

To Be or Not To Be

by Bill Herbst

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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 objective origins. The Bard presents the dilemma as a binary either-or choice — surrender to suffering, or go to war. 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? — but I consider it a false dichotomy. Either of those choices is, in essence, a Faustian bargain that will lead to no good.

In the Buddhist tradition, suffering is a natural and inevitable part of embodied Life in the material world. Though we seek pleasure, try to avoid pain, do everything possible to insure our security, and may even succeed for awhile, in the long run most such efforts cannot be maintained in the face of life's impermanence, unreliability, and perpetual change. Some suffering is literally unavoidable and doomed to fail (such as not dying).

Another level of suffering exists, however, that of our inner responses to pain, loss, grief, and death (or fear of death) through mental and emotional reactions to those and all of life's other 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, and doing so quite often in a manner that is deeper than the pain itself and which may persevere long after the objective suffering 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 by the various social worlds in which we participate. The majority of humans are sensitive to socialization. If everyone around us experiences reality in a certain way, that way tends to become seductive for us to adopt and build in to our own wiring, whether or not we are aware of that or would choose it for ourselves independently.

Western culture, and modern life in general, especially in technologically rich First World countries, places tremendous emphasis on pleasure and the fulfillment of fantasies. To protect those dreams (and to better sell them to us, since consumerism is based largely on such dreams), we've 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, 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. Americans are not frequently reminded of that truth. While we routinely fill our media entertainment (movies, TV, and video games) with violence and extreme mayhem, we remain largely sheltered from the harsh realities of actual human misery. These days, 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.

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. Other kinds of material suffering, however, may be very 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 our own creation, mistakenly assuming that it is "objective" or material suffering. Very often, we can't distinguish one from the other.

Since I was presented early on in my life with the idea from numerous spiritual traditions that egoism was a destructive illusion, I've spent much of my life studying humility and compassion. Not that I can claim to have achieved either of those as permanent states in my life, but I don't question their validity, and I continue to work at developing them in myself.

Recently, however, I've been reminded through writings by the Dalai Lama that some people regard both humility and compassion, along with kindness and non-aggression, as personal deficiencies, indications of "softness," impotence, or vulnerability. That 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, but can it actually be true that some people consider strength to mean false pride, aggression, and perhaps even hatred? Or that compassion could be regarded as a sign of weakness?

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 it is 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.

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 or going to war. We can study reality and learn how it works. We can also discipline our own minds to eliminate the causes of personal suffering. And we can increase and broaden our

compassion so as not to fall into the belief that we are isolated, alone, or victimized.

These kinds of inner work are not easy solutions or quick fixes. In fact, 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're programmed to "grade" ourselves 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 where we think we should be. In reality, our work is right here with us, custom-tailored to exactly where we are in this moment. That's all we can do, and all we need to do. If we forget, 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 I am on my little island, hoping you're out there, too."*