

# Suffering

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson deals with the topic of suffering in human life. You're going to look at how religion confronts the reality of suffering. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. [Suffering](#)
2. [Christianity](#)
3. [Buddhism](#)
4. [Hinduism](#)

## 1. Suffering

**Suffering** involves the experience of physical and emotional pain, which might include various existential and spiritual trials and challenges. In the context of religion, it also signifies the individual and collective response to the suffering of others.

If we look at the etymology of the words “suffer” and “suffering,” they trace back to the Indo-European root “bher,” which means to bear and to carry. Perhaps the most vivid example of this is in Christianity with Jesus Christ bearing the weight of sin represented by the cross.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### **Suffering**

Physical, psychological, or spiritual pain.

## 2. Christianity

The early monastic movement within Christianity was exemplified by a group called the Desert Fathers. They intentionally renounced all physical comforts with the intention of getting closer to God through the suffering undertaken by Christ.



#### DID YOU KNOW

Someone committed to these kinds of practices and commitments is referred to as an ascetic, living the life of asceticism, with the goal of spiritual growth and understanding. Austerity, simplicity, physical challenge, and even discomfort and pain (in some cases intentionally inflicted) were considered routes toward communion with God and, ultimately, release from the suffering that comes from the world.

The different branches of Christianity recognize the value of this teaching to varying degrees. Most, if not all, also emphasize the importance of consoling others and helping with relief from suffering. This is expressed through charitable organizations that are associated with the church and other Christian institutions, such as work with the homeless, or hospice groups that help guide people and their families through the final days of life.

The Christian idea of penance is also associated with suffering. Confession of sins, repenting, and receiving final absolution for one's sins constitute the Christian notion of penance. It involves the individual's and the community's commitment to alleviating suffering. In terms of suffering or release from suffering, some branches of Christianity have doctrinal clues for what might be in store in the afterlife as well.

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## 3. Buddhism

Life is suffering. This is the first Noble Truth of the Buddha. The Sanskrit term for it is **Dukkha**. As Buddhism unfolded, it developed a spiritual, philosophical, really a psychological doctrine for coming to terms with this fundamental truth of human life. Buddhism's second Noble Truth states that suffering is caused by cravings and attachments that are guided by our desires and fears, which are a result of ignorance of the way out of suffering.

One thing that Buddhism teaches the practitioner is how to train his or her mind to see cravings, desires, and everything that takes the form of will, thought, and habit when they arise. From there it teaches us to accept them and simply let them go without grasping and clinging to the security that our ignorance tells us they might provide.

**The Noble Eightfold Path** is a guide for the practitioner to learn the value of **karuna**, which means "compassion." It includes both self-compassion and compassion for all beings. Buddhism emphasizes compassion, moral integrity, intention, and a holy life that's committed to day-to-day consciousness about how one communicates with the world. These represent aspects of the three jewels of Buddhism: the Buddha, the Dharma, or the "teaching," and the Sangha, or the "community." It offers a possibility of release or liberation from suffering, a state of being known as **nirvana**.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Noble Eightfold Path**

In Buddhism, a series of practices that lead to enlightenment and to the end of suffering.

##### **Karuna**

In Buddhism, the practice of compassion.

### Nirvana

In Buddhism, liberation.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Dukkha

In Buddhism, suffering.

## 4. Hinduism

In Hinduism, suffering is believed to be the result of negative actions in this life or in a former life. These are just laws that must be accepted along the way. The factors that determine one's spiritual advancement have to do with personal behaviors and actions, moral and ethical conduct that, in turn, affect one's karma and the possibility of liberation from endless rebirth

This liberation is called **moksha**. Hinduism teaches that the manifestation of universal soul is possible. One of the first sources of this teaching is in the Bhagavad Gita, which is part of the larger epic tale called the Mahabharata.

One of the most important stories in the Bhagavad Gita tells of an exchange between Lord Vishnu and Prince Arjuna. The setting is a battlefield, and Arjuna is faced with a most difficult decision. The unfolding revelation of truth represented in this image is given to Arjuna as a reminder of his original soul and the ultimate state of peace and freedom that might await him after the battle.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Moksha

In Hinduism, liberation from rebirth.



#### SUMMARY

The Indo-European root of **suffering**, which is "bher," means to bear and to carry. The example from **Christianity** of Christ bearing the cross, or bearing the weight of sin for humanity, was used. You also looked at the idea of Christian penance, the idea of repenting and confessing one's sins, and how community support is often available to help alleviate suffering. In **Buddhism**, the first Noble Truth is: life is suffering. **Hinduism** offers the concept of moksha, the state of final release from suffering, and the idea of karma, or how one's actions in the world dictate one's entanglements in suffering or not.

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#### TERMS TO KNOW

**Dukkha**

In Buddhism, suffering.

**Karuna**

In Buddhism, the practice of compassion.

**Moksha**

In Hinduism, liberation from rebirth.

**Nirvana**

In Buddhism, liberation.

**Noble Eightfold Path**

In Buddhism, a series of practices that lead to enlightenment and to the end of suffering.

**Suffering**

Physical, psychological, or spiritual pain.