

Pyrrho's Buddha on *Duḥkha* and the Liberation from Views

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a rereading of Buddhist scriptures from the Pāli *Nikāyas* in the light of Christopher Beckwith's 2015 theory that Pyrrho professed early Buddhist ideas. This changes, above all, how we read one of the central terms in Buddhism, *dukkha/duḥkha* (usually “suffering,” now “unreliable” or “precarious”). I argue that many scriptures make better sense with Pyrrho's reading and, moreover, that it reveals a depth of wisdom in many otherwise obscure passages in early Buddhist teachings. Through an exploratory, hermeneutic method, the article suggests a reconceptualization of Buddhist scriptures and philosophy in the light of Pyrrho.

“We cannot understand without wanting to understand.”

—Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 101 (Gadamer 1976)

THIS is a wonderful quotation from Gadamer. If you want to understand it, you have to *want* to understand it. At first reading, it seems trite and obvious, almost a cliché. It is only when you try to think it through—when you acknowledge the inadequacy of your first reading and ask not what position this person holds in your classificatory structure but what reason this person might have had for shaping their sentence in these words, that you see how beautifully it exemplifies what it is saying. To understand the purpose of bringing forward this sentence, you need to step imaginatively inside Gadamer's head and think along with him as best you can, with whatever resources you have. But then, as soon as you realize you need to do that, you also realize that that is what the quotation means. This is the kind of interest and effort that understanding requires.

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Although I have been studying Buddhism for decades, when I really want to understand Buddhist thought, I often fail. There are many excuses for such failure: Ancient tradition, foreign language, meditative experience I do not have, religious mystery no one really understands. I call these “excuses” because they sensibly justify my giving up on a genuine sense of understanding. Just how well can I hope to understand? But hoping to understand—wanting to understand—is what keeps me going and prevents me from “deliberately drawing the line” before I reach understanding, to borrow a phrase from Confucius.¹ In this article, I would like to pursue understanding at a moment in Buddhist thought where I think most of us have given up hope, drawn the line, and accepted defeat. I want to reignite our curiosity about one of the most basic of Buddhist topics: the meaning of the term *duḥkha*.

I came to notice my (our) failure to understand *duḥkha* when I found myself seriously considering a new translation of the term after encountering Christopher Beckwith’s argument that Pyrrho of Elis represents an early witness to Buddhist terminology—centuries before other witnesses (Beckwith 2015). The new translation led me to rethink what I had felt I understood about the term, renewed a variety of doubts I had thought settled, and then, as I experimented with applying the new translation, led me through a series of cascading, surprising discoveries. As a result, I will never think of *duḥkha* the same way again. This article is my attempt to share my new discoveries with readers of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, readers who may be familiar with the notion of *duḥkha* as the First Noble Truth, most commonly translated “suffering.” I present a diverse range of interpretive problems in the *Nikāyas* of the Pāli canon, which are all, amazingly, resolved by adopting what Beckwith says is the translation provided by Pyrrho, our earliest witness to Buddhist doctrine. The final section before the Conclusion summarizes the main points in question-and-answer format.

I will begin by focusing on the relation between the core doctrines of impermanence (*anitya*) and suffering (*duḥkha*). Throughout the early canon, and across countless Buddhist texts, we see the recognition of impermanence yielding to the recognition of suffering. It is an absolutely crucial link in the chain of argument and the line of experience that leads to liberation:

Consciousness is impermanent. What is impermanent is suffering. What is suffering is non-self. What is nonself should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: “This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self” (Bodhi, trans., *Samyutta Nikāya* [SN] 22.76).²

This very common formula is a crucial step in the process that leads to liberation. As a result of seeing suffering (*duḥkha*), one feels revulsion toward the thing that is the basis of the suffering (generally the aggregates, the components that make up the mind-and-body), and that “turning-away” leads to freedom. Without seeing *duḥkha*, no freedom; and without seeing impermanence, no seeing *duḥkha*. But how and why, exactly, is this supposed to work?

The problem is this: impermanence does not directly display or prove the unpleasant, *suffering* nature of something, so it is not immediately clear why seeing impermanence should lead to seeing the truth of suffering. If it turns out it is something you just have to experience to see the reason, then basic Buddhism is a mystical teaching that we are not expected to understand without directly experiencing it. If the point is that impermanence shows you your mortality, then why say *suffering* and not just *death*? In either of these cases, there is something important

¹ To “deliberately draw the line” is to use our weaknesses as an excuse to give up before we have truly exhausted our resources. “Jan Ch’iu said, It is not that your Way does not commend itself to me, but that it demands powers I do not possess. The Master said, He whose strength gives out collapses during the course of the journey (the Way); but you deliberately draw the line.” Confucius, *Analects*, VI.10: Waley 2008, 118.

² This is Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation of SN 22.76. Translations of all *Nikāya* texts throughout are by Bhikkhu Bodhi or Bhikkhu Sujato, as noted, accessed January of 2024 from www.suttacentral.net (SuttaCentral). Author emendations are noted in the text.

we fail to understand, and to claim we understand it as much as we can would be an acceptance of failure. Now, those who have studied Buddhism can appeal to venerable tradition, or other passages, or just claim it stands to reason and say that impermanence leads to suffering through attachment; it is painful to lose what you are attached to, and anything impermanent is ultimately lost. I am proposing that it is significant that this explanation is not supplied in the formula.

We can see the problem clearly in a text that is famous for having established the connection between impermanence, suffering, and no-self in the form of an argumentative proof, namely the *Samyutta Nikāya* teaching called the *Characteristic of No-Self Scripture* (SN 22.59). This teaching is said to be the Buddha's second sermon, and upon hearing it the first five disciples attained enlightenment. The scholar Mark Siderits uses this text as his primary teaching resource for elucidating two Buddhist proofs of no-self, which he calls the "Argument from Impermanence" and the "Argument from Control" (Siderits 2007, 37–50). I will not run through the details, but in brief, the arguments say (respectively) that the aggregates that make up the body and mind are impermanent and out of our control and that anything worth calling *my self* would need to be permanent and under my control. The proof passage based on impermanence, for consciousness, is the quote above. This is replicated for each of the five aggregates, which are the Buddha's five-fold analysis of the body-and-mind: form, feeling, recognition, conditioning, and consciousness. This would seem, then, to establish the Buddhist position that the five *aggregates* cannot be *my self*. But that does not clinch it. To make this scripture an argument that *there is nothing* that *could* be my self and therefore that there is no self at all, Siderits proposes that we accept there to be an implicit "Exhaustiveness Claim," which is the claim that the aggregates exhaust all the sensible candidates for selfhood. If we assume the aggregates to exhaust all the candidates for selfhood and each of them is disqualified from being a self, then there can be no self.

Although the text is focused on denying the *self* character of the aggregates, it is often said that the Buddha disproved a view of the self as unchanging controller—something that can be neither impermanent nor out of control. These qualities make sense as a view of self, if you think about it. The unchanging aspect assumes a need for identity over time, which is a sensible expectation of something we would be comfortable calling *my self*. The *I* that is the subject of selfhood must be *the same I* from moment to moment, year to year, or even birth to rebirth. Anything that changes across a given span of time cannot be the *I* that stays the same over that span of time. The controller aspect, on the other hand, assumes a self that is the agent of action. If something is not under my control, then it might be part of me, or something I own, but it cannot be *me*. Siderits, like many other readers, takes these points about any possible candidate self to be central to the logic of the argument.³

Justified by the implicit notion of an unchanging controller, Siderits' reading, and most readings traditional and modern, see the Buddha's denials of self in such texts as targeting not just any self-idea but specifically the Brahmanical view of the self from various *Upaniṣads*, where the self (*ātman*) is called both the "unknown knower" and the "uncontrolled controller."⁴ Yet, such a view of the self, as an *imperceptible* knower and agent, although it would indeed appear to be denied by the Buddha in these passages, seems rather surprisingly to

³ Some scholars have long thought, for reasons similar to those noted here, that the early scriptures were not targeted at proving no-self. See, for instance, Schmithausen 1973. My approach here is indebted to and in general consonance with Beckwith (2015) in his preface and first chapter, though I am not committed to his specific philological analyses, and I am not addressing his position that the Buddhist arguments are intended to counter Zoroastrianism. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this. *Anatta* requires further study (but see my discussions of Route One and Route Two below, and my conclusion).

⁴ For example, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (BAU), 4.5.15. Buddhist Abhidharma philosophers argue explicitly against this view of self, for instance *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* of Vasubandhu (AKBh) IX. All translations of *Upaniṣad* texts are from Olivelle 2008.

escape the specific frame of the Buddha's argument. An unchanging, unknowable controller self is not disproven by the simple observation that the aggregates are impermanent and uncontrolled. You really need the Exhaustiveness Claim. Without it, the Upaniṣadic *ātman* seems tailor-made to elude the argument. Granted, to affirm that there is an imperceptible perceiver who persists across time and controls things without being controlled certainly adds a new unseen element to the universe and so violates the "Principle of Lightness"—which is the Buddhist version of Occam's razor—but Brahmanical traditions accept the violation of lightness in exchange for the self's explanatory power. And the Buddha does not articulate the Principle of Lightness here either. So, the question naturally arises: if the Buddha had these exact ideas in mind when he gave these teachings, why did he not articulate and defend the Exhaustiveness Claim?⁵

A sensible possibility is that the *Upaniṣads* we have were crafted after the Buddha's arguments, perhaps even designed to counter them.⁶ But that leaves us without a clear understanding of the original target of the Buddha's critique, and if the argument was not designed to counter an Upaniṣadic *ātman*, the narrow focus of the Argument from Impermanence and the Argument from Control seems to be unmotivated. If we do not already have the idea in mind that the self is a permanent, unchanging controller, we would expect there to be, at least, some intuition-pumping to establish that anything worth calling a self would have to be an unchanging controller. It would not have been difficult to make the points clearer. To make the point about the self as unchanging the Buddha could have asked, "Is a self two different things, or is it always only one thing?"—an argument later advanced explicitly by Abhidharma philosophers. But he does not ask this. In fact, the only positive criterion the Buddha provides for a self is its quality of control:

Bhikkhus, form is nonself. For if, bhikkhus, form were self, this form would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to have it of form: "Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus." But because form is nonself, form leads to affliction, and it is not possible to have it of form: "Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus." (Bodhi, trans., SN 22.59)

Here the point seems to be that if something is your self, it should not be a problem for you and you ought to be able to control it. This makes sense, but it is hardly definitive proof that the Buddha was setting up the idea of an uncontrolled controller as an *entity*. Rather, he might simply be saying, "If something is out of your control, it is not you." The idea of an uncontrolled controller is a sensible counter-proposal, but that is just to say that again the *Upaniṣads* would be responding to this presentation, not predicting it. We really do not get a definitive statement here about the nature of the self that is ostensibly being disproven, and we do not get the complete argument disproving it. And this is not a function of the compressed nature of some of the scriptures; there is no version of this argument in the *Nikāyas* that includes the missing pieces.

⁵ See below for a discussion of SN 22.53, which has a version of the Exhaustiveness Claim that applies to consciousness, not the self. Just to be clear, this confusion applies whether we take the Buddha here to be the origin of the scriptures or simply a character in the narrative.

⁶ I am not convinced as Beckwith is (relying on Bronkhorst 1986) that the Buddha's teachings preceded the composition of the relevant *Upaniṣads* in their entirety. Several early Buddhist scriptures do seem cognizant of Upaniṣadic ideas. Yet, even Witzel acknowledges that passages discussing *ātman* in BAU 4 (the *Yājñavalkyakāṇḍa*) and *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (CU) 6 (Uddālaka Āruṇi) are close to, and possibly contemporaneous with, early Buddhist sources, even if the "events" they describe are temporally distant (Witzel 2007 & 2009). My point here is that the pericope does not suggest, let alone necessitate, that we read it as responding to the *Upaniṣads*.

BUDDHIST SCRIPTURES ARE MEANT TO BE CLEAR

I am not suggesting that Buddhist scriptures serve no purpose beyond their role as carriers of philosophical arguments. I am personally interested in how the language of the Dharma carries narrative, poetic, mimetic, mnemonic, figurative, and evocative qualities that facilitate participation in a collective embodiment of the Buddhist path. That is certainly going on in this text, as elsewhere. But in accordance with Gadamer's principle with which I began this article, I am going to read the passage as a comprehensible flow of ideas that are supposed to make sense even to me, a reader thousands of years and half a world away. I want to know what this is supposed to mean, and I am approaching the text with the confidence that it is reasonable and respectful to ask.

And let me be clear; I am not saying that the Buddha's teachings should have been clearer than they are. I am just pointing out that the flow of reasoning here is quite unclear until you assume that it is targeting a particular, unarticulated view of self. This contrasts markedly with the Buddha's general practice throughout the *Nikāyas* and *Āgamas*, which is to be extremely clear. The Buddha sometimes refrains from answering questions, and he sometimes provides different answers to the same question, but when he speaks, it is generally so clear that the meaning is unmistakable. The fact that we sometimes do not get the point should not prevent us from seeing that the Buddha is always depicted as saying exactly what he means in impeccably clear language—often painfully so. He is the clearest philosopher. This is not just a side result of the formulaic, repetitive quality of the teachings. It is a proudly declared character trait of the Dharma that it is well-spoken, and when people hear it, they are amazed. A common formula is:

Magnificent, Master Gotama! Magnificent, Master Gotama! The Dhamma has been made clear in many ways by Master Gotama, as though he were turning upright what had been turned upside down, revealing what was hidden, showing the way to one who was lost, or holding up a lamp in the dark for those with eyesight to see forms. (Bodhi, trans., SN 46.6)

The Buddha of the *Nikāyas* is not speaking in riddles and inuendo like a Zen master. It is unwarranted when orientalist exoticization, or an analogy to Christianity, imposes a cloud of mystery around his words. As he puts it, he does not have a “closed fist,” keeping the key to his teachings for some and not others (SN 47.9). That does not mean that we should expect to understand everything that appears in these ancient texts. But it does suggest that while for many philosophers a missing premise might be explained with reference to style or idiosyncratic presuppositions, in the case of the Buddha, our need to impose extra premises to make the argument go through suggests that we are missing something due not to the intrinsic complexity of the argument but to our distance from it in time and context. Even if we acknowledge that the purported clarity of the Buddha and the resultant amazement of his audience are rhetorical strategies, it is hermeneutically preferable if we can understand the Buddha of the *Nikāyas* to be saying exactly what he means.

READING THE SCRIPTURE CLOSELY

When we turn to the words of the text, there are further confusions about just what the Buddha's point is supposed to be. As I mentioned, the Buddha runs through the aggregates, asking a series of questions of his disciples and receiving formulaic responses. He asks for each aggregate whether it is permanent or impermanent, and the disciples respond, of course, that it is impermanent. Then, repeated five times, we get what is, I propose, a very confusing exchange:

“Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?”

“Suffering, venerable sir.”

“Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self?’”

“No, venerable sir.” (Bodhi, trans., SN 22.59)

It may be that, to be a good disciple in this situation, you just say what you know the Buddha wants you to say. It may be that the disciples are advanced practitioners—they became stream-enterers after the first teaching—and so they see his point. But if we read this with Gadamer’s injunction in mind, is it not strange to think that just because something is *impermanent*, it is *suffering*? If I was asked whether something that is impermanent is suffering or happiness, I would at least ask for a clarification of the question.

This brings us to our focus for this article: the Pāli word *dukkha*, Sanskrit *duḥkha*.⁷ Surely “suffering” is not an ideal translation, even if it is widely used. The tradition speaks of three kinds of suffering: ordinary suffering-suffering, the suffering of change, and the suffering of conditioned existence. So if change is a kind of suffering, there is your answer: obviously, impermanence is change-suffering. But that would be just to juggle words. The reason that change is considered suffering in the Buddhist tradition is that even when we experience pleasant states, the fact that they are impermanent—that they will not last—casts a shadow. If we know our pleasures are fleeting, we are anxious that we will lose them, and if we do not know, we are even more distraught when the end arrives. This points to another standard explanation here, which is that *dukkha* refers to a lack of *final* happiness, a lack of complete and total happiness. It should, therefore, not be translated as “suffering” but “unsatisfactoriness.” There is always some suffering—some unpleasantness—either in the background or just offstage, ready to emerge. And the big unsatisfactoriness that is always hovering in the background is our mortality. Impermanence means that we are impermanent, which means that all pleasures are discolored by the shadow of death.

These are standard explanations (see AKBh VI.3), but in the context of the Buddha’s dialogue with his disciples it appears to beg the question (in the sense of a logical fallacy), and I hope you will agree that to accept this explanation is to draw the line at an imperfect understanding. The Buddha did not ask whether *anything* impermanent is unpleasant; he was asking categorically whether what is impermanent is unpleasant. But is the categorical claim that everything impermanent is unsatisfactory really convincing? Is an ice cream cone suffering or happiness? What if it is melting? A reasonable possibility is that even as it is melting, it is still mostly happiness. Even if you change the translation, this is true. Even as it is melting, an ice cream cone is satisfying, not unsatisfying. If you can say that some impermanent things are pleasant, then the categorical nature of *duḥkha* does not follow from a thing’s impermanence. But that is what you would need to make the disciples’ response, and the argument as a whole, make sense. And then, it is the unpleasantness—the *duḥkha*—that serves as the lynchpin justifying the statement that what is impermanent and subject to change is, decisively, not fit to be regarded, “this is my self.” There is nothing else here telling us why we should not be willing to accept that “I” change.

If we really want to understand this, there is definitely something missing. After saying categorically that all things that are impermanent are unsatisfactory, the final point is dropped like a QED that obviously, something impermanent, unsatisfying, and subject to change is not “fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self.’” But why not? Again, if we are arguing categorically, we need to acknowledge that most people think this about their self. Most people are happy to say, “I am mortal and subject to change and suffering. But still me!” What’s the

⁷ I generally use the Sanskrit term *duḥkha* unless I am specifically citing a Pāli *sutta*, in which case it is *dukkha*.

problem? That is, even if we accept the argument that there is suffering, we might be glum about it but still hold that these aggregates are mine.

Unless, that is, we go back to the idea of the Upaniṣadic *ātman*. If the “I” needs to be—must be—an unchanging controller, then we can acknowledge that the *ātman* is disproven just by change and impermanence. But if that is the argument, why include *suffering* here at all? The controller part has already been proven; and the unchanging bit is covered with impermanence.⁸

INTRODUCING PYRRHO'S BUDDHISM

I had been studying and teaching Buddhist scriptures, including the above passages, with Siderits's readings and others, for several years before I read Christopher Beckwith's fascinating and controversial book, *Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia*. I do not pretend to be an expert in the various topics Beckwith surveys, and I will not attempt to summarize the whole book, though the evidence below compels me to think it is worth taking seriously. What I want to focus on is a set of parallel terms that come up within Beckwith's argument that Pyrrho is an early representative of Buddhist thought. He travelled in India in the court of Alexander no later than 324 BCE, so he is a very early witness, almost three centuries before our earliest surviving scriptures were first written down. And he is known to have views that resemble Buddhist ideas.⁹

One of Beckwith's startling claims is that Pyrrho's philosophy does not just resemble Buddhism, it is Buddhist. Pyrrho is represented as advocating three terms that parallel quite exactly the Buddhist “three marks of reality” (*trilakṣaṇa*), saying that matters (Greek *pragmata*, Sanskrit *dharma*) are indeterminate/unfixed (*anepikrita*, *anitya*), unreliable/unsatisfactory (*astathmēta*, *duḥkha*), and natureless (*adiaphora*, *anātman*). Like the Buddha, he says we should hold no views. He says we should be “uninclined” to one side or the other, a notion that Buddhists name the “middle path.” He says we should free ourselves of cravings that pull us hither and thither—a reflection of Buddhist admonitions against “thirst” (*trṣṇā*). He says that quarreling is futile, and he engaged in practices geared toward suspending opinions in order to reach inner states free of passion that lead to peace (*apatheia* → *ataraxia*; *dhyāna* → *nirvāṇa*).

Pyrrho	Buddha
<i>anepikrita</i>	<i>anitya</i>
<i>astathmēta</i>	<i>duḥkha</i>
<i>adiaphora</i>	<i>anātman</i>
“uninclined”	“middle path”
<i>apatheia</i>	<i>dhyāna</i>
<i>ataraxia</i>	<i>nirvāṇa</i> ¹⁰

Beckwith's philological work here is speculative and contested (Johnson and Shults 2018). Furthermore, specialists in Buddhist traditions, and Buddhists, may bridle at the simplistic reduction of Buddhism to these doctrines. There is surely more to the Buddha and Buddhism than these ideas. Religions are not sets of doctrines alone, and in any case this is only a small slice of Buddhist doctrine. In addition, the ideas do not fit exactly. Most evidently for our purposes, the Buddha's view of *duḥkha* is broader than Pyrrho's *astathmeta*, the unreliable nature of

⁸ Although I doubt the necessity that the passage refers to an Upaniṣadic *ātman*, I leave open that it may; but either option spells confusion around the term *dukkha*. Bett (2018) contains a brief introduction to Pyrrho.

¹⁰ Beckwith notes all of these parallels (Beckwith 2015, 22–44). Beckwith cites specifically the Fourth Dhyāna as parallel to *apatheia*.

facts and ideas, including as it does the notion that all states are phenomenally unpleasant—as we have been discussing. In addition, the third characteristic, the “naturelessness” of Buddhist *anātman* is generally considered to have targeted first and foremost the personal self. The more general claim of the essencelessness of the various elements of experience (*dharma*) is usually taught to be a later, Mahāyāna supplement to the early teachings. Finally, the Buddha did occasionally declare he held no views, but he also held forth on what he termed “right view.” The focus of Buddhism is not centered as Pyrrho is on the suspension of opinion; instead, Buddhist progress toward concentrative states and *nirvāṇa* is made via a path of morality and meditation.

What I have come to believe is that the imperfect resemblances between Pyrrho’s terms and mainstream Buddhism as traditionally understood actually speak in favor of Beckwith’s claim that Pyrrho is a genuine witness to early Buddhist doctrine. Buddhism might never have been a monolithic, unified system, and if it was, there would be no reason to expect that Pyrrho learned it all. So his views might be expected to represent, at best, one portion of one angle on early Buddhism. I find it difficult to deny that this minimal expectation appears to be met.¹¹

What is more significant, though, is that although Pyrrho’s terminological inexactitudes fail to fit with early Buddhism as traditionally understood, they do so in a way that suggests new, fruitful readings of otherwise problematic scriptural passages such as the ones I have just discussed. Pyrrho provides a way to understand early teachings about which we are otherwise accepting defeat. Beckwith, I will add, has not to my knowledge mentioned the specific passages or problems I have been discussing.¹² His introduction of Pyrrho’s terms therefore constitutes a proposed paradigm shift that is proven fruitful by shedding new light on old problems. Since such a method leaves open the possibility that my own biases simply match Pyrrho’s misreading of Buddhism, I ask for your assistance as an aid in assessing the viability of my interpretations.

REDEFINING *DUḤKHA* AS “UNRELIABLE”

As I have said, Beckwith argues that Pyrrho’s principle that matters are *astathmēta*, “unstable, unbalanced” and hence unmeasurable, corresponds to *duḥkha* in the Buddhist *trilakṣaṇa*. This reduces the key concept of suffering in the Buddhist tradition from a universal statement about the unpleasant and unsatisfying nature of all things to a conceptual conundrum, that ideas are uncertain because they are difficult to measure. Pyrrho is the original skeptic, and he was basically concerned to point out the indeterminacy of views, not the universality of the experience of suffering. In this article I will not pursue the relation between Buddhism and Pyrrhonism any further than the question: What if this was not a reduction, not Pyrrho’s (or Beckwith’s) mistake, but a central sense of the term *duḥkha* in early Buddhism? Beckwith cites Winthrop Seargent as saying that the early meaning of the term referred to having a bad axle hole in a chariot, leading to a bumpy, unpleasant ride. He cites Monier-Williams’s suggestion that *duḥkha* might be from *duḥ-sthā*, indicating an unsafe or unsteady place to stand. So I am interested to see how this works. Let us look again at early Buddhist scriptures with the idea in mind that the “unsatisfactoriness” that is *duḥkha* refers not so much to the experience of unpleasantness per se

¹¹ Extensive and impressive parallels have long been noted between Pyrrhonic Skepticism and Madhyamaka philosophy by, for instance, Matilal (1986), Garfield (1990), and others, and recently between Pyrrhonism and mainstream Buddhism by Kuzminski (2020). I am indebted to these authors, and I admire their work, but I do not engage them—or any Pyrrhonic sources—here. Instead, I am following the hermeneutic circle in the other direction and flying low to the ground, examining only *Nikāya* sources that use the term *dukkha*. McEvilley (1982) is the first I know of to have listed parallels between Pyrrho’s terms and those of Sanskrit Buddhism, but it was Beckwith’s (2015) defense of the full *trilakṣaṇa* that introduced a new reading of *dukkha*.

¹² He has criticized the standard translation of *duḥkha* as “suffering” and defended Pyrrho’s translations on philological grounds. I am deploying Pyrrho’s sense of *duḥkha* across passages from texts that Beckwith considers unreliably late and corrupt. Beckwith also argues at length against the view that early Buddhism was denying an Upaniṣadic self—a point that I take up in a preliminary way, as framing support to my discussion of *duḥkha*.

as it does to bumpiness, instability, and uncertainty—not a good ride, not a safe place to stand, being *unreliable*.

This reading, I propose, makes excellent sense of why *duhkha* follows logically from impermanence (*anitya*). Altering our problematic passage to benefit from Pyrrho's Buddhist witness, we get:

“Is what is impermanent reliable or unreliable?”

“Unreliable, venerable sir.” (SN 22.59, *modified*)

Notice immediately that with no talk of pain or suffering here, the fact of unreliability follows very naturally from impermanence. There is no problem of the overreaching categorical claim that a melting ice cream cone is unpleasant. We can all agree that a melting ice cream cone is unreliable! But of course ice cream does not come up; the logic flows naturally.

Next, notice how the change in translation entirely changes the logic of the second question and brings out the evident meaning of the strange locution, “fit to be regarded thus”:

“Is what is impermanent, unreliable, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self’?”

“No, venerable sir.” (SN 22.59, *modified*)

Instead of making an abstract, categorical statement that all things impermanent and unpleasant are in contradiction with the nature of a self, an equally sensible reading here is to see the Buddha asking a psychological question: Are you going to *want to* appropriate for yourself something you know to be impermanent and unreliable? Will you want such a thing to be your self? Would you stake your identity on it? This reading, I think, quite astonishingly transforms the questionable question-begging argument that had relied on a covert definition of self as an eternal substance into something more like a sports coach or a military sergeant egging on his new disciples toward self-discovery. Are impermanent things reliable? No, sir! Are you going to stake your identity on unreliable, impermanent things? No, sir!¹³

The self-transformation enacted in this dialogue quite exactly follows the final stages of the path of liberation, which makes good sense of why it is said that the five noble disciples attained liberation as a result. Thus we arrive, remarkably, at a crystal clear explanation of the path of liberation based on the perception of impermanence. When you realize the impermanence of the aggregates, you see them as unreliable, and seeing them as unreliable, you experience *revulsion* toward them. Once you see them for what they are (impermanent, unreliable), you consequently refrain from identifying with them (“No, sir!”). If you can do that, it brings dispassion and liberation:

Seeing thus, bhikkhus, the instructed noble disciple experiences revulsion towards form, revulsion towards feeling, revulsion towards perception, revulsion towards volitional formations, revulsion towards consciousness. Experiencing revulsion, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion his mind is liberated. (Bodhi, trans., SN 22.76)

If we read the earlier passage as being not about the abstract truth of selfhood or the no-self doctrine but about this process wherein an advanced practitioner attains liberation, the previous problems fall away, and we have no need of the Exhaustiveness Claim or the Principle of Lightness, which the Buddha did not provide.

¹³ Under this reading, we might translate *anatta* as “not-oneself”—which would be an alternative reading available before the ostensible “transformation of ‘not-self’ into ‘no self’” (Johnson & Shults 2018, 24 n.30, citing Wynne 2015, 85ff.). The transformation of *dukkha* I am suggesting here parallels this known transformation in *anatta*; but that is a topic for another paper.

LIBERATING CONSCIOUSNESS FROM “UNRELIABLE VIEWS” (*DUḤKHA*)

There is, I should acknowledge, a passage from the *Samyutta Nikāya* that expresses something very much like the Exhaustiveness Claim. But this turns out to be an exception that confirms the rule: it too is concerned not with the nature of the self but with exactly the same process of liberation from attachment we have just outlined. For the Exhaustiveness Claim to support the argument as stated above, remember, it needed to show that there could be no sensible view of self that exists beyond the five impermanent aggregates. What the passage in question addresses, instead, is the relation between consciousness and the other four aggregates:

Bhikkhus, though someone might say: “Apart from form, apart from feeling, apart from perception, apart from volitional formations, I will make known the coming and going of consciousness, its passing away and rebirth, its growth, increase, and expansion”—that is impossible (Bodhi, trans., SN 22.53).

At first glance, the Buddha seems to be denying the possibility of a self that persists in the background either throughout life, or across multiple lives. But two aspects of the statement prevent us from describing this as an argument against an eternal, unchanging soul. First, it is denying not the soul, but *consciousness*, which is the fifth aggregate. It might be thought that the Buddha is arguing that there can be no consciousness that serves as an unknown knower, no experiencer that sits in the background from life to life. But this possibility is countered by the second point: the passage does not address itself to the question of an eternal, unchanging consciousness; it says specifically that without the other aggregates you cannot know about a consciousness that comes and goes!¹⁴

Clearly, then, the passage is not about the nature of an unchanging self; it is about the nature of consciousness. Specifically, the passage is concerned with the fact that consciousness is fueled by, and comes about due to, grasping after the aggregates. Once that grasping stops, consciousness dries up and becomes “liberated.” The liberated consciousness—the consciousness that is not captured by the aggregates—eventually settles, calms down, and becomes pacified. After consciousness becomes pacified, the practitioner is personally liberated. These are two significant shifts in the transition to nirvana. First, *consciousness* becomes liberated, and second, the *person* is liberated.

The process in the first transition is the main topic of this short text, which is stated for each of the five aggregates. Ordinarily, consciousness fuels its own growth by “taking up” (*upaya*) one or another of the aggregates. This engagement with an aggregate is described as the base, the standing, where consciousness can grow. Standing there, it is “sprinkled with bliss,” which suggests that conscious engagement with an object is pleasurable in itself—and this generates the relish, the “joy” that “waters” consciousness so that it grows into fullness.

It is an interesting and complex idea that consciousness is nourished by the enjoyment of experience itself, but this notion is pursued elsewhere. Here, the emphasis is placed not on exactly how consciousness arises and grows but rather on the fact that the whole process depends, crucially, on consciousness being engaged with the aggregates, as a “basis.” Absent that basis, consciousness has nowhere to come about or grow. This is the reason the Buddha says that the causal story of consciousness cannot be told without making reference to the causal

¹⁴ Here is not the place to lay out the details, but this passage distinguishes consciousness from the other four aggregates in a way that calls into question Wynne’s thesis that the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* narrates the moment where the Buddha came up with the fifth aggregate to meet the needs of his audience (Wynne 2010).

story of the appropriation of the aggregates. That process is foundational for the causality of consciousness.

It is also why he says that if you stop grasping after the aggregates, you remove that basis, and consciousness is liberated:

Bhikkhus, if a bhikkhu has abandoned lust for the form element, with the abandoning of lust the basis is cut off: there is no support for the establishing of consciousness. When that consciousness is unestablished, not coming to growth, nongenerative, it is liberated. (Bodhi, trans., SN 22.53)

It is thus the grasping after the aggregates, the appropriation of the aggregates, that provides a crucial basis for the causal continuity of consciousness, and by the same token, it is the abandonment of craving that removes the necessary foundation that consciousness needs to grow. Once the basis is relinquished, consciousness is liberated.

This shift from the ordinary processes of consciousness to the relinquishment of the aggregates and the liberation of consciousness is all one process on the path of liberation. This leads to a second and final stage, which runs from the liberation of consciousness to personal nirvana: “Being liberated, they are steady; being steady, they are content; being content, they are unworried. Being unworried, they personally attain nirvana” (Bodhi, trans., SN 22.53, *modified*).¹⁵ Without engaging deeply in the interpretation of early Pyrrhonism, we may note that this two-fold transformation seems to parallel Pyrrho's *apatheia* → *ataraxia*.

Reading Pyrrho's Buddhist's understanding of *duhkha* as an unstable position—as opposed to the traditional view of *duhkha* as experiential unpleasantness—has helped us make sense of the Buddhist scriptural logic that moves from impermanence to no-self, and now we see it reflected in the notion of liberating consciousness from views. Let us call this the “unreliable views” reading of *duhkha*.

EXPERIENTIAL SUFFERING FOLLOWS FROM APPROPRIATING DUHKHA

I do not mean to suggest that early Buddhism under this view would be read to have no discussion of experiential suffering. Even the philosophical skeptic, like the Buddhist, seeks to allay suffering through the pursuit of peace or liberation. It is just that unpleasantness is not the *duhkha* itself; it is the *result* of mistaken appropriation, which is to say, taking the aggregates to be in some relation to oneself or a self. It is said that the uninstructed 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 the change and alteration of form, there arise in him sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair” (Bodhi, trans., SN 22.43). The opening of this quotation replicates in just slightly different words the earlier passage where the Buddha denied that form and the other aggregates are “fit to be regarded, “This is mine, this I am, this is my self.” In both cases, the Buddha is describing different persons either “regarding” (*samanupassati*) the aggregates or not regarding the aggregates as being in a specific relation to self. Here we see specifically that it is mistaken “regarding as” that leads to sorrow, lamentation, etc., when the aggregates change. So, it is the unstable nature of the aggregates, the fact that they are unreliable, that causes the experience of suffering. But the list of unpleasant experiences does not include within it, or as its summary, the word *duhkha*. The term *duhkha* under the “unreliable views” reading then

¹⁵ I replace Bodhi's repeating “it is” with “they are.”

makes sense here as referring not to the experience of suffering but to the unreliability of things (specifically, the aggregates), an unreliability that makes it such that clinging to views of self with respect to them brings about experiences of suffering.

The various versions of this foundational “regarding” of the aggregates as having some relation to a self are summarized with the generic name “existent body view” (*sakkayaditthi*), sometimes translated “identity view,” and it is said that all other views, or, at least, seventy-two dangerous philosophical positions, are grounded in it (e.g., SN 41.3). Thus, to overcome views and avoid sorrow, it is necessary not just to gain equanimity about philosophical positions; one must also conquer the deeper views that the aggregates are in some relation to oneself or a self. But one does need to relinquish all philosophical views.¹⁶

It may thus be argued that Buddhism is first and foremost about freedom from views or, more modestly, that freedom from views has always been a significant thread within Buddhist traditions; either way, this should not be considered an innovative emphasis of the Mahāyāna. The Abhidharma philosopher Vasubandhu’s explanation of the moral actions of a noble (*ārya*) is instructive here (AKBh VI; [Jampalyang 2018](#), 742–43). Abhidharma philosophers call a “noble” anyone who has accomplished that first transition where consciousness is freed through revulsion toward the aggregates (a transition called The Path of Seeing). This purifies the practitioner of two kinds of mental defilements, namely false views and doubts. But nobles still have other defilements, specifically attachment, anger, pride, and ignorance. So the question is raised whether such noble beings can still commit negative actions. Vasubandhu’s answer, fascinatingly, is that they can indeed commit some negative actions, like falling asleep—but that many negative actions, including killing and stealing, depend on holding false views. Even if you feel anger, you do not kill someone once you have seen that all things are unstable. This point is worth further study and suggests another way that Pyrrho’s Buddhist witness may shed light on otherwise dark corners of the doctrine.

To return to our main point, we can now trace a pattern that locates *duḥkha* in a distinctive space within the early scriptures. The normal pattern whereby suffering for ordinary beings follows from self-view is:

Route One: seeing form (and the other aggregates) as self, or self as possessing form, or form as in self, or self as in form AND form changes → experiences of suffering.

In liberation, on the other hand, this self-centered “seeing” of the aggregates is reversed, and experiences of suffering are avoided:

Route Two: seeing that form is not fit to be regarded as self, or possessed by self, or in self → revulsion toward form → dispassion → liberation.

The purpose of the teachings is to train disciples to switch from Route One to Route Two by getting them to see that form, etc. is not fit to be regarded as having a relation to self—more commonly, seeing that the aggregates are non-self. How does the Buddha say that this switch takes place? How do disciples come to see that the aggregates are non-self? We have seen this already:

¹⁶ It is possible that Pyrrho missed this subtle, deep “self-view” in Buddhism, since he seems only to have spoken about the need to suspend ordinary views ([Bett 2018](#)). Then again, Pyrrho does seem to have preserved the distinction between two stages of liberation—the liberation of consciousness from views and the deeper liberation of the person that follows upon it. And in any case, it is not wrong, according to the passages we have been reading, to say that liberation is gained through relinquishing views. It is just that some views—those pertaining to the aggregates—are the most important ones to relinquish, because they are foundational for the other views. This is a question in the interpretation of Pyrrhonism that must await further research.

Prep for Route Two: seeing that form is impermanent → seeing that form is *duḥkha* → seeing that form is not fit to be regarded as self, or possessed by self, or in self.

Under the standard reading of *duḥkha*, impermanence entails “suffering” (*duḥkha*) because identification with the impermanent leads to experiences of loss when, inevitably, impermanent things change. This replicates Route One. This means that the standard reading of the causal story I am calling “Prep for Route Two” includes within it a “seeing” of Route One. To be precise, seeing that form is impermanent leads one to see that Route One applies to form and then to conclude from having seen that Route One applies to form that form is not fit to be regarded as self, etc. This is certainly a possible reading. But notice the complex shifting of conceptual levels and the assumed prior knowledge that it entails. It says that, when they see the impermanence of form in their Prep for Route Two, a disciple will conclude from form's impermanence that identification with it would lead to experiences of suffering when it changes and consequently that form is unfit to be regarded as self. We may ask: Does the disciple already know that impermanent things with which one identifies, when they change, lead to experiences of suffering (perhaps from having been taught Route One by the Buddha)? Or is there something in the “seeing” of form's impermanence that makes this evident? Or is it supposed to be an obvious fact? This is undecided. But in any of these cases, the reasoning is abstract. The disciple sees form's impermanence directly but deduces from this the abstract fact that since form is impermanent, identifying with it will lead to suffering. And it is this abstract fact that form is a potential cause of suffering that leads one to see that form is unfit to be regarded as self, etc.

I realize that this is not all that difficult for those experienced in Buddhist traditions to accept, and in any case, the Dharma is profound. It is the price of doing business. I had never really doubted that this was the best reading before considering Pyrrho's Buddhist witness. But it turns out that if we change the translation of *duḥkha* to “unreliable,” the general point remains the same (seeing impermanence leads one to reject what otherwise would lead to experiences of suffering), but the causal story is much cleaner. When the disciple sees the impermanence of form, they naturally see that form is unreliable. In seeing that it is unreliable, they naturally see that it is unfit to be regarded as self. There is no recursive calling-up of previously taught Buddhist doctrines (Route One plays no part in the Prep for Route Two), each awareness leads naturally and directly to the next awareness, and there are no mysterious revelations. No one wants to identify themselves with something unreliable.

By contrast, to read the word *duḥkha* as referring to both the change and the experience of suffering compresses two stages in the causal story, which the Buddha kept separate when describing Route One, into a single word. Again, it is tolerable, but it is not magnificently clear.

DEBT, NOT PAIN, AS QUINTESSENTIAL *DUḤKHA*

Our Pyrrho-influenced understanding of *duḥkha* as “unreliable” may be confirmed and elaborated by plugging the new reading into further examples of difficult scriptural passages. An illuminating example is the *sutta* called *Debt* from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (AN 6.45). Here the Buddha uses the idea of a poor person who goes into debt as an analogy for a *bhikkhu* who lacks diligence and tries to cover up his faults. Leaving *duḥkha* as “suffering,” here is Sujato's translation:

“Bhikkhus, isn't poverty suffering in the world for a person who enjoys sensual pleasures?”

“Yes, sir.”

“When a poor, penniless person falls into debt, isn't being in debt also suffering in the world for a person who enjoys sensual pleasures?”

“Yes, sir.”

“When a poor person who has fallen into debt agrees to pay interest, isn’t the interest also suffering in the world for a person who enjoys sensual pleasures?”

“Yes, sir.” (Sujato, trans., AN 6.45)

It is certainly the case that poverty brings about a great deal of suffering in the world. But let us try to be clear about what the Buddha is saying. Since he is about to compare the experience of a hypothetical person going into debt with the experience of a wayward mendicant, the expression “in the world” refers specifically to the fact that the impoverished person, who pursues sensual pleasures, is not a mendicant. So the opening question is just asking, is it not the case that for ordinary people who pursue sensual enjoyments in the world—which is just everyone who has not renounced sensual pleasures and become a monk—poverty is *duḥkha*? The monks say “yes.”

Now, one of the standard explanations of *duḥkha* includes in its formula the expression “not getting what one wants,” which is surely the situation for an impoverished person who wants sensual pleasures they cannot afford. But the Buddha does not take this tack of explaining the way poverty leads to suffering. His second question does not mention the suffering of a poor person who ends up hungry or homeless; he asks about when the person falls into debt—is not the falling into debt also *duḥkha*? Maybe the poor person is not actually not getting what they want, is not literally cold and hungry—they are just experiencing sensual enjoyments on borrowed money. Whatever the case, the repetition here suggests that maybe we were wrong to think that the Buddha was pointing to the *duḥkha* that is caused by poverty; instead, he seems to be highlighting that there is *duḥkha* in poverty itself. That would make sense of saying that debt, and then owing interest on that debt, are “also” *duḥkha*—instead of just new causes of the same suffering due to poverty.

On the standard reading of *duḥkha*, then, we need to ask, what is the “suffering” that is not just caused by these economic conditions but intrinsic to the economic conditions themselves? A standard way to go would be to suggest that the Buddha is highlighting the mental state of a penniless person in debt. We sometimes see *duḥkha* translated “unpleasantness” or even “stress,” and that might seem to help us here. As the anxiety-inducing situations escalate, the person gets charged interest, they are issued a warning, they get prosecuted, and finally they are imprisoned. In such a situation, mental suffering for someone who is financially stressed might increase with each stage, since each development comes with new kinds of worrying, new degrees of anxiety.

There is certainly wisdom in the Buddha’s teaching read this way. But notice that, as with the no-self argument, our interpretation has depended on supplying something fairly significant that was not directly stated, in particular, a psychologization of the teaching. The Buddha’s words cannot be a straightforward declaration that poverty is difficult; it has to be taken to be a psychological lesson about the stress of poverty. This was not at all clear from the opening question, and the Buddha could certainly have been much clearer at each stage by asking whether poverty, or debt, and so on, is mental suffering. But he never says that. The psychological reading only becomes natural as an inference to the proper meaning after reading the second question. At that point, it is sensible to deduce that the move from poverty to debt increases stress, even if it does not necessarily increase results of poverty such as hunger. Even if moving to a psychological interpretation clarifies our interpretation, though, this shift at the second question is confusing when we consider the monks’ responses. It is perfectly legitimate for the monks to have answered “yes” to the first question, because poverty is unpleasant whether you think of it as a cause of not getting what you want or as a stressful mental state. And when they were answering that first question, it could have been either. They were saying “yes” at a point when it was natural to think that the Buddha was asking about poverty as a cause of suffering in general.

But when we see that we ourselves were misreading the Buddha, it is equally true that the monks saying “yes” might also have been doing so. Even for them, there is a small misdirection, which is confusing even if the monks would be willing to agree either way.

All of this is somewhat troubling. What is especially difficult to follow, however, is the Buddha's opening statement with a virtual equation of poverty with *duḥkha*. Of course, the statement that poverty is unpleasant is hardly controversial. But so many things are unpleasant. Why the claim that for people pursuing pleasures in the world, it is poverty and debt that constitute unpleasantness? What about getting your leg sawn off? What about losing a loved one? What about dying? Granted, the teaching turns out to be about explaining the distinctive mental state of a mendicant who neglects the path, so the anxieties of poverty hit the nail on the head. On that we can be properly impressed by the Buddha's precision. But why should the anxieties associated with poverty be described as *duḥkha* itself—at least, for worldly beings?

After all, this is what the expression “suffering in the world for a person who enjoys sensual pleasures” (*dukkhaṃ lokasmīṃ kāmabhogino*) seems to indicate. Unlike pretty much everything else in the *Nikāyas*, this is not a formulaic expression. These words are not used elsewhere to describe just any states of suffering. We do not have instances where the Buddha starts a teaching saying, “Bhikkhus, isn't stubbing your toe suffering in the world for a person who enjoys sensual pleasures?”—or anything else, except poverty, debt, having to pay interest, etc. What makes poverty so quintessential an exemplification, not just for a monk who is worried about his misdeeds but for *duḥkha* itself? What makes debt, quite simply, the state for non-mendicants that most exactly exemplifies *duḥkha*?

A powerful possibility is that this teaching about *duḥkha* is not about experiences of suffering and unpleasantness. Rather, *duḥkha* just means precarity, instability, an unreliable place to stand. This is why poverty and debt so perfectly exemplify it:

“Bhikkhus, isn't poverty precarity for a person who enjoys sensual pleasures in the world?”

“Yes, sir.”

“When a poor, penniless person falls into debt, isn't being in debt also precarity for a person who enjoys sensual pleasures in the world?”

“Yes, sir.”

“When a poor person who has fallen into debt agrees to pay interest, isn't the interest also precarity for a person who enjoys sensual pleasures in the world?”

“Yes, sir.” (AN 6.45, *modified*)

Notice how translating *duḥkha* as “precarity” establishes the logic from the very first sentence and maintains a straight line of argument. There is no bait-and-switch here, no leading *bhikkhus* down the wrong garden path. The Buddha is restored to his ideal role, as clear as can be. Furthermore, we have no need to psychologize the meaning of *duḥkha* to make sense of the Buddha's message. Precarity is a situation where you never know when bad stuff will happen. The bad stuff, of course, is unpleasant. But that is just what to expect when you are in an unsafe, unstable, insecure situation. So there is no unclarity in saying that poverty *is* *duḥkha* rather than saying that it is the cause of *duḥkha* or that it is associated with an unpleasant mental *duḥkha*. For non-mendicants, poverty is an ordinary-world version of *duḥkha*. Indeed, poverty, debt, being charged interest, being issued warnings, being prosecuted, and imprisonment are all exemplary instances of insecurity or precarity. Getting your leg cut off is unpleasant, but it is not quintessential *duḥkha*.

This notion of *duḥkha* as being subject to precarity is reiterated with regard to that same mendicant already discussed above who neglects the path; he is in a dangerous situation, liable to go to hell, and so experiences mental anguish in this life:

Here, a Bhikkhu is devoid of faith, morally shameless, morally reckless, lazy and unwise. Possessing these five qualities, a Bhikkhu dwells in suffering (*duḥkha*) in this very life—with distress, anguish and fever—and with the breakup of the body, after death, he can expect a bad destination. (Bodhi, trans., AN 5.3)

“A bad destination” is Bodhi’s translation of *āpāya*. Bodhi understandably expands the range of *savighātaṃ*, *saupāyāsaṃ*, and *sapariḷāhaṃ* to cover as much of the category of *suffering* as might reasonably be reflected by these terms, but they are actually all focused on the same general mindset: the Bhikkhu is troubled, unsettled, and distressed. But if the point is supposed to be that bad behavior leads to suffering in this life, this is again a strangely narrow way of describing the kinds of suffering that might ensue. Instead, the point is (now) clearly that bad behavior creates an insecure situation, destined for decline: “A bhikkhu dwells in insecurity (*dukkha*) in this life—troubled, unsettled, and distressed—and after death, with the breakup of the body, he can expect a bad destination” (AN 5.3, *modified*). Moral laxness is therefore beautifully analogized to seeking out poverty. Moral behavior is like cultivating wealth, establishing one in a relatively stable situation, staving off the insecurity that is *duḥkha*.

On the other hand, the distinctive form of fear for one’s status and one’s future, which is generated as a result of bad behavior, is sometimes specifically named a “mental form of *duḥkha*” (*cetasikampi dukkhaṃ*). Here we see the Buddha speaking of someone who engages in killing as experiencing this distinctive state. I replace Bodhi’s “mental pain” with “mental insecurity”:

One who destroys life engenders, on account of such behavior, fearful animosity pertaining to the present life and fearful animosity pertaining to the future life, and he experiences mental insecurity (*cetasikampi dukkhaṃ*) and displeasure. (Bodhi, trans., SN 12.41, *modified*)

Surely the point of calling this mental state “mental *duḥkha*” is to distinguish it from ordinary *duḥkha*, which is not presumed to be mental. The quintessential mental state that corresponds to ordinary *duḥkha* is the anxiety and fear for one’s future that one has after behaving badly. But ordinary *duḥkha* is just the quality of insecurity and precarity that all things have due to their being conditioned and hence impermanent.

If we apply Pyrrho’s sense of *duḥkha* to the *Nikāya* passages that describe the tortures of hell, the most painful suffering in the Buddhist universe, we see that they, too, are designed to heighten awareness of precarity. If the notion of suffering were indeed the essence of the concept for the Buddha, we would expect *duḥkha* to appear in the name of hell, or at least to be named throughout the descriptions of its varied sufferings. Instead, it appears in a very specific, repeating phrase: a being in hell “experiences a feeling of intense, sharp, bitter *duḥkha*.”¹⁷ This formula appears at the end of each description of intense torture, as the narrative carries the hell denizen from one grotesque affliction to the next. We can see why tradition would have read the capstone to each description, a “feeling of *duḥkha*” (*dukkha... vedanā*), to be a summary, simply, of intense pain and suffering. But inserting the sense of *duḥkha* as an unstable or unreliable situation, a place you do not want to be, pinpoints quite precisely the feeling one might have, being tortured again and again, each time in a new and surprising way. This might well have been the distinctive feeling of hell that the Buddha was interested to highlight and that he says lasts until one’s bad karma is eliminated. At the end of each round, one feels not just the pain of torture itself but the recurring experience of dread, the feeling of intense, bitter insecurity. Thus, it is natural to feel *duḥkha* in hell, but if we take Pyrrho’s sense, the *duḥkha* is conceptually

¹⁷ MN 130: *dukkhā tibbā kharā kaṭukā vedanā vedeti*.

distinguishable from the physical pain there.¹⁸ When the Buddha narrates the experience of hell, the *duhkha* at its center is the repeated recognition of a total loss of control.

Furthermore, incorporating the sense of “instability” into our understanding of *duhkha* even in hell vindicates the Buddha from the common accusation that his hell narrative indulges in a sadistic revenge fantasy; the newness and surprise of each new torture serves a clear, Buddhist pedagogical goal: it elevates the characterization of the precarity and insecurity of hell. Again and again, the hell denizen is deprived even of the security of knowing what form their pain will take, and when, if ever, it will end. This reading also makes sense of the strange claim that the *duhkha* of devas who learn they are soon to die is greater even than that of hell beings. If *duhkha* includes all suffering, that cannot be true. Devas never experience pain; nothing happens to them even vaguely comparable to the tortures of hell. But if *duhkha* refers specifically to the dread of realizing one's precarious situation, it makes perfect sense to speak of maximal *duhkha* when all at once, for the first time in eons, a deva knows that they are insecure. In these examples we see that, even when *duhkha* takes on the meaning of a feeling or a mental state, it maintains the sense of precarity and danger.

NEW DEPTH IN THE YAMAKA STORY

Another instance where the clarity of the Dharma seems to emerge from obscurity when we deploy Pyrrho's sense of *duhkha* is a teaching where Sāriputta asks Yamaka to state his views about what happens to an enlightened arhat after death. To set the context, Yamaka had apparently once held a pernicious view, which Sāriputta repeats back to him as something he has been known to say: “But, friend... is it fitting for you to declare: ‘As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, a bhikkhu whose taints are destroyed is annihilated and perishes with the breakup of the body and does not exist after death?’” (Bodhi, trans., SN 22.85) At this point, Yamaka denies that this is still his view. He has had a Dhamma breakthrough and no longer holds that view. So Sāriputta asks him to confirm his new view—and here we are going to keep Bodhi's standard translation “suffering” for *duhkha*:

“If, friend Yamaka, they were to ask you: ‘Friend Yamaka, when a bhikkhu is an arahant, one whose taints are destroyed, what happens to him with the breakup of the body, after death?’—being asked thus, what would you answer?”

“If they were to ask me this, friend, I would answer thus: ‘Friends, form is impermanent; what is impermanent is suffering; what is suffering has ceased and passed away. Feeling... Perception... Volitional formations... Consciousness is impermanent; what is impermanent is suffering; what is suffering has ceased and passed away.’ Being asked thus, friend, I would answer in such a way.” (Bodhi, trans., SN 22.85)

It seems like Yamaka now tows the line. But what exactly is the meaning of his statement? Even if we replace the term *suffering* here with a subtler experiential term such as *unsatisfactory* or *stressful*, it would still leave us scratching our heads. Is he saying that the arhat was suffering anyway, so his death was no big deal? That is a strangely callous thing to ascribe to someone who has had a breakthrough to the Dhamma. But if the story is just that Yamaka had a breakthrough and used to think something wrong, but got corrected, what is the big deal that would make this account of the replication of formulaic statements worth preserving through the centuries? I mean, it is fine, but it is not a compelling narrative.

¹⁸ This distinction is quite important for contemporary Buddhist-influenced pain management meditation. As Shinzen Young puts it, “Suffering = Pain × Resistance” (Young 2016, 1).

Now read it again, when we retranslate *duḥkha* not as *suffering* but *unreliable*: a fuller meaning emerges. When asked to state his breakthrough understanding of the state of the arhat in the breakup of the body at death, Yamaka says:

If they were to ask me this, friend, I would answer thus: ‘Friends, form is impermanent; what is impermanent is unreliable; what is unreliable has ceased and passed away. Feeling... Perception... Volitional formations... Consciousness is impermanent; what is impermanent is unreliable; what is unreliable has ceased and passed away.’ Being asked thus, friend, I would answer in such a way. (SN 22.85, *modified*)

It was obvious already that Yamaka was displaying his full knowledge of the tradition, having accepted the truth of suffering. Now, the story of Yamaka exemplifies the composure in facing death that comes from familiarity with the unreliable nature of all things. The story of Yamaka teaches a profound lesson that death itself—or, at least, the false belief in death—is conquered through the breakthrough to awareness of impermanence and (not suffering, but) the intrinsic precariousness of the aggregates.

The fact that what had seemed like a formulaic recitation can be transformed into a profound expression of the Buddhist approach to mortality speaks well, I think, for the usefulness of the Pyrrhonic witness.

ON MY HERMENEUTIC METHOD

If Pyrrho is truly our earliest Buddhist witness, his translation of *duḥkha* might reflect an important thread of the tradition, perhaps even an early version of Buddhism that has not been well documented. Beckwith argues in defense of this position using historical and philological data. My method is hermeneutic, in the Gadamerian sense. When Gadamer invokes the hermeneutic circle, it refers to the way understanding grows through alternating attention between context and text, whole and part, expectation and encounter. I am noting success when I perceive a new degree of depth in deploying a new component within the interpretive frame. I am attempting to reach greater understanding of the text (and the corpus of texts) by stages, accessing my knowledge of context (historical frame, knowledge of the genre, etc.) in alternating conversation with particulars of the text, remaining guided above all by my own sense of where I feel like I lack understanding, where I still want to understand. This means I do not claim to have established an objective, final interpretation of the texts; I remain open to challenges to my approach and my conclusions at every juncture, both from other interpreters and from the texts themselves. I began by simply asking whether and in what ways the Pyrrhonic Buddha’s concept of *duḥkha* might guide our understanding of potentially relevant, otherwise confounding Buddhist texts, and I am working to refine my understanding of that concept, of its applicability to Buddhist texts, and of those texts themselves.

The method builds confidence in any given deployment as its successes cascade. If there were no good readings available in the early canons for Pyrrho’s translation of *duḥkha*, we would have had to say he simply got it wrong or that he never encountered what we consider Buddhist texts. By dropping his translation into the passages we have examined, however, we have seen why he might have had reason to think texts like these—assuming he was taught something similar—meant what he thought they did. Our initial confirmation that he might have encountered genuine Buddhism comes from seeing that the texts can be made sense of with this reading. But he still might have gotten them wrong. The significant utility of Pyrrho’s Buddhism for us as readers of these texts only emerges in the next stage, when we reread them on the assumption of Pyrrho’s interpretation. This is where we begin to encounter not just an alternative reading

but—unexpected and unsought—newly satisfying clarifications of the particulars of the texts and, most impressively, new profundities.

Thus it is amazing that we even can read early Buddhist texts on *duḥkha* using translations with no implication of negative phenomenal valence (“unreliable” or “precarious”). The fact that the logic from *anitya* to *duḥkha* flows better than usual and makes clearer sense indicates the possibility that the new translation may be an improved reading in some cases. When texts under the new interpretation open up new depths, as in the *Scripture on Debt* and in Yamaka’s declaration, the reading is confirmed to be worth applying more widely. How far can this be taken? After all, the doctrine of *duḥkha* is not simply a tool for interpreting this or that scripture.

REREADING THE FIRST NOBLE TRUTH

In truth, one could hardly propose a more consequential challenge to traditional Buddhism than to say that we must reconsider the meaning of *duḥkha*. “The Truth of Suffering” is, after all, the First of the Four Noble Truths, all of which are interconnected and hang on the meaning of the first. If the initial teaching is not the Truth of Suffering but the Truth of Precarity, of unreliability, then the Cause of it (*trṣṇā*) and the Elimination of it (*nirodha*) and the Path to its elimination (*marga*) are all going to change. The goal of eliminating *duḥkha* under such a reading would not be to transcend pain; it would be to establish oneself in a stable, reliable location—that is, in nirvana. If it is asked whether nirvana is really supposed to be a stable, reliable location, well this is another one of those previously confounding statements from the Buddha that we can now begin to understand:

If there were no unborn, unproduced, unmade, and unconditioned, then you would find no escape here from the born, produced, made and conditioned. But since there is an unborn, unproduced, unmade, and unconditioned, an escape is found from the born, produced, made and conditioned. (Sujato, trans., *Itivuttaka* 43)

Nirvana is one of the most difficult concepts in Buddhism, because there is great confusion about whether it is blissful or not, and if not, just what is good about it. What is escaping from what? What is eliminated? If everything is suffering and all suffering is eliminated, is it just annihilation? It seems like some headway can be made by taking it to be the elimination of the precarity that is ever-present in conditioned things. If there were no “unconditioned,” no nirvana, there would be no escape. But there is.

The Buddhist tradition contains many texts that elaborate the ways that living beings suffer, so I do not want to claim that Buddhism is not about suffering and its elimination. I do not want to say that *duḥkha* is never meant to refer to unpleasant subjective states. What I do want to argue is that an overemphasis on the unpleasantness of *dukkha* may be causing us to miss the point. Most famously, the *Scripture Turning the Wheel of the Dharma* elaborates on the Four Noble Truths and therein defines *duḥkha* with reference to what is commonly considered a list of the bad things in life:

“Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of suffering:
birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering;
union with what is displeasing is suffering;
separation from what is pleasing is suffering;
not to get what one wants is suffering;
in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering.” (Bodhi, trans., SN 56.11)

This might appear at first glance to be a proof text for the translation of *duḥkha* as “suffering.” The summary tells us that the five aggregates are, by their nature, suffering—and this is given greater elucidation by first pointing out that the displeasing experiences of birth, old age, sickness, and death are inevitable for those in possession of the five aggregates (that is, living beings) and that in the meantime, they are subject to three problems: meeting with displeasing things and people, losing pleasing people and things, and not getting them in the first place.

But is this really a statement about the persistently unpleasant nature of conditioned experience? Many readers have noted the unjustifiably “pessimistic” character of Buddhist doctrine under such an analysis. After all, living beings between birth and death also experience union with what is pleasing, separation from what is displeasing, and not being beset with things they do not want. These are not permanent states, but neither are the others. The fact of suffering does not prove its universality.

Furthermore, notice that, as with the passage on poverty, the elucidation of displeasure with this list is oddly selective. “Union with what is displeasing,” more naturally, “meeting someone you do not like,” is a strangely gentle way of putting the only category here in which we would want to throw a great mass of pain and suffering—in fact, everything bad that can happen to you beyond losing things and not getting what you want. Hunger, exhaustion, and pain would rank high, along with the full range of what David Hume counted as the forms of emotional suffering in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*: “remorse, shame, anguish, rage, disappointment, anxiety, fear, dejection, despair” (Hume 2017, 42). Strange indeed to bundle all of that under a phrase that seems suited to the annoyance of being stuck at a boring dinner party. Add to this the age-old but culturally unique oddity of the Buddhist insistence that birth is traumatic for the baby (with little to say for the mother), and we have, once more, reason to suspect that there might be something we have been missing.¹⁹

To build our alternative reading, we must first recall that we have already encountered the summary, the notion of the “five grasping aggregates” being called *duḥkha* meaning not “suffering” but “precarious.” The point was that the aggregates are impermanent and unreliable, so it is problematic when they are appropriated, taken up as being in some relation with oneself.²⁰ Since they are unreliable, they change, and when the aggregates change, they lead to unpleasant experiences. Now, we can see that “old age, sickness, and death” represent exactly the kind of change that causes suffering for someone who has mistakenly appropriated the aggregates. This very point is made quite clearly in the *sutta* called *The Arising of Suffering* (replacing Bhikkhu Bodhi’s *suffering* with *unreliable*):

Bhikkhus, the arising, continuation, production, and manifestation of the eye is the arising of the unreliable, the continuation of disease, the manifestation of aging-and-death. The arising of the nose... the tongue... the body... the mind is the arising of the unreliable, the continuation of disease, the manifestation of aging-and-death. (Bodhi, trans., SN 35.21, *modified*)

This passage rather fascinatingly places the arising of *duḥkha* between the arising of the aggregates (in each case) and the subsequent arising of “disease” and “aging-and-death.” It seems to be saying that, when you have the body-and-mind, you have the unreliable, which is to say you inevitably have old age, sickness, and death. This makes sense both of why the body-and-mind as a whole would be called *duḥkha* and specifically why birth would be called *duḥkha*. Notice

¹⁹ The “we” here includes the age-old Buddhist tradition. Clearly the issue here is not simply reducible to modern scholars’ interpretive errors or bad translations.

²⁰ This definition of *duḥkha* as the first of the Four Noble Truths (without being called that) appears in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya sutta* called “*Dukkha*” (22.104).

that there is no naming of *birth* here. Yet, we do have the “arising” of each of the sensory organs, which together may be said to account for *birth*. *Birth* thus read is not being described as especially painful but as the arising of a situation of precarity, of risk, and of the beginning of an inevitable trajectory toward old age, sickness, and death. To say that everything is *duhkha* in this reading is simply to reiterate the famous motivation for the Buddha's leaving home to pursue the life of a wanderer: Everyone is subject to old age, sickness, and death.

We are now in a position to understand the famous definition of *dukkha* from the *Scripture Turning the Wheel of the Dharma*, with “suffering” replaced with “unreliable”:

“Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the unreliable:
 birth is unreliable, aging is unreliable, illness is unreliable, death is unreliable;
 union with what is displeasing is unreliable;
 separation from what is pleasing is unreliable;
 not to get what one wants is unreliable;
 in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are unreliable.” (SN 56.11, *modified*)

The Noble Truth of the unreliable is sensibly summarized as the fact that anyone with a body-and-mind is in a situation of precarity. It starts by pointing out that throughout life, there is always uncertainty and danger. Early Buddhist scriptures seem to be saying that all things are unreliable, using the fact that old age, sickness, and death are ever-present concerns as proof of universal precarity. This is surely not unfamiliar to Buddhism; it is a crucial theme across Buddhism that the threat of death is always present. It matches with the Buddha's life story that his First Noble Truth would be the truth of the unreliable, not the truth of suffering. After all, what kind of a hero leaves home to free himself of unpleasantness? The Buddha sought to conquer not pain but death. The basic problem of ordinary existence is that there is no stable position, no solid ground, nothing on which a person can rely.

Then, instead of reading the union with the displeasing, separation from the pleasing, and not getting what one wants as various kinds of experiences of suffering, we can read them as further exemplifying situations that you cannot control. No matter who you are, you are going to meet up with people you do not like, you are going to lose loved ones, and there are going to be things that you want but cannot have. Rather than reading these as covering all kinds of suffering, they make a sensible list of unavoidable, unpredictable things. Notice, however, that they depend on your likes and dislikes, your wants and desires. This is to identify situations in the world as being in some relation with oneself. Wishing things are otherwise as a theme allows us to come full circle and recall, once again, the passage that was ostensibly an “argument from control” from the *Characteristic of No-Self* scripture:

Bhikkhus, form is nonself. For if, bhikkhus, form were self, this form would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to have it of form: “Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus.” But because form is nonself, form leads to affliction, and it is not possible to have it of form: “Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus.” (Bodhi, trans., SN 22.59)

To see *duhkha* in things is to see that they cannot be controlled and therefore to see that they are inappropriate to appropriate, to identify as oneself. This is just as true of situations as it is of the mind-body complex. Just as the five aggregates are called the “aggregates subject to clinging,” the three unpredictable situations are only a problem to the extent that they are liable to grasping after control of the uncontrollable. Let it go!

This reading makes the characterization of *duhkha* in the statement of the Four Noble Truths into a subtle and detailed statement of a Buddhist approach to life rather than a strange

hodge-podge of oddly unconnected ways of speaking about unpleasantness. It says that there is danger, precarity, uncertainty in every life, because there is no avoiding the ever-present possibility of change, leading to death. It says that throughout life, there is no control to be had; however one positions oneself, situations inevitably arise that fail to meet one's hopes and expectations. Then, as a summary pulling this together, it says that the aggregates themselves, the mind-and-body complex that is the basis of all this grasping is the basis of contingency, uncertainty, and danger. With the Truth of the Uncontrolled, the Buddha encourages his disciples to think of every situation as offering the danger of attachment to what is unreliable and the proper object for renunciation.²¹

TEN QUESTIONS ANSWERED BY REPLACING “SUFFERING” WITH “PRECARITY”

Q1: How does suffering follow, logically, from impermanence?

A1: It does not. Precarity follows from impermanence.

Q2: Why does no-self follow, logically, from suffering?

A2: It does not. The Buddha is saying you should not identify with something precarious.

Q3: Why is poverty said to be the quintessence of suffering? (AN 6.45)

A3: It is not. Poverty is the quintessence of precarity (for worldly people who pursue sensual enjoyments).

Q4: Why did the Buddha speak of poverty when he meant the stress of poverty? (AN 6.45)

A4: He did not. He was speaking about the precarity, not the suffering/experience, of poverty.

Q5: Why does the Buddha provide such harsh, dramatic detail about the hell realms? It seems sadistic. Is he trying to scare you? (MN 130)

A5: Yes, but the point is that the hell realms are the most out-of-control situation you can experience, so the details serve an expressive function beyond engendering fear.

Q6: What is the point of the story where Yamaka reiterates that the suffering aggregates of the *arhat* are now gone? Is he happy that an *arhat* died? Is it just a formula? (SN 22.85)

A6: It is saying that, once you see the aggregates as unstable and unreliable, you are not surprised when they cease. The point of the story is to demonstrate how Buddhist liberation eliminates the fear of death and, in a sense, even the perception of the reality of death.

Q7: What unifies the list of qualities that describe the First Noble Truth (i.e., not getting what you want, etc.)? Why is “encountering the undesired” so mildly stated, if it covers all unpleasant experiences in this canonical definition of suffering? (SN 56.11)

A7: These terms indicate types of situations that are inevitably out of your control.

²¹ Other examples make it difficult to think that Buddhism is focused above all on eradicating pain. According to *Digha Nikāya* (DN 16), the Buddha experienced wracking pains from the illness of which he eventually died. If pain is *duḥkha*, then the Buddha experienced *duḥkha* even after his nirvana (which is described as the cessation of *duḥkha*). And finally, negative-valenced experience is a *vedanā*. Yet, the Buddha says that “the five aggregates subject to clinging are *duḥkha*” with no special discussion of the second of the five, *vedanā*.

- Q8: Why is birth suffering? (Not for the mother, but for the baby?) (SN 56.11)
- A8: It is not. It is a precarious situation, which leads inevitably to old age, sickness and death.
- Q9: Why did the Buddha renounce home to address the problems of old age, sickness and death, but end up with a teaching focused on conquering suffering?
- A9: He did not. Old age, sickness and death, he discovered, are united as exemplifications of the pervasive nature of precarity. To find a stable position (nirvana) is to conquer death.
- Q10: What is the point of the passage where the Buddha enumerates the distinctive kinds of suffering of women? Did he think of menstruation as painful? Did he have a feminist social perspective? (SN 37.3)²²
- A10: No. He was using the well-known precarity of women as an analogue to explain the precarity of all beings.

CONCLUSION (FOR NOW)

To conclude, I will admit to being amazed by the success of this new set of readings. The emergence of newly straightforward expositions of widely known traditional passages that were previously met with obfuscation, question-begging, psychologization, and other strategies (including acknowledgement of defeat) just by slotting the sense of “precarity” into *duhkha* raises several questions. If even the Four Noble Truths not only succumb readily to such a significant revision, but in its light reveals previously hidden depths, the question might be asked how far this interpretive line can be taken. How widely, and with what caveats, can we apply this new sense of *duhkha*, and what changes might it bring to our understandings of various Buddhist texts and genres? How might it alter the picture of Buddhist thought as a whole and in its many varieties and expressions? And finally, if these readings are right, just what prevented us from seeing this—us being almost everyone, for a very long time, who has wanted to understand Buddhist texts? If, as it seems, something important in the meaning of *duhkha* was lost, when, why, and to what degree was it lost?

At this stage I really do not have answers to these questions. As to the question of limits: when I first looked into this, I expected to find numerous passages in the *Nikāyas* that are totally resistant to the new reading of *duhkha*, but so far I haven't found any. The notion of *duhkha* as “unreliable/precarious” (sometimes in addition to, but very often in place of, “unpleasant/unsatisfying”) most definitely improves many, many readings of Buddhist scriptures. I expect that other genres will reflect a very different view. Where is the line? In any case, there are two quite different directions for future research suggested by the two distinctly new aspects of the Pyrrhonic view I have been deploying: first, the idea that *duhkha* is not principally a phenomenological term; and second, the idea that *duhkha* is principally about “views.”

To say that *duhkha* is not principally a phenomenological term is to say that it does not stand for an emotion or an experience of any kind. It is a quality, like being impermanent and non-self, that can be universally applied to things whether they are experienced or not. It has worked to translate it *unreliable*, *precarious*, or *insecure*. But of course one can have a characteristic feeling or experience of precarity, as when one is impoverished or when one is in hell or liable to go there. I am not certain yet when and where the assimilation of subjective, unpleasant experience into the term became normalized. The early formula listing three kinds of suffering indicates an awareness of different uses of the term. But since the list is not elaborated in the *Nikāyas*, it is

²² For discussion of Question 10, see the Conclusion below.

not clear that *dukkha-dukkha* definitively refers to pain instead of just ordinary-world precarity (SN 45.165). (If it refers to unpleasant feelings, why not just call it *vedanā-dukkha*, meaning “the suffering that is a feeling?”)

Several passages we have discussed seem on their surface to be about the subjective experience of suffering and yet yield to the general picture we have drawn of situations of insecurity in which one is liable to wish things were otherwise. Another instance is where women are described as having their specific *dukkha* (SN 37.3) in being separated from their families; undergoing menstruation, pregnancy and birth; and being subject to their husbands. It would appear natural to read this as the distinctive “suffering” of women. Yet, the term often translated to indicate women “experiencing” this *dukkha* (*paccanubhoti*) is probably closer to “having as one’s purview.” It is used to name the capacity to deploy sensory organs or magical powers. So, although these are situations where women often fail to get what they want, the emphasis is not necessarily being placed on women’s subjective experience. Rather, the point is once again, just as likely, that women have special kinds of lack of control.²³

This article has focused on reading early Buddhism in the *Nikāyas*, so a natural next step would be to look forward in time for this sense of *duḥkha*, inquiring into the success of “unreliable views” readings in other teachings, commentators, and genres. Further analysis even in the *Nikāyas* may require that our best translations of *duḥkha* going forward still imply something experientially displeasing. But I will ask everyone to look at your work, today, and check if there are discussions that might be illuminated with new light by changing the term *suffering* into *precarity*—or, at least, adding to it the *sense* of precarity.

We have seen that the term *duḥkha* means “unreliable,” but as such it means a precarious situation that is liable to yield to suffering if it is not seen properly for what it is. This establishes a natural causal association between *duḥkha* and suffering, which issues in many texts looking like they are very nearly equating *duḥkha* with the suffering in whose cause it is implicated. In such a situation, the interpretation of *duḥkha* might well have taken on the subjective experiential valence. From there, the foregrounding of the phenomenal quality of *duḥkha* might naturally have had the effect of suppressing the degree to which *duḥkha* is taken to be about the undecidability of views, the other, partner component of this new reading.

To say that *duḥkha* is principally a problem with views is to highlight how the recognition of *duḥkha* leads to understanding the no-self nature of things. To follow-up on this idea will require a clearer articulation of the nature of Pyrrho’s term *adiaphora*, to see how and in what ways this might fit with Buddhist *anātman*. On the surface there are significant divergences, but here is not the place to pursue them. What we have seen already as a result of pursuing the “unreliable views” reading of *duḥkha* is that early scriptures display an ambiguity between two interpretations of no-self: the unreliable nature of things means both that they have no nature (*anātman*) and that things are unsuitable to appropriate to oneself (*anātman*). These reflect, respectively, versions of the Mahāyāna and pre-Mahāyāna understandings of *anātman*. At the same time, these two views might both together, or separately, be classified broadly as a no-self position, even though neither is explicitly concerned with a traditional Upaniṣadic self. It might be that in their efforts to counter emergent Brahmanical or Jain *pro-ātman* traditions, Buddhist traditions (ironically) split along the lines of these two views of no-self. This is only the beginnings of a hypothesis, and future research will be necessary to determine if it is viable.

²³ So there is no mystery of just what the Buddha is saying about women (Is he saying women are inferior? Or is he expressing feminist sympathies?). He is using obvious facts about women to elucidate the nature of *duḥkha* as precariousness. We are all subject to the same degree of precariousness as a young girl sent to her new husband; we just do not see it.

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