experience machine, even if we were able to program in as many pleasurable experiences as we desired. This shows that humans care about more than how the world feels to us (Nozick, 1974, pp. 42–44).

One solution to the problem raised by the experience machine is to endorse a desire-satisfaction theory that claims that satisfying one's desires is what makes a life go well. The ordinary version of this theory claims satisfying whatever desires we happen to have is what welfare consists in. An obvious problem with this view is that we often desire things that are bad for us and that some of these desires result from false information. The theory may be nuanced to account for this objection by including rationality and informational clauses, so that a life is said to go well when a rational agent with all the relevant information satisfies his desires. A difficulty facing the informed-desire theory is that it is no longer clear why the satisfaction of desire, rather than objectively good qualities of the object desired, is thought to be welfare promoting. If a fully informed rational agent desires a given item, the objection goes, surely there must be some feature of the object desired that is valuable for its own sake, regardless of whether anyone wants it.

In contrast to desire theories, an objective list theory claims that certain items enhance our welfare, regardless of whether we want them. The list of objective welfare enhancing items might include things such as friendship, appreciation of beauty, and character development, but also can include subjective mental states such as pleasure and even desire satisfaction.<sup>11</sup> Objective list theories are distinguished from desire theories in that they hold the items on the list benefit an individual whether or not she desires them. An important characteristic of an objective list theory is its rejection of subjectivism, the view that the agent has the final say as to how well her life is going (Haybron, 2008, p. 22). One of the complaints against objective list theories is that they do not explain what it is about the items on the list that enhance our well-being

(Heathwood, 2010). Unlike mental state theories and desire-based accounts, objective list theories are not able to unify our intuitions about welfare value.

It is not my purpose to evaluate these theories, but to consider their relation to Buddhist insights about suffering. Further, although this taxonomy is not exhaustive, considering whether Buddhists would endorse any of these three theories will be sufficient for my purpose. Given Buddhists' emphasis on the importance of eliminating suffering, it might seem obvious that they would accept some form of mental state theory where welfare consists in mental states that lack suffering. All of the theories listed above, however, can acknowledge the welfare-increasing value of ending suffering. A Buddhist desire theory can claim that a particularly important desire possessed by each of us is to remove our suffering and that our life goes much better if that desire is fulfilled.<sup>12</sup> An objective list theory may accept the absence of suffering as one of the items that are a direct source of value to my welfare.<sup>13</sup>

Buddhist texts also devote considerable energy to analyzing and explaining how to develop the various virtuous qualities (*kuśala dharmas*) that are conducive to liberation. One might use Buddhist language praising these virtues as evidence that Buddhism accepts an objective list theory, since these seem to be esteemed even if they do not bring pleasure and are not desired by some individuals. A difficulty with this interpretation is that it does not rule out the possibility that such items have only instrumental value, possessing worth only insofar as they contribute to either obtaining the positive mental state of absence of suffering (mental state theory) or achieving our desire to be free of suffering (desire theory). Like the emphasis on suffering, the attention Buddhists give to the virtues is compatible with all three theories of well-being listed above. Pointing out that the Buddhist goal is the attainment of *nirvāṇa*, the state in which ignorance and craving are eradicated forever is no help, for we can then ask whether this state is valued for its own sake, or because we desire it. We might also claim with Damien Keown (2001) that attainment of *nirvāṇa* is constituted by intrinsically valuable virtuous states, thereby pushing us back toward an objective list theory of welfare.<sup>14</sup>

Although it is undeniable that Buddhist texts are committed to removing suffering and developing virtue and that they hold this is vital to the welfare of sentient beings, they do not clearly mark the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value. As a result, they do not mark at the deepest level what it is that makes a person's life go best: whether it is to experience a mental state free of pain, or to fulfill one's desire to be free from suffering, or to perfect the human virtues, one result of which is freedom from suffering. It is therefore difficult if not impossible to determine which theory of well-being Buddhists would adopt. Nevertheless, the Buddhist analysis of suffering discussed in the first part of this chapter excludes many of the items usually held to have welfare value by contemporary versions of these three theories. It therefore functions to narrow the shape that any theory of well-being acceptable to Buddhists can take. Below, I discuss the forms these three theories might take that would be compatible with Buddhist commitments. I argue that this narrowing process itself is enough to justify the kinds of lives Buddhist texts endorse.

A mental state theory acceptable to Buddhists will be quite different from contemporary varieties. Given the drawbacks of the pursuit of pleasure illustrated by the Buddhist analysis of the suffering of change (*vipariṇāma-duḥkhatā*), the prospects of Buddhist hedonism are grim. It is true that, as remarked above, pleasure in itself is not viewed as harmful when not conjoined with ignorance and craving. Nevertheless, there are only scant references in Buddhist scriptures to *arhats* and the Buddha enjoying a kind of rarified pleasure, usually in deep meditative states, and no indication that this is the underlying aim of Buddhist practice. Still, a mental state theory that emphasized a mind free of craving and suffering might be developed into a plausible Buddhist candidate for a theory of welfare. Such an account would sit well with examples like that of the monk Bhaddiya who finally experiences relief from anxiety when he gives up his kingly possessions. What this means is that, although Buddhists can accept a mental state theory, the shape it can take is radically constrained by their analysis of suffering. Many of the pleasures endorsed by hedonisms such as those of Bentham and Mill would be banished from the Buddhist version, and instead only mental states conjoined with the virtuous qualities, and lacking the mental afflictions (*kleśas*) and states of pain (*duḥkha*) would have value.

As far as I know, no one has defended a desire theory account of Buddhist well-being, and at first its prospects might seem particularly dim, especially given the critique of craving emphasizing the subject-related drawbacks to pleasure in which desire is seen as an insatiable force. The English word ‘desire,’ however, is ambiguous and can refer to a mental state of attached grasping, or to a more neutral state in which one is motivated to act with no additional implication of greedy attachment to the result. The Sanskrit for craving, *trṣṇā*, refers to only the first of these motivational states, but Buddhists accept that even fully liberated beings can have the motivation to act in the second sense. To borrow Paul Williams’s example, even the Buddha can be motivated to go on his daily alms round without implying he has craving for its results (Williams & Tribe, 2000, p. 44).

Buddhists, therefore, are not barred at the outset from accepting some forms of desire theory, so long as desire is understood to be a karmically neutral pro-attitude rather than a negative state of clinging. A basic desire theory in which satisfying whatever desires one has makes one’s life go better, however, must be rejected by Buddhists. As we have seen in the discussion of the suffering of change, humans are massively deluded about what we think will bring us happiness. The entire point of the extensive Buddhist critique of pleasure is to convince us of how wrong we are about what will make our lives go well.

A more sophisticated informed-desire theory, however, is compatible with the Buddhist analysis of suffering. Here, the Buddhist will claim that many of the goals we ordinary use to structure our lives are accepted on the false supposition that they will bring lasting satisfaction. By invoking the information clause of the theory, Buddhists will claim that only the pro-attitude of one who deeply understands the various forms of dissatisfaction accompanying *samsāric* pursuits will be incorporated into the theory as well-being conducive. Likewise, a Buddhist desire theorist will

exclude desires that arise involuntarily as a result of the series of cognitive mistakes that take place when impermanent and dependent phenomena are incorrectly experienced as if they were lasting.<sup>15</sup> As with mental state theory, we find the Buddhist analysis of suffering radically limiting the shape an acceptable desire theory may take. As a result of its strong informational condition, the list of acceptable desires that are well-being conducive will be constrained, likely containing only commitments to the Buddhist goals of pursuing *arhatship* and *bodhisattvahood*.

The content of objective list theories tends to be similar to those of informed desire theories, since it is natural to suppose that fully informed rational agents would desire mainly the things that an objective list might posit as possessing objective value. Items that frequently appear as candidates for intrinsic value in objective list theories include pursuit of knowledge, friendship, the raising of a family, and the achievement of life goals. Some of these items are at least somewhat resistant to the Buddhist critique of pleasure. A career that on the whole promotes the well-being of others, enduring friendships spanning many years, attention paid to one's children, all these apparent goods have resonances with Buddhist virtues, such as compassion (*karuṇā*) and love (*metta*). Moreover, occasional pleasures of Mill's higher variety, like philosophical discussion or an evening at the theater, do not in any obvious way incite the pernicious lust alluded to by Buddhist texts. The Buddhist may respond, of course, that the suffering of change can be subtle and can infiltrate even ordinarily wholesome relationships. A parent often acts with a virtuous motivation, caring only for his child's benefit, but then might also become angry when the child fails to obey, or become jealous of another parent whose child is more successful in school.

Perhaps an even stronger Buddhist critique of mainstream objective list theories would be to draw upon the analysis of conditioned suffering, in which all such items are seen as unsatisfactory insofar as they are experienced within impoverished perceptual and cognitive systems in which negative mental states arise repeatedly and sufferings constantly reoccur. At this level of analysis, the Buddhist need not convince us that any single item, such as children or an achievement like the publication of a first book, is *of itself* suffering. It is enough that the item links us to a system of suffering which as a whole ought to be rejected. The fact that my high salary at a stress-filled and unpleasant job lets me care for my children and support charity is all the worse for me, since it likely means I will not escape the situation in which I suffer. Likewise, the Buddhist can claim that the enjoyment of poetry and the raising of children are unfortunate snares that bind us to the cycle of rebirth and death.

This in no way entails Buddhists could not accept an objective list theory; as before, it only restricts the shape such a theory must take. The acceptable contents of such a theory will be largely limited to *kuśala dharma*, the Buddhist virtues that are conducive to liberation of self and others, as well as perhaps mental states that are free from suffering, or the achievement of the desire to be free of suffering itself.



## Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to forge a connection between Western theories of welfare and the Buddhist analysis of suffering, which provides the ultimate justification for Buddhist conceptions of valuable lives. The most straightforward defense Buddhists might make in support of their conception of worthwhile lives would be to defend a certain conception of welfare which endorses Buddhist lives, and then to claim this theory of welfare is superior to the theories with which these Buddhist ideals conflict. I have, however, argued that Buddhist texts do not offer a theory of welfare, at least in the sense of specifying which items have intrinsic value in making a life go well. Nevertheless, although multiple theories of welfare are compatible with early Indian Buddhism, accepting the Buddhist analysis of the three kinds of suffering severely restricts the shape any of these theories can take. Moreover, this is enough for the Buddhist to offer a philosophical defense of her conception of what makes a life go well. The Buddhist can claim that items of supposed value, such as career, family, acquisition of secular knowledge, and sensual pleasure, the lack of which made monastic and renunciate lives seem impoverished, are infected with multiple forms of suffering and are therefore not themselves worth having. They must be stripped from any adequate theory of welfare. This lets the Buddhist claim that lives devoted to ending craving are themselves the best lives there are. Whether they are good because they lead to mental states free from suffering, the satisfaction of our informed desires or an intrinsically valuable virtuous character can be left aside as one more speculative question that is not worth answering.

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## Notes

- [1] When citing from the Pali canon, the second reference refers to the Pali Text Society's edition.
- [2] Of course, *arhats* and Buddhas who have eliminated craving and ignorance will not experience mental pain like frustration and grief that arises from craving. The *Sallasutta* and *The Questions of King Milinda* claim that *arhats* experience physical, but not mental pain (Bodhi, 2000, p. 1264: S iv, 208; Rhys Davids, 1890, p. 69: Mil 44). On the other hand, a few passages in early Buddhist texts suggest that the Buddha did experience occasional mental frustration. For instance, he cites as one reason for his reluctance to teach that to do so to foolish beings 'would be wearying and troublesome for me' (M i 168; translated by Webster, cited in Webster, 2005, p. 17, and see this same article for commentary.) Further, numerous Mahāyāna sources reference the bodhisattva feeling mental pain due to his great compassion for suffering beings, including Śāntideva at BCA 6:123. It seems to me that since mental

sensation (*vedanā*) arises in the uncontaminated part of the perceptual system, there should be no objection in principle to a Buddha or *arhat* experiencing mental pain.

- [3] For example, Asaṅga (2001, p. 85).
- [4] It is natural to suppose that these two attitudes toward pleasure found in the early Pali canon developed into the realist and antirealist positions on the existence of pleasure exemplified by the Vaibhāṣika, and the Madhyamaka as well as certain early Buddhist schools, respectively. See Vasubandhu (1988, pp. 903–908) for the Vaibhāṣika response to a series of arguments regarding the nonexistence of pleasure.
- [5] *nāvajānāmi viṣayān jāne lokāṃ tadātmakam|anityaṃ tu jagamatvā nātra me ramate maṇḥ|| 85|| jarā vyādhiśca mṛtyuśca yadi na syādidam trayam| mamāpi hi manojñeṣu viṣayeṣu ratirbhavet||86||* Aśvaghōṣa (1995). See also translation by Olivelle in Aśvaghōṣa (2008, p. 115).
- [6] I use Olivelle's elegant translation of this pair of verses.
- [7] See Engle (2009, pp. 120–137) for an extremely helpful explanation of *saṃskāra-duḥkha*, which has influenced my account.
- [8] Cś 7:10; P 5246: 135.5.3-4. Cited in Tsong-Kha-Pa (2000, p. 285).
- [9] These are the Sanskrit equivalents of the Tibetan terms Tsong-kha-pa uses. See Engle (2009, pp. 122–123), and footnote 408, p. 424.
- [10] See Heidegger (1962), Section 40.
- [11] Parfit (1984, pp. 403–407) offers an influential discussion of these three theories which is often taken as a starting point for considering what theory of welfare is correct. See also Heathwood (2010) for a good introductory discussion.
- [12] A Buddhist desire theory would have to accept that if a person did not have the desire to end suffering, then suffering would not make her life go worse. Buddhists, however, could claim that it is simply a psychological fact that all persons have this desire.
- [13] Goodman (2009, pp. 60–72) argues that Buddhists accept an objective list theory in which virtues as well as pleasurable mental states are valued for their own sake. I am not convinced Goodman rules out the possibility that Buddhist virtues have only instrumental value, however. I discuss this point below.
- [14] See Keown (2001), esp. chap 8.
- [15] A Buddhist desire theory must accept that an individual who had a pro-attitude toward *samsāric* pursuits even after the full understanding of the frustration that accompanied their pursuit would have to accept that satisfying these desires would make their life go better, provided the desires did not themselves result from cognitive error. Nevertheless, these Buddhists could also claim that it is simply a psychological fact that all individuals strongly want to end dissatisfaction and that there would actually never be an individual who remained committed to these pursuits once they realized this.

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