

Dukkha¹

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

"I teach one thing: Suffering and its end." *The Buddha*

Today we are continuing an exploration of the four noble truths of the Buddhist tradition. And we ask, how might the Buddhist tradition help us with the problem of suffering?

Reading:

Prayer for Entering the Book of Sorrow²

...May great courage accompany those willing to cross the River of Sorrow

May all who read these words be freed from the bondage of fear and denial.

May our eyes remain open even in the face of tragedy.

May we not become disheartened.

May we find in the dissolution of our apathy and denial, the cup of the broken heart.

May we discover the gift of the fire burning in the inner chamber of our being--

burning great and bright enough to transform any poison.

May we offer the power of our sorrow to the service of something greater than ourselves.

May our guilt not rise up to form yet another defensive wall.

May the suffering purify and not paralyze us.

May we endure; may sorrow bond us and not separate us.

May we realize the greatness of our sorrow and not run from its touch or its flame.

May clarity be our ally and wisdom our support.

May our wrath be cleansing, cutting through the confusion of denial and greed.

May we not be afraid to see or speak our truth.

May the bleakness of the wasteland be dispelled.

May the soul's journey be revealed and the true hunger fed.

May we be forgiven for what we have forgotten

and blessed with the remembrance of who we really are.

Sermon

Siddhartha Gautama, the man who became the Buddha, was the son of a nobleman in ancient India in the fourth century before the Christian Era. Everything was going well in his life. He was brought up in luxury, married to a wife, who bore a son; he had the future of a nobleman. But he grew curious about the world outside the palace. One day, he asked to be taken out for a ride, and during that excursion he saw a strange sight. He saw someone who was very very old. On another trip, he saw a person who was ill. On a third trip, he saw a dead body. Suddenly he was aware that suffering existed in the world. On the next trip, he saw a holy man begging. Siddhartha left his life of luxury to seek the meaning of life, to attempt to deal with the problem of death, of old age, of illness, the problem of suffering.

American culture has a hard time with the problem of suffering. It fosters a certain can-do attitude, if something is broken, we fix it. That attitude sometimes has been very helpful. But when we are faced with suffering that we can't fix, we often come up short.

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² From *The Box: Remembering the Gift*, (The Terma Company, 1992)

I have been thinking about suffering the past few weeks, especially when I visited my parents in West Virginia. As many of you know, my 86 year old father fell in December. He had a compression fracture of a vertebra, and was experiencing a lot of back pain. After a stroke two and a half years ago, his health and mental clarity had declined, but he had been able to live at home with my mom, with some support. Now, that is no longer possible. After a failed attempt at Rehab, he has ended up in a nursing home.

While I was there, I visited my dad each day, sometimes with my mother and sometimes alone. For the first few days, it was very hard to understand him when he spoke. We were able to ask for a change in his medication, and during the last couple days he was easier to understand. But there is not a whole lot we can do to ease his suffering. He cannot walk, so must wait for nurses or aides to transfer from bed to chair or to bed again. He often needs help to eat. He gets frustrated at not being able to get up to go to the bathroom. Some of the aides seemed very knowledgeable and helpful. Others did not. He had a back brace, but it wasn't always well positioned, and he wasn't always well positioned for someone with back pain.

It is not what I would wish for my father. It is incredibly difficult to watch someone we love suffer. I noticed that when I posted something about my dad on my personal Facebook wall, many people responded with ideas to try to fix things. We just can't help it. Our very kindness and compassion lead us to want to ease suffering, to want to fix it. And sometimes we can help. But sometimes we can't. We don't have many resources for dealing with suffering that we can't fix.

While I was in West Virginia, all of us witnessed the first week of the new administration in Washington. This was another kind of suffering. I watched with millions of others while executive orders were published that put a ban on immigrants and refugees from seven predominantly Muslim countries. I watched as cabinet members were confirmed who were the antithesis of the central purpose of the agencies they would be leading. I watched as the first steps were taken to dismantle health care coverage for millions of Americans. I watched as an executive order was signed to ignore the concerns of the Standing Rock Sioux and proceed with the Dakota Access Pipeline.

As Americans, we are learning about ways to respond to some of these problems. There were federal judges who issued stays of some orders, and lawyers who filed lawsuits, and people who marched and rallied. But we know that what is happening in Washington is already causing suffering to so many people, and will continue to do so. Once again, I can't fix the suffering of people detained at airports or caught in bureaucratic nightmares after trying to get a visa to be united with family members. I can't fix the suffering that is happening as indigenous rights are trampled and oil company profits are held above the future for our children.

According to tradition, Siddhartha Gautama tried to find the meaning of life first of all by embracing the path of asceticism. He joined the monks who fasted and begged on the streets and denied all the pleasures of the body. But he couldn't find the answers he needed through that path. Then he sat beneath a fig tree and meditated for 49 days, until he was enlightened, or as he said, woke up. Buddha means one who is awake. The Four Noble Truths are understood to be his first teaching, and form the basis of all Buddhist traditions.

The short version of these four noble truths is this:
One: Life is suffering.

Two: The origin of suffering is attachment

Three: The cessation of suffering is through letting go of attachment

Four: The way to do this is through the 8 fold path.

People have spent lifetimes learning to understand these truths, so I do not expect to provide real clarity about the four noble truths during a twenty minute sermon. But I will offer some reflections that have filled my heart, asking if there is something we might draw from the Buddhist tradition that could be a help to us in our relationship with suffering that we cannot fix.

The first noble truth is that “life is suffering.” But as in all translation, something gets lost. The word translated as “suffering” is Dukkha. “Dukkha” can also be translated as pain, dissatisfaction, sorrow, anguish, or frustration. Noah Rasheta, a secular Buddhist describes it in this way, “In life, there is suffering.”³ At any moment, we may encounter difficulties, interruptions, illness, loss. The first step is to understand that these are a normal part of life.

Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron writes: “The first noble truth of the Buddha is that when we feel suffering, it doesn't mean that something is wrong. What a relief. Finally somebody told the truth. Suffering is part of life and we don't have to feel it's happening because we personally made the wrong move.”⁴

Dukkha includes three types of suffering. The first is easiest to understand—suffering as unpleasant or painful experiences, whether physical, emotional or mental. My dad's back pain. My emotional pain to see him suffer. The second type of Dukkha is a bit more complex—it includes “anything that is not permanent, that is subject to change... Thus, happiness is dukkha, because it is not permanent. Great success, which fades with the passing of time, is dukkha.”⁵ Nothing lasts forever.

Buddhist writer, Toni Bernhard, helped me to better comprehend the third form of Dukkha. She writes that it “arises when we take that step beyond simple aversion to an unpleasant physical or mental experience and engage in stressful mental activity, such as concocting “shoulds” and “shouldn'ts,” judgments, and anxiety-filled thoughts and questions.”⁶

The second noble truth is that the cause of Dukkha is attachment, or craving. Most basically, this is our craving for life to be other than it is. Bernhard writes,

In his Second Noble Truth, the Buddha said that the origin of dukkha – the dissatisfaction with the circumstances of our lives – is tanha, or thirst. I like to translate tanha as craving or longing, as this refers to a self-focused desire to get something for ourselves...

I think of tanha as the constantly recurring experience of “want” and “don't want” in my life. I want (crave) pleasant experiences (mental and physical); I don't want (am averse to) unpleasant ones. The Buddha wasn't mincing words when he said: “Dukkha is (1) not getting what you want and (2) getting what you don't want.” And so, dissatisfaction and craving go hand in hand. No dukkha, no tanha. No tanha, no dukkha.⁷

³ <https://soundcloud.com/secularbuddhism/the-nature-of-human-suffering>

⁴ Pema Chodron, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*, (Boston: Shambala, 2000) p. 40.

⁵ Barbara O'Brien at <http://buddhism.about.com/od/thefournobletruths/a/dukkhaexplain.htm>

⁶ <https://www.lionsroar.com/deep-dukkha-part-2-the-three-kinds-of-suffering/>

⁷ <https://www.lionsroar.com/deep-dukkha-part-2-the-three-kinds-of-suffering/>

Bernhard goes further to say that painful experiences in themselves aren't Dukkha, it is our craving for them to not exist that makes them Dukkha. Life is impermanent, and includes both painful and pleasant experiences.

The third noble truth is that we can alleviate suffering by letting go of our craving for life to be other than it is. This truth is paradoxical—how can it be that the way to alleviate suffering is to accept that suffering is part of life? But letting go frees us from the constant attempt to get for ourselves things we want, and to avoid things we don't want. It lets us open our hearts to the experience of life as it is.

The fourth Noble Truth describes the path that enables us to let go of our craving for life to be other than it is. I am thinking that the cultures in which Buddhism was formed must like numbers, because the fourth Noble Truth says that to get free we must follow the Eight-fold path. There are many different forms of Buddhism, and many different interpretations of the Eight-fold path. Today I want to include just one practice within that path, the practice of mindfulness.

According to Rick Hanson, “Mindfulness is simply a continuous, non-judgmental, accepting awareness of your inner and outer world - especially your inner one: the flow of experience. It is a very grounded awareness, not some kind of lofty mystical state.”⁸ Mindfulness lets us simply experience the sadness, the joy, the craving, the aversion, whatever pleasures or discomforts that arise. We accept our experiences but do not cling to them, letting them wash through us. It is similar to when we are breathing in and out: the air flows into our bodies and out again.

We don't try to figure it all out, or make a story about it, or try to find the meaning of it. Rather, mindfulness helps us to open our heart to the experience of life as it is, in this moment. And it also opens our mind to notice the ways that we do crave for life to be different than it is, and those cravings can pass through us just as other experiences pass through us.

Sometimes when we first hear about mindfulness, or we hear that we should let go of the craving for life to be other than it is, we may think that Buddhism encourages a kind of fatalism, a passive acceptance of how things are. I suppose this might be true in some contexts—but, truly, the Buddhists I have encountered are fully engaged with compassionate activism. For example, for someone like Joanna Macy, a Buddhist ecological activist, the practice of mindfulness becomes the well of compassion for taking action in the world. When we can feel our grief for the world, we are less likely to shut down, to pursue activities that merely distract us from the pain we encounter, such as addictions and other activities whose purpose is to numb our pain.

To come back to our topic from last week, Buddhism teaches the interdependence of all that exists. So our pleasure and pain are like waves arising from the ocean of existence, and all states and all beings have that temporary quality. As we become more aware and accepting of the temporal nature of all, we grow in compassion, we grow in our capacity to experience the larger whole, the ocean from which the waves arise. When we have compassion for ourselves and for all other beings, we are better able to ride the waves as it were, like a surfer might ride the waves.

⁸ <http://www.wisebrain.org/RightMindfulness2.pdf>

There is a phrase being used among young African American activists about what is needed for a time like this—we need to “stay woke.” Mindfulness is a way of staying woke through the difficult experiences and the pleasant experiences, keeping our heart open. Coming back to my example of the suffering of my dad in the nursing home, mindfulness enables me to stay connected to him, whether that is during a visit in which I can do nothing but sit with him in his discomfort, or during times when I am far away, through keeping him in my heart. Mindfulness helps me not to disconnect in an attempt to avoid pain.

In the face of the suffering in our nation, mindfulness likewise enables us to stay connected, when we are tempted to shut down, go into denial, or escape into distraction. Mindfulness is a powerful tool for leaning into the suffering, honoring our grief for the world, without becoming immobilized by it. I want to share with you a mindfulness practice created by Joanna Macy for honoring our grief for the world.⁹

Meditation: Breathing Through

Joanna Macy

I invite you to sit comfortably,
close your eyes, if you wish, or gaze softly at the candle light.
Focus your attention on your breathing.
You don't have to breathe in any particular way.
Just watch your breathing as it happens, in and out.
Note the sensations of the air in your nostrils or lips, in your chest or abdomen.
Stay passive and alert, like a cat by a mouse hole...

As you watch the breath, notice that it happens by itself, without your will.
You don't have to decide each time to inhale and exhale.
It is as if you are being breathed, as if life is breathing you.
Just as everyone in this room is being breathed by life,
everyone in this city, in this planet is being breathed by life,
all sustained in a vast, living breathing web...

Now, imagine your breath as a stream or ribbon of air.
See it flowing up through your nose, down through your windpipe and into your lungs.
From your lungs, imagine it going through your heart.
Picture it flowing through your heart and out, to reconnect with the larger web of life.
Let this ribbon of air, as it passes through you and through your heart,
appear as one loop within that vast web, connecting you with it...

Now, as you continue breathing,
I invite you to open your awareness to the suffering that is present in the world.
Drop for now all defenses and open to your knowledge of that suffering.
Let it come as concretely as you can...

Images of your fellow beings in pain and need, in fear or isolation,
in prisons, detained at airports, in refugee camps, on the streets...
No need to strain for these images;

⁹ Slightly adapted, from Joanna Macy & Molly Brown, *The Work that Reconnects*, p. 276-8.

they are present to you by virtue of our interbeing.
Relax and just let them surface...
the vast and countless hardships of our fellow humans,
and of our animal brothers and sisters as well,
as they swim the seas and fly the air of this planet.

Breathe in these images of hardship and pain
as if they were small granules of sand on the stream of air,
or tiny pebbles on that ribbon of breath,
flowing up through your nose, down through your trachea and lungs
and out again through your heart, into the world's interconnected net.
You are asked to do nothing in this moment, but let them pass through your heart.

Be sure that the stream flows through and out again;
don't hang on to the pain...
Surrender it for now to the healing resources of life's vast web...

With Shantideva, the Buddhist saint, we can say,
“Let all sorrows ripen in me.”
We help them ripen by passing them through our hearts
making good rich compost out of all that grief
enhancing our larger, collective knowing...

If no images or feelings arise and there is only blankness, gray and numb,
breath that through also...
That numbness is a real part of our world...

And if what surfaces is not the pain of other beings,
so much as your own personal suffering, breathe that through too.
Your own anguish is an integral part of the grief of our world, and arises with it...

Should you feel an ache in the chest, a pressure in the rib cage,
as if the heart would break, that is all right.
Your heart is not an object that can break...
But if it were, they say the heart that breaks open can hold the whole universe.
Your heart is that large. Trust it.
Let us keep breathing together in silence
letting the ribbon of air flow into our lungs
and out through our heart into the web of life.

Conclusion (ring a bell...)

When Zen Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh was asked, “What do we most need to do to save our world?” he replied, “What we most need to do is hear within ourselves the sounds of the Earth crying.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Quoted in Joanna Macy & Molly Brown, *Coming Back to Life*, (New Society Publishers, 2014) p. 105-6.

Our pain for the world can be our deepest ally in the work of healing our nation and our planet. This is because our grief brings us evidence of our interconnection with all beings. Our grief for the world springs from our love and connectedness. We grieve because the fabric of our connection has been torn. And what the earth most needs are human beings who fully experience their interconnection with the vast web of life. When we know in our bones that sense of interconnection, we will have the wisdom and compassion and strength to go forward.

And paradoxically, when we fully experience our interconnection, including the grief it brings, we can also find a sense of home, a sense of deep equanimity, a sense of wonder.

Closing Words:

I invite you to rise now, and join hands for our closing words.

Notice the warmth of the hand that is holding yours.

This hand is flowing with the blood of a beating heart, a heart just like your own.

This hand has known joy and clapped with delight at the songs of birds.

This hand has known sorrow, and also comforted those who were suffering.

This hand belongs to a person living in the same earth time
and earth space as you are living,

together you are part of one breathing web of life.

Take a moment of silent gratitude for this hand you are holding in your own.

Blessed be.

As we go forward with our day today,

let us be mindful to be gentle with our hearts and the hearts of those around us.

As we extinguish the flame of this chalice,

let each of us carry its light into every day of our lives.

I invite you to be seated now for our closing music.

Closing Music: Finding Wonderland Jack Murphy & Frank Wildhorn