

Buddha's Question by Michelle Wruck

I had the great privilege of teaching a course in early Buddhism at The Forever Learning Institute in my home town. Forever Learning offers university level courses to seniors, to help them keep their minds sharp. Teaching something always brings the material home to you in a new way and this was no exception. What really struck me this time through was Buddha's opening questions. What is suffering? How do we end suffering? One of my students said it very well, "Of course I want to end suffering! Why wouldn't I want to end my suffering!" That's when I realized that in some sense, all of Buddhism is contained in these two, very simple opening questions.

Buddhism, as I see it, is fairly simple. It's the teaching that our suffering comes from an attempt to create stability. We are thus freed by the understanding that everything is change, all is *pratītyasamutpāda*, *dependently arisen*, or *empty*. The genius in Buddha's question is that it brings to light a question that is so ubiquitous that we never realized we were asking it.

Every time we make a decision in our lives, we are attempting to end our suffering. When we decide to date someone, we do so because we think that it will bring us happiness, or quench our desire for partnership. When we go back to school, we do so because we believe that it will further our career, bringing us greater financial stability or perhaps prestige. When we make a purchase, we are doing so because we believe that it will make our lives easier or more comfortable in some way.

What Buddha is telling us is that by realizing these actions as attempts to answer the question of suffering, we can become wise about what works and what doesn't work. Does buying a new car genuinely ease our suffering? Does the new degree or the new girlfriend relieve our suffering?

Buddha knows (and I agree) that if we begin to watch closely, we will find that in fact, none of these things eases our suffering in a permanent way. The car may distract us for a while. The new partner satiate temporarily, and the advanced degree may open new doors for us, but at the end of the day, we are always looking for more. More degrees, more money, more security.

What Buddha shows us with these simple questions is that our minds are constantly scheming to make our lives better - and that scheming is what creates our suffering. By asking the questions, What causes suffering? and How can I end suffering? Buddha gives us everything we need to reach our own enlightenment. All we have to do is genuinely engage with these questions and we will see the truth for ourselves.

It's often said that Buddhism is "beautiful at the beginning, beautiful in the middle, and beautiful at the end." There's also a good deal of debate about exactly what this means. To me, it means that because Buddhism is based on a true understanding of the nature of existence, there is no part of it that doesn't contain the whole. Whether it's simply the story of Buddha's life, the opening question, the instruction on mindfulness, or the teaching on dependent-arising. Each teaching contains the whole teaching. I see that this is true over and over again and it's one of the many reasons that Buddhism has been so satisfying for my mind.