Chapter 3

The cause of unhappiness

Discussion points

- Why do we become unhappy?
- Physical pain and psychological suffering.
- Body-mind complex, always in flux - the paradigm of five aggregates.
- The notion of “I” – the root cause of unhappiness

Ask yourself: ‘Why do I do what I do?’ and wait for an answer. Pursue asking the question why, till that question is no longer valid. Irrespective of where you start from, you will always stop at the answer: ‘Because I want to be happy!’ To be happy is intrinsic to all humans, but alas, the appearances delude us and our actions lead more to unhappiness than to happiness.

Prima facie the unhappiness in our lives seems to have its roots in the world outside – in situations beyond our control, in capricious behaviour of people, in natural calamities etc. ‘We were late by about ten minutes - the car tyre went flat - and the whole joy of seeing the film was lost’; ‘took just two additional helpings of that delicious dish, and – what a pity – I have fallen ill’; ‘this expensive litigation against my partner – bloody cheat – has turned my life into a hell’; ‘this illness has really sapped my enthusiasm to live – have to swallow so many pills everyday’ and so on, goes the usual ranting. But if we reflect deeply, it would become evident that much of the unhappiness is self-inflicted. In life we all encounter sometimes unpleasant, painful situations. If we are wise and understand the ‘Truth’ that this is the nature of human life on planet earth, we do not get upset or resent it. Instead we assess the situation objectively, and take appropriate action as deemed fit. If we are unwise and get perturbed, we often get into a blame game – blaming other people, administration, government, weather, God or even ourselves – and then we react out of aversion. Such a reaction would usually only exacerbate the unhappiness. The Buddha used a vivid simile to illustrate the difference between these two approaches:

8 SN 36.6 : Sallatha Sutta
“When an untaught worldling is touched by a painful (bodily) feeling, he worries and grieves, he laments, beats his breast, weeps and is distraught. He thus experiences two kinds of feelings, a bodily and a mental feeling. It is as if a man were pierced by a dart and, following the first piercing, he is hit by a second dart. So that person will experience feelings caused by two darts. ……

But in the case of a well-taught noble disciple, O monks, when he is touched by a painful feeling, he will not worry nor grieve and lament, he will not beat his breast and weep, nor will he be distraught. It is one kind of feeling he experiences, a bodily one, but not a mental feeling. It is as if a man were pierced by a dart, but was not hit by a second dart following the first one. So this person experiences feelings caused by a single dart only.’

We can clearly spare ourselves from the pain of this second dart of mental anguish which we unwisely thrust into ourselves. It is because of my unwise reaction to missing just ten minutes of a three hour film, that ‘the whole joy of seeing the film is lost’; falling ill is a natural consequence of overeating, and not due to lack of compassion in Nature; litigation against the partner who has cheated me should be the concern of my lawyers; it need not ‘turn my life into hell’; a few tablets of medicine cannot ‘sap my enthusiasm to live’, it is the ‘second dart’ of non-acceptance of ‘having to take medicines’ which does so.

We need to appreciate that nobody can completely escape from the ‘first dart’ of unpleasant situations or physical pain. The great Buddha also had his detractors, some of whom even tried to physically harm him, and he too, like all mortals, suffered from various bodily ailments. But being a wise man, he never hit himself with the ‘second dart’ of mental anguish arising from non-acceptance of the reality. We too, by following his teachings, can learn to keep the second dart at bay.

The first step in this direction is to get a deeper understanding of the root cause of our non-acceptance, resentment and unwise reaction to unpleasant situations. In the very first discourse that he gave after Enlightenment, The Buddha expounds on the nature of suffering in the following manner\(^9\) (usually termed as the first noble Truth):

‘The Noble Truth of Suffering (dukkha), monks, is this: Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering, association with the unpleasant is suffering, dissociation from the pleasant is suffering, not to receive what one desires is suffering — in brief the five aggregates subject to grasping are suffering.’

This statement can be broken into three parts. The first part: ‘Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering’, which is quite obvious. Physical pain indeed is suffering.

The second part: ‘association with the unpleasant is suffering, dissociation from the pleasant is suffering, not to receive what one desires is suffering’. This is a generic, and a rather obvious, classification of what constitutes ‘psychological’ suffering.

\(^9\) SN 56.11; Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta
The third part: 'In brief, the five aggregates subject to grasping, are suffering.' This statement is clearly not obvious. The word 'aggregates' used here must have been quite prevalent at that time, so the Buddha did not need to explain it to the five monks to whom he was addressing this first discourse; but we should understand it properly. Elsewhere, the Buddha explains the five aggregates to be: ṛūpa, viññāna, vedanā, saññā, sañkhāra. These Pali words are usually translated as form (or body), consciousness, feeling, perception and mental formation. The last four aggregates constitute what we call today as mind and thus the five aggregates can be called as the body-mind complex.

Elsewhere, the Buddha gives a detailed exposition on these five aggregates:

The four great elements and the form derived from the four great elements: this is called form. .... And why, bhikkhus, do you call it form? 'It is deformed' bhikkhus, therefore it is called form. Deformed by what? Deformed by cold, deformed by heat, deformed by hunger, deformed by thirst, deformed by contact with flies, mosquitoes, wind, sun and serpents.

And what, bhikkhus, is feeling? There are these six classes of feeling: feeling born of eye-contact, feeling born of ear-contact, feeling born of nose-contact, feeling born of tongue-contact, feeling born of body-contact, feeling born of mind-contact. This is called feeling. And bhikkhus, why do you call it feeling? 'It feels', bhikkhus, therefore it is called feeling. And what does it feel? It feels pleasure, it feels pain, it feels neither-pain-nor pleasure.

And what, bhikkhus, is perception? There are these six classes of perception: perception of forms, perception of sounds, perception of odours, perception of tastes, perception of tactile objects, perception of mental phenomena. This is called perception. With the arising of contact there is the arising of perception... And why, bhikkhus, do you call it perception? 'It perceives', bhikkhus, therefore it is called perception. And what does it perceive? It perceives blue, it perceives yellow, it perceives red, it perceives white....

And what, bhikkhus, are volitional formations? There are the six classes of volition: volition regarding forms, volition regarding sounds, volition regarding odours, volition regarding tastes, volition regarding tactile objects, volition regarding mental phenomena. With the arising of contact there is the arising of volitional formations. And why, bhikkhus, do you call them volitional formations? 'They construct the conditioned', bhikkhus, therefore they are called volitional formations.

And what, bhikkhus, is consciousness? There are the six classes of consciousness: eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness, mind-consciousness. With the arising of name and form [body-mind] there is the arising of consciousness. And why, bhikkhus, do you call it consciousness? 'It cognizes', bhikkhus, therefore it is called consciousness. And what does it cognize? It cognizes sour, it cognizes bitter, it cognizes pungent, it cognizes sweet, it cognizes sharp, it cognizes mild, it cognizes salty, it cognizes bland...

The Buddha points out that these aggregates – what we call today as the body-mind complex - are continually in a flux since these depend on ever-changing supportive conditions and therefore do not qualify to be called as 'I' or 'mine' or my 'self'.

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10 who had been his associates for six years after he left his palace in search of the path of liberation, but had left him after he gave up ascetic practices and took food
11 Pali is the language in which the words of the Buddha have been preserved and must have been the language spoken in the central and north India in those days.
12 SN 22.57: Sattaṭṭhāna Sutta, and 22.79: Khajjaniya Sutta.
13 Namely the earth element(pothavi), water element(a̅po), fire element(tejo) and the air element(vāyu)
take any of these as ‘I’ or ‘my Self’, when their arising & falling away are discerned, it would follow that ‘I arise and falls away’. These aggregates arose because of certain conditions in the past, and will be dis-aggregated because of certain other conditions in the future. These essentially belong to the nature, and wisdom lies in appreciating their intrinsic impermanence and not taking these personally.

Thus the notion of ‘I’ or my ‘Self’, which seems to be so tenaciously ingrained that we never even question it, is essentially an illusion, a mere convention. This illusion gets strengthened by the limitations of language necessary for communication. Thus we are forced to use words like ‘I’, ‘me’, ‘mine’, ‘you’, ‘yours’ etc. for meaningful communication, but these are mere consensual terms referring to the apparent truths, termed sammutti sacca in Pāli. When the entities being referred to are analyzed, all that we find is various combinations of five aggregates, which could be seen as the ultimate realities, or the Parramatta sacca. It would obviously make communication very difficult if to conform to ultimate realities we were to say ‘those five aggregates walk’ or ‘these five aggregates eat’ instead of saying, ‘you walk’ and ‘I eat’. It is like the conventional words that a scientist uses when he says mix ‘common salt with water’, rather than going into the detailed description of the atomic structure of the two substances being mixed. The difficulty arises when we forget this fact and take linguistic designations of ‘I’ and ‘you’ as substantial entities due to our attachment to the aggregates. This point is very succinctly brought out by Bhikkhuni Vajirā:

Just as with the assemblage of parts, the word ‘chariot’ is used; So, when the aggregates exist, there is the convention ‘a being’.

Thus, this innate feeling of “I am” is only a notion arising due to attachment to the five aggregates. It has no solid essence, just as a ‘Chariot’ has no essence apart from its various constituent parts. These aggregates are intricately inter-related and incessantly undergoing change in accordance with the law of cause and effect -- there being no permanent ontological entity which could be termed as “I”. Apart from the aggregates there is no distinct ‘being’ – the feeler, the thinker or the doer; just as there is no ‘forest’ apart from the trees; no ‘car’ apart from the component parts (viz. the axle, the wheels, the chassis, the engine, the fuel tank, the steering etc.); no ‘river’ apart from the water flowing between the two banks.

14 SN 5.10 Vajirā Sutta
15 It is interesting to note that the Buddha could identify that all the material realm is, at its core, constantly in a state of vibration, a fact which science realized in the twentieth century
In another discourse the Buddha gives an excellent example to illustrate how the notion of “I” arises due to clinging to these five aggregates:

It is by clinging, Ananda, that the notion of ‘I am’ occurs, not without clinging. And by clinging to what does ‘I am’ occur…? It is by clinging to form that ‘I am’ occurs, not without clinging. It is by clinging to feeling … to perception … to volitional formations … to consciousness that ‘I am’ occurs, not without clinging.

Suppose … Ananda, a young woman – or a man- youthful and fond of ornaments would examine her own facial image in a mirror … she would look at it with clinging. So too, it is by clinging to form that ‘I am’ occurs, not without clinging. It is by clinging to feeling … to perception … to volitional formations … to consciousness that ‘I am’ occurs, not without clinging.

Since we consider these ever changing psycho-physical components as ‘I’, ‘mine’ or ‘my-self’; any unpleasant change in any of these is seen as a threat to ‘I’ or ‘my-self’ and we suffer. Thus, in the words of the Buddha, the suffering or unhappiness arises primarily because of this attachment to the aggregates:

… And, bhikkhus, from what are sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair born? How are they produced? Here, bhikkhus, the un instructed worldling …. regards form as self, or self as possessing form, or form as in self, or self as in form. That form of his changes and alters. With change and alteration of form, there arise in him sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair. He regards feeling as self … perception as self … volitional formations as self … consciousness as self, or self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in self, or self as in consciousness. That consciousness of his changes and alters. With the change and alteration of consciousness, there arise in him sorrow lamentation, pain displeasure and despair.

Of course, in the very first exposition of Dhamma, the Buddha, in the formulation of the second noble truth, seems to identify something else, viz. the insatiable thirst for pleasures, as the immediate cause of unhappiness:

And this, monks, is the noble truth of the origination of suffering: the ‘wanting’ (tanha) that makes for further becoming — accompanied by passion & delight, relishing now here & now there — i.e., craving for sensual pleasure, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming.

Now if we ask: what is at the root of this incessant pleasure seeking, this tanha, the insatiable ‘wanting’ -- be it the wanting of sensory delights, or wanting to become someone with power or authority, or not wanting unpleasant situations; a little reflection would reveal the answer. It is the self-centeredness resulting from the congenital attachment to the body-mind complex which makes us believe that this composite of five aggregates is what we are, and we regard it as: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self’. But these are by their inherent nature conditioned, subject to change. We all experience these changes and since we ignorantly take these ‘personally’ -- whether it is the change in body due to illness or old age, or the change in feelings due to interaction with the sensory world etc. -- we suffer. The end of unhappiness would obviously lie in waking up from this stubborn illusion -- the

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notion of “I”. This is also termed as the insight of anattā, egoless-ness which follows directly from the insight of anicca, the intrinsic impermanent nature of these aggregates. While the insight of anicca is easy to accept intellectually – for we continually see the aging, decay and death of all sentient beings; the insight of anattā is extremely counter-intuitive. We will explore it in more detail using a modern approach in the next chapter.