

Dharmette: Suffering Is More Complex

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on April 30, 2014

I would like to offer you a little wisdom statement that may not be universally true, but I think it is broadly true. It is a useful statement to carry in your back pocket to reflect upon. That is: "Suffering is always more complicated than freedom. Suffering is always more complicated than peace."

What I mean by this is that it takes extra effort on our part to suffer. If you are suffering in the way Buddhism understands suffering, it means that we have some kind of response or reaction – desires, wishes, aversions – some kind of reactivity to our experience in life. Without that reactivity, that involvement, then suffering wouldn't be there. It is always there because of causes and conditions. Certain things have to come together for us to suffer. Suffering is not a simple, inherent part of life. It's not that just because you are born a human being, you will suffer. Or that you are born with this shiny, perfectly round pearl of suffering that resides in your heart, and that will survive you! You will be cremated and this little pearl relic of suffering will continue. No, suffering doesn't have an inherent existence. Suffering comes together because of certain conditions.

The primary condition you can do something about is how we get involved in our suffering – how we react, how we get afraid, how we get tangled up in what is going on. That entanglement with things is the complication.

Freedom is the disentanglement. Freedom is simplifying, being simple. For example, your car gets bashed up in an accident on a rainy day because you hit a telephone pole. No one hit you; you hit the pole, and that's embarrassing. Everywhere you go, you are in this dented up car, and your friends must wonder if you should even be driving. You start to take long roads to avoid your friends. You park far from their homes so they don't see your car. If they do see it, you feel so much shame. That is the complicated world of suffering. To let go of that is just to have a dented car. You backed into a telephone pole. That's all. Friends can think what they wish. You don't have to hide it. Just keep it simple.

Or, you are meditating and your meditation is not working. If you are suffering because of that, chances are you have complicated it. A common complication people have is that they think they are going to get concentrated and that meditation is going to save them, and that they will reach a certain level of attainment; they will be a good person in the community. But then they don't get concentrated! Then they are frustrated because of this need about what is supposed to happen. So it's a complicated relationship we have with meditation and what it is going to do in our life. Let go of that. Then meditate. It's simple. You sit; you take one or two breaths, and the mind wanders away. Come back, and do it again. It is very simple. You don't have to make a big complicated story. Just be simple. There is a lot of freedom there. Suffering is always complicated, and freedom is simple. You might look at this and consider it.

The great Indian teacher Munindra-ji is famous for his slogan: "If it's not simple, it's not mindfulness." We are not talking about accepting your life as it is so that you can suffer better in a simpler way. You can progress and become freer, but often it's in a different way. A lot has to do with letting go. Letting go of complexity and complications. Letting go of the extra stuff we add onto our lives. Letting go of the second arrows we add. Unfortunate things happen to people. And we add second arrows, making it more complicated than it needs to be. The bad things that happen are not necessarily the suffering; suffering is the second arrow.

Suffering is something we can do something about. The primary thing is to be simple. There is something really wonderful about simplicity. The characteristics of simplicity are more peace, more ease, just being here.

The simpler we get, the less there is that has to happen. The drive that something must happen belongs to that world of complexity. The idea that nothing needs to happen is very intimidating to some people: "It can't be that simple. It's not enough just to be. Of course something has to happen." Look into that. What complexity are you buying into? What do you think has to happen?

How simple can you be? Maybe there are situations where you can't be simple, like doing your taxes for example. I bet there are lots of opportunities in your lives for greater simplicity – to appreciate it, to enjoy it, just to be!

You might carry this slogan with you for the week: "Suffering is complicated; freedom is simple." See what it is like to be simple in the situation you are in. And if you are simple – what would that mean? Is there freedom to be found in that simplicity?

Thank you.