

Painful Feelings, Hurtful Words

August 19, 2018

The Pali language has a word, *khanti*, which covers a lot of words in English: patience, endurance, tolerance, tenacity, resilience. It's a quality of the mind that can put up with things that are unpleasant, and it's an important part of the practice. It's a necessary part of our survival skills in the world, because the Buddha talks about two things in particular in the world that we have to develop this quality for. One is dealing with unpleasant speech from other people, and the other is dealing with physical pain. And the instructions he gives for dealing with each of these have some patterns in common with the other. Both pain and with unpleasant speech have some points in common in the problems they present and in the approaches we can take to solving those problems.

The first problem is that we tend to see these things as abnormal. When someone says something unkind—especially someone close to us—we regard it as something outrageous. It shouldn't have happened. And the same with pain: When pain comes up in the body, our basic feeling is it shouldn't be there.

So first we have to undo that misunderstanding.

In terms of unpleasant speech, the Buddha says to think about human speech throughout the world: There are people who tell the truth and people who don't tell the truth. There's kind speech, unkind speech. Useful speech, useless speech. So the fact that you're being subjected to something unkind or untrue or useless is not out of the ordinary. The same with physical pain: It's hard to go through life without pain. Everybody's got to face it. Some people have to face more than others. It has its ups and downs. But can you think of anyone in the world who has not had to deal with pain? It's universal. What this means in both cases is that we have to learn how to live with these things, to accept them as normal, but not make ourselves suffer over them.

That's the whole point of the Buddha's teachings. We live in a world where there's aging, illness, and death, there's pain, on the one hand. And then there are unpleasant people—and sometimes worse than unpleasant. It's a part of the human race. We need to find a skill whereby we don't suffer from these things. This is what the Buddha offers us in the path. We just chanted the factors of the path, from right view all the way down through right concentration. And each of the factors of the path helps us deal with unpleasant words and physical pain. Right view, of course, starts with that fact: These things are normal in the world.

They're going to happen. But why do we suffer from them? We suffer from craving and clinging.

This gets into the second feature of the Buddha's way of analyzing the problem around these things that we have to develop patience and endurance for. That's that we lay claim to things, lay claim to areas of our life, and then these things seem to come in and violate our claim. Not only that, we tend to scoop these things up and hold onto them as well. So it's a double violation. One, they move into areas that we've claimed as ours, like our body is ours. Our ears are ours. The social context that we want to have, that's our social context. And then when these things come in, it's strange: We tend to scoop them up.

Ajaan Lee's image is of someone plowing a field. In Thailand, when they plow fields, they have water buffalos pulling the plow. He says it's like taking a big bag and tying it to your water buffalo's leg, and as the dirt falls off the plow, you stick it in the bag. Well, you're not going to get very far. You're weighed down by all the things you've scooped up. It's the same way both with unpleasant words and with physical pain: With unpleasant words, of course, we just keep remembering these things. Someone said something really bad, and we pick it up and we stab ourselves with it again. Then we pick it up and stab ourselves again. The Buddha's image is of a gong. You strike the gong once, but it reverberates for a long time.

As for physical pain, you may notice that you're sitting here and there's a pain in a certain part of the body. There's this tendency to stick it in a bag, to gather it up and say "This is my pain. This is happening to me." There's a big narrative that goes around it, especially about how long the pain has been there, how much longer it's going to be there, how much it's oppressing you right now. We have to learn how to let that go. Part of it, as I said, is learning how not to claim that territory as yours. And second, allow the pain to be there, but without your gathering it up. If you don't gather it up, it just goes, goes, goes.

Our minds are like vacuum cleaners. We go around sucking up the dirt, and as the dirt comes at us, we blame the dirt for coming at us. But we're the ones sucking it up. If we're not sucking it up, it's just there and it goes. In fact, as soon as you look at it, it goes. It may be replaced again and again and again by another pain, but then each pain goes. If you can see it that way, it's going to have a very different impact on your mind.

So look at this territory that you've claimed as yours, such as a relationship when you feel that someone has said something unpleasant in the relationship: You feel that the territory of your relationship has been violated. But the whole part about being in relationships with other people is that there's a lot that's not under your control, and even though you are contributing something to the

relationship, there's a lot of not-you that's being contributed. So if you're looking for happiness there, you're looking in the wrong place.

This is what right concentration provides: the right place to look. You get the mind in a state of well-being inside, and even if you can't get the whole body to be pleasant, there are parts of the body that will be pleasant. You learn how to take your strength there, because the trick to endurance is that you don't focus on the things that are hard to endure. You focus on what is still there that you can depend on. If you can't depend on things outside, at the very least learn how to depend your own mind. Move into whatever part of the body is pleasant at the moment, and let the pain have the other part. You focus on what you've got that's good here.

Then if part of the mind complains "Why is that pain still there?", remember, pain is normal. We come into the world with pain. We go out with pain. And so in the meantime, we're trying to clear a little space here so that we have some well-being, so that the mind can settle down and look at itself and figure out, "Why is it that I'm taking these things and making myself suffer?"

That chant we had now, the world being a slave to craving, is basically saying that things are inconstant, stressful, not self. There's nothing to protect us from pain, nothing to protect us from having to lose things. And yet we keep going back for them again and again and again. We're a slave to craving.

So look into this craving. Why do you want to lay claim to these things? You lay claim to the body, of course, because it's useful, but you have to learn how to pick it up and put it down. And even when you're focusing on the body, you've got to learn how to put aside certain parts of the body that you cannot make comfortable. Focus on the parts that you can, and use that as your space here in the present moment.

As for the words of other people, try to develop a state of mind that allows the words to go through. Your happiness doesn't have to depend on other people's high opinion of you or the care they take for your feelings. You need to have something more solid inside. Again, this is what the concentration provides.

So look for the areas where you can take sustenance, where you can find a sense of well-being. Focus on those. And you find that you don't have to create so much suffering around the bad things of the world.

After all, this was the Buddha's insight. There's the suffering that's just there, the pains that are just there. And then there are pains that we pick up and we stick into the mind. It's like a fire outside. The fire is burning, but we go out and we find a burning coal from the fire and then we stick it into our brains, and then we complain about how the fire's hot. It's burning our brains. But we're the ones who

picked it up, gathered it in. So learn how not to pick it up. Let the fire be there in the world. It has just as much right to be in the world as you do. Once you accept that fact and learn how to live around it without scooping it up and making yourself suffer from it, then you can find some peace in this very unpeaceful world. A passage in the Dhammapada says, "How peaceful we are! Living in a world that's not peaceful, we are peaceful." There's a boundary line there, and you want to learn how to make the most of it.