Pain Without Suffering

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The Buddha talks about some of the things that we do have to accept as we go through life. The fact that there will be pain, we accept. The fact that people will be speaking harsh words to us, we accept. When someone has died, we also have to accept that. What we don’t have to accept is that we have to suffer from these things. In other words, when there’s pain in the body, or pain in the mind, how can you beat with that in such a way that it’s not making inroads in the mind? That’s going to require discernment. You can’t just tell yourself, “Okay, accept that.” You accept the fact that it’s happening, but if you see that it’s making inroads in the mind, you’ve got to do something about it. The Buddha talks about not letting it invade the mind and stay. But he doesn’t talk very much about what to do, how to do that. For that, you have to look at more modern teachers like Ajahn Mahābhū and Ajahn Lee. Ajahn Lee would say, “To begin with, don’t focus directly on the pain.” You’re trying to notice which parts of the body are comfortable, or can be made comfortable by the way you breathe. Focus there. The analogy he gives is eating a mango. If the worms have taken part of the mango, you don’t eat the part that the worms are in. You cut that part out, and you eat the flesh that remains. But you don’t stop there. You also think of the good breath energy that you’ve got in that comfortable part of the body going through the pain. Say there’s a pain in your knee. Think of the good breath energy going down the leg, out past the knee, out the toes. In other words, you don’t want there to be a shell of hard tension around the pain. Think of the breath permeating that, loosening it up. Ajahn Mahābhū talks about specific ways of looking into the pain directly. What is your experience of pain? To what extent are you making it worse than it has to be? So he has you question your assumptions, your perceptions around the pain. Is the pain the same thing as the body? The body, or your experience of the body, is made up of the four elements. Earth, water, wind, fire. The pain is something else. Then your tendency to want to locate the pain in the body actually makes it worse. It may be useful when you’re trying to figure out if there’s an illness, but right now that’s not your concern. Your concern is more with the mind. How can you be with the pain and yet not be invaded by it? You can ask, “Where is the sharpest point of the pain right now?” And track it down. You find that it moves. And this way you change the usual relationship to pain. Usually the victim of the pain that’s being aimed at you. Well, now you’ve chased it down and it begins to run away. Then you ask yourself if it’s one solid sensation or is it more moments of sensations? And if they are moments, are they coming at you or are they going away? These are questions you can ask. As you take a more proactive attitude toward the pain, you find that it can’t shoot you. If you’re running away, you’re the target, but now you’re not the target. Pain is the target. So you accept the fact that there’s pain, but you don’t accept the fact that there’s going to be suffering around it. The same with our speech. You can’t prevent people from saying nasty things to you. After all, as the Buddha said, this is a normal part of human speech. It’s not just Australians or New Yorkers. People say pleasant things, people say unpleasant things, people say true things, untrue things. They speak to you with a heart of goodwill or ill will. This is part of being in the human realm. And Chan Phuong had a student one time who felt that she was a victim of gossip more than her fair share of gossip. One day, after particularly bad hearing people gossiping about her, she went to meditate. She had this vision of herself in a hall of mirrors, reflections of herself going in one direction and another direction. She started thinking about all the many lifetimes she’d been through and she’d probably been a victim of gossip. All those lifetimes as well. So she came out of meditation, went to talk to Chan Phuong, hoping that he would console her. He basically said, you know, you were the one who wanted to be born. You stuck your nose into the human realm. What do you expect? To accept the fact that this is there in the human realm, but you learn how not to take it in. The Buddha says when someone says something nasty to you, just tell yourself an unpleasant sound or unpleasant contact has made contact at the ear. That’s it. How many times have you let it just stop there at the ear? You don’t let it stop at the ear, you pull it in. The fact that you’re suffering from it is because you’re pulling it in. It’s the same with the pain. You’re suffering from it because you’re making a connection between the pain and the body and the mind. This should teach you some good lessons, that the suffering in the mind is largely our own fabrication, our own concoction. It’s the same when someone has died, someone close to us. While they were alive, it was only as if they were part of you. Now that part has been ripped out. As long as the Buddha said you do honor the person with eulogies, make gifts and dedicate the merit to the person, listen to the Dhamma. Why do you listen to the Dhamma? Because the Buddha wants you to think in the proper way about what has happened. There’s a chant we have, “I’m subject to aging, illness, and death. All beings are subject to aging, illness, and death.” The Thai translation is “aging, illness, and death.” They’re normal. No, killing is not normal. You’re not going to condone killing. But the fact that people are going to die, other beings are going to die, that’s a normal part of the world. And it’s happened many, many times. The Buddha wants you to think about this, how many times it’s been. He said there’s so many that the tears you’ve shed over the death of a mother, a father, a brother, a sister, a son, a daughter, in each case there’s more than the water in the oceans. It would be hard to find somebody who hadn’t been your mother, father, sister, daughter, brother, son, in all these many lifetimes. So it’s happened again and again and again. You have to ask yourself, how much longer do you want to go? And you can console yourself that the people you’ve loved, you’ll probably meet them again. But you don’t know under what circumstances. The Dhammahabhava once said that people who look forward to getting reborn don’t really understand the teaching on rebirth. It’s really scary, because you don’t know what your past karma is. You may lead a really good life, this time around, but you may still have some past karma that casts a shadow over the way you’re going to get reborn. As for the people you love, it’s the same sort of thing. You don’t know under what circumstances you’re going to meet them again. But this is the way it is for everybody. When you think about the universality of this, it’s been going on for a long time and it’s spread out across space. It should give you a sense of compassion for all the people who are suffering in the world. So you’re not just hovering around your own loss. As the Buddha said, there comes a point in grief when you have to remind yourself, “I have other things I have to do. I have important work.” See, they’re important work. Outside are important work in your own mind. That’s your real responsibility right now. You may feel you’re being disloyal to the person, but that other person, who knows where they are right now. There’s a story in the commentaries about a king whose major wife dies. And so he keeps the body in the palace. He doesn’t want to admit that she’s dead. So there’s a monk who’s psychic. And he traces down where the queen has gone. It turns out she’s been reborn as a worm. And so he’s able to arrange a situation in which the king can hear the worm talking. And the monk asks the worm, “Do you miss the king?” And the worm says, “No, not at all. I have a new husband. He’s really nice, a really cool worm.” So the king decides, “Okay, I never mind keeping the body around.” The people have gone on. They’ve gone on. They’ve got their new life. And you have your life that has to be lived. And you’ve got work to do. As the Buddha said, as long as there’s any creative version of delusion in your mind, you’ve got work to do. And in doing that work, you can get to a point where you don’t have to keep coming back and suffering these things over and over and over again. And the Buddha doesn’t explain the cosmos as a whole. All those maps of the Buddhist cosmos come later. What he does is give you things to think about that are useful. Things to tell yourself, perceptions to hold in mind. He even tells you how to breathe to minimize suffering. Everything in his teachings is there for a purpose. So we should learn how to use them in a way that helps us pry ourselves away from the clinging that makes us suffer. Step back from the cravings that make us suffer. Create a path inside. So we get to a place where there is no suffering. All his teachings are there for a purpose. And the more you realize that they’re there for you to use, the happier you’ll be.

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