Attached to Suffering

Mitchel Hally

"The ultimate goal of Buddhism is to put an end to suffering and rebirth" (Keown pg. 48). In the Buddhist tradition it is taught that the notion of attachment or craving is the cause of suffering. This essay will answer the question as to whether or not I agree with this Buddhist teaching based on my knowledge of the Four Noble Truths. Samsara is the cycle of rebirth in which humans are subject to karma that determines their state of rebirth, which can only be broken by attaining enlightenment or reaching Nirvana. In order to attain enlightenment one must first transcend suffering. In order to transcend suffering one must first eliminate the source of suffering. Throughout the next few paragraphs I will attempt to prove that eliminating craving or desire (tanha) will also eliminate suffering. If I am able to prove this I will be able to agree with the notion that attachment or craving is the cause of suffering. Before I can come to my conclusion I must first discuss The Four Noble Truths.

The first of the Four Noble Truths is the truth of suffering (dukkha). "Birth is suffering, sickness is suffering, old age is suffering, death is suffering...Not to get what one wants is suffering. In short, the five factors of individuality are suffering." After reading this I asked myself, "Is boredom is suffering?” I look again at the Truth of Suffering, 'Not to get what one wants’; by deconstructing boredom we can see that by its definition boredom is an unsatisfactory feeling caused by the lack of occupation. Obscure examples of suffering like boredom, frustration, disappointment, and disillusionment are described as 'existential' kinds of suffering. This view of human life at first glance seems quite pessimistic, but once you understand that the Buddha never mentions a soul or self rather a moral identity that lives on with everyone throughout samsara, we see that an individual has no real core. When we see the five components of individuality as constantly shifting it becomes inevitable that at some point or another suffering will arise. The Truth of Suffering is like admitting procrastination. When you do it, you never want to admit it, yet until you recognize you are doing it there is no way to stop procrastinating. Keown compares the concept of inevitable suffering to an automobile that will eventually wear out and breakdown just by using it. From this one can conclude that suffering is an effect of living just as wearing out and breaking down is an effect of using a car. This conclusion leads us into the second of the Four Noble Truths, The Truth of Arising.

The Truth of Arising (samudaya) says "It is thirst or craving (tanha) which gives rise to rebirth, which is bound up with passionate delight and which seeks fresh pleasure now here and now there in the form of (1) thirst for sensual pleasure, (2) thirst for existence, and (3) thirst for non-existence." When talking about tanha one must understand that it does not mean all desires, but only the perverted or "wrong" desires. Good desires, or chanda, consist of things like having positive goals for oneself or others, desiring that others should be happy, and wishing to leave the world a better place than one found it. The Buddha uses the metaphor of fire to describe desire because it "consumes what it feeds on without being satisfied". (Keown pg. 53) In the same sense, samsara is like a fire because if you stop feeding it oxygen it will eventually go out and if you stop feeding samsara desire you will break the cycle of rebirth. In a simpler sense, The Truth of Arising is basically saying that every effect has a cause. (Keown pg. 55) From this we see all phenomena as part of a series, and nothing exists independently in and for itself. Every aspect of the Buddhist universe becomes characterized by cyclical change. It is like the universe is being split up into several processes of cause and effect, each being an endless cycle inside samsara. If everything is a process of cause and effect then if we eliminate the cause we essentially eliminate the effect.

The Third Noble Truth states that "when craving is removed suffering ceases and nirvana is attained". (Keown pg. 56) If this is true then it is also true that craving is the cause of suffering. Do I believe this to be true? Like I explained earlier, there are two types of craving (tanha and chanda). By removing tanha, one is actually bringing a literal end to greed, hatred, and delusion. Since the Second Noble Truth asserts that everything has a cause and effect, before I can be sure that removing tanha ends suffering I must know from what tanha is a cause/effect of to be sure that after removal it can not manifest again. This poses the question, could an effect of chanda be inherently tanha if all tanha has been removed? For example, if I desired someone else to be happy, yet that person could never reach happiness, could I end with a resulting feeling of satisfactoriness? The answer is no. This is because if one is completely void of tanha, which we assume is the cause of suffering, then it must be true that all further actions are caused by chanda, therefore no matter the outcome of the action it can never leave a feeling caused by tanha because tanha is non-existent to create the feeling. From this, I conclude that in the case that a human being can legitimately remove all "bad desires" from their thought process it is true that suffering will cease.

After deep processing and question asking, I have come to conclusion that I agree with the Buddhist notion that craving (tanha), or "bad desires", is the cause of suffering. Keeping in mind the difference between good desires and bad desires I am able to agree with this notion based off of my understanding of cause and effect. Through minor assumptions and deduction of principles posed in the readings I was able to come to my conclusion that by removing all tanha from a human being all suffering will therefore be removed as well because suffering is caused by tanha.

Bibliography:

Keown, Damien. *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996. Print