



Becoming Aware of Suffering - And How to Deal with It

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THE Buddha taught about two arrows of suffering. The first one is pain — adverse life events and difficult times that all people are forced to face in daily life. No one can escape pain. It is an inevitable part of existence. We are all vulnerable to the miseries of life. The first arrow is something that happens to us, something that comes from outside. Even if we did everything right, we could not avoid it entirely. Bad things just happen.

The second arrow is something that happens inside us. It is the reaction to hardships, perceptions, thoughts, emotions, feelings, bodily sensations, and actions. We shoot that arrow ourselves. This is where we have some power, perhaps not much, but some. It might not be easy, but we can influence how we react, how we perceive things, how we think, and how we act.

Let us look at the second arrow in more detail. Cognitive behavior therapy emphasizes that the interpretation one makes of events has a strong effect on how one reacts. Imagine the following example.

We are walking on the street and see a friend of ours on the other side of the road.

We try to greet him, but he does not greet us back. He does not seem to notice us. How would we react?

The thoughts that come to our mind give direction to the succeeding emotions and other reactions. If we think, “I guess he is avoiding me; maybe he does not like me anymore; maybe I have offended him somehow”, we would probably feel sad, disappointed, and alone. On the other hand, if we think, “He might be busy; he just did not see me”, it would be easy to let go and just continue the day.

Following this kind of event, *some people who have a tendency for depression might continue thinking*, “I am so stupid and uninteresting. Nobody likes me”, and thus make themselves feel even worse. These thoughts can keep rolling on in one’s head and by the time one gets back home one is feeling very anxious, ashamed, and lonely. One might scream at the wife and children and binge watch TV and drink beer all evening, or act in some other unconstructive way, such as withdrawing from social connections or doing excessive work or recreation, ignoring everything else in life.

The thoughts that come up in the challenging



situations of daily life are automatic. Usually, we do not even realize what is happening in our head. During the day, thousands of thoughts can run through our mind. When we are not aware of this process, in the evening we just feel bad and do not know the reason. The automatic thoughts derive from the belief system, from one's personal philosophy of life that one has learnt throughout life, usually unconsciously.

The belief system activates when something reminds us of the history we have lived, of the wounds we have had, of the wounds that have not yet healed. When we investigate the belief system, we can find rudimentary thoughts and emotions that express how we think about ourselves, about others, and about the world around us. These core beliefs are usually something like "I'm worthless", "I don't deserve love", "I'm a bad person". It seems that in the core of one's personal philosophy of life lies a deep sense of separateness, a strong, "I don't belong" thought.

However, we can become aware of this and start changing our conditioning that we have been building up since early childhood, and even before that. We can stop reacting and start recreating ourselves and our lives. There are four steps, which we can take to weaken the power of the second arrow.

The first step is to become aware that this is a moment of suffering. In the West, the ethos is that suffering is an anomaly of life. Bad things are not supposed to happen, at least not to "me". Western people have a tendency to look away when there is suffering — whether it is our own or

someone else's. However, suffering does not go away when we bury our head in the sand. It remains until we decide to do something about it.

We need to stop and look at the situation, look at the reactions, thoughts, feelings, emotions, bodily sensations, and action tendencies, and try to see everything as purely as we can and just hold everything in open awareness. At this point, we do not try to change anything, not the situation, not the inner reactions. Just let everything be as it is. The first step is to see what is really happening. We do not judge or criticize our life or our reactions, just note them. We recognize that this is a moment of suffering.

The second step is to accept that suffering is a part of life. Bad things happen. It means to accept not only the hardship but our own reactions to the difficulties, too. We are human beings. We were born with this "fight, flight, or freeze" response. Whatever we think, feel, or experience, it is alright. We do not need to be ashamed of our reactions. They are the voice of our past. Accepting means that we stop tilting at windmills. It means that we stop trying to put life, or ourselves, into a predetermined form of how we would like everything to be. Instead, we connect with reality. Accepting takes a lot of courage, but only then, a real change is possible.

The third step is to remember the unity of humanity. When something bad happens, we may think that we are the only ones having difficult times. If we think along these lines, we feel alone, separated from others. In this case, we are forgetting



the reality that everyone faces difficulties. No one likes suffering. No one likes stress. Everyone wants to be happy. All this is part of being human. We can remind ourselves that we, too, belong to the network of life. We are part of this great body that is humanity. When we open our heart to this fact — and it is a fact — we may feel elevated. The pain is not gone, but it is lighter to bear when we are not alone. We have a connection with others, with the whole of humanity. We belong.

The fourth step is our commitment to do whatever we can to improve the situation. It also means to refrain from making things worse. It is common that when hardships enter one's life, one starts to criticize or blame oneself or others. This

kind of talking with oneself can be discouraging, and it diminishes the energy that we need to improve the situation. We do not need to wallow in self-pity. Life is already difficult enough. Instead, we can be kind to ourselves, as we are kind to others.

To conclude, pain and hardship are unavoidable parts of life. However, understanding how the mind can make it worse, becoming aware of the conditioning of the mind, and changing the way we relate to situations can make the miseries of life easier to bear. With awareness, we can start building a happier future.

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