Acceptance Without Suffering

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In Jhansu, I would often begin his Dhamma talks by saying to get in the right mood to meditate. Have a sense of confidence, conviction that this is something good you’re doing, training the mind. Developing concentration is a noble truth. It’s noble because you’re taking responsibility for your own actions. Whatever suffering or pain or stress there is in your life, instead of blaming other people, blaming conditions outside, you realize that by training your mind you don’t have to suffer those things. So this is good work. It’s work that harms nobody. It doesn’t take anything away from anyone else. And it’s work that many people have been doing for many, many generations. The Buddha himself often recommended that you think thoughts of goodwill at the beginning of meditation. When he taught his son meditation, he taught a series of preliminary exercises. One, he said, was to make your mind like earth. People throw disgusting things on the earth. The earth doesn’t react. In the same way, you meet up with disagreeable things. You don’t have to react, especially when you meet up with things that you don’t like in your mind. Instead of reacting, you just want to watch them for a while. You want to understand them. The Buddha also recommended that you develop what are called the brahmaviharas, attitudes of limitless goodwill, goodwill for everybody, all beings of all kinds, on all levels of the cosmos. You wish for their happiness, realizing, of course, that your simple wish may not make them happy. Because after all, they’re going to be happy based on their actions, just as you’re going to be happy based on your actions. And a lot of times you can’t stop people from doing things that you can see are harmful. So you wish that they would change of their own free will, that they would have a change of heart. You have compassion for all beings. For anyone who’s suffering, may they find a way out of their suffering. For those who are happy, may they continue doing the skillful things that maintain their happiness. And finally, equanimity for all beings, realizing that there are cases where you can’t influence someone else’s behavior. And if you spend a lot of time working on that, trying to push them in ways that they resist, you’re missing opportunities where you could make a difference. You’re wasting your energy. So you simply accept the fact that there are some things you can’t change. With those thoughts in mind, then you can settle down. You have no ill will for anyone. And at the moment you realize that your happiness doesn’t have to depend on anyone else. You can create the conditions here. You can be independent. So you watch the breath. Notice when it’s coming in. Notice when it’s going out. Because this will be your grounding for the next hour. When you breathe in, where do you feel it? You might try breathing in long and deep to emphasize the sensation of the breathing, and also to energize the body. There’s a tendency, as the mind gets more and more quiet, for the breath to get more and more subtle. It’s good to energize the body first. Then try to find a rhythm and texture of breathing that feels just right, really gratifying, right now. Explore how it feels in the body. And begin to realize that simply by paying attention to the breath, you change how you breathe. This should alert you to the fact that not everything you experience right now is caused by causes from outside—past karma or anything outside. Some of the things you’re experiencing right now come from your own actions, your own decisions right now, your own intentions right now. So focus on those. Accept some responsibility for your actions, and then see what you can do to make them skillful. There’s a lot of talk about how Buddhism is all about acceptance. It’s interesting. You look in the Pali Canon. The word “acceptance,” ativasa, appears very rarely except for cases where the Buddha has accepted an invitation for a meal. But in terms of actually accepting situations in the world, it’s mentioned only in two or three places. You learn to accept the fact that there are physical pains in the body. You learn to accept the fact that there are people in the world who will say harsh, unpleasant things. You have to accept the fact that some of your loved ones are going to die. All of your loved ones are going to die. But even then, even though you accept, it doesn’t mean you just sit there and deal with it willy-nilly. The Buddha gives you advice on how not to suffer from these things, and it’s going to be based on how you shape the present moment. You’re learning to do this as you watch the breath. You’ve got the in-and-out breath, which the Buddha calls bodily fabrication. You’ve got your mind thinking about the breath and evaluating the breath. There are two processes—directed thought and evaluation. Those are verbal fabrication—how you talk to yourself. And then there’s mental fabrication—feeling tones of pleasure and pain, neither pleasure nor pain. And perceptions you hold in mind. Labels you apply to things. Images you apply to things to identify them and give them meaning. In this case, you have an image of the breath flowing in the body. What image do you have? For a lot of us, it’s simply air coming in and out through the nose. The lungs are like big bellows. They expand, they contract. Air comes in, the air goes out. That’s pretty much it. But the Buddha mentions that there are breath energies that float through the body. And John Lee recommends that you take advantage of that fact. Think of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. The breath coursing down the spine. Here, we’re not talking about the air. We’re talking about the energy coursing down the spine, out the legs, from the back of the neck down the shoulders and the arms, coming in and out through the eyes, the ears, the nose, going from the middle of the chest down through the torso. When you hold a perception like that, you notice your awareness of the breath changes. And when you talk to yourself about the breath, you realize you ask questions and you begin to notice things you didn’t notice before. These are the processes—bodily fabrication, verbal, mental—by which you shape your experience. You have the raw material of your experience coming in from your past actions, and then you shape it. So you have this power in the present moment, and you’re going to learn how to make good use of it. So, for example, when there is physical pain, notice how you breathe around the pain. Sometimes when you’re sitting here, there’ll be a pain, say, in your hips, in your back, in your knees. And your attention goes straight to the pain. And you can really make yourself miserable by emphasizing the pain in that way. What you might want to do first, though, is breathe in a way that makes the rest of the body comfortable, so that you have a good place to take as you’re grounding. If the pain is in the knee, let the pain have the knee. You can make the rest of the body comfortable by the way you breathe. And then you can think of that comfortable breath sensation flowing through the pain in the knee, out the toes. See if that loosens up some of the tension that aggravates the pain. And also, it changes your attitude toward the pain. You’re talking to yourself in a different way about it, instead of just thinking about how much the pain is making you miserable. You can tell yourself, “I have some tools to deal with this. I don’t have to be afraid of it.” Then you look at your perceptions around the pain. Do you perceive it as a block of pain or is it little tiny moments, little dots of pain here and there, arising and passing away very fast? You look carefully and you see it’s dots. Which dot is the strongest, the sharpest of the pains? If you pursue it, instead of running away from it as you ordinarily do, you notice that it moves around a lot. That loosens up the sense of the pain as this big solid thing. And sometimes as you chase it around, there’s a sense of the pain and the legs separate out from each other. So you can be there, feeling your knee. The pain is hovering around the knee, but it’s not in the knee. You can leave it there. And it’s a lot easier to sit through the pain that way. Your awareness and the body and the pain separate out like this. So those are some tools you can use to deal with physical pain. As for harsh words, again, you can use the different kinds of fabrication to deal with that. Talk to yourself about harsh words that other people give. One of the things the Buddha has you tell yourself is that it’s just a contact at the ear, and then it stops. If it reverberates, it has nothing to do with the pain. It has nothing to do with the words that the person said. It has everything to do with what your mind is talking about—the pain. So you can just tell yourself, “Let it stop at the ear.” You don’t have to take it in. You don’t have to feed on it, stamp yourself with it. So you’re using different perceptions around it, different ways of talking to yourself. Often the Buddha says you have to keep telling yourself, “This happens to everybody. Everybody who’s born is going to have to die. Either they die first or you die first. But you have to be separated.” And when you think in those terms, it takes a lot of the acuteness of the pain away, the pain of the grief. It’s not just you that the universe is dumping on. It’s something that happens everywhere. As you expand the range of your awareness that way, you can’t help but feel compassion for everybody. We’ve all been through this. We’re all facing this. So that turns the grief into a more normal emotion. It doesn’t deny the grief. It turns it into compassion, which is a lot easier to bear. So even though you have to accept these things, physical pain, harsh words, the death of a loved one, the Buddha gives you the tools to enable you to not have to suffer from them. And the tools come from where? They come from your sensitivity to these three kinds of fabrication that develop as you meditate. To try to get sensitive to these processes as they’re happening, the way you breathe, the way you talk to yourself about the breath, the perceptions you have of the breath, the feelings that you can create by the way you talk and the way you perceive the breath. This way you take the raw materials of the present moment, this body you have here, sitting here, your awareness right here, and you can shape them in a way that gives rise to a sense of well-being, stability, contentment. Then you can use these skills as you go through the day and deal with the things that you have to accept. As for the things you don’t accept, the Buddha says that any unskillful thoughts come up in your mind, you don’t feed them, you don’t pursue them. You figure out some way that you can release yourself from them. That may simply mean stepping back from them. It’s okay, there is greed, but I don’t have to identify with it. There’s anger, but I don’t have to identify with it. And when you don’t identify with it, it loses a lot of its power. Again, you’re going to be using the insights you gain from the meditation. Things are going to come up. As you sit here, you’ve got this intention to stay with the breath, and all of a sudden other intentions come in. You say, “Look, you’ve got a whole hour here. How about just giving a few minutes for this topic or a few minutes for that topic?” Then you can go back to the breath. It’s like that cartoon I saw one time of a woman sitting and meditating. All of a sudden, the word “think” appears across her forehead, and then another “think” in her chest, and another “think” in one of her legs, and then there’s “think, think, think.” And by the end of the cartoon, it’s just this cloud of “think, think, think, think, think,” obliterating her body. So when a thought comes in, you have to say, “No, this is not the time.” And again, you learn how to step out of it. It may be inviting. It may tell you that it’s important or necessary to think about this or that it would be pleasant to think about this. But you can tell it, “No, I have other things to do. I have to work on mastering these skills.” As you meditate like this, it gets easier to pull out of thoughts in the course of the day. Thoughts that you know are going to cause suffering, that are going to cause trouble. So both as you’re working with things that you have to accept and things that you don’t have to accept, you master the skills of the meditation and you have the tools that you can deal with these things in such a way that you can free yourself from the things you don’t have to accept. And be with the things you have to accept but not suffer from them. And those are skills that are really worth mastering.

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