You Can Choose Not to Suffer

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In that chant that we often recite about aging, illness, death, and separation, we say that aging is unavoidable. Illness and death are unavoidable. A more literal translation might be the fact that we have not gone beyond them. They’re still in our future. We’ve had a lot of them in the past as well, and we know that we don’t like them. But fortunately, the suffering around them is optional. You can choose not to suffer when aging comes, when illness comes, when death and separation come. Now, the choice here has to be based on skill. That’s why we’re meditating. You focus on your breath. Find a spot in the body where the mind likes to stay, or has a potential for liking to stay, and give it a little space. Don’t press down on it. Allow the breath to flow freely. Allow the blood to flow freely through the body. Think of your mind just barely touching the breath, but touching it consistently. So there’s steadiness in the focus, but also a sense of lightness. If it feels too light to settle down, okay, you can bore on in for a while. But realize that at some point the mind is going to have to back out a little bit to find a point of equilibrium. Because it’s when the mind is at equilibrium that it can see things clearly, both in the body and in the mind, to see where it’s adding any unnecessary stress, unnecessary sense of burdensomeness on itself. That’s the skill, and there’s the potential for choice. The Buddha talks about those two arrows. You get shot with the arrow of physical pain. But that doesn’t apply just to physical pain. It can also be the mental pain of having a body that grows ill, that gets old, that’s going to die, living in a world where there’s a lot of separation. That’s the first arrow. The second arrow is all the unnecessary and optional stuff we put on top of it, the original arrow. Although, as I’ve said many times before, the idea that there’s just one second arrow seems to underestimate a lot of the suffering. We just keep shooting ourselves again and again and again. And you want to watch yourself doing that so you can learn where it’s optional. This will take time. But simply realizing, “Hey, it is optional. It doesn’t have to be there,” that knowledge helps to lighten some of the problem, lighten some of the burden. In other words, there’s hope. We live in a world where we haven’t gone beyond aging, illness, and death, but there is hope for us. There’s a state of mind where we don’t have to suffer from them. But what are some of the things we do? It’s all in this process of fabrication that the Buddha talks about, the sankara. There’s an intentional element in every sankara. There’s bodily fabrication, which is the way you breathe; verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself about things; and mental fabrication, which are feelings of pleasure, pain—either pleasure or pain—and perceptions. Perceptions are like the labels you put on things, which can either be individual words or images. And it’s in the combination of these three things that we mix these things together—the way you breathe, the way you talk to yourself, the basic images and feelings you have. And when we do that with ignorance, there’s going to be suffering. If you do it with knowledge, that’s the path. And you notice all these things right here as you’re meditating. Your breath is right here. You’re talking to yourself about the breath. That’s verbal fabrication. And, of course, there are feelings of pleasure, greater or lesser pleasure. Sometimes there are feelings of pain. And then there are your perceptions. And when you want to look at suffering, you have to look at all three of these areas. Some people say that suffering comes just from the body, from your old sankaras. Old sankaras have a lot to do with it, but your present sankaras have a lot more to do with it. Sometimes your body detects some of the stuff in the body, and sometimes it’s more in the mind. But this doesn’t mean that you can avoid suffering just by not thinking. There’s so much of that idea in Western Buddhism that somehow if you could just stop thinking about things, then you’d be okay. We could all go out and have a frontal lobotomy, and that would be the end of the problem. But that’s not how the Buddha taught. He said you have to learn how to think properly to think your way out of the problem. Something else you often hear is that animals don’t suffer, it’s just us with our ideas about who we are and our self-identity. Well, animals, even though they might not have a lot of verbal fabrication, have a lot of mental fabrication. They know feelings. They know perceptions. A lot of our perceptions come out of the lizard brain, and those can cause a lot of suffering. So you have to learn how to look at these things carefully and learn how to do them more skillfully. So we think about the breath, evaluate the breath, try to get skillful in the way we do that. And we look at the perceptions that come up, how we perceive the breath, and what feelings arise when you perceive the breath in different ways, and how that affects the way you breathe and the way you breathe in turn will affect your feelings. We do this to sensitize ourselves to these processes so that when we encounter them in other contexts, we can notice ourselves. This is so much of the practice of learning how to observe your mind in action. And then realizing that you can think in your old ways and perceive in your old ways and breathe in your old ways, or you can do it in other ways. You’ve got the choice. A couple of summers back I was teaching in Canada. We were talking about equanimity and how important it is to be able to develop equanimity in the face of a lot of the difficult things that happen in life. Someone raised an objection. He said, “It’s horrible. You’re placing this burden on people, telling them they have to be equanimous. When they lose their children, when they meet with difficulties in life, they learn that they’ve got cancer or whatever.” And the response, of course, was not that. Nobody’s forcing it on them. But if you can learn the skills to muster equanimity in the face of difficulties, you’re a lot better off. So the Buddha’s not telling you that you should be equanimous, but he’s saying you can be equanimous if you master these skills. And when you’ve been abused, you might say, “Well, shouldn’t we settle for some justice first, and then we can think about equanimity?” But look at how much of the world’s troubles are based on people trying to look for their idea of justice. And sometimes they’re right and sometimes they’re wrong. But that kind of back and forth never comes. It comes to an end. There’s a story of Somdet Do when he was abbot at Wat Rakhang in Bangkok. Some monks came to him one day and complained that this other monk had hit them over the head. He looked at them and said, “Well, you hit him first.” They said, “No, we didn’t. He was the first one to hit us.” He said, “No, you hit him first.” And they got really upset. So they went and found another senior monk to complain about Somdet Do. Somdet Do was crazy. So this senior monk came to see Somdet Do and asked him what it was all about. He said, “Well, obviously if this monk hit them over the head sometime in the past, they probably hit him over the head.” So when you’re looking for justice, where does the story begin? When you’re tallying up who’s right and who’s wrong, where does the tally begin? You could trace it back and it just goes back and back and back. And you begin to realize that settling scores never got settled. And if you spend your life trying to settle a score, your life has been wasted. The Buddha’s offering you the tools, the strategies, the techniques for learning how to get out of all this. He says, “We’re not here to straighten out the world. We’re here to straighten out our minds, to teach ourselves the skills that we need in order to extract ourselves from the back and forth of score-settling and justice-seeking, and to find a happiness that doesn’t have to be fabricated, as even fabricating with knowledge is still just the path.” I say “just the path.” Of course, it’s a lot better than the normal way we fabricate. But the whole purpose of the path, and what makes the path special, is that it leads you to a state where there is no fabrication. From the outside, it looks like equanimity because the mind is no longer disturbed by things. But that’s a lot greater than equanimity. We talked about the immeasurable brahmavahara of equanimity. Well, this is still bigger, in the sense that it’s totally beyond the world. Equanimity and the brahmavahara get sent in all directions. This is beyond all directions. That’s where we’re headed. And when you choose the Buddhist path, that becomes a possibility. So learn to look at these processes that you’re working with here. Learn how to do them skillfully. Because as you can do them skillfully focused on the breath, then you can take those same processes of bodily, verbal, and mental fabrication and catch yourself in the act when you’re shooting yourself with that second or third or fourth arrow, realizing it’s just these things—the way you breathe, the way you talk to yourself, the feelings and perceptions. And ask yourself, “Which one of those things can you change so that the arrow doesn’t get shot and you don’t keep on wounding yourself unnecessarily?”

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