

A Mind Bigger than Pain

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You probably know the story of how Devadatta tried to kill the Buddha. He rolled a rock down a mountain, hoping to crush the Buddha. Fortunately, the rock hit another rock that diverted it. But still, a sliver broke off from the big rock and pierced the Buddha's foot, causing him a lot of pain.

The texts tell us how, after the sliver was removed, the Buddha went to lie down and rest. Mara came to taunt him, accusing him of moping and being depressed and not facing pain like a real Buddha who apparently should get up and walk around even though he was in a lot of pain.

The Buddha replied, "I'm not moping. I'm lying down out of sympathy for all beings."

We can take two lessons from that. The first is that when the body is sick, you look after it. You don't try to prove that you're able to deal with pain to the extent that you abuse the body.

Lying down out of sympathy, the Buddha was preserving his strength so that he could help other beings.

At the same time, that accusation that Buddhas shouldn't suffer pain: I know some people who believe that anyone who's spiritually advanced should not have disease, should not have pain. And that's totally deluded.

Some diseases come from present karma, but a lot of them come from past karma. And everybody, no matter how awakened, has past karma. So it's simply a fact of life that even fully awakened beings, will face disease. They'll face pain.

The Buddha himself points this out in the difference between the ordinary person experiencing pain and the awakened person experiencing pain. They're the same in that they both are subject to pain. The difference is that the ordinary person shoots him or herself with extra arrows. The physical pain is one arrow, which is actually manageable. It's all those extra arrows: when we get upset, we get distraught, worried about the body. Those are the arrows that cause extra suffering to the mind and also add pain to the body.

So our responsibility when we're sick or injured is to look after the body as much as necessary, but to look primarily after the mind, realizing that our experience right now is a combination of past karma and present karma. We can't do much about the past karma but we do have a lot of control over our present karma—if we train the mind.

In fact, the more trained the mind is, the more control you have over how

you're going to actually be experiencing that past karma. And part of understanding the situation is to realize that your past karma doesn't present you with just one option at a time. You've got lots of potentials. There are potentials for pain in the body, and there are also potentials for pleasure.

You have the choice of what you're going to focus on and how you're going to focus on it. If you're going to focus on the pain, it's useful to focus on it as if it's going away, going away, going away. The pain may be there and it may be appearing repeatedly, but each time it comes, tell yourself that it's going away, going away, going away.

An image I've found useful is thinking of yourself sitting in one of those old station wagons that had a backward-facing seat. As the station wagon drives down the road, and you see things coming past you on either side of the road, they're actually going away from you. You've got your back to the front of the car. It's a very different experience from sitting in the front facing forward, where things are coming at you.

So try to look at the pain as moments, moments, moments, and each time you see a moment of pain, it's passing away, passing away. That gets you out of the line of fire.

You also have to be careful about how you think about the past and the future of the pain: in other words, how long you've been experiencing a particular pain and how much longer you may be experiencing it. Or thoughts about what this pain may mean in terms of how much longer you're going to live, whether the injury may be permanent or temporary: Put those thoughts aside. Those are extra arrows.

You can also think of them as extra burdens that just weigh down the present moment so that the mind is carrying more than it can bear.

At the same time, realize that you don't have to be focusing on the pain all the time. It's good to try to create a much larger state of mind that's not overwhelmed or overcome by the pain.

Think of the Buddha's image of the lump of salt. If you've got a lump of salt and you put it in a cup of water, you can't drink the water because it's too salty. But if you put the salt into a large clean river, there's so much water that the salt hardly makes a difference.

As the Buddha said, in the same way, when the results of bad past karma come, if you make your state of mind unlimited, immeasurable, you'll hardly notice the results of the past bad karma.

Of course, the immeasurable state of mind has to do with developing thoughts of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity for all beings. It's a

useful exercise when you're suffering from pain, because it gets you out of your individual narrative and reminds you of the larger context.

If you've been injured, you don't want to bear any ill will for the person who injured you. And if you've injured yourself, it's the same thing: You don't want to bear any ill will for yourself.

Think of how you would like all beings to be happy. That's a nice thought to bear in mind. It makes your mind much larger.

Think of all the different kinds of beings there are. You can think in terms of how you relate to them: the people you like, the people you're neutral about, the people you don't like, the people you don't know.

You can also think of them in terms of different kinds of beings. There are human beings, there are devas, there are animals, there are beings in hell, there are noble ones, there are ones not-yet noble ones, there are beings that are looking for a place to be born.

Think about beings all the way out to infinity. It's good to think about infinity a couple of times a day, like that character in *Through the Looking Glass* who liked to think of two or three impossible things every day before breakfast just as a mental exercise. Try to think about infinity every day. It airs out the mind, expands the mind.

If you've developed thoughts of goodwill, then you think about all those beings out there who are suffering. You're not the only one who's suffering right now. There's a lot of suffering going around all over the world. You want to have compassion for all those beings who are suffering.

As for the beings who are happy or enjoying good fortune right now, you don't want to resent them. The fact that they're enjoying good fortune right now doesn't make your pain harder to bear.

Remember that we're all trading places. The Buddha once said that if you see someone who's really, really miserable, remember: You've been there. You see someone who's enjoying extremes of wealth and power: You've been there as well. That helps to depersonalize the whole issue of pleasure and pain.

As Ajaan Lee once said, pleasure and pain, think of them as words that people say in jest. You want a state of mind that's beyond them.

Then finally there's equanimity. A traditional way of developing equanimity is to think about karma: that we all have good karma; we all have bad karma. And if bad karma's bearing fruit right now, remember that's not the only thing you have in your past. There are lots of good potentials there as well.

You don't want to get worked up about the fact that at the moment you're suffering from the fruiting of bad karma. This is going to end and there will be

good karma bearing fruit at some point. As for the question of whether that's going to be soon or a long time away, just put that one aside. Just realize that we all have these things.

As you think of that larger perspective, it helps develop a sense of samvega, that even when it gets good again, then it's going to get bad again, and it's going to get good again, bad again. That reminds you that you really want to go beyond all of this. You want to develop a state of mind that's not suffering, not clamoring after pleasure or running away from pain.

This is one of the reasons we're trying to develop a centered state of mind. And, from that centered state of mind, really look into how it is that the mind creates suffering, not only out of pain but also out of pleasure.

So as you're facing pain or illness or injury, remember that that's not the only thing your past karma has to offer. There are other potentials as well. It's like a field with lots of different seeds, and you have the choice as to which seed you want to water. Although the pain may be insistent, you can be even more insistent. The pain may seem large, but you can make your mind larger.

A good way to do that is to develop thoughts of infinite goodwill, infinite compassion, infinite empathetic joy, and infinite equanimity. They're the large river of clear water that can dissolve away the salt of the pain and take away the sting: not only of the pain but also of the different narratives that may come up in the mind around how you don't like where this pain is taking you, you don't like where this disease is taking you. You can put those aside.

Keep the bigger picture in mind, and let the smaller pictures just slough away.