

teisho d'Albert Low

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Pain inflicted upon us by others is far different from pain coming from situations of our own choosing. Many sports require considerable pain and effort when training. Olympic-class divers practice at the Complexe Claude Robillard swimming-pool, the site of the 1976 swimming Olympics, and which is quite near the Montreal Zen Center. They do many different kinds of dives: somersaults and backsaults, spins and twists which are very demanding and often they hit the water awkwardly. The shock and pain that must come from such a crash as they do this must be considerable. During practice they get no recognition, no applause, no inducement to continue and yet up they go again, up to the top diving board and off they fly once more. Time after time, hour after hour, these people put themselves through it. So it is with anyone who is doing this kind of Olympic training: running, jumping, gymnastics all demand constant effort, all demand that one returns again and again to work after, even in the midst of, pain.

But this kind of pain is quite different from that which you feel if, for example, a bully were deliberately to hit you. This pain can be intolerable even though, physically, it may be much less severe than that which comes during training. It is not the pain itself but the circumstances surrounding the pain which determines whether it is tolerable or not.

Whether something is pleasant or unpleasant, pleasant or painful, lies ultimately in whether one can accept it: actually accepting. Although it may seem a small point, perhaps it would be better if we were to use the expression 'to be one with' rather than 'accept.' This modification in wording may seem just a question of semantics, but it is not really so. When we accept something, it is often because we have no alternative. It is often a case of, "I don't like it but I suppose I just have to accept it, I just have to put up with it, don't I?" This kind of acceptance is at the basis of some Stoic philosophy. The Stoic philosopher said that life was suffering, but one has to accept the suffering in life, one has to put up with it. This attitude underlies many people's reaction to suffering "I can do nothing about it and so therefore I have no alternative but to accept it. »

However something much more basic than mere acceptance, "I have to put up with it," is implied in being 'one with' the pain. The Christian counterpart to being one with is to be fond in the Lord's prayer : "Thy will be done." We have suggested this line as a mantra, and later as a koan, for people who, though practicing Christians, nevertheless wish to benefit from Zen practice. "Thy will be done" is one of those bottomless statements. On the face of it, it looks as though one is saying: "Well, I accept Thy will, I accept what is happening." But, when one penetrates it deeper and deeper, one realizes ultimately that "Thy will be done" and being at one with whatever happens are not different. A bird singing, the leaves rustling as the wind blows, the rain falling, the legs hurting as one sits for long hours in meditation, are all God's will being done as long as

you are one with them. If you are one with the devil you can be happy in hell. If you are at odds with the angels, even heaven will be painful. Suffering, on the other hand, comes from the unwillingness, or, one might say, from the inability to be at one with the situation.

Some time ago a father and a son wanted to come to a seven-day sesshin at the Montreal Zen Center. At first I refused to accept their application because, as the application was being made by phone and I had not met them in person, I did not know them sufficiently well to judge whether they would be able to undertake a long sesshin. I said: "I think you will have to come for a shorter period, for a four-day sesshin." They protested a great deal, saying they had been practicing meditation for a long while, that seven days would present no problem to them and so on. However I insisted and said, "You must come for four days of the retreat only and, in any case, when you come you must sit for one day and then, at the end of that first day, come to dokusan (individual instruction) to commit yourself to how long you will stay, but this must not be for more than four days." "Oh, they said, all of this is so unnecessary." Anyway they came. I saw them before the sesshin started, and again said to them: "You must be able to commit yourself to this kind of sesshin, because it can create problems for you in the future and is not good for other people attending the sesshin, if you just break away and leave. So wait until you have done one day and then make up your mind" "Oh, we won't break away. «

So the first dokusan arrives. First of all, the son comes in, he is in tears: "I don't know that I can go on at all," he says. "This is too much." So we spend some time talking together and eventually he says: "I'd like to do a two-day sesshin." "O.K." I said, "you're going to do a two days sesshin." Then the father comes in and nearly blows my head off. He is shouting at me: "This is ridiculous! What you are doing to these people is brutal. I don't understand what your attitude is nor what you are doing. I am not staying for another minute.! »

So, sure enough, off they went. In fact they went off in such a hurry that they forgot half their belongings. Now, here are two people (the man was in his late forties, I suppose, the son in his early twenties) who were just unable to tolerate the pain, even for one day. They felt that this pain was beyond anything that they could bear. Furthermore, and this is important, they blamed me and the way retreat was being run. It was, they felt, the situation - not themselves - which was at fault. They seemed to feel something malicious was being done and that I was acting in a malicious way toward people. This is not meant as a criticism of these two people. What it shows is that they had separated themselves from the pain. Others, some much older, much more frail, one lady is 76, another a Monsignor of over 70, another an ex college professor of 70, all come for retreat after retreat after retreat. The pain in the legs, the pain from the kyosaku, the hardship of having to rise early in the morning and to continue hour after hour, that the father and son suffered and what these others, who come back time and time again, suffer, is not different in any real way. The men had no particular physical problems; on the contrary they were quite fit. But they had a wrong attitude - an arrogant, brash attitude towards what was going on - and it was this that prevented

them from being sufficiently open and able to be one with the pain. It was the resistance, the separation, that made the pain intolerable, not the pain itself. This, furthermore, is true not only of physical pain but of all kinds of pain, of all the suffering in life: physical, psychological and moral.

During a sesshin one sees different kinds of pain - the pain that comes from being told what to do, which entails its own kind of pain; the pain that comes from having to sleep in strange surroundings in the company of people you do not know too well; the pain of not being able to talk and of having to maintain silence, of having to keep the eyes down. In addition is the pain that comes from sitting long periods with its attendant pain of anxiety, rage, as well as the pain that comes from - well, we can call it - dryness. This pain that comes from dryness, from the desert, from there-being-nothing-at-all-that-has-any-interest-in-the-situation-... could be looked upon as the worst pain of all. Many people, when faced with it go into a panic. They just can't face it. Indeed it was almost certainly this that got to the father and son.

When totally one with the pain, one is going quite contrary to the whole habit patterns established, not only by society but, you might say, by the biological system itself. By working with pain, by being open to pain, then like the carp, a symbol often found in the entrance to Zen monasteries, one is swimming against the stream of life and against the stream of what society accepts as normal. But because one is not relying upon simple instincts or habitual reactions that arise at the level of the personality, then one must draw upon resources lying at a much deeper level, a level where the distinctions "me and this," "me and you," "me and them" "mine and yours" have not yet arisen.

During dokusan people who are experiencing a lot of pain sometimes say: "You know, if my wife, (husband, friend, boss or whomever) could see me doing this, they would laugh at me. They would think I was silly, stupid, doing this." But this means, for those who say this, that their pain comes not so much from the situation itself, but from being divided against themselves. She, or he, is seeing the situation first of all as it is, and then through the eyes of another. This other may either be some particular person, such as a wife or husband, friend or so on, or people in general, "they." If "they" could see me. This other, observing viewpoint always seems to be negative, cynical, ridiculing, bemused, and so very critical about what is going on. Being divided against oneself in this way happens, not only in sesshins or when sitting in meditation, but also in life generally. This means that when they come up against a situation in life, such people do not only see it as it is, but they also see themselves in the situation through the eyes of another. Because of this, the pain is felt not only as itself, but also as mirrored back from the other. This can cause the pain to build up until it becomes intolerable, much like feedback between a loudspeaker and a microphone.

Unfortunately some of the teachings of the Church can exacerbate the problem. Many of us were taught when young that God could see whatever we did. The idea of an ever-watchful and critical eye was built into us by religion. Everything that we did would be seen through this ever-watchful eye of God. What this does, whether the ever watchful eye is God's, or one's spouse's or friend's, is to awaken, by giving form to, the

deep schism that lies at the heart of our being¹, a schism, which divides us against ourselves and, by giving it form, holds it rigidly in place. Suffering, which is a constant background to life, is accentuated through constant feed back from the ever watchful eye. One can let go of this feedback if one can see into it, that is to say know it is there, recognize it for what it is, recognize the way it works. Then it is not necessary to struggle with it; just let it go.

When you practice Zen it is probably best at first, that means for the first ten years, not to tell too many people what you are doing. The fewer who know the better. Most people will not understand because they will see what you are doing simply from outside, not from their own direct experience and so naturally they see it as bizarre. The problem is that if you discuss it with them you may well pick up this problem that we have just referred to, of seeing your practice through their eyes.

Our true nature is happiness (or perhaps serenity would be a better word to use). We know this, we know, at the deepest level of our being, happiness is our right. Saint Augustine said, "If you had not already found me, you would not be seeking me". If your true nature was not already happiness or serenity, you would not be seeking serenity. It is because this is so, because our true nature is serenity, that, paradoxically we suffer, because we try to find happiness, peace, serenity, reflected in experience: in a love affair, in being famous, in owning many things, in having great wisdom, all of which are subject to the vicissitudes of life.

Why not go straight to the source? Why go in such a roundabout way? a way that requires that we have the approval of others, that we acquire a certain amount of belongings, or knowledge, or friends, or foreign postage stamps, or other kinds of "brownie marks"? "That would be breaking the rules of the game," someone might say. It would be cheating to go straight to happiness without all the circumambulation, without putting up a target and getting others to accept it as the target, and then getting others to help you reach the target and then trying to beat all of them to the target (which somehow, in some way seems to be the game). But even so, why not go straight to the source? Why not just work with happiness? Why not work with, or better still from, your true nature? Again, the paradox: to do so we should have to give up our desire for happiness, bring to an end the self with its desires and fears, desires for happiness as well as fears that we shall not find it, and we are reluctant to do this, even though the self is the only obstruction to true happiness.

The only way to happiness is through oneness : "to be at one with". The only way to peace is to let go of separation, of division, of the "it-is-alright-over-there-but-not-so-hot-over-here' feeling. This is what Zen practice is about, what following the breath is all about. People sometimes say to me: "Quite frankly I don't see really what the connection is between my following the breath and my inability to really get into life. On the contrary it seems to me that I am running away from life when I am sitting facing the wall, following the breath. I have got all kind of things going on: problems, fears, difficulties, antagonisms, and I just don't get the connection between coming to terms with all of that and following the breath".

A Zen teacher said that if you are one with a speck of dust you are one with the whole world. To be "at one" therefore is not quantitative. If you are at one with an out breath at that moment you are at one with the whole world. The only way to know this is to experience it for yourself. To be completely at one with an outbreath, is the same as being at one with pain. To be total ly at one with pain, and to look deeply into it, will mean that the separation between pain and pleasure breaks down. Both become experience, not my experience, my pleasure, my pain but just.....

Often, when doing a spiritual practice one comes face to face with the desert, a feeling of being abandoned, a feeling of dryness and an endless sense of nothing to look forward to. At its most intense it is not a feeling to which one can give a name. At first this is very painful and one has a strong tendency to want to stir things up, try to make something happen, to try this, do that... But one has entered this desert because one has let go of the various ways one has used in the past to entertain oneself. These ways have, for the moment at least, come to an end. It is now possible for a much deeper unity to manifest, a unity that is not dependent upon an integration from outside. It is the entry into the state known in Christian meditative traditions as apatheia, from which our word apathy has been derived but which means freedom from feeling rather than absence of feeling. However apatheia most often first makes itself known in the desert.

If you encounter the desert do not think that something has to be wrong with your practice, or that you are not sufficiently "spiritual." As long as one feels something is wrong with the practice, then one cannot bring one's full awareness to what is going on at the moment. Instead most of one's awareness will be given to finding some other way. This is why great faith is necessary, great faith not only in the teacher and the teaching, but also faith in yourself: the faith that you are capable of discerning the truth for yourself. Ultimately such faith is already truth and its discernment. It is also important to realize that, although you may find some way by which to divert yourself for the time being and so escape this particular desert, sooner or later a desert will appear from which you can only escape if you are willing to spend your life skimming life's surface, and scarcely living at all, living in a twilight zone in which ghosts encounter ghosts; a twilight zone wherein, alas, most people live.

Very often the dryness is accompanied by the inability to breathe freely. The breath is restricted and shallow, hot and harsh. Just be aware of the situation, be present to the restriction of the breath also. Don't try to breathe deeply, don't try to change the breath. Be present to the restriction of the breath. Sometimes, the diaphragm is very tense-well, be present to that tension also. Then of course, hundreds of thoughts flit in and out like gnats on a summers eve. Again, so there are thoughts. Recognize, without any kind of judgment, that these flitting thoughts have no connection whatsoever with one another nor with the practice at the moment. If you do this quite dispassionately you will find that it is not necessary to bind them together, no need to take them into account or feel they have any importance at all, no need to claim them as "mine".

When we talk about being at one with pain, non-resistance, courage and endurance we are not talking about heroes or heroines. This deep courage and endurance is simply

being one with your practice. If one gets an image of being a hero, then of course the acceptance of pain becomes something quite different: one starts to inflict the situation onto oneself. One makes the situation into something over which one acquires a sense of power and superiority by being able to endure it. This is just not what we are talking about, just the opposite. If you feel any sense of puffing up, any sense of swelling, any sense of inflation that comes as a consequence of this kind of practice, then beware. It will lead into its own kind of terrible pain and because it is, so to say, coming up from behind you, it is even more difficult to work with.

Just awareness: "here it is... here it is..... This is what is present now". And it is exactly the same way when one gets into high blissful states: one doesn't take off into the never-never. Always remember bliss that one can experience is not the bliss of One-mind. Being present, not claiming the practice for one's own, not soaring away in blissful states also takes courage, endurance, non-resistance: to be able to just breathe, in and out, not to make a big deal out of it, this is the practice. But this is bliss.

Sometimes people will ask, "Why should one deny oneself?" You can call what we are talking about a denial of the self, but it is not so really: one is not specifically denying anything. It is not that one is putting the self down, humiliating it, getting rid of it, or anything like that. To be 'one with' is to be open to what is. The self on the other hand is to be closed to everything other than what "I" consider important. To be present to what is, is to be present to what is unimportant as well as to what is important. This is what in Zen is meant by denying the self and it is this that leads us into, and ultimately out of, the wilderness. Recognize right from the start that the practice holds nothing for the personality, the personality will gain nothing from it now or in the future.

Every living being longs always to be happy, untainted by sorrow; and every one has the greatest love for him or herself, which is solely due to the fact that happiness is his real nature. Hence in order to realize that inherent and untainted happiness, which indeed one daily experiences when the mind is subdued in deep sleep, it is essential that one should know oneself. - Ramana Maharishi

This article "On Pain" is also found in Albert Low's book "To Know Yourself" which includes talks, stories and articles on Zen. Though the entries range from dharma talks on koans to discussions on Buddhism and Christianity, they all address concrete concerns of our lives and reveal the author's profound insights.