

The Truth of Interpersonal Suffering

Greg Kramer

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[This article is extracted from a talk given by Greg Kramer at the start of a one-week residential intensive program at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies in October of last year. Greg is a student of Anagarika Dhammadina, Achan Sobin Namto, Ven. Ananda Maitreya Maha Nayaka Thera, and Ven. Punnaji Mahathera. He holds a Ph.D. based on work with dialogic meditation and meditative practice on the internet, and teaches Insight Dialogue worldwide.]

The framework for all the Buddha teaches is found in direct, immediate experience. What is the texture of this very moment? He does not look for some transcendence that takes us out of the moment, but invites us to be fully present with experience—just as it is. When you read the discourses you get a sense of his humanity, from the occasional sore back to a wry humor. You also see clearly how he spoke of and from this fleshy and challenging human experience.

And the experience of being human includes suffering. That is just part of how it is; it is the first noble truth. The Buddha said:

And what is suffering? Birth is suffering; aging is suffering; sickness is suffering; death is suffering; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are suffering; not to obtain what one wants is suffering; in short, the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering. [M9:15]

Some of what this insight covers I would call biological suffering, such as aging, disease and death. There are also difficulties associated with having senses: the pleasant things we perceive and want and maybe can't get, or that pass away; the unpleasant things we're exposed to, whether smells or sounds or other sense contacts. And we have the psychological suffering of sorrow, lamentation, grief, and so on.

To all this I would add something else: the unique forms of suffering emerging in relationship that have to do with the experience of encountering other people. This is hinted at in the Buddha's reference to separation from what is wanted, and I think it is worth looking at more closely.

My work with dialogic practice began as an inquiry with a colleague into how we can speak or interact online and still be strongly mindful. I learned a lot about communication, relationships, and so on, but over the years, as I developed and taught the practice in retreats, something more basic began to emerge. I saw that people went through the same stages of suffering they encountered in traditional retreats: initial elation, discomforts, and, above all, endless confrontations with suffering. Why should simply being with people and relaxing, speaking honestly, and cultivating a refined awareness bring up so much pain?

I began to see what I came to call inter-personal suffering, the kind of suffering that arises in association with others. This is a very significant subset of human

suffering in general. And when we look at it carefully it becomes apparent that it can manifest in both interpersonal and social ways. There is interpersonal suffering arising in the interactions between two individuals, and there is social suffering an individual experiences in relation to groups of people such as ethnic groups or nations.

Interpersonal Suffering

Like all experience, interpersonal suffering arises in the same way biological and personal psychological suffering arises. According to the classical description, there is a co-arising of the eye and forms and eye consciousness (“seeing”); when these three things come together, we have this very moment of contact. If what we then see is felt to be pleasant, we want it; and if it is unpleasant, we push it away. These responses are conditioned by—and feed—greed and aversion, respectively. And if the feeling is neither pleasant nor unpleasant, we may experience a kind of foggy indifference which is a form of ignorance.

If the object you see happens to be another person, the formula is the same. If it is a person you like, there is pulling towards, desire. If it is a person you feel aversion towards, there is pushing away. And if you feel indifferent, there is often a kind of foggy, delusory quality; you almost don’t see them, as if they do not really exist. Even the thought of another person can arouse these responses. We need only think of someone we dislike to feel the agitation and aversion, or think of someone we like to feel desire for them.

There is also a special form of contact that arises in the human domain, namely communication via language. When we include words, the field for liking, disliking and delusion expands immensely. This is where we get into the ways we verbally express feelings, share our inner experiences with each other, and form stories and spin yarns. It also includes the whole conceptual world—my ideas and your ideas. The desires, aversions, intense reactions and proliferations associated with language can get quite complex, as you know.

There are no rigid distinctions between personal and interpersonal suffering; their dynamic is fundamentally the same. In both cases, the suffering is not inherent in the experience, but arises from our reaction to experience. Moreover, while personal suffering comes almost entirely from reaction, interpersonal suffering comes also from inter-reaction, which can go both ways. If you are upset because your food tastes bad and you feel really agitated about it, the food is not going to get agitated back at you! Another person will. It is a whole different dynamic, with feedback loops which can get quite troublesome.

It might be worth getting concrete in looking at what makes up these two forms of suffering: It is personal suffering when someone resists doing the dishes because they would rather be reading. It’s inter-personal suffering when they are angry about doing the dishes because they don’t feel appreciated, or they think someone else should be doing the dishes. It’s still just the dishes. Or a person is experiencing personal suffering due to the inconvenience or pain caused by her illness, but it becomes inter-personal suffering when there is embarrassment because a good friend has to handle her bedpan. Being ill, uncomfortable and scared to die is personal suffering, while grieving on your deathbed about leaving those we love or feeling remorse about unfulfilled

relationships is closer to a form of interpersonal suffering.

Some more examples: When someone is concerned about the form of their body because of discomfort, inconvenience or possible medical complications, that is personal suffering. But body concerns due to what someone will think of your hair, or your wrinkles, or some similar physical manifestation—that is interpersonal suffering. The pain of a gunshot wound is personal suffering. The anger at the person who shot you is inter-personal suffering. Anger spreading over to a country or an ethnic group, associated with the person who shot you, would be the social aspect of suffering.

The Arising and Ceasing of Suffering

Now we go to the second noble truth. What is the cause of this inter-personal suffering? The Buddha identified it:

It is craving, which brings renewal of being, is accompanied by delight and lust, and delights in this and that; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for being, and craving for non-being. This is called the origin of suffering. [M9:16]

Here the Buddha names three hungers or cravings. These are usually interpreted as personal hungers: sensual craving, the craving to be, and the craving to no longer be. I would like to lay out the interpersonal side of these three hungers now, and discuss how they are the cause of interpersonal suffering. Simply put, interpersonal suffering is caused by inter-personal hunger.

Sensual hunger in the case of personal suffering is based on the craving to gain and hold on to the pleasure and to avoid the pain of physical sensations, tastes, smells and so on. The interpersonal equivalent of that is the pleasure and pain associated with relationships. We seek relational pleasure. We stimulate one another in a kind of social contract: I'll entertain you, you entertain me, and this is how we'll live our lives together. We have all kinds of ways of stimulating each other, which can spring from the desire for pleasant emotions, the fear of unpleasant emotions such as loneliness, or simply to alleviate the boredom born of fogginess and delusion. It is important to note that this pleasure seeking is a far cry from the joy people bring each other when they relate without grasping, i.e., without coming from an emptiness that must be filled by others.

The “hunger to be” is where things really begin to heat up in interpersonal suffering, because it manifests in the desire to be loved, to be seen, and for the validation of the ego. These are all the hunger to “be” interpersonally, to exist in the eyes of others. The individual hunger to be is simply the existential fear of death. The interpersonal hunger to be is the need to be seen, in all its manifestations.

From infancy we've turned to others, especially the mother, for physical survival and for taking away the pain of hunger. To not be loved meant death—literally. So of course we turned to our parents for love, and as we grew up we turned to others for love—friends, co-workers, and so on. We began to see our existence as valid and meaningful largely through our relationships with others.

This hunger for validation becomes more subtle as we mature. It includes the peer validation that teenagers seek, the work life and accomplishment validation that adults seek, and it includes all the glances, hugs, handshakes, and code words by which we confirm each other's self-concept. You know: "Show me that I exist, I'll show you that you exist, and we'll have this deal going." Based upon this "craving to be" our mutuality is a mutuality of hunger, so even though it may be temporarily satisfied it is always unstable and imbued with discomfort, .

The "hunger to not be" is most evident in the form of social anxiety, shrinking from social encounter out of fear. Here is the basis of feelings of inadequacy and the small suicides of unworthiness and self-hatred. These feelings lead to a shrinking from life, and the hunger to not be manifests as escapism. Escapism can be of very normal sorts, such as television, overwork, overeating, and so on. Or the desire to "not be" can manifest in very serious addictions, and even the most intense fulfillment of the urge to not be: suicide.

The "social hunger to not be" may be stronger in one person, and the "social hunger to be" may be stronger in another. One person may be out there with their, "Look at me, I'm really special," and another person may say, "Please don't look at me, I'm going to stay hidden as much as I possibly can." But in both cases, there is suffering based on inter-personal manifestations of hunger or craving.

Well, it would be pretty dismal if I stopped now, wouldn't it? The human condition would look pretty miserable. So I think I'll keep going. The third noble truth is the cessation of suffering:

What is the cessation of suffering? It is the remainderless fading away and ceasing, the giving up, relinquishing, letting go, and rejecting of that same craving. [M9:17]

The end of personal suffering is the end of the attachment to the sensations, things, and ideas we experience. It's the collapse of all the structures of self-concept we're busy feeding all the time with our misconceptions. There is an ease, a resting, an unshakeable happiness that emerges from no longer participating in the construction of suffering.

What about the end of interpersonal suffering, what might this look like? What would it be like to be with others with no thirst, with no defenses, no grasping in regards to intimacy? How happy, stable and centered would that be? What would communication be like without any personal agenda whatsoever? What would happen if our need to sustain a social persona collapsed?

A truly peaceful encounter with others is qualitatively different than anything most of us have experienced. It's certainly different from our normal social experiences. It would be authentic, intelligent, and kind. It would be peaceful and imbued with easeful joy. And just as personal liberation lies latent in each moment and is enacted whenever one is able to let go psychologically, so also interpersonal liberation is latent in each social moment. It is normally intertwined with confusion, but when attachment is released—even temporarily—love and compassion emerge. People not wrapped up in hunger and fear are

naturally present for each other. And when our interpersonal knots are untied and we recognize our social identities as fabrications, the personal knots and identities are also weakened. Freedom alone and freedom with others are not two isolated things. Both are based in non-clinging.

The fourth noble truth is the path to the cessation of suffering, to the abandonment of the craving at the root of pain and stress. Being very honest and looking at the pain, acknowledging it and seeing how things really are, points us toward this path. Personal suffering points towards a personal path, and interpersonal suffering points towards an interpersonal path.

While personal practice helps us be free from personal pain, it also contributes to freedom from interpersonal pain. If we have stability and calm and we've begun to let go of the constructs that support self-concept, then we will be more comfortable in social situations. Interpersonal practice is done with other people, and this particularly helps us to be free from interpersonal pain; but it also contributes to freedom from personal pain. If we are not carrying the stresses and identities associated with relational hunger, it's easier to let go of the personal defenses that keep self-concept in place.

An Integrated Path

In our lives, of course, the personal and interpersonal dimensions coexist and are completely intertwined. Even right now in this room, each of us is sitting here with all of our individual background bringing us to this moment. And the interior life of each of us is very individual. But there is also a shared experience, here and now. Just as these two truths of personal suffering and interpersonal suffering are intertwined within us, so also the personal path and the interpersonal path are intertwined.

I would like to add to this another distinction: the extraordinary and the ordinary path. In order to explain what I mean by this further discrimination, I have to give you some personal background.

For all the years I was meditating, I was absolutely determined to have my meditation integrated with my daily life. But I found that no matter what my determination, I'd come back from retreat and it would call for a huge adjustment as I tried to re-enter my ordinary life. It was like a different world. Even though I said all the right things ("Oh, I'm going to be mindful all the time."), I had a very hard time with the transition. Over the years it became less difficult for me, but generally speaking there seemed to be one sort of practice that happened in the meditation hall and on my cushion, and then there was the rest of my life.

I had an immense breakthrough on this issue, a true "Aha!" moment, when instead of trying to fool myself that there was no difference between practice on the cushion and the rest of life, I decided to acknowledge a difference. This eventually led me (as you'll see in more detail soon) to a very profound integration of a different kind. I said, "OK, there is the practice I do in my everyday life, which I call ordinary practice, and then there are times I set aside just for meditation. Such time is actually extra-ordinary. Let's see what the differences are and what we can learn from that."

So the first distinction between ordinary and extraordinary practice is whether special time has been set aside or it is part of your ordinary routine. The second distinction has to do with one's mind state. Any moment is elevated to an extraordinary moment when there is some acknowledgement of the truths of suffering, its arising and cessation, or which is consciously and energetically given to awakening to the fundamental truths of impermanence and impersonality. As Sariputta notes, "Right view, right effort, and right mindfulness run and circle around" each super-ordinary aspect of the path. So with these factors in place, ordinary right speech becomes extraordinary right speech; ordinary right intention becomes extraordinary right intention, and so on. Put another way, as these factors become stronger, whatever you are doing becomes more extraordinary.

When we combine the notion of personal practice and interpersonal practice with the further distinction of ordinary and extraordinary practice, the noble eightfold path is seen to unfold in four quadrants—a broad spectrum path. In each quadrant you have a full path: you have the full eightfold path of ordinary personal practice, the full eightfold path of ordinary interpersonal practice, the full eightfold path of extraordinary interpersonal practice, and extraordinary personal practice.

Let's take a few examples so we can see how this unfolds in our lives. Having a discussion with some friends about stress in our lives, and about how letting go of striving eases the stress, is an ordinary interpersonal practice of right view. Exploring these truths at an Insight Dialogue retreat is an extraordinary interpersonal practice of right view.

Taking a walk alone in nature can be a personal practice of right concentration (which I prefer to call "calm unification of mind"). Calming the breath and entering jhàna on retreat is the extraordinary personal practice of right concentration.

Working with a therapist under normal circumstances to be free of one's painful personality patterns is the ordinary interpersonal practice of right effort, specifically the effort to abandon arisen unwholesome states. Working with a therapist who is grounded in right view—which includes knowing there is no abiding self to be fixed—and bringing clear effort and strong mindfulness to this task, elevates this process to the extraordinary interpersonal practice of right effort.

The personal path tends to incline towards wisdom, towards ultimate reality, towards emptiness. It is an existential path we walk alone, culminating in awakening. The interpersonal path inclines towards compassion, towards relative reality, towards love. It contributes to a harmonious society while supporting the release of socially constructed self-concepts.

The extraordinary path is all about putting aside special time and dedicating ourselves to special practices in order to fundamentally transform the heart. The ordinary path of everyday life has to do with integrating these extraordinary transformations and, above all, cultivating virtue, calm, and wisdom in each and every activity.

All four domains we've talked about—ordinary and extraordinary personal, and ordinary and extraordinary interpersonal, head in the same direction: towards the non-clinging mind suffused with compassion.

Now each of us of course has different strengths, different inclinations, and so are going to be drawn to some particular area or another. Someone may begin with ordinary right living, another with extraordinary right mindfulness. The beauty of this model is that you can start absolutely anywhere and it leads through the whole thing. The path is completely integrated and holographic: every path factor, every truth, encompasses and leads to every other.

Interestingly, as you acknowledge the difference between these different modes of practice, the split between retreat life and ordinary life, as well as the split between the personal and inter-personal, begins to dissolve. I was grateful to learn that the path is so much bigger than mindfulness and concentration and that every factor of the path is the same whether it unfolds alone or with others, in everyday life or in extraordinary practice. For me, this was a whole new way to look at things and has completely solved the dilemma of integration. It's not about integration, it turns out, it's about recognizing exactly HOW it is all the same path.

Throughout this week we will undertake a systematic exploration of this landscape—a landscape of full-spectrum practice. Our basic practices will be calming down in silence and Insight Dialogue, all in a context of dynamic lovingkindness. We will see how each of the thirty two elements of the path offer a unique opportunity for skillful cultivation of awakening as taught by the Buddha. Each offers a particular perspective on suffering, its arising and its cessation.

At the same time, we will see again and again how each factor in all four domains overlaps with the others, each deepens and enriches the others, and each fulfills every other. The more we explore this realm of practice, the more every aspect of life can be seen as having a single taste—the taste of liberation.