

Suffering is Optional

By

Dr. Ong Tien Kwan
(M.B.B.S.)

A Buddhist Workshop

Recently I had the good fortune to attend a self discovery workshop conducted by Bhante Kumara of the [Sasanarakkha Buddhist Sanctuary](#). It was a one-day workshop organized by the [Sungai Long Buddhist Society](#).

One of the most profound insights that I experienced happened towards the end of this workshop when Bhante introduced the work of Byron Katie.

Using the structured tool introduced by Byron Katie, Bhante masterfully led some of the participants through a process of self discovery that seeks to root out the very cause of suffering – our clinging mind.

It takes one with deep understanding of the working of the mind, coupled with the quality of compassion and patience, to be able to skillfully lead the participants step by step in unraveling the layers of wrong views, perceptions and ideas that our mind eagerly and forcefully cling to despite evidence to the contrary.

The process helps us to see reality as it really is, without any embellishments from our filtered and prejudiced mind. It is as if we have been wearing a pair of sunglasses all these while and suddenly Bhante removed the sunglasses from our face. The darkened mind becomes clear as day.

A Mind is like a parachute.
It is useless until it is opened.

When I first learned about the Buddha's teachings, I was elated to have found a treasure of wisdom from an incomparable teacher. As I learned these teachings with greater depth, I saw its value and priced

it such that I closed my mind to wisdom from other sources – be they of spiritual or religious nature or from teachings of other gurus and life coaches.

In my mind, no other teachings is comparable to that of the Buddha's.

It was not until I met with a fellow Buddhist who introduced me to the various different teachings from other gurus and masters that I finally saw that while the Buddha's teachings is complete in its understanding of suffering, the way its knowledge has been disseminated and taught to the Buddhist community allows only a handful of practitioners to truly transformed their lives.

The only tool offered seems to be meditation, and that is assumed to be effective for all types of people. Thus when people tried meditation and found that it is not effective for them, we have the tendency to blame the failure on the practitioner. Few of us stop to ponder that perhaps some people require different tools and approaches to reach the stage of heightened self awareness that comes with meditative practice.

Open Your Mind to New Possibilities

Once I opened my mind to new possibilities and new methods, I found that there are indeed many other tools that are equally useful and effective in leading our mind from darkness to light, from one of delusion to understanding and accepting reality as it is.

Opening up my mind has brought me immense gifts and works from contemporary teachers such as Byron Katie, Michael Ryce, Lester Levenson and Dr. Hew Len. In addition, we can now see that many of the newer psychotherapy techniques such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction therapy (MBSR) actually incorporate such Buddhist concept as the mind being the creator of our suffering.

There are many more, I am sure, but these few alone have offered me enough effective tools to understand my own suffering and how to be free from it.

Their teachings allow me to see the Buddha's teachings from a different perspective. I find that their teachings do not contradict the

dhamma in any ways. In fact, they provide me with additional options and tools to transform my life for the better.

Understanding Suffering

Let me share with you how I have come to understand suffering. My understanding has come from the synthesis of the Buddha's teachings, the works of these various teachers and some other scientific methods from the world of psychology and psychiatry.

Suffering is mental. While we may experience bodily pain, we do have the choice whether to suffer it or not. Suffering is therefore a state of mind, and it is a state of mind that comes with holding on to a particular thought or belief.

All sufferings can be traced back to a thought or belief.

Here's how we suffer:

1. We encounter someone or experience something.
2. We hold a thought or a belief about that person or experience.
3. The thought or belief is incongruent with reality.
4. We deny (not accept) that reality and thus we suffer.

For example, as a parent I often find myself wanting my children to be better – better in their studies, better behaved, better manners, etc. I also notice that I get very stressed up when their behavior do not match up to my expectations.

When I recognized that I am feeling stressed, and I looked at the source of my stress, I realized that it arises from a thought I hold in my mind – a belief that my kids should behave in a certain way. The stress arises when their behavior is incongruent or do not match that expectation.

The moment I drop my hold on that thought or expectation, I am free from the stress. It is exactly like what the Buddha said about holding on to a burnt charcoal or ember in your hand. Just open your hand and it drops off on its own.

Pain gone! Suffering stopped!

Stop grasping on to your thoughts, beliefs, perceptions, concepts and ideas and you will stop your sufferings. Truly knowing this makes suffering optional. When we do not know or see this, suffering follows like a shadow that never leaves us.

Acceptance and Letting Go

Buddhists talk a lot about acceptance and letting go. When someone encounters an unpleasant experience, we readily offer the advice to accept and let go but how exactly do we do that?

What is it that we are asked to accept? And what are we letting go of?

Often, as good Buddhists, we tried to force ourselves to accept the circumstances but that only makes it worse because then we feel that it is incongruent with our feelings. We end up feeling like a hypocrite, being unauthentic with our true emotions.

Working through a proper process of examining and tracing our thoughts (such as using the structured tool introduced by Byron Katie), we can see that what we need to accept is the what is. What is is the reality as it is, without it being plastered over by our perceptions, beliefs, prejudices, concepts and ideas. And what we need to let go is the clinging or grasping to our perceptions, beliefs, prejudices, concepts and ideas. We need to let go of our thoughts.

Byron Katie's tool provides us with a simple, do-able and reproducible method of identifying our root cause of our suffering and abandoning it. Once we identify and recognize the erroneous thought, acceptance comes naturally and letting go becomes automatic.

There is no effort involved. All resistance simply dissolves.

Simple but not Easy

For most people, the entire process of suffering outline above is very simple to understand. In fact, it is precisely because it is so simple that many do not regard it as useful or transformational.

Yet, all we really need to transform our lives is just this bit of understanding AND practice the tool to change it. However, as the

saying goes, "Even an 8 year old can understand it, but even an 80 year old cannot practice it."

An Ounce of Practice is Better than a Ton of Knowledge

One problem I encounter with the teaching of the dhamma in the Buddhist community is that the entire dhamma talk and lecture system in existence today provides us with tons of knowledge and understanding about the Buddha's teachings, yet offers us very little in terms of putting such knowledge into practice.

Yet we know that knowing alone is not enough. Just like we need to eat the cake to know the taste of the cake, in order to taste the benefits of the dhamma, we have to live it. We have to truly internalize the dhamma into our lives. We have to be able to live the dhamma in our daily mundane lives.

More often than not, it is not that we do not want to practice the dhamma. Rather, it is because we do not know how. There is no manual being offered to us on how we can put such knowledge into practice in our lives.

Well, now there are.

Understanding Suffering makes us Free

Once I truly understood the root cause of my suffering, and have learned the tool to observe and trace my thoughts to its root, it becomes easier for me to simply let go. I know that going against reality is a hopeless situation and resisting what is only creates suffering for me. Thus, the logical and sensible choice is simply to let go of grasping to the thought.

However, this process needs to be put into practice constantly until it becomes second nature to you. Only then can you let go easily.

In the beginning, before you are familiar with the process, the going can be quite tough. It takes courage and honesty to your self. It takes discipline and effort. The end result, however, is worth it. In fact, it is priceless.

Once you have become an expert with the process, you may wonder how you could have survived for so long without it.

Tools for Transformation

While we encourage others to meditate, we must also be aware that people with different temperaments, beliefs, characters and attitudes may benefit more from different methods and tools for personal transformation. When we use meditation as a “one size fits all” solution, we may actually be doing a disservice to others.

That is why I was so encouraged by the self discovery workshop conducted by Bhante Kumara. His workshop offers a totally different but refreshing approach to understanding the Buddha’s teachings from a different perspective.

Having said that, if you are looking to transform your life in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha I have here a few effective tools from different teachers that I have found to be compatible with the Buddha’s teachings and that are extremely powerful in bringing transformation and insights.

1. The Work of Byron Katie
2. Why is this happening to me again? By Michael Ryce
3. The Release Technique of Lester Levenson
4. Ho’oponopono by Dr. Hew Len

The Work of Byron Katie

Byron Katie’s work leads us directly into identifying and recognizing the root cause of our suffering, which is an erroneous thought, belief or idea that we cling on to and refuse to let go. She offers a structured method that guides us to do this and to look inward until we achieve insights.

You can follow this simple process using a worksheet that can be downloaded for free at her website at <http://www.thework.com>. The worksheet is called Judging Your Neighbor worksheet.

The same website also offers free short video clips on how she uses the same process with others as she guides them through their thoughts, self understanding and insights.

Why is this Happening to me Again?

Michael Ryce, who authored the book "Why is this Happening to me AGAIN?", offers a similar method of identifying and recognizing our erroneous thoughts. He also offers a worksheet to guide you through the process, albeit with slight variations from that of Byron Katie.

Michael says his work is about forgiveness. However, his definition of forgiveness is the letting go of erroneous thoughts. Coming from a Christian background, you may find a lot of Christian terminologies being used and referenced in his work. If you can look beyond those words and terminologies, you will then see the real value of his work.

You can download a free ebook copy of his book from his website at <http://www.whyyagain.com>. His worksheet is also available for download there.

Locally, you can find a workshop called "Busting the Mind Game" conducted at Clove and Clive, a spiritual centre in Kelana Jaya, that utilizes the principles and teachings of Byron Katie and Michael Ryce to guide you through similar processes. For more information, visit their website at <http://www.clovenclive.com>

The Release Technique

For you to benefit from the work of Byron Katie and Michael Ryce, you need a certain degree of maturity in thinking as well as the honesty and courage to see things as they truly are. Such criteria may not fit everyone.

The Release Technique introduced by Lester Levenson, on the other hand, does not require the above criteria.

All you need to benefit from this technique is the ability to recognize and accept your negative emotions, and then let them go. There is no need to identify your erroneous thoughts or beliefs. For some, this process is easier to do and is needed to remove the resistance and blocks to their spiritual progress.

Lester was a physicist who was suffering from an incurable heart disease and was sent home from the hospital to die. Instead, he

stumbled upon this method to release all his negative emotions and eventually not only healed himself but lived on for many years to share his techniques with others.

Lester's work is now being packaged and called "The Sedona Method" by Hale Dwoskin and "The Released Technique" by Lawrence Crane, two of his earliest students. Unfortunately, the courses are commercialized and quite expensive, and beyond the reach of many people.

However, the technique itself is very simple to learn and practice.

Here are the steps:

1. Tilt head downward as in prayer
2. Choose an unresolved issue and focus on it
3. Feel the negative emotion that arise in the heart or stomach areas, recognize the emotion and acknowledge it
4. Ask yourself 3 questions
 1. Could I let it go?
 2. Would I let it go?
 3. When?
5. Once you have decided to let it go, visualise the release of the emotion. There are many ways to do this. One simple way is to visualize the negative emotion as pouring out of a hole in your heart (like oil sprouting out) until it clears completely
6. Feel the light feeling that accompanies the release
7. Repeat 1 to 6, doing it repeatedly like pulling out pieces of tissue from a tissue box until it is empty.

Ho'oponopono

Ho'oponopono is a Hawaiian system of healing that was popularized by Dr. Hew Len and Joe Vitale in their book "Zero Limits".

This method also does not require you to identify your erroneous thoughts but simply accept that all negative feelings and experiences that you encounter in your life arise from erroneous thoughts.

Like the Release Technique, you then simply let go of your thoughts without having to identify them specifically. This is done using four simple phrases:

1. I am sorry
2. Please forgive me
3. Thank you
4. I love you

You can learn more about this technique by reading their book "Zero Limits", which delves a lot more into the rational and working of this simple healing technique. You can also learn the amazing work of Dr. Hew Len himself.

Joe Vitale's other book called "The Key" offers more reasons and methods for clearing our blocks and defilements.

No One Size fits All

In the end, what I am saying here is that while there is only one truth, there are many roads that lead to that truth. There is no one method that is suitable for everyone. Different people with different characteristics, personalities and temperaments will benefit from different method.

In this way, the one who has an open mind towards the other alternative methods of spiritual healing will stand to benefit from them.

Meditation

I don't want you to go off with the idea that meditation is not effective or inferior to these new tools that I am introducing to you here. In fact, I believe that you can gain the most benefits from these tools as a meditator because the heightened self awareness that comes with regular meditation increases your ability to see, appreciate and utilize these tools effectively.

So, if you are already meditating, continue with your meditation and try out these tools to see if they enhance your spiritual growth. If you are not meditating yet, then I strongly advice you to start now. In my opinion, the ability to be aware of your thoughts and emotions is the essential skill needed for your spiritual progress. No spiritual seeker should be without it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I hope that by sharing these other modalities of healing with you, it will help you to open up your mind to new possibilities and offer you other methods that may be just right for your spiritual progress and personal transformation.

I wish you all the best in your spiritual journey.

Sincerely,

Dr. Ong
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