

*David J. Kalupahana* The notion of suffering in early Buddhism compared with some reflections of early Wittgenstein

It may appear too simplistic to make the observation that the early Buddhist notion of human existence, and therefore of the notion of human suffering, is dependent on the sort of knowledge it recognized. The most reliable knowledge according to early Buddhism is called *paññā* (Sanskrit, *prajñā*) and is identified with the “knowledge of the cessation of influxes” (*āsavānaṃ khaye ñāṇa*).<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, this form of knowledge has been subjected to very little critical examination. The most comprehensive study of the subject, Jayatilleke’s *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, containing 517 pages devotes only one small paragraph (p. 441) to the description of this knowledge. Although this is not the proper place to discuss the nature and significance of this knowledge, a few remarks about it will help to clarify some of the issues related to the notion of human suffering according to early Buddhism.

It seems that the significance of the knowledge of the cessation of influxes (*āsavakkhayañāṇa*) as revealing the true nature of the phenomenal world came to be lost at a time when *nirvāṇa* was considered to be a sort of transcendental ultimate reality. When *nirvāṇa* came to be regarded as such, the highest knowledge in Buddhism also came to be recognized as revealing that ultimate reality looked upon as nondual (*advaya*), and so forth. It is true that the highest knowledge (*paññā*), according to early Buddhism, reveals the cessation of influxes (*āsavakkhaya*).<sup>2</sup> Cessation of influxes is *nirvāṇa*. But this is only the description of what goes on within oneself, that is the purity of mind one achieves as a result of meditation (*jhāna* or *dhyāna*). But the epistemological significance of this cessation of influxes is that, as a result, one is able to develop an objective and unbiased perception of things as they are (*yathābhūta*). In some instances, it is stated that one gets rid of the influxes as a result of seeing things as they are.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, although this highest knowledge is related to the cessation of one’s own defilements, it is also said to reveal, as a result of such cessation, the true nature of things in the world. This true nature (*dharmatā*) of things is their “causal dependence” (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) and not the existence of a ‘self’ (*ātman*) or a ‘substance’ (*svabhāva*). It is this kind of knowledge that is referred to in the Buddha’s own account of his ‘enlightenment’ (*bodhi*), as preserved in the *Udāna*.

When, indeed, things (*dharmā*) appear  
To the brahman absorbed in meditation,  
All his doubts disappear,  
As he sees their causal nature.<sup>4</sup>

This explains the relationship between the cessation of influxes (*āsavakkhaya*) and the knowledge of the four Noble Truths. In fact, knowledge of the cessa-

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tion of influxes is almost always defined as the knowledge of the four Noble Truths.<sup>5</sup>

When it is held that the highest form of knowledge gained as a result of cultivation of *yoga* reveals things as being causally conditioned (*paṭiccasamuppanna*), it is to admit that the content of that yogic intuition is amenable to *linguistic formulation*, and is not, as some later Buddhist schools believed, something that goes beyond conceptual thinking (*nirvikalpika*) or something about which “nothing can be said” (to use a Wittgensteinian phrase). It is because causal dependence constituted the content of the highest yogic intuition that early Buddhism considered causation as an ontologically valid phenomenon, not as a mere a priori assumption or as a baseless superstition.

In the early Buddhist texts this linguistic formulation of causal dependence is articulated with great philosophical acumen. It is presented as the “middle” (*majjhima*) position between the two extremes of substantial existence (*astitva*), as advocated in some of the *Upaniṣads*, and substantial nonexistence (*nāstitva*), as upheld by the Materialists.<sup>6</sup> This conception of “dependence” (*paṭicca* or *pratītya*) enabled the Buddha to avoid the two metaphysical assumptions regarding causation, namely, the potential existence of the effect in the cause, hence the identity or substantial connection between them, or the potential nonexistence of the effect, and hence the nonidentity or absence of any connection between the cause and the effect. Moreover, the early Buddhist doctrine of “dependent arising” (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) represents an *empirical* theory of causal dependence, not a *logical* theory of necessary connection. The knowledge that whatever phenomenon that is experienced is causally conditioned was, as pointed above, arrived at on the basis of unbiased perception. This was called “knowledge of phenomena” (*dhamme ñāṇa*).<sup>7</sup>

The Buddha used empirical arguments in order to refute the two metaphysical theories of substantial existence and substantial nonexistence. He maintained that he who sees the passing away (*nirodha*) of phenomena would not believe in substantial existence or eternalism (*sassata*), and he who perceives arising (*uppāda*) would not accept a theory of substantial nonexistence or annihilation (*uccheda*).<sup>8</sup> Since every phenomenon that is experienced arises and passes away, conditioned by causes, every such phenomenon is also nonsubstantial (*sabbe dhammā anattā*).<sup>9</sup> On the basis of the knowledge of such phenomena (*dhamme ñāṇa*), the Buddha made inferences regarding the past as well as the future. This came to be called inferential knowledge (*anvaye ñāṇa*).<sup>10</sup> Thus all predictions were made on the basis of inference; not even the so-called higher knowledges (*abhiññā*) provided man with absolute or infallible knowledge of the future events.<sup>11</sup>

As a consequence of this unbiased perception developed by the Buddha, he not only denied the validity of certain metaphysical theories about the world that were presented by his predecessors, but also presented his own empirical account of it. According to his view, the world is

- (i) impermanent (*anicca*),
- (ii) “dispositionally determined” (*sankhata*), and
- (iii) “causally conditioned” (*paṭiccasamuppanna*).<sup>12</sup>

A superficial understanding of the last two terms has led classical as well as modern students of Buddhist philosophy to see them as synonyms. In this connection, Yaśomitra, the author of the subcommentary, *Sphuṭârthâ*, on Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, leads the field.<sup>13</sup> A careful examination of the early discourses would reveal that these three terms refer to three different characteristics of phenomena.

There is not much misunderstanding regarding the first characteristic, namely, impermanence. Denying a permanent substratum, the Buddha emphasized the impermanence of all dispositionally conditioned events.

The second is the most misunderstood and misinterpreted. *Sankhata* (Sk., *saṃskṛta*) is derived from *sam* and  $\sqrt{kr}$ , “to do”. *Sankhata*, as a past participle form, would then mean something that is “put together” or “concocted.” The emphasis is on the verb meaning to “do,” as opposed to “happening.” An element of agency is implied here. This active doing is goal-directed. The nominal form, *sankhāra* (Sk., *saṃskāra*), is therefore used to refer to dispositions. If properly understood, *sankhata* should mean “that which is dispositionally determined.”

As opposed to this is *paṭiccasamuppanna* which emphasizes natural causal occurrence. This past participle form is derived from the combination of the two terms *paṭicca* (from *prati*, “toward,” and *īya*, “having gone”) meaning “dependent” upon” and *samuppanna* (*sam* + *ut* +  $\sqrt{pad}$ ) meaning “arisen”. *Paṭiccasamuppanna* or “dependently arisen” is therefore very different from *sankhata* or “dispositionally determined.”

The Buddha speaks of all phenomena (*sabbe dhammā*) as being causally conditioned (*paṭiccasamuppanna*) and therefore nonsubstantial (*anatta*). But he is extremely careful to distinguish these from *sankhata* or dispositionally determined, for, the latter are the results of attachment or passion (*rāga*), aversion or malice (*dosa*), and confusion (*moha*). It is maintained that all events that are not determined by these three elements are not dispositionally directed or determined (*asankhata*; Sk., *asaṃskṛta*).<sup>14</sup> But this latter is never said to be uncaused or independent (*appaṭiccasamuppanna*). While *sankhata* has its contrary in *asankhata*, *paṭiccasamuppanna* has none. This means that all phenomena are causally conditioned, and only some phenomena are dispositionally determined.

This is extremely important distinction between causally conditioned phenomena (*paṭiccasamuppanna*) and dispositionally determined phenomena (*sankhata*) has been ignored by many a critic of Buddhism, resulting in an unjustified interpretation of the early Buddhist doctrine. The uncritical belief among scholars is that, according to early Buddhism, all phenomena are impermanent (*anicca*), suffering or unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), and nonsub-

stantial (*anatta*).<sup>15</sup> Nowhere in the early discourses attributed to the Buddha do we come across any such statement. On the contrary, we find the Buddha being extra careful to distinguish between all dispositionally determined phenomena (*sabbe saṅkhārā* = *sankhata-dhammā*) and all phenomena (*sabbe dhammā*).<sup>16</sup> Only those events that are dispositionally determined are said to be suffering-wrought or unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), not all phenomena. This means that all phenomena are causally conditioned and therefore nonsubstantial (*anatta*). But only some phenomena are dispositionally determined and, therefore, unsatisfactory (*dukkha*). Such an analysis would render meaningless the question that is often raised whether Buddhism is optimistic or pessimistic.

Since human suffering (*dukkha*) is generally attributed to the unsatisfactoriness (*dukkhatā*) of dispositionally determined phenomena (*sankhata*) and since happiness is always associated with the realm of the nondispositionally-determined (*asankhata*), it will be necessary to examine in detail the nature of the dispositions (*sankhāra*) and how these influence human life.

*Sankhāra* is one of the most complex terms among Buddhist philosophical nomenclature, so much so that it is almost impossible to provide an exact rendering of it into any Occidental language. Even a cursory reading of the early Buddhist discourses will reveal that the term connotes various meanings, some of which are as follows:

- (1) As one of the five aggregates (*khandhā*) into which the human personality is analyzed, *sankhāra* represents a psychological tendency or element very similar to dispositions.
- (2) As a factor responsible for bringing about renewed birth (*punabbhava*), *sankhāra* denotes a compelling force or factor that propels human beings in the continued series of existences.<sup>17</sup>
- (3) As the cumulative effect of one's actions, bodily, verbal as well as mental, *sankhāra* stands for habitual tendencies.<sup>18</sup>
- (4) These very same habitual tendencies can function as motive forces for one's future actions, and, hence *sankhāra* can serve as causes of our behavior and is in this way synonymous with volition (*cetanā*).
- (5) Finally, *sankhāra* stands for every phenomenon that is determined by human dispositions or represents any object of human desire or longing. This last usage of the term is to be met with in many places in the discourses, and especially in the *Mahā-Sudassana-suttanta* where, after enumerating all the wealth of a universal monarch (*cakkavatti*), including the palaces, gardens, pools, and so forth, the Buddha declared that all these *sankhāras* are impermanent.<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, not only the psychic elements, such as dispositions, but all phenomena that constitute human civilization, as long as they are directed and determined by dispositional tendencies, are prompted by attachment or aversion or confusion and are not natural causal occurrences are called *sankhāras*. *Sankhāra* represents both the cause and the caused, hence the synonymous use of the terms *sankhāra* and *sankhata*.

It is now possible to ask the very important question: Why are all dispositions or dispositionally determined things unsatisfactory or suffering-wrought (*dukkha*) and not those things that are natural causal occurrences?

The answer to this question is rather complex. The discourses emphasize the fact that all *sankhāras* are impermanent and subject to change (*vipariṇāma*). How the entire world consisting of what human beings crave for, hence referred to as *sankhārā*, is gradually destroyed is explained in the *Anguttara-nikāya*.<sup>20</sup> But the unenlightened human beings dominated by attachment or aversion or confusion cling to these *sankhāras* as if they are permanent, satisfactory, substantial, and beautiful things. Hence the four types of perversions (*vipallāsa*, Sk., *viparyāsa*).<sup>21</sup> These perversions are as follows:

- (i) Perception of permanence in the impermanent (*anicce niccasaññī*).
- (ii) Perception of satisfaction in what is unsatisfactory (*dukkhe sukhasaññī*).
- (iii) Perception of substance in what is nonsubstantial (*anattani ca attā ti saññī*).
- (iv) Perception of beauty in what is ugly (*asubhe subhasaññī*).

For example, this human personality is nothing but a “bundle of dispositions” (*sankhārapuñja*). Yet, through attachment and confusion, man clings to the belief in a substantial self or a metaphysical subject (*atta*), permanent (*nicca*) and eternal (*sassata*), on the basis of the wrong understanding of “Thinker therefore I am” (*mantā asmi*<sup>22</sup> = *cogito ergo sum*). The Buddha argued that if there is a real personality or self, one should be able to exert power or supremacy (*vasa*) over it.<sup>23</sup> Thus, one who is unable to realize the absence of a self and continues to believe in his ability to exert power over his self, in his ability to use the self as he wants, is bound to be disappointed.

The foregoing analysis leads to the following conclusions. *Sankhāras* consist, first, of human dispositions generally dominated by attachment and confusion and, second, of all phenomena that are dispositionally determined. While there is no real self or soul that serves as an agent, *sankhāras* are real and active within their own sphere, within the world directed and determined by *sankhāras*, that is, the sphere of the *sankhata*. Within the world, dispositionally directed there are things that we are able to achieve. For example, one can have pleasure (*assāda*) of the senses by enjoying the amenities of the world which are themselves created according to one’s dispositions or for the purpose of satisfying one’s dispositions. But these, as pointed out, do not lead to the lasting happiness that human beings expect of them. Hence, eventually they turn out to be sources of dissatisfaction and suffering.

If the world of dispositions (*sankhāra*) or the sphere of the dispositionally determined (*sankhata*) is unsatisfactory and is a source of human suffering, it follows that the world of nondispositions (*visankhāra*) or the sphere unconditioned by dispositions (*asankhata*) is satisfactory. It is the world of natural causal happening.

According to early Buddhism, this world of natural causal happening is not transcendental in the sense that “nothing can be said about it.” It is a world of dependent arising. It is natural in that the element that makes it unnatural, namely, the disposition, is absent. It can be called “transcendental” (*lokuttara*) only because it transcends the world determined by dispositions.

The absence or presence of dispositions (*sankhāra*) explains human happiness or suffering respectively and these in their turn serve as criteria for determining whether anything is good (*kusala*) or bad (*akusala*). Thus, human behavior (*kamma*) is evaluated in terms of the preceding criterion. In the *Discourse to Rāhula at Ambalaṭṭhikā* good and bad actions are evaluated in terms of the amount of happiness or suffering they produce.<sup>24</sup>

Whatever action (*kamma*), bodily, verbal, or mental, leads to unhappiness or suffering (*byābādha*) for oneself, for others, for both, that action is bad (*akusala*). Whatever action, bodily, verbal, or mental, does not lead to unhappiness or suffering for oneself, for others or for both, that action is good (*kusala*).

Early Buddhism was prepared to go only so far in the analysis and not beyond. It did not ask the question why what is satisfactory or what produces happiness should be considered good. The empiricist attitude of early Buddhism stood against a search for absolute or ultimate answers.

This explanation of human suffering and happiness, in terms of the presence or absence of dispositions (*sankhāra*), and the utilization of the notions of suffering and happiness for moral justification are important, especially when one is confronted with the very influential ideas of philosophers like Ludwig Wittgenstein. Just as in early Buddhism where human suffering is explained in terms of dispositions, even so according to Wittgenstein’s philosophy human suffering is dependent on the status of the human will in the world. As is well known, Wittgenstein began with the idea that the world is independent of the human will. He reasoned out:

Even if all we wish for were to happen, still this would only be a favor granted by fate, so to speak: for there is no logical connection between the will and the world, which would guarantee it, and the supposed physical connection itself is surely something that we could not will.<sup>25</sup>

This conclusion is emphasized in the *Notebooks*.<sup>26</sup>

I cannot bend the happenings of the world to my will: I am completely powerless.

If man is unable to exercise his will, if he is completely powerless, he is bound to suffer all the misery in the world. Such a view is hinted at when he raised the following question in the *Notebooks*.<sup>27</sup>

Suppose that a man could not exercise his will, but had to suffer all the misery in the world, then what could make him happy?  
How can man be happy at all since he cannot ward off the misery of the world?

Thus, for Wittgenstein, human suffering is the result of the absence of any connection between the human will and the world. Since the human will (as a phenomenon) is not in the world, it is not a fact and therefore cannot be expressed in language.

But he was keen to answer the question he raised as to how a man can be happy in the world. His answer was:

Through the life of knowledge. Good conscience is the happiness that the life of knowledge preserves.  
Life of knowledge is the life that is happy in spite of the misery of the world. The only life that is happy is the life that can renounce the amenities of the world.  
To it the amenities of the world are so many graces of fate.<sup>28</sup>

Here, as is well known, Wittgenstein was speaking of the “will as the subject of ethical attributes.” According to Wittgenstein, this will is different from the former, namely the will as a phenomenon. Unlike the phenomenal will which is not in the world, this pertains to the limits of the world, that is to say, it pertains to the world as a whole. It is the world of the happy man which is different from the world of the unhappy man. Wittgenstein maintained that “nothing can be said” about this world.<sup>29</sup> It is transcendental. This linguistic transcendence of ethics came to be upheld even after Wittgenstein abandoned his view of the nature of language which prompted such transcendence.

Thus, the two systems of thought—early Buddhism and early Wittgenstein—can be compared and contrasted on several important respects. Wittgenstein’s views regarding the will follows from a doctrine of *logical determinism*. This doctrine is very similar to the one held rather early in Western philosophy by the Megarians, and especially by the Stoics who believed that logic alone suggests that men’s wills are fettered, that nothing is really in their power to alter. This logical determinism based on the truth of *tertium non datur*, and the impossibility of asserting the truth or falsity of statements regarding the future, especially of the future of human actions, led to a denial of freedom and moral responsibility. Following a similar doctrine of logical determinism, Wittgenstein seems to have refused to recognize even an empirical connection between the will and the world. This compelled him to accept a belief in fatalism.<sup>30</sup>

The early Buddhists, faced with a similar situation where the human will or effort seems to fail occasionally, did not lean toward fatalism. In fact, they rejected the central tenet of the Ājīvika school, namely, *niyatīvāda* (fatalism), which denied the efficacy of the human will (*purisakāra purisathāma purisaparakkama*).<sup>31</sup> Instead of perceiving the human will as something confronting the world as its equivalent (as Wittgenstein did) and thereby finding it to be impossible, the Buddha considered the human will (*purisakāra*) or action (*kamma*) to be only one of the factors that determine the flow of events that we call the world. The theory of dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), being

an empirical theory of causation, enabled the Buddha to explain the function of human action in relation to everything else in the world.

As is evident, Wittgenstein began by drawing a distinction between the will and action only to dissolve that distinction in the end. The attempt to explain ethics in terms of the “will” was probably a carry-over from Schopenhauer and Kant. The Buddha, on the other hand, began by equating the human will (*purisakāra*) with action (*kamma*) itself (note the relationship of *-kāra* is *purisakāra* to *kamma*), and therefore did not try to explain ethics in terms of the will. Instead, he emphasized the notion of disposition (*sankhāra*) and made it the basis of ethical judgments. It may be noted here that the dispositions, though functioning as the determinants of action (*kamma*), are themselves formed by or produced as a result of *kamma*. Hence, their interpretation as habitual tendencies. The distinction the Buddha made between disposition, on the one hand, and the human will or action, on the other, permitted him to speak of men, such as the saints, who are capable of willing or acting without following any dispositional tendencies.

Finally, for the Buddha, the world of the happy man is not transcendental in the sense that “nothing can be said” about it. For him, it is transcendental (*lokuttara*) only in a moral sense. At the beginning of the discussion, reference was made to the important distinction the Buddha made between the world conditioned by dispositions (*sankhata*) and the larger world of causal happening (*paṭiccasamuppanna*). Because the presence of dispositions renders the world unsatisfactory, the former was considered to be unsatisfactory and the latter satisfactory. Therefore, the world of perfect happiness (*paramasukha*) or the world of the happy man in early Buddhism is the state in which there is pacification of all dispositions (*sabbasankhārasamatha*), which is the same as *nirvāṇa*. Pacification of all dispositions enables one to lead not only a happy and peaceful life but also a natural life, a life dominated by causal dependence (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), but unconditioned by dispositions (*asankhata*). It is a life that conforms to nature (*dhammatā*). This involves a life of complete renunciation (*virāga*), for attachment (*raga*) causes dispositions. It is the form of happy life recognized even by Wittgenstein when he said: “The only life that is happy is the life that can renounce the amenities of the world.”<sup>32</sup> The renunciation that is spoken of in Buddhism is not a mere physical renunciation, but the ability to be involved with the world without being smeared by it (*lokena anupalitta*).<sup>33</sup>

#### NOTES

1. See *Anguttara-nikāya*, ed. R. Morris (London: Pali Text Society, 1955), 2.183.
2. *Anguttara-nikāya*.
3. *Majjhima-nikāya*, ed. V. Trenckner (London: Pali Text Society, 1948), 1.175.

4. *Udāna*, ed. P. Steinthal (London: Pali Text Society, 1948) p. 1.
5. *Dīgha-nikāya*, ed. T. W. Rhys Davids & J. E. Carpenter (London: Pali Text Society, 1967), 1.83–84.
6. *Samyutta-nikāya*, ed. M. Léon Feer (London: Pali Text Society, 1960), 2.18.
7. *Samyutta-nikāya*, 2.56–58.
8. *Samyutta-nikāya*, 2.18.
9. *Dhammapada* 279; see edition by S. Radhakrishnan (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), pp. 146–147.
10. *Samyutta-nikāya*, 2.58.
11. The only prediction that the Buddha or any other *arahant* (saint) could make with absolute certainty was with regard to their own freedom from *sansāric* existence. This, in a way, may be more fundamental than inferential knowledge, since an element of determination not to be tempted by future pleasurable sensations is involved here.
12. *Samyutta-nikāya*, 2.26.
13. *Sphuṭārthābhīdharmakośa-vyākhyā*, ed. U. Wogihara (Tokyo: The Publishing Association of Abhidharmakośavyākhyā, 1932–1936), p. 174, Samskr̥tatvam praṭītyasamutpannatvam iti paryāyāv etaū. Sametya sambhūya praṭyayaīḥ kṛtaṃ samskr̥taṃ. Taṃ taṃ praṭyayaṃ praṭītya samutpannam praṭītyasamutpannam’ ti.
14. *Samyutta-nikāya*, 4.359.
15. See Edward Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India* (London: George Allen & Unwin), p. 34, where reference is made to “all conditioned things.” Here the term “conditioned” (*sankhata*) is taken in the same sense as “causally conditioned” (*paṭiccasamuppanna*) (see p. 56) as was the case with Yasomitra.
16. *Majjhima-nikāya*, 1.228; *Samyutta-nikāya*, 3.133; 4.401; *Anguttara-nikāya*, 1.286.
17. *Majjhima-nikāya*, 1.389–391.
18. *Samyutta-nikāya*, 2.4.
19. *Dīgha-nikāya*, 2.198.
20. *Anguttara-nikāya*, 4.100.
21. *Anguttara-nikāya*, 2.25.
22. *Sutta-nipāta*, ed. D. Anderson and H. Smith (London: Pali Text Society, 1913), 916.
23. *Majjhima-nikāya*, 1.231. Taṃ kiṃ maññasi Aggivessana: Yaṃ tvam evaṃ vadesi: rūpam me attā ti, vattati te tasmim rūpe vaso: evaṃ me rūpaṃ hotu, evam me rūpaṃ mā ahoṣi.
24. *Majjhima-nikāya*, 1.415–416.
25. *Tractatus*, 6.374.
26. *Tractatus*, p. 73.
27. *Tractatus*, p. 81.
28. *Tractatus*, p. 81.
29. See essay on “Wittgenstein’s Treatment of the Will” in Peter Winch’s *Ethics and Action* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 110–129.
31. *Dīgha-nikāya*, 1.53–54.
32. See note 28.
33. *Anguttara-nikāya*, 2.38–39.