

Suffering

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I began Buddhist training because all the other directions my life could go seemed meaningless. I was not at peace and I was definitely not content. I felt bound by circumstances, bound by my strong emotions, bound by desires that I knew intellectually, were shallow and empty. I was confronting the First Noble Truth, that suffering exists- the recognition that something in my life was seriously wrong. Buddhism clearly offered a way out of suffering and a way for me to find real peace and happiness.

I had considerable resistance, however, to doing what I needed to do in order to follow the Buddhist Way. Naturally enough, I wanted to be free of my suffering, escape my pervasive negative states of mind, all the difficulties that always seemed to be present themselves. Yet the arising of suffering in my life was, and is, a vital teaching, pointing me to look deeply at how I am living, what I am choosing. Over time, I learned that in embracing the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, I found the greatest treasure, a path I could trust to lead me out of emptiness and confusion.

It is a natural and functional aspect of our humanity that we are conditioned to seek pleasure and avoid pain. That is why real spiritual life goes against the grain of how the world generally responds to suffering. The problem with the normal approach to suffering is that we flee uncomfortable situations and the painful feelings. I often notice myself thinking, I do not want this to be happening, let me escape from this situation, from this unpleasant person, from this distress in my body or from this painful emotion. Yet, when I am willing to be still and accept the difficult or painful situation, this very arising of aversion and suffering is, amazingly, a gift of liberating Dharma.

When we suffer, the suffering is instructing us to look at what we are asking for, what I am telling ourselves we need in order to be at peace. Everyone's life, when seen through stillness and acceptance, is

a Dharma lesson. Yet the world is filled with people closing their eyes and saying, "I do not want this karma, I demand something else." In an endless variety of ways people are telling themselves the same basic story, "I will be so much happier, if I have this career; this new boss, could be with this special person or not be with this horrible person, or get rid of this health problem." But suffering is not flowing into us from the pain and difficulty. It is produced by our delusion in which we identify ourselves with our thoughts and feelings, and then feel the need to escape. Liberation in Buddhism comes from the meditative mind which recognizes that the endless flow of thoughts and feelings have no fundamental reality. When we see life with a still heart, we find that nothing is really changing. We just see the flow of thoughts and do not get caught up in them or attach our hearts to them. What we usually think of as reality is just our minds swirling out of control, being driven by an endless flow of states of mind such as worry, pride, despair, fear, envy or desire. What we generally think this world to be, in actuality, is our restless and disturbed minds and hearts, leaving stillness and peace and getting caught up in this spinning, grasping mind.

The Second Noble Truth, that suffering is due to attachment, is a teaching that is constantly demonstrated in my daily life, almost shouting its truth at me, yet often, I put in enormous energy into not seeing this obvious Truth. I do not want to take responsibility for seeing that all of my suffering is flowing from my attachments, flowing from what I am trying to unsuccessfully to grasp. The roots of all my suffering lies allowing my heart and mind to leave stillness and instead, filling myself with burning desires and strong opinions. Such colloquial expressions as "seething with rage", "burning with lust", "being filled with themselves", are all accurate reflections of how overwhelming we experience strong passions and opinions. Suffering results from our hearts and minds being so focused on our desires that we become hard and inflexible.

When we meditate, we are saying that it is enough to simply let go of whatever thought or feeling arises and return to stillness and silence. Formal sitting meditation is based on the very willingness to see that whatever arises is just a changeable thought or feeling. While

meditating, we do not need to deal with, solve, or examine anything. Instead, we can just see the thought or feeling and then let it go and return, in faith, to the completeness we can find in stillness. Each time we do this, we demonstrate our faith that what we can find in the stillness and silence of our hearts is more real than our seemingly strong desires. We have to see how the source of all fear is flowing from our hearts trying to grasp what cannot be grasped. Our lives are tinged with fear because we know that impermanence and change can take away all that we hold dear, whether it is a person, a position, our health, or anything else we are grasping.

In order to see what is real and find true freedom, we need to see how all our desires and fears are just thoughts and feelings that arise out of stillness and emptiness. When we choose not to be moved by this flow of fear or desire, they disappear and pass back into emptiness. The practice of sitting meditation embodies the faith that there is a deeper reality than this passing reflection of our minds spinning with desires and fears. We need to bring that same faith to our daily lives, so that we let go of whatever arises in daily life and be inwardly still. We must be willing to act and respond to what is needed, but without allowing our minds to spin out of control by grasping our desires and fears.

The solution of suffering comes from not seeing a difficulty as something unfortunate happening to me, but rather seeing that I am generating all my suffering by how I react to that difficulty. I am generating my suffering by not being still and accepting the unfolding of my life with an open heart and mind. This is teaching that took me a long time to understand. My perception of reality is often a dream created by my heart and mind being caught up in desire and then weaving a tale. Often, when I sit down to meditate, I see that my mind has been swirling with a problem, with a fear, with a complaint. I am seeing all the world through this swirling mind, through a self absorbed fog. In this fog, I am telling myself, "I need this, I want this, I cannot believe this". This swirling mind is looking the wrong way and, not surprisingly, finding life very confusing and difficult.

What is the right way to look? The whole Dharma is telling us where to look to find what is real. It can be very easy to say that suffering is not real yet we all know the seemingly burning reality of our suffering when we are hurting deeply. An account by Jacques Lusseyran shows us how we can look deeper at suffering so we can see its real nature. Lusseyran was a young French resistance fighter during WWII who was captured and imprisoned in Buchenwald, a Nazi concentration camp. Concentration camps are about as hellacious a place as humans have devised. Lusseyran's account shows how everyone can find real joy and peace in the midst of any form of suffering. In the midst of the most overwhelming horrors and suffering, Lusseyran meets a man named Jeremy who is at peace and filled with joy in the midst of this man-made hell.

"One went to Jeremy as toward a spring. One didn't ask oneself why. One didn't think about it. In this ocean of rage and suffering there was this island: a man who didn't shout, who asked no one for help, who was sufficient unto himself.

A man who did not dream: that was more important than anything. The rest of us were dreamers: we dreamed of women, of children, of houses, often of the very miseries of other times which we had the weakness to call "liberty" We weren't at Buchenwald. We didn't want anything to do with Buchenwald. And each time we came back it was there just the same, and it hurt.

Jeremy was not disappointed. Why would he have dreamed? When we saw him coming with his immense serenity we felt like shouting, "Close your eyes! What one sees here burns!" But the shout remained in our throats because from all evidence, his eyes were solidly fixed on all our miseries and did not blink. Even more, he did not seem like someone who takes a great burden upon himself, the air of a hero. He was not afraid, and that just as naturally as we were afraid.

"For one who knows how to see, things are just as they always are." he said. At first I did not understand. I even felt something quite close to indignation. What? Buchenwald like ordinary life-impossible! . . . I remember that I could not accept this. It had to be

worse-or if not-then more beautiful. Until finally Jeremy enabled me to see.

It was not a revelation, a flashing discovery of the truth. I don't think there was even an exchange of words. But one day it became obvious, palpable to me in the flesh, that Jeremy, the welder, had lent me his eyes.

With those eyes, I saw that Buchenwald was not unique, not even privileged to be one of the places of greatest human suffering. . . . Jeremy taught me, with his eyes, that Buchenwald was in each one of us, baked and rebaked, tended incessantly. nurtured in a horrible way. And that consequently we could vanquish it, if we desired to with enough force.

. . . He said that in ordinary life, with good eyes, we would have seen the same horrors. We had managed to be happy before. Well! The Nazis had given us a terrible microscope: the camp. This was not a reason to stop living. Jeremy was an example: he found joy in the midst of Block 57. He found it during moments of the day where we found only fear. And he found it in such great abundance that when he was present we felt it rise in us. Inexplicable sensation, incredible even, there where we were: joy was going to fill us.

. . . The joy of discovering that joy exists, that it is in us, just exactly as life is, without conditions and which no condition, even the worst, can kill.¹

This passage points out how we can free ourselves from suffering. Jeremy did not dream, and all of Buddhist practice is aimed at liberating us from dreaming, so that we can be fully present and aware of what we have right now. The dreaming we do is the story we weave of our past and future and neither has any true reality. The past is but a memory we are grasping and repeating to ourselves and the future is just a tale we are telling ourselves of what may be. Suffering is our minds, refusing to fully accept our present experience, instead dreaming of a future that either entices or

frightens us and dreaming of a past that we cannot let go. "For one who knows how to see, things are just as they always are."

Dogen offers us similar teachings: "When the opposites arise, the Buddha mind is lost".² The opposites are thinking that in the flow of existence, something is really changing; that there is something we can gain and something we can lose. Again Dogen writes, "The most important question for all Buddhists is how to understand birth and death completely for then, should you be able to find the Buddha within birth and death, they both vanish".³

Meditation and spiritual practice is teaching us that unless we stop clinging to what is changeable, we will not find what is real. The whole point of Buddhist practice is to find the place that knows we have nothing to lose and nothing to gain. Jeremy was not afraid because he found what is real and indestructible. Jacques Lusseyran writes, "The joy of discovering that joy exists, that it is in us, just exactly as life is, without conditions and which no condition, even the worst, can kill." Even when we are in pain, even when we are surrounded with the intense suffering of others, we can let go and find the Buddha, and be free. "For one who knows how to see, things are just as they always are."

When I am suffering, I need to remind myself to stop my mind from spinning its woeful tales and its empty dreams. I must stop trying to grasp this flowing life or else I cannot find my way out of suffering. I must not worry about the unfolding of my life's karma, but instead I need let go and trust the Three Refuges with the deep trust of a small child holding its mother's hand. In the stillness of my heart is the unbounded life of Buddha and this cannot be grasped but can only be found with an open heart which knows it does not need to ask for anything. The real goal of Buddhist training is to have an open heart and mind which has the faith that there is nothing to fear. Then we will find that we have always possessed our deepest longing, the living Heart of Buddha, the place of real, indestructible peace and joy.

¹ Jacques Lusseyran, Against the Pollution of the I: Selected Writings of Jacques

Lusseyran; translated by Noelle Oxenhandler., (New York, Parabola Books, 1999) pp.150-153.

² (Rules for Meditation by Dogen) translated from by Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett in Serene Reflection Meditation (Mt. Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey, 1996), p.1.

³ (Shushogi by Dogen) translated from by Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett in Zen is Eternal Life (Mt. Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey, 1999), p.94