Overcoming the Suffering of Life[1]

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Two Corollaries of Shakyamuni's First Noble Truth

SHAKYAMUNI'S four noble truths are quite well-known, even to non-Buddhists. His first noble truth, that life entails suffering, is discovered empirically by most people, sooner rather than later.[2] Most babies are born crying, not laughing, into this world.[3] Laughter would clear their airways as well as tears; but crying is something that suffering beings do. So a vital question in life is not whether one will suffer, nor even what one will suffer from; rather, it is what one will do with one's suffering. This paper characterizes five ways in which people commonly deal with suffering. The first three are ill-advised; the fourth is better; the fifth is better still.

Before addressing these five ways, let us state two corollaries stemming from the First Noble Truth. Initially we are confronted by a naturalistic corollary: The potential to inflict, as well as to alleviate suffering, increases as a function of sentience. Great intelligence can produce great cruelty or great kindness, depending on where its moral compass points.[4] Since human beings are the most sentient creatures on this planet (although it is fervently hoped at times that there are more sentient creatures on other planets), it follows that humans have the greatest potential to inflict, as well as to alleviate, suffering. This naturalistic state of affairs leads to a moral corollary: Since suffering is usually unpleasant and sometimes harmful, we have a duty to alleviate suffering, in ourselves and others, in order to make life as pleasant and helpful as possible, for ourselves and others.

Let us also remain cognizant of a fundamental law governing all (physically) manifested forms: The phenomenal universe and all its contents are impermanent. Thus life is impermanent, human relationships are impermanent, careers are impermanent, honors and riches are impermanent, and joys and sorrows are impermanent too.

Even so, there appears to be an underlying asymmetry (along with many natural laws) governing this pervasive flux: Sorrow seems to out-

last joy; pain seems to vanquish pleasure; torment seems to dominate rapture. Taken together, suffering and impermanence suggest a view that life is fundamentally or predominantly sad, not happy. Each occasion of happiness seems tinged with sadness, yet not every occasion of sadness seems tinged with happiness. This has led many people to despair that life is intrinsically unfair; and that, just as entropy is bound to increase with time, so is suffering. This view, which is true of entropy but false of sorrow, can actually self-fulfill suffering into being. It is surely more constructive to interpret impermanence and asymmetry as challenges or irregularities placed in our path in order to make us live more wisely, by seeking to emulate enduring and benevolent principles. The First Noble Truth is not to be multiplied needlessly or dwelt on obsessively; rather, its purpose is to alert us to the default nature of sentient suffering, and to point to the way beyond.

Pain versus Suffering

A word of clarification is in order here, as the terms "pain" and "suffering" are often used interchangeably. It is important to make some distinction between them, even if such a distinction remains permeable owing to our imperfect knowledge.

A physical harm, like an injury or a disease, is likely to cause pain. Pain is a physical sensation. So pain is often a warning that something is physically wrong. If you accidentally placed your hand on a hot stove and didn't feel pain, your hand would not last very long. Similarly, if you didn't feel pain from a cavity in your tooth, you'd end up losing the tooth itself. There are exceptions—"phantom pain" in amputated limbs, metastasizing cancer without any painful symptoms—but on the whole, pain is meant to signal you that something is physically wrong and needs attention.

Suffering, on the other hand, is a mental state. As with offense, you must usually be a willing accomplice in order to feel it. Other people can inflict pain on us against our wills, but very rarely can they make us suffer without our tacit consent. Ironically, people who are closest to you and who know you best can often make you suffer most. Why? Because they know what makes you tick, and therefore know exactly how to recruit you and enlist you as a willing accomplice in your own suffering. At the other extreme, those who know you least—that is, total strangers—can also make you suffer most. Why? Because: they may choose to disregard your humanity, and impose conditions on you that are intolerable. However, please realize that while pain can be inflicted

on you by someone else (or indeed by yourself), suffering cannot be inflicted on you in this way. You can be afflicted by external circumstances that increase or decrease your tendency to inflict suffering on yourself, but that suffering is your own. In one sense, this is good news: if you own your suffering, you can also disown it. You cannot do this so easily, if at all, with pain.

However, pain and suffering can also be related at times. In cases where disease causes acute or chronic pain, it also causes acute or chronic dis-ease (suffering) on account of that pain. Pain hurts the body to begin with; suffering is pain's echo in the mind. We say that people "suffer" from migraines. We mean that migraines cause blinding pains and other unpleasant symptoms, which in turn cause dis-ease (suffering) because of the pain, unpleasantness and incapacitation. If your suffering comes from pain alone, then to alleviate the suffering you must alleviate the pain. That is a medical problem, not a philosophical one.

Similarly, people who are chronically depressed because of a brain disorder also suffer chronically from the mental echo of that disorder. They generally feel the suffering and *not* the pain, because the brain itself isn't pained by its disorder. Yet when they take medications that correct the brain's neurochemical dysfunction, their suffering abates. At least, that particular form of suffering ends. They may then need to deal with other forms of suffering, such as moral dilemmas, which are philosophical in origin. In some cases, like bipolarity, they may prefer the disease to the cure: Medication prevents them from sinking too far into the depressive phase, but also "cuts" the exhilarating and creative peaks off the manic phase. Some would rather suffer from the periodic depressive state than suffer because they can no longer attain the summit of their creativity. Such difficult choices fall more simply into Aristotle's category of the lesser of two evils,[5] and more complexly into the modern paradigm of rational choice theory.[6]

Philosophy is helpful when you are suffering—but most likely not in acute pain. Those who seek philosophical guidance, or any other kind of talk-therapy, are usually suffering from something. Nor is their suffering caused by a brain disorder. They are physically and mentally functional people, who have created or encountered circumstances that engender or promote their state of suffering. They want not to suffer, and they rightly look upon dialogue as an instrument that both reveals the causes of their suffering, and points to a way beyond it. In the ancient world, philosophy was called "medicine for the soul," or "the cure of souls."[7] It did this job admirably well.

To summarize: pain comes from disease; suffering, from dis-ease.

Whereas a heart attack produces physical pain, a "broken heart" produces emotional anguish, and mental suffering. You may not be able to ease pain at will, but you can surely alleviate anguish and suffering once you know what is causing the dis-ease. If you're having a heart attack, there's little you can do to stop it by yourself. But if you're experiencing a broken heart, that's the result of dis-ease rather than disease, and there are many steps you can take to mend it.

One more thing: While pain itself can be a primary cause of suffering, one's attitude toward pain, or one's ability to tolerate pain, can have a big effect on suffering. If you are in pain because of an untreated disease, or after-effects of treatment, then you're probably also suffering. But if you are in pain from intense athletic activity, like running a marathon or climbing a mountain, then I'll bet you're not suffering in the usual sense: You may even find the exertion exhilarating. That's the "runner's high." In general, you may learn to improve your tolerance for pain, but your initial tolerance level seems more a matter of nature than nurture. With suffering, it's the other way around: Just as you can be influenced to suffer greatly but needlessly, you can also learn how to minimize or abolish your suffering altogether.

Five Ways of Dealing with Suffering

There are five ways in which people commonly respond to suffering: (1) they internalize it, (2) try to escape from it, (3) pass it on to others, (4) end it in themselves, or (5) transform it into something helpful. The first three ways are not recommended, because rather than alleviating suffering they tend to increase it. The fourth way is better, but is ultimately flawed. The fifth way is best. I will briefly assess each way in turn, and will also provide some illustrations with examples (case studies) from my philosophical counseling practice.

Internalize it

A popular (yet far from ideal) strategy is to keep your suffering to yourself—to "suffer in silence." You may have been taught that this is somehow noble, but it's actually needless. It deprives you, unnecessarily, of enjoyment and fulfillment. Or perhaps you believe that your suffering is a necessary preparation for your happiness the next world. Or perhaps you harbor false beliefs about yourself, implanted by others, which prevent your authentic person from flourishing. Beliefs are not determined by our genes; they are acquired by cultural transmission. A belief that causes you sorrow can be replaced by a belief that causes you joy, but

it's up to you to make the change. Alternative beliefs of all kinds are available to you; the world is teeming with them. But it's up to you to find beliefs that are helpful to you, rather than harmful. And while suffering can be a kind of guide at times (like anything else in life), once you've learned its lessons you're allowed to graduate-and you deserve to.

Ruth's Case

Ruth suffered needlessly for more than 50 years. She was essentially a very creative person, especially with language, and had aspirations to be a journalist or an author. Her parents were immigrants with a strong work ethic, but they didn't understand literary culture. Ruth and her older sister Alice both had to quit school during the 1930s economic depression, to help the family make ends meet. After the depression, they married businessmen, raised children, and continued to work at part or full-time office-jobs. Ruth always felt that there was a creative writer "locked up" inside her, yearning break out. That sense of imprisonment caused her to suffer. But her parents and her elder sister did not appreciate that kind of creativity: They lived in the "real world" of nine-to-five punch-clocks, steady paychecks and traditional aspirations. This was fine for them, but not for Ruth. Yet whenever she expressed her desire to be a writer, they said she was fantasizing or daydreaming. Ruth was once even offered a job as an apprentice journalist, but declined it. Why? She lacked the self-confidence, and unfortunately received no encouragement from her family.

So Ruth invented a little a story, to the effect that she would have been a writer if only the depression hadn't happened. Why didn't she go back to school afterward? Well, by that time she had kids, and couldn't. What about when her kids were grown? Well, by that time she had a lot of responsibility at her office, and couldn't very well leave. She tried to content herself with crossword puzzles, and was really good at them, but all the while that creative writer locked up inside her was serving a life-sentence. For decades, she kept repeating the story that she would have been a writer if only circumstances hadn't prevented her. But the story wasn't true, and she suffered from lying to herself about herself. A pleasant personality on the surface, Ruth was creatively unfulfilled and deeply embittered by her life, and those twin toxins caused her much suffering inside.

Eventually that writer got released, but only after Ruth abandoned her false beliefs. With assistance from the method of Socratic midwifery, which through dialogue helps people identify and change false beliefs they carry about themselves,[8] Ruth finally faced the fact that she had

prevented herself from being a writer, and had used her circumstances as an excuse. It took great courage for Ruth to change her beliefs after all these years, but as soon as she did the writer inside her blossomed. By now a very mature student—in her 70s—Ruth began to take courses in creative writing, and within a few years wrote several volumes of poetry and short stories. She even got some of her pieces published. Her life took on new meaning, and she experienced deep contentment. Her long suffering ended.

The moral: Keeping suffering to yourself, however nobly, is not the answer. Rooting out its causes, no matter how long that takes, is the best approach.

Escape from it

This sounds tempting, and also has a heroic ring to it. It is not a coincidence that the theme of escape is perennially popular in Hollywood. Audiences love escape movies, presumably because so many people identify with them. *The Great Escape, Papillon, The Birdman of Alcatraz,* and *The Shawshank Redemption*, among many others, share the common theme of a protagonist escaping from suffering by breaking out of a prison. The kind of suffering that we're talking about, however, is not produced by the pain of physical captivity in drastic surroundings; rather, by ordinary situations in life, from which people unwittingly, unconsciously or unerringly fashion their own prisons and then seek to escape.

Those who are responsible for their own sufferings cannot escape them except by confronting them, understanding their true causes, and removing them. Attempts to escape from self-induced suffering not only fail, but often worsen the suffering itself. Fight or flight is one of the oldest biological instincts in humans, hard-wired into the most primitive part of our brains, and undoubtedly reflected in the psyche. Suffering is kind of threat to one's well-being, and so there is a natural inclination to fight or flee this threat.

But when the suffering is self-induced, we cannot fight it except by confronting it, and we cannot flee it at all. If you were suffering, and someone offered you a free trip anywhere in the world, or the galaxy for that matter, would you take it? You might do so for distraction, or temporary escape, but you know full well that your suffering would accompany you wherever you went, as surely as your shadow. Yet people will naturally attempt to escape-through alcohol, drugs, relationships, cults—whatever medium seems to take them away from themselves, to put time or space or altered states of consciousness between them and

their suffering. Yet escape is only temporary. People who wish to flourish, and not to suffer, must find a way to face and overcome their suffering.

As Shakyamuni says: "Not in the sky, not in the middle of the ocean, not even in the cave of a mountain, should one seek refuge... none of these is a safe refuge, nor is it the supreme refuge. For even after arriving at a refuge, one is not emancipated from all suffering."[9]

But when suffering is not self-induced, one can neither flee from it nor fight it. Then, I must honestly say, neither medicine nor philosophy can be of much help. Extreme cases of schizophrenia, manic depression, endogenous clinical depression, and a host of other dysfunctions of the brain rob the afflicted individual of the capacity to alleviate his or her suffering, because it is not self-induced. It is a question of disease, not dis-ease. Although medications exist that can help stabilize many people so afflicted, many others among them still commit suicide. They find the suffering of their existence too much to bear-even if they are gifted and loved and able to help others greatly. Some try every medication and philosophy known to man, but they live recklessly and die suicidally because there is no other end to their suffering on this earth. For these unfortunate beings, some of whom may be truly beautiful people, life itself is such an unbearable unhappiness that their only way of fighting it or fleeing it is to do both together, and make an end of it. For them, death is the ultimate escape. But for those whom they leave behind, it is only the beginning of new suffering.

Pass it On to Others

Another very common strategy is to try to pass your suffering on to someone else. In the short run, this looks like the human equivalent of the barnyard pecking order: Your boss yells at you; you yell at your kid; your kid kicks the dog. Unfortunately, suffering is not like a baseball: You can't just pitch it to someone else and thereby disown it. If you try, you'll find it has a multiplier effect. That is, you can't get rid of suffering it by passing it around. That just increases its presence in the world. People who seek out others just to implicate them in their suffering are actually suffering twice over: First from whatever's really bothering them at source, and second from the delusion that implicating others will alleviate their own problems.

The most gruesome examples of this inappropriate way are provided by serial killers, terrorists, gangsters and genocidal mass-murderers. Such persons inhabit a hell-world in which they hunger to harm others, and eventually to die themselves. They callously inflict pain and suffer-

ing on their victims, and lifelong painful memories on the friends and families of their victims. Some of them appear unable to experience other people as human—perhaps because they do not experience themselves as human either. Daisaku Ideka attributes to terrorists an "... utter and complete numbness to the suffering, sorrow, pain and grief of their fellow humans..."[10] The same can be said of anyone who premeditatedly spreads such suffering in the world. There is enough of it already, through natural causes and normal life cycles alone. Why make things more difficult than they are? Spreading your suffering around is by far the worst way of dealing with it, for you and everybody else.

People who follow this harmful path do not endure, and neither do their evil works. Whether they act alone or bend the resources of entire nations to their harmful wills, they find neither refuge nor safe harbor in this world. They are hunted, harried and reviled, and eventually meet the doom they have decreed for themselves. They can spread their suffering to others for a time, but not for long. They can neither make the whole world suffer, nor can they compel the world to tolerate their hell. As Lao Tzu said: "He who takes delight in the slaughter of men cannot have his will done in the world."[11]

End it in Yourself

It is good—for you and everyone else—if you choose to end suffering in yourself. If you are suffering from a disease, this disease is in your body, and must be extinguished there. Why should this be any different when it comes to dis-ease? But it seems to be much more difficult for people to "own" their dis-ease, because they have to accept responsibility for their mental contents in order to end suffering in themselves. It seems much easier, at least in the short run, to blame others: "He's making me unhappy," or "She's not appreciating me," or "Society is treating me unfairly." It's much harder to admit that some of your beliefs or expectations are working against your better interests, and harder still to puzzle out what to do about it. In the long run, however, the only way to end your suffering is to disown it. But in order to do that, you have to admit to owning it in the first place.

Philip's Case: What Goes Around Comes Around

Philip, a handsome but ruthless womanizer, eventually learned that the suffering he caused others came back to haunt him. He then took steps to end it in himself. Philip was an aspiring New York actor, in his early 30s—an intelligent, articulate and very presentable young man. There are hundreds (for all I know, thousands) like him in Manhattan, many of

them waiting on tables between engagements, and hoping for that big break. Philip also had many women waiting on him; he possessed what the French call that "je ne sais quoi"—an attractiveness combined with an apparent indifference that made him irresistible to women. Many women of varying ages and statuses fell in love with Philip, and he had brief but torrid affairs with them, which all ended in one way: He simply abandoned them one day, and never spoke with them again. So he left a lot of broken hearts in his wake, and experienced some sorrow himself—but only for himself. He seemed insatiable, but that wasn't his problem. Philip suffered from a philosophical condition called "solipsism."

Solipsists are not to be confused with narcissists. Narcissists pretend to be in love with themselves—often because they think nobody else is, or can be. Yet they selectively try to draw others into their world, to "validate" how lovable they are. Narcissists are deeply conflicted beings, who mask their conflict with facades of perfection which they need others to acknowledge. Solipsists share a similar intensive self-awareness, or self-absorption, but at the same time they deny that there is anyone else in the world besides themselves. The classic philosophical problem of solipsism is the problem of other minds. You know you have a mind, but how do you know that anyone else does? Whatever data you process about the world, you process in your own mind. You can sense other bodies directly, but not other minds. Most of us, being reasonable and charitable beings, suppose that other humans are very much like ourselves. You have a mind, so you suppose that others have minds too. Solipsists don't. The universe revolves around a solipsist's mind, because he or she can't be sure that there are other minds out there. It's an extremely skeptical position, but skepticism never deters philosophers—it more often encourages them.

In fact, there's an old "insider" joke about solipsism that I'll share with you. A woman once sought to compliment Bertrand Russell during a lecture on solipsism. She said she was delighted he was a solipsist, said she was one too, and wished there were more of us.[12] If you don't get it, you need to think more philosophically! The point is that each solipsist thinks he or she is alone in the world: if there are no other minds, there are no other solipsists either.

So Philip's problem was that, being solipsistic, he didn't really believe he was hurting the women he dated and dropped. They didn't really exist for him, except physically. Until he met his nemesis, Kathleen. He fell head over heels in love with her. They dated for a while, had an intense romance, and then she suddenly abandoned him. This

really got to Philip. His Big Question was "How could she behave so callously toward me? I thought she loved me!"

Suddenly, Philip was not a solipsist anymore: He was attributing to Kathleen a state of mind in which she loved him. This was a revelation for Philip, who then contemplated the philosophy of karma, or moral cause-and-effect. Perhaps he was suffering from her sudden rejection because he had caused so many other women to suffer from his sudden rejections. Although cause-and-effect is rarely this simplistic in human affairs, it still appears true that one's behavior is reflected back to one over time. And Philip's suffering taught him a valuable lesson: That other people suffer too. Moreover, because it dawned on Philip that solipsistic relationships had produced all this suffering, he did not seek to alleviate his own dis-ease through yet another relationship.

Instead, he adopted a different and very courageous stance: he decided to end the suffering in himself. He chose a religious path as his vehicle, and retreated to a monastery for a period of prayer, contemplation and celibacy. By walking this path of spiritual refinement, Philip was probably going to do himself and others a lot of good, and surely cause a lot less suffering as well.

If you choose to end suffering in yourself, you can too. Your means to that end will be your own to discover or devise, but helpful philosophical ideas abound. There are many paths and many benevolent guides to help you find this way. They are there for you if you are there for yourself.

In Buddhist terms, this approach is known as "Theravada" (also "Hinhayana"—or somewhat pejoratively, "lesser vehicle"). While this approach is certainly better than the previous three, it remains far from ideal, for both theoretical and practical reasons.

In theory, religious asceticism is a form of extreme self-denial, and as such is merely the polar opposite of extreme self-indulgence. In Shakyamuni's philosophy of the Middle Way, extremes to not conduce to attaining a state beyond sorrow. One does not tread the Middle Way by vacillating from one extreme to the other, then computing their average. Indeed, the most influential philosophers of the ancient world-including Aristotle, Confucius and Buddha—all recognized that extremes should be avoided.

In practice, there is another well-known reason why ending suffering in oneself alone is ultimately a flawed strategy. It has to do with the interconnectedness of sentient beings, via the causal nexus by which all phenomena are interrelated. Given this interrelatedness, it is impossible to isolate oneself in a state of lasting happiness as long as other sentient

beings are suffering at the same time. Why? Because: In the process of overcoming one's own suffering, one necessarily develops greater awareness of and heightened compassion for all suffering beings. One cannot long maintain personal bliss while remaining oblivious to the suffering of others. Even though one may practice assiduously to gain personal salvation or liberation from suffering (e.g. in the Theravada way), such merit is bound to expire sooner or later, as it cannot sustain itself indefinitely while other beings are drowning in a sea of sorrow. For one precondition of such liberation is an acute awareness of suffering per se, which is "broadcast" by sentient beings simultaneously on many wavelengths. Anyone sufficiently awakened to the causes of his or her own suffering, to the extent of being able to uproot them, is necessarily awakened and receptive to the causes of all sentient suffering, and is therefore compelled to the duty of helping uproot those causes in others too. This is of course the Mahayana way, which teaches explicitly that personal salvation cannot endure as long as any beings are suffering anywhere in the cosmos.

Transform it into Help for Others

Thus the very best thing you can do with your suffering is to transform it, from something hurtful to you to something helpful to others. If all you do is end your suffering within yourself, then that is good for you—as far as it goes. But if you continue to perceive suffering in others, and want to help them end it in themselves too, that is good for everyone. And even if you can't fully disown your own suffering, you can help diminish it by helping diminish the sufferings of others. If you can manage this, you will have transformed your own suffering into other people's non-suffering, which is the greatest achievement anyone can aspire to in this life.

Ida's Case: Transforming Suffering

Ida, a career woman in her 50s, had borne her share of suffering. Most recently, she had endured a lengthy and painful rehabilitation from injuries sustained in a car accident. Her professional life was undergoing transformation too. An insurance executive, Ida increasingly doubted that her company was doing as much good as it could. Dealing with unsettled or disputed insurance claims, and the added anxieties these caused to the insured, eventually unsettled Ida too. She wanted to change her career. Ida said she had two interrelated goals: First, to do work that was more meaningful to her; and second, to do work that was more helpful to others.

Like most people who seek philosophical guidance, Ida was stable and functional. Less commonly perhaps, she had a fair idea of what she wanted to accomplish. In fact, in Ida's case, she had already thought out many specific details. She wanted to get out of the corporate pressure-cooker of Manhattan, and set up an alternative care center in a more rural setting. She wanted her center to offer acupuncture, reflexology, hypnotherapy, homeopathic remedies—and maybe even philosophical counseling!

So why had Ida sought philosophical counseling herself? Given that she knew where she was coming from, and where she wanted to go? It was during this present fuzzy interval, lying undefined between a past tinged by her personal suffering and a future devoted to alleviating suffering in others, that Ida sought shape and definition. She saw philosophy as a bridge between her past and her future. So she sought a philosopher to help her build that bridge, and to encourage or accompany her across it. Among other things, I told Ida what I'm telling you: that I thought her idea was excellent, and her goals worthy. She had found a great way to combine her need for a meaningful career with her desire to help others.

Yet Ida wanted more than a common-sense validation of her mission: A philosophical bridge needs philosophical girders and spans. She wanted to ground her transition in some particular tradition. Why? Because thoughtful people do not simply seek rationalizations for their purposes in life—they can get those from fortune cookies or cereal boxes. Thoughtful people want to develop their philosophical identity, which means they need to find a way of looking at things that resonates with their past experience, accommodates their present circumstances, and justifies their future goals. In other words, people want to craft a philosophy of and for their lives, not just find an aphorism to see them through a bad hair day.

Although Ida was both analytical and intuitive, I sensed she had an affinity for Chinese philosophy, so we re-interpreted her situation from a Taoist perspective. Over time, we explored two main points.

First, from Lao Tzu, was the idea that big things are a sum of little things. What would amount to a major transition for Ida would really be accomplished in small incremental stages. So she didn't have to worry about doing everything at once. She could find some repose in this fuzzy interval of transition, just as the pupa reposes in its transition between larva (caterpillar) and chrysalis (butterfly). As Lao Tzu says: "All great things in the world start from the small... A thousand miles' journey begins from the spot under one's feet."[13]

Second, from the ancient Chinese doctrine of complements that informed Lao Tzu and Confucius alike, we learn the idea that everything contains its opposite. Thus Ida's past suffering contained the seeds of her future non-suffering. Similarly, her present unstructured life contained the seeds of the future structures she envisioned.

Ida soon crossed her philosophical bridge, opened her center, and embarked on her new journey. For me, she is a great example of the magnificent things ordinary people can accomplish, and the tremendous good they can do, if they decide to transform their personal suffering into help for others.

Appreciating Nature's Majesty

In this final section, I would like briefly to introduce another approach to overcoming suffering; namely, through an appreciation of nature's majesty. Although many animal species are able to make relatively small modifications to their immediate environs (e.g. birds building nests in trees), or even to make significant changes to their local habitats (e.g. beavers building lodges and dams), the human being is the only animal on earth with the power to make drastic alterations on a planetary scale—from over-cultivation to deforestation, from the destruction of the ozone layer to the pollution of oceans and the disruption of food-chains. Nietzsche thought of man as a parasite on the earth's surface, and of course a wise parasite does not kill its host.[14] Part of human suffering undoubtedly derives from man's self-imposed yet often unconscious estrangement from nature, and that part can be alleviated by a return to and appreciation of nature.

Nichiren's Buddhism, based on the Lotus Sutra, teaches that every human is a potential Buddha, but not all are fully awakened to their Buddha-natures.[15] The greatest expressions of human majesty—awareness, understanding, kindness, compassion, inner peace—lie dormant in our very natures, and require nothing more than tranquility to emerge. Frenetic civilization, for all its benefits, is the antithesis of tranquility. So by communing with nature, one rediscovers tranquility, which in turn enhances the emergence of our majestic qualities. People are heavily influenced by, and reflect the attributes of, their environments. By immersing oneself in a beautiful and tranquil environment, one's beauty and tranquility emerge. By immersing oneself in the majesty of nature, one's natural majesty likewise emerges.

This has been known since antiquity. Various philosophers have recognized the benefits of retreating into small communes in natural set-

tings. The Forest Sages in India, the Epicureans in Greece, the New England Transcendentalists in America, and a great many hippies in the 1960s, discovered tremendous peace, love and cooperation by living in small, rural bands. Contrary to popular misconception, the original Forest Sages were not ascetic, anti-social hermits. Writes Rabindranath Tagore: "The forest life of the Brahmanas was not antagonistic to the social life of man, but harmonious with it."[16] They sought simplicity in order to cultivate the finer things in life, such as friendship. So Epicurus said "Happiness and blessedness do not correlate with abundance of riches, exalted positions, or offices or power, but with freedom from pain and gentleness of feeling and a state of mind that sets limits that are in accordance with nature."[17] And Thoreau agreed: "A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone."[18]

There is an emotion beyond happiness and sadness together, and that is majesty. A philosophy student of mine, who had excellent musical instincts but whose musical education had been neglected, began to listen to Baroque music at my suggestion. While its harmonic complexity and deep structures appealed strongly to her intelligence, she became immediately overwhelmed by its emotional content as well. "Is it all so sad?" she asked me one day. I replied that it was not merely sad; rather, majestic. Many of the Baroque composers were not only great creative artists; they also lived in a culture that afforded them an enriched perspective on life—a window on the world—that precious few artists have been privileged to enjoy ever since. As a result, their overall view of life became majestic, and they were able to infuse their compositions with that majesty. Their music, like all great music, captures the most profound experiences of joy and sorrow alike—and everything in between, across the entire emotional spectrum. So if that philosophy student had been a happier person herself, she might well have asked "Is it all so joyous?" My reply would have been consistent: "It is not merely joyous; it is majestic."

And this is precisely how you can choose to view your life: as majestic. You may never be able to make yourself happy or sad or indifferent by an act of will, but you can always choose to locate your emotions on a bigger map: the map of the nobility of your existence, even in the face of its impermanence. Every human being can experience the wonder of being alive, and episodes of happiness or sadness only add to the beauty and majesty of it all. Think of yourself as a majestic mountain in the vast human range. Describe yourself as the environmental philosopher John Muir described the peaks of Yosemite:

> Some lean back in majestic repose; others, absolutely sheer or nearly so for thousands of feet, advance beyond their companions in thoughtful attitudes, giving welcome to storms and calms alike... in stern, immovable majesty, how softly these mountain rocks are adorned and how fine and reassuring the company they keep.[19]

Moreover, cultivating a sense of majesty by communing with nature eventually leads to a state of contentment or happiness that is not dependent on attachments to persons or things per se, for nature is neither a person nor a thing. The majestic natural photography of Daisaku Ikeda, displayed in many places around the world, embodies a profound majesty emanating from a consciousness that is one with nature, a soul that is therefore a window onto and a channel for nature's transcendent abundance.[20]

This particular conception of oneness with nature constitutes an advanced teaching on overcoming the suffering of life, whose summary also provides a conclusion to this paper. It is no accident that this teaching is conveyed implicitly by Daisaku Ikeda's photographs, for he is well-aware of its explicit elucidation, for example in the writings of both Ralph Waldo Emerson and Tsunesabaro Makiguchi. The Buddhist theory (derived from orthodox Indian philosophy) that underpins this teaching is simple and clear to be sure: Our mundane joys and sorrows stem chiefly from our attachments and aversions.[21] But a more evolved doctrine, elaborated by Nichiren Buddhists and New England Transcendentalists alike, teaches that by attaining human majesty through realizing nature's majesty, one also attains a transcendent happiness that cannot be dispelled by changing seasons, changing fashions, changing desires, changing circumstances, or any other kind of phenomenal impermanence. Transcendent happiness (or "perfect contentment," in Emerson's words) does not change. Why not? Because: It is based on oneness with noumenal (i.e. unmanifest) nature, which is the unchanging source and complement of phenomenal (i.e. manifest) nature. Unmanifest nature does not lie in the observable seasonal cycles; rather, it is that which gives rise to them. Similarly, perfect contentment does not lie in perceiving a sunrise or a sunset; rather, it is that which gives rise to their perception.

From a Taoistic perspective, imperfect discontentment depends on existence; perfect contentment depends on non-existence. One way to experience non-existence, and therefore to experience the perfect contentment of human majesty, is through unity with nature's majesty. Because such unity is experienced at the noumenal level, it confers

immunity against suffering, which is always confined to mere phenomena. I conclude with two quotes, from Emerson and Makiguchi. If you don't believe me or them, then immerse yourself in nature, and consult your own perception of sunrise and sunset. What makes them appear so beautiful is the awakening of your perfect contentment.

> There is a soul at the center of nature, and over the will of every man... place yourself in the middle of the stream that animates all whom it floats,... and you are without effort impelled to truth, to right, and a perfect contentment.
>
> —Ralph Waldo Emerson[22]

> Our happiness in life is very much connected with nature; it depends on the closeness or depth of our relationship with nature.
>
> —Tsunesaburo Makiguchi[23]

Notes

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[2] There are many versions. See e.g. *The Word of the Buddha*, trans. Nyanatiloka, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Ceylon, 1981.

[3] My own son is a rare exception: I was present at his birth, and he came into this world smiling.

[4] Socrates too was aware of this. In the *Crito*, he said: "I only wish... that the many could do the greatest evil; for then they would also be able to do the greatest good—and what a fine thing that would be!" See Plato, *Crito*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, Walter J. Black Inc., Roslyn, NY, 1942, 44d.

[5] "As it is [sometimes] difficult to hit the mean exactly, we should take the second-best course... and choose the lesser of two evils." Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics, trans. James Welldon, Walter J. Black Inc., Roslyn, NY, 1943, Book 2, Chapter 9.

[6] E.g. See John Von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1946.

[7] E.g. see Epicurus: "Vain is the word of a philosopher that does not heal any suffering of man. For just as there is no profit in medicine if it does not expel the diseases of the body, so there is no profit in philosophy either, if it does not expel the suffering of the mind." Fragment #54 from uncertain sources, see Cyril Bailey, *Epicurus: The Extant Remains, Oxford*, 1926.

[8] "And the most important aspect of my skill is the ability to apply every conceivable test to see whether the young man's mental offspring is illusory and false or viable and true." Plato, *Thaeatetus*, trans. Robin Waterfield, Penguin Books, London, 1987, 150c.

See also Pierre Grimes and Regina Uliana, *Philosophical Midwifery*, Hyparxis Press, Costa Mesa, CA 1998.

[9] Buddha, *Dhammapada*, trans. Harischandra Kaviratna, Theosophical University Press, Pasadena, 1980, Canto 9, Verses 127–28, & Canto 14, Verse 189.

[10] Daisaku Ikeda, *The Humanism of the Middle Way: Dawn of a Global Civilization*, SGI Office of Public Information, Tokyo, 2002 Peace Proposal, p. 15.

[11] Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching, trans*. Ch'u Ta-Kao, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1937, Ch. 31.

[12] Attributed to W.H. Thorpe, in *Beyond Reductionism*, eds. Arthur Koestler and J. R. Smythies, Hutchinson Publishing Group, London, 1969.

[13] Lao Tzu, Ch. 63.

[14] "The earth, said he, hath a skin; and the skin hath diseases. One of these diseases, for example, is called 'man.'" Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Thomas Common, Project Guttenberg (on-line), 1999, Second Part, Ch. 40.

[15] See The Lotus Sutra, trans. Burton Watson, Columbia University Press, NY, 1993, *passim*.

[16] From a letter to Charles Andrews, 5 March 1921, in Rabindranath Tagore: An Anthology, eds. Krishna Dutta & Andrew Robinson, Picadore, London, 1997, pp. 169–73.

[17] Epicurus, fragment #85.

[18] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, Book-of-the-Month Club, NY, 1996, Ch. 2.

[19] John Muir, *The Mountains of California*, Penguin Nature Classics, Penguin USA, NY, 1997, Ch. 1.

[20] See also Daisaku Ikeda, *Symphonic Poems with Nature*, The Soka Gakkai, Tokyo, 2000.

[21] E.g. "Desire consumes and corrupts everything. It is man's greatest enemy." *Bhagavad-Gita*, trans. Shri Purohit Swami, Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1969, Ch. 3.

[22] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "*Spiritual Laws*," *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. 1, G. Bell & Sons Ltd., London, 1913.

[23] Tsunesabaro Makiguchi, *A Geography of Human Life*, ed. Dayle Bethel, Caddo Gap Press, San Francisco, (publication year not indicated), p. 31.