

## *The Choice Not to Suffer*

*June 28, 2011*

“I am the owner of actions, heir to my actions”: That’s one of the reflections the Buddha has us think about every day, to give rise to a sense of heedfulness. It’s part of a larger set, of course—those five reflections that we chanted just now. The first four talk about how we haven’t gone beyond aging, illness, death, and separation—all the things we don’t like in life. They’re going to come. And it’s normal. The Thai translation for those reflections actually says, “Aging is normal, illness is normal, death is normal.” And as long as you’re born, there’s no way around these things. It sounds pretty depressing, but it’s not meant to be depressing. It’s meant to give you a sense of heedfulness.

Because the fifth reflection is that we have our actions, and our actions make the difference as to whether we suffer or not. In other words, we *don’t* have to suffer from aging, illness, death, and separation. We have the choice. We have to experience them, of course, but the question of whether we’re going to suffer from them or not is up to us.

This is why we’re practicing, to develop the skills that will enable us not to have to suffer when aging comes, not to have to suffer when illness comes, not to have to suffer when death and separation come. And it’s always important that you keep the power of your choices in mind. Otherwise, these things come and you’re just a victim. And you flail around, and that doesn’t help anything at all—you just suffer all the more. And at that point, if you were asked, “Would you like to have the choice of not suffering?” You’d say, “Of course.”

We meditate now so that we actually *will* have that choice. If you don’t develop the skills now, it’s going to be very hard to develop them then when you need them most. You have to develop them beforehand, while you’re still relatively young, healthy and alive, so that when the time comes and you’re asked, “Would you like to have the choice not to suffer?” it’s not a nasty question. It’s actually a reminder, “Hey, you don’t have to suffer. You know how not to suffer.”

There was an old man who was dying of cancer, staying at the monastery in Thailand. He’d had some meditation practice. We were trying our best to find

some pain killer for him. But before we could get the pain killer, the best treatment for him was this: We noticed that as the pain was getting to him, all you had to do was whisper his meditation word into his ear. And that was enough to remind him that he had a choice: He didn't have to focus on the pain; he could focus on the meditation word. He didn't have to get sucked into the vortex of the pain; he could pull himself out. And as long as he had the mindfulness—i.e. the ability to remember this and keep it in mind—he had the choice. When he forgot that, we'd help him remember again.

This is why mindfulness is such an important part of the meditation—to remind us that we have the choice, and to remind us that if we don't have the skills to separate your awareness out of the pain, we'd better work on them. If you have developed the skills, always remember that fact, so that you can use them when you need them.

The skill isn't a matter of blotting out the pain or of not being aware of it. It's there but you have the sense that you're not the victim. It's not aimed at you, and as long as you don't take it in, it's something separate from your awareness. It's simply a fact, like the sound of the crickets in the background right now, the coolness in the air, the things that are there that you really can't have any control over. But you don't have to suffer because of them. If you're sitting here thinking, "I wish those insects would stop," well, why? You don't have to focus on the sounds. They're there in the background, but you don't have to focus on them. You can focus on the breath. Think of the sound as just going right through you. You're not putting up any resistance, and the sound isn't penetrating anything of you that's really essential to you. So let it go.

And you want to be able to develop the same skill with things like pain—physical pain, emotional pain. Don't put yourself in the line of fire. One of the reasons we develop a large frame of reference in our concentration—being aware of the whole body—is to have a sense that these things can go right through you, and you don't have to be affected by them. You don't have to be knocked off your center.

If you're experiencing physical pain, in the beginning you don't have to focus directly at the pain. You focus on another part of the body. Allow the breath energy there to be comfortable, refreshing. Allow it to give rise to a sense of

fullness. And then think of that fullness seeping through the rest of the body, down through the pain and on beyond it, so as to dissolve away any patterns of tension you may have built up around the pain in your effort to avoid it, to push it out of the way, to control it. Those patterns of tension often become the burden that the mind actually feels.

One of the Buddha's insights is that pain comes in two forms. One is pain in the three characteristics: the fact that there is stress simply because things are put together and fabricated—and that's everywhere. But the stress that weighs down the mind is a different kind of stress. It's the stress that comes from craving and ignorance. And those are things you can change.

This is where it's good to think of that committee in the mind, and learning how to make use of it. Some members may be yelling about the pain, but not everybody in the mind has to be yelling about the pain. Other members could be saying, "Hey, wait a minute, you have your skills." The physical pain is one thing; your sensation of the body is actually something else. The sensation of the body is made up of the four elements or properties of solidity, liquidity, warmth, coolness. Coolness is part of the liquid, and then there's the energy of the breath. But the pain is something else. It's not solid and it's not warm and it's not liquid and it's not energy. It's just pain. And that comes and goes. So learn to separate those things out.

When you can separate them out, you can also begin to separate the pain away from your awareness, too. The awareness is one thing; the pain is something else. Your awareness knows; the pain doesn't know anything. It's a different kind of quality. These things may be right there together, but they don't have to be connected. Your perceptions are what connects them, your labels saying, "This pain is fixed in my body" or "This pain is fixed in my awareness." It's like you're shooting yourself. Then the Buddha comes along and says, "Hey, you have the choice. You don't have to shoot yourself."

This is the point where the mind really welcomes the idea that things are not totally determined. You really want a way out, and here's a way out being offered to you. There are other times when the mind is less likely to want to believe in freedom of choice because it's been making bad choices. And one of its ways of

comforting itself is to say, “Well, I couldn’t help it. I had no choice.” That’s pretty meager comfort—and it offers you no hope at all when you really are suffering.

This is why for the Buddha one of the most important aspects of his teachings is that we do have freedom of choice. It’s one of the few topics that he’d actually go out and argue with other people about. Most of the time, he would have people coming to him to argue. But when he learned that there were teachers who were teaching the doctrine of determinism, he would go and challenge them. “If you believe in that,” he said, “there’s no hope. You give people no basis for deciding that some things should be done and others shouldn’t. Why set yourself up as a teacher? What purpose would there be in teaching? What purpose would there be in practicing?”

Now, he didn’t say that he could *prove* freedom of choice to you. But he said, you take it as an operating hypothesis, a working hypothesis. Why would you want to do that? Because there’s suffering. And you don’t like it. There’s that part of the mind that says, “Okay, I really would like a choice not to have to suffer.” Well, here the Buddha is offering that choice to you, telling you that it takes work, and you have to develop skill, but it can be done.

So now, when the suffering is not overwhelming, you get to work with it. Whatever little pains come up during the course of the meditation, see them as the opportunity to gain some understanding. If the concentration isn’t strong enough to deal with them, focus someplace else for the time being. If the pain is in your leg, just give the leg over to the pain. You don’t have to lay claim to it right now. There are other times when you don’t lay claim to your legs—sitting and watching a movie you’re not even thinking about your legs. So as you’re watching your breath, you don’t have to think about your legs.

Then, as your concentration gets stronger, you can start facing the pain. And you face it with a lot more confidence, now that you at least have a place to go when the pain gets really bad. Now you can actually look at it. Because this is what the Buddha says is your duty with regard to pain and suffering: You want to comprehend it. To comprehend it means watching it so that you can understand it and you can give rise to dispassion for whatever causes it. You see the causes operating—these movements in your own mind, which you wouldn’t have seen if you weren’t looking really carefully at the pain.

So look at pain as an opportunity. It's a challenge. It's not going to be an easy opportunity, but you can take advantage of it. You can learn from it. You can benefit from it. You can get practice in exercising your choice of not having to suffer.

It's a simple fact of life that the more skills you have, the more opportunities you see, and the more opportunities you can take advantage of, given whatever raw materials you have. Some people look at a pile of scrap wood and all they see is a pile of scrap wood. It doesn't look very good; they want to get rid of it. Other people look at the pile of scrap wood and they see the potential for a table, a chair, a bookcase. It's because they've developed a skill and they see a wider range of choices.

This is your most important skill: the skill that allows you not to suffer from pain. Some people look at pain and all they see is suffering. Other people look at pain, and they see an opportunity to go beyond suffering.

So pose that question in the mind: If you had the opportunity not to suffer, if you had the choice not to suffer, would you go for it? And when you say, Yes, then work on the skills you need to make that opportunity a reality.