



William Blake, Let the Day Perish Wherein I Was Born. (detail) The woodcut depicts Job at the point at which he is overcome by suffering and grief.

*National Gallery of Art,
Washington, D.C.,
Rosenwald Collection*

A Buddhist View of Suffering

Humans ask Why? of the universe. J.B., the protagonist in Archibald MacLeish's play, says, in trying to make sense out of his grief, "What I can't bear is the blindness. If I knew why."⁸ We are stalkers of meaning but perhaps, as the Buddha argued centuries ago, humans are misguided in asking Why? of the cosmos. Such a question presumes that the power in the universe is a personal being who is somehow responsible or at least aware of the purpose of suffering. Novelist Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., playfully makes a similar point in a dialogue that he imagines transpiring between God and Adam:

Man blinked. "What is the purpose of all this?" he asked politely.

"Everything must have a purpose?" asked God.

"Certainly," said man.

"Then I leave it to you to think of one for all this," said God.

And he went away.⁹

In the Buddha's view, many of the questions that preoccupy human beings resolve nothing and actually create further suffering. For example, by

implying that an eternal self exists, the perennial concerns of Who am I? Why am I here? and Where am I going? may cause one to misconstrue the nature of personal identity and may lead to such illusory pursuits as seeking to know whether one has or has not existed previously and whether one will or will not survive beyond this life. Such reflections do not, in the Buddha's reckoning, contribute to liberation from *dukkha*. In contrast to such speculation, the Buddha's teaching is a response to four very basic concerns: *dukkha*, its causes, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation.

Dukkha

The truth with which Buddhism begins is the universality of suffering. The Buddha taught that all is ill or unsatisfactory. Besides the obvious and natural afflictions to which flesh is heir (disease, old age, death), there is the misery that results from immoral thoughts and actions, which range from the overt and intentional doing of harm to that which is concealed and unintended. In addition to natural and moral *dukkha*, all is ill because life is transitory. Whatsoever is impermanent, what arises and passes away, negates the possibility of permanent happiness.

The Buddha recognized that it is difficult to assimilate the fact that *dukkha* is a universal quality of existence. Awareness that things are not as they should be is often a transitory mood that disappears with the alleviation of pain and suffering, rather than a conviction that existence itself is inherently unsatisfactory. The positive aspects of existence allow us to mitigate and obscure what is unpleasant. In *The Plague*, Rambert, a youthful journalist, visits the city of Oran just as an epidemic of the plague breaks out. Quarantined in a city in which he is a stranger, Rambert tries desperately to secure an official permit to leave. "I don't belong here!" he protests.¹⁰ Good fortune, a healthy body, and earthly delights may enable us to act, like Rambert, as if pain is something we have accidentally stumbled upon and can escape. However, there comes a time for us, as it did for Rambert, when we realize that suffering or evil is not a superficial characteristic of existence. The Buddha came to such a disquieting realization when his contentment was shattered by an encounter with disease, old age, and death. Deeply troubled by suffering, the Buddha-to-be left the security of his family to discover the causes of suffering and the ways it can be overcome.

The Causes of Dukkha

From the fact of *dukkha*, the Buddha moved to an analysis of its causes. Insatiable desire or craving, which has its origin in illusory conceptions or ignorance, gives rise to suffering. Existence, in the Buddha's metaphor, is "burning with the fire of lust, with the fire of hate, with the fire of delusion."¹¹ Craving is reflected in a thirst for and an attachment to fame, fortune, novelty, power, ideals, beliefs, causes, pleasures of the body, and

even to those who are loved. Desire is rooted in greed, in selfishness. Accordingly, writes Buddhist scholar Walpola Rahula, "all the troubles and strife in the world, from little personal quarrels in families to great wars between nations and countries arise out of this selfish 'thirst.'"¹²

Liberation from Dukkha

In the Buddhist perspective, the causes of *dukkha*, burning desire and ignorance, are overcome by cultivation of dispassionate detachment and by the wisdom that comes from an understanding of things as they ultimately are. The process in which ignorance is replaced with understanding and craving with nonattachment is known as the Noble Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path shuns moral corruptions of speech (lying, rudeness, gossip) and promotes personal and social well-being through abstention from stealing, illicit sex, and the destruction of life. As a mental as well as moral discipline, Buddhism calls for an unbending effort to develop wholesome-ness of mind through meditative exercises that stress close attention to activities of mind and body and that intensify the powers of concentration. Mindfulness and concentration can culminate in a meditative state in which the mind is emptied of all content and is no longer aware of subject and object, good and evil, joy and sorrow. Those who understand the truth of *dukkha*, who follow and keep the Noble Eightfold Path can, in the cultivation of nonattachment, eliminate craving and realize nirvana. Nirvana is the Buddhist term for the cessation of suffering and the extinction of desire and illusion. In the ultimate, the absolute, *dukkha* is extinguished, the cycle of reincarnation is exhausted, and nothing remains to be done.

Nonattachment as a Theological Breaking Point

Just as there are philosophical objections to belief in the God of monotheism, there are intellectual dilemmas or breaking points in Buddhism. Nirvana and nonattachment are two such points. Since objections to the idea of nirvana were discussed in conjunction with the arguments against the existence of God, only a criticism of nonattachment is discussed here. Buddhism teaches that the overcoming of suffering is possible through nonattachment. In the *Dhammapada*, Buddha likened nonattachment to the severing of all ties. In another context, the liberated monk is said to neither love nor hate.

Critics of Buddhism have argued that in advocating the ideal of nonattachment, Buddhism embraces apathy as a way of responding to the world. Thus the severing of all ties is a way of mitigating psychic wounds by disengaging from emotional involvement. Nonattachment is equated with indifference. It is a justification for inaction that, in counseling the acceptance of things as they are, acquiesces to oppressive and potentially remediable social conditions.

*Daibatsu Buddha,
Kamakura, Japan. A
monumental Buddha
seated in meditation.*

Photo: Frederic Lewis



Buddhists have responded to such criticism by insisting that nonattachment should not be confused with apathy. The desire to have and to hold is a glorification of the ego that mistakenly places personal existence at the center of being. Before unbridled thirst can be overcome, the individual must learn that life cannot be controlled by acts of will. Human life is transitory, and, no matter how securely we spin our webs of possession, the outcome is unpredictable. We cannot, for example, insure that those we love will return our affection. Mature caring recognizes that when we are possessive and manipulative, we almost invariably drive those we love away from us; thus possessive love leads to sorrow. In contrast, Buddhist nonattachment is more a letting-be, a nonpossessive involvement that is compassionate, flexible, and caring. Nonattachment allows those who are loved to have room to fashion their own way of being and to work out their own salvation. When Buddhist nonattachment is understood as nonpossessiveness, it is not unlike the Christian conception of love. John Macquarrie writes, "The essence of

love is precisely letting-be, and for this reason love has become, not only in Christianity but in other religions besides, the supreme symbol of divine Being."¹³

Further evidence that those who are liberated from *dukkha* are neither apathetic nor indifferent is evident in the Buddhist recognition that the annihilation of suffering does not eliminate pain or preclude the possibility of enduring pain for the well-being of others. Enlightened ones, Buddhas, experience physical pain and death. What they have destroyed is the anguish that stems from the desire to exist in a world in which self-gratification is assumed to be the highest good. Pain that results from a genuine caring rather than a masochistic thirst is honored by Buddhists. The Buddha is the compassionate one who taught those who follow the Buddhist path to cultivate love without limit toward all existence. In the *Dhammapada*, Buddha teaches his followers to "conquer anger by love, evil by good; conquer the miser with liberality, and the liar with truth."¹⁴ A tradition with such a concerned founder would naturally gravitate to what is known as the Bodhisattva ideal—namely, the approval and veneration of those Buddhas who have embraced and endured pain out of a compassionate regard for others. The Buddhist willingness to serve and even suffer for others leads naturally to a consideration of the Christian concept of redemptive suffering and of Christ, the man for others.

A Christian View of Suffering

In attacking the problem of suffering, Buddhism begins with the fact of *dukkha*, diagnoses its causes, and prescribes an antidote. The problem and its resolution is entirely a human matter. In Christianity the difficulty that suffering poses for the human spirit leads from the existential character of human affliction to God, the Lord of Creation. Theodicy, the difficulty of reconciling the existence of evil with belief in a God who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and absolutely good, has been from ancient times the most imposing problem that Christians and other monotheists face. The dilemma or breaking point that theodicy raises for theism is stated quite succinctly by John Hick: "If God is perfectly good, He must want to abolish evil; if He is unlimitedly powerful, He must be able to abolish all evil: but evil exists; therefore either God is not perfectly good or He is not unlimitedly powerful."¹⁵

Christian Views on the Genesis of Evil

While there is no single Christian explanation of the origin of evil, the dominant Christian perspective has attempted to absolve God of the responsibility for evil by insisting that Adam and Eve were responsible for

the loss of paradise. In this interpretation, suffering and death are the consequence of sin—that is, of human being's willful turning from God. Essential to the argument that makes human beings rather than God culpable for the origin of evil is the belief that God created us free. In choosing to disobey God, Adam and Eve forfeited their place in the Garden of Eden not only for themselves, but for all human beings. The result of this original sin is that suffering, death, and a will that corrupts the goodness of God's creation are universal features of fallen existence.

In a more cosmic version of the Fall, the sin of Adam and Eve was preceded by a heavenly rebellion in which angels led by Satan revolted against God and his loyal subjects. Cast from his heavenly abode, Satan, in the form of a serpent, tempted Adam and Eve to sin. In one apocalyptic interpretation of this myth, the present age is so under the dominion of Satan that it is no longer redeemable. Seen in this light, there is an answer to the prophet Jeremiah's perplexing question, "Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?"¹⁶ In this view, the righteous suffer because Satan and his dominions have corrupted God's creation. The apocalyptic message is that God hears the cries of the righteous and will one day break Satan's rule. When that day comes, suffering, death, and all that is evil will be overcome and God will establish "a new heaven and a new earth."¹⁷