



CHUNG TAI CHAN MONASTERY

Zen Buddhism Class I

5. Impermanence and Suffering (First Noble Truth)

Recognizing suffering is the first step to end suffering.

Impermanence

Causality and **impermanence** are two important features of nature.

When we observe the world around us, we can see that everything comes from a certain set of causal conditions. For example, a tree starts as a seed, and it needs earth, water, air, and sunshine to grow. Because the causal conditions are always changing, the resulting phenomena must always be changing. When the necessary conditions fall apart, things disintegrate, dissolve away, or change into other forms. Nothing in nature is fixed; everything is always in a flux.

This “everything” includes people, property, money, fame, power, love, family, enemy, pleasure, pain, life, and the cosmos. All things, physical and nonphysical come and go.

Even though impermanence is all around us, we often choose to ignore it. Instead, we think, or we wish, that things would stay the same. Friends would always be there. Wealth and fame stay forever. We would live for a long time. We cling to the past or the future, and ignore reality. Therefore we are unprepared when changes hit us. Consequently we suffer.

Eight Kinds of Suffering

Buddha observed that there is *duhkha* in everyone’s life. Duhkha means suffering, dissatisfaction, or that something has gone wrong. There are eight kinds of suffering common to all people: birth, aging, illness, death, separation from the ones we love, being with people we dislike, wishing for things we cannot have, and body-mind imbalance.

Birth: At the time of birth, both mother and child are in danger and suffer much pain. Being in the womb is like being in a prison. When the mother eats, drinks or moves, the baby is affected. For the child, being born is like being squeezed by two mountains closing in. A newborn’s skin is so tender that touching it causes great pain.

Aging: When we become old, our health deteriorates; we lose our strength and vitality. The beauty of youth is gone. Our memories and concentration fail us; we can no longer do the things that we used to do.

Illness: Despite the advances in medicine, there are always more diseases than available cures. Everyone is beset by illness many times in life. When we are sick or wounded, we endure much pain, discomfort, and distress. The pain may be so great that it feels like living hell.

Death: the sutra says the pain of death is like peeling off the shell of a live turtle. If we have performed many misdeeds, then we will suffer greatly when we die. We may see our whole life

flash before our eyes; we may see frightening visions such as shattering earth, great flood or fire, etc. Only by achieving enlightenment and samadhi can we transcend life and death.

Separation from the ones we love: whether it's our parents, spouse, sibling, or friends, each person has a different course in life. Separation will come eventually, while alive or by death. The more we love, the more we suffer when separation happens.

Being with people we dislike: no matter where we are, there always seems to be some person who bothers us, whom we prefer not to meet, whom we don't want to work with. And that person may even be in your own family!

Desiring things that we cannot get: whether it's money, love, fame, power, or food and sleep, there always seems to be many things we don't have, or don't have enough of. And even when we get them, they are not enough, or they are not what we expected them to be.

Body-mind imbalance: technically, the term is "imbalance of the five *skandhas*" (or five aggregates: form, feeling, conception, volition, and consciousness.) We all experience annoyance, frustration, exasperation, boredom, anxiety, depression, fear, etc., which are afflictions of the mind. These are caused, or easily induced, by imbalance of the body and mind.

First Noble Truth: Suffering

All people have or will experience the eight kinds of suffering in each lifetime, whether they are men or women, from the West or East, wealthy or not wealthy. This is a true observation; *duhka* is a universal human condition. This is the first of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths.

The Four Noble Truths are: Suffering, the Causes of Suffering, the Cessation of Suffering (Nirvana), and the Path to the Cessation of Suffering (e.g. the Eightfold Path).

We must first recognize suffering. Then we need to find out the causes of our suffering. Only then do we have a chance to end our suffering. The cessation of suffering is liberation, it is true and lasting bliss, it is nirvana. And it can be achieved.

There is a strong relationship between impermanence and suffering. If we are not conscious of the impermanence of all things, then we will cling to fantasies, wish for impossible things, and suffer. Recognizing suffering is the first step to end suffering and bring true happiness.

Questions

1. Give several examples of impermanence. Is there anything that never change? Base your answer on real experiences, not speculation.
2. What is the relationship between impermanence and suffering? Does impermanence necessarily cause suffering?
3. What are the eight kinds of suffering? Which affect you the most? How can we avoid them? Think about what cause these sufferings.
4. Does Buddhism have a pessimistic outlook on life? Why does it teach us to look at suffering? How does the First Noble Truth help us in life?