

Reflections on Suffering and Happiness

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“Reflections” is an occasional section in Interreligious Insight. Pieces draw on various traditions to unfold an important theme in spirituality, philosophy, or interreligious work. We hope that readers will make their own fruitful connections for dialogue and engagement. This issue offers Reflections on Suffering and Happiness from the Buddhist and Christian perspective



The Centered Wheel JIM KENNEY

Setting off in a cart with an off-center wheel guarantees an uncomfortable journey. Travelling on what should be a smooth path becomes a jolting, uncomfortable experience. It's unsatisfying, to be sure; but one might hesitate to speak of "suffering" in describing the trip. That's why – given that one of the most common metaphors encountered in Buddhist commentary on the human experience of life's unsatisfactoriness is the uncentered wheel – I have always resisted the translation of the Buddhist term *duhkha* (Sanskrit) or *dukkha* (Pali) as "suffering".

Those who have only a casual acquaintance with Buddhist thought often assume that it offers the most pessimistic of worldviews, grounded in the assumption that "life is nothing but misery". Actually, Buddhist teaching affirms the opposite. Life's persistent unsatisfactoriness and, yes, the fact that we humans do inevitably suffer are captured in the first pronouncement of the Buddha. He immediately proceeds, however, from the "bad news" to the very good news that human destiny is defined not by misery but by fulfillment.

In his first sermon following his enlightenment, given to disciples in the Deer Park at Sarnath, Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, set out the Four Noble Truths that disclose the way to the attainment of life's purpose, enlightenment. The Truths are observations on the nature of sentient existence, each one a dependent variation on the First – the

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central existential fact that ordinary life is dukkha, somehow off-center, disquieting, and ultimately unsatisfactory.

The Second Truth proclaims that dukkha has a source: it arises from the tendency to cling to things, experiences, and conditions that are impermanent and inherently unrewarding. Our grasping is rooted in our ignorance. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama puts it, “Ignorance dispatches the desires in foolish directions indeed!” The Second Truth, however, contains the germ of Buddhism’s message of transformation – the seed thought of enlightenment. If ignorance or “non-seeing” (avidya) is the root of desire and attachment, those conditions are therefore open to amelioration; they are curable. The Third and Fourth Noble Truths affirm in turn that dukkha – arising from human habituation to ignorant cravings, delusions, and hatreds – has a natural cessation in the cultivation of wisdom (the end of ignorance) and compassion (the end of selfishness).

The Dalai Lama says it clearly. The purpose of existence is happiness and its true source is compassion. “Compassion stems from wisdom.... And compassion automatically brings happiness and calmness.” We find countless beautiful examples of the healing and joyful power of compassion in the stories of the bodhisattvas who emerge as the central mythic figures in the Mahayana Buddhism of China, Tibet, Korea, and Japan. The bodhisattva is a being on the path to enlightenment, but one concerned with the enlightenment of others rather than his or her own. The bodhisattva embodies the wisdom (prajña) that is synergetic with compassion (karuna). The non-attachment that the bodhisattva cultivates finds expression in the truest form of happiness: loving-kindness in service to others. And, as the Buddha often taught, the path to compassion is testable. It is (in the Pali language of early Buddhist scriptures) *ehpassika*, a “come-and-see thing”.



Suffering and Happiness in Judaism

HERBERT BRONSTEIN

The issue of suffering is already engaged in Biblical texts (Amos and Isaiah 1-39) which scholars tell us are among the earliest in Hebrew scripture (late 9th and 8th centuries BCE). These outcries against the suffering of the poor and the powerless, the widow, orphan and stranger, breaches of the sacred covenant between God and the people Israel, arise according to prophetic teaching from the greed and ruthlessness of the powerful sectors of the community including, at that time, priests, large land holders, nobility and even, at times, the king. Scripture contains, particularly in the book of Exodus and Deuteronomy repeated statutes requiring charitable works

to protect the needy from heedlessness and cruelty and from the suffering that arises as well from humiliation and from unfair treatment in courts of law.

The alleviation of suffering is required throughout the vast tapestry of Judaic religious teachings, ancient and modern, in numerous modes of charitable generosity, especially at times of one's own personal happiness and even at times at one's own sorrow and loss. Suffering is extended to animals as well; the ox should not be muzzled while treading out the grain, nor for example, animals of different strengths yoked together in their work. The sabbatical and jubilee years prevent the alienation of the indebted from their land and intergenerational penury.

Further, there is an ancient doctrine referred to in Jewish teaching called Tzaar Baalei Chayyim which means the inevitable suffering endured by all living beings. Since it is the fate of everyone to endure some suffering in life, it is dreadful to add anything to that suffering by meanness or even heedlessness. On the contrary, our covenant relationship with God requires daily acts of unconditional deeds of loving kindness to others (g'milut chasadim).

An ancient sage two millennium ago noted that it is "not within our capabilities to understand or justify the well-being of the wicked while good, even saintly people, at times suffer terribly." Nevertheless, we can all respond to suffering.

And this brings us to Happiness. Judaism speaks about the simcha, the happiness of doing a good deed. The English word "Happiness" bears within its origin and nuance the idea of something that "happens" to us from the outside as in the word "happenstance". While there are, from time-to-time, happy circumstances which do occur from the outside, nevertheless according to Judaic tradition, happiness is emphasized as something that emanates from within.

First of all it is an attitude that can cultivate; for example, an affirmative attitude towards life. Rabbi Meir two thousand years ago said that we have the opportunity to say at least one hundred blessings of praise every day: for example, on seeing a beautiful flower, or bird, or rainbow or a beautiful lake, or seeing an old friend after a long period of time, or hearing a beautiful teaching, or even just waking up in the morning and opening our eyes and standing up and performing our natural bodily functions (in this case, words of praise for the awesome complexity of our physiologies that enable us to function and in fact to praise God). Such conscientious utterances of praise imbue us with affirmative attitude towards life as if to say: "yes there is beauty", "yes there is truth", "yes there is meaning in life!"

Happiness also derives from attaching one's energies, conscientiousness and purposeful acts to some cause or purpose outside of the narrow pursuit of our own self interest or success. This is defined as service of the Highest, of God.

In Jewishness all the sacred celebrations such as the party at the birth of a child or the celebration of a Bar Mitzvah and above all a wedding which unite family, friends, community, charitable acts for good causes, singing, feasting, singing and dancing, all of these are called "Simchas; Happinesses".



Suffering Leading to Joy

RON MILLER

Most religions premise something of ultimate importance going on in the universe and a way of being connected with that transcendent reality. For Christians,

what is ultimately important is called God and the person of Jesus Christ is the way to relate to God. As a connecting link, Jesus both reveals the ultimacy of the divine and offers a way to participate in that transcendent mystery. Christians differ in many ways but most would agree to the statement that Jesus Christ most reveals God to them and at the same time most provides a way of relating to that same God.

What then is suffering? For Christians, suffering is defined in terms of Jesus' life experiences. In Mark's gospel, Jesus warns his disciples that he must "undergo great suffering..." (Mark 8:31). In Matthew's gospel, shortly before his arrest, Jesus tells his disciples "I am deeply grieved" (Matthew 26:38). Withdrawing from his disciples to pray alone, Jesus, according to Luke's narrative "in his anguish prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground" (Luke 22:44). Certainly Jesus suffers from the torture preceding his death and from the pain of being nailed to the cross.

What do Christians make of this suffering of Jesus? Certainly it is unmerited. And yet, with equal certainty, it reveals to us the sacrificial dimension of love. Christians understand Jesus as the one who "became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8). Obedience means careful listening. Jesus is portrayed in the gospels as always listening carefully to God, even when that listening entailed suffering. Jesus did not seek this suffering. Anticipating the torturous death awaiting him, Jesus prayed, according to Mark's narrative: "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want" (Mark 14: 36).

The Christian response to suffering emerges from meditating on the mystery of Jesus' life and death. When we suffer, it is not necessarily because we have done something to deserve it, though sometimes that is indeed the case. Suffering is often a cup that we are asked to drink. It is part of listening carefully and loving fully. It is the cross that a disciple of Jesus is asked to take up

and carry (Mark 8:34). Like their model and mentor, Christians are asked to see their lives as bread that must be broken so that others may eat, wine that must be poured out so that others may drink. This is what is to be remembered whenever they gather to do what Jesus commanded them to do at his Last Supper.

No other answer is needed or expected. To be a Christian is to be another Christ. To be a Christian is to live and love as Jesus lived and loved. And Christian living and loving entail suffering, just as they also contain joy. And one of the New Testament letters attributed to Peter exhorts Christians to “rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed” (1 Peter 4:13). Joy, in this sense, does not contradict the reality of suffering. Any joy that tried to exist apart from suffering would be illusory. But for the Christian, joy trumps suffering, because God wins in the end. And when God’s glory is fully revealed in the individual and in all of creation, history culminates in an eternal shout of joy.