

## The End of Suffering

by Lisa Hoffman

The Buddha was teaching at a small village in India when he was approached by a tearful young mother. She held the still form of her small child, who had just died.

"Please, Tagathata, bring my child back to life," she begged. "I know you can do this."

The Buddha said very gently, "I will do as you request. Before I do, I ask that you bring me a mustard seed from a home that has not known death."

Thrilled that the Buddha would grant her wish, the mother attended to this task. She knocked on the door of every house in the village and asked if anyone had died.

"My husband's mother has just passed," said one of her neighbors.

"My wife died after a sudden illness," said another.

She heard of children, grandparents, friends who had died. She could not find one home that had not known death.

She went back to the Buddha, lifted her child from his arms, and said, weeping, "Everyone in this village has been touched by the loss of a loved one. How can I ask you to bring my child back to life and leave everyone else to their suffering? Please bless us, and I will offer my firstborn to the great mystery."

This young mother experienced the Buddha's Third Noble Truth: that there is an end to suffering. The Four Noble Truths were the Buddha's first teaching after his awakening. The First is that in this life there is suffering. We can't escape it. The Second is that the cause of suffering is craving, our attachment to how we want life to be.

Nirvana is where we go when our suffering ends. The good news is that we don't need to die. We do need to deeply know that every person in this world is connected. This broken-hearted woman entered Nirvana when she opened to the suffering of others. Her grief became shared grief.

We also cross over to Nirvana when we become aware of how *we* want the world to be, and turn toward how it is. The young mother understandably felt that her child should not have died. But she found out that death and grief affect everyone, and compassion grew -- for herself, and for her neighbors.

Suffering can be transformed by community, compassion, and knowing that life will be as it is. How else can we shift our relationship to suffering? Can we choose a way out? Sometimes we can. A recent near-romantic experience showed me that changing my

relationship to suffering through what I choose is rooted in awareness. Without mindfulness, I am unlikely to see many options.

A while ago, I found out that a woman I had been attracted to for some time had broken up with her girlfriend. I let her know of my interest through a mutual friend and heard back that she'd like to get together, but not for a while. She needed to recover from the split.

A couple of months later I saw her at a party and was encouraged by an enjoyable conversation. I decided to send a holiday card, e-mailed for her address, and the e-mail I received back was signed "warmly."

I was wildly excited. She had to be incredibly interested in me to sign off like that! She had to know we were meant for each other! I was swept away by what I *wanted* "warmly" to mean. But the word itself brought me back to reality. "Warmly" is a nice, friendly term. I decided to stop there.

It would have been easy to lose myself in my "meant for each other" fantasy. Coming back to reality was a choice that began with awareness. With noticing my racing heartbeat, dreamy energy, and disconnect from others because of my focus on her. I wanted to talk and talk about this woman, but didn't. I would not make my life about something that was not happening. At the same time, there were possibilities, and I would remain open.

Of course, every time I had contact with her, the fantasy reasserted itself. Mindfulness always grounded me. It was not so different than my daily meditation practice: sitting with the breath and coming back to the present moment when distracted by thoughts and feelings. Meditating was a choice. Every time I brought my attention back to my breath was a choice. And this practice had cultivated the ability to come back to reality -- that present moment -- throughout my life.

It's so easy to be unaware of what we cultivate. Where do you go when you screw up at work, hurt someone's feelings, or speak in public? How do you talk to yourself? Do you become intensely self-critical? Do you blame someone else? Do you judge yourself and others without mercy?

Imagine noticing that you are caught in judgment, criticism or blame and choosing to direct your attention to another aspect of your experience. The skills of awareness and focusing-at-will can serve you when you are caught in this kind of suffering. They grow through meditation and help you see what you cultivate

Does this mean your tendency to blame yourself or criticize others will cease forever? I doubt it. But you will probably notice where you go much sooner, maybe even immediately, and travel to a different territory. And in my experience that territory includes compassion.

Is this the end of suffering? I think it is, in a way. There is still pain, sadness and related feelings at times, and I attend to these emotions. But I notice when suffering is caused by criticism or judgment and move through that experience quickly, often seamlessly.

What about that woman? She became involved with someone else. I needed to deal with some disappointment. And what is unfolding is a sweet and supportive friendship. It feels right, and I am grateful.

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