

Don't Clap Hands with Pain

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You hear it said again and again, how the Buddha said that life is suffering, even though he never said that. If he had said that, it wouldn't have been all that useful. What's the alternative? Death. What he did say was that there is suffering, and he enumerated a lot of the ways in which we suffer, things that we find painful, starting with birth. Birth is hard both on the mother and on the child. They cause a lot of pain to each other. They don't want to, but that's just the way bodies are. And then there's aging, illness, and death: These all follow in line. There's not getting what you want. Having to be with what you don't like. Having to be separated from what you *do* like. These kinds of suffering are all things we're familiar with.

And then the Buddha pinpointed exactly where the suffering was in all that. He said it's clinging to the aggregates. And there is an alternative to that. We can learn not to cling. As he said, once you learn not to cling, then even painful feelings don't need to have an impact on the mind. The mind experiences them as something separate, he says. That's the way it naturally is for an arahant. But we can work in that direction by training our minds to step back a little bit from the pain and comprehend it: to comprehend exactly where the clinging is, what things we're clinging to, what kind of clinging we have. So when you find yourself clinging to something, and you're suffering because of it, you can learn how to let go.

Now, you can't just let go of everything to begin with. You've got to hold onto something. Otherwise, you get lost. This is why we work with the breath to get the mind to settle down, so that the mind can have a state of concentration with a sense of well-being inside. That's where you can hold on, at least for now. You've got a spot where you can stand so that you can look at these things. Otherwise, it's like being surrounded by fire on all sides, and inside you as well. It's hard to comprehend the fire when you're surrounded by it. All you can see is fire in every direction. You want to run to the south, well, there's fire to the south. You run to the north, there's a fire to the north. If you stay where you are, you're burning inside. You don't know where to go. But if you have your cool spot inside, the fire can be around you, but you don't have to be burned by the fire. That's a really useful skill to develop.

And it teaches you an important lesson: Even where there's physical pain, there doesn't have to be suffering. But to see that, the mind has to get very quiet. And you don't want to wait until birth, aging, illness, and death hit you hard before you suddenly decide to take up this training. You want to do it while you can, right now. We've all experienced aging to some extent. We've reached the stage where the body is no longer

developing. It's beginning to undevelop, but at least it's still together enough that we can work with it. Its decay is not yet overwhelming. The mind can be trained. The mind can have its place inside—so that when illness does get overwhelming, or birth gets overwhelming, or death gets overwhelming, we don't have to be overwhelmed.

So you want to develop this skill. This is your first line of defense. Because to comprehend pain, you have to be willing to sit with it to see where in the pain is the clinging. The painful feeling is one thing, but that's not necessarily what's driving the mind crazy. What's driving it crazy is the clinging in there. That's the problem. You may be clinging to your desire for a sensual pleasure. And the Buddha says that's a big problem: In the face of pain, all we can think about is sensual pleasures. That's the only way we believe we can gain relief from the pain. But he says that there's another alternative that's more skillful, which is getting the mind to be quiet, finding a sense of well-being there in the quiet mind: knowing that even in the midst of the turmoil of life, there can be a still point inside your mind.

One of the reasons we meditate is to find that. Where is your center? Where's the spot in the body where you can feel at ease? Now, there may be times when there doesn't seem to be a quiet or easeful spot in the body at all. That's when you can think about space. There's space all around you. There's space between the atoms, space *in* the atoms that make up the body. In fact, there's more space there than hard matter. Learn how to hold that perception in mind.

This is where you begin to see the power of perception. As the Buddha said, just the fact that you're experiencing the present moment already involves some fabrication. The fact that you're breathing involves some fabrication, and there are perceptions, and there are thoughts, and there are intentions: All of these things are types of fabrication. So hold the perception in mind that there is space permeating the body. That will help fabricate the present moment in a useful way. It'll loosen up any tightness or heaviness in the body and give you a pleasant place to stay.

I knew a woman who was meditating one night when a voice came to her and said, "You know, you're going to die tonight." And the woman said to herself, "Well, if I'm going to die, I might as well die meditating." So she stayed in meditation. And sure enough, pain started developing in her body. As she told me, it got to the point where there was no place in the body where she could focus her attention without running into pain. It was like being in the house on fire. No matter which room you went into, all the rooms were up in flames. But then she thought of space. So she held that perception in mind, and she had a sense that her awareness was separate from the fire in the house. She focused on the space around the body, the space inside the body.

When you hold this perception in mind, there may be sensations of body, but you don't have to be there to meet them. You know that Zen image of the clapping hand?

Usually a sensation comes up and our awareness goes right to it. And that's the sound of two hands clapping. But if, when the sensation comes, you're not there to clap it, you're not there to hit against it, it can continue do it's thing, but you don't have to respond to it. You don't have to take responsibility for it. You can just be there. And it doesn't have to hit the mind, because the mind's not hitting it. That's the sound of one hand.

How do you do that? Well, you start by having this center inside. This is where you give your full attention: the spot where the breath is comfortable, the spot where you can have some sense of ease. That way, the mind can learn how to settle down. It begins to realize that it can settle down not only in a physical sensation, but also in a perception, like the perception of space. And you can hold on there. Or just the perception of "knowing, knowing, knowing, aware, aware." Sensations come up, but you don't have to make contact with them, you don't have to meet them and engage with them. That's what the clapping is all about. You don't have to hit the sensation, you don't have to acknowledge it, you don't have to place a label on it, or anything. It's just that the sensation is there, and you're not responsible for it. You're responsible for maintaining the centeredness of the mind, your perception of knowing. When you don't clap the sensation, its one hand makes no sound.

This is one of the reasons why we work with the breath, so that we can get closer and closer to the things that are closer and closer to awareness itself—so that, when the time comes when you just want to be with awareness, you're right there, and everything can go past go past, go past. A useful image, especially when there's pain in the body, is that you're sitting in the backseat of an old station wagon, looking backwards as you go along the road. As soon as anything comes into your range of vision, it's already going away. For most of us, we're sitting in the front seat looking forward and anything that comes, comes right at us. That's how we normally deal with pain. Pain arises and it's coming at us, attacking us. But if you can perceive it, as soon as it arises, as going away—it arises, it's running past you, it's going away: If you hold that perception in mind, it makes things a lot easier. You're not gathering things up.

Ajaan Lee's image is of a person plowing a field, who, as the dirt falls off the plow, tries to put it into a bag. And, of course, he'll get weighed down. In other words, if you're thinking about all the pain you had in the past, and all the pain you're going to have in the future, it just weighs you down right now. Because it's too much for the mind to take. Too much for the present moment to take: One moment can't handle all that pain.

So if you find that your mind is heading off in that direction, thinking, "Oh my gosh, it's been going on for x number of hours, how many more hours is this going to be?", drop that thought. Just be with the perception that there's a sensation arising right now and it's going away. And you don't have to clap hands with it. That way you protect the mind. And in protecting the mind, you've learned how to let go of a lot of things that

would otherwise drive you to the brink of saying, “I can’t stand anything anymore.” You begin to realize that you *can* stand things, your awareness is still there. You can maintain that sense of awareness as something separate from the physical pain. You begin to see that the perception with which you approached the pain was what made the connection, what put together the physical pain and turned it into a mental pain. But if you can drop the perception that “This is my body, I’m responsible for every little sensation that comes up in the body,” you can let the sensations do whatever they have to do, but you don’t have to clap hands with them. They’ll do their thing and then they’ll go. They’ll appear as they’re disappearing, disappearing as they appear.

So the Buddha’s analysis of suffering is really helpful right here. Because, as I said, if he had said that life is suffering, that wouldn’t be very helpful at all. He’d be telling you to go die, or to simply put up with the suffering as a necessary part of life. That’d be the choice: suffer or die. But that’s not the choice he’s giving you. He’s saying that suffering is something very precise: that it’s an activity that you’re doing, and that you don’t have to do it and still be alive.

There’s that verse that begins in the Dhammapada: “Everything has the mind as it’s forerunner.” That’s actually a verse about dependent co-arising, the Buddha’s analysis of suffering. What the mind does is what comes first, before you experience anything. The perceptions you have in mind, the ones you cling to, can then prime you either to suffer or not to suffer. Your intentions, the things you’ve decided you’re going to pay attention to, how you pay attention to them: All of these things come prior to sensory impressions. *They* determine whether you’re going to suffer or not. So learn how to work on your own mind, so that no matter what comes up in birth, aging, illness, or death, you’ve got the mind protected. The instigator lies right here, but the solution lies right here as well. This is why we meditate: to master these skills so we have them at hand when we really need them.