

Affirming Faith in Mind (11) Working with pain.

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Working with pain and difficulty in our practice is a common theme. I happened to meet someone who told me a very sad story of their childhood. Then I happened to meet the parents of that person who were involved in that childhood. Everybody is working with a great deal of pain and difficulty, and sometimes when they stop struggling with it they get through it much more easily than when they are working on it. Sometimes when you are trying to do something or are working on it, that delays the natural process of the pain being worked through, or absorbed, or accepted.

Attempts to work on it in psychology in some ways have been to blame for people struggling to work on things. Sometimes it actually slows the process down because you are making efforts to try and change what is inevitably there, and to try and change it you are focusing on it too much, sometimes making it worse by resisting it by, trying to change it. It is difficult. Psychology can go either way with people so it's best to work out the fastest way to go with people – how not to prolong the situation, get the best feedback and let nature take its own course, as it will. There is no one in the world who can shorten someone's period of pain and suffering artificially. Even with a drug, which might deaden the brain, the pain and suffering still continues, unrelievable without having been worked through naturally. The moment the drug is stopped, it comes back with a vengeance. Nature has its way with these things in its course.

The practice that we do often has a lot to do with working through painful situations. Often that pain can be physical pain, and the practice offers a way to work with that, but quite often the pain is psychological pain which is arguably more difficult to work through for most people. It may not seem so immediate and so sharply painful but it's probably more difficult to work through as it seems deeper, longer, more to do with our thinking and some ancient patterns we might have whereas physical pain can be dealt with through the chiropractor, the osteopath, the homeopath. Often that will tide you over and somehow the thing gets better physically, whereas quite often the psychological pain remains there for longer periods and seems to be more difficult for people to deal with.

One reason might be because it is more subtle. It's not as immediately in your face as physical pain. It's a subtle thing, often to do with thinking patterns or early memories, whatever.

The practice of Buddhism generally is very focused on suffering for good or for bad. It sounds a bit negative but the focus is on the fact that life in itself is suffering in a bigger sense. Not that it can't have its pleasures, but in the bigger deeper sense there is a sense that there is suffering. But one needn't treat it in a maudlin or a depressing way. It's just the way that life is. Suffering is mainly there physically because this body is going to pass away and that happens to every being in the Universe. That can be seen as suffering, but this is mainly to do

with the psychological aspect of life. If one accepts all the physical things it's only the psychology that is left to promote the suffering that Buddhism deals with.

One animal gets eaten by another animal in Africa – it's sad and we watch it and we think it's full of suffering but it is a natural process. One animal has got to survive by eating another. We eat certain animals too sometimes. We need that to survive. So on that level, life has a degree of suffering about it without any psychology involved. But as soon as the mind gets involved the suffering becomes much stronger and much more difficult.

In a sense it can be seen as a beautiful thing, the tiger jumping on the gazelle to survive. In some ways it's like the tide of the ocean going and coming, it's a natural process. It has a shock about it because it's the survival of another animal, being threatened and killed, but in some ways in the Universal sense it has a natural side to it too. But then when we add our own mind to that we create a much greater suffering out of it. That's what Buddhism attempts to deal with, the mind involvement in the suffering.

As Krishnamurti used to say, you can go to the dentist, have a tooth pulled out, be in agony yet that physical pain passes. But the memory of that can sometimes have more suffering involved than the actual physical event. We are thinking about it, mulling over it, wishing it hadn't happened to it, the resistance to it – all the mental involvement makes the suffering much greater than it would have been. The event itself may be over hours ago but the mind is mulling over it. Then the next tooth begins to ache and the mind thinks, "I've got to go back and see the dentist about this one!" And already there is the shaking in the body, the fear that the pain you remember from last time is going to happen again. That is the mind's involvement in what is just a physical event.

Buddhism tends to deal with that mind level. It can't stop the pain from happening but it is all about our attitude to those things in life that are happening. There is the story of the Buddha responding to someone with 84 problems. "I can't help you with any of them, I can only help you with the 85th problem, how to relate to those problems."

Old age, disease and death will inevitably happen, but Buddhism can help you face those in a way that doesn't make them worse, or make them a huge problem. Our practice is mainly about that. We cut the thinking mind off when it is not needed. We do that in our practice all the time whether we practice Mu, or breathing, or the posture, or general mindfulness - we stay in the moment. The thinking mind can't live in the moment when it is not needed in the moment. Thinking about the toothache I had yesterday, suddenly the memory starts coming back - in practice we won't have that thinking mind, we won't have that shaking because we are in this moment now, we won't be thinking about the terrible pain we had yesterday with that sore tooth coming back to haunt us, shaking in our boots worrying about going back again tomorrow to the dentist.

If we can stay in the moment where the thinking mind is not operating we are living moment by moment. When we go back to the dentist we go back with fresh eyes, forgetting about the pain of last time. We are in a totally new moment, totally new tooth, totally new pain, fresh to meet it again.

So that is one level, an important part of our practice, working with that psychological pain. On another level, a deeper level that we work with in Zen practice, we see that even the pain is perfect. Even going through that pain is a perfect event.

At the recent Transmission Ceremony for new teacher Maggie Gluek, she had to give a talk and people could come up and ask her questions in a traditional ceremony. Someone came up to Maggie and asked her an ancient koan, "When your body is returning to the five elements, how will you be in that situation when that is happening?" Maggie responded by going into death throes, and gasping for breath, showing that even in that situation, it is just perfect. In that moment everything is there. The absolute is there, it is just another happening in the Universe that is totally perfect, it is meant to happen. We are meant to have a certain lease on life and then it ends. We just go through that process.

There was a great Zen Master who stayed in his temple after everyone had left, fleeing foreign forces. He stayed alone in the temple. As the soldiers came in and went through him with a sword, the Master was said to have screamed so loudly that it could be heard 5 miles away. When Hakuin Zenji, our great Zen teacher first read this story as a boy he thought, how could this be a Zen teacher? He was so frightened, so afraid of death. But he missed the point. In Zen we say, enjoy whatever is happening. If you are in pain, be fully in pain. That too is the ultimate understanding. Whatever the situation be totally one with it. The Master was totally one with the situation and wholeheartedly let out a scream that could be heard 5 miles away.

That's not different from the absolute truth. That is the absolute truth. It's not a separation. It's not that someone has to be perfect in a real sense. Hakuin thought he should have been braver than that. He had an ideal of what he should be – a great Zen teacher. No that is missing the point entirely.

When Maggie gave her presentation, she went into the death throes, gasping. Going through that process just as it is, is perfect. There is nothing wrong. It is totally, absolutely perfect. As she said later on in the talk, "the finest wine in China". That is another koan. The story relates to a butcher in one of our Zen stories. A person approached the butcher and asked, "Can I have a dozen cuts of your best meat?" and the butcher immediately replied, "All my meat is the best meat!" At another point the student said to the teacher, "Today is not a good day." and the teacher replied, "Every day is a good day!"

Whatever is happening is perfect. From the absolute point of view, whatever is meant to happen is perfect.

Our teacher Hogen used to say, if you are sipping a sour lemon at the moment, thoroughly enjoy the sour taste of the lemon. That's perfect too. The absolute is giving you that bitter experience, that's perfect too. The absolute is totally there in that experience. It's not away from that experience somewhere else. There it is in the moment, totally, the bitter drink of the lemon. Fully and totally enjoy that experience 100%. That is true Zen teaching – whatever is happening is totally right to happen, totally perfect.

If we resist what is happening, that is totally right too. Be fully in that resistance. That is totally right too. Whatever is arising, be totally with it.

When we do our practice we cut off the mind's road. We cut off a lot of static in the system. A lot of the radio static gets cut out. What is left if the mind's road has cut off the thinking mind is the genuine experience of what we are going through –being run through with the sword, the pain and loss of a loved one, whatever is happening is a genuine experience when the mind is not there. Our practice is to go through whatever is happening.

Joko Beck used to say, "So high, can't get over it. So low, can't get under it. So wide, can't get around it. Got to go through the door of whatever has been given to you." You can't escape it. So go through it wholeheartedly. If it is a bitter lemon you are drinking. Enjoy the bitter lemon you are drinking. That is not separate from the absolute. That is our teaching in Zen. We are not seeking an ideal. As the sutra says, not seeking pleasure, not avoiding pain. We are just dealing with what is happening now in this moment just as it is.

That's the challenge in our practice to do that. That is challenging because the thinking mind is operating all time wanting something else, wanting something better, if only I could have avoided coming tonight, whatever. Whatever the thinking mind is doing, it is doing. That is part of our practice, to notice what the thinking mind is doing. Watching that is part of the practice as well.

This is a deep subject because dealing with pain is possibly the biggest challenge of our lives. Whether it is the pain of childbirth - that is usually a very physical pain, but for some women it is a psychological pain. I have known a woman who had severe post-natal depression and it became a deep psychological pain.

This is one of the most difficult subjects to deal with. Dull pain, sharp pain, psychological pain, how do we work with it? In our sitting practice, sometimes the pain comes up in sitting still. How do we work with that? Gently, by not trying to be a Samurai warrior bravely suppressing it, but just trying to work with it. If you can change it, of course you can gently, mindfully shift to a better position. You might need to see an osteopath to make the pain bearable. You can do those things. It's not about deliberately, masochistically, ascetically dumping suffering on yourself for the sake of doing that. No, it's about how to work with the inevitable things we can't change. There is someone at work we can't stand, we can't leave the job, we need the money, can't shift to another department because it's not available. We can't stand them! How do we work with that painful situation?

There are so many levels of challenge here that our practice tries to address. I don't normally talk about pain but tonight I am because it is something that is up there, up front with a lot of people. Physical pain, psychological pain, ancient pain from the past, some anxiety haunting us from our past – it is all painful, isn't it?

We can take great comfort in the fact that everything changes, even the deep pain in the moment, deep anxiety will pass if we stay with it. If we don't freak out about it, don't panic about it, even deep anxiety can be worked with. It

is related to the fact that everything is changing anyway. Even if I can't make it to my psychiatrist immediately, I know that that deep feeling of pain will change and pass even without the psychiatrist talking to me. It's very interesting this whole topic.