



Christian / Buddhist DIALOGUE



PART III "THE QUESTION OF SUFFERING"

Christian Comment

The Biblical warrant for suffering has its inception in the book of Genesis, the opening book of the Hebrew scriptures. In that story, the two original humans, Adam and Eve, sin in eating from the tree of knowledge. As punishment, we are told, in Genesis, chapter 3:

"To the woman he said,
I will make your pains in childbearing very severe;
with painful labor you will give birth to children.
Your desire will be for your husband,
and he will rule over you.

To Adam he said, Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, You must not eat from it,

"Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat food from it
all the days of your life.

It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.

By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food
until you return to the ground,
since from it you were taken;
for dust you are
and to dust you will return.

Throughout the stories of the Hebrew and Christian testaments are accounts of people who suffer, some from illnesses, some from persecution, some from what seems like sheer malice on the part of the Almighty. They respond to their suffering with varying degrees of resignation, anger, or grief. Job

is a figure of suffering whose legend remains to this day. People, some of whom no doubt have no idea the origin or details of the story, refer to people who have the patience of Job. The Israelites, wandering for forty years in the wilderness, responded with alternating bouts of whining, rebellion, and acceptance. The Psalms are filled with songs that include accounts of suffering, and the response of the Psalmists cover the gamut of human emotion. In the Christian testament, people suffering a variety of illnesses and troubles come to Jesus and the disciples for healing and wholeness.

And of course, the account of the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus, and his acceptance of this fate, provide a gripping example of suffering that many hold as an example of how we, as Christians, are called to respond to our own suffering. We hear people talk about 'the cross they bear', as if the suffering they are going through, whatever the burden is that they are carrying, is somehow sanctified in accordance with the example of Jesus.

There is a real difficulty when people look at the image of Jesus as the 'suffering servant' and decide that suffering is in itself somehow an okay thing. That suffering is somehow sanctified, if we just accept it as a part of life. This attitude has been, and continues to be, a part of the rationale for domestic abuse. It continues to play into the attitudes of those who ignore the very real needs of the millions of the world who are suffering in ways too horrific to imagine. There are some who quote Jesus by saying, the poor will be with us

always and use this as a reason for ignoring the cries of those in need.

For Christians who have looked more deeply into the message and ministry of Jesus, and who have seen beyond the surface of the stories concerning his life, death, and resurrection, understand that if we are going to claim his name, we must also claim his teaching that in all places and in all ways, we try to alleviate the suffering of others. God's desire for each and every one of us, is that we live lives of abundance. Not abundant stuff, but abundant opportunity, abundant love, and abundant relationships- with each other, with the world around them, and with Godself.

Buddhist Comment

The question of suffering as a universal human experience is one of the most important and common religious questions we have. For Buddhists, it is the question which initiated the Buddha's quest and set in motion our whole 2500 year tradition. It is one of the three central doctrinal issues defined by the Buddha in his first teaching. He proposed that human life is characterized by three stains - *dukkha*, *anicca* and *anatta*. These terms are usually translated as suffering, impermanence and no-self.

The historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, himself experienced and later articulated a teaching to address the apparent inescapability of four forms of human suffering - birth, sickness, aging and death. His doctrinal starting point for the Buddha Way is called The Four Noble Truths. This is Shakyamuni's attempt to establish a baseline description of the human dilemma and from which he could elucidate some kind of path of salvation. The four truths are:

1. All of human experience is characterised as suffering;
2. The origin of this suffering is the human tendency to desire, cling and attach;
3. There is a way to extricate ourselves from this predicament; and
4. That way is an eight-step process which

includes certain wisdom, ethical behaviour and practices.

Although suffering is the commonly used English term for *dukkha*, it is a richer term than that. One way we can understand it is as part of a commonly used pair of terms used in Indian philosophy to describe experience - *sukkha-dukkha*. The contrast of *su-/du-* in these words is an expression of that which pleases as opposed to that which dissatisfies. *Sukkha* is related to our word 'sugar', and has overtones of sweetness and pleasure. In contrast, *dukkha* implies that bitterness or sourness in our lives, that flavour of pain, frustration and uncontrollability which we associate with suffering.

The great Western Buddhist commentator and social theorist, David Loy, has introduced and established a new interpretation of the meaning of *dukkha* as "lack". He has written:

We experience this deep sense of lack as the feeling that 'there is something wrong with me'I'm not rich enough, not loved enough, not powerful enough ...in this way Buddhism shifts our focus from the terror of death to the anguish of a groundlessness here and now. The problem is not that we will die, but that we do not feel real now."

(*The Great Awakening*, Loy, p. 22)

So, for Buddhists, suffering/*dukkha*/lack defines human experience and, at the same time, defines the spiritual predicament. It is this which confronts us in each and every moment of our experience. This has lead early Westerners to label Buddhism as "pessimistic" and "life-denying". Nothing could be further from the truth. The teaching of the Buddhas is simply to point out to us the observable fact of our own impermanence, to challenge us to consider that as the starting point for a way of living and to provide a coherent path for relief.

From my own personal perspective, it has taken a very long time to come to appreciate the

distinction between *dukkha* as pain/sorrow and as lack. I long resisted and struggled with the idea of life as suffering. Life, as I experienced it was full of joy and pleasures, satisfactions and achievements. What has grown in me, at least I hope this is true, is an awareness and understanding that *dukkha* does not mean life is pain but rather that there is nothing within this ever-changing experience called life to which I can cling or rely with an expectation of it enduring. It has become my journey to experience spiritual relief in being a part of the unfolding drama, and being able to let go of the need to glue any of it into my own precious scrapbook.

Christian Reply

As a person new to the concepts of Buddhism, I find it helpful to reiterate what I have read from Rev. Innen, in hopes of clarifying my own thoughts, and also, to find out if I've understood his message clearly.

If I understand Innen correctly, Buddhist teachings indicate that for all people, suffering is the normative state, and that the purpose in life is to find a way to move beyond this suffering, or to alleviate suffering, in the world. There is a conflict between the desire to be a part of the world (Innen uses the words 'desire', 'cling', 'attach') and the need, or ideal, to stand apart from those drives, in order to transcend the suffering of the world. Innen describes some of the concepts in Buddhism: That which pleases, versus that which dissatisfies; the understanding of "lack"; a movement from the terror of death to the anguish of day-to-day groundlessness (citing *The Great Awakening*, Loy). Buddhism points out our own impermanence and encourages us to focus on a path for relief. Innen acknowledges the challenge in his own life, to come to an understanding that there is a difference between the concepts of 'pain/sorrow', and 'lack.' Ultimately, for Innen, there is a recognition that nothing in life, no matter how pleasant, is enduring. The teachings of Buddhism provide him a teaching, and a path,

for his own, and the world's relief.

In Christianity, we also have the teachings that tell us that those who wish to gain their life must deny their life. We are encouraged to quit worrying about heaven and hell, and deal with relationships right here and now. There is an echo of the Buddhist emphasis on worldly impermanence, balanced with the understanding that we're called to work to alleviate suffering in the world.

Buddhist Reply

I am pleased that Rev. Meg questions the proposition that suffering is somehow ennobling, that forbearance of life's pain and frustration generates some kind of future reward. I agree that re-framing suffering as a test which negates its very negativity is a dangerous message to send out, since it somehow ties the perpetrators of individual and large scale violence to some good consequences. Further, it bizarrely transforms the experience of suffering into something desirable, a source of pride. This, as she notes, challenges the popular interpretation of the suffering servant. I think it still remains to consider how this also challenges the notion that the suffering of Jesus accomplishes such a massive feat as washing away sin.

Through these conversations I am appreciating the emphasis Rev. Meg assigns to what I understand as the "social gospel". By that I mean the call for us to mirror the behaviour of Jesus in the service of others and to heed his call to act for social justice. This reminds me of the weakness in what I see as the New Agey Buddhism. This view suggests that Buddhist teaching and practice are solely about addressing individual suffering and liberation. This version emphasizes the attainment of some personal peace of mind as the goal of our tradition. Sadly this is often the more popular understanding. Returning to David Loy, he and many others represent what I see as a more faithful representation of the Buddha's teaching, namely that our spiritual goal is nothing less than the end

of the suffering of all beings. The oft-touted view that one must free oneself first seems nonsense to me. Given the Buddha's insistence on the interconnectedness of all beings, it seems like blindness to even imagine one could accomplish some individual spiritual freedom independent of the impact and consequence in the lives of all beings. This is one of the areas where I see a strong resonance between Jesus and Shakyamuni Buddha. They both connect religious life with dedicated service to the improvement in the lives of all beings.

This dialogue is between Reverends Innen Ray Parchelo, of the Red Maple Buddhist Congregation, Renfrew, Ontario and Meggin King, of the United Church of Pugwash, Nova Scotia.