

Reinterpreting Dukkha in the 21st Century: The Four Noble Truths as a Framework for Analyzing Contemporary Human Suffering

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Abstract

This paper reinterprets dukkha within the context of the Four Noble Truths to examine modern human suffering in the 21st century. Traditionally described by Gautama Buddha as an existential state arising from craving and ignorance, dukkha is now applied to contemporary issues including mental health crises, consumerism, digital dependency and socio-economic inequality. The study employs a qualitative and interpretive methodology, integrating classical Buddhist texts with contemporary interdisciplinary scholarship (2020–2025). It also includes the Nepali socio-cultural context to show how suffering and resilience show up in different places. The findings indicate that the Four Noble Truths serve as both a diagnostic framework and a pragmatic approach for confronting evolving manifestations of suffering, thereby affirming their continued significance in modern society.

Keywords: Dukkha, Four Noble Truths, Contemporary Suffering, Mindfulness, Nepal, Buddhism

Introduction

The central tenet of Buddhism is the notion of dukkha, commonly defined as suffering, inadequacy, or existential discomfort. It is within the scope of the Four Noble Truths that this problem is recognized, scrutinized, and finally surpassed. Traditionally, dukkha was regarded as an intrinsic feature of conditioned reality, emerging due to the

attachment to transient objects.

Nevertheless, the 21st century brings forth novel and complex forms of dukkha influenced by globalization, scientific progress, and changing economic relations. Despite material comfort, people experience growing mental strain, disconnection, and frustration. Consequently, there arises a critical issue of the adequacy of

conventional philosophical theories when applied to modern circumstances.

This paper proposes that dukkha can be employed as an interpretative tool that accounts for the sufferings experienced today. Through the revision of the Four Noble Truths, it is possible to establish a connection between traditional wisdom and current problems. Special consideration is paid to Nepal, where drastic social changes contribute to this process.

Literature Review

The classical Buddhist philosophy offers an adequate interpretation of dukkha. According to Walpola Rahula, suffering should be understood not only in terms of physical pain but also in connection with the conditioned and transitory nature of life (Rāhula, 1974). Rupert Gethin considers the Four Noble Truths as an ordered system involving both the diagnosis of the disease (suffering) and the treatment (the path to the cessation of suffering) (Gethin, 1998).

Contemporary scholarly sources show increased interest in applying Buddhist ideas in psychology and mental health issues. For example, Jon Kabat-Zinn shows the efficiency of using mindfulness-based stress reduction to manage stress and improve one's state (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). These conclusions are supported by numerous studies conducted between 2020 and 2025 and prove that mindfulness is useful for

emotional control and psychological stability (Su & Luo, 2024).

It should be noted, however that the modern approach to Buddhist teachings involves criticism regarding the decontextualisation of mindfulness. Boxer et al. suggest that the separation of philosophical aspects and ethical background from practices undermines their meaning and transforms them into empty techniques (Boxer et al.)

Critical theory goes beyond psychology to explore the structures behind human suffering. Loy criticises consumer capitalism for being an inherently dissatisfied system that produces continuous desires (Loy, 2008). The connection between consumer capitalism and contemporary suffering is clearly outlined within the Second Noble Truth. It suggests that craving lies at the core of human suffering.

Modern scholars also investigate the influence of technology on the psychological well-being of individuals. For instance, the rise of social networks leads to anxiety, self-comparison and decreased ability to concentrate. The above data implies that contemporary suffering can be understood both internally and externally, especially from a technological perspective.

However, there appears to be a significant gap between Buddhist tradition and modern reality. Thus, the Four Noble Truths do not incorporate

the modern psychological and technological context despite their significance. The current paper aims to address the above-mentioned problem.

Statement of the Problem

Buddhism offers great wisdom about the nature of suffering from the perspective of dukkha, its use in modern settings is not extensive. The problems faced by modern society, such as technological dependence, consumerism-based discontent and inequalities, are usually treated without taking any philosophical perspective into account.

The central issue that will be discussed in this research paper is the lack of an integrated methodological framework to combine traditional Buddhism philosophy and contemporary suffering.

Objectives

The primary objectives of the research study include:

1. An exploration of the concept of dukkha under the Four Noble Truths
2. Reinterpretation of dukkha considering present-day global issues
3. Evaluation of the applicability of Buddhist principles in today's Nepal

Methodology

The research employs an interpretive and qualitative approach.

Sources of Data

- Buddhist texts like the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta

(*Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, n.d.)

- Buddhist classical commentaries
- Academic literature on Buddhism (from 2020 to 2025)

Analytical Approach

- Conceptual analysis of dukkha
- Thematically organized modern instances of suffering
- Socio-cultural context of modern Nepali sufferings

This methodology allows for the comprehensive analysis of old teachings and new trends

Delimitation

This study is limited to:

- Conceptual and theoretical analysis
- Secondary data sources
- General observations of Nepali society

It does not include empirical fieldwork or quantitative data analysis.

Analysis and Discussion

Psychological Dimension of Dukkha

The most prevailing indication of suffering today is that it is caused by mental problems. These include anxiety, depression and identity issues, especially among younger people. Even though life has improved in many ways, there always seems to be an underlying feeling of dissatisfaction.

In Buddhism, this is viewed as dukkha that is internalized, arising due to craving and clinging. When one craves

acceptance, success and identity, not having them creates inner turmoil. This corresponds to the Second Noble Truth, where craving is seen as the source of all suffering. Mindfulness techniques can help solve these problems. Nevertheless, to do this successfully, ethics must be incorporated into practice along with wisdom.

Structural Dimension of Dukkha

There is also an important role played by socio-economic structures in the contemporary world that causes suffering. The capitalist economy promotes consumerism, which is based on the idea of perpetual acquisition and comparison between individuals. People are trained to think that their happiness lies in material achievement, although such an approach seldom leads to satisfaction.

Social layering, or economic inequality, adds to the problem by restricting people's access to necessary resources and opportunities. In this respect, the meaning of dukkha goes beyond the subjective realm to include structural problems as well.

Digital Dimension of Dukkha

New ways of suffering have emerged with the emergence of the digital era, which did not exist in previous eras. Although social media has connected people, it also makes people feel insecure and distracted.

Some aspects are:

- Comparison with other individuals results in low self-respect
- Lack of concentration due to an excess of information
- Psychological imbalance due to online validation

From a Buddhist viewpoint, these can be viewed as contemporary expressions of craving and ignorance. The need for validation and the fallacy of digital permanence contribute to attachment, and thus, dukkha is continued.

Nepali Context: A Case Study

The country Nepal offers an interesting environment for studying dukkha in the present day. Urbanization, globalization, and migration have altered social structure.

Critical Issues

- Unemployment among youth and problems related to migration
- Educational stress and competition
- Addiction to technology
- The struggle with cultural identity

In cities like Kathmandu, youths frequently experience a clash of tradition and modernity, leading to psychological and cultural discord.

Buddhist Responses

Buddhism remains relevant in coping with these issues:

- Meditation centers offer venues for spiritual well-being

- Buddhist monasteries teach ethical consciousness
- Buddhist practices encourage resilience and social connection

Engaging in Buddhist meditation camps and religious classes has assisted numerous people in dealing with stress and achieving emotional balance. It shows that even though dukkha varies, Buddhism can still adapt.

Relevance of the Four Noble Truths

The relevance of the Four Noble Truths is evident in the present-day world:

1. Dukkha (Suffering): Extended to encompass the psychological, structural and virtual worlds
2. Samudaya (Origin): Desires are expressed as material, social and technological aspirations
3. Nirodha (Ceasing): Liberation is still possible through the transformation of desire
4. Magga (Path): Moral behavior, meditation and wisdom are still relevant

Collectively, these truths offer not only a theoretical perspective but also a practical one for modern-day suffering.

Conclusion

This paper illustrates how the concept of dukkha can still be an effective way to describe and analyze human suffering in the current period. Through a reinterpretation of the Four Noble Truths, the analysis brings classical Buddhism into line with contemporary

psychological and structural facts.

The main conclusions drawn from the paper include that:

- Misery exists even with development in technology and the economy
- The ways in which it manifests itself change due to changes in society
- Buddhist philosophy is a useful means both in analyzing problems and finding solutions

From the perspective of Nepal, Buddhist philosophy has continued relevance when addressing modern-day problems. Further studies must involve specific applications of the above observations to contemporary issues.

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