

WHO CREATES PROBLEMS?

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Human problems are complicated. One day one of the Devas approached the Buddha and asked him how to overcome problems. The Devas said, “Lord, can you explain the mystery of the inner tangle and the outer tangle. Human beings are entangled in a tangle and I would like to ask, who will succeed in disentangling the tangle.”

The word “tangle” refers to all the mental and physical disturbances that we have to face in our day-to-day life. We are tangled with various problems. From our birth up to the last breath numerous problems confront us. It is impossible for any human being to exist without facing such problems in this world. The Buddha has advised us to understand the nature of our problems if we want to exist peacefully in this world. He has also advised us to ponder on the purpose of our existence and to try to find out why we are not satisfied with our lives. If we can understand this situation, there will be no reason for us to suffer from undue fear, to harbour enmity or grudges and worries.

We all like to lead very happy, contented and peaceful lives but how many of us can really say that we experience such happiness? We are willing to do anything in every way possible to gain contentment but we never really experience true satisfaction because we can minimise certain problems and overcome some others only through a complete understanding of the nature of this world, how some things we crave for are merely illusory, while others only create greater craving once achieved.

Facing problems

We usually create other serious problems while trying to solve our existing ones. If the new problem is minor, we tolerate it to the best of our ability and do what we can to alleviate the pain. For example, when we have gastric ulcers and suffer severe pain, we consult a doctor. Then if the doctor says we have to undergo an operation, we will accept the fact that we will have to suffer more pain if we want to be cured. But since we know there is no other solution, we decide to face the new problem of the operation to get rid of the existing gastric ulcers. Then we make up our minds to bear the pain and uneasiness during the operation thinking that we can finally be rid of the pain once and for all.

In the same manner we are willing to tolerate certain problems or pain to overcome the existing big problem created by existence. That is why we

sometimes face suffering with smiling faces. We cannot overcome our existing problems without facing other new problems or without sacrificing something. But one thing is clear, it is impossible to settle our problems permanently by being selfish, stubborn or violent. That is why a “give and take policy” is important to settle our problems.

The Buddha has advocated a meaningful, practical and realistic method to settle this problem. He did not recommend a method just to patch up a problem here and there simply to make us happy for the time being. Rather he taught us the way to penetrate to the root of the problem and find out the main cause of it. His method was not even to reduce the symptom of the problem just like some doctors do when they cure only the symptom of our sickness but not the sickness itself.

Nature of life

When we have a severe stomach pain, or headache, doctors give us painkiller tablets. After that, we feel better for a short period. But it is not the complete cure, because the pain can come back. Assume that we have a very big painful wound on our body. After applying all sorts of medicines, we can manage to get rid of the pain. When the doctor or somebody asks “How do you feel now?” we say we feel very good. But can you define this word “good”? Can we show anything to prove what good feeling is? Here it means there is no more pain. For anything in this world, we say we feel good or nice only to tell others that there is no problem for the time being. When we say we feel “good” we are aware that this “good” feeling is not permanent. It will be replaced with other painful feelings. This is the nature of life. The Buddha’s method for gaining permanent happiness is to uproot the main cause of our problems and not to suppress it. Of course some people say it is difficult to practise the Buddha’s teaching, because it does not provide short-term relief. The Buddha taught that the cause of our misery is so deep-rooted that we must take very strong measures to root it out permanently, so that it can never return.

To the question on how to disentangle the tangle, the answer given by the Buddha is. “When a wise man, established well in morality (sila) has developed his mind and understanding (panna), then such an ardent and wise person succeeds in disentangling this tangle”. A person who is diligent and understanding, by realising the real nature of existence, develops his **sila**, his moral behaviour or self-discipline. Sila means discipline of the senses, speech and action according to a moral code. When a man is diligent and wise he knows how to face his problems and how to overcome some of them. Here the Buddha’s advice for us is to be good, diligent and act wisely if we want to solve our problems. No other method can give a final solution to our problems.

Superstitious beliefs

Whenever we have problems, we approach others, and seek their advice. They may ask us to go and pray to certain gods in a temple or other places of worship or to recite some mantras. But the Buddha's attitude is entirely different. He never gives such advice because he wants us to directly approach the problems and analyse it and discover where the first cause is. The trouble with us is that whenever we face any problem, we suffer from fear, ignorance, imagination and suspicion and we seek advice from others in order to get rid of them. For example, when people face failure in their business they try to use magical power to gain good luck and success in their business. But they do not realise that many of such practices are also based on superstitious beliefs. Some of these so-called "seers" or astrologers exploit the ignorance of innocent people and make them believe that "evil forces" are behind their bad luck.

The Buddha advised us to develop patience and understanding, without depending on superstitious beliefs, and to cultivate the rational way of life without wasting time and money on meaningless practices and to use our full effort to overcome problems in a reasonable way, if we want to succeed. Most of the time, we cannot understand the causes of many of our problems because our way of thinking is clouded by a worldly life which is filled with selfish desire and illusion. Because of ignorance, we give the wrong reasons for our misery and seek the wrong means to overcome such unhappiness. We pray, we make offerings and vows by thinking that our misery is due to the working of an external force. Actually our misery is caused by ourselves.

We do not strive to develop our way of life through moral and spiritual development. We think that religion is only for us to pray or to perform certain rituals. When we believe in superstition like these how can we concentrate on enriching our knowledge to understand things in their proper perspective?

Today we have organised our worldly life in such a way that we have no time to devote for mental training or to cultivate inner peace. Although we may have more than enough to satisfy our material needs like food, shelter and clothing all the while we go on thinking how to make more money, how to enjoy life in a materialistic, worldly sense even at the cost of others' happiness.

When we experience certain problems, we start to grumble, show our temper and create more disturbances and blame others for our troubles.

Sensual pleasures

Today, especially in many so-called advanced societies, people are facing more problems, unsatisfactoriness and mental derangement than in under-developed societies. This is because men have become slaves to their sensual pleasures and crave for worldly enjoyment without proper moral and spiritual development. Their tensions, fears, anxieties and insecurity disturb their minds. This kind of mental imbalance disturbs the human psychology. This state of affairs has become the biggest problem in many countries. Since people have not learnt to maintain contentment in their lives in industrial societies they experience unsatisfactoriness in their lives.

Many young people have lost confidence and face difficulty in deciding what to do with their lives. The main cause of this mental attitude is excessive ambition and anxieties created by competition, jealousy and fear. Such problems naturally create a very bad atmosphere for others who want to live a peaceful life. It is a fact that when one individual creates a problem, his behaviour affects the well-being of others. In every society “good begets good and evil begets evil”.

There is no short cut for us to get rid of our problems. We must cultivate our way of life to discover the cause of the human problems that we are facing. It is true that there is no existence without problems. If we want to be really free we must examine our problems and understand why they make life miserable.

Marital problems

One of the common problems that people always complain of is about their married lives or family problems. On the other hand, unmarried people also complain about the loneliness in their lives. They say life is dull without a married partner. But the same people start to grumble after getting married when they are confronted with problems. In many conservative societies, as soon as some problems arise, people immediately suspect that others might have done some “charms” or “black magic” to disturb their peace. But they are not ready to admit their own weaknesses or to think that they may be the cause of the mistake and that ultimately they are responsible for the problem. In their ignorance they ask some spiritualists to invoke the power of some invisible beings to stop their problems.

Married people are confronted with many other family problems such as to maintain their families and to protect them. They have to work hard to support their families. Those who have children, have to attend to their education and to guide them. Those who cannot cope with these problems, create more worries.

When misunderstanding occurs in their families it makes life more miserable. Sometimes there is violence, blood-shed and suicide. Those who have many children have to face a lot of responsibilities and worries. At the same time those who have no children also worry. So where is the satisfaction in a worldly life?

Today, people need more income, not only for their living and to fulfil their duties, but because their craving for indulgence is increased. It has become a sort of competition.

Worries

People concentrate more on pleasure rather than their duties and responsibilities. Some people entertain worries by considering their future although they have more than enough at the moment. “They worry about their sicknesses, old-age, death, funerals and also about heaven and hell or the next birth. Every day, they experience unsatisfactoriness in their lives. They run here and there searching for a remedy to end their problems. Throughout their lives they continue this search for peace and happiness until they die but they never find the real solution. When they feel that they are getting old, they worry. They worry when they cannot gain what they want. They worry when they lose their belongings or person they love. After that, they create frustration, anguish, mental agony and later suffer from mental derangement.

Not knowing the real nature of our existence, we try to maintain life without experiencing any disappointments and changes. But life is changeable. It is a bundle of elements and energies which are always changing and the situation is always not according to our satisfaction. Sometimes we feel life is not in our favour. When the elements and energies are imbalanced, we experience uneasiness, sickness, pain and many other problems. When mental energy is being disturbed, we experience mental problems. After that our organs and glands also change their normal functions and affect the blood circulation, heart beat and brain cells. We can avoid many of these problems if we can understand this conflict in our nature and if we lead a natural life in harmony with these natural forces which make up our physical existence.

Facing realities

Today many people lead an artificial life not knowing its danger. Many of our problems are created by us due to our ignorance and crazy attitude for too much pleasure. Many of our problems and burdens come after middle age.

For example, assume there is a pit about 100 feet deep and we put burning charcoal at the bottom. After that we lower a ladder into it and ask some people to go down one by one. Those who start to go down do not complain about the heat until they go down to a depth of 30 to 40 feet. After 40 to 50 feet, they feel a certain amount of heat. When they go further down to 70 or 80 feet and reach nearer to the burning charcoal, they experience the sensation of burning. In the same manner, young people do not experience suffering although the Buddha says life is suffering. But this is a good analogy to explain that as we gain more experience we see the truth about suffering more clearly.

Accept advice of the elderly

It is not necessary to have personal experience in certain things to understand whether they are good or bad. Here is an analogy for you to understand this situation. A shoal of fishes came across an obstruction in the water with an unusually small opening. It was actually a trap laid by a fisherman to catch the fish. Some fish wanted to go inside the fence and see what it was, but the more experienced fish advised them not to do that because it must be a dangerous trap. The young fish asked, “How do we know whether it is dangerous or not? We must go in and see, only then can we understand what it is.” So some of them went in and got caught in the trap.

We must be prepared to accept the advice given by wise men like The Buddha who knows infinitely more than us. Of course, the Buddha himself has said that we must not accept his teachings blindly. At the same time we have to listen to wise ones. This is simply because their experience is more advanced than our theoretical knowledge regarding our worldly lives.

Parents usually advise their sons and daughters to do certain things and not to do certain other things. By neglecting the advice given by the elders, young people do many things according to their own way of thinking. Eventually when they get into trouble, they remember the elders or religious teachers and seek their help and sometimes ask to pray for them. Only then do they remember religion and seek some blessing and guidance. The main purpose of a religion is to help us to follow certain noble principles to avoid many of our human problems before they confront us.

Experience comes with age

We gain academic knowledge without personal experience. Armed with academic knowledge some young people think they can solve all the world's problems. Science can provide the material things to solve our problems, but it cannot help us to solve our spiritual problems. There is no substitute for wise

people who have experienced the world. Think about the saying, “When I was 18, I thought what a fool my father was. Now that I am 28, I am surprised how much the old man has learned in 10 years!” It is not the father that has learned, rather it is you who have learned to see things in a mature way.

More than two thousand years ago the Buddha, Confucius, Lao Tze and many other religious teachers gave us wonderful advice. This advice can never become out-of-date being based on truth and it will remain fresh forever. It is impossible to overcome our human problems by ignoring the ancient wisdom. This wisdom is to develop human dignity, understanding, peace and happiness.

Neighbourliness

Let us consider our families. How many families are there who live with co-operation, unity, love and understanding? Here we think not only of our immediate families but also those who live around us. We can invite the whole world into our room through our T.V. but we are not willing to invite our next door neighbours into our houses and talk to them kindly. We have no time to look at the faces of our own family members but we spend many hours to see the faces of unknown people on the television screen. Even within one family we have no time to look at each other with smiling faces although we live in the same house. How can there be unity and happiness in such families? The sad fact is that this unfriendly selfish behaviour more and more characterizes modern society today.

Some people completely ignore their family members after their marriage. That is not the civilised way for humans to live. It is a manifestation of the animal nature. We should maintain community lives by assisting each other and by giving moral support to those in need. Although animals do not assist each other very often to the extent that human beings do, they live together, sometimes they protect their group or their young from their enemies.

It seems that today we are not living as real human beings. We have gone very far from our natural ways of life. That is why we have to face so many problems. That is why we feel loneliness. It is true that we have to face problems throughout life. Some of them are natural problems and there is no way to escape from them. Some problems are man-made, some are mind-made, resulting from illusion and ignorance.

Mental imbalance

Mental imbalance which we regard as madness is another big problem. By violating an ethical way of life, man disturbs his own peace and happiness and

that of others. Then by allowing internal and external incidents into the mind more unsatisfactoriness, miseries, excitement, fear and insecurity are created.

Many people have to suffer from frustration and nervous breakdowns because they have not trained their minds to maintain contentment. They have developed only craving to enjoy their lives. To them development means development of craving for various kinds of pleasures. As a result, they also develop unhealthy competition, jealousy, enmity, hatred, then start to fight and to kill each other. That is how they have turned the whole world into a battlefield. After that everyone cries for peace. People accuse god or the devil of putting them in misery. They then start to pray and worship. They do all kinds of things to escape from problems which they really created themselves.

You can understand now who creates problems and who can overcome them. The Buddha says the world is within you. When you discipline yourself, the whole world is disciplined and peace is maintained. It is not necessary then to beg for peace. Good and bad, peace and violence, all exist because of the mind.

World cycle

The Buddha has advised us not to be bothered about the beginning of the world cycle since such speculation does not contribute to settle human problems. Still, many people want to know about the beginning and the end of the world. Some people have a very shallow concept of the world. They do not know what this world is really like. When the Buddha said there is neither a beginning nor an end in the world systems, people could not understand what he meant. This was because their beliefs regarding the beginning and the end of the world contradicted the Buddha's teaching on the matter. If you can examine the whole world and compare it with your life or body, you can understand that the same elements, energies and conditions that exist in this so-called world are within yourself. The only difference is that you have a mind to think and comprehend the nature of existence. But the object that you have accepted as the world is composed of only elements and energies.

Mental energy

The extraordinary mental energy that human beings experience cannot be found anywhere else. However this mental energy is wild and free and it must be trained and controlled for us to benefit from it. Otherwise the human mind becomes the main cause for our own problems. When that mind is harnessed properly through intense training, then harmony, understanding and peace will prevail and we can perform great good deeds not only for ourselves, but others also. Let us take an example of a great waterfall. Imagine the great energy that

is wasted as the water falls thousands of feet over a high cliff. But when man controls that energy and changes it to electricity, then people benefit from it. But remember, even when the mind is trained, whatever precaution we take to avoid the unsatisfactoriness of our lives, the universal law of impermanence changes everything in this world. This is the nature of existence. Existing things change and disintegrate according to worldly conditions. The combination of elements and energies and their existence together produce objects which we can see and touch, thus giving them an illusion of solidity and permanence. The cause of their change is friction of the elements and energies. When a visible object disintegrates through time it is the dissolution of the elements and energies which are compounded. The energy is not lost, but goes on into new forms and the process goes on and on, without end. This is a natural phenomenon and every component thing is constituted in this way.

There is no reason for us to regard this situation as a certain creation of a supernatural being or that it is the result of punishment for a primordial crime. Buddhists regard this as a natural phenomenon. But many others regard this situation as a problem because changes and impermanence disappoint this craving for permanence. The unsatisfactoriness of life begins when we realise that permanence in another life, in heaven or hell, is impossible.

Because the energies of our bodies are a part of them, cosmic forces also influence the elements and energies within our physical bodies. Some of our physical and mental problems are due to their influence. Some other unknown forces also disturb our lives which people regard as being caused by evil spirits. Fear, imagination, suspicion and superstition always feed on such beliefs to disturb the mind. When the mind is disturbed, we suffer from physical problems.

However, if our minds are well trained and developed through understanding, we can prevent many of these problems from occurring. This is why the Buddha has said, "Mind is the fore-runner of all good evil states, mind made are they". Actually we suffer from problems because they are the results of our hallucinations. By following the Buddha's advice we can eradicate fear and ignorance.

We are responsible

People do not use their education wisely when it comes to superstitious religious practices. Try to get rid of this poor mentality by strengthening your mind and developing self-confidence. Then you can overcome many of your problems and in most cases, your imaginary problems will simply disappear.

Some religionists try to escape from reality by saying that there is a god who is responsible for all the good things that happen to you and if anything goes wrong, then the devil is to be blamed for it. To the Buddhists there is no meaning in this kind of belief. Most of us simply do not try to understand why we are not happy and why we are not satisfied with our lives, and who is responsible for this situation. The Buddha teaches that we are ultimately responsible for every action of ours which leads to contentment or unsatisfactoriness.

Besides all major problems for which we are responsible and which affect us directly we also create other racial, religious, cultural and economic problems which divide mankind and create discrimination. Problems such as these indirectly contribute to our sense of discontentment.

Purpose of religion

The purpose of religion is to guide mankind, to develop unity and a harmonious life and to cultivate humane qualities. Today however, religion is being used to discriminate against other religions and to develop jealousy. Actually man is not using religion to maintain peace but to disturb and hate others. This hostile attitude and unhealthy religious competition has even created blood-shed in many parts of the world.

At the same time, while cherishing their own superstitious beliefs as part of their valuable culture or traditions, some religionists ridicule others' cultures and traditions. In their beliefs and practices which they introduce as the only true religion, they promote selfish ideas for material gain, political power and self-glorification.

Accumulation of wealth

Some people think that by accumulating more and more wealth, they can overcome their problems. So they try to become billionaires by working hard, but after becoming billionaires they have to face many more other unexpected problems – insecurity, unrest, enemies and difficulty in maintaining their wealth. This, clearly shows that the accumulation of wealth is not the solution for human problems. Wealth can help to overcome certain problems but not all the world's happiness can be gained through money. Money cannot eradicate natural problems.

Philosophers, great thinkers and rationalists have pointed out the nature of human weakness and how to overcome them. However, the common people regard them as mere theories and not as solutions to their problems. Sometimes

the intellect actually creates more problems because it increases our egoistic opinions about ourselves.

Good conduct

Good conduct such as kindness, patience, tolerance, honesty and generosity also cannot stop certain problems because cunning people can take undue advantage of the good qualities of others. Therefore good qualities must be practised wisely.

Social welfare workers are trying to wipe out human problems. But their contribution also can only minimise certain problems. Some others try to settle human problems by distributing property and revenue of a country equally amongst the public in so-called socialist societies. It seems that their method is also not every effective to settle human problems, since selfishness, cunningness, laziness and many other shortcomings can upset the situation.

Overcoming problems

Modern scientific education has created more problems rather than promote peace, happiness and security. Government is trying to maintain peace and order by punishing those who disobey the law. But, all over the world, evil and immoral practices are spreading rapidly.

Ignorant people resort to charms, magic, supernatural powers and mantras to overcome their problems. But nobody knows just how far they can succeed through such beliefs.

Some use violent methods such as killing, destruction and creating disaster to gain what they need to settle their problems.

Some try to settle human problems by improving the people's way of life through financial aid.

Religionists on the other hand try to settle these problems by illustrating the concept of a paradise to create temptation and frighten people by threatening them with hell-fire if they don't behave themselves.

Whatever method people adopt to avoid their problems they experience more and more new problems, in their day-to-day lives. The reason for this situation is that they have not realised that the main cause of most of their problems is the untrained mind or selfishness.

When we study the life of primitive people we can see that they have to face relatively few problems. These problems are mostly related only to their need for survival. But in the so-called civilised societies of today many of our problems are due not to our desire to continue living but because we seek too much enjoyment. Many people believe that the purpose of their lives is only for sensual enjoyment.

Selfishness

The modern job-oriented education system produces students who are equipped with more academic knowledge which develop selfishness. It produces clever people without any moral development. Such people do not care what happens to others or to the world as long as they alone profit on a materialistic level. Through cunningness and by adopting scientific methods to achieve their selfish desires they increase their own anxieties and those of their fellow beings.

Craving

Human beings are more selfish in their craving for pleasure than any other living being. They enjoy worldly lives and sensual pleasures with no thought for the welfare of others or for the survival of the species. Sensual people like to live long to experience pleasures. They develop craving towards the property that they have accumulated and do not want to die because they do not want to leave their properties when they depart. Other living beings have no such selfish ideas. They use their five senses only for their survival and lead a natural life without wilfully hurting others. It has been said that only man hoards more than he can eat. All other animals take only as much as they need from nature. What they do not need they leave alone for others to use. Today we even neglect our health but indulge in the senses to such an extent that we have become slaves to self-gratification.

Facing death

Human beings are the only beings on this earth who can understand that one day they have to face death. That is why they worry unnecessarily about it. Worrying about it will not make death go away, so why not accept it calmly? Shakespeare makes Julius Caesar say:-

“Of all the wonders that I yet have heard and seen,
It seems to me most strange that men should fear,
Seeing that death, a necessary end,
Will come when it will come”.

On the other hand, there are those who do not bother at all about the end of their lives or about what happens after that. However, the majority do worry about existing problems and also worry about the next life. All other living beings are free from that problem.

In conclusion, we have to realise that whatever method we adopt to overcome our problems, it is impossible to gain complete satisfaction in our lives until we train our mind and reduce selfishness and craving. The teachings of the Buddha give us a very clear exposition of how to understand the nature of human problems and how to overcome them.