

Through the Teachings of the Buddha

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD January 22, 2023

Young Siddhartha Gautam lived as a prince in a lavish palace in the foothills of the Himalayas. Having lost his mother as she gave birth to him, he knew, at his core, suffering, and yet lived a life of luxury as his father shielded him from any further hardship. Surrounded by beauty and grandeur and protected from nearly any form of suffering, Siddhartha nevertheless begins to ask himself, “How did I get here?” and took to the roads to find his answer. On his first venture beyond the palace, he saw a sick person, and asked his chauffeur, “What is that?” His chauffeur responded, “That person is ill. Each of us falls ill. You and I alike. No one escapes sickness.” On his second outing, Siddhartha encountered an old man, and asked his chauffeur, “What is that?” His chauffeur responded, “And old person. Each of us gets old. You and I alike. No one escapes old age.” In his subsequent outing, Siddhartha saw a corpse. “What is that?” he asked. Again, his chauffeur responded, “A dead person. Each of us dies. You and I alike. No one escapes death.” On his fourth and final journey, Siddhartha noticed a wandering holy man. He asked, “What is that?” the chauffeur responded, “A sannyasin, a wandering ascetic who has left his house, family, job and home in order to search for spiritual liberation.” Exposed to these four sights, Siddhartha began to understand life through the lens of suffering, acknowledging that each person would experience illness, old age, and death. He left his family, his palace, and his wealth, and began the life of a wandering holy man.¹ Thus is the tale of the origins of Buddhism.

Buddhists find the spiritual path to be “born out of suffering” – any true sacred path begun, not after nor while experiencing joy and delight, but in response to “pain, disappointment, and confusion.” Why is this? Because only in true pain can we trigger an “inner realization,” a dawning insight that we each face crises that require a spiritual solution. Just as the young

¹ *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World* by Stephen Prothero pgs. 169-171

Buddha experienced illness, old age, and death, so, too, will we. Now I note here: while important in understanding Buddhism and suffering, I do not mean to preach that old age is inherently bad – old age is also a time of great wisdom. It does, however, come with its own maladies. It comes with its own sources of suffering. Buddhism is based on what those of this faith find to be the four truths in life: suffering is inherent in life, everything we suffer from has an origin, the origin can be eliminated, and one does so by following the Noble Eightfold Path – a path we will explore in greater detail later.²

Buddhists structure their faith as a reaction to this basic understanding: “human beings can solve the human problems on our own, without recourse to God or divine revelation.”³ Buddhism is what I like to call a “this worldly faith,” focusing on the here and now, not another realm after death. These reflections remind me of the tenets of humanism: we are the change we want to see in the world. Likewise in Buddhism, there is no God, there is no eternal life, there is no soul.⁴ No soul – that thing I have been reflecting upon all month! There is simply us. As such, what is fundamental to life in this faith is experience, not belief.⁵ Our solution is not found in prayer, whether to nature or to our God of many names. It was the experiences of Siddhartha that led him to a holy life, no divine revelation nor call from the holy. Suffering is experience. Healing is experience.

What is suffering? There are those physical maladies we touched upon: illness, aging, and death. We are susceptible to ailments: accidents, injuries, cancers. But it goes deeper: what are our inner reactions to those disagreeable, unpleasant, even harmful situations in life? Sorrow, anger, frustration, fear.⁶ It’s about our core – suffering is in the tangible, and suffering is our inner response to the tangible. It is our core reaction that dictates how much and how long we suffer. Does death lead to detrimental, extended grief, or guide us on a path towards deeper spirituality and stronger faith? Suffering permeates us – it distorts our minds; it interferes with

² *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World* by Stephen Prothero pg. 172

³ *Ibid* pg. 172

⁴ *Ibid* pg. 184

⁵ *Ibid* pg. 172

⁶ *The Noble Eightfold Path: Way to the End of Suffering* by Bhikkhu Bodhi pg. 6

our relationships.⁷ I wonder, how does our understanding of suffering change if we see it as an inevitability? As a fundamental life experience, not to be avoided, but to be solved?

I share with you a Buddhist story. The Buddha encountered a man with many philosophical questions: What is eternal? What is the soul? The Buddha offered a question in return: “if you were shot by an arrow dipped in poison, would you pause to ask questions such as: who shot this? How tall were they? What did they look like? Or would you simply pull the arrow out, as quickly and as swiftly as possible? Buddhism,” the enlightened one teaches, “is about removing the arrow that causes suffering. These questions only cause more pain.”⁸

I think of my time as a chaplain at an organization that served to help the unhoused. This was the arrow of poverty, dipped in the poisons of addiction, illness, injustice, inequity. While those suffering did ask “why?” and while those suffering did turn to their God, in the immediate their needs were shelter and food and work and childcare. We could not ask of the eternal, nor ask of the soul, but remove the arrow and help them survive.

These are the arrows of poverty, illness, addiction. What about the arrows of anger, disappointment, greed, or jealousy? Do we pause to ask about these philosophical, theological questions, or do we just work to alleviate the suffering? How is the second option one of faith?

Buddhism is the faith of removing the arrow and offers a sacred solution. Buddhists identify the Four Noble Truths, which I touched upon earlier. The first truth is that existence is characterized by *dukkha*, or suffering. Each one of us will face illness, old age (if we are lucky to live that long) and death. This first truth is what we have spent the time discussing thus far.⁹

The Second Noble Truth is as follows: everything we suffer from has an origin. Often, suffering is perpetuated when we stray from our core and grasp on to those superficial things

⁷ *The Noble Eightfold Path: Way to the End of Suffering* by Bhikkhu Bodhi pg. 7

⁸ *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World* by Stephen Prothero pg. 173

⁹ *Ibid* pg. 182

surrounding us: people, places, and things – chasing after the tangible as if that will relieve our suffering; when really, we must identify the core problem – the origin.

I think of the responses I have seen in my own family to suicide. We were shot with the arrow of an unexpected, tragic death. Our immediate need was survival. We suffered, my aunt Nancy's children and sisters and parents held in the ironclad grasp of grief. We experienced the First Noble Truth and one of life's fundamental and inevitable tragedies – death. We knew the cause of our suffering - grief. I think many of us strayed from our core grasping on to the superficial in a desperate attempt to make sense of things. It was with ultimate acceptance of this death that we made our way to the Third Noble Truth: suffering can be eliminated. The world is in unending flux and flow; everything is impermanent; we cannot cling to life nor to things but let them run through our fingers. Because it has a cause, it can be eliminated.¹⁰

Which leads us to the Fourth and final Noble Truth: following the Eightfold Path will relieve one of suffering. The Eightfold Path is complicated to explain and to understand for many of those not well versed in Buddhism. There are eight ways of acting – eight ways of being – that we cultivate within. It's about how we act in the world, how we engage with our thoughts, how we cultivate insight and understanding. I heard religious scholar Stephen Prothero summarize the path as follows: "In short, be kind, be wise, be mindful."¹¹ Can the basic tenets of Buddhism be bundled up so succinctly? Overcoming suffering – being kind, wise, and mindful. In part, it is about our actions and intentions. Could we help remove the arrow of poverty with intentional action— each of our days spent finding resources, providing childcare, easing hunger, finding work? Could we help remove the arrow of grief by coming to peace with kindness - finding acceptance and fiercely loving one another?

Buddhism is focused on the inner, not the outer. Suffering is manifested within, no matter what external factors seem to be the cause. It's perpetuated by those superficial things we grasp on

¹⁰ *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World* by Stephen Prothero pg. 183

¹¹ *Ibid* pg. 183

to, and our reactions within. Suffering stems from our reactions of anger or jealousy or greed. Healing, too, is an inward journey. A journey of acceptance; of acknowledging and searching for a root cause; of shifting the mind into a framework of recovering. Not otherworldly, but this worldly. Suffering is not to be avoided, but to be expected. Not to be grasped on to, but gently released. The Eightfold Path is also called the Middle Way, which I think is important in this explanation. It is the way between two extremes. On one end, we chase and overindulge in sense pleasures – trying to mask dissatisfaction by “gratifying desire” – transitory pleasure. The other extreme is self-mortification – trying to liberate oneself by inflicting intentional pain. This way sees the body as holding one in bondage, when really it is the mind. These are the two extremes: overindulgence, and self-mortification.¹² Let us find the middle way – cultivating kindness, mindfulness, and wisdom. Let these be held in our core.

We connect to our core by practice. Some Buddhists chant. Some simply sit. Some visualize mandalas or expand their minds by reflecting on perplexing mind benders. Others embrace the practice of meditation. Sometimes, we simply need to be idle. This sounds, in our culture of constant doing and acting and moving to be a waste of time, a pointless act, when in fact it serves to heal. I fall into this trap! I read about vipassana meditation – which is a practice to “simply ... be mindful of things as they are” – thoughts, feelings, and emotions merely “arise and pass away.”¹³ So, I practiced this – right at my desk. In that moment, I felt anxious, I acknowledged it, felt a sense of peace, and let the anxiety pass away. Simple, yet rather profound. Just by acknowledging anxiety, I connected with my core. We live in the present moment. This reminds me of our Time for All Ages. One monk carried with him the annoyance and disgust he held towards the rude, unthankful woman. The other monk, traveling in peace, let it go.¹⁴ Which monk would you rather be?

This reminds me of two more Buddhist ideas I want to touch on: death, and love. Due to various books I have been reading, I’ve been reflecting on death quite a bit. I bring this into

¹² *The Noble Eightfold Path: Way to the End of Suffering* by Bhikkhu Bodhi pg. 9

¹³ *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World* by Stephen Prothero pg. 178

¹⁴ “A Heavy Load” from *Zen Shorts* by Jon J. Muth

conversation with my husband and my mother from time to time. Does nothing happen? Is there another realm? Does our essence traverse through multiple lives? Ultimately, we reached a similar conclusion – life, in all of its beauty and wonder, is hard work. We – my mother, husband, and I – do not want to traverse life after life in this realm. This seems to echo the sentiments of many Buddhists – who do believe in multiple lives. Buddhists trace the problem of karma – of cause and effect – through a series of births and rebirths. But Buddhists understand rebirth as undesirable – life is filled with too much inherent suffering.¹⁵ Death does not bring an end to suffering, as it does in Christianity or in Universalism, because the life process “does not stop with death.”¹⁶ Each successive life works toward eliminating suffering, until one reaches the ultimate goal – nirvana – when life has been “blown out,” as a candle, and you are released from the cycle of rebirth.¹⁷ How does this bring us to our center? It teaches, in my mind, that the most important thing we can do for our own well-being, in this life, and beyond, is to eliminate suffering – to connect to that core of wisdom, kindness, and mindfulness found in the Eightfold Path. The only way to be free of suffering is to intentionally work to be free of suffering.

I want to end with a note on love. We spoke earlier of the practice of meditation. *Metta* is a form of Buddhist meditation, often translated as “loving kindness.” It is a practice of centering in unconditional love – for ourselves, for our beloveds, and for our enemies. It is a love we offer without any “attachment or expectation of return.”¹⁸ How does this connect us to our center? It releases the need to chase love and seek it in others, and instead we cultivate it within ourselves. It releases us of anger and hate and allows us to center in love instead. Love is everything. May we each hold it tenderly within.

Young Siddhartha Gautama left his life of luxury only to find the innate, fundamental suffering in life: illness, old age, and death. And yet the story does not end there, but spurs an ancient,

¹⁵ *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World* by Stephen Prothero pg. 177

¹⁶ *The Noble Eightfold Path: Way to the End of Suffering* by Bhikkhu Bodhi pg. 9

¹⁷ *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World* by Stephen Prothero pg. 177

¹⁸ *Ibid* pg. 178

widespread faith with hundreds of millions of followers. For while we are offered a problem, we are offered a solution, and are called to live lives of kindness, mindfulness, and wisdom. So may we find our center and rest in the pause. May we live, may we love, may we die.

May it be so, and Amen.