

Christians at the Roundtable of World Religions:
What Can Christians Learn from Buddhists?
Romans 8:18, 28

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Scott Peck opens his book The Road Less Traveled with these words: “Life is difficult.” Indeed it is. It is a way to handle life’s difficulties which is the essence of Buddhism, the world religion we want to consider today. Buddhists are challenged to wake up to the pains of life and become enlightened in how to deal with it, a worthy mission for any person.

Let me tell you a little bit about Siddhartha Gautama, the sixth century monk who became Buddha, the founder of Buddhism. Siddhartha was born in 563 B.C. in Nepal to a father who was a prince and ruler of a small kingdom. Siddhartha’s mother died shortly after his birth so his father set out to give Siddhartha only the best things in life. Siddhartha lived in the lap of luxury, carefully protected from the sufferings of the world. He married at sixteen and had a son. As to the things of life, he had it made.

Siddhartha eventually became restless in his life of luxury. He needed to understand who he was and his place in the world so, according to legend, he started slipping out at night with a chariot and driver to see the rest of the world. Legend has it that these excursions confronted Siddhartha with the harsh realities of human life.

He sees an old man, bent over, obviously frail and uncomfortable. Siddhartha asks, “Is this the fate of all people?” The driver of the chariot answers, “Yes.” He sees a person suffering from a terminal illness, broken, disease eating him away, and he turns to his chariot driver and says, “Is this the fate of all people?” The chariot driver says, “Yes.” He observes a funeral procession, the family taking a loved one to the burial site and once more he says to the chariot driver, “Is this the fate of all people?” And once again, the answer came, “Yes, that is the end of us all.” All this plunges Siddhartha into a deep angst, a dread and anxiety about the apparent pervasiveness of suffering in life.

So sure enough, one night Siddhartha leaves his family and embraces the life of a monastic. Six years later, at the age of thirty-five, he falls into a deep trance while meditating under a bogaha tree. There he experiences a revelation which enlightens him about the meaning of life.

Siddhartha Gautama becomes Buddha, the enlightened one and spends the next forty-five years of his life teaching others what he had learned - a philosophical and meditative system that was meant to free human beings and to save them from suffering in this life and deliver them from the endless circle of reincarnation.

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS OF BUDDHISM

PAIN IS INEVITABLE.

Giving birth is painful for a mother. Growing up is painful for a child. Losing the things we love is painful for us all; disease and death happen. Life is just one pain after another; we understand that.

As I prepared this sermon I kept getting distracted by the thoughts of persons for whom I am presently praying: a woman waiting for a stem cell transplant, a ten-year-old and a six-year-old fighting leukemia, a businessman reduced to disability, a newcomer recovering from surgery, a member who lost his father, a friend of over thirty years who passed away. As I made each of these phone calls in the midst of preparing this sermon, I was reminded that life is full of heartache.

SUFFERING IS A RESULT OF CLINGING

While pain is inevitable, suffering is optional. We suffer because we cling to things, to people, and to life. Suffering is what happens when we struggle with our experiences because of our inability to accept them. Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do the innocent suffer? Why should an innocent child go hungry or be abused? Why is this happening to me?

C.S. Lewis once said that, if you never want to be hurt, never love anyone or anything, not even your dog. To love is to subject ourselves to pain. The more we love, the more we hurt.

Buddhism says, “If I didn’t cling, nothing would frighten me, because there would be nothing I would be afraid to lose, and nothing I would need to be happy.”

LIBERATION IS POSSIBLE

The road to liberation is detachment. Selfishness can be overcome. Quit complaining about the hand life deals you. Your only choice is the attitude about the cards you hold and the finesse with which you play them. It is incredibly freeing to know that you do not need to be pleased in order to be happy says Buddhism.

ENLIGHTENMENT COMES FROM FOLLOWING THE EIGHT-FOLD PATH

Right Understanding	5. Right Livelihood
Right Aspiration	6. Right Effort
Right Action	7. Right Concentration
Right Speech	8. Right Mindfulness

St. Paul says in Philippians 4:8, “*Whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think on these things.*”

CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO SUFFERING

We gather to receive Holy Communion. Have you ever thought how weird a service of Holy Communion must seem to someone who knows not the fundamentals of Christianity? Some of you parents know, because you have to explain it to your sons and daughters. We gather at Holy Communion so we will never forget Christ's crucifixion, which as Paul says, is a stumbling block for the Jews and sheer foolishness to the Gentiles.

So we get in line, receive a pinch of bread and a taste of wine, the unfermented kind that we Methodists have, and we hear the words, "The Body of Christ, broken for you." "The Blood of Christ, shed for you." And every once in a while it clicks. The mystery grips us. Christ really does enter my suffering! I wish you could see the act of Holy Communion through my eyes as I look into the eyes of recipients:

Eyes troubled by battlefields of our own making and prisons of our own decisions

Eyes dimmed by pain that you didn't ask for and don't deserve

Eyes filled with compassion for others you feel for

Eyes perplexed by trying to figure it all out.

Face after face, person after person, life after life, the Body of Christ, broken for you, the Blood of Christ shed for you, and you, and for you. What would have happened if that mystery really would have come home?

The Son of God suffered unto death, not that we would be kept from suffering, but that our sufferings might be like His. At Communion I think of that old proverb, "Joys shared are doubled and sorrows shared are halved."

At Communion I come to see the redeeming nature of suffering. Even at the cross God was at work, taking the worst of evil and transforming it into a means of salvation for humankind.

Henri Nouwen once said, "Many people do not think they are loved or feel safe and so when suffering comes, they see it as an affirmation of their worthlessness. The great challenge of the spiritual life is to learn to live our brokenness under the blessing and not the curse."

And so it happened that one of my sons said to me as I fought my way back from the curse of cancer, "Dad, you are a better person and a better preacher after cancer than before cancer." With tears in my eyes, I said, "Oh, I hope so. Oh, by God's grace, I hope so."

So never let your suffering go to waste. Redeem it for the glory of God.

Amen.

