

Why suffering?

by Piya Tan

Buddhism gives the best explanation and solution to why there is suffering. Neither blaming anyone for it, nor seeking for answers in history or myths, the Buddha discovers the nature of suffering and how to end it, in the most effective way there is: at its source.

The Buddha goes through a lot suffering himself to find the answer to this cosmic problem. At first, as a young man, he thinks that sensual pleasures are the answer to our pains. After all, isn't pleasure the opposite of pain? Buddhist stories tell us that he enjoys every kind of sensual pleasure as a young prince.

The problem with pleasure is that it only delights us momentarily. If it is sustained, it begins to bore us, and we need to look for new ways of delighting ourselves. Pleasure is a word for our need for variety. Why do we need variety? Because we are always (often unconsciously) seeking for a way out of suffering.

If pleasure is only a temporary break from suffering, could the answer be in the opposite direction? Why not deprive the body totally of pleasure, even torture it, so that, through pain, we will free ourselves of it. The Buddha, in his efforts here, reaches a point when he almost dies from physical exhaustion through self-mortification. He realizes that we need a healthy body to support a healthy mind.

One great advantage that the Buddha has is that he comes from an ancient society where religious contemplation is common. If he were born in a tribal community in the Middle East, troubled by wars, invasions, and unrest, he might have come up with a tribal religion that centres around some almighty God idea.

It is like natural selection in evolution, where what is best in us gets carried on until all these mental genes, as it were, manifest themselves in a single person: the Buddha. But evolution of species is just that: we evolve as a group, a tribe, a species.

But the group, tribe or species, can be so self-regulating as to be self-limiting, even narcissistic. The crowd does not think; only individuals think. Good thinking makes true individuals. There are those who think on their feet, but the Buddha, following the trend of his days, finds that it is more effective to think when we sit: sitting in meditation, that is.

As the Buddha sits peacefully in meditation, letting his thoughts come and go as they will, he discovers that a thousand voices are speaking at the same time. A crowd of voices, and the crowd does not think. So he lets the passing crowd of thoughts move on.

When that crowd of thoughts has receded into the background of his mind, a deep and great peace arises. It is so calm and clear, it is like looking into the lucid waters of a huge and deep pool, and able to see fishes, water creatures, beautiful pebbles, and treasures at the bottom.

Then he directs his laser-sharp and crystal-clear mind to the problem at hand. He uses what I call the “Why” method, or what is technically called “causal relations.”

Why do we suffer?	Because we are born.
Why are we born?	Because there are other humans.
Why are we born from other humans?	Because we cling to one another.
Why do we cling to one another?	Because of craving.
Why do we crave?	Because we feel.
Why do we feel?	Because of sense-stimuli.
Why are the senses stimulated?	Because we have the senses.
Why do we have the senses?	Because of mind and body?
Why are there mind and body?	Because of consciousness.
Why is there consciousness?	Because of our thoughts.
Why are there thoughts?	Because of ignorance.

Then the Buddha examines this whole process of suffering and how it arises in the reverse sequence, and he discovers the ending of suffering, and the path to its ending. The great 20th century poet, James Joyce, poetized this in his “Finnegans Wake” (1967:18), in these words:

In the ignorance that implies impression that knits knowledge that finds the nameform that whets the wits that convey contacts that sweeten sensation that drives desire that adheres to the attachment that dogs death that bitches birth that entails the ensuance of existentiality.

Suffering arises from ignorance. Ignorance is when we think we understand what we really are, but deep inside we are not really sure. We have thoughts after thoughts; we hold on to all kinds of views, especially those of God, gods, demons, spirits, and gurus; we are attracted to fleeting pleasures, and so on

Suggested solution. Just keep on asking yourself *why*, and don’t make a conscious effort to answer. Let your heart speak, and let it take its time. If you are courageous enough to examine the answers with another *why*, and so on, you will soon enough discover your true self.

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