

Dukkha and *Māyā* : The Philosophical Dimensions of Suffering in Buddhism and Vedanta

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Introduction

In both Buddhism and Vedanta, suffering—or *dukkha* in Sanskrit and *dukkha* in Pali—emerges as a central concern, posing questions about the nature of existence and the search for liberation. One of the first realizations in life is that fulfilment seems elusive. This sense of dissatisfaction stems from what some might consider a deep-seated, unconscious reservoir. As we navigate life, we find that the external world's paradoxes rarely align with our innate desire for happiness. The pursuit of happiness often reveals itself as a mirage, a fleeting goal that leaves us yearning for something more substantial. Buddhism identifies this cycle of desire and attachment as *dukkha*, an inherent part of the human condition (Conze 24).

Vedanta, particularly Advaita Vedanta, approaches the problem of suffering through the concept of *māyā*—a term often misunderstood as simple 'illusion'. In reality, *māyā* represents a complex principle of misperception and cosmic ignorance. Swami Vivekananda elaborates that *māyā* is not a mere illusion but 'a statement of the inadequacy of human perception', showing that ignorance distorts our understanding of the self and reality (Vivekananda 63). The *Bṛihadāraṇyaka Upanishad* similarly posits

that suffering arises from this ignorance, which binds the individual to a cycle of desires and mistaken identity (Upanishads, 1.4.10).

This article explores *dukkha* in Buddhism and *māyā* in Vedanta, comparing each tradition's perspective on the origins and implications of suffering. While Buddhism advocates detachment from desire to alleviate suffering, Vedanta emphasizes self-realization, seeing suffering as an illusion that dissolves upon attaining true knowledge of the Self. Examining these complementary approaches gives us insight into two philosophical systems that offer profound guidance on confronting suffering and pursuing liberation.

Suffering in Buddhism

One of the most profound moments in Buddhist teachings is the story of the Buddha's encounter with a shepherd. When the shepherd asked the Buddha about the nature of his enlightenment, the Buddha responded by indicating that enlightenment, or *bodhi*, is not something easily captured by words. It is an experiential realization that transcends conventional knowledge and cannot be fully conveyed through intellectual explanation. This story reflects the Buddhist perspective that awakening is not simply an academic or theoretical pursuit but a

transformative, experiential journey that reveals the true nature of suffering (*dukkha*) and its cessation.

As Huston Smith elaborates in *The World's Religions*, the Buddha's teachings are centred around pragmatic methods for understanding and overcoming suffering. Smith highlights that the Buddha's approach is not to theorize about the metaphysical nature of the universe, but to directly address the human experience of suffering and the path to its cessation. Smith captures the essence of the Buddha's teachings, emphasizing that enlightenment is a shift in perception, one that leads to a deeper understanding of life's inherent difficulties and the cessation of suffering. This encounter between the Buddha and the shepherd encapsulates the core of Buddhist philosophy—that the path to liberation is not about abstract speculation but about direct insight into the nature of suffering.

In Buddhism, suffering is central to the human experience. The Buddha's Four Noble Truths form the foundation of his teachings on suffering, where the first truth asserts that life is filled with suffering (*dukkha*), the second reveals the causes of suffering, the third describes the cessation of suffering, and the fourth outlines the path to freedom. By confronting the reality of suffering, the Buddha provides a transformative approach to life, offering a way out of this cycle through mindfulness, meditation, and ethical conduct. Buddhists speak of four noble truths about the world.

The Four Noble Truths

Swami Tapasyananda, the former Vice President of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission at Belur Math, insightfully highlighted a critical tenet of Buddhist philosophy, calling it a 'serious religion' because it demands the acceptance

of suffering as an intrinsic aspect of human existence. In Buddhism, suffering, or *dukkha*, is not merely an episodic experience that one can avoid or mitigate but is the very fabric of our reality. As the Buddha himself articulated, '*dukkha*' is a universal truth that pervades all phenomena, extending far beyond the physical pain or emotional distress that we often associate with suffering. It reflects the deep existential dissatisfaction inherent in the cycle of existence itself.

The Four Noble Truths, central to Buddhist philosophy, represent not only the diagnosis of the human condition but also an elaborate prescription for its transcendence. They present a framework that is both metaphysical and practical, aimed at understanding and liberating the self from the constraints of suffering (*dukkha*). Philosophically, the Four Noble Truths offer an integrated view of reality—one that invites practitioners to challenge their fundamental assumptions about existence and adopt a more profound way of engaging with the world.

The truth of suffering (*Dukkha*)

The first Noble Truth presents suffering as an intrinsic aspect of life. In Buddhist philosophy, suffering is not merely physical pain or emotional distress, but an existential condition rooted in the impermanence of all things. The notion of *dukkha* extends beyond the personal to encompass the universal. As the Buddha articulates, even in moments of apparent pleasure, there is a latent dissatisfaction, a sense of incompleteness. This dissatisfaction is not simply a reaction to external events but stems from the very nature of existence itself.

Buddhist thinkers such as Nagarjuna explore this deeper understanding of

dukkha, emphasizing that it arises from the inherent nature of reality, which is in a constant state of flux. In this sense, suffering is not just a condition to be eradicated, but a window into the impermanent and interconnected nature of all things. According to Nagarjuna, understanding *dukkha* is a necessary step in realizing the emptiness (*shunyatā*) of all phenomena—an insight that frees the individual from attachment and ignorance (Nagarjuna, *Mulamadhyamakakārikā*).

The truth of the cause of suffering (*Samudaya*)

The second Noble Truth identifies craving (*tanha*) as the root cause of suffering. This craving can manifest in various forms—the desire for pleasure, aversion to pain, or the desire to perpetuate a false sense of self. It is, in essence, the attachment to transient things that creates the cycle of suffering. Philosophically, this resonates with the concept of *anātta*, or non-self, a central tenet of Buddhism. The illusion of a permanent self, clinging to the notion of an enduring identity, is a major source of suffering.

The early Buddhist texts describe craving as an affliction that binds the individual to the cycle of *samsāra* (the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth). This philosophical idea aligns closely with Heidegger's existential notion of 'being-towards-death', where our attachment to selfhood leads to a constant state of anxiety and dissatisfaction, blocking the realization of our true nature. Craving, then, is not merely the desire for external objects but the existential craving for permanence in a world that is inherently impermanent. As the Buddha taught, the cessation of this craving leads directly to the cessation of suffering.

The truth of the cessation of suffering (*Nirodha*)

The third Noble Truth offers the possibility of transcending suffering, not through the rejection of existence itself, but through a shift in perception. Nirvāna, the cessation of suffering, is described as the extinguishing of the flames of craving, aversion, and ignorance. In a sense, nirvāna represents the realization of the true nature of existence: the interconnectedness and impermanence of all things, leading to the release from the false constructs that generate suffering.

Philosophically, the cessation of suffering is not merely the negation of desire but the profound insight into the non-duality of existence. This insight enables one to experience the world without attachment or resistance, engaging with it as it is. This philosophical shift mirrors the process of deconstructing the metaphysical assumption of a permanent, independent self. According to the philosopher D.T. Suzuki, this realization of non-self and impermanence brings an end to the suffering that arises from ignorance.

The truth of the path to the cessation of suffering (*Māgga*)

The fourth Noble Truth offers a practical guide—the Eightfold Path—which serves as the method to achieve the cessation of suffering. This path is divided into three areas: ethical conduct (*shila*), mental discipline (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*prajñā*). Each element of the Eightfold Path addresses a different facet of human existence, providing a comprehensive framework for overcoming the attachments and delusions that give rise to suffering.

Philosophically, the Eightfold Path is not a set of isolated practices but an integrated

system of thought and action that aligns the practitioner's mind, speech, and body toward liberation. It is through the cultivation of wisdom, ethical conduct, and mental discipline that one comes to realize the true nature of suffering, its causes, and its cessation. This path is deeply dialectical, in that each step is both a means and an end—a dynamic interaction between insight and practice, philosophy and life.

The Four Noble Truths offer a profound philosophical inquiry into the nature of human existence and the possibility of transcending suffering. Rather than viewing suffering as an external imposition, Buddhism invites us to understand it as a result of our attachments, desires, and ignorance. Through the practices outlined in the Eightfold Path, one can begin to dismantle these illusions, arriving at a state of non-attachment and freedom from suffering. The Four Noble Truths thus provide not only a diagnosis of the human condition but a blueprint for the liberation of the self, offering a profound reorientation toward reality.

Swami Tapasyananda emphasizes that understanding this profound concept begins with acknowledging the universality of *dukkha*. It is not merely something external or transient but is embedded in the very nature of life. Buddhism, in its unique capacity, dissects this suffering into three essential aspects, each revealing the profundity of human experience.

The first aspect of suffering, known as the 'suffering of suffering', refers to the immediate pain and discomfort that individuals regularly encounter. This includes physical afflictions such as illness or injury, and psychological distress such as grief or loneliness. While external remedies, such as medical interventions or therapeutic support, may alleviate these

pains temporarily, they cannot fully eradicate the cycle of suffering. Buddhist philosophy teaches that both pain and pleasure are impermanent and thus cannot provide lasting fulfilment. According to the Buddha's teaching of *anicca* (impermanence), all things—whether joyful or painful—are subject to change, rendering any form of attachment a source of inevitable dissatisfaction.

The second form of suffering, known as the 'suffering of change', delves into the existential dissatisfaction rooted in the impermanence of life's pleasures. As Tapasyananda observes, 'What was new and fresh gradually becomes unattractive', emphasizing how the initial joy of gaining something desirable is inevitably followed by a sense of dissatisfaction as time erodes the novelty of experiences. This suffering is particularly evident in our desires for external sources of happiness, whether material possessions, relationships, or status. As Buddhism teaches, attachment to these transient entities inevitably leads to disillusionment, for no external phenomenon can offer lasting satisfaction. This is further reflected in the Buddha's doctrine of *anātta* (non-self), which asserts that our identification with fleeting, impermanent things only compound our suffering.

The third aspect of suffering, which is described as pervasive suffering, touches upon the deep, existential discontent caused by our false identification with the 'body-mind complex'. According to Buddhist thought, humans are composed of five aggregates (form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness), all of which are mistakenly understood as the 'self'. This erroneous attachment to the body-mind complex traps us in a cycle of desire, as we constantly strive to preserve and protect what is inherently unstable and

impermanent. Only by recognizing the transient, interdependent nature of these aggregates can one begin to loosen the grip of attachment and move toward liberation (Bodhi 65). This insight into the nature of suffering invites a shift in perspective, urging individuals to see the impermanence of all things, including the self, as the path to freedom from suffering.

Through these three aspects of *dukkha*—the suffering of suffering, the suffering of change, and pervasive suffering—Swami Tapasyananda illustrates a deeply nuanced and profound view of the Buddhist understanding of existence. These teachings invite us to confront the core realities of our lives: that suffering is universal, that our attachments and desires are rooted in illusion, and that liberation from suffering comes only through insight, awareness, and transcendence of the self.

To further deepen the exploration of suffering in Buddhism, we can delve into the Buddhist concept of the Five Skandhas (also known as the Five Aggregates), which are the fundamental components of human existence. These are form (*rupa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*sannā*), mental formations (*sankhāra*), and consciousness (*vinnāna*). The grasping of these aggregates as the self is the root cause of suffering or *dukkha*.

The five skandhas and their role in suffering

The first ‘skandha’, *rupa* (form), represents the physical aspect of existence, including the body and its material components. The second, *vedanā* (feeling), encompasses emotional and sensory experiences, which can be pleasurable, painful, or neutral. *Sannā* (perception) is the process by which we recognize and interpret sensory information, while

sankhāra (mental formations) refers to volitional actions, habits, and conditioned responses. Lastly, *vinnāna* (consciousness) is the awareness or knowing aspect that integrates the other aggregates (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2000).

In Buddhism, these ‘skandha’s, when mistaken for a ‘self’, perpetuate suffering. This identification creates attachment, causing clinging to impermanent states, leading to the cycle of *samsāra* and, consequently, *dukkha*. The enlightened one, however, realizes that these aggregates lack a permanent self or Ātman. Recognizing them as impermanent, constantly changing, and not inherently one’s identity allows the enlightened person to transcend suffering arising from attachment.

Pervasive suffering and the body-mind complex

The body-mind complex, a collection of these ‘skandha’s, becomes the basis for what Buddhism refers to as *pervasive suffering*. As long as we continue to identify with this temporary and fluctuating complex, we are bound to experience *dukkha*. The mistaken belief in a permanent self—clinging to both the body and the mind—sustains this cycle, leading to more suffering. However, for the enlightened being who understands *anātta* (non-self), suffering ceases because attachment to the aggregates dissolves.

The eight types of Dukkha according to Tsongkhapa

In Tibetan Buddhism, Tsongkhapa, a prominent scholar of the Gelug school, outlines eight specific types of suffering that offer a nuanced view of how suffering manifests in life. These types include:

1. *Suffering of birth*: The pain and vulnerability inherent in the entry into life.

2. *Suffering of old age*: The decline of physical and mental faculties over time.

3. *Suffering of disease*: The physical and emotional distress brought on by illness.

4. *Suffering of death*: The existential fear and pain of separation at the end of life.

5. *Suffering of contact with the unpleasant*: The distress caused by encountering people or situations we dislike.

6. *Suffering of separation from the pleasant*: The sorrow of being parted from loved ones or cherished things.

7. *Suffering of desire*: The internal dissatisfaction that arises from craving and unfulfilled longing.

8. *Suffering from ignorance and attachment to the body-mind*: Misidentifying the self with the body and mind, is a root cause of all other forms of suffering (Tsongkhapa, 2004).

The *Bhagavad-Gītā* also refers to these types of suffering in chapter 13, where verses 8–12 discuss awareness of ‘birth, death, old age, and disease’ as intrinsic to human life (*janma-mrityu-jarā-vyādhi-duhkha-doshānu-darshanam*). This aligns closely with Tsongkhapa’s teachings, as both acknowledge that suffering permeates existence due to attachment to impermanent states and objects.

Swami Vivekananda’s perspective on *Dukkha*

Swami Vivekananda provides further insight into the Buddhist concept of *dukkha* by drawing from Vedānta. According to him, ‘Things are dead in themselves, and then we breathe life into them’, highlighting how we imbue lifeless objects with meaning, value, and emotional significance. This process, termed *Māyā*, is remarkably similar to the Buddhist understanding of *dukkha*: by projecting permanence and fulfilment onto transient things, we become ensnared in a

cycle of desire, attachment, and eventual suffering (Smith, 1991).

This idea suggests that the pursuit of transient pleasures and attachments, or *māyā*, leads to continual dissatisfaction, as the world cannot fulfil the expectations we project onto it. For instance, we may relentlessly pursue wealth, status, or relationships in the hope of attaining lasting happiness. However, the fleeting nature of these pursuits often leaves us empty, constantly ‘running after’ or ‘running away from’ things we falsely believe will bring us contentment. Here, Vivekananda’s words serve as a reminder that suffering arises from our mental projections and attachments—*māyā* itself.

Both Buddhist and Vedantic perspectives point to an inherent truth: liberation from suffering is attainable, but only through understanding the impermanent, interdependent nature of all phenomena. By loosening the grip of *māyā* and realizing the illusory nature of attachment, one can transcend *dukkha* and live in harmony with reality.

This enriched perspective provides a comprehensive view of suffering in both Buddhist and Vedantic frameworks, emphasizing how attachment to the self and transient phenomena leads to pervasive *dukkha*. Through understanding the interconnected nature of reality, both traditions suggest that liberation is achievable, revealing a path to profound peace.

Advaita Vedānta’s approach to *Māyā*: A bridge between illusion and reality

In Advaita Vedānta, *māyā* is understood as the cosmic illusion that veils the true nature of *Brahman*, the absolute reality, from human perception. Shankarāchārya articulated this concept with the formula *Brahma Satyam, Jagat Mithyā, Jivo*

Brahmaiva Nāparah—‘Brahman alone is real, the world is illusory, and the self is none other than Brahman’. According to Shankara, māyā obscures this unity, creating a world of apparent multiplicity that misleads individuals into identifying with the transient body-mind complex rather than the eternal Self (*Jiva Brahman*). This *mithyā*, or apparent reality, is akin to a mirage that perpetuates attachment and suffering, making liberation (*moksha*) attainable only through knowledge of the Self as Brahman.

Swami Vivekananda, in his *Jnāna Yoga* lectures, expands upon māyā as not merely a theory or a metaphor but a ‘statement of fact’. He describes māyā as the innate paradox of existence, where life is simultaneously full of promise and pervaded by limitations. In his dialogues, Vivekananda illustrates this through experiences of change, death, and suffering—phenomena that, despite our attempts to control them, persistently challenge our sense of permanence. The human desire for happiness and security, he notes, often only increases suffering, as seen in the endless pursuit of wealth and pleasure which, rather than satisfying, intensifies feelings of inadequacy. This cycle of seeking and suffering, of clinging to transient joys, exemplifies the ‘web of māyā’ in everyday life.

Swami Vivekananda also critiques Western philosophical perspectives that view reality as an evolving, progressive force. He engages with Hegel’s dialectical model, in which reality is seen as a self-unfolding process aiming toward perfection. Vivekananda challenges this, arguing that any ‘expression’ of reality, even one that progressively evolves, is ultimately finite. The infinite, he argues, cannot be captured through finite expression. This, he posits, is the inherent flaw in Hegel’s dialectics and, by extension, in Marx’s material dialecticism,

which derived its structure from Hegel. Where Hegel sees reality advancing through stages of conflict toward an ultimate synthesis, Vedanta sees this outward movement (*pravritti*) as leading further into māyā, only escapable through an inward turn (*nivritti*), renouncing the transient for the unchanging.

In a more accessible analogy, Vivekananda recounts the story of Manmathanath Ganguly, who experienced māyā firsthand when he felt the world dissolve into a shimmering illusion as he listened to Vivekananda speak. This profound moment of realization, where even the most concrete realities seemed to flicker in and out of existence, underscored the impermanence and fluidity of the world. Vivekananda tells us that māyā is not to be viewed as a mere intellectual construct but as an intrinsic part of our lived experience. The illusions of control, identity, and material pursuits that govern our lives serve as manifestations of māyā, keeping us bound to a cycle of unending desires and dissatisfaction.

Sri Ramakrishna offers another layer of insight, distinguishing between *avidyā māyā* (māyā of ignorance) and *vidyā māyā* (māyā of knowledge). *Avidyā māyā* encompasses negative qualities such as lust, greed, and anger, which bind the individual to the cycle of suffering. *Vidyā māyā*, on the other hand, includes virtues like compassion, love, and discrimination, which can lead a person toward spiritual liberation. Sri Ramakrishna uses the analogy of clouds that temporarily obscure the sky to illustrate māyā: while the clouds may block the view, they cannot erase the sky itself, just as māyā cannot diminish the underlying reality of Brahman.

Thus, Advaita Vedanta and Buddhist teachings converge in their understanding of suffering as rooted in attachment to illusions. However, while Buddhism negates the concept of an eternal self (*anātta*), Vedanta asserts the

existence of an unchanging self (Ātman) that is one with Brahman. Both paths, however, agree on the necessity of transcending the illusions of māyā to alleviate suffering, emphasizing inner renunciation as the means to liberation.

In examining the philosophical foundations of suffering in both Buddhism and Vedanta, it becomes evident that *dukkha* and māyā represent profound insights into the nature of human existence. While Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta approach suffering through distinct frameworks—*dukkha* as an existential condition inherent to life and māyā as the veil that obscures ultimate reality—their aims converge in the pursuit of liberation from the cycle of attachment and illusion. Buddhism proposes that suffering arises from the clinging and ignorance embedded in our conception of the self and the world, advocating for mindfulness, ethical conduct, and the Eightfold Path as a means of attaining inner peace and freedom from the cycle of *samsāra*. Similarly, Advaita Vedanta's concept

of māyā suggests that true liberation lies in transcending the illusions of the material world and realizing the unity of Ātman and Brahman.

Both philosophies, while differing in their ontological premises, underscore a transformative shift in perception as essential to overcoming suffering. Where Buddhism emphasizes non-self (*anātta*) and the direct experiential realization of reality, Vedanta points to self-knowledge and the dissolution of egoistic boundaries to reveal the unchanging, infinite consciousness. Through the lens of these teachings, suffering is not an external affliction but a product of inner misperception—a mirage that dissolves as one gains insight into the transient and interconnected nature of all things. In understanding *dukkha* and māyā, individuals are invited to a more profound awareness of life's impermanent nature and to an enduring peace that arises from insight and self-realization. This philosophical exploration encourages a deep reevaluation of self, reality, and the path to true liberation. ■

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