

## *Endurance Made Easier*

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We're practicing to put an end to stress, suffering, and pain. But the practice itself involves stress, suffering, and pain. As the Buddha said, there are times when you realize that certain unskillful qualities in your mind are not going away as you live at your ease. So you have to be willing to put up with some pain if you want to get rid of them. In other words, we're not out pursuing pain in order to prove a point, but we use it when we need to.

Recently someone claimed that people who choose the monastic path are the young men out looking for the hardest path they can find—kind of a macho masochism. But that's not the case at all. You don't look for pain any more than you have to, but you realize that there are times when if you don't put up with some pain or stress, then greed, anger, and delusion aren't going to vacate your mind. The image the Buddha gives is of a fletcher, someone who makes arrows. The fletcher has to straighten the arrow shaft by running it next to a flame. As long as the shaft isn't straight yet, he has to keep running it next to the flame, first this side, then that side. Once the shaft is straightened, though, he doesn't need to run it against the flame anymore.

In the same way, our practice is not necessarily heading into pain, but straightening out the mind is going to involve running alongside some pain so that we can ultimately get beyond the pain. This is why the Buddha began the *Ovada-Patimokkha*, one of his first major summaries of the path, by saying that patient endurance is the utmost austerity. Back in his time there were people who practiced austerities to burn away their defilements. But as the Buddha pointed out, the particular type of physical austerity didn't matter—such as standing on one leg out in the sun, lying down on a bed of nails, or whatever. What mattered was learning how to develop the quality of endurance in the mind: That's what burns away defilement.

So we're after a mental quality, a quality that can live with pain and not get upset by it. The comparison the Buddha gave is of an elephant going into battle. If the elephant has been trained, then no matter what horrible sights or sounds or smells or tastes or tactile sensations it encounters in the battle, it's not deterred. No matter what enticing sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or tactile sensations, it's not swayed. That's the kind of quality you want to develop in the practice. It's not going to be easy, but you can make it easier—if you know how to approach it.

The first step is to focus on the mind. To what extent is the mind making it harder to endure these things? The Buddha gives the example of a person shot by an arrow. And being shot by one arrow isn't enough: He shoots himself with more arrows. The first arrow is the actual pain; the extra arrows are all his mental flailing around in reaction to the pain. These extra arrows are the problem. As Ajaan Fuang once said, if physical pain isn't killing you, you can take it. But for most of us, the problem isn't so much the physical pain. It's all that extra suffering that we add on top of it, all the extra arrows we shoot into the mind.

So you want to keep looking into the mind. What are these extra arrows? And how can you prevent yourself from shooting them? One way is to develop a good sense of humor around the whole situation. I don't know the Pali word for humor, but you see examples of it in the Canon where the Buddha talks about the conditions for aroused effort as opposed to the conditions for laziness. The external conditions are the same in either case. If you haven't eaten enough, you sit there complaining, "I can't practice today. I have no energy. I'm feeling hungry. I'm feeling tired and weak." That's a condition for laziness. The condition for aroused effort, if you haven't eaten enough, is to say, "Ah, the body is light. I don't have to worry about digesting my food today. I'm not sleepy or drowsy or weighed down by the food." And in the way the Buddha expresses each pair of cases, there's a humor to the whole sutta. That's one thing: learning how to maintain good humor around the practice.

You may have heard the story of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Englishman who went across northern Canada with a group of Dene Indians. He noticed that on the days when they couldn't find any food, the Dene tended to joke and laugh the most. That's how they were able to keep up their spirits. The same with the passage in *Slaughterhouse Five* where the American prisoner of war visits the section of the prisoner-of-war camp where the British troops are being held: The British troops are all very organized; they're putting on comedy sketches; they're basically having a good time. They're suffering a lot less than the Americans, who just sit around moping over their individual sufferings, plotting revenge on one another. The British troops are actively determined to keep up their spirits as much as possible in the face of a very difficult situation.

So try to develop that attitude as you practice. This is why adjusting the breath is sometimes called *playing* with the breath. If you're sitting with pain, ask yourself, "What can the breath do that I've never had it do before?" And think of the breath in different ways you've never thought of before—coming in and out different parts of the body, running in different ways through the body, connecting up in different ways. See what you can do to keep yourself entertained with the breath, to gladden the mind. Become more proactive toward the pain, investigate it, be curious about it, instead of just passively suffering from it. Keeping a good humor helps to put you in a position of power. That's one attitude to ease the burden of endurance.

The second is to have an attitude of infinite goodwill. Many of the Buddha's teachings on endurance make this point. After he was wounded by Devadatta, with a stone sliver in his foot, the pain was excruciating. So he went to lie down. Mara came up to taunt him, "Are you moping? Are you drunk? Are you a lazybones? What's your problem here?" The Buddha replied, "I'm not moping, lazy, or drunk. I'm not in a stupor. I lie down with sympathy for all beings." That's what minimizes the pain: developing a sense of goodwill for everybody, even those who may have injured you. You realize that you're not the only person in the world who's suffering, and you wish no one any ill. That helps to lighten your pain.

The third attitude is to depersonalize the situation: your ability to step back from the situation and not put it into a narrative where *you're* the victim, the person who's suffering. Think of the passage where the Buddha describes the different ways that people can speak to you. They can speak in timely or untimely ways. They can speak with good intentions or bad intentions, say

words that are true or false—so on down the line. These are the kinds of speech that exist in the human world. So when something unpleasant is said to you, analyze it. Ask yourself, “Were those words timely or untimely? True or false? Beneficial or harmful?” By analyzing the words in these impersonal terms, you pull yourself out of the narrative. Remind yourself: This is the human condition. Unpleasant, nasty words are nothing unheard of. They’re happening to people all around the world all the time. As the Buddha says, when people have wronged you, have wronged someone you love, or have done good things for someone you hate, keep reminding yourself, “What else should I expect?” This is the human condition. Put things into the larger perspective. You can pull yourself out of the condition of being the victim simply by learning how to analyze things in impersonal terms.

There’s a great passage in the Canon where Ven. Sariputta says, “If someone says something really hurtful, tell yourself, ‘Ah, an unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear.’” We usually don’t think in those terms. We think, “Why is that person saying that to me? How outrageous can you get?” We create a narrative that lays more suffering on the mind. The next time someone says something really unpleasant, remind yourself: “An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear.” That depersonalizes it. Pulls you out of it. Stops you from shooting yourself with arrows.

Then, as the Buddha says, spread thoughts of goodwill to all beings starting with the person who’s harmed you. Keep spreading those thoughts to include everyone, including yourself.

All of this applies to the physical pain that comes up in the meditation as well. Part of the mind says, “Why am I doing this? Why am I torturing myself?” Look at that thought simply as a thought arising and passing away. Look at the pain simply as momentary sensations arising and passing away. Analyze the thoughts as events. Then remind yourself: If you’re sitting here moaning and groaning about the pain, you’re not really showing goodwill for yourself. Goodwill for yourself means learning how to pull yourself out of the suffering: learning how not to identify with it, not to glamorize it, not to romanticize it, not to insist on your right to suffer. You’re here to find a way around it.

The suffering we’re trying to gain release from is the suffering caused by the mind. As Ajaan Lee says, there are two kinds of suffering: the suffering of natural causes, which comes from the conditioned nature of things; and unnatural suffering, which comes from craving. And often our craving manifests itself as the narratives we want to tell ourselves about whatever’s happening.

So the trick to developing endurance is to learn to look at what the mind is doing. Learning how to sit with pain is often a good way of seeing what’s happening in the mind. That old image of the watering hole out in the savannah is good to keep in mind: If you want to survey the animals in the savannah or take a picture or make a documentary film of the animals in the savannah, you don’t go wandering around the savannah. They’ll hide from you. You go to the watering hole. Any animal in the area will have to come to the watering hole at some point during the day or the night. That’s when you can observe and take pictures and make your documentary.

It’s the same with the mind. When there’s pain and you’re sitting with it, watching it from the point of view of the breath, all the unskillful little animals in your mind are going to come up at some point, and you’re in a great position to

observe them. You say, “Ah, this is what anger is like: This is how it comes; this is how it goes. This is how the victim comes; this is how the victim goes. This is how the whining member of the committee comes, how it goes.” You get to see them all.

And as you see them, you learn how not to identify with them. Try to develop that sense of humor, that ability to pull yourself out of the narrative simply by analyzing what’s going on in impersonal terms. Develop goodwill for all beings. When personal terms do come up, develop that sense of goodwill for all, as the Buddha says, with a mind like earth. Again, he’s got that humorous story of the man who comes along and tries to dig at the earth and spit on the earth and urinate on the earth, saying, “Be without earth, be without earth.” But of course the man is never going to succeed in making the earth be without earth, because earth is so large. You want to make your mind that large, so that no pain—physical or mental—can have an impact with its piddling urine and spit.

Humor, infinite goodwill, and the ability to see things in impersonal terms: These are the strategies for keeping yourself from shooting those extra arrows. These are the strategies for helping your endurance become less of a burden and turn into something stable, lasting, and strong.