From the Urban Dharma Newsletter of 2/24/08**...**

Suffering in Christianity and Buddhism: The Same or Different?

1. Suffering / From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suffering

Suffering, or pain in this sense,[1] is a basic affective experience of unpleasantness and aversion associated with harm or threat of harm in an individual.

* Suffering may be called physical or mental, depending on whether it is linked primarily to a body process or a mind process. Examples of physical suffering are pain (as a sensation), nausea, breathlessness, and itching.[2] Examples of mental suffering are anxiety, grief, hatred, and boredom.[3]

* The intensity of suffering comes in all degrees, from the triflingly mild to the unspeakably insufferable. Factors of duration and frequency of occurrence are often considered along with that of intensity.

* People's attitudes toward a suffering may vary hugely according to how much they deem it as light or severe, avoidable or unavoidable, useful or useless, of little or of great consequence, deserved or undeserved, chosen or unwanted, acceptable or unacceptable.

* The words pain and suffering can be confusing and may require careful handling. (1) Sometimes they are synonyms and interchangeable. (2) Sometimes they are used in contradistinction to one another: e.g. "pain is inevitable, suffering is optional", or "pain is physical, suffering is mental". (3) Sometimes one word refers to a variety of that to which the other refers: e.g. "pain is physical suffering", or "suffering is severe physical or mental pain". (4) Sometimes yet, people use them in another fashion.

All sentient beings suffer during their lives, in diverse manners, and often dramatically. No field of human activity deals with the whole subject of suffering, but many are concerned with its nature and processes, its origin and causes, its meaning and significance, its related personal, social, and cultural behaviors, its remedies, management, and uses.

2. How does Christianity Explain Suffering?

http://en.allexperts.com/q/Presbyterians-959/Christianity-Explain-Suffering.htm

Expert: Don Hurray
Date: 8/1/2005
Subject: How does Christianity Explain Suffering?

Question

I have been interested in understanding how different world religions explain the

pain and suffering that is so pervasive in this world.

The way God has been introduced to us, i.e. as all knowing, omnipotent, and omnipresent, it seems impossible to believe that anyting happens independent of God's will.

I have heard number of common explanations, but none of them our completely satisfactory. So I was wondering if you could tell me more or refer me to some reading materials. Explanations I have heard are:

1. We deserve the suffering because of our sins.

2. God is testing our faith.

3. The suffering is caused by the evil in the world and not God.

4. We simply don't know, i.e. God works in mysterious ways.

Thank you for sharing your knowledge.

Adrien

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Answer

Hello Adrien,

You ask a very important question. You explain sin and suffering and you explain everything else in life.

These questions are answered in the Bible but it takes a lifetime of learning and experience and we still don't fully have a handle on it.

But we do know that God is good and that He suffers along with us (we see this all through scripture from the Exodus to the prophets to God sending His own Son to suffer for us, to the sufferings and death of the apostles, etc).

In Christ we know that there is purpose and redemption with suffering because there was so with His suffering.

We also know from scripture that suffering was not God's intention for humanity but came from our first parents bad choice to believe the serpent.

Suffering is never good but God will use it to bring about good. Many people seek God during times of suffering and He uses it to draw us to Jesus Christ. When times are good we horribly and falsely believe that we don't need God. Thus like a cancer, we think things are well but they are not. We only see suffering from one angle this way.

I can see from a practical standpoint that when everything goes well with us we drift away from God. Suffering, many times, brings us back to God as we see our true frailty and weakness.

Speak to any pastor about what happened after Sept. llth. My church was packed for weeks afterwards. Why? Because people awoke (temporarily) to humanity's true frailness and the danger of being without God. As things got better people drifted back into the old humdrums of life without God. Humanity in this way shows extreme stupidity.

Despite it's evil, suffering awakens us to our need for God. In doing so suffering works for our long term good.

3. Christianity: A Life of Chosen Suffering? / Blog by Rob N.

http://josenew.blogspot.com/2007/09/christianity-life-of-chosen-suffering.html

For whatever reason, it seems that the topic of suffering has been coming up a lot lately. Whether, it is appearing in the books I'm reading, the sermons I'm hearing, or the TV I'm watching...

This passage from John Piper's Desiring God really hit me between the eyes...

(Taken from Desiring God by John Piper pp.260-261)

"And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied."

1 Corinthians 15:17-19

Christianity as Paul understands it is not the best way to maximize pleasure if this life is all there is. Paul tells us the best way to maximize our pleasures in this life: "If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (1 Corinthians 15:32).

When Paul says, "If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink," he does not mean "Let's all become lechers." He means there is a normal, simple, comfortable, ordinary life of human delights that we may enjoy with no troubling thoughts of heaven of hell or sin or holiness or God—if there is no resurrection from the dead. And what stunned me about this train of thought is that many of the professing Christians seem to aim at just this—and call it Christianity.

Paul did not see his relation to Christ as the key to maximizing his physical comforts and pleasures in this life. No, Paul's relation to Christ was a call to choose suffering—a suffering that was beyond what would make atheism "meaningful" or beautiful" or "heroic." It was a suffering that would have been utterly foolish and pitiable to choose if there is no resurrection into the joyful presence of Christ.

In Paul's radically different viewpoint I see an almost unbelievable indictment of Western Christianity. Am I overstating this? Judge for yourself. How many Christians do you know who could say, "The lifestyle I have chosen as a Christian would be utterly foolish and pitiable if there is no resurrection"? How many Christians are there who could say, "The suffering I have freely chosen to embrace for Christ would be a pitiable life if there is no resurrection"? As I see it, these are shocking questions.

The Christian life for Paul was a life of chosen sacrifice on earth, that he might gain the joy of fellowship with Christ in the age to come. Here is how he put it:

Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ…. I share his sufferings… that by an means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:7-8, 10-11)

I say it again: The call of Christ is a call to live a life of sacrifice and loss and suffering—a life that would be foolish to live if there were no resurrection from the dead. This is a conscious choice for Paul. Listen to his protest: "If the dead are not raised…. Why am I in danger every hour? I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day!" (1 Corinthians 15:29-31). This is what Paul has chosen. He "protests" because he does not have to live this way. He chooses it; "in danger every hour!" "Dying every day!" This is why he says he should be pitied if there is no resurrection from the dead. He chose a path that leads to trouble and pain virtually every day of his life. "I die every day."

4. The Goals of Christianity and Buddhism / OCA NEWS

http://www.oca.org/QAPrintable.asp?ID=233

QUESTION:

I recently read a statement by an Orthodox author that said, "The goal of Christianity is radically different than the goal of Buddhism, Hinduism, etc." The goal of Buddhism is the relief of human suffering. The Buddha Dharma, or Buddhist teaching, begins with human suffering and ends with human suffering. Literally so. It is that simple. It is my observation that if Christianity, specifically Orthodox Christianity, does not hold the relief of human suffering as at least part of its goal, then we are missing the point. I look forward to your response.

ANSWER:

YOU WRITE: I recently read a statement by an Orthodox author that said, "The goal of Christianity is radically different than the goal of Buddhism, Hinduism, etc." The goal of Buddhism is the relief of human suffering. The Buddha Dharma, or Buddhist teaching, begins with human suffering and ends with human suffering. Literally so. It is that simple. It is my observation that if Christianity, specifically Orthodox Christianity, does not hold the relief of human suffering as at least part of its goal, then we are missing the point. I look forward to your response.

RESPONSE: The goal of Our Lord's earthly ministry is the salvation of the world. Jesus Christ is "truly the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Who came into the world to save sinners." While He was indeed concerned with human suffering, His ministry -- and that of the Church today, which continues His ministry -- was not limited to the relief of human suffering.

You note that "Buddhist teaching begins with human suffering and ends with human suffering." During His earthly ministry, Our Lord ministered to the suffering, but his ministry was certainly not limited to this, nor did it find its end in human suffering. It

ends precisely with the restoration of all that had been corrupted, fallen, distorted, and disfigured, including the human condition, in Him, in His Kingdom, in His becoming "all in all." His ministry was one of proclamation and revelation, rather than mere alleviation.

YOU WRITE: It is my observation that if Christianity, specifically Orthodox Christianity, does not hold the relief of human suffering as at least part of its goal, then we are missing the point.

RESPONSE: I am not sure what leads you to observe that Orthodox Christianity does not pursue the relief of human suffering. Orthodox Christianity does not address human suffering simply out of sympathy, or out of humanitarian concern, or out of pity. It addresses it in response to the image of God that is found in "the least of the brethren," in recognition of that image, and in response to that image. Ultimately, we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give drink to the thirsty, and minister to the sick and imprisoned not just for the sake of the hungry, naked, thirsty, sick, and imprisoned, but for the sake of Jesus Christ and for the sake of the Gospel. Such ministry is a proclamation and revelation of the Gospel, of the presence of God in the midst of human suffering, as a means of moving the suffering beyond their own condition and focusing them on the Good News that there is more to life than food and clothing and sickness and distress.

If Orthodox Christianity does not address human suffering, then why would we celebrate and offer hope through the sacrament of Holy Unction? Why would we anoint and pray for and visit and comfort the sick and infirm? Why would be struggle to continue Christ's three-fold ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing?

Many of our parishes distribute food to the needy or operate "soup kitchens" or volunteer at homeless shelters or assist with offering encouragement to unwed mothers or counsel overwhelmed new immigrants in settling in to new surroundings. In pursuing such ministries, they are not simply relieving suffering but, more importantly, doing so in the process of proclaiming and revealing the love of God to those who could easily grow hopeless.

Hence, while it is true that the goal of the Savior's work is not simply to relieve suffering -- He Himself tells us that we will have the poor [humans who suffer] with us always -- it is not the case that addressing suffering is not a part of the Gospel or an expectation in the life of God's people, who are called to minister and serve "the least of the brethren." Meanwhile, the goal of Christianity is salvation and the enjoyment of eternal life in the Kingdom of God where, as we sing in the Burial Service, "there is neither sickness, sorrow, nor sighing, but life everlasting."

This is radically different than the goal of Buddhism.

5. Suffering and Buddhism - Paul Ingram

http://www.counterbalance.net/scisuff/suffe-body.html

While Howell touches on possible integrations of genetic science, suffering, and aspects of Christian Womanist, process, and liberationist theologies, Dr. Paul O. Ingram of Pacific Lutheran University presents the Buddhist tradition’s treatment of the problem of suffering.

"Reflection about how Buddhist tradition has conceived the 'problem of evil'" as it relates to science, suffering, and genetics is problematic, Ingram says. "Buddhists have been exploring the relationship between the Buddhist doctrines of interdependence and impermanence with contemporary physics and biological evolutionary paradigms for at least fifty years. Yet Buddhists have not, to my knowledge, explicitly connected analysis of the experience of suffering with the science of genetics." And, secondly, Ingram says, "the 'problem of evil' is not a Buddhist problem." Rather, Ingram says, the question of "how one can account for the existence of evil and suffering" rises from Jewish, Christian, and Islamic characterization of God as good, just, loving, and all-powerful.

"Buddhism indeed focuses on the suffering undergone by all sentient beings - not just human beings," Ingram says, but "evil in a world created by a just, good and loving, all-powerful deity, as well as the problem of undeserved suffering of the righteous and the 'undeserved prosperity' of the unrighteous have never been structural elements in Buddhist explanations for the nature and cause of universal suffering."

To understand Buddhist treatment of suffering, one must be acquainted with four "interdependent aspects of the Buddhist world view - apart from which there is no Buddhism" - the doctrines of impermanence, non-self, and interdependent co-origination, and the Law of Karma. "The first three doctrines characterize the structural character of all things and events at every moment of space time," Ingram notes, "while the Law of Karma points to how human beings cause suffering both to themselves and other sentient beings. These elements of the Buddhist world view are so interdependent that each involves the other - like spokes of a wheel - so that each one needs to be understood in light of the other three."

The doctrine of impermanence and the Law of Karma.

"[T]he Buddha taught that all existence is duhkah, usually translated as 'suffering' in Western languages," Ingram says. "But more than simple suffering is involved in this teaching . . . all existence involves suffering, or better, 'unsatisfactoriness,' because all existence is characterized by change and impermanence. Literally, everything and event at every moment of space-time - past, present, and future - has existed, now exists, or will exist as processes of change and becoming, because all things and events are processes of change and becoming. Consequently, life as such is duhkha, 'unsatisfactory' 'suffering,' physically, mentally, morally." When "we become aware that our own lives mirror the universality of impermanence, that change and becoming are ingredient in all things, that there is no permanence anywhere; when we experience our own mortality and feel the resulting anxiety about our lack of permanence, we have an understanding of what the Buddha was driving at in the first noble truth."

"Seeing permanence of any kind forces us to live out of accord with reality, 'the way things really are,'" Ingram says. And as "Buddhists understand the Law of Karma, living out of accord with reality causes suffering in the numerous forms suffering can take individually and collectively."

The doctrines of non-self and interdependent co-origination.

"If there exist only process and becoming, but no permanent 'things' that process and 'become,' who or what experiences 'suffering?'" Ingram asks. "Or put another

way, if there is no 'soul,' who suffers?"

"Hinduism, some forms of classical Greek philosophy, and traditional Christian teaching," Ingram says, suggest "the existence of a permanent soul-entity remaining self-identical through time to explain continuity, "the paradoxical experience that we are the same person through the changing moments of our lives even as we experience that we are not the same person through the moments of our lives." Buddhism, however, "rejects any and all notions of permanence, including the notion of unchanging self or soul entities," Ingram says. "We are not permanent souls or selves; we are impermanent non-selves."

"Non-self," however, does not mean "non-existence." Rather, Ingram says, "we either exist or non-exist as a continuing series of interdependently causal relationships." According to the doctrine of interdependent co-origination, "things, events, and us become in interdependent relation with everything in this universe at every moment of space time . . . we are as impermanent as the systems of relationships that constitute us." Stated differently, Ingram says, "we are not permanent soul entities that have interdependent relationships and experiences. We are those relationships and experiences as we undergo them. We are not soul-entities that suffer, we are our suffering" as we experience suffering.

Nirvana, enlightenment, and awakened compassion.

Through meditation the Buddhist experiences "nirvana," "awakening," "enlightenment," or "wisdom" - an "apprehension of the universal interdependence and interrelatedness of all sentient beings as these processes coalesce in our own lives. This wisdom "Generates 'compassion' or karuna - experiencing the suffering of all sentient beings - not just human beings - as our own suffering, which is exactly what it is in an interdependent universe." For the Buddhist, Ingram says, "no one is free from suffering unless all sentient beings are free from suffering." Thus, "energized by awakened compassion, the awakened ones . . . are moved to work in the world to relieve all beings from suffering."

The Buddhist way of addressing suffering - "social engagement," or "social activism," as it is more familiarly called by American Christians - is grounded in the practice of non-violence and the practice of meditation. Because "individual greed, hatred, and delusion are central problems from which all need deliverance," Ingram says, quoting Thich Nhat Hahn, "'social work entails inner work.'" And it is meditation, that practice in which Buddhist social engagement is grounded, that opens us "to the experience of interdependence [of] all things and events" and "engenders compassionate action."

"However," Ingram writes, "while Buddhist have always been socially engaged with the forces that engender suffering, focus on 'systemic' suffering has not generally been a central point of Buddhist thought and practice until its contemporary dialogue" with Christian liberation theology's emphasis on "issues of structural suffering" - institutionalized causes of economic, gender, social, political, and environmental oppressions, as well as racism and war. Systemic suffering, Ingram says, the "suffering all persons experience but which bears little, if any, relation to personal choice or an individual's clinging to permanence in an impermanent universe," is "the primary form 'the problem of suffering' seems to be assuming in contemporary Buddhist theory and practice."

Two particular issues - and "problems" for the Buddhist treatment of suffering - are

human rights and violent social activism. "[T]hrough Buddhist eyes, the Western struggle for human rights seems to be a disguised form of clinging to permanent existence as in an impermanent universe," Ingram says. "From this perspective the struggle for human rights can only engender more suffering for all sentient beings. "Nevertheless, according to Ingram, "Buddhists realize the importance of human rights issues as issues of suffering," and thus "Buddhist debate on the nature of human rights still continues."

"Related to the issues of human rights is non-violent resistance against economic and political oppression," Ingram adds. "Since the heart of Buddhist social engagement is the practice of non-violence that grows out of the sense that all things and events are interdependent, Buddhists are in principle opposed to any form of violent social activism in the struggle for justice and release from communal suffering. The general Buddhist principle at work here," Ingram says, "is that violence only creates more violence in an interdependent universe. For this reason, until recent times, Buddhists have not been led to be socially active in struggle against unjust political systems, institutionalized forms of economic exploitation, and other forms of international violence. That is, classical Buddhist teaching and practice has tended to focus on individual suffering, but has not focused attention on how suffering becomes institutionalized in social systems."

However, in "confronting systemic suffering," Ingram says, "Buddhists are now facing this question: in a universe in which life must eat life to survive, is non-violence always the most ethical response to systemic suffering?" Or are there times in which the practice of non-violence "might itself engender more systemic suffering?"

Monotheistic theology faces "the problem of evil" and the related "problem of suffering" - the task of defending the Christian, Judaic, or Islamic good, just, all-powerful and loving god against accusations of unjust suffering and evil in the world. Buddhist teaching, however, grounded in the classical Buddhist doctrines of impermanence, non-self, interdependent co-origination and the Law of Karma, faces a different challenge. Buddhist teaching explains the presence of suffering as a result of individuals attempting to cling to permanence in a fleeting universe. The difficulty for Buddhism, however, lies in how to address, from a worldview grounded in non-violence, the suffering that results from oppression institutionalized in social systems.

According to Ingram, "the issue of suffering is not approached anywhere in Buddhist thought as a 'problem of evil,' since, given the non-theistic character [of] the Buddhist world view, the problem of theodicy cannot even occur. Furthermore, Buddhist reflection on unmerited systemic suffering has occurred only within the last thirty years, mostly inspired by Buddhist dialogue with Christianity." Ingram concludes, "All that can be said for certain in this regard is that Buddhist thought and practice on this issue [are] still in process."

6. Four Noble Truths - From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Four_Noble_Truths

1. The Nature of Suffering (Dukkha):

   "Now this ... is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering,

illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering."[6]

2. Suffering's Origin (Samudaya):

"Now this ... is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: it is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there, that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination."[6]

3. Suffering's Cessation (Nirodha):

"Now this ... is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: it is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, nonreliance on it."[6]

4. The Way (Marga) Leading to the Cessation of Suffering:

"Now this ... is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering: it is the Noble Eightfold Path; that is, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration."[9][10]

7. Life Isn't Just Suffering - By Thanissaro Bhikkhu

http://www.hinduwebsite.com/buddhism/essays/suffering.asp

"He showed me the brightness of the world."

That's how my teacher, Ajaan Fuang, once characterized his debt to his teacher, Ajaan Lee. His words took me by surprise. I had only recently come to study with him, still fresh from a school where I had learned that serious Buddhists took a negative, pessimistic view of the world. Yet here was a man who had given his life to the practice of the Buddha's teachings, speaking of the world's brightness. Of course, by "brightness" he wasn't referring to the joys of the arts, food, travel, sports, family life, or any of the other sections of the Sunday newspaper. He was talking about a deeper happiness that comes from within. As I came to know him, I gained a sense of how deeply happy he was. He may have been skeptical about a lot of human pretenses, but I would never describe him as negative or pessimistic. "Realistic" would be closer to the truth. Yet for a long time I couldn't shake the sense of paradox I felt over how the pessimism of the Buddhist texts could find embodiment in such a solidly happy person.

Only when I began to look at the early texts myself did I realize that what I thought was a paradox was actually an irony -- the irony of how Buddhism, which gives such a positive view of a human being's potential for finding true happiness, could be branded in the West as negative and pessimistic.

You've probably heard the rumor that "Life is suffering" is Buddhism's first principle, the Buddha's first noble truth. It's a rumor with good credentials, spread by well-respected academics and Dharma teachers alike, but a rumor nonetheless. The truth about the noble truths is far more interesting. The Buddha taught four truths -- not

one -- about life: There is suffering, there is a cause for suffering, there is an end of suffering, and there is a path of practice that puts an end to suffering. These truths, taken as a whole, are far from pessimistic. They're a practical, problem-solving approach -- the way a doctor approaches an illness, or a mechanic a faulty engine. You identify a problem and look for its cause. You then put an end to the problem by eliminating the cause.

What's special about the Buddha's approach is that the problem he attacks is the whole of human suffering, and the solution he offers is something human beings can do for themselves. Just as a doctor with a surefire cure for measles isn't afraid of measles, the Buddha isn't afraid of any aspect of human suffering. And, having experienced a happiness that's totally unconditional, he's not afraid to point out the suffering and stress inherent in places where most of us would rather not see it -- in the conditioned pleasures we cling to. He teaches us not to deny that suffering and stress or to run away from it, but to stand still and face up to it. To examine it carefully. That way -- by understanding it -- we can ferret out its cause and put an end to it. Totally. How confident can you get?

A fair number of writers have pointed out the basic confidence inherent in the four noble truths, and yet the rumor of Buddhism's pessimism persists. I wonder why. One possible explanation is that, in coming to Buddhism, we sub-consciously expect it to address issues that have a long history in our own culture. By starting out with suffering as his first truth, the Buddha seems to be offering his position on a question with a long history in the West: is the world basically good or bad?

According to Genesis, this was the first question that occurred to God after he had finished his creation: had he done a good job? So he looked at the world and saw that it was good. Ever since then, people in the West have sided with or against God on his answer, but in doing so they have affirmed that the question was worth asking to begin with. When Theravada -- the only form of Buddhism to take on Christianity when Europe colonized Asia -- was looking for ways to head off what it saw as the missionary menace, Buddhists who had received their education from the missionaries assumed that the question was valid and pressed the first noble truth into service as a refutation of the Christian God: look at how miserable life is, they said, and it's hard to accept God's verdict on his handiwork.

This debating strategy may have scored a few points at the time, and it's easy to find Buddhist apologists who -- still living in the colonial past -- keep trying to score the same points. The real issue, though, is whether the Buddha intended for his first noble truth to be an answer to God's question in the first place and -- more importantly -- whether we're getting the most out of the first noble truth if we see it in that light.

It's hard to imagine what you could accomplish by saying that life is suffering. You'd have to spend your time arguing with people who see more than just suffering in life. The Buddha himself says as much in one of his discourses. A brahman named Long-nails (Dighanakha) comes to him and announces that he doesn't approve of anything. This would have been a perfect time for the Buddha, if he had wanted, to chime in with the truth that life is suffering. Instead, he attacks the whole notion of taking a stand on whether life is worthy of approval. There are three possible answers to this question: (1) nothing is worthy of approval, (2) everything is, and (3) some things are and some things aren't. If you take any of these three positions, you end up arguing with the people who take either of the other two positions. And where does that get you?

The Buddha then teaches Long-nails to look at his body and feelings as instances of the first noble truth: they're stressful, inconstant, and don't deserve to be clung to as self. Long-nails follows the Buddha's instructions and, in letting go of his attachment to body and feelings, gains his first glimpse of the Deathless, of what it's like to be totally free from suffering.

The point of this story is that trying to answer God's question, passing judgment on the world, is a waste of time. And it offers a better use for the first noble truth: looking at things, not in terms of "world" or "life," but simply identifying suffering so that you can comprehend it, let it go, and attain release. Rather than asking us to make a blanket judgment -- which, in effect, would be asking us to be blind partisans -- the first noble truth asks us to look and see precisely where the problem of suffering lies.

Other discourses make the point that the problem isn't with body and feelings in and of themselves. They themselves aren't suffering. The suffering lies in clinging to them. In his definition of the first noble truth, the Buddha summarizes all types of suffering under the phrase, "the five clinging-aggregates": clinging to physical form (including the body), feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, and consciousness. However, when the five aggregates are free from clinging, he tells us, they lead to long-term benefit and happiness.

So the first noble truth, simply put, is that clinging is suffering. It's because of clinging that physical pain becomes mental pain. It's because of clinging that aging, illness, and death cause mental distress. How do we cling? The texts list four ways: the clinging of sensual passion, the clinging of views, the clinging of precepts and practices, and the clinging of doctrines of the self. It's rare that a moment passes in the ordinary mind without some form of clinging. Even when we abandon a particular form of clinging, it's usually because it gets in the way of another form. We may abandon a puritanical view because it interferes with sensual pleasure; or a sensual pleasure because it conflicts with a view about what we should do to stay healthy. Our views of who we are may expand and contract depending on which of our many senses of "I" is feeling the most pain: it may expand into a cosmic sense of oneness with all being when we feel confined by the limitations of our small mind-body complex; it may contract into a small shell when we feel the pain that comes from identifying with a cosmos so filled with cruelty, thoughtlessness, and stupidity. And then we hit the point where the insignificance of our finite self becomes oppressive again.

So we find our minds jumping from clinging to clinging like a mustard seed in a sizzling hot wok. When we realize this, we naturally search for a way out. And this is where it's so important that the first noble truth not say that "Life is suffering," for if life were suffering, where would we look for an end to suffering? We'd be left with nothing but death and annihilation. But when the actual truth is that clinging is suffering, we simply have to look to see precisely where clinging is and learn not to cling.

This is where we encounter the Buddha's great skill as a strategist: He tells us to take the clingings we'll have to abandon and transform them into the path to their abandoning. We'll need a certain amount of sensual pleasure -- in terms of adequate food, clothing, and shelter -- to find the strength to go beyond sensual passion. We'll need Right View to overcome attachment to views; and a regimen of the five precepts and the practice of meditation to overcome attachment to precepts and

practices. Underlying all this, we'll need a strong sense of self-responsibility in order to overcome attachment to doctrines of the self.

So we start the path to the end of suffering, not by trying to drop our clingings immediately, but by learning to cling more strategically. In other words, we start where we are and make the best use of the habits we've already got. We progress along the path by finding better and better things to cling to, and more skillful ways to cling, in the same way you climb a ladder to the top of a roof: grab hold of a higher rung so that you can let go of a lower rung, and then grab onto a rung still higher. As the rungs get further off the ground, you find that the mind grows clearer and can see precisely where its clingings are. It gets a sharper sense of which parts of experience belong to which noble truth and what should be done with them: the parts that are suffering should be comprehended, the parts that cause of suffering -- craving and ignorance -- should be abandoned; the parts that form the path to the end of suffering should be developed; and the parts that belong to the end of suffering should be verified. This helps you get higher and higher on the ladder until you find yourself securely on the roof. That's when you can finally let go of the ladder and be totally free.

So the real question we face is not God's question, passing judgment on how skillfully he created life or the world. It's our question: how skillfully are we handling the raw stuff of life? Are we clinging in ways that serve only to continue the round of suffering, or are we learning to cling in ways that will reduce suffering so that ultimately we can grow up and won't have to cling. If we negotiate life armed with all four noble truths, realizing that life contains both suffering and an end to suffering, there's hope: hope that we'll be able to sort out which parts of life belong to which truth; hope that someday, in this life, we'll discover the brightness at the point where we can agree with the Buddha, "Oh. Yes. This is the end of suffering and stress."