

THE TYPES OF SUFFERING IN THE MAHĀVYUTPATTI AND THE PĀLI CANON*

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In this paper an analysis is attempted of the triple suffering (*duḥkha-duḥkhatā, saṃskāra-duḥkhatā, viparināma-duḥkhatā*) as it appears in the Mahāvyutpatti and in earlier sources. Comparing it to some non-buddhistic triads (e.g. in the *Yoga-sūtra*) and similar concepts in the Pāli Canon and its commentaries, a connection is suggested to the *trilakṣana* (*duḥkha, anitya, anātman*) and to the frequent series old age – disease – death. It appears that the original understanding of *saṃskāra-duḥkhatā* was probably not the suffering related to subliminal impressions but rather the suffering inherent in anything of a composite nature.

Key words: suffering, *duḥkhatā, trilakṣana, saṃskāra, Mahāvyutpatti, Pāli Canon, Yoga-sūtra.*

Duḥkha in the Mahāvyutpatti

It is a kind of mystery why Alexander Csoma de Kőrös never published his edition and translation of the Mahāvyutpatti. It seems that he spent several years on the preparation of the text and that suggests that he was fully aware of the importance of this Tibetan–Sanskrit Buddhist vocabulary. It is an important tool for the “reconstruction” of lost Sanskrit originals and for the comparison of the Tibetan and Indian understanding of Buddhism.

There is a third aspect, quite interesting in its own right that can be analysed from the Sanskrit part only. The Mahāvyutpatti is not organised alphabetically but conceptually: groups of related concepts are listed together and this shows their interrelation and/or structure in later Buddhist scholasticism.

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In this paper I am going to review one such cluster of concepts, the types of *duhkha*, and compare it to the same as it appears in the early Buddhist scriptures.

The importance in Buddhism of *duhkha*, ‘suffering/frustration/unsatisfactori-ness’ of the whole human existence hardly needs elaboration. It is the starting point and basic premise of the Teaching; all the effort of the *bhikṣu* goes to overcome it; and the great promise, the final goal is *nirvāṇa*, its complete blowing out. A detailed analysis of its role in the life of Gautama Siddhārtha, its interrelations with other fundamental tenets of the *dharma* or its relation to facts of history is beyond the scope of this study; an excellent summary can be found in Gombrich (1994, pp. 54–59, 62–65).

Suffering appears as the theme of two successive groups in the *Mahāvyutpatti*, nos. CCXXVI–CCXXVII in Csoma de Körös (1984, pp. 307–308) = 103–104 in his manuscript, 111–112 in Minayeff’s and Sakaki’s editions. The second group is the well-known characterisation of suffering from the Four Noble Truths as they are formulated in the Benares Sermon, the Turning of the Wheel of the Teaching.¹ The group is here analysed as eight kinds of suffering: birth, age, sickness, death, separation from the beloved, union with the disagreeable, not gaining of desires and finally the five aggregates of clinging (*upādāna-skandhāḥ*).²

The triad

The first group, a triad, is less clear: (1) *Duhkha-duhkhatā*; (2) *Samskāra-duhkhatā*; (3) *Vipariṇāma-duhkhatā*. In Csoma de Körös’s rendering they are “the pain of misery; the fancied misery or the consciousness of misery; the misery of change”. These cannot be considered translations of the Sanskrit – even accepting the terminology we should say ‘the misery of pain’ and ‘the misery of consciousness’. But it is far from evident that the notoriously vague *saṃskāra* here means anything like ‘fancy’ or ‘consciousness’. Also it is worth investigating why we have here exactly these three? Why not, say, four?

It seems that it was something of a commonplace in classical India that there are three main kinds of suffering. The *Sāṃkhya-kārikā*, an important short text from ca. the 4th century CE, starts with the very words *duhkha-trayābhīghātāt*, “because of being hit by the triad of suffering”. The commentaries³ explain that the three kinds

¹ On other formulations, and especially on its possible original form see the classical analysis of Norman (1982).

² That is, the mental and physical factors of human existence; see Rhys Davids and Stede (1993, p. 149 and esp. p. 233) and Edgerton (1993, p. 607 and esp. p. 145). A fresh approach is suggested by Gombrich (1997, pp. 66–69) who underlines the importance of the metaphorical character of the expression (‘bundle of fuel’) and its relation to the fire-metaphor.

³ For example, *Gauda-pāda ad loc: tatra duhkha-trayān – ādhy-ātmikān, ādhi-bhautikān ādhi-daivikān ceti. tatrādhy-ātmikān dvi-vidhān: śārīram mānasām ceti. śārīram vāta-pitta-ślesma-viparyaya-kṛtāni jvara-īśārādi...* “There the triad of suffering is: referring to oneself, referring to the creatures and referring to the gods. There ‘referring to oneself’ is of two kinds: bodily and mental. ‘Bodily’ is fever, dysentery, etc. caused by the abnormality of wind, bile and phlegm...”

of suffering are *ādhyātmika*, *ādhībhautika*, *ādhidaivika*: internal (bodily and mental), related to other beings and dependent on higher powers.⁴ This interpretation is not beyond doubt;⁵ in the text itself we find only *jarā-marana-kṛtaṁ duḥkham*, “suffering caused by old age and death” (55. kārikā).

It is perhaps more to the point that the (probably a little earlier) Yoga-sūtra says: *parināma-tāpa-saṁskāra-duḥkhair* ... *duḥkham eva sarvaiḥ vivekinaiḥ*, “Everything is suffering for the discriminating because of the suffering of change, pain and *saṁskāra*” (II.15). The commentators again take *saṁskāra* to be ‘mental impression or karmic residue’,⁶ which is not implausible in this text; however this sentence looks more like a proverb than a sūtra proper, so perhaps our analysis of the older Buddhistic texts will shed some light here as well. The peculiar wording typical to this formula, speaking of *duḥkhatā* (“miserableness”) instead of simply *duḥkha* (although not in the Sūtra, but in the Bhāṣya⁷) also suggests a close relation.

The Pāli Canon

The immediate source of the three kinds of suffering in the Pāli Canon seems to be Sāriputta’s formulation of the teaching. The *locus classicus* is the Saṅgīti-sutta; Sāriputta recites a long list of categories (at the Buddha’s request) in Pāvā, after the death of the Niganṭha Nāṭaputta, i.e. Vardhamāna Mahāvīra, the Jina. No meaningful context – here we have just a list of triads. *Tisso dukkhatā – dukkhadukkhatā, saṅkhāradukkhatā, vipariṇāmadukkhatā*; “Three kinds of suffering – the suffering of suffering, the suffering of *saṁskāra*, the suffering of change”.⁸

We have two similar passages in the Saṁyutta-nikāya;⁹ in the first Sāriputta answers the question of Jambukhādaka, a *parivrājaka* (wandering mendicant) – What

⁴ The same analysis appears in the Vyāsabhāṣya ad Yoga-sūtra I.31, but the following unmistakable paraphrase (*yenābhīhatāḥ prāṇinas tad-apaghātāya prayatante tad duḥkham*, cf. *Sāṅkhya-kārikā* 1: *duḥkha-trayābhīghātāj jījñāsā tad-apaghātāhetau*) shows that this evidence is not an independent testimony.

⁵ It seems to depend on an old medical tradition preserved in the Suśruta-saṁhitā. Cf. Ruzsa (1997a; 1997b, pp. 27–35).

⁶ *kā punah saṁskāra-duḥkhatā? sukhānubhavāt sukh-saṁskārāśayo duḥkhānubhavād api duḥkha-saṁskārāśaya iti. evaiḥ karmabhyo vipāke ‘nubhūyamāne sukhe duḥkhe vā punah karmāśaya-pracaya iti.* “And what is the suffering of *saṁskāra*? From the experience of happiness, a *saṁskāra* of happiness will be stored, from the experience of suffering a *saṁskāra* of suffering. And so from the *karmas*, when their fruition is experienced either as happiness or as suffering, again a storage of *karma* will be accumulated.” (Vyāsabhāṣya ad loc.)

⁷ *eṣā parināma-duḥkhatā nāma ... atha kā tāpa-duḥkhatā? ... kā punah saṁskāra-duḥkhatā?*

⁸ Dīgha-nikāya, III. Pāthika-vagga (10. (= 30.) Saṅgīti-sutta, Tikam) 305. (PTS vol. III, p. 216.)

⁹ a) Saṁyutta-nikāya, IV. Saṅyatana-vagga (4. (= 38.) Jambukhādaka-saṁyutta, 14. Dukkhaṇīh-sutta) 327. (PTS vol. IV, p. 259.) In the village of Nālaka, in Magadha. “‘dukkham, dukkhan’ ti, āvuso Sāriputta, vuccati. katamāṁ nu kho, āvuso, dukkhan” ti? – “tisso imā, āvuso, dukkhatā. dukkhadukkhatā, saṅkhāradukkhatā, vipariṇāmadukkhatā”.

is suffering? In the second the speaker is unspecified and here we have again a list of triads. In both cases the Noble Eightfold Path serves to recognise (and to know perfectly, to perfectly overcome and to reject) the three.

That our triad is not unconnected to that of the *Yoga-sūtra* is corroborated by closer Pāli parallels. In the paracanonical *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and also in the *Visuddhimagga* we read of four meanings of suffering: *pīlana-saṅkhata-santāpa-vipariṇāmaṭṭhena vā dukkham ariyasaccam*,¹⁰ “the Noble Truth of Suffering [can be analysed] in the sense of oppression, compound, torment and change”. So instead of the standard *dukkha-dukkhatā* we have two synonyms: *pīlana* and *santāpa*, and the latter is almost identical with the *Yoga-sūtra*’s *tāpa-duhkha*. That the number is here four, not three, seems typical to the postcanonical literature: although they are fond of counting the types of suffering, they seem to be unconcerned about the exact number. Sometimes we find also lists of two or seven *dukkhas*.¹¹

Pain, change, compositeness

Accidentally we also got a little closer to understanding the meaning of our terms. We found that *dukkha-dukkhatā* meant the most immediately felt, direct suffering; we could say ‘pain’. Also the substitution of *saṅkhata* for *saṅkhāra* is less ambiguous. The equivalent of Sanskrit *saṃskṛta*, it seems to refer not to mental impressions but rather to anything made up of parts, a compound. This accords very well with Buddhaghosa’s interpretation of the triad.

In the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* (the *Atṭhakathā* to our *locus classicus*), we read:

“‘The suffering of suffering’ – suffering as actual suffering; this is the name of the feeling of suffering. ‘The suffering of *saṅkhāra*’ – the suffering arising from the state of being a compound; this is the name of the feeling of no suffering, no happiness. And this, being essentially a compound, is tormented by arising, ageing and breaking up; therefore ‘suffering of compound’ is said in the absence of the state

b) Saṃyutta-nikāya, V. Mahā-vagga (= 45) I. Magga-saṃyutta, 7. Esanā-vagga, 5. Dukkhatā-sutta) 165. (PTS vol. V, p. 56.) Of the circumstances we know only that the text belongs to the Sāvatti tradition. “*tisso imā, bhikkhave, dukkhatā, katamā tisso? dukkhadukkhatā, saṅkhāradukkhatā, vipariṇāmadukkhatā – imā kho, bhikkhave, tisso dukkhatā*”.

¹⁰ Visuddhimagga (Samādhibhāvanādhikāra, 7. Chaanussati-niddeso, Buddhānussati-kathā:), 144. (PTS vol. II, p. 212.)

Similarly in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, II. Yuganaddha-vagga (2. Sacca-kathā), 8.:
kathām dukkham tathaṭṭhena saccanī? cattāro dukkhassa dukkhaṭṭhā tathā avitathā anaññathā. dukkhassa pīlanaṭṭho, saṅkhataṭṭho, santāpaṭṭho, vipariṇāmaṭṭho – ime cattāro dukkhassa dukkhaṭṭhā tathā avitathā anaññathā. evam dukkham tathaṭṭhena saccanī. (PTS vol. II, p. 104.)

¹¹ Two e.g. in the *Nettippakkaraṇa* (IV. Paṭiniddesa-vāra, 1. Hāra-vibhaṅga, 2. Vicayahāra-vibhaṅga =) 11.

duvidham dukkham – kāyikañca cetasikañca. yam kāyikam idam dukkham, yam cetasikam idam domanassam. (PTS vol. II, p. 12.)

Seven e.g. in the *Petakopadesa*, 1. Ariyasaccappakāsana-pathama-bhūmi, 12. (PTS vol. II, pp. 19–20.) Here *appiyasampayogo* and *piyavippayogo* are added to the above two and the usual three.

of another suffering. ‘The suffering of change’ – suffering in change; this is the name of the feeling of happiness. For by the changing of happiness suffering is born; therefore ‘suffering of change’ is said of happiness. Moreover, discarding the feeling of suffering and the feeling of happiness, all experiences of the three levels of existence can be recognised as ‘suffering of compound’, based on the saying: ‘All compounds are painful’ (Dhammapada 278).¹²

Similar and even more clear is the analysis of the Visuddhimagga:

“There bodily and mental suffering – essentially suffering according to the nature of the feeling and according to name: it is called the suffering of suffering.

A pleasant feeling by changing causes the rise of suffering so it is the suffering of change.

And also an indifferent feeling and the rest of *saṅkhāras* in the three levels of existence, essentially tormented by rising and destruction: it is the suffering of *saṅkhāra*.^{13, 14}

Trilakṣaṇa

Now if we have pain, change, and compositeness in a triad, this seems to be very close to the series *dukkha*, *anicca*, *anattā*: painful, non-eternal, insubstantial. This list¹⁵ appears frequently in the Nikāyas,¹⁶ characterising either the five *khandhas* or

¹² dukkhadukkhatāti dukkhabhūtā dukkhatā. dukkha-vedanā-yetā nāmañ. saṅkhāra-dukkhatāti saṅkhārabhāvena dukkhatā. adukkhamasukhā-vedanā-yetā nāmañ. sā hi saṅkhata-tā uppāda-jarābhāngapīlītā, tasmā anñadukkha-sabha-virahato saṅkhāra-dukkhatāti vuttā. viparināma-dukkhatāti viparināma-dukkhatā. sukhā-vedanā-yetā nāmañ. sukhassa hi viparināma-dukkhañ uppajjati, tasmā sukhāñ viparināma-dukkhatāti vuttāñ. apica ṭhapetvā dukkha-vedanā sukhā-vedanāñca sab-bepi tebhūmakā dhammā “sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā” ti vacanato saṅkhāra-dukkhatāti veditabbā. (PTS vol. III, p. 992.)

¹³ Paññābhāvanādhikāra, 16. Indriyasacca-niddeso, Dukkhaniddesa-kathā, Jāti-niddesa (539). Accidentally this list also continues and has seven items in it:

kasmā panesā dukkhāti ce: anekesām dukkhānañ vatthubhāvato. anekāni hi dukkhāni. sey-yathidañ. dukkha-dukkham, viparināma-dukkham, saṅkhāra-dukkham, paṭicchannadukkham, appaṭicchannadukkham, pariṭāyadukkham, nippariṭāyadukkham.

tattha kāyikacetasikā dukkhā vedanāsabha-vato ca nāmato ca dukkhattā dukkha-dukkhanti vuccati. sukhā vedanā viparināma-dukkha-pattihetuto viparināma-dukkham. upekkhā vedanā ceva avasesā ca tebhūmakā saṅkhārā udayabbayappaṭipīlītattā saṅkhāra-dukkham. (PTS, p. 499.)

¹⁴ The analysis of Vasubandhu (Abhidharma-Kośa-Bhāṣya, vol. II, pp. 688–696) is similar, starting *tisro hi duḥkhatāḥ – duḥkha-duḥkhatā, viparināma-duḥkhatā, saṃskāra-duḥkhatā ca*.

Also closely parallel is Asaṅga’s understanding in the *Viniścayasamgrahā* on *Cintāmayī bhūmi*. See Wayman (1997, pp. 244–246), where an interesting analysis of the relation *duḥkha-skandha-saṅskāra* can be found; he, however, insists on translating *saṅskāras* with ‘motivations’ or ‘constructions’.

¹⁵ For a nice analysis of the interrelationships of the members of the *tilakkhaṇa* see “The Three Signata” in Wijesekera (1994, pp. 71–83).

¹⁶ And also in the Yoga-sūtra, just ten *sūtras* before our previous quotation: *anityāśuci-duḥkha-nātmasu nitya-śuci-sukhātmakhyātir avidyā*. “Ignorance is to take the non-eternal, impure, painful and insubstantial for eternal, pure, agreeable and substantial.”

the senses and their objects. Sometimes they are connected explicitly to our terms – to compositeness: “Here a certain person realises non-eternity in all compounds ... painfulness in all compounds ... insubstantiality in all constituents.”¹⁷ And to change: “The eye [etc.] is non-eternal, painful, insubstantial, necessarily changing.”¹⁸

Why is a compound painful? I guess the most authentic interpretation comes from the last sentence of the Enlightened One: *vayadhammā saṅkhārā*, “compounds necessarily decay”.¹⁹ A compound can, and sooner or later will fall apart and will no longer exist. In the end even a Buddha dies.

Right now we have connected one item, *saṁskāra-duḥkhatā* of our triad with another, *marana* (death) of the longer list. There may be more interrelationships.

Less abstract formulas

The first four of the eight, birth, age, sickness and death are closely connected both logically and traditionally. However *jāti* seems a little misplaced: it is generally considered a reason for happiness.²⁰ Although there are some rather forced explanations in the tradition, stating that to be an embryo means unbearable suffering, still it seems more probable that birth is suffering only in a secondary sense. It starts that life which is full of suffering, so in a sense it is a cause of suffering only, not itself suffering.²¹ This is exactly what we find in the *paticca-samuppāda*, where suffering (the last member in the chain) is the result of birth, the last but one.

This triad is, of course, the famous three visions of the young Gotama: this is what sent him on the road. Though this is a nice and expressive myth, unfortunately we cannot prove its existence at a very early date. Rather it seems that in the Nikāyas we have typically only age and death, often in the company of other forms of *dukkha*. That *jarā* and *marana* by themselves equal suffering, is shown in this passage: “The

¹⁷ Aṅguttara-nikāya, VII. Sattaka-nipāta (2. Anusaya-vagga, 6–8. Aniccānupassī, Dukkhānupassī, Anattānupassī-sutta), 16–18.

¹⁸ *idhekacco puggalo sabbasankhāresu aniccānupassī* (// *dukkhānupassī* / *sabbesu dhammesu anattānupassī*) viharati. (PTS vol. IV, pp. 13–14.)

¹⁹ *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*, Vibhaṅga (2. Āyata-vibhaṅga, 1. Suttanta-bhājanīya), 154. *cakkhūm aniccaṁ dukkham anattā vipariṇāmadhammam*. [Similarly with the other eleven āyatanas, *rūpā*, *sotām*, *saddā*, ... *mano*, *dhammā*.] (PTS, p. 70.)

²⁰ Dīghanikāya (II. Mahā-vagga 3. =) 13. Mahāparinibbāna-sutta, 185. (PTS vol. II, p. 120.)

²¹ One might also wonder why old age, the period of being wise and respectable is considered so evidently painful. That in practice the obvious drawbacks of mental and bodily decline were not at all counterbalanced by rising in social status, not even in the case of monks, is nicely demonstrated by Hinüber (1997).

²² Although his conclusion is different, this has been recognised by Kalupahana (1994, p. 87).

On the other hand Pande (1995, pp. 405–406) thinks that in the Nikāyas *dukkha* in general has the secondary meaning of “what may be proximately or remotely causal to such feeling”. “This ambiguity of usage ... was noted in the Nikāyas themselves, and the theory of the threefold ‘Dukkhatā’ was possibly advanced to effect a reconciliation of the conflicting statements about dukkha.”

noble disciple recognises age and death, recognises the origin of age and death, recognises the suppression of age and death and recognises the path leading to the suppression of age and death.”²²

Once we matched *saṃskāra-duḥkha* with death, it is easy to connect *jarā* (ageing) with *vipariṇāma* (change to the worse). What remains is to identify the parallel of *duḥkha-duḥkhatā*, suffering in the trivial sense. Sometimes we find *dukkha* itself in this position; e.g. “Birth, age, death and suffering will rise no more”.²³ Usually, as in the formula of dependent origination, we see the stereotyped grief-lamentation-suffering-dejectedness-trouble²⁴ line. And of course, *vyādhi*, sickness fits best to ageing and death.

Conclusion

To sum up: we related the triple suffering of *duḥkha – vipariṇāma – saṃskāra* to the triple characterisation of the world as *duḥkha, anitya* and *anātman* and to the three traumas of the Bodhisattva seeing a sick person, an aged man and a dead body. I feel that it is just to say that there are essentially two forms of suffering only, pain and decay. Suffering in the immediate sense and suffering based on the transience of all worldly phenomena. Both can be further analysed in a number of ways, but especially the latter lends itself easily to bifurcation into gradual corruption and final destruction, ageing and death. So the two lists of the Mahāvyutpatti are, after all, not so fundamentally different. We have seen also that to see in the *saṃskāra-duḥkhatā* pain related to the mental impressions is probably a late and not very plausible re-interpretation of the old concept.

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²² Majjhima-nikāya, I. Mūla-paṇṇāsa (1. Mūlapariyāya-vagga, 9. Sammādiṭṭhi-sutta), 92. *ariyasāvako jarāmarañāica pajānāti, jarāmarañasamudayañica pajānāti, jarāmarañanirodhañica pajānāti, jarāmarañanirodhagāminīn patipadañca pajānāti ... jātisamudayā jarāmarañasamudayo, jātinirodhā jarāmarañanirodho.* (PTS vol. I, p. 49.)

²³ Majjhima-nikāya, III. Upari-paṇṇāsa (4. Vibhaṅga-vagga, 8. Uddesavibhaṅga-sutta), 313. *... āyatīn jātijarāmarañadukkhasamudayasambhavo na hotī.* (PTS vol. III, p. 223.)

²⁴ Several times in the Majjhima-nikāya, e.g. I. Mūla-paṇṇāsa (4. Mahāyamaka-vagga, 8. Mahātanhāsañkhaya-sutta), 402.

... bhavapaccayā jāti, jātipaccayā jarāmarañanī sokaparidevadukkhadomanassupāyāsā sambhavanti. evam etassa kevalassa dukkhakkhandhassa samudayo hoti.

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