

The 6 kinds of existential struggles (1 of 3)

Source: An excerpt from *SD 60.1f*

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5.4.8.5 We need not wait to die to be reborn into nonhuman states of being. Even as humans, we habitually (on account of our habits) waver and swing amongst the 4 subhuman states (the asura, the animal, the preta and the hell-being). Only rarely do we gain the divine state but just for moments; even our human state is but a moment's flicker, unless we have made good effort to be and remain human, by joyfully nurturing the values in which the 5 precepts are rooted [5.1.2.5].

Hence, we do not only struggle as humans, but it is a struggle to *remain* human or perhaps enjoy moments of divine bliss, when doing some good, such as meditating. Often as humans, we struggle against being overpowered by a subhuman mind—that of the asura, the animal, the preta or the hell-being—then perhaps we free ourselves out of such darkness.

Veritably, we are each Jekyll-and-Hyde: Jekyll may be human or divine, but Hyde may be any of the 4 subhuman states that lurks in our minds. Thus, according to Buddhism, there are **the 6 kinds of existential struggles**, which we will investigate in some useful way.

5.4.9.1 The human struggle

(1) The human struggle is put *first* because this is our most common and familiar situation. We are born only with a human body; our **humanness** (a good mind, a good heart) is mostly rooted in being warmly humanized by *the love, care and contact* of parents, caregivers and loved ones, especially during our formative first 7 years.

Even then, as adults, we easily forget or lose this *humanness* when we come into contact with others who have not been well humanized or who are simply inhuman, even subhuman—themselves going through the asura struggle, the animal struggle, the preta struggle and the hellish struggle. These latter are what we may call “**toxic beings**” when we are negatively affected or conditioned by them. We will be prudent to keep well away from such toxic beings and states.

(2) On the other hand, to mature as humans we need to well use our mind and heart—metaphors for thinking and feeling. The Indian commentator Dhammapāla gives the etymology of **man** (*manussa*) as follows: “On account of the preponderance [abundance] of mind, he is called ‘man’” (*manassa ussannatāya manussā*, VvA 18). We (male and female) are “man” because we are able to “mind”: as a verb it encompasses both *thinking* and *feeling*. When thinking and feeling is guarded with proper attention, it is called **learning**, the most human of struggles. We will say more of this below. [Part (5)]

This ability and inclination to think and to feel is also what makes us religious (to find a connection (Latin, *ligare*, “to bind”) with everyone and everything else, with something higher or spiritual (to seek or attain the deeper meaning of things). Hence, our most human

act by and for ourself is to **meditate**, to mind the heart and feel the heart of the mind, to cultivate our humanness and humanity here and now; and, in time, to rise above the human itself, become divine and beyond. This is the human struggle.

(3) The English philosopher and statesman **Francis Bacon** (1561-1626), in his essay, “Of studies” (1597, 1625), wrote: “Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man.”¹ The knowledge we acquire through good reading and wide learning empowers us to do our best. Conference or discussion enables one to have a keen mind. He can then deftly answer or discuss almost any questions on a wide range of subjects. We will be good in debate and discussion, at least enjoying them. In our times, writing is a very effective way of expressing ourselves over time. The writings of great minds—like the oral traditions of ancient times—have **greater value than the spoken word**. Though it may be easier to recognize someone’s voice than his handwriting, it is a signature in the document that has great value. With these abilities we become great teachers and leaders in society.

Although **right speech** traditionally refers to the oral tradition of the Buddha’s time, it embodies the spirit of wholesome communication, which includes *writing*. One of the noblest of human struggles is to describe such a struggle from experience, in a manner that would benefit others, even posterity. Such writings would be described as being “timely, true, beneficial, words worth treasuring, timeless, well-reasoned, well-defined and connected with the goal (of the highest good), reflecting the Dharma-Vinaya (early Buddhism).”²

(4) **The moral struggle** of Pargament’s theory of the 6 religious/spiritual struggles [5.4.8.3] may be included here. The human struggle is highlighted by tension and guilt about not living up to one’s higher standards and wrestling with attempts to follow moral principles, especially when one has breached the precepts, or desecrated some holy object or sacred place. In other words, as humans (in body and mind), we are capable of knowing good and bad, and choosing the good. This is the basis of personal growth and social progress amongst humans.

Another moral struggle is that of keeping **good health**, meaning *a healthy body as a support for a better mind, and excellent speech to express both*. It is our moral duty to stay as healthy as we possibly can so that we do not spread sickness to others or be a burden to them. Not only should we keep the body³ healthy through our actions but also through how to feed it—moderation in food⁴ —and also through right speech,⁵ inspired with truth, fellowship, beauty and goodness. This is our daily human struggle.

(5) The most human of struggles is **the struggle to learn** [Part (2)]. This is being human at its best: it gives us the ability to learn. What entails learning? Basically, we are capable of thinking, feeling, reasoning and proper attention. I will define “**thinking**” here as simply knowing right from wrong: this is of course ethics, the nature of moral principles: how we

¹ See also Samuel Johnson, “On studies,” first appeared untitled in no 85 of *The Adventurer*, 28 Aug 1753.

² This is a modern adaptation of the sutta definition of right speech: D 11,13 (SD 1.7) = M 41,13 (SD 5.7) = A 10.206,9 (SD 3.9); SD 10.16 (3.4.4.2).

³ On right action (the body), see SD 10.16 (4).

⁴ On moderation in food, see **Kakacūpama S** (M 21,7.2), SD 38.1; **Bhaddāli S** (M 65,2), SD 56.2; **Mahā Assa-pura S** (M 39,9), SD 10.13; **Kīṭṭa, giri S** (M 70,4), SD 11.1; **Āma, gandha S** (Sn 2.2), SD 4.24 (3.4.1); SD 32.2 (5.1); SD 37.13 (1.2).

⁵ On right speech, see SD 10.16 (3).

can live together happily and freely knowing the truth and wisdom (these are, in fact, the 5 values of the precepts).

“**Feeling**” refers to knowing what’s good, what’s bad, and choosing the good, which is felt as beautiful and lived as true. While *ethics* is the principle underlying all our actions and speech, *feeling* is embodied in our “morals,” that is, acting rightly and speaking rightly. Together they form the twin characteristics of **aesthetics**: truth and beauty.

In order to truly appreciate ethics and morals, we need the wisdom of **reasoning**. This is a capacity to understand and accept such right conduct—ethic-based morals—for the good society to rise and grow. The purpose and benefit (both are *attha* in Pali) of such a society is to allow us to be able to see how reasoning works: through *causes and effects*, **conditionality**.

Conditionality has 2 important senses. The first is that nothing arises from a single cause. Whatever arises, does so from a number of causes, and, in turn, join with other effects to become new causes, and so on. In other words. What is of the nature to arise is also the nature to cease. The second sense of conditionality is that by mindfully repeating a good habit or quality we can internalize it. We become good by doing, repeating, good.

With **proper attention**, we understand the essence or principle of what is being taught, or broadly what life is teaching us, in the sense that *everything is teaching us* when we are willing to learn. With learning, we are able to envision or imagine how this applies to other situations, this is called **wisdom**. This way, we can create good things and beautiful things, and be good and beautiful. Thus this capacity for learning and the industry for learning and growing is the greatest of the human struggle.

(6) Just as difficult a struggle as learning is that of **teaching**—not merely a routine or measured transfer of knowledge and fact—but by seeing anew that transforms us anew. This is how Dharma teaching and learning transforms us. Our task as teachers is to reveal to the young and young at heart that they have better **toys** to play with; that is, the mental game that is the Buddha Dharma. Its rules are simple: don’t kill, don’t steal, don’t violate others, don’t lie, don’t lose the mind. Next, we avoid any kind of toxic thoughts, cultivate healthy ones. The mind that is thus calm, clear and bright will more likely see things as they really are. This is the **wisdom** in which we grow, learn and become free.

5.4.9.2 The divine struggle

The divine struggle refers to these 3 kinds of human endeavours:

- (1) understanding why only humans believe in some kind of God-idea or gods;
- (2) maintaining one’s goodness, well-being and happiness in this life itself;
- (3) the religious devotion for a heavenly life in the hereafter; and
- (4) the reality of a freedom beyond heaven, beyond space-time.

We may be caught up in any of these struggles, maybe two or three of them; or even all of them.

(1) The 1st kind of divine struggle is usually manifested by feelings of anger or disappointment with God (for God-believers) or god/s, and feeling punished, abandoned, or unloved by them; or by feelings of fear or apprehension by the belief of interventions of gods or some higher power. We may thus include a fear of karmic misfortune. This kind of belief is unhealthy and unhelpful because there is a feeling of resignation, even fatalism, that there's nothing we can do about it.

The Buddha's advice against such sense of helplessness is a simple and practical one: we should courageously face the situation and deal with it. In **the (Pañcaka) Ṭhāna Sutta** (A 5.48), the Buddha tells us to act as follows:

If he should know, "Not to be attained is this goal by me nor through anyone else," then, ungrieving, he would bear it thus: "What shall I do now with resolve?"⁶

A 5.48,72, SD 42.1

(2) The 2nd kind of person lives a happy, wealth, successful and almost⁷ blamefree life. Ideally, they are those who keep to the precepts, whose minds are calm and clear, and who are wisely learned. As a rule, however, in most cases, such a person must struggle to keep up appearances and defer to the powerful and significant others, especially when the person bears some social status or heraldic title. Even when one may oneself be able to live an exemplary life, someone or some in one's family (a spouse, or a child, or a relative, or a close associate) may fail one in some way. This is the nature of such a "successful" life.

(3) This 3rd kind of person is usually a **God-believer**, conditioned by the tenets of a God-fearing believer who places God above everyone and everything else, even his own family. Since God is his only or highest meaning and purpose in life, he is likely to see everyone else as lesser beings (often as "sinners") either to be converted or to be rejected even when they are closely related. Hence, they are either in constant denial, lacking unconditional love, or they keep reminding themselves they are true to their God. In this way, they are assured of a place in heaven after death. Hence, neither this world nor "others" (non-believers) are of any real significance to them. This "divine" struggle is only in name, since one is really either a grandiose narcissist (blessed by God) or a vulnerable narcissist (having to put up with all kinds of non-believers and their "sins"). [5.3.3.2]

(4) All religions end with stage 3, that is, some kind of heaven or Universal Soul or Idea; except for early Buddhism, which sees even the highest heavens as part of the cosmos, thus, impermanent, unsatisfactory and nonself. The Buddha is a unique being on account of his awakening, including the ability to see through all such ideas, no matter how sophisticated or holy, they are all conditioned by human **society and history**. While society is the extended experience of our senses (sight, sound, smell, taste and touch), history is really a creation of our own mind. Real peace exists when we are able to know what this means, and by that

⁶ *Kammaṃ dalhaṃ kin'ti karomi'danī ti*, lit, "What firm action do I take now?"

⁷ This qualifier, "almost," applies even to one blame-free, since there will always be those who are not happy with others, and are by nature fault-finding: easily seen are others' faults (Dh 18), SD 48.1 (9.2.2.2); everyone is likely to be blamed by someone: "They blame those for sitting silent, they blame those for speaking too much. Those speaking little, too, they blame. There is none who is not blamed in the world" (Dh 227).

means transcend what limits us to our senses and history. This is our divine struggle at its highest.

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