

Suffering – Not the Only Option Here

A Special Report

By

Charles Burke

Waking Up Who You Want to Be

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I'm sitting here in the hospital, and perhaps because this is so far from my usual routine, I find my mind wandering into unaccustomed byways. I see people all around me facing the uncertainty of declining health, unexpected surgery and massive medical bills.

I see them meeting their circumstances in various ways. Most are facing their unsettled future with courage. Surprisingly few cower. They are all facing upset and change, but their styles vary.

Buddha, in his wisdom, told us that, "Life is suffering." Now, you may be comfortable with that statement, but somehow I'm not. And it would be terribly presumptuous for me to take issue with the venerable Mr. Buddha, but I'm going to do it anyway.

There are probably days when you feel that, yes, life is indeed suffering. It's a vale of tears, a sojourn of sorrow, an unending stream of tribulations and travail, a journey where nearly everything eventually goes wrong, and usually at the worst possible time.

But I probably don't have to tell you about that. You've already had plenty of that stuff. We all have. Most of us tend to spend a large slice of our life accompanied by discontent, frustration and emotional turmoil. Even if this isn't outright suffering, it falls fairly far from where we'd like it to be. Maybe it isn't quite suffering, but neither is it pleasant.

So to get started, let's take a closer look at this matter of suffering, and see if that's really what comprises life.

Goodness knows, we've all had our share of suffering in many of its various forms. When suffering comes calling (perhaps too frequently), we sure don't welcome it. We tend to shy away and try to avoid it. That's just common sense, right?

But just this once, let's NOT shy away. Instead, let's stand up and demand, "What are you doing here, and what did you bring me?" Let's skip over the major upsets like life-threatening illness, massive injury and death. Few lives are comprised totally of these events, so let's assume that Buddha was talking about the common folk and the everyday stuff that most of us agonize over.

Of course, we don't suffer much when we're getting what we want. On the contrary, we suffer precisely when we are NOT getting our way: Your raise didn't come through; your spouse doesn't love you quite the way you want him/her to; your children don't appreciate all you've done for them; your parents or in-laws treat you like you're an idiot. And on and on we could go.

Other suffering is centered more around the inner experience: Your health is weak; you don't feel smart enough to get good grades or to enter the career you'd prefer; your hair is hopeless; your feet aren't the same size; your nose is too small/large/off-center. You can supply a much more complete list, I'm sure.

So yes, there are lots of things in life that we can suffer over, but does that mean that life is really suffering? Hmmmm... let's dig just a bit deeper.

You may be thinking that so far, I've only dealt with relatively trivial worries. Nose size? Bad hair day? C'mon Burke, that's not important stuff...

Oh yeah? Says who? How many billions are spent each year on hair? How much more on cosmetic surgery? Do you really think people don't agonize over these "trivial" things? I have known a number of ladies who always, ALWAYS came home from the hairdresser in tears. And when was the last time you fretted over what to wear to a party, to a job interview, or to meet your spouse's boss for the first time?

"But that stuff isn't serious enough to call suffering, either." You're probably

right... it's not such serious stuff, but you and I both know that it causes an awful lot of emotional upset anyway.

Ask the person who just received a hacker haircut, who just failed to snare the job they'd been counting on, or who gets major tremors anytime they're about to meet an "important" person. Ask 'em whether or not they're suffering.

But here's a curious fact – not everyone is pained by the same experiences. Some people will spend large sums of money to join a crash weight-loss program, lose 10 or 15 pounds, and be glad of it. At the same time, others have been without food for days, have lost the same 10 or 15 pounds, and they're hating it. Those in this second group are definitely suffering.

Isn't that interesting? Same general experience; different reaction.

This can offer us a clue to unraveling why life is so filled with suffering for so many. It may also help us understand why some favored few love their lives. (It's true – there are those who feel they're lucky, or blessed, or favored by the gods of life.)

Let's switch tracks here for just a moment.

Do you like sports? I do. Now, I'm not much of a participant, but I love to watch. The power, speed and strategies of any team sport can be breathtaking.

But it's the individual sports that fascinate me most. Gymnastics, diving, running. There are no team members to take up the slack if you mess up; it's all up to you whether you succeed or fail. And of all the individual sports, the one that seems to me most like a perfect metaphor for life itself – is surfing.

First, a disclaimer: I have never surfed; in fact, I can barely swim. But that doesn't stop me from admiring what a master surfer does every time he or she paddles out to catch a wave.

The size of the wave is fairly important, but it doesn't matter as much as what you

do with it. It's the ride, not the wave that counts. Of course, there's a bigger thrill from catching a huge, curling tube that just goes on and on, but even middling waves can be enormous fun.

Surfers don't ride a wave by a ten-step process. They don't hold their surfing manual in one hand as they paddle out to meet the on-coming swell. Nah... they simply go out, get up and ride. Just direct experience which is completely devoid of intellectualizing. The simple joy of doing.

But those who are not surfers won't look at waves the same way at all. When the big, pounding surf comes, they quit swimming and get out of the water. They have a totally different attitude toward those big, beautiful, curling waves.

But what if we were to take that surfing attitude and transfer it over to how we live life? When the big surf comes your way, when the towering waves of unexpected change come disrupting your neatly laid plans, do you start complaining? Do you begin resisting the new flow, because it isn't YOUR idea? Maybe you even quit swimming so you can devote yourself full time to complaining.

Well that's one way. On the other hand, you COULD look around, say, "Wow, that's a huge one," and try to find a way to ride that magnificent new wave of circumstances in your life.

The truth? You don't HAVE to gripe or complain. You actually have a choice. Yes, I know that resisting the unexpected is the way we've always done things up till now. And yes, I know that it's bitterly unfair, and that these things always happen to you (if you say so).

But I also know that, fair or not, every change carries within it the seeds of massive opportunity. But those seeds – stamping on them and trying to grind them under your heel is probably not the optimal way to make them grow and deliver their fruits to you.

So the next time life hands you an unexpected disruption, you have a choice. You can either gripe, complain and resist the change. In other words, you can choose to

suffer.

Or..... you *could* choose something different. You could look for ways to surf that big new wave and get the greatest good from it. You could choose to prosper. In fact, it's *all* your choice.

If you choose to suffer, you'll be joining yourself to the great, helpless masses who only know how to get dissatisfaction from life. For you, Buddha's statement that life is suffering will be unshakeably true.

On the other hand, you *COULD* choose another way. You could decide that changes, unexpected twists and turns are not threats at all, but simply waves to ride, bringing you wonderful new experiences and opportunities.

But I warn you... if you take the second route, you'll no longer belong among the great suffering masses. Instead, you'll be one of the few who has begun the first small step in the process toward enlightenment. But really now, is that such a hard decision?

Cheers from sunny Japan,

Charles Burke

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Contact information:

Charles Burke
Corp. Kokuba C-119
Kokuba 335-1
Naha, Okinawa
Japan 902-0075

Contact form: <http://2-be.com/contact/>