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The teacher who is indeed wise does not bid you to enter the house of his wisdom
but rather leads you to the threshold of your mind.
Khalil Gibran

TAKING IT TO THE STREET

PHYSICAL PAIN IS INEVITABLE BUT SUFFERING IS OPTIONAL

[With grateful acknowledgement of Upasaka Culadasa (John Yates, Ph.D.) for his recent teachings on pain, suffering, and the end of suffering, which inspired this article.]

There is a kind of equality between all living beings. Every living creature wants to be happy, and every living creature wants to avoid pain and suffering.

The people you like want these two things, the people you don't like want these two things, the people you don't care about one way or the other want these two things, and you yourself want these two things.

Physical pain is a part of this kind of life. With the types of bodies that we have, pain is inevitable. Eventually we will all die, and that is generally known to be unpleasant. And on the way to death, we will experience, if we're lucky, old age, which is also known to be unpleasant. And during our life, we will also experience sickness and injury, which are unpleasant.

But here is a secret of life...

Physical pain may be inevitable, but suffering is optional.

Suffering comes from resistance to what is.

For this discussion, pain will refer to the initial, undeniably unpleasant physical, mental or emotional sensation of hurt. Suffering will refer to that mental anguish that your mind layers on to the actual pain, as it protests against the pain.

Here is a helpful metaphorical equation to describe the relationship between pain and suffering, spoken by Shinzen Young, an American meditation teacher who is trained in three Buddhist traditions as well as Western schools of thought:

Suffering = Pain x Resistance



Let's imagine that you have 10 units of pain: you have a nasty illness, or your loved one recently died, or you have a nasty situation at work.

Your natural reaction to pain is to respond with mental resistance. Your mind cries out, "Why me! How could this happen to me! This shouldn't be happening to me! I don't deserve this!"



Resistance means that some part of the mind refuses to accept what is happening to you. Actually, you just try to refuse it. To refuse pain or unpleasantness which has already happened is impossible, because it has already happened! So you are trying to do something absolutely impossible when you feel this kind of resistance - you are trying to change what has already happened. No wonder resistance brings suffering.

Now let's say you have 10 units of resistance to whatever the pain or unpleasantness is, along with our 10 units of pain, and look back at our equation.

You end up with 100 units of suffering - 100 units of mental anguish. Sure, there was some pain occurring for you, but then on top of that, you try to deny accepting what it happening to you. This mental anguish that we add on, blowing our own pain out of proportion as if it were the end of the world ... is totally optional and avoidable suffering.

You all have either experienced this phenomenon directly or seen it in someone else. Let's say that your loved one dies, not accepting this fact doesn't bring them back, it just makes you more miserable for a longer period of time. The healing comes when you start to accept that you are not going to be seeing this person in the flesh ever again.

Let's say something bad happened to a friend of yours when they were a child, some kind of abuse maybe. Now your friend is in their forties and they still haven't let go of trying to resist the facts of what happened to them. Their mind is still crying out "How could this have happened to me!" In this case the original abuse is actually long gone, and the person is keeping their own suffering alive sometimes for years after the fact.

Let's take an example, say you just found out that you or a loved one has cancer. That is a real, unpleasant situation. However, what are you going to do about it? Are you going to, in addition to the cancer, be really upset about it? If you do, then you will be causing yourself or your loved one additional stress that is totally avoidable.

Or let's say someone at work does something in a manner you think is totally wrong. Then you get fixated on the problem and roll it around and around in your head, creating a whole story of suffering for yourself instead of just accepting that this is the current situation, and you can either choose to try and do something about it or not. And in either case, getting upset - resisting the situation - is not helpful or productive.

As the Buddhist Master Shantideva (Peace Angel) wrote circa 700 AD,
If there is something you can do about it, why get upset? [just fix it]
If there is nothing you can do about it, why get upset?
[since there's nothing you can do]



Acceptance also works with physical suffering. Let's say you cut yourself in the kitchen accidentally, or injured your back at work.

There is a physical pain, and that hurts. But then on top of that, again there is the whole feeling and story of resistance. "Ouch, ouch, ouch, this shouldn't be happening to me." If you can let go of that story and accept and notice whatever pain may be, you can notice that the actual painful physical sensation is almost always much smaller than we are making it out to be. Even the physical pains are being blown out of proportion by your mind's unwillingness to accept reality as it is and deal with it.

Back to our equation: What if you only had 1 unit of resistance to the 10 units of pain? Then you would have 10 units of suffering. Your mental anguish after the original pain wouldn't be blown way out of proportion, "making a mountain out of a molehill", it would be just about the same size as the original pain. But we remember something from math class.

In the equation,

$$\text{Suffering} = \text{Pain} \times \text{Resistance}$$

what would happen if we could take our resistance down to zero?

There would be no suffering left. The original pain would have still occurred, of course, but the mental anguish after the fact that we ourselves create due to our futile attempts to resist and not accept the reality of the situation, that mental anguish would be zero! Your suffering would be zero!

So, I hope this is helpful. If you can, going forward, practice and train your mind to let go of the suffering stories that it overlays and tells to you again and again, and instead just deal realistically with the much smaller, unavoidable pains of life, however makes the most sense in each situation. The first step in this process is just noticing that although some pain is unavoidable, all your suffering is totally avoidable, and you are creating it. Relax the drama, and have a good, happy life.

- Jesse Fallon
