Enduring the Heat

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When the Buddha discusses the topic of endurance, he focuses on two things. Enduring unpleasant bodily sensations and enduring unpleasant words. He doesn’t give much advice on the bodily sensations. He simply says, “You endure them.” Well, there is one passage where he has to endure the pain of a stone sliver that went through his foot, someone who tried to kill him, and so he had to lie down to rest. Mara came along and taunted him, “Are you moping? Are you sad?” The Buddha said, “No, I’m extending goodwill to all beings.” Physical pain, that’s one thing you might try, instead of focusing on the pain, in the case of today, instead of focusing on how things were. Spread goodwill to all beings. But you don’t focus on what’s making things unpleasant, and that’s the trick to endurance. You focus on what is still okay, what strengths you do have, inside, that are not being threatened by whatever is unpleasant outside. In terms of unpleasant words, the Buddha has two pieces of advice. One is that you tell yourself, if someone says something unpleasant, you tell yourself, “An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear,” and you drop it right there. Now, for most of us, we don’t stop at that. We continue the discussion. “Why did that person say that? Why did that person show me disrespect?” and it goes on and on and on. But if you leave it simply as, “An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear,” you’re not stabbing yourself with that person’s words. The second piece of advice, is to remind yourself that the nature of human speech around the world is that there will be people who say kind things, and people who say unkind things. People who say true things, people who say false things. People who say things with good intentions, people who say things with bad intentions. This is normal human speech. So when someone says something unkind or untrue, perhaps this shows they have bad intentions towards you. So remind yourself, this is not abnormal. You’ve encountered this before, other human beings have encountered this, have encountered this, for who knows how long. So it’s nothing new, nothing outrageous, nothing unbearable. It’s not going to kill you. The Buddha goes on to give some examples of spreading goodwill to the people who say said unkind things, or done unkind things. Think of the analogy of someone who’s being attacked by bandits, they’re sawing off their limbs. He said, “Even in a case like that, you should have goodwill.” Starting with the people who are attacking you, and then spreading out from there to all beings in the universe. In a case like that, you can’t fight back, but you want to make sure that your mind doesn’t suffer from the suffering of the body. Because if you die with malice, or die with ill will in your heart, it’s going to take you to a bad place. So for your protection, you protect your goodwill. That’s the meaning of that image in the Karnanayamanta Sutta, where the Buddha talks about protecting your goodwill as a mother would protect her only child. He’s not saying that you love everybody the same way your mother loves her only child. That’s impossible. But just as you would protect with your life your only child, you should protect your goodwill with your life. And think of your goodwill as being large. The image the Buddha gives is of the earth. A man can come along and try to spit on the earth, and urinate on the earth, and dig around in the earth, saying, “Be with me.” “Be without earth.” “Be without earth.” But a man would never succeed, because the earth is so large. In the same way, you want to develop goodwill that is large, and have an image in your own mind to ensure goodwill is that large. And that image helps you to endure a lot of things you wouldn’t be able to endure otherwise. So those are some of the ways of dealing with unpleasant speech, and they can apply to unpleasant physical sensations as well. On a day like this, when it’s really hot, you can simply tell yourself an unpleasant sensation has made contact with the body and leave it at that. We make the heat worse by commenting on it, making an issue out of it. When you prepare yourself physically, you get plenty of water, plenty of salt, find a relatively cool place to stay. And if you don’t have the strength to sit up in the heat, well, you can still lie down and meditate. But remember, the work you’ve got to do is work in the mind. And the mind is not hot. It’s the body that’s hot. There can be an awareness which is not affected by the heat at all. There is that aspect to your awareness. You want to look for it. After all, if someone comes along and says something really interesting to you at that point, you get involved in the conversation. You totally forget about the heat. Why can’t you forget about the heat even without the conversation? The Buddha talks about right mindfulness. Thinking about how much you’re suffering from the heat is not right mindfulness. You remind yourself again and again and again that it’s wrong mindfulness. Right mindfulness would be simply, there is a sensation and there’s a feeling, and there’s your awareness. The physical sensation, the feeling, the awareness, these are three separate things. We tend to glom them together, but we can take them apart. Leave the heat only and the physical sensation. It may be unpleasant, but neither of these things have to make inroads on the mind. It’s the mind. It grabs on to them. That’s the problem, because once it grabs on to them, it uses them to stab itself. So leave the heat at the level of contact without pulling it in to create unnecessary burdens for the mind. And there’s the contemplation of the mind. This is normal. You’ve experienced heat before. It’s passed before. And the same with cold. Think about a couple months back when it was really cold. All you could think of was a little warmth. Well, now you’ve got the warmth. Right now, all you can think about is how much you’d like things to cool down. Well, in a couple months, it’ll cool down again. We’ve been through this before. We survived it. We can survive it again. In other words, the trick to endurance is to make little of the things you have to endure, and make much of your strengths. If you want to make your perception of your awareness really large, think of it extending out from the body, way up. It’s a hundred feet up in the atmosphere, and it’s cool, even on the very hot days. Go down into the earth. You can reach a level where the temperature inside the earth is constant, regardless of what’s happening on the surface. If you want to hold something in mind, that’s something you can hold in mind. In other words, make yourself bigger than the pain. Make yourself bigger than the hardship, and it’s something you can do. After all, you’re using your imagination to make yourself smaller and weaker than the hardship. As you tell yourself again and again and again, “I can’t stand this. I don’t like this. I can’t bear it.” Even though you’re bearing it, you’re not dying. It’s not doing permanent damage. If you’re going to use your imagination, use it in the other way. Remind yourself that you can stand these things. Don’t see these unpleasant sensations as an imposition. See them as a game. Don’t take them so seriously. John Lee has a nice phrase, “Pleasure and pain.” Think of them as words that people say in jest. That image of the man trying to dig in the earth. It’s meant to be a comical image. He’s spitting here and urinating there, saying, “Be without earth. Be without earth.” But the earth is just too big. Well, bring some humor to the heat. Bring some humor to the pain. Bring some humor to unpleasant words. Now, don’t you shake them off. When you’re not stabbing yourself with them, then there’s just the contact. And the contact comes and goes. But it doesn’t have to make inroads in the mind. In other words, when you don’t pull it in, it doesn’t come in on its own. So remind yourself that you are bigger than your pains. And anything that’s unpleasant, it also means you’re bigger than pleasures. And that’s a strength you want to develop.

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