

Transformation of Suffering

Getting over the pain of it all

“Birth is unsatisfactory, aging is unsatisfactory; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are unsatisfactory; association with the unbeloved is unsatisfactory; separation from the loved is unsatisfactory; not getting what is wanted is unsatisfactory.”

~Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion¹

Western religious traditions

Over time, the followers of many Western religions have reached a variety of conclusions about suffering. Whether or not we are believers, the Bible continues to be a dominant influence in our Western culture today and conditions our ideas about the causes of suffering.

God causes Suffering

A “classical” view is that God causes suffering as punishment for sin. In the 8th century BCE, Israel’s defeat at the hands of the Assyrians and later the Babylonians, in the 6th century, was punishment wrought by God on the Jews because they had strayed from God’s Law. This idea remains with us. After WWII the German Evangelical Conference at Darmstadt claimed that the Holocaust was God’s punishment for the Jews failure to accept Jesus! Even more recently, the Rev. John Hagee of the 18,000-member Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, said, “I believe that the Hurricane Katrina was, in fact, the judgment of God against the City of New Orleans.” In commenting on the Holocaust, Hagee said, “How did it happen? Why did it happen? Because God said, “My top priority for the Jewish people is to get them to come back to the land of Israel.”²

People cause Suffering

Another notion about suffering found in the Bible is that suffering may be caused by other people. The actions of the powerful may oppress the helpless. Even thoughtless actions may cause unintended suffering. Even the failure to act may contribute to suffering.

Suffering is Redemptive

Another idea found in the Bible is that through suffering good things are derived; suffering builds character. The Apostle Paul certainly thought that suffering was redemptive. “We even boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces a proven character; and a proven character produces hope; and hope is not put to shame, because the love of God is poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us”³. There is no question that sometimes good may come as a result of suffering. Many people speak of having suffered a life-changing experience that left them stronger. However, most suffering doesn’t end that way.

Suffering is a test

The idea that suffering is inflicted by Satan to test our faith in God is found in various places in the Bible. In the Book of Job, we see Job described as “blameless and upright”⁴. In the opening part of the book, God’s adversary, Satan, argues that Job is righteous only because he is well-off. Satan is permitted to take things away from Job to test his faith. First, Job’s innocent sons and daughters are wiped out along with all of Job’s household. In the second wave of disaster, Job is given all sorts of illnesses. Despite suffering these losses, Job does not waiver in his faith. Ultimately Job passes all these tests, and everything is restored to him, including new sons and daughters to replace the ones taken from him!

There is no answer

At the end of the dialogue between Job and the friends that have come to comfort him we find God appearing before Job and essentially not answering our question of why Job has been made to suffer so.

Biblical and Buddhist similar views of suffering

The author of Ecclesiastes does not attribute suffering to God, as in the book of Job, but rather suggests that it is something that just happens. Suffering is not attributed to either God or Satan. Life is seen as impermanent, changing, short, and sometimes meaningless. The opening paragraph of Ecclesiastes says: “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanity! All is vanity.”⁵ Because “vanity” has, in the original Hebrew, the literal meaning of “a mist that evaporates,” some Biblical scholars translate this verse as: “Emptiness of emptiness, says the preacher, emptiness of emptiness! All is emptiness.”

The overall view of the writer of Ecclesiastes is that there is no inherent fixed nature to things; when we try to describe our experiences at a very deep level, we come up empty-handed. This biblical perspective of impermanence and emptiness is similar to the Buddhist view.



Buddhist Perspectives

The story is told that, when the Buddha sat under the Bodhi Tree in deep meditation, he realized that not only was his physical body in constant change but also that he could find no static, unchanging, self or soul. Even his mind was in constant change. At this moment, the transient nature of all phenomena became evident. The Buddha’s first sermon addresses how our relationship to this fundamental fact of nature is key to understanding our personal misery and the misery of the whole world.

In his first sermon, the Buddha explained misery and how it may be dispelled. In his message, he spoke of four truths that became the very core of his teachings. These “Truths” have been held in such high regard, that they became widely known as the “Four Noble Truths.”

The Four Noble Truths

Suffering and the Relief of Suffering

The first of these “truths” is that suffering (*dukkha*)⁶ is a significant part of the experience of all sentient beings: embedded in life itself; all sentient creatures experience suffering. Three of the many kinds of suffering that the Buddha addressed are physical and emotional pain, emotional pain that arises from our reaction to change, and the pain occasioned by the imperfectability of all conditioned existence.

The second “truth,” (*samudaya*), calls us to a comprehensive self-examination of the process of how our feelings of suffering arise, and how they were formed from our reactions to the world. By focusing on how, when, and why our feelings of dissatisfaction arise, instead of being fixated on suffering, we engage in a paradigm shift that begins to lay bare the causes of our current malaise. We recognize that many of the causes of our dissatisfaction are self-imposed. If we consider the Buddha’s example of “the emotional pain that arises from our reaction to change” we realize that in a world that is constantly changing, our reactions may be the cause of our suffering. This realization leads us to recognize that many of our reactions arise from old attitudes, dysfunctional views, and worn-out habits. Strategies that have worked in the past may no longer be relevant in a world that continues to change. A desire for stability inevitably dooms us to a thirst that can never be quenched.

The third “truth,” (*nirodha*), asserts that we can transform the suffering that arises when we face unwelcome circumstances. Only by embracing ownership of our dissatisfaction, are we able to let go of our reactive tendencies. By letting go, we can transform our suffering into well-being.

The fourth “truth,” (*marga*), presents a path to well-being. This path is commonly known as the “Eightfold Path” because it consists of eight elements. Practicing all of these elements leads to happiness and liberation from suffering. Although these elements, traditionally, have been modified by using the word “right,” as in “right practice,” right is not intended to imply that this is the only approved way to accomplish the steps of the path. “Right” can, in the sense used in these pages, also mean “straight,” as in following a straight and direct pathway.



The Eightfold Path leading to Happiness

1. Right Understanding (*samyag drishti* ~ sometimes translated as “right view”) means to have confidence that others who have embraced the Four Noble Truths and have engaged in the practice of the eight elements have thereby transformed their suffering into well-being. “Right Understanding” is the foundation of the other seven practices. Those who have undertaken to accomplish right understanding have often been said to have “entered the stream.”

2. Right Thinking (*samyak samkappa* ~ sometimes translated as “right thought”) Right thinking means to dwell in the present moment without allowing past reactions to control our perception of the world as it is. Our reactions to current events are often colored by baggage from the past. By abandoning negative tendencies and by nurturing right thought we learn to prevent harmful reactions from controlling our current responses. Learning how to transform our thoughts leads to a transformed mind, which leads to transformed action, which ultimately leads to a transformed world. In one of the most revered teachings of the Buddha, the *Dhammapada*, the following thoughts on thinking are expressed:

“All that we are is the result of what we have thought; it is founded on our thought; it is made up of our thoughts. If a person speaks or acts with a pure thought, happiness follows like a shadow that never leaves. She abused me, he beat me, she defeated me, he robbed me; in those who do not harbor such thoughts, hatred will cease. For hatred is not overcome by hatred, hatred is overcome by love. This is an ancient rule.”⁷ - From the *Khudakka Nikaya Sutra*

3. Right Speaking (*samyag vaca* ~ sometimes translated as “right speech”) The Buddha said, according to the *Samyutta Nikaya* sutra: “Abandoning false speech...he speaks the truth, holds to the truth, is firm, reliable, no deceiver of the world...Abandoning divisive speech...What he has heard here he does not tell there to break those people apart from these people here. Thus, reconciling those who have broken apart or cementing those who are united, he loves concord, delights in concord, enjoys concord, speaks things that create concord. Abandoning abusive speech...he speaks words that are soothing to the ear, that are affectionate, that go to the heart, which are polite, appealing and pleasing to people at large.”

4. Right Acting (*samyak karmanta* ~ sometimes translated as “right action”) means to follow the principle of non-exploitation of oneself and others by seeking to live in such a way that our physical actions bring no harm and are peaceful, benevolent, compassionate and pure.

5. Right Working (*samyag ajiva* ~ sometimes translated as “right livelihood”) means to choose an occupation that is based on the ethical principles of love, compassion, and non-exploitation: to embrace a living that entails no harmful consequences.

6. Right Persevering (*samak pradhana* ~ sometimes translated as “right effort”) One way to explain the practice of perseverance is to follow the tradition of many Buddhist writers and compare our efforts to that of tending a garden. Successful gardening has always required persistence.

Weather, soil fertility, the weeding of unwanted plants and the encouragement of desirable ones, all contribute to a successful harvest. Tending the garden of consciousness requires learning which strategies are successful and which are not. By skillfully nurturing the seeds of positive mental formations and discouraging the growth of harmful seeds, a successful gardener of consciousness transforms suffering into well-being. To be successful, we must tend our mental garden with a mind of perseverance and a heart of loving-kindness.

7. Right Remembering (*samyak smriti* ~ sometimes translated as “right mindfulness”) The practice of “remembering,” in the sense used here, means remembering to return our attention to the present, after having been distracted by extraneous thoughts. Learning to refocus our attention on the present is the key to success in the other seven practices leading to happiness.

8. Right Meditating (*samyak samadhi* ~ sometimes translated as “right concentration”) Practicing meditation helps develop the skill to return mental focus to the present, thereby curtailing the activity of a cluttered and distracted mind. Meditation practice enables one to see the nature of reality as it is. This resulting clarity of vision nurtures a compassionate loving-kindness toward all. By raising our consciousness we are also raising the consciousness of all beings.



The essence of the Buddha's Awakening was to realize the relevance of the impermanent nature of all phenomena, thereby correctly seeing the true nature of life. Having experienced this "Awakening," he spent the rest of his long-life teaching others a practice designed to transform suffering into well-being and happiness.

The "Flower Garland Sutra" (*avatamsaka sutra*), presents, what many believe to be, one of the most beautiful expressions of the Buddha's teachings about the true nature of life. By ending with this excerpt, the authors wish to give the Buddha the "last say."

"Everything in the universe comes into being as a result of the union of certain causes and conditions. Likewise, all things pass away as these causes and conditions change and cease to exist. Suffering also has certain causes and conditions; suffering also passes away as these causes and conditions change and cease to exist. Rains may come and go; winds may blow, flowers bloom and wilt, green leaves turn to rainbow colors to then be blown away: all of these changes are due to the changing of causes and conditions. Humans are born through the causes and conditions of parents: food develops the body, community develops the spirit. Accordingly, both the body and the spirit change as causes and conditions change. Everything in this universe is enmeshed together like the lines and ties of a fisher's net. To think that any part can stand alone is as foolish as it is to think that one small knot in a fisher's net can catch a fish. Not a single flower blooms, nor does a leaf fall, independent of causes and conditions. All things in the universe are interdependent in this ocean of constant change; this is the one thing that does not change.⁸

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Prayer of the Four Immeasurables

“May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness
May all beings be free from suffering and the causes of suffering
May all beings never be separated from the supreme joy that is beyond all sorrow
May all beings abide in equanimity, free from bias, attachment, and aversion”



Notes and References

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dukkha>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/14/world/middleeast/robert-jeffress-embassy-jeru>

³ RSV Bible Romans 5:3-5

⁴ RSV Bible Job 1:1

⁵ RSV Bible Ecclesiastes 1:2 See a discussion of the translation in Hastings, Dictionary of the Bible pages 957-958 NY, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909. "Vanity is the most frequent tr of *hebbel* 'breath' or 'vapour.' The literal meaning can be seen used in Isaiah 57:13. The word naturally became an image of, what is transitory; in Psalms 144:4 man is said to be like a breath. It connotes what is fleeting, unsatisfying."

⁶ Words in italic are Sanskrit.

⁷ <http://www.karidasangha.net/Recitations.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.karidasangha.net/Recitations.pdf>