

Nostalgia for Suffering

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I once suggested to Ajaan Fuang that he should write a book on breath meditation. He said there was no need to, because Ajaan Lee had already written a book wotj all the basic principles. So I told him, “There’s more to breath meditation than just the principles.” There were a lot of details that Ajaan Fuang had taught that I couldn’t find in Ajaan Lee’s book. He said, “They’re there. They’re in the principles.” Which shows that it’s part of our own training in discernment to learn how to take the principles and apply them to our particulars—the particulars of our suffering, of our problems as we meditate. If you have everything handed to you, as many of the forest ajaans will say, then you won’t learn how to fix your own food. You won’t learn how to figure out how to do things for yourself. Ajaan Maha Boowa made a similar observation about Ajaan Mun. He said that Ajaan Mun would give you the trunk of the tree, and you would have to work out the branches.

When you look at the Buddha’s teachings about suffering, he gives a long list of the different kinds of suffering there are, but then he boils them down to five clinging aggregates. It’s not an intuitive summary but it gives you the basic principles, and from there you work out the details. If there’s suffering in the mind, you’re clinging in one way or another to one of these five activities. And seeing them as these five activities, seeing the different forms of suffering you have in these terms, helps to give you some distance from them.

After all, that’s a large part of discernment: learning to see things as separate. Because when you look at the categories, they’re all pretty broad, especially fabrication. All kinds of things come under the category of fabrication: all the different ways you think about things, all the different ways you talk to yourself about your suffering—that’s all fabrication. The Buddha had to give just the basic principles because there’s no way he could have detailed every possible way that people can talk to themselves about their suffering. After all, a lot of it has to do with your language, with your culture, your personality, the things you pick up. Even people in the same situation or a very similar situation to you can pick up totally different things.

I remember talking to my brother one time about the implicit messages that were being taught by our parents when we were younger, and, granted, we were five years apart, but still I was amazed that he had picked up messages that I didn’t pick up and I had picked up messages that he didn’t pick up, and some of the messages were very different. So a karmic receptivity is also in play.

Think of all the different variations of what the mind can do—and as the Buddha said, the mind is more variegated than the animal kingdom. Think of

all the different species out there and all the different types of animals: They all came from mind. A mind thought, “Wouldn’t it be cool to be a lizard... wouldn’t it be cool to be a frog... wouldn’t it be cool to fly up and down and back and forth, you’d become a hummingbird.” And the mind is more variegated than all those animals out there, so there’s no way that the Buddha’s going to detail all the types of suffering, but he does give you the major categories, and seeing things in terms of those major categories helps pull you away from them.

One aspect of our suffering is that we want to have somebody acknowledge the details, the particulars of what we’re suffering from at a particular time. There’s a part of the mind that wants to have somebody else there acknowledge, yes, that really was suffering, that really is something to feel sorry for, so that people should pity you, feel compassion, feel empathy, sympathy. That’s nostalgic. We’re nostalgic for our suffering. And yet one of the qualities of the third noble truth is *analayo*, which means letting go of your nostalgia for suffering. You don’t want to ruminate over your old sufferings again. They hold no interest any more. You’ve got to realize you’ve had enough. Only then will suffering cease.

So you have to take the larger principles and figure out how they’re going to apply to your particular issues. Then, once you’ve got the particular connection, you want to pull back out again so that you can see that these things are just aggregates; this is just clinging—and that’s it. It can be clinging to a sense of self; it can be clinging to particular views; clinging to your sensual desires; clinging to your habitual ways of doing things, and it involves the five aggregates—and that’s it. The more you can depersonalise a situation, the more you can pull out of it. It’s like those issues with people coming and saying harsh things to you: The Buddha has you depersonalise them by saying, “An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear.” How many times when someone’s been yelling at you do you think in those terms and leave it at that: “An unpleasant sound is making contact at the ear”? Usually, you pull that sound into your heart and create all kinds of narratives around it. You personalise it, and by personalising it you make it painful. If you depersonalise it, it’s just that: an unpleasant sound.

Or in that list that the Buddha gives of the different kinds of human speech: There’s harsh speech and there’s kind speech; there’s true speech and there’s false speech; timely, untimely. So when people address harsh words to you, you have to realise that this is the way speech can be, this is one of the characteristics of speech in the world. That depersonalises it. You don’t have to go back and ruminate over the particularities of precisely how it was outrageous, that that person said that. We’re here to learn how to dismiss things and not let them fester inside.

So try to take the Buddha's larger teachings—as Ajaan Maha Boowa would say, the trunk of the tree that you get from the Buddha—and see how can you work out the branches of the tree so that they're helpful to you. Once you've got the particulars, then you can trace it back to the trunk, to pull yourself away. That's how you learn how to get over your nostalgia for your suffering.

It may sound strange, but a lot of the suffering we carry around because we're still very much nostalgic for old things. It's like our memories of childhood: Maybe there was a stain on the kitchen wall where you grew up, and simply because it was part of your childhood, that stain becomes something you treasure. The particulars of your suffering when you were a child: Those stick with you, and there's part of the mind that wants to go over them again and again and again. People like to talk about them; they want to have them acknowledged. Well, you can acknowledge them to yourself and then just move on. Otherwise, you just keep coming back to the same old suffering again and again and again.

So don't get nostalgic for the details. Realize that this quality of nostalgia for suffering is one of the things that keep you trapped. When you've decided you've had enough, then you can let go. And the Buddha shows you the way out.