



Finding Joy in Suffering

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Being human, we are all subject to suffering. We experience suffering due to pain—both its physical manifestation and its associated mental anguish. We experience suffering simply because we exist in a conditioned world with all its imperfections, and we experience suffering from our resistance to change. Given that suffering is such a natural state of existence, the idea of finding joy in it may seem counter-intuitive.

In reality, from the moment we are born until we die, all beings continuously search for happiness and joy against the backdrop of this suffering. We search and search to find a way to end the suffering and gain happiness and joy. We believe that if we find that “right relationship” our suffering will end (or greatly diminish), because we will not have to go it alone. We believe that if we could land that good job our suffering would end (or greatly diminish), because we would finally have financial security. We strive to have perfect lives, good kids, nice cars, big houses, and all the comforts that come with success.

But alas, this kind of happiness is illusive and short-lived. Instead of ending suffering, it tends to bring more stress to an already stressful life. The reason is simple: all of these traditional tools are equally subject to pain, imperfections, and change; they are just as conditional as the world we live in. If we rely on conditional things to bring happiness and joy, we are subject to the inherent limitations of their conditions.

The Buddha suggested that we take a different route—a Noble Search for happiness and joy. A Noble Search requires that we begin to take an interest in the nature of our suffering rather than looking for a way out of it or a way to end it. To do this, we need to let go of the idea that “something is a problem.” The word “problem” denotes that something is wrong, needs to be fixed or corrected, and that there exist something better than what is in front of us.

For a long time, I tried to use my meditation practice as a way of healing myself from all my troubles. I described my efforts as “sitting with” or “being with” my fear, sadness, anger, or any the other nasty emotion I didn’t like. I mistakenly believed that meditation would take me to a state of being where such emotions no longer existed or at least no longer affected me. Of course whenever I felt these emotions (as I continuously did), I believed I was a failure at meditation, just like I failed at everything else.

My Noble Search began, however, while spending an evening at home watching the movie “The Matrix” with my two sons. There is a moment when the main character, Neo, sees a spoon bending in front of a little boy. Neo then tries to use his mind to bend the spoon, but nothing happens. The boy tells Neo *not* to try to bend the spoon, because that would be impossible, but to realize the truth—that there is no spoon. “Then you will see that it is not the spoon that bends: it is only yourself.”

Upon hearing this, I had a flash of understanding. I realized that I was trying to use my meditation practice to change my reality just as Neo was trying to use his mind to bend a spoon—neither of which was possible. What if there was no problem, just as there was no spoon? What if my problems were all a

matter of perception? I paused the movie and, in a state of euphoria, tried to explain this insight to my sons. They were not impressed.

I was completely changed. I became increasingly curious about anything I considered a problem. I wanted to know why I thought some situations were problems and some were not, what made something a problem, whether there was a way to see the situation for what it was without seeing it as a problem, etc. The more I inquired into these unpleasant, uncomfortable, and uneasy experiences, the less difficulty I had with them. In fact, I found myself having the capacity to face extremely difficult situations with greater equanimity and peace. I experienced life with a greater sense of ease. It had nothing to do with my life getting easier or better. I had no added money, no new-found love. No promotion or other good fortune had come my way. Nothing had changed in my life except my decision to stop seeing reality as a problem.

The Noble Search begins when we are willing to let ourselves see the dangers and limitations inherent in our traditional tools for happiness and joy. So long as we believe we have to “be happy,” we cannot be “unhappy,” and whenever we are “unhappy” we have to get “happy” again. This can become a vicious cycle, mainly because it is impossible and unrealistic to always “be happy.” We begin to depend upon our traditional tools to make us happy, and they do make us happy to a certain extent. I definitely feel good when I have more money, more recognition, more fun times, etc. Difficulties arise, however, when I become attached to these traditional tools for happiness, or when I take the easier path and just try to “play” my difficulties away. By letting go of the need to “be happy,” you can open yourself to “just be” with whatever is arising in the moment. If you find yourself in a moment of unpleasantness—or what we call unhappiness—you can see it for what it is: a moment in time, an opportunity for awakening, a path to liberation.

Starting out on a Noble Search is not an easy path at first, certainly not as easy as using our traditional tools. Over time, however, this Noble Search for joy within suffering will bring with it a greater sense of harmony, balance, and inner strength—and, above all, unconditional joy. This joy is not something you acquire. It is an experience that arises within the difficult. It is not subject to the limitations of our conditioned world, nor is it something you can learn how to make happen. It is a natural arising aspect of being still with whatever is present, and it is available to all who are willing to search for it.

Finally, I leave with this song recently shared to a group of practitioners by Sr. Jewel (Chau Nghiem in Vietnamese), a nun in the Thiet Nhat Hanh tradition. It came from practitioners during the Katrina disaster:

I'm gonna let life move me
I'm gonna let life stir me deep
I'm gonna let life wake me
From an ancient sleep

I'm gonna laugh all my laughter
I'm gonna cry all my tears
I'm gonna love the rain as deeply as I love the sun when it clears.