

# 1 Sermon, July 29, 2012

Texts: 1 Peter 3:8-17, 1 Peter 4:15-19

Title: "Christianity Compared: The problem of suffering in Christianity and Buddhism"

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## 1. Intro

This week, I'm talking about Buddhism and Christianity, and their approaches to suffering.

Buddhism and Christianity are similar in their view that suffering is going to happen and that people need to be prepared with their manner of dealing with it. They are similar in their promotion of a lack of attachment to material things so that the loss will be less difficult. They are similar in many of their ethics regarding people's actions and attitudes in life. But they are very different in their way of handling the suffering that comes, and in the meaning of that suffering.

## 2. Buddhism – suffering is reality, and attachment is the problem

"Four Noble Truths of Buddhism" are briefly:

- 1 – Suffering is our existence.
- 2 – Suffering is caused by craving, wanting or desirousness.
- 3 – Freedom from suffering can be secured.
- 4 – The way out of suffering is to follow the path Buddha taught.

Siddhartha Gautama, later called the Buddha, or enlightend one, lived in India about 500 years before Jesus. Legends say that he was of the royal family and was protected from bad things in his childhood.

When he grew up, he ventured out to meet his subjects, and discovered people suffering from sickness and aging and saw a dead body for the first time. He was shocked.

The Buddha's then concluded that the most basic fact of life is suffering. We all suffer – from sadness, grief, sickness, imperfection, and a lack of lasting satisfaction. He concluded that there was nothing that you could do about it. Suffering is a basic fact of existence.

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The Buddha further concluded that we suffer because our expectations don't match reality. We long for things we do not have. And the things we do have, we become attached to in a way that leads us to be dependent upon those things.

For example, if my cell phone were to stop working, I would become distressed. Instead of accepting that my cell phone didn't work I would first try to force it to work. Then if that didn't work, I would complain to myself or to those around me that it didn't work. Of course, complaining always helps. I then might find someone to blame, or get frustrated about the things I can't do because my cell phone is broken.

That's attachment. I can become attached to physical things, but also to my reputation, or my competence, or my singing voice, or even my relationships. And when these things fail – according to Buddhism – I suffer.

Christians also realize that getting stuck on material things is a barrier to a full life. The letter of James 4:1 asks,

"What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight."

## 3. Buddhism – choose to become less attached; spiritual practices

Buddhism describes a path out of suffering. It is achieved by learning not to get attached to things.

The method of doing this is best described by an eightfold path: "right views, aims, speech, action, livelihood, perseverance, mindfulness, and meditation."

The first five of these mean you should avoid "lying, stealing, killing, unnatural sexual activity and intoxication."

The last three, perseverance, mindfulness and meditation are spiritual activities.

That is a very brief summary of the path out of suffering. The path helps Buddhists avoid attachment. It is not exactly resignation or passivity, although it can look like that. Instead, it is disciplining oneself to let go.

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#### 4. Traditionally, making this world better, justice, is not Buddhist

This explains a big difference between Buddhism and Christianity. In Buddhism, right action helps you to avoid getting involved. In Christianity, right action means getting involved.

The word "Justice" is a rare, almost non-existent word in the Buddhist canonical literature. Doing the right thing to benefit society was a foreign concept. As Ken Jones, a Western Buddhist who has applied social concepts to Buddhism, has written:

Until the nineteenth century the social order in the Orient evidently presented for many people much the same kind of inevitability as the natural order. Oppressive rulers and their wars and exactions together with flood, pestilence and famine were experienced as all a part of the same inevitable order of things within which good and bad fortune alternated.

For Buddhists, who do not necessarily believe in God, suffering has nothing to do with God's action or inaction. Suffering is not part of God's grand plan. For Buddhists, suffering just is.

#### 5. Christianity – suffering is only part of reality; there's good, too

Christians are also taught to expect suffering to be a part of our lives. Yes, suffering is there, but there is also joy, peace, and comfort.

There are Christians who talk about this life as a "veil of tears," but that's not a Biblical concept. The New Testament talks about joy much more than pain. The phrase, "that your joy may be complete" occurs six times in the New Testament.

Christian faith talks about joy in this life, not just in the next. Christian faith is about joy filling you, abundantly, to overflowing. Now that doesn't mean you will *always* be happy. What it does mean is that the joy will triumph over the pain and sadness.

So Christians put suffering into perspective as a part of life, not its essence.

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### 6. Christianity – suffering can be redeemed by faith in this life

More than that, Christians see that suffering can have meaning if done in faith. Paul wrote in Romans:

"And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." Romans 5:3-5, NRSV.

The Book of James says something similar in 1:2-4:

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

In Matthew 5, Jesus told his disciples that they would mourn and that they would be persecuted for righteousness' sake.

So, for Christians, suffering can test our faith. Suffering can strengthen our faith. Suffering can help discipline us and give us hope.

### 7. Christianity – suffering is redeemed finally in the next

For Christians, suffering isn't all bad, like it is for Buddhists. Part of that is because we don't see life as a repetitive series of rebirths, where we hope eventually to stop the cycle and get to nirvana.

Instead, we see two realities, an earthly one and a heavenly one, and we believe that after death, there is a heavenly one awaiting those who are faithful. In Matthew 6:19 Jesus says,

"Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven."

So our suffering can have meaning if it stores up a treasure for something greater later.

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### 8. Christianity – suffering can be redemptive

For Christians, suffering can be redemptive, as Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."

Jesus' death on a cross was the greatest example of redemptive suffering. Christ, on the cross, took on himself the pain and evil of the world, and suffered a horrible death.

But that death led to a resurrection, a new life, not only for Jesus, but for the world.

Jesus chose to suffer. He could have chosen not to – even up to the time of his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, he could have run away. Instead, he chose to suffer.

I would bet that most of you have chosen to suffer in the last couple of days. You have chosen to do something unpleasant for the sake of others.

It may be that you've chosen to go to work, even though you don't like your job. But you want to honor your commitments, so you go anyway.

It may be that you've decided not to buy something that you really wanted because you are saving for something for someone you love.

It may be that you will go to the family reunion and endure the irritating questions of your Aunt or the teasing of your Uncle because, well, because they're family and you want the best for the family.

It may be that you're going to wait a long time in line, or eat a terrible meal, or go to the kind of movie you don't really like because you want to please someone whom you love.

Those aren't the *degree* of suffering experienced by Mother Teresa or Albert Schweitzer or some of the saints who suffered intensely for the sake of the gospel. Still, these examples point out how Christians are willing to suffer for the sake of the good of others.

For Christians, suffering can lead to hope, and hope does not disappoint us. Amen.

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1 Peter 3:8-17

Contemporary English Version (CEV)

8 Finally, all of you should agree and have concern and love for each other. You should also be kind and humble. 9 Don't be hateful and insult people just because they are hateful and insult you. Instead, treat everyone with kindness. You are God's chosen ones, and he will bless you. The Scriptures say,

10 "Do you really love life? Do you want to be happy? Then stop saying cruel things and quit telling lies.

11 Give up your evil ways and do right, as you find and follow the road that leads to peace.

12 The Lord watches over everyone who obeys him, and he listens to their prayers. But he opposes everyone who does evil."

13 Can anyone really harm you for being eager to do good deeds? 14 Even if you have to suffer for doing good things, God will bless you. So stop being afraid and don't worry about what people might do. 15 Honor Christ and let him be the Lord of your life.

Always be ready to give an answer when someone asks you about your hope. 16 Give a kind and respectful answer and keep your conscience clear. This way you will make people ashamed for saying bad things about your good conduct as a follower of Christ. 17 You are better off to obey God and suffer for doing right than to suffer for doing wrong.

1 Peter 4:15-19

Contemporary English Version (CEV)

15 But you deserve to suffer if you are a murderer, a thief, a crook, or a busybody. 16 Don't be ashamed to suffer for being a Christian. Praise God that you belong to him. 17 God has already begun judging his own people. And if his judgment begins with us, imagine how terrible it will be for those who refuse to obey his message. The Scriptures say,

"If good people barely escape, what will happen to sinners and to others who don't respect God?"

19 If you suffer for obeying God, you must have complete faith in your faithful Creator and keep on doing right.