

Pain and Suffering

According to modern psychology (not to mention ancient Buddhism), the difference between pain and suffering.

Pain is pain, and it is bad enough. Suffering --- which features distress and misery layered on top --- occurs only when you try to fight that pain.

Suffering and Letting Go

Pain is inevitable. Suffering is not. Suffering arises from grasping. ^L_{SEP} Release grasping and be free of suffering.

Anyone who has had even the briefest introduction to Buddhist teaching is familiar with its starting point: the inescapable truth that existence entails suffering.

This is called the First Noble Truth.

But how difficult it is to fully embrace this truth. Of all the maps of Buddhist psychology, the Noble Truths, which teach the understanding of suffering and its end, are the most central. The whole purpose of Buddhist psychology, its ethics, philosophy, practices, and community life, is the discovery that freedom and joy are possible in the face of the sufferings of human life. T

he Four Noble Truths are laid out like a psychological diagnosis: the symptoms, the causes, the possibility of healing, and the medicinal path.

Whether we are healers, therapists, or friends, when

people come to us for help, we are first a witness to their suffering. Whatever form that suffering takes—conflict, fear, depression, stress, obsession, confusion, mental illness, divorce, trouble with work or family or the law, unfulfilled creativity, or unrequited love—we must willingly acknowledge its truth.

We are also witness to their pain. Buddhist psychology makes a clear distinction between pain and suffering. Pain is an unavoidable aspect of the natural world. It is physical, biological, and social, woven into our existence as night is with day, as inevitable as hard and soft, as hot and cold. In this human incarnation we experience a continuous ebb and flow of pleasure and pain, gain and loss. Inhabiting our human society is the same: we encounter praise and blame, fame and disrepute, success and failure, arising and passing constantly.

The Third Noble Truth offers us the way out, the end of suffering.

Suffering is different from pain. Suffering is caused by our reaction to the inevitable pain of life. Our personal suffering can include anxiety, depression, fear, confusion, grief, anger, hurt, addiction, jealousy, and frustration. But suffering is not only personal. Our collective suffering grows from human greed, hatred, and ignorance, bringing

warfare and racism; the isolation and torture of prisoners; fueling the unnecessary hunger, sickness, and abandonment of human beings on every continent. This individual and collective suffering, the First Noble Truth, is what we are called upon to understand and transform.

The Second Noble Truth describes the cause of suffering: grasping. Grasping, it explains, gives birth to aversion and delusion, and from these three roots arise all the other unhealthy states, such as jealousy, anxiety, hatred, addiction, possessiveness, and shamelessness. These are the causes of individual and global suffering.

The Third Noble Truth offers us the way out, the end of suffering. Unlike pain, suffering is not inevitable. Freedom from suffering is possible when we let go of our reactions, our fear and grasping. This freedom is called nirvana. This is the Third Noble Truth.

The Fourth Noble Truth is the path to the end of suffering. This path is called the middle way. The middle way invites us to find peace wherever we are, here and now. By neither grasping nor resisting life, we can find wakefulness and freedom in the midst of our joys and sorrows. Following the middle path, we establish integrity, we learn

to quiet the mind, we learn to see with wisdom.

The Four Noble Truths insist that we face our pain, the pain in our body and mind and the pain of the world. They teach us to stop running away. Only by courageously opening to the sorrow of the world as it is can we find our freedom. This is the demand placed on all who would awaken.

As Joseph Campbell reminds us, “The first step to the knowledge of the wonder and mystery of life is in the recognition of the monstrous nature of the earthly human realm as well as its glory.”

Of course Western psychology also thoroughly acknowledges suffering. But in certain ways it leads us to simply accept our suffering, what Freud called our ordinary level of neurosis. As Freud said in his famously resigned terms, “The goal of psychoanalysis is to claim a little more ego from the vast sea of id.” Like Freud, the great existential philosophers Sartre and Camus also focused on the inevitability of our suffering. But a philosophical or psychological acceptance of normal unhappiness is a poor place to end the story.

The Four Noble Truths promise much more. They are a complete and systematic set of psychological principles and teachings that we can use to end the causes of suffering. Through their understanding we