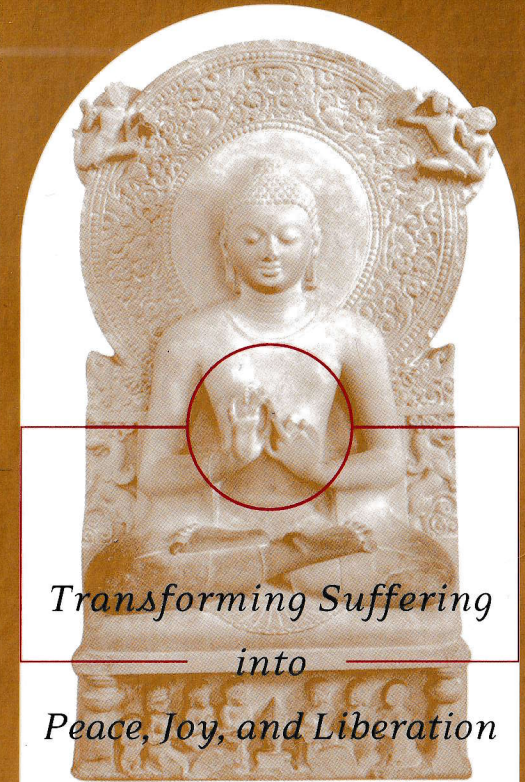


The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching

"Thich Nhat
Hanh writes
with the voice
of the Buddha."
—Sogyal Rinpoche



*Transforming Suffering
into
Peace, Joy, and Liberation*

THICH
NHAT
HANH

Is Everything Suffering?

If we are not careful in the way we practice, we may have the tendency to make the words of our teacher into a doctrine or an ideology. Since the Buddha said that the First Noble Truth is suffering, many good students of the Buddha have used their skills to prove that everything on Earth is suffering. The theory of the Three Kinds of Suffering was such an attempt. It is not a teaching of the Buddha.

The first kind of suffering is “the suffering of suffering” (*dukkha dukkhata*), the suffering associated with unpleasant feelings, like the pain of a toothache, losing your temper, or feeling too cold on a winter’s day. The second is “the suffering of composite things” (*samskara dukkhata*). Whatever comes together eventually has to come apart; therefore, all composite things are described as suffering. Even things that have not yet decayed, such as mountains, rivers, and the sun, are seen to be suffering, because they will decay and cause suffering eventually. When you believe that everything composed is suffering, how can you find joy? The third is “the suffering associated with change” (*viparinama dukkhata*). Our liver may be in good health today, but when we grow old, it will cause us to suffer. There is no point in celebrating joy, because sooner or later it will turn into suffering. Suffering is a black cloud that envelops everything. Joy is an illusion. Only suffering is real.

For more than two thousand years, students of Buddhism have been declaring that the Buddha taught that all objects

of perception — all physical (table, sun, moon) and physiological phenomena and all wholesome, unwholesome, and neutral states of mind — are suffering. One hundred years after the Buddha passed away, practitioners were already repeating the formula, “This is suffering. Life is suffering. *Everything* is suffering.” They thought that to obtain insight into the First Noble Truth, they had to repeat this formula. Some commentators said that without this constant repetition, the Four Noble Truths could not be realized.¹

Today, many people invoke the names of the Buddha or do similar practices mechanically, believing that this will bring them insight and emancipation. They are caught in forms, words, and notions, and are not using their intelligence to receive and practice the Dharma. It can be dangerous to practice without using your own intelligence, without a teacher and friends who can show you ways to practice correctly. Repeating a phrase like “Life is suffering” might help you notice when you are about to become attached to something, but it cannot help you understand the true nature of suffering or reveal the path shown to us by the Buddha.

This dialogue is repeated in many sutras:

“Monks, are conditioned things permanent or impermanent?”

“They are impermanent, World-Honored One.”

“If things are impermanent, are they suffering or well-being?”

“They are suffering, World-Honored One.”

“If things are suffering, can we say that they are self or belong to self?”

“No, World-Honored One.”

¹ *Samyukta Agama 262.*

When we read this, we may think that the Buddha is offering a theory — “All things are suffering” — that we have to prove in our daily life. But in other parts of the same sutras, the Buddha says that he only wants us to recognize suffering when it is present and to recognize joy when suffering is absent. By the time the Buddha’s discourses were written down, seeing all things as suffering must have been widely practiced, as the above quotation occurs more frequently than the teaching on the origin of suffering and the path to end suffering.

The argument, “Impermanent, therefore suffering, therefore nonself” is illogical. Of course, if we believe that something is permanent or has a self, we may suffer when we discover that it is impermanent and without a separate self. But, in many texts, suffering is regarded as one of the Three Dharma Seals, along with impermanence and nonself. It is said that all teachings of the Buddha bear the Three Dharma Seals. To put suffering on the same level as impermanence and nonself is an error. Impermanence and nonself are “universal.” They are a “mark” of all things. Suffering is not. It is not difficult to see that a table is impermanent and does not have a self separate from all non-table elements, like wood, rain, sun, furniture maker, and so on. But is it suffering? A table will only make us suffer if we attribute permanence or separateness to it. When we are attached to a certain table, it is not the table that causes us to suffer. It is our attachment. We can agree that anger is impermanent, without a separate self, and filled with suffering, but it is strange to talk about a table or a flower as being filled with suffering. The Buddha taught impermanence and nonself to help us not be caught in signs.

The theory of the Three Kinds of Suffering is an attempt to justify the universalization of suffering. What joy is left in life? We find it in nirvana. In several sutras the Buddha

taught that nirvana, the joy of completely extinguishing our ideas and concepts, rather than suffering, is one of the Three Dharma Seals. This is stated four times in the *Samyukta Agama* of the Northern transmission.² Quoting from yet another sutra, Nagarjuna listed nirvana as one of the Three Dharma Seals.³ To me, it is much easier to envision a state where there are no obstacles created by concepts than to see all things as suffering. I hope scholars and practitioners will begin to accept the teaching that all things are marked by impermanence, nonself, and nirvana, and not make too great an effort to prove that everything is suffering.

Another common misunderstanding of the Buddha's teaching is that all of our suffering is caused by craving. In the *Discourse on Turning the Wheel of the Dharma*, the Buddha did say that craving is the cause of suffering, but he said this because craving is the first on the list of afflictions (*kleshas*). If we use our intelligence, we can see that craving can be a cause of pain, but other afflictions such as anger, ignorance, suspicion, arrogance, and wrong views can also cause pain and suffering. Ignorance, which gives rise to wrong perceptions, is responsible for much of our pain. To make the sutras shorter and therefore easier to memorize, the first item on a list was often used to represent the whole list. The word "eyes," for example, is used in many sutras to represent all six sense organs⁴ and "form" is often used to represent all Five Aggregates (*skandhas*).⁵ If we practice identifying the causes of our suffering, we will see that sometimes it is due to craving and sometimes it is due to other factors. To say, "Life is

² *Samyukta Agama* 262 (*Taisho* 99).

³ *Mahaprajñāparamita Shastra*. See Étienne Lamotte, *Le Traité de La Grande Vertu de Sagesse* (Louvain, Belgium: Institut Orientaliste, 1949).

⁴ Six sense organs: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind.

⁵ The Five Aggregates are the elements that constitute a person, namely form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. See chap. 23.

suffering," is too general. To say that craving is the cause of all our suffering is too simplistic. We need to say, "The basis for this suffering is such and such an affliction," and then call it by its true name. If we have a stomachache, we need to call it a stomachache. If it is a headache, we need to call it a headache. How else will we find the cause of our suffering and the way to heal ourselves?

It is true that the Buddha taught the truth of suffering, but he also taught the truth of "dwelling happily in things as they are" (*driṣṭa dharma sukha viharin*).⁶ To succeed in the practice, we must stop trying to prove that everything is suffering. In fact, we must stop trying to prove anything. If we touch the truth of suffering with our mindfulness, we will be able to recognize and identify our specific suffering, its specific causes, and the way to remove those causes and end our suffering.

⁶ *Samyutta Nikaya* V, 326, and many other places.