Human suffering was one of the main points of departure for the religious quest in several traditions. Why should man, a seeker of good and of ultimate happiness, actually find himself in constant suffering? Even today it remains the main human focus of religions. What do religions provide as solutions to this problem of human suffering? This is the theme we have chosen for this issue of the Journal of Dharma.

Besides being a deep metaphysical problem, suffering has also psychological, social and cultural implications. It is a central theme in numerous works of art, down the centuries. Man has tried to depict his tragic condition in marble and paint, as well as in immortal works of tragic drama and poetry. But in these he has also expressed his capacity to survive the greatest tragedies of nature and to retain his personal life and dignity. The earliest signs of human artistic creativity appear in the burial places, where he has depicted in unmistakable symbols his belief in the immortal survival of the departed.

But from a common sense point of view, suffering is, apparently, a problem which has no solution. Some Existentialist philosophers seem to emphasize the view that life is absurd and man a useless quest. Freud condemned all religious efforts to solve the problem of suffering as mere wishful thinking: "Earthquakes, floods and fires do not differentiate between the good and devout men, and the sinner and unbeliever.... It happens often enough that the violent, the crafty and the unprincipled seize the desirable good of the earth for themselves, while the pious go empty away." This pessimistic, cynical view of suffering is further strengthened by the fact that a good deal of poverty and misery in the world today is man-made, produced by the unbridled ambition of men who want to secure their own well-being at the expense of those who are too weak to fight for their rightful share of goods.

But world religions that have always attempted to find solutions for the fundamental problems of human life started from this common sense view and each in its own way sought to find the meaning behind the apparent meaninglessness of human life. Siddhartha Gautama Buddha started with the common sense view that life is all suffering and that the few pleasures which we find in life serve only to make more acute the suffering that follows...
Son of God made man, identified himself with the suffering part of faith and obedience. In Christianity, Jesus Christ, the loving design of God for turning the sinner back to the path of faith and obedience. In Christianity, Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, identified himself with the suffering humanity and died on the Cross offering himself as a sacrificial victim for the salvation of mankind.

These various attempts at solving the riddle of suffering have not exhausted the possibilities. The problem still remains, and evil and suffering are facts. A good part of human suffering is deliberately inflicted by human beings on their fellowmen. On the other hand, it is not in affluence and the intoxicating experience of worldly pleasures, but in privation and suffering, that man discovers his own naked existence and arrives at self-consciousness and the realization of his own reality that transcends the limitations of time and space.

Suffering is a mystery and will remain a mystery for the finite mind of man. All that is possible is to approach it from different perspectives and points of view. This is what is aimed at in this issue of the Journal. Robert Neville approaches the fact of human suffering, which is first and foremost a psychological phenomenon, under the form of guilt from a Christian point of view. John Bowker, who has written a comprehensive book on Problems of Suffering in the Religions of the World, gives here further elucidation of the theology of suffering. Mahmoud M. Ayoub, who has done a long and scholarly research on the problem of suffering in the Muslim tradition, has given a lucid presentation of the redemptive value of suffering in Islam. Coming to the East, Frank J. Kenney discusses the conception of suffering in the Sāṃkhya-Yoga schools of thought. Both B.K. Matilal and R.P. Sharma discuss the concept of suffering in Buddhism, but from two different perspectives. R.K. Tripathi takes an overall look at the approaches to suffering today. We are glad to present in the survey section an interesting discussion by Yvonne Korshak on Western art in its depiction of suffering at different stages in history.

We have made no attempt to synthesize these different contributions to any unified view. They speak for themselves. Their net result, we hope, is that of a limit language, that man's life of suffering is not useless nor meaningless, that it points beyond itself to a region of light, glory and fulfillment, existent already here in the immortal self of man, to be realized fully in the future in the authentic condition of man.

John B. Chethimattam
Associate Editor