

What's So Noble about Suffering?

by Lisa Hoffman

I liked the sound of Zen Buddhism's Four Noble Truths. They suggested a rarefied kind of enlightenment, and perhaps even understanding the elusive meaning of life.

Who wouldn't want knowledge of such sublime secrets?

So, I was surprised to learn that these Noble Truths are actually a practical way to experience and transform suffering. They are the Buddha's first teaching after his enlightenment. It all begins with the First Noble Truth: that there is suffering in life. This was a relief, because I thought Zen saw life *as* suffering. As attracted to Buddhism as I'd always been, unrelenting suffering was a grim and discouraging proposition.

On face value, the notion that there is suffering in life didn't seem like a particularly profound revelation. Of course there is suffering in life. Most of us know this from direct experience. What was the big deal? Then I discovered that this view was also an invitation to deeply know suffering through my own life. I wasn't sure why anyone would want to hang out with pain any more than necessary, but I was willing to give it a try. Meditation was the vehicle.

I was surprised to find that sitting with suffering, rather than pushing it away, was actually comforting. I hadn't realized that a part of me yearned to be with life as it is in the moment, whether this meant pleasure or pain. I discovered that there was energy in turning toward "just this" -- Zen shorthand for how things are right here and right now.

And I was also startled to find that *understanding* this truth of suffering wasn't the same as *knowing* suffering. As feeling it in your bones and owning your unique experience of life's challenges. That seemed to be a not-so-sublime secret of transforming suffering. The skills developed through meditation practice cultivated this deep knowing.

Recently I headed over to a dinner party hosted by a relatively new friend and was running uncharacteristically late. I called her from the bus to let her know my ETA. Just before hanging up, she said, "Oh, I didn't know you have a cell phone."

I snapped the phone shut, feeling a little bad. I couldn't imagine why. This dinner had been planned for weeks, and I was happy about it. As the cell beeped off, a slight heaviness spread into my chest and mood. What was this about? I felt these sensations, and I realized I was afraid my friend was upset with me for not giving her my cell phone number. That she felt somehow slighted or taken for granted, and was hurt.

I had to smile. She had made a casual comment about not knowing I had a cell phone. In less than 60 seconds, I had made it into an issue. This was self-made suffering.

What happened was this: the bad feelings passed. I would give my friend my cell phone number. If there was an issue there for her, which was highly doubtful, she would have the opportunity to tell me.

This little internal drama arising and falling away could just be the transformation of suffering.

Awareness, strengthened by a regular meditation practice, illuminated the drama in my mind. Noticing and staying with the physical sensations led to mindfulness of emotions and thoughts. Stability, which is the skill of sitting with whatever happens, allowed the show to have a beginning and end.

It is definitely human nature to sometimes read a criticism or problem into an innocent comment. And I certainly know this from my own experience, because it is part of my particular nature. You could say that it's my karma, learned in the family and somehow in my cells. Karma is often described as cause and effect. And when the cause is distorted thinking, the effect is rarely positive.

It amazes me that sitting 40 minutes a day and experiencing my thoughts and feelings coming and going can so dramatically affect everyday living. Waking up in this way shines light on how I relate to myself and others, offering choices like letting my self-made drama play itself out. In other situations, there might be an issue I choose to confront. Meditating with the irrational play of mind is also quite humbling. I have found over time that compassion towards self and other naturally develops, softening the heart and external expressions like words.

A classic Buddhist image for meditation is a mountain: the surface of the mountain pulsates with life -- animals, insects, people, wind and rain, rockslides, eruptions if it's a volcano. Under the surface, the mountain is stability itself. For someone who is meditating, thoughts and feelings represent the mountain's teeming surface, and the body and breath represent the still mountain depths.

There is a unique power in knowing suffering when it arises, sitting with it, and following it to its source. Sometimes I can influence the course of the suffering, as in the dinner party story. And sometimes it is a situation in which all I can do is experience and respond to suffering as it follows in its own path.

Two people who are very important to me -- my Buddhist teacher and a very close friend of many years -- have been battling ovarian cancer for the last six months. Both are vital and exuberant, cherished by an amazing number of people. Their illness has roiled us all.

I find it fascinating and comforting to see how different people handle these crises. Some fall apart. Others organize care teams and hospital visits and updates on health status and chemo effects. Others conduct in-depth research about every aspect of ovarian cancer and treatment and share this information with the rest of us.

I am part of various communication trees and care teams, and appreciate all the information disseminated by amateur scientist friends. Many of us have said to each other that we know our friend, our teacher will beat this thing because of innate joie de vivre, boundless energy, and sheer will. But I think all of us at some level realize that no one knows -- not even the oncologists -- what will happen. It is terrifying.

What does transformation of this kind of suffering look like?

Strange as it might sound, I think it is similar in nature to the cell phone situation. The major difference is the gravity and reality of the situation. The phone caper was manufactured by irrational thought and emotion. These beloved people have life-threatening illnesses.

I find myself often overwhelmed with emotions evoked simply by these situations, or by receiving an e-mail communicating discouraging test results or describing a particularly awful chemo. Sometimes these feelings come up during meditation, and more often they arise at unexpected moments. Either way, I find it transforming simply to sit with these feelings. And knowing that this is part of the experience of loving someone who is fighting cancer. It is swimming with the tides of emotion and thought, letting them come in and flow back out into the sea of living.

It is not easy. But I find deeper capacity to support other friends and make a difference in these situations. It seems that flowing with the tide can release compassion and energy. And it also opens up places of joy.

When overwhelming or puzzling emotional or mental experiences come up, my reaction usually is to do nothing -- to sit with what's happening for a little while. Deeply engaging the experience usually connects me with what's next, which might be a chuckle and a shrug, planning a care visit, comforting a friend, or feeling the mystery that we are all part of.

I still don't know if it's noble to suffer. I do know the power of sitting like a mountain with suffering. Or pleasure. Or both. And then? I follow this classic Zen teaching: "The stone woman gets up dancing."

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