

To Be or Not To Be

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I wrote and posted the Commentary below (Commentary #65) on October 28th, 2017. It was a response to what appeared to me at the time as a welling-up of formerly hidden and repressed suffering in American life. Now, more than five years later, that initial welling-up has become an ongoing flood of pain. While some people enjoy the fruits of success and privilege, the mood of the country as a whole is troubled and far from joyous. America may still be the land of milk and honey for a small percentage who still believe in the Dream, but it's become an increasingly unhappy place for a majority of Americans. I wonder if this Commentary might be more timely today than when it was originally posted.

Perhaps the most famous soliloquy in all of western literature is from William Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet (from Act III, Scene I)*. Hamlet's musings begin as follows:

*To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take Arms against a Sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them.*

Shakespeare refers here to difficulties in two ways, as "*the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune*," implying that the problems Hamlet speaks of are external and circumstantial, but also as "*a Sea of troubles*," which is broader, even more poetic, and might include our inward or emotional responses to suffering, not just their circumstantial origins. The Bard presents the dilemma as a binary either-or choice — surrender to suffering, or go to war against our travails. I understand how common that approach is among human beings. Who among us hasn't felt those as our only two options at one time or another? Still, I tend to consider that either-or choice a false dichotomy. In essence, either of those options could all-too-easily become a Faustian bargain that leads to no good.

In the Buddhist tradition, suffering is a natural and inevitable part of embodied Life in the material world. Organisms seek pleasure and avoid pain. Yes, perversities develop for some people where pleasure and pain exchange places, so that it "hurts so good," but that remains the exception rather than the rule. In the long run, pleasure-seeking and pain-avoidance run up against withering opposition from life's impermanence, unreliability, and perpetual change. Especially as the vitality of youth fades with the onset of old age, suffering becomes more and more a part of our everyday experience. Our health fails, and physical pain becomes our daily companion, unwanted but inevitable.

Another level of suffering exists right alongside physical pain, however. That second level occurs in our psyche's inner responses to pain, loss, grief, and death (or fear of death) through our inflamed mental and emotional reactions to life's many afflictions. When untrained, our minds often present such experiences to us in ways that don't merely acknowledge the troubles that beset us, but which "pile on," increasing our suffering. This can and sometimes does occur in ways that are deeper than the pain itself and which may continue long after the external cause of suffering stops or passes away. To some extent, that has to do with the biology of our brains, where experiences become routinized by habit, and also by the pressures of social conformity or groupthink, where our assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs are strongly influenced or even shaped by the various social worlds in which we participate.

The majority of humans are not merely sensitive to socialization, but ruled by it. If everyone around us experiences reality in a certain way, those ways tend to become seductive for us. We adopt and build them into our own neural wiring, whether or not we are aware of that or would otherwise choose it for ourselves.

This fact — that we are fundamentally social animals — is easy to overlook, especially in societies that embrace individualism as an ideal, such as ours does, but the social pressure to conform should never be discounted or overlooked as the immensely powerful force that it is for humans.

Western culture, and modern life in general, especially in technologically rich First World countries, places tremendous emphasis on pleasure and particularly on the fulfillment of fantasies. To protect such dreams (and to better sell them to us, since consumerism is based largely on such dreams), society has carefully removed as much suffering as possible from ordinary life. We haven't gotten rid of it, of course, but we've removed it from sight, making it invisible by keeping pain and decay mostly hidden from view. Those who are ill, old, or dying are frequently removed from our midst and placed into "facilities" — hospitals and nursing homes. Death is shadowy and antiseptic. Perhaps that's why people in poorer or more "primitive" cultures are more accepting of life's suffering. They experience it more often as part of their regular lives.

Buddhism's First Noble Truth — that Life inevitably involves suffering — may seem depressingly dark and pessimistic to many of us. It's much more matter of fact than that, but such a reaction is understandable. Although our media entertainment (movies, TV, and video games) is routinely filled with violence and extreme mayhem, in real life Americans remain largely sheltered from the harsh realities of actual human misery. We even hide the returning coffins of soldiers killed in foreign wars. Some of us are so shielded that we've come to regard real suffering as evidence of abnormality, of something gone horribly wrong, rather than as an utterly predictable occurrence within the natural scheme of life. Mass shootings, once so rare as to be utterly jarring to the senses, are now so frequent and commonplace in America that we are no longer shocked or even surprised by such seemingly random violence.

These days, no one who dares to venture into the public realm — schools, churches, grocery stores, nightclubs — is ever completely safe from the potentially fatal vulnerability of finding ourselves *"in the wrong place at the wrong time."*

Still, certain kinds of suffering can indeed be alleviated by taking action in real life. The physical suffering associated with hunger can be relieved by eating food. Sleep can restore us from exhaustion. Exercise can calm anxiety and improve our ability to handle stress. Other forms of material suffering, however, may be extremely difficult to eliminate. The social pain of dishonor or betrayal can warp the most buoyant spirit, while the emotional trauma of humiliation or rejection may damage even a loving heart. Suffering at the hands of others is notoriously complex and resistant to easy fixes or quick recovery. If we are held captive in a prison and tortured by our captors, no actual protection may be possible to end the torment.

In addition, psychological suffering is especially difficult to eliminate, since it is caused by our interior programming, much of which is beneath the level of our awareness. We may not even realize that such misery is in effect our own creation, mistakenly assuming that it is external or material suffering. Very often, we can't distinguish the psychological from the literal.

Since I was presented early on in my life with the radical idea held by numerous spiritual traditions that egoism is a destructive illusion, I've spent much of my life studying humility and compassion — learning about and striving to experience or integrate them. Not that I can claim to have achieved either as a permanent state in my life, but I don't question their validity or necessity. Even when I fail -- as I so often do — I continue to work at developing humility and compassion within myself.

Recently, however, I've been reminded that some people (perhaps even many people) regard both humility and compassion, along with similar qualities such as kindness and non-aggression, as personal failings — indications of "softness," impotence, or vulnerability. As if gentleness were just a kink in one's armor. That Ah-Ha took me aback, and I'm still trying to wrap my head around it. Admittedly, my attitudes are probably not a reflection of the middle of the bell curve in society. Despite my outlier status, I still ask myself: *Can it actually be true that some people consider strength to mean false pride, aggression, cruelty, and even hatred? Or that compassion should be regarded as a sign of weakness?* Apparently the answer is yes, many people do.

Buddhism holds that the causes of suffering are ignorance, attachment, and hatred. Ignorance in the Buddhist perspective doesn't mean lack of education in general, but rather a misunderstanding about the nature of the material world, specifically through unawareness of its impermanence and unreliability. Attachment is clinging to desires. It goes with ignorance in mistaking illusions for realities. Hatred is fairly obvious and implies aggression through blame. By disciplining the mind, some of the causes from which suffering arises can be minimized or removed. The addition of empathy and compassion further

reduce suffering by reminding us that everyone experiences anguish, that we are not alone in being singled out for bad treatment.

Buddhism doesn't promise a perfect life free from pain or difficulty. Those conditions are part of embodied life on earth and cannot be eliminated. But — if I've understood the teachings correctly — we can undergo considerable pain and difficulty yet still experience the love and joy at the root of consciousness that underlie all manifestations in the physical.

Suffering, however, has a different quality. Suffering isn't just pain, loss, grief, disappointment, or any of the other many unpleasant experiences in life. It is an immersion into torment that blunts our consciousness and blocks the experience of joy and love. While acceptance of life's pain and difficulty is necessary, since they are unavoidable, our working to reduce or eliminate suffering is profoundly worthwhile. The promise of Buddhism (and similar philosophies and spiritual traditions) is release from suffering through liberation and freedom from that ultimately deadening torment. It is not, however elimination of suffering. Some reduction of suffering is the most we can hope for.

So, to return to the quote from Hamlet with which I began this commentary, when confronted with the inevitable problems in life that come our way, we have more choices than the either-or of surrendering to suffering or going to war against it. We can study reality and learn how it works. We can discipline our own minds to eliminate the causes of personal suffering. We can increase our compassion, so as not to fall into the false belief that we suffer alone.

These kinds of inner work are not easy solutions or quick fixes. Buddhism avoids any judgments about how "far along" we are on our paths toward awakening or self-realization. This makes the work itself more challenging, since we tend to be programmed to "grade" ourselves, so as to measure our "progress."

That reminds me of a comment I heard Ram Dass say in a talk on the radio many decades ago: *"You work diligently to be able to say the name of God with a little grace and humility, and when you're able to do that for a few seconds, your ego walks up behind you, pats you on the back, and says, 'Pretty good!'"* Rim shot.

We work from where we are, not from where we think we should be. In reality, our work is right here with us, custom-tailored quite precisely to who and where we are in this moment. That work is pretty much all we can do, and, to be really honest, it's just about all we need to do. If we forget that, life will remind us.

And, just to make the point perfectly clear, I'm not pretending to be a spiritual teacher. First and foremost, I'm writing to myself. But this is also my attempt to share where I am, like a message in a bottle, tossed into the ocean: *"Here on my little island of life, joy and suffering exist as a balance, in proportions that shift and change. There is some joy and much suffering on my island. Wherever you are, I hope the balance between joy and suffering leans toward joy."*