

Encountering Suffering



Encountering Suffering in Buddhism

The Buddha said, “All I teach is suffering and the end of suffering.” Suffering was the Buddha’s first teaching

From “Buddha’s Four Noble Truths” The Buddha’s first teaching was on the Four Noble Truths. They are the noble truths of suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the path to the cessation of suffering.”

According to Buddhism, we living beings are trapped in the cycle of existence known as samsara. In samsara, we wander aimlessly and experience unbearable suffering—day and night, year after year, life after life—because of the tight grip of our grasping at self. In order to heal this disease-like condition, first we have to find its cause, and then we apply the medicine-like path of training to restore our original good health, which is enlightenment. We all experience suffering.

The Buddha said, “All I teach is suffering and the end of suffering.” Suffering in his teaching does not necessarily mean grave physical pain, but rather the mental suffering we undergo when our tendency to hold onto pleasure encounters the fleeting nature of life, and our

experiences become unsatisfying and ungovernable. Suffering comes from our experience of impermanence. We suffer because we are projecting the myth of permanence upon a situation that is actually conditioned, selfless, and constantly changing. Everything is interrelated and interdependent. There is nothing substantial and separate that we can lean upon. Samsara, “the cycle of suffering,” is a direct result of our desire for permanence.

In contemplating impermanence, we can see samsara for what it is. Its conditioned quality produces an unstable environment. Our response to that instability is grasping and the solidification of a “self.” The result is suffering, because we are relating to appearances as if they were independent and permanent, when in fact they are exactly the opposite. The list of suffering follows; faint unsettledness, irritation, impatience, annoyance, frustration, disappointment, dissatisfaction, aggravation, tension, stress, anxiety, vexation, pain, desperation, sorrow, sadness, suffering, misery, agony and anguish.

Of course, you may add to this list; there is virtually no end to it. It is obvious that each of these qualities involves some degree of unease, so “unease” is how I translate the term for general usage.

There are three kinds of suffering

The Buddha identified three kinds of suffering: 1) Suffering caused by **physical discomfort**, from the minor pain of stubbing a toe, hunger, and lack of sleep, to the agony of chronic disease. 2) Suffering caused by **emotional discomfort** that arises when you become frustrated that things don't go your way, or upset about life's injustices, or worried about money or meeting others' expectations. 3) Suffering caused by the fact that life is constantly **changing**. Doesn't it often seem as though the moment you have found happiness in life, it disappears almost at once? ... In truth, no moment is reliable because the next moment is

always coming along fast on its heels. It is like a constant bombardment of change undermining every state of happiness. The mind never finds a place to sit back and enjoy life without fear... Furthermore, every day, even during the pleasant moments, do you not experience an underlying unease about the future? This worry and anxiety is a manifestation of the third type of suffering the Buddha identified—life's inherent unsatisfactoriness due to its intrinsic instability.

Impermanence is not the cause of suffering

We may discover, as the Buddha tells us, that the lack of substantiality or permanence in all that surrounds us gives rise to unhappiness and pain. This does not mean, however, that the experience of impermanence or non-substantiality is itself suffering or the direct cause of suffering. We misconstrue the Buddha's message if we think it is the fact that all things are impermanent or non-substantial or without a solid self that generates suffering. These basic facts are not the truth of the origin of suffering.

The simple teaching of the first noble truth, the truth of suffering, may be the most difficult to understand and accept. We keep thinking that if we just fix this or fix that, tweak here or there, we can avoid it. We think that if we were smarter, prettier, wealthier, more powerful, living somewhere else, younger, older, male, female, with different parents—you name it—things would be different. But things are not different; they are as bad as they seem! Since it is unrealistic to hope for a stress-free life, and that would not be all that good in any case, it makes more sense to learn how to deal with the stresses that inevitably arise.

The truth of suffering is not a doomsday prediction. It is not expressing an inevitable destiny. On the contrary, it alerts us to the fact that we are not being aware of what we really are.

Whenever there is pain of any kind—the pain of aggression, grieving, loss, irritation, resentment, jealousy, indigestion, physical pain—if you really look into that, you can find out for yourself that behind the pain there is always something we are attached to. There is always something we're holding on to.

Encountering Suffering in Christianity

Bible Verses About Suffering

1 Peter 5:10 - But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle [you].

Romans 8:18 - For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time [are] not worthy [to be compared] with the glory which shall be revealed in

2 Timothy 3:12 - Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.

All Christians suffer. Either you have, you are, or you will — “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

But just because we experience suffering as we await the redemption of our bodies, it doesn't mean that our suffering is random or without purpose. And neither does it mean that Scripture doesn't tell us how to think about our suffering now.

The following are important biblical truths about suffering:

1. **Suffering is multifaceted.** Suffering has many faces. The Bible doesn't whitewash our experience of suffering by saying that it's all of one stripe. Rather, it recognizes the multifaceted ways that suffering can come upon us. The apostle Paul wrote, “We are afflicted in every way,

but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Corinthians 4:8–9).

In these two verses, Paul lists several types of suffering — mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual. Each of these are different ways that we can suffer, and when suffering comes, often several of these types of suffering are involved.

2. **Suffering happens in community.** Christians still suffer as we wait for Jesus to return, but none of our suffering is random or without purpose. The church is not meant to be a loosely bound association of functional Lone Rangers. Paul confronts that type of thinking when he

3. **Suffering equips us for ministry.** Firsthand experience in suffering is essential in equipping us for ministry. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 1:4 that God “comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”

4. **Suffering is a battleground.** Wherever there is suffering, there is a battle — a battle for your soul. The book of Job shows us there can be two ways to respond to suffering: one that curses God because of suffering and one that praises God, even in the midst of suffering (Job 2:9–10).

5. **Suffering prepares us for more glory.** God says a lot about suffering in Scripture so that you know where to look when the pain comes to you. One of the counterintuitive truths about suffering is that it prepares Christians for more glory. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:17–18, “This light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient,

but the things that are unseen are eternal.” 0These verses are like sandpaper on our modern sentiments about suffering. We naturally try to avoid suffering at all costs. But God brings suffering in our lives for the sake of our eternal joy — yes, even glory.

Encountering Suffering in Confucianism

According to some interpretations of Confucianism, suffering and evil are inevitable in human life, and can promote learning and growth. A mistake is not a "sin," but an opportunity to learn and do better next time. Empathy for the suffering of others also provides motivation to grow morally, but not all humans are capable of empathy. The most influential Confucian reflections on suffering and the problem of evil come from Mengzi and those who sustained Mengzi's tradition, such as Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming.