

Karma as teacher¹

“Suffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be. I have been bent and broken, but – I hope – into a better shape.”

Estella to Pip at the end of Dickens’ *Great Expectations* (1861)

The Sabba,lahusa Sutta (A 8.40) is a short teaching on the potential and potency of karma, that all karma in an unawakened person has the chance of bringing on its fruits, both good and bad. The Sutta focuses on the “lightest” or minimum fruits that bad karma brings in a human.

The “lightest” fruit of killing living beings is a short human life; of stealing, loss of property; of sexual misconduct, rivalry and hate. The minimum result of false speech is that we often face false accusations; of divisive speech, we often lose friends; of harsh speech, we often make unpleasant sounds; of frivolous speech, others do not heed us. And the lightest result of taking strong drinks is madness.²

Although our negative traits and conditions are due to our past karma, this does not mean that they are unchangeable states, which would otherwise be a fatalistic view, rejected by early Buddhism. It means that, firstly, there is really no one to blame for this – not even ourselves – since their karmic roots are in the past.

Blaming anyone for our disadvantages or difficulties is not really helpful. Of course, if the intentional actions of others have brought upon us those problems, then, those perpetrators have created bad karma for themselves, the fruits of which they would face.

Instead of blaming anyone or anything for our disadvantages or difficulties, it is better to work at correcting these problems or working around them. In **the Alabbhaniya Thāna Sutta** (A 5.48), the Buddha teaches us that when we seem to have exhausted all avenues to solve a problem, we should then mindfully pause and ask, “**What shall I best do now with resolve?**”³

Our karma is like some electrically conductive material that we wear or have on us, while we are caught in an thunder storm. We are then likely to be struck and harmed by lightning. In an electrical storm, we should avoid the open ground, or not have anything that conducts electricity on us. On the other hand, we can install some kind of lightning conductor so that the powerful electrical surges will go through the conductor safely into the ground.

Lightning is like past karma. The electrically conductive material we wear or have is like our present karma. So our present karma becomes the condition for, or “attracts,” past karma, and may do so in a terribly “electrical” way.⁴ Having a lightning conductor above us is our lovingkindness. It harmlessly guides the bad karmic fruits into the ground, which is our “store” of good karma.⁵

We should wisely apply **the 4 noble truths** to understand our situation. This may be said to be “situational spirituality,” that is, learning from conditions, present and past, and acting on it.

IDENTIFYING SUFFERING. First of all, we ask what is **the meaning** of all this, that we are going through? It means that the **suffering** is real. Note that only “the suffering is real”: we do not say “my” suffering, or use “I” or “me” — we only *identify* the suffering, but we do not identify *with* it, that is, we do not own the

¹ This Reflection is from the Introduction to **Sabba,lahusa Sutta** (A 8.40), [SD 6.5](#).

² A 8.40/4:247 f ([SD 6.5](#)).

³ A 5.48/3:54-56 ([SD 42.1](#)). See also [SD 30.8 \(3.3\)](#).

⁴ On new and old karma, see (**Nava Purāṇa**) **Kamma Sutta** (S 35.146), [SD 4.12](#).

⁵ On how lovingkindness limits our bad karma and prevents its negative fruition, see [SD 2.10 \(2\)](#). See also **Saṅkha(dhama) Sutta** (S 42.8/4:322), SD 57.9.

suffering. This approach becomes clearer when we further reflect that “pain is natural, suffering is optional.”⁶ In other words, we reflect, “There is **suffering**”—this is the first noble truth.⁷

WHY WE SUFFER. Secondly, we ask again, “What is the meaning of this suffering?” Put more practically, we can ask, “**How did this suffering arise?**” We then begin to understand the difference between “pain” (*dukkha,dukkha*) and “suffering” (*saṅkhāra,dukkha*).⁸ As we have said, “Pain is natural,” mainly because we have a body, and the body feels when stimulated by something unpleasant—so pain arises.

Such pain can, however, be useful to us: it tells us that our body’s cells are being destroyed, or that a bodily situation needs adjustment or correction. So, we act to heal or improve our bodily condition. On the other hand, often enough, we are *not* happy with the pain: now this is real suffering. It is the mental aspect of this pain. We have *internalized* an “external” condition by thinking about it.

Often, thinking about it makes it worse: thinking about it makes it so. We feel our pain, and we *hate* it; we *long* for a situation when this pain is gone, or when we feel something pleasant, and so on.⁹ In short, this is called **craving** (*taṇhā*), the second noble truth.¹⁰

ENDING SUFFERING. When we accept suffering to be what it is, nothing more, nothing less (as far as possible), we have grasped the venomous snake by its neck.¹¹ When we understand the difference between pain and suffering – that pain is natural, suffering optional – we understand that suffering is mind-made. Whatever is mind-made can be “unmade” by the mind, with proper training.

We now come to the **purpose** behind suffering – or, better, the purpose of life. Properly speaking, there is *no* purpose in suffering or life in itself. Purpose here refers to how we *view* life and its imperfections, and what we *can* do about it.

UNCONDITIONAL HAPPINESS. Let us return to the question: What is the purpose of life? Some people think that the purpose of life is to be *happy*. This may be true on a very short term—because happiness never lasts. When the conditions that bring us happiness are gone, then we feel sorrow – happiness and sorrow are inseparable twins: we cannot know one without the other.¹²

If our happiness comes from having a lot of money, or pleasure, or power, then, when that condition is missing, we are unhappy. Even something as simple as being happy with our car, or our handphone, can bring us great suffering, when something undesirable happens to that source of happiness. So, it makes sense to think of the possibility of “**unconditional happiness**.”

In fact, there is such a happiness: it is called **nirvana** (*nibbāna*).¹³ We cannot really say much that is meaningful about nirvana: we must personally experience it for ourself. So, we will leave it at that for the moment, and discuss what is more practical.

⁶ See [SD 48.9 \(6.2.4.5\)](#).

⁷ On the nature of values, see [SD 43.1 \(3.5.1.3\)](#).

⁸ **The (Sāriputta) Dukkha Sutta** (S 38.14) speaks of 3 kinds: “physical suffering” (*dukkha,dukkhatā*), “suffering due to change” (*vipariṇāma,dukkhatā*), and “suffering due to formations” (*saṅkhāra,dukkhatā*): S 38.14/4:259; also S 45.165/5:56; D 3:216. See [SD 1.1 \(4.1\)](#).

⁹ On the 2 kinds of pain, see **Sall’atthana Sutta** (S 36.6/4:207-210), [SD 5.5](#); see also **Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M 36,20), [SD 1.12](#).

¹⁰ On craving (*taṇhā*), see **Dhamma,cakka Pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11,6 n), [SD 1.1](#). On craving for sensual pleasures, see **Kāma-c,chanda**, [SD 32.2](#).

¹¹ This parable of the water-snake, on the right approach to learning the truth, is from **Alagaddūpama Sutta** (M 22,23-29) + [SD 3.13 \(3.1.3\)](#).

¹² See the 8 worldly conditions: **Loka,dhamma Sutta 1** (A 8.5), [SD 42.2](#) & **Loka,dhamma Sutta 2** (A 8.6), [SD 42.3](#).

¹³ On terms related to nirvana, see [SD 1.1 \(4.2.2.2\)](#).

THE WAY TO END SUFFERING. Earlier on, we asked, “**What is the purpose of life?**” and we discussed the problem of happiness. Perhaps, there is a better answer to this question, that is: the true purpose of life is to grow. We see growth in humans, animals, plants, and even minerals (but the last is non-living). Science calls this “evolution.” We have all evolved *biologically*, that is, as a species, or a human race, and as human tribes. But, that is as far as biological evolution goes. After that, we are on our own.

“On our own” refers to the evolution of **the true individual** (*sappurisa*). To be a true individual, according to early Buddhism, we need to go through **the 3 trainings** in moral virtue (*sīla, sikkhā*), mental development (*samādhī, sikkhā*) and insight wisdom (*paññā, sikkhā*). Those who diligently train themselves in this way are said to be walking the eightfold path, and, in due course, end up as members of the noble sangha, the spiritual community of the awakening and the awakened.

The 1st training – that of moral virtue—is the understanding of the nature of our 5 physical senses and the mind. We train our senses not to be caught up and misled by their respective objects, and the mind by its own thoughts, especially on account of the unwholesome karmic roots of greed, hate and delusion.

Since our senses are what we really are, **our self-created world**, we need to refine them as sense-faculties, so that they are able to feel beauty and see truth.¹⁴ In other words, our sense-faculties are capable to be trained not to be caught up with likes and dislikes, but to rise above such dualities, and prepare the mind to be unified, so that it is the basis for mental joy.

The 2nd training is that of mental cultivation, which is the beginning of the true path of spiritual evolution. We begin by learning to restrain the 5 physical senses so that they are *calm*, that is, not running after any sense-objects, so that the mind can focus on itself. As the mind stays focused on itself, it *clears* itself up like a peaceful lake high in the mountain wilds.

The mind calms itself with the stilling of the breath, and beautifies itself with lovingkindness. In fact, the mind can be calm and beautified with either breath or lovingkindness. But lovingkindness—a joyful and unconditional acceptance of self and others – is a divine emotion that also makes it easier for us to keep the precepts – that is, the 1st training. So, moral virtue and mental cultivation help one another to spiral up the path of spiritual evolution.

A well-cultivated body (*bhāvita, kāya*) and a well-cultivated mind (*bhāvita, citta*) are the foundations for **the 3rd training**, that of insight wisdom. This is the calm and clear mind happily at work, looking deep into our own being and the true nature of life. Looking deep, the mind sees a universal pattern of things: all things in this universe go through the same cycle of impermanence, change and becoming other.

When we truly see the reality of this **impermanence**, we understand why there is no way that we can ever grasp at any thing, that even pain, pleasure, and neutral feelings, are all impermanent.¹⁵ If we do try to grasp at any of these things, suffering arises. It is like a snake biting its own tail: it feels the pain. and thinks that someone else is hurting its tail, so it bites harder, and suffers even more. Only when it stops biting, to let go of itself, it is relieved of its suffering. When we stop clinging to the world (after understanding what this means by way of the first 3 truths), then we begin to awaken to full liberation.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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¹⁴ On beauty and truth, see [SD 40a.1 \(8.1.2\)](#); as aesthetics, see [SD 46.5 \(2.4.2\)](#); on right livelihood, see [SD 37.8 \(2.3\)](#); see also (Reflection) “[No views frees](#),” R255, 2012.

¹⁵ On the recollection of impermanence and its benefits, see (**Anicca**) **Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1), [SD 16.7](#).