

One of the most difficult tasks in doing examinations is to be concise, precise and yet at the same time be able to explain something clearly. The skill of 'outlining' something is very under-rated. The best example of outlining is a dictionary or encyclopaedia where world-renowned experts are called upon to draft up a precise and clear explanations of a word, term or concept but with the aim of keeping it concise.

Here is an example. The term 'dukkha' refers to the Buddhist teaching about the nature of the problem faced in life. Read the following extract written for a dictionary of world religions:

Dukkha is the first of the noble truths. It can be better translated as "frustration". Narada Thera, 'The Buddha and His Teachings', gives the literal rendering of dukkha as "that which is difficult to endure" (a compound of du - difficult & kha - to endure). We cannot find an essence to our personal being nor can we find one thing that does not change; however, because we would like things to stay the same (e.g. happiness, life) and like to think of ourselves as being individuals with a unique identity then we suffer when this does not happen. We like to think of ourselves as constantly healthy and so find illness difficult; ageing is a sad process; death is difficult to come to terms with. Even being happy can be sad; for example, when on holiday, although we are very happy, when we entertain the thought of this ending we immediately experience sadness! Dukkha is often translated as 'suffering' or 'ill' although this is not a satisfactory literal translation. Peter Harvey refers to it as "frustration" or "general unsatisfactoriness" with regard to life: "suffering is inherent in the very fabric of life". Indeed, the whole idea of dukkha comes from the Buddha's experience of the four sights. It is a characteristic of 'being' i.e. existence (along with anicca and anatta). The best place to look for a more accurate translation/understanding is to refer to Nyanatiloka's "Buddhist Dictionary"; he points out that dukkha can be both physical and mental 'pain' or 'suffering'; however, "dukkha is not limited to painful experience....but refers to the unsatisfactory nature and the general insecurity of all conditioned phenomena.....this includes also pleasurable experience" - general insecurity refers to the other two 'marks of being' from which it cannot be divorced if we are to offer an accurate description. The Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta states : "Birth is dukkha, ageing is dukkha, sickness is dukkha, death is dukkha; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are dukkha; association with what one dislikes is dukkha, separation from what one likes is dukkha, not to get what one wants is dukkha; in short, the five groups of grasping (which make up a person) are dukkha". Nyanatiloka argues that "The first truth does not deny the existence of pleasurable existence, as is sometimes wrongly assumed". Nor is it pessimistic, as the Buddha pointed out, "This above all do I teach, suffering and the deliverance from suffering". Suffering is a natural result of not seeing things as anicca and anatta; consequently objects, ideas and experiences that are seen as permanent and as existing in themselves naturally lead to attachments which then lead to painful experiences when these are inevitably broken as the 'laws of existence' dictate and they do not last. (458 words)

This summary is 458 words long but as 'editor', I am only allowed 250 +/- 5 words for my own article. I have highlighted what I would use in my final draft. Look at the editing I have done below:

Dukkha is the first of the noble truths. It can be better translated as "frustration". Narada Thera, 'The Buddha and His Teachings', gives the literal rendering of dukkha as "that which is difficult to endure" (a compound of du - difficult & kha - to endure). We cannot find an essence to our personal being nor can we find one thing that does not change; however, because we would like things to stay the same (e.g. happiness, life) and like to think of ourselves as being individuals with a unique identity then we suffer when this does not happen. We like to think of ourselves as constantly healthy and so find illness difficult; ageing is a sad process; death is difficult to come to terms with. Even being happy can be sad; for example, when on holiday, although we are very happy, when we entertain the thought of this ending we immediately experience sadness! Dukkha is often translated as 'suffering' or 'ill' although this is not a satisfactory literal translation. Peter Harvey refers to it as "frustration" or "general unsatisfactoriness" with regard to life: "suffering is inherent in the very fabric of life". Indeed, the whole idea of dukkha comes from the Buddha's experience of the four sights. It is a characteristic of 'being' i.e. existence (along with anicca and anatta). The best place to look for a more accurate translation/understanding is to refer to Nyanatiloka's "Buddhist Dictionary"; he points out that dukkha can be both physical and mental 'pain' or 'suffering'; however, "dukkha is not limited to painful experience....but refers to the unsatisfactory nature and the general insecurity of all conditioned phenomena.....this includes also pleasurable experience" - general insecurity refers to the other two 'marks of being' from which it cannot be divorced if we are to offer an accurate description. The Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta states : "Birth is dukkha, ageing is dukkha, sickness is dukkha, death is dukkha; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are dukkha; association with what one dislikes is dukkha, separation from what one likes is dukkha, not to get what one wants is dukkha; in short, the five groups of grasping (which make up a person) are dukkha". Nyanatiloka argues that "The first truth does not deny the existence of pleasurable existence, as is sometimes wrongly assumed". Nor is it pessimistic, as the Buddha pointed out, "This above all do I teach, suffering and the deliverance from suffering". Suffering is a natural result of not seeing things as anicca and anatta; consequently objects, ideas and experiences that are seen as permanent and as existing in themselves naturally lead to attachments which then lead to painful experiences when these are inevitably broken as the 'laws of existence' dictate and they do not last.

It now reads:

Dukkha, the first of the noble truths, can be better translated as “frustration”. The literal rendering of dukkha is “that which is difficult to endure” (a compound of du - difficult & kha - to endure). We cannot find one thing that does not change; however, because we would like things to stay the same (e.g. happiness, life) then we suffer when this does not happen. Dukkha is often translated as ‘suffering’ or ‘ill’ although this is not a satisfactory literal translation. Peter Harvey refers to it as “frustration” or “general unsatisfactoriness” with regard to life: “suffering is inherent in the very fabric of life”. Indeed, the whole idea of dukkha comes from the Buddha’s experience of the four sights. It is a characteristic of ‘being’ i.e. existence (along with anicca and anatta). Nyanatiloka’s “Buddhist Dictionary” points out that dukkha can be both physical and mental ‘pain’ or ‘suffering’; however, “dukkha is not limited to painful experience....but refers to the unsatisfactory nature and the general insecurity of all conditioned phenomena.....this includes also pleasurable experience”. The Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta states: “Birth is dukkha, ageing is dukkha, sickness is dukkha, death is dukkha; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are dukkha; association with what one dislikes is dukkha, separation from what one likes is dukkha, not to get what one wants is dukkha. It is not pessimistic, as the Buddha pointed out, “This above all do I teach, suffering and the deliverance from suffering”. Suffering is a natural result of not seeing things as anicca and anatta. (255 words)

You may not agree with my editing and may have chosen to do this a different way; however, this is the beauty of selection and presentation of material whereby we all explain things in different ways. This skill goes towards developing the art of explaining concepts yourself.

Today you will all do similar editing with anatta. In an exam you cannot always mention everything so it is always a good exercise to make something more concise but yet still display a high level of understanding. Hopefully, the skills you will be practising, at first interactively, but then in your own studies and revision will help you extract the best from your wide reading.