

Chapter 7: The Meaning of Life, Birth, Aging, Sickness, and Death

There was once a wise Chinese man named Zhang Liang, who said:

“ Being human is difficult.

A human is difficult to be.

It is difficult to be human.

Undoubtedly, playing our role as a human being is not easy. The journey of life is complex, unpredictable and subject to change at any moment. The experiences that we have in life—bitterness, sweetness, achievement, and loss—are often beyond our ability to predict or control.

In the days when Buddha was still Prince Siddhartha, he led a very sheltered existence. He stayed in the palace surrounded by people who looked beautiful, young, healthy, and happy. One day, however, he went through the palace gates into the city and there he saw sights which he had never seen before. He witnessed the pain of birth, the suffering of age and of the sick, and the agony of death.

It was the sight of these four forms of suffering that prompted him to leave the idle, pleasure-filled life of the palace and to set out alone to search for truth. When he became enlightened, he found the path that can free us from these four basic experiences of pain and suffering.

What is that path? Why is it that the knowledge of such suffering should lead the prince to seek truth?

1. What Are the Four Major Sufferings?

i. The Suffering of Birth

The suffering of birth can be considered from two points of view: the pain of our mothers who give birth to us, and the pain we ourselves feel in the process of being born.

All mothers experience pregnancy and most mothers experience labor. Bringing a child into the world is a painful process. From the time of conception, there are all kinds of discomforts: morning sickness, fatigue, loss of appetite, and odd cravings. Towards the end of the pregnancy, there is the awkwardness of a very large belly to contend with. The period of labor begins, bringing the indescribable pain of pushing a baby into the world. It has been called a struggle between life and death. In the past, it was common for women to die in childbirth, and even now there is a saying that "*the birth of a child endangers the mother.*"

Birth is also painful for the one who is being born, so this is a pain we have all experienced. Most of us, however, have forgotten this pain and the important lesson that it holds for us.

In order to be born, we all go through the processes of conception, the growth of the embryo into a fetus, and, in most cases, turning and positioning ourselves within the womb to be born upside down. A baby preparing to come into the world goes through a little cycle of life and death. If anything goes wrong, then the new life will fail to be embodied. Labor is a painful process for the baby, as well as the mother. It is no wonder that so many of us cry as we enter the world.

Buddhist texts describe the pain that is experienced by a fetus, as its pure spirit is embodied in the weighty impurity of matter and imprisoned in the harsh environment of the physical, conditional world.

From these few points, we can see that the process of birth is painful, and indeed, the whole journey of life is marked by troubles and cares.

A poem describes the pain of birth and the delusion that so often characterize the lives of sentient beings:

“ When we are born into the world, we cannot avoid the eight major sufferings.

When we are born into the world we become restless, with ceaseless, anxious thoughts.

Rushing all day for fame and gain,

Who are we working and saving for?

ii. The Suffering of Old Age

Old age also involves suffering. We may not have experienced it ourselves, but from talking to our older friends and relatives, we can understand a little of how it must feel. Unless we depart from the world while we are young, we will all go through the process of aging.

Like all physical things, we have a limited life and at some point our bodies will begin to fail us. Once we are old, we tend to lose mobility. It becomes more difficult to do the things we used to

take for granted. We want to watch television, but our eyes are too weak. We see delicious food but are unable to eat, because our false teeth can't manage it, or it is too rich for our delicate digestion.

So often when we are young and busy, we postpone our schedule until we have more time. We look forward to retirement and all the leisure activities we will enjoy. But by then, who knows if the body will still have the energy or the strength? When we are young we try to save money for our old age, but once we are old we find that we can't do much with the money anymore.

If we could look forward to old age as a time when our children and family members grow to respect us and care for us it would not seem so bleak, but the truth is that people tend to ignore, ridicule, and even abuse the aged. For the many lonely, homeless old people in the world, old age is truly a time of suffering.

“ When people grow old they become weak and their memory begins to fade.

Guarding the door, they look after the house in loneliness.

The hairs on their temples grow snowy white,

Their bodies are thin and gaunt and they no longer have a say in the running of the household.

iii. The Suffering of Illness

We all have bodies of flesh and blood. It is impossible not to become ill at some time. We don't all suffer major health problems, but all of us at some time have had colds, flus, infectious childhood diseases, and other minor illnesses. The experience of illness is unpleasant. When our friends are ill, we do what we can to comfort them, but no matter what we say or do, we cannot share their pain or suffer the illness for them.

To be seriously ill can involve long periods of pain, frustration, and distress. Thinking of the often long, drawn-out suffering that comes with illness, a Chinese army general named Zhang Fei once said:

“ I have no fear of death but I'm afraid of being ill.

Whether the hospitals are large or small clinics, they always seem to be filled with patients. Anyone who has ever visited a hospital will understand that people suffer in operating theaters, or even in routine procedures that can make a hospital seem like a living hell.

So far, we have mentioned only physical illness. We also suffer spiritual disease when our heart is filled with troubles and anxieties. This kind of illness is even more painful than the sicknesses of the flesh.

iv. The Suffering of Death

Of the four major sufferings, death is the most frightening. Many people claim not to fear death, but in most cases their attitude changes dramatically when death actually approaches. Although we have no experience of death (or rather, we have forgotten our past experiences of dying), death comes to us all as an unavoidable fact of life.

When we sit with someone who is dying and observe their pain, when we realize that all our cherished memories, hopes, plans, and ambitions will die with us, we naturally feel the fear and grief of loss. Death separates us from the people and places we love. Some people pass away before they are able to fulfill lifelong vows or wishes, and that gives even greater pain at the time of death.

People are considered clinically dead when their breathing stops and their hearts no longer beat. However, clinical death is not the same as the real moment of death, which occurs when the soul has completely departed from the body. Different people's souls take different amounts of time to leave: the faster ones take about two hours, four to ten hours is average, and the slow ones take up to two days.

This is the way death was described by Buddha, and it is consistent with the observations of medical science. During the period of the soul's transition from the body to the disembodied state, the body undergoes great pain. Some people have likened it to the pain that a turtle or a snake might feel if it were to be stripped of its shell or skinned alive. It is indescribably painful, and no one, neither king nor beggar, can escape it.

What is even more distressing is that the soul will have to bear its karma and face the endless cycle of pain through births, illness, ageing, and deaths. In short, death hurts when it happens, and hurts even more when it is over.

2. Only Through Receiving and Cultivating Dao Can We Transcend Suffering and Dwell in Happiness

When Prince Siddhartha went around his city, he witnessed the four kinds of suffering and understood that no one could avoid them. These four are not the only kinds of suffering; there are many ways for us to experience pain. Since pain is unavoidable, the only way to have a pain-free existence is to overcome it.

When he realized this, the prince left his palace and his family, went to seek truth and to find the way for the world to be free of suffering. His perseverance never failed him and at last, in his enlightenment, he found Dao, or truth, the remedy for all suffering. This essence that he acquired is exactly the same as the essence that is passed on to us when we receive Dao.

Can receiving and cultivating Dao help us to overcome the four major sufferings? The answer is undeniably **yes**.

The suffering of birth and death comes from our confusion about what it really means to be born and to die. It is because we do not understand the purpose of birth that we are fearful and willing to be born. And because we do not know where we will be after death, we are afraid to leave the place that is familiar. We come to the world confused and we leave it the same way. Between our arrival and our departure, we endure all kinds of sorrow, pain, and frustration.

Now that we have received Dao, we can understand the purpose of life and live in a meaningful way. We can understand the purpose of death and die gracefully. With this approach to life and death, the pain and suffering is resolved. That is why many virtuous Dao relatives, even though they are busy with their personal lives and the work of Dao, still wear smiles on their faces and live happily. At the end of their lives, they leave the world still smiling because they have fulfilled their mission in life.

We can see then that the way to overcome the suffering of birth and death lies in receiving Dao and learning the real source of our troubles, then cultivating our virtues in order to fulfill our heavenly mission. This is the only way for us to break out the cycle of reincarnation and completely resolve the suffering of birth and death.

The pain of illness can also be resolved or eased through our cultivation of Dao. The most serious illnesses are those caused by our karmic creditors. Many serious illnesses manifest for this reason. The only way to overcome them is by learning more about Dao, so that we can understand our illness with our growing wisdom.

We need to realize that the only way to cure karmic-induced illness is to establish our virtue and accumulate merits. On one hand, we use these virtues and merits to cleanse ourselves of our karmic contamination. On the other hand, we are embraced by the spiritual grace of the universe. Only then can our karmic sickness be resolved.

The same applies to emotional problems. When we cultivate Dao and understand its essential truth, we will have a more peaceful mind. We learn to stop craving and to feel contentment in our lives, and we can find the best remedy for emotional stress.

Cultivation can also alleviate the suffering that comes with ageing. When we cultivate, we work on our virtue and we become wiser. We find that our cultivation has a very positive effect on other members of our family, so that we can support each other in mutual respect and care.

As well as our personal family, we have a large family of Dao relatives. With such supportive and loving family networks, we can cultivate and propagate Dao until our old age, and never fear loneliness or rejection.

Conclusion

As we have seen, by participating in Dao we can realize the true source of our suffering. By cultivating and propagating Dao, we can resolve the four major sufferings and transform them into happiness. This shows us once again how truly precious Dao is, and how fortunate we are to have the opportunity to cultivate.

In this chapter we have touched on another aspect of the preciousness of Dao cultivation. At times this cultivation may be a rough journey filled with challenges, tests, and trials. This pain, however, will be short-lived, and afterwards our hearts will be filled with boundless happiness and joy.

If we understand the suffering of life, we want to be away from it. With the joy of cultivation, we want to make rapid progress. So on one hand we remove ourselves from suffering, and on the other hand, we approach the source of happiness. As we come closer to this source, our suffering diminishes and we begin to feel true happiness and joy.

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