

II

UNDERSTANDING THE TRUTH OF SUFFERING

In the *Three Principles of the Path*, Je Tsongkhapa, founder of the Ganden Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, wrote:

*Swept away by four raging rivers,
Tightly bound by karmic chains, so hard to escape,
Trapped in the iron cage of self-grasping,
Shrouded by pitch-black ignorance,*

*Born again and again in endless cycles of life,
Constantly tortured by the three sufferings,
All our mothers are in this plight.
Please generate ultimate compassion and love.*

The First Noble Truth is here, quite clearly. We are really swept away by four raging rivers: attachment, confusion, desire, and wrong view.

Attachment and desire are slightly different. Not every desire is attachment, but every attachment is also desire. It is possible to have desire for enlightenment, but that might not be attachment. We are caught up in some very strong pull-and-push dilemmas, torn between love and hate, and attachment and rejection. That is the meaning of being swept away by four raging rivers. Almost every activity in our lives, every agenda, is directed by these powerful currents that sweep us back and forth all the time. Otherwise, why do most of us show long faces so often? We share our tears all the time. I am sure many times they are real tears and not just crocodile tears. We have been tormented in this way throughout our life and lives.

Even though we are swept away by those four rivers, it would not be so bad if legs of compassion and hands of wisdom were at our disposal. We could probably swim to the shore. We have very strong survival instincts and would definitely manage to survive. However, we don't have the wisdom of the hands. We may have some human intelligence, but even that is tied and shackled by the confusion, fear, and ignorance that I call ego.

Ego is so powerful. Any tiny little disagreement comes up, and our ego feels hurt. Whatever anybody does anywhere, ego reads it as an insult, as being put down, and reacts with pain. It tells us, "I have not been respected! They don't remember what I did for them! I am not being treated like a human being!" When we feel hurt all the time, it is the ego that is getting hurt. These feelings are very powerful, and they completely control us.

That is what is meant by *tightly bound by karmic chains so hard to escape*. Our hatred pushes in one direction, our attachment pulls in the other directions, and ego holds us tight.

Then, being swept away by the four rivers with hands and legs bound would still not be so desperate if at least it were daytime and someone could see us and help us. However, it is dark, and no one can see us. That is the effect of ego-ignorance. It is the reason why many people are not straightforward, though they would like to be. In reality, they hide their wrong motivation and wrong actions, their agendas. Again, this is the work of ego. It tells us that if we do things openly and clearly, we are exposing ourselves and making ourselves vulnerable, so we try to hide our agendas. In that way, ego keeps us under the cover of darkness, so that no one can see and help us.

The Three Kinds of Suffering

Not only that. Being swept away by the four rivers happens not just once, but we have been repeating this pattern life after life. We do it all the time, day after day, week after week, month after month. Again and again we live in that condition. In fact, life after life, we are in that situation, tortured by three sufferings: *the suffering of suffering, changing suffering, and pervasive suffering*.

We know about *the suffering of suffering*. It is the mental, physical, and emotional pain we always experience. This kind of suffering is gross and vivid and obvious.

Changing suffering is also our constant, daily experience. We feel hot, so we turn on the air conditioner. Then it gets too cold, so we turn it off. We may even turn on the heating. Again it gets too hot, so we turn the air conditioner on. Soon it gets too cold, and we have to grab every blanket we can reach. If we can't, we have to pull the curtains down! We experience something that seems at first like a little bit of joy, but when it is slightly more or less than what is comfortable, it immediately becomes suffering.

This goes for everything we enjoy. If we overdo it just a little, it gives us pain. It goes for food and everything else, including sex. It looks like something pleasant, but a little extra turns the experience into pain. You don't even need the extra bit. Just doing the same thing regularly makes the quality of the experience get worse and worse and worse. You know what I am talking about. That shows you that what you think is pleasure is really changing suffering.

Pervasive suffering is a little more difficult to understand. According to the Buddha, everything we experience, including joy, is not happiness at all. In the prayer *The Four Immeasurables*, we pray for *the joy has never known suffering*. That shows us that there is a kind of joy that we have not experienced so far. According to the Buddha, we are constantly in samsara, the state of misery and pain, and not in nirvana, the state of joy and peace. In our experience we think that some moments are joy and happiness, but in reality they are all pain and suffering.

This is true. The joy we experience is like the joy of people addicted to cigarettes. It becomes a physical need to have another drag on a cigarette. Not having one causes physical tickling in the joints and sometimes headaches. I know because I have been through it. I never knew that these were called withdrawal symptoms. When I stopped smoking, I took aspirin. For thirteen years I smoked up to three packs a day of an Indian brand called Panama, a heavy cigarette without filters.

I finally gave up smoking through willpower. I didn't stop because I got sick, but because I was supposed to accompany a big Rimpoché who had come from Tibet on a trip to Ladakh. He is related to our family and is the head of the Drikung Kagyu school. He came out of Tibet as a young man and stayed for a while in America. By rank he is pretty much the most prominent lama in Ladakh. He was supposed to visit Ladakh for the first time and asked me to go with him. He was asked to compose texts and do blessing ceremonies. They needed someone to help and asked me to go, and I agreed.

In Ladakh, if you smoke, they look at you almost as if you are a butcher. That is their culture, so I had to cut it out. A friend of mine said, "You should stop after this pack." I thought, "Right." But then I thought, "Oh, if I wait till after the pack, I am never going to stop. If I stop, I have to do it right now!" I did not even finish the cigarette I was smoking. I put it out half-smoked and flushed the rest of the pack down the toilet.

Then I got this itchy business. I kept on looking at my watch. Half an hour went by, one hour went by, then four hours, and then I thought, "I feel like smoking one now, but do I want to blow the sacrifice of the last four hours for a few drags on a cigarette?" Thinking like that I extended the period of not smoking to days, and then weeks, and then it was certainly not worth blowing all that effort again. Just the headaches alone wouldn't be worth it. I never knew that they were withdrawal symptoms. I was taking aspirin anyway, quite a lot. After a while, I forgot all about wanting to smoke, until I saw other people doing it, and I got the itch again, but I forced myself to remember that I had stopped.

Once you make your mind up strongly, you are not going to go back and submit to the addiction. Then later, if you smoke one here or there, it will not bother you.

The little joy-kick of smoking a cigarette may be experienced initially as wonderful, but you know how harmful it is. It will give you lung cancer and so many other problems. Clearly, it is not joy but suffering, and so are alcohol and all other intoxicating substances, including some prescription drugs. They may not give you much joy, but they certainly give you a lot of trouble.

Like that, Buddha tells us that in samsara, every joy we think of as joy is actually pain. Pain is hidden within that fake joy. It will cause pain and create ego-boosting mechanisms that hurt the individual more and cause more pain. That is what pervasive suffering is all about, briefly speaking. Normally, when you talk about pervasive suffering you are supposed to talk more in detail about "anti-wisdom" ideas. But in brief,

“pervasive” means that the suffering is everywhere. Every joy we experience is contaminated; every experience is contaminated by the cause of suffering or by its result—the suffering itself.

Basically, these three types of suffering constitute what Buddha identified as the First Noble Truth of suffering. Every single thing that we consider happiness and pleasure is included. We don’t have any uncontaminated joy at all—any *joy that has never known suffering*. We have never experienced this kind of joy; we don’t even know what it is all about. We have just heard the words and repeat them like a parrot, but other than that, we have no idea.

We do have suffering, but many times, we do not recognize it. When we are young, we don’t know about it and don’t think about it. We think we can handle anything. We think we can run as fast as a galloping horse! We think we can catch anything in our hands, even a bird flying in the air! But year after year, day after day, week after week, we learn we can’t do this, and we can’t do that. We slowly discover the truth of suffering. We are not discovering anything new. It was already there, but we hadn’t encountered it directly yet.

We know for a fact we will encounter it gradually. It is going to happen. The police can make computer drawings from a photo that show how the face of a suspect will look after twenty years. All these really show is how the natural process has taken place. In reality, that natural process is the true suffering of aging, plus illness, plus death. All of those are there waiting right in front of us. We cannot escape that reality. However, we can learn how to handle it.

A few weeks ago I went to a medical checkup in Malaysia. This time they said, “Oh my god, your kidneys are not functioning properly. They are only functioning at 40 per cent of their capacity. That is terrible!” For two days I was worried. I asked them how long I could rely on my kidneys. They said, “If there is nothing else, like a stroke or a heart attack, your kidneys will only function for another two and a half years maximum.” I thought, “I am only going to live for another two and a half years? Then I will die? Oh well, so what? Everybody has to die. The most important thing when you die is that you have some solid spiritual development to carry with you. If you are a great spiritual practitioner, you will see this as a great warning, and you will focus: Let me not waste my remaining two and a half years and work hard, so that I can achieve something. I am not a good practitioner and just keep on doing my normal work. Perhaps my normal work is my dharma work. If that is true, let me do it for as long as I can.”

These pains and worries are there. We get them. However, we have to realize that it is not that much, not unreasonable. People die much younger everywhere else. Often healthy ones drop dead, while chronically sick persons continue to struggle on. Uncertainty is one of the sufferings in samsara. Anyway, this is the reality, the nature of our life. When you are young, you look beautiful. That is not a surprise, since you are

young. When you get old, you look ugly. No surprise there either, since you are old. So what's wrong with that? Old people worry about their looks. We all do, even the young ones do. They put on makeup and so on, and that is because they worry. It is mental pain. We all have that. That is the nature of our life.

The Sufferings of the Six Realms

If it stopped there, it would still be okay. But it doesn't. As long as you are in samsara, every life you take, every transition you go through, every change that happens is suffering in nature. Not only that: much stronger suffering exists than what we know in our human life.

Life in the hell realms is reality, not a fabrication. A lot of people say, "Hell may not exist, but we can experience hellish suffering within our human life." Many spiritual leaders say that. I wish it were true, but unfortunately I cannot say that.

The reason why spiritual teachers avoid talking about hell realms is the fear that people may not like to hear about it and the fear that people may lose faith and not believe it. No one can say, "Yes, I went to the hell realms and have just come back. I saw So-and-So down there and that person sent a message." At the same time no one can confirm that the hell realms are not true, either. So in between that, we choose not to talk about it and would rather leave it alone. Personally, I don't have proof that hell exists, nor do I have proof that it doesn't exist, but if it exists and we don't talk about it, it may not be right.

If I don't mention it and pretend that it doesn't exist, I would be sweeping it under the rug, and that might not be right. According to the Buddha's teachings, not only is there one hell realm, but there are eighteen of them! There are eight hot hell realms and eight extremely cold hell realms, plus two in the usual human realm.

Let's talk about the lightest of them, which in Tibetan is called *yang ts*. That means "reviving" or "recovering hell." People there are so controlled by hatred that no one can stand anyone else. They pick up weapons and kill each other. The moment everybody is dead, a voice comes from the sky saying, "You may all revive." So they get up and pick up their weapons and start fighting and killing each other again. That happens a hundred times a day.

One step below that is another hell. You know how carpenters, before they cut a piece of wood, draw lines to indicate where they want to cut? In this hell, the hell attendants draw lines on your body and then cut through your body along those lines with sharp weapons. Then you revive and the same thing happens again. You don't die, because you are in a hell realm. You go through this again and again until the hell experience is finished.

Another hell is one that butchers are supposed to experience. The animals that you butchered appear to you in this hell as huge mountains and smash you in between them.

Then you revive, and it happens again.

The lowest of all hells is called “vajra hell.” *Vajra* means “indestructible,” and the person suffering in that hell is indestructible, like a vajra. You burn in such intensely hot fire that there is almost no separation between your body and the fire. But no matter how hot you burn, you don’t die. It is like a very dry, three-year-old log that you put into the fire. It burns immediately, and you cannot see the difference between the log and the fire.

As I said, I have no proof that the hell realms are reality and no proof that they are not reality. But Buddha’s teachings tell us that the hot and cold hells are there.

Similarly, there are indeed hungry ghost realms. These ghosts or spirits are so hungry, yet they can’t eat. Some of them are extremely wealthy, but they can’t use their wealth. Sometimes I am reminded of my experience as a diabetic. I love sweets, and people give them to me, but I can’t eat them. These hungry ghosts, even if they find food, can’t eat it. They can’t get it through their throats.

In his praise to Avalokiteshvara, the Seventh Dalai Lama describes the suffering of the hungry ghosts. He says that their stomachs are a hundred times bigger than ours. They are like little mountains, but due to some kind of karmic knot in their throat, they can’t get any food through. Their legs are as thin as stalks of hay. Their bodies are extremely dry, as if they were made of dust, totally covered by dust. When our human skin is very dry, it feels as if there is some dust on it, but hungry ghosts are covered in dust! They are extremely hungry and thirsty, so much so that fire comes out of their mouths.

That is the description of hungry ghosts. Many of the powerful ghosts that come and help or do harm are in the category of hungry ghosts. We know that they are there. They come and talk to psychics and give them all kinds of messages.

The suffering of animals is very well known to us. We see it all the time. Some animals we like, and some of them we don’t. Some of them we cut, chop, and eat. We use their bones, their skin, and their meat. The famous oxtail soup is made from an ox’s tail, the tail of an animal. In order to get that oxtail, we kill the ox. In order to get ivory, we kill elephants. And of course, animals also eat each other. Shantideva says that the biggest suffering of animals is that one eats the other. That is reality. We see it. Within the animal realm, a tremendous number of creatures live in the ocean. Deep down in the darkness there are zillions of them.

As human beings we know how much pain and suffering is in the human experience. That is no mystery to us. We don’t need to be a rocket scientist to find out what sufferings we have. We know very well, as I have described already.

According to the Buddhist teachings the demigods are always jealous of the samsaric gods. They keep on fighting with them all the time, and they lose all the time. Still, they keep fighting. They won’t give up.

The samsaric gods have suffering too. They may have a wonderful time and not see any suffering while they are in the god realm, but that does not mean they have overcome

suffering.

According to the Buddhist sutras, Shariputra, one of Buddha's outstanding disciples, himself had a disciple who was totally dedicated and devoted and was developing very well. Suddenly, an unfortunate incident took place, and the person died. Shariputra thought, "I will find out where he has been reborn and give him continuous teachings until he is liberated." Through his meditative power, Shariputra found out that this guy had been reborn in the thirty-third heaven, and so, he went there to teach him.

Residents of the thirty-third heaven are known as "three-timers." By their own karmic power, they know three times—their past, present, and future lives. Therefore, when Shariputra showed up in the thirty-third heaven, his former student recognized him. Since as a human being he had been totally devoted, Shariputra expected that his disciple would run towards him the moment he saw him, but the disciple was riding on an elephant, throwing flowers. Shariputra thought, "Now he will jump from the elephant and come running," but instead, he just briefly raised his hand and went on his way. Shariputra appeared again for him somewhere else, but again, the disciple only raised a hand and moved on. That happened three times.

Shariputra went to Buddha and said, "I tried to connect with him and to continue to teach him, but he ignored me." Buddha said, "Don't you know that he is in a samsaric god realm?" Shariputra said, "I know. That's why I went there." Buddha said, "The gods in the samsaric god realms don't have any suffering and are not in touch with suffering at all. Suffering is not a problem for them until the time they are about to die."

These samsaric gods are supposed to have flowers on their bodies all the time, naturally, from birth onwards. They don't have to replace them. The flowers are just there, by the power of karma. We human beings have to change our clothes every day, but samsaric gods don't have to do that. The flowers are all naturally fresh. But close to the time of death, suddenly the flowers begin to get old. That is the sign that their life as a samsaric god is coming to an end. That realization causes them extremely intense suffering. They begin to worry, "What is going to happen to me?"

Also, all their friends begin to avoid them. They know, "This person is going to die. They are full of disease and bad things. If I go nearby, I will be contaminated." So they avoid the dying gods, who end up sitting in a corner somewhere by themselves. Some very close friends may give them a flower garland to wear, but they won't give them the flowers by hand. They take a long stick, put the flower garland at the tip of the stick, and then throw the garland at them. That is experienced as a terrible insult.

The dying god thinks, "Where am I going to be reborn?" and through their karmic power, they realize, "Tomorrow I will be a little piglet in the slums of Calcutta." That will give them tremendous worry and suffering.

Therefore, as long as we are in samsara, no matter where we are, we have suffering by nature. Therefore, Buddha declared: *Samsara is suffering. Nirvana is peace.* In samsara,

everything you do is contaminated. Everything in samsara is suffering.

There are a lot of different ways of determining what constitutes contamination. The views vary according to the various schools of Buddhist thought. Most Buddhist schools say that you overcome contamination on the third [of the five Mahayana paths], the path of seeing [emptiness]. In any case, as long as everything we do is ego-controlled, ego-influenced, we have contamination. And as long as that contamination remains, we are under the control of suffering. We are not only within reach of suffering, but we are inside of suffering. Everything is suffering.

Some sufferings are experienced as painful, and some are experienced as nice little picnic spots. If it weren't for these picnic spots, no one would remain in samsara. The negativities are so clever; they know they have to sell samsara to you. That's why there are picnic spots.

We have talked about the sufferings in the six realms of existence: hells, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, demigods, and samsaric gods. The first three are called "the lower realms," full of the suffering of suffering. Human beings, demigods, and samsaric gods are part of the better or higher rebirths. They have changing suffering as well as the suffering of suffering. All of the six realms have pervasive suffering. These three kinds of suffering completely control our life as well as our previous and future lives. They have tormented us and tortured us life after life.

Today, it is a different picture. We now have this precious human life with a precious mind. We have a mind that can understand and analyze, can decide to do right or wrong, so we do have a choice. We have the capability to make a difference. That is the value of the open-minded human life; we are willing to do something for ourselves to end our suffering once and for all. It is indeed a great time.

While the tradition may tell us that we are living in a degenerate age, for us this time is the greatest time that we could hope for. We have the opportunity to fulfill the mission of life: to end our suffering. That's why this life is different. In many lives, we have been multi-billionaires. At other times, we have been poor, homeless, and sick. In some lives we have been born in Darfur-like environments and undergone the sufferings the people have there. Sometimes we were born in situations like being in the middle of Iraq today. Some lives were okay: a life when we were in touch with pain and had an understanding of how we could end it, a life when we could decide between right and wrong, as we wanted to. Such a life is a precious open-minded life, and that is where we are today.

My dear friends, this is where we are today. This is not a joke or just a dharma talk. It is reality. If we want to help ourselves, we can. If we don't want to, we don't have to. No one can force you to do something that you don't want to do, anyway. That's our life. That's how it is.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Audience: I am intrigued by the idea of understanding suffering without necessarily having to experience it. How does that work? If it is a direct perception (Tib: *ngön sum*), then that means you do in fact experience it yourself. If not, you are just watching others go through it. You may think that homeless people feel cold and hungry, but to what degree can you really understand it without experiencing it yourself?

Rimpoche: Very good question. Your understanding of suffering is still a direct perception, even if you don't suffer yourself. I don't think that in order to have direct perception, you have to suffer. Let's say we see a car running over somebody on TV or the Terminator shooting everybody. Let's presume he is not the governor of California!

Two things are happening here. One mind is telling you that it is just a movie, not reality. On the other hand, you can go too much into it and no longer experience it as a movie but think it is really killing and hurting. You may say, "Turn off the TV. It is too much violence. I can't bear it any more!" That indicates where you are and how you are able to handle it. If you can make the distinction and tell yourself, "It is a movie; it is a movie," you are reminding yourself that this is not reality. Another person gets really involved and believes it is real.

Both do "get" what's happening. One gets the message of the violence and takes it so much on them selves that they can no longer watch it. The other sees the same thing, and gets the same meaning. It is the same direct perception through eye consciousness seeing the same action and getting the same message through to the sixth consciousness, mental consciousness. However, the way the sixth consciousness takes the message is different.

Actually, a movie is not really the best metaphor, because nothing is really happening. Let's assume the TV show is real. In that case, you see all the pain, and yet that does not mean that you need to suffer. Some individuals do take on the suffering and have to turn off the TV. Some individuals can see it and realize that it is a movie. So, not every knowledge of suffering necessarily means that you have to experience it.

Audience: I am still not clear about it. Some people will somehow understand your suffering better than others. It makes you feel better to talk to them about it. What is that difference?

Rimpoche: Again, let me use the ordinary term: the one whom you feel understood by, the one who "gets" what you are suffering from.

Audience: Let's say I am myself in acute pain. I am experiencing that as pain . . .

Rimpoche: The pain that you experience as the one who is suffering and what the person who understands your suffering feels cannot be compared. There is no comparison.

Audience: If I have strong physical suffering, there is also mental and emotional suffering that accompanies that. Maybe I can remedy the mental and emotional suffering through understanding the illusory nature of everything, but meanwhile, living in the relative

world, I still experience the physical pain. How can I have any joy then? How can I deal with that suffering?

Rimpoche: Take some aspirin. If that is not enough, take Tylenol!

Audience: How does a highly developed individual who has understood reality and developed bodhimind while living the life of a human being handle getting stomach cancer and having strong physical pain? Can they adjust to it only on a mental level or can they change the experience also on the physical level to eliminate suffering?

Rimpoche: I don't know. I should have asked the Sixteenth Karmapa, who did die of cancer. It is not certain whether the physical pain really tortures a person with high development, but by being born in this life as a human being, they do have discomfort, for sure. I don't know how much physical discomfort they really have. Of course, the mind plays a very powerful role in that. Some physical pains can be made into pleasure just by mind.

I am sorry, but I have to give you a dirty example. In some magazines you see these girls with rings in their nipples and "down there" as well and then they pull at that and call it pleasure. To me, it looks like pain, but these individuals, because of their minds, may actually read this as samsaric pleasure. Otherwise, why would they willingly pull on that? This is proof of mind over matter. If you look along those lines you may get some understanding of this issue.

Audience: Why do we, as spiritual practitioners, have to wait for the moment of death to end suffering?

Rimpoche: Nobody says you have to wait for death.

Audience: You said earlier in the talk that we were born with suffering and are suffering now and will continue to suffer, but that we don't have to die with suffering.

Rimpoche: I did say that by the time we die, we don't want to still have suffering. That means we should get rid of it *before* we die.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION/MEDITATION

1. How have I experienced the three kinds of suffering?
2. What is my reaction to the descriptions of the sufferings of the six realms of existence?
In what ways do I find these descriptions helpful?
3. How does taking a panoramic view of my life and lives help me to "get" the First Noble Truth?