Sharp Words & Sharp Pains

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When you practice the Dhamma, there are some kinds of pain that the Buddha has you be averse to, and others that he recommends that you learn how to endure. Now, the enduring isn’t just putting up with something, gritting your teeth. He teaches you to analyze the things that you have to endure with wisdom and discernment. And to make that distinction, what are the things that you should be averse to and what are the things you shouldn’t? The things you should be averse to are wasted time, wasted opportunities, the kind of suffering that comes to the mind from its own lack of skill. That’s something you should be averse to. There’s a passage where the Buddha talks about reflecting that. But someday you’re not going to be young anymore, and it’s not easy to practice when you’re not young. And there are all kinds of difficulties that come with old age. So you want to make an effort now to attain the attainment, as he says, to see the as-yet-unseen, to reach the as-yet-unreached, so that when you get old you will live in ease. The same with health. Now you’re healthy enough to practice, but there will come times when you are too sick to sit and meditate. The doctors may give you drugs, so it’s hard for you to keep your mindfulness clear, your alertness clear. So you’ve got the opportunity now to practice. Take advantage of it. Other dangers are similar. Social unrest, a split in the sangha. You’ve got the opportunity now to prepare the mind so that it doesn’t have to suffer when those things come along. So that’s the kind of suffering, or the kind of pain, that you should be averse to. You don’t want to have to meet up with those things and say, “Oh, I wish I’d spent more time practicing when I was younger, or when I was healthier, or when society was at peace.” In other words, the Buddha wants you to be free of that regret. And you look at it coming at you in the future. That kind of danger, that kind of suffering or pain, is something you should be averse to. You don’t want to have to suffer that. There are two dangers that the text talks about again and again and again. One is critical words, and the second is sharp pains. In both cases, the Buddha doesn’t simply say, “Suck it in.” He says there are ways of listening to the sharp words and ways of dealing with the sharp pains where you don’t have to suffer from them, where you can minimize the suffering. And again, use them as a spur to continue practicing. With critical words, the first thing he asks you is, “Are they true?” We don’t like criticism, but how are we going to learn unless we let other people criticize us? Especially people we trust, people whose wisdom and discernment we trust. Because we want to look good in their eyes, we don’t like it when they find something to criticize. But you have to look at their motivation. If they’re truly wise and discerning and trustworthy, they’re criticizing us out of compassion. Instead of focusing on the idea that they’ve found a flaw in us or they’ve found something lacking in us, they’re going to be looking at how we take the criticism. I learned this many, many times with the Chan Phu. I really hated being criticized. I wanted to create a good impression. But you’d always find something. And admittedly, it wasn’t all that hard to find. I’d left plenty of avenues for criticism. And if I reacted in the wrong way to the criticism, it became even worse. So I learned to realize, “Okay, you’ve got to listen to it. Is it true? If it’s true, you’ve got something to work with.” Because our faults are like vampires. In other words, you look in the mirror and the vampire doesn’t have a reflection. In the same way, your faults are that you look in the mirror and you don’t see your faults. They may be as blatant as they are to other people. So you want to take advantage of that fact. Because then you know you’ve got something to work with and you can know what you do have to work with if the criticism is false. Then it depends on where it’s coming from. If the person is well-meaning and just simply has misinformation, you take that as an opportunity to show that you can put up even with false criticism. Wait for the proper time to straighten out the record. But don’t straighten it out right away if it’s not the proper time. Because once it is an incident where it’s not the right time, it’s not the right time. So you look back and report it. And you say, “Well, you’re not looking hard enough.” So I went back and I looked again. Couldn’t find them at all. So I decided the best thing to do would be just disappear for a while. So finally I sent someone else to look for them, and sure enough, they weren’t there. It turned out the woman in the kitchen had commandeered them. So the next morning Jon Fung said, “You know, those pillows really weren’t where I thought they were.” That’s all he said. No apologies, nothing. That was the closest I ever got to an apology from him. But the point here is that if I’d made a big fuss about it, it would have just gotten worse. So if you can learn how to put up with some criticisms or misunderstandings and wait till the proper time, to talk them over, you’ve learned an important skill. As for people who don’t mean well to you, they just want to criticize you for the sake of carrying you down, well, you’ve learned something about them. The extent to which you can trust them, the extent to which you can trust their intentions towards you. And there may be people that you’d rather not see that have ill will towards you, but it’s good to know. So in that case, you can take the criticism as a learning opportunity. And in the meantime, try to depersonalize the whole thing, the many of the instructions the Buddha gives about being criticized or being scolded, fairly or unfairly. It has to do with taking the “you” out of the equation, the sense that the words are aimed at you. There’s one where he says, “Think about human speech. There are true words and untrue words, words that are given with kind intentions, those that are given with unkind intentions.” It goes down the list. I mean, this is the way human speech is. So when you’re being criticized, it’s not out of the ordinary. This is part of what it’s like being in the human realm. And then another spot where it’s one of my favorite lines in the Pali Canon is that of the Buddha. He says, “You’re being criticized harshly, and you should reflect. An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear.” Now, how many times have you thought that? Someone’s yelling at you. You’re thinking, “Why does that person think that about me? Why are they saying that?” And all these narratives get built up. And you punish yourself with those narratives. And it’s best just to take yourself out of the line of fire. “Oh, an unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear.” That’s it. In other words, you learn to use the opportunity to see the mind in action, how it creates suffering for itself, and learn how to pull yourself out of that process. So even unfair criticism can be an opportunity for practicing the Dhamma. And all the more so when it’s fair and you can benefit from it. And this is one of the worst things for practitioners, to be averse to criticism. I mean, you try your best not to be criticized, but when it comes, you say, “Okay, here’s an opportunity to learn.” That’s how you grow. That’s how you learn. It helps to have a good sense of humor and being able to laugh at yourself. You say, “Yup, that’s what I’ve done. I did that, yes, and I was stupid, and I know it’s stupid.” But step back from it and not take it all so personally. Because that’s what a sense of humor is, is the ability to step back from a situation. This is how you learn to overcome aversion to criticism. As for aversion to pain, we’ve talked many, many times about dealing with pain. Seeing the various ways you perceive the pain, seeing the various ways you identify with it, and realizing that you’re actually making some choices there. The pain in the body may be a raw fact, but what you do with it is not a raw fact. You do all kinds of things to fabricate around it. If you want to see fabrication, this is why the Buddha said, “Pain is a noble truth.” Because when you comprehend the pain, you learn an awful lot about the mind. And there’s no way you’re going to comprehend it unless you learn how to sit with it. This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration. You give the mind a foundation where it doesn’t feel threatened by the pain. It doesn’t regard the pain as an invasion of your territorial rights. The body’s there. The fact that you have a human body, and this is another thing the Buddha has us reflect on, that depersonalizes the situation. The fact that you’ve got a human body means that you are open to all kinds of injury and damage. So what do you expect? When pain comes, it’s going to come. But the mind doesn’t have to suffer. This is one of the reasons why we develop both concentration and discernment. Concentration to give us a sense of stability so we can watch it carefully and not feel threatened by it, and discernment to take it apart. Perhaps the most important part of discernment is that you take on the role of the aggressor in looking into the pain. Instead of running away, running away, running away from it, you turn around and look at it. Probe into it. Once you’ve got a good, solid foundation and you don’t feel afraid of it, look into it. Ask questions about it. It’s like that character in The Wizard of Earthsea. He gets chased around all the known world that he knows about by this evil shadow. He finally realizes that the only way he’s going to get away from it is to turn around and face it. And in facing it, he realizes that the shadow is himself. It’s the same way with the pain. A lot of the problem with the pain is our own self-created shadow around the pain. So once you’ve gotten your foundation with concentration, you turn to look at it. Ask questions about it. Are you coming at you, or is it going away? Are you above the pain or below the pain? All those weird questions which sound strange when you hear them, but when you actually look at the way the mind relates to the pain, you realize that sometimes you think you’re above the pain, sometimes you think you’re below the pain. The pain has you surrounded, or it’s as solid as your body. Is it really solid, the pain? Solidity is a function of the body. Pain is a feeling. They’re two different kinds of things. Or you may feel that the pain means ill toward you. It may not be a conscious thought, but it might be buried down there in the mind. So ferret it out. And simply the fact that you’re not afraid of the pain and you’re turning on it and asking questions, that changes the relationship entirely. So these are the two things that the Buddha teaches us to learn how to endure. But not simply endure, but endure so that we can understand them. So you want to learn how not to be averse to criticism, not be averse to pain. If you allow yourself to be averse to them, you place huge limitations on your practice. If you’re willing to learn from them, that opens up the way.

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