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# Suffering Made Sufferable: Śāntideva, Dzongkaba, and Modern Therapeutic Approaches to Suffering's Silver Lining

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# Suffering Made Sufferable: Śāntideva, Dzongkaba, and Modern Therapeutic Approaches to Suffering’s Silver Lining<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Suffering’s positive side was elucidated beautifully by the eighth century Mahāyāna poet Śāntideva in his *Bodhicāryavatāra*. Dzongkaba Losang Drakpa, the founder of what came to be known as the Gelukba (*dge lugs pa*) order of Tibetan Buddhism, used Śāntideva’s text as his main source in the chapter on patience in his masterwork, *Lam rim Chenmo*. In this article I attempt to explicate Śāntideva’s thought by way of the commentary of Dzongkaba. I then consider it in the context of what Ariel Glucklich has called “Sacred Pain”—the myriad ways in which religious people have found meaning in pain. I will conclude with some observations about ways in which some Buddhist-inspired or -influenced therapeutic movements such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and Positive Psychology are helping contemporary people to reconcile them-

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selves to pain or to discover that it may have positive value.

It is the First Noble Truth: suffering is the problem, the enemy. Life should be joy, not anguish.

Yet on the path to the end of suffering, enemies can be friends. In fact, without suffering, there is no path because there is no motivation. The *devas* (and their human emulators who are sick with “influenza”) cannot rouse themselves to lifestyle changes and self-analysis because they lack the simple discomforts that stir most of us. And without suffering, there is no character development. As the Dalai Lama likes to say, only your enemy can teach you patience.

The positive side of suffering is elucidated beautifully by the eighth-century Mahāyāna poet Śāntideva, whose *Bodhicāryavatāra* (Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds) is especially loved in the Tibetan tradition. Śāntideva composed it at the great monastery of Nālandā, where he is said to have recited it to a great assembly of monks. Its transcendent power was such that near its conclusion he floated off his teaching seat and disappeared into the sky, where his voice could still be heard as he intoned the book’s last chapter and dedication.

Śāntideva’s praise of suffering appears principally in his chapter on the perfection (*pāramitā*) of patience or forbearance (*kṣānti*), verses 12 to 21:

Happiness is scarce. Suffering persists with no effort; but only through suffering is there escape. Therefore, mind, be strong!

In Karṇāta the devotees of Durgā willingly endure to no purpose the pain of burns, cuts, and worse. Why then am I a coward when my goal is liberation?

There is nothing which remains difficult if it is practiced. So, through practice with minor discomforts, even major discomfort becomes bearable.

The irritation of bugs, gnats, and mosquitoes, of hunger and thirst, and suffering such as an enormous itch: why do you not see them as insignificant?

Cold, heat, rain and wind, journeying and sickness, imprisonment and beatings: one should not be too squeamish about them. Otherwise the distress becomes worse.

Their own blood for some is valor's boon;  
While others' for others produces a swoon.

This comes from the bravery or cowardice of the mind. Therefore one should become invincible to suffering and overpower discomfort.

Not even in suffering should a wise person allow his serene confidence of mind to be disturbed, for the battle is with the defilements, and in warfare pain is easily won.

Those who conquer the enemy taking the blows of their adversary on the chest, they are the triumphant heroes, while the rest kill what is already dead.

The virtue of suffering has no rival, since, from the shock it causes, intoxication falls away and there arises compas-

sion for those in cyclic existence, fear of evil, and a longing for the Conqueror.<sup>3</sup> (51)

According to Śāntideva, these, then, are the hidden blessings of suffering:

- (1) It encourages us to escape, that is, to renounce saṃsāra;
- (2) It strengthens us against greater difficulties to come;
- (3) It prevents the additional suffering of worry and anxiety that normally follows pain;
- (4) It removes intoxication or arrogance;
- (5) It enables us to develop compassion;
- (6) It helps us to avoid evil;
- (7) It helps us to rejoice in virtue or to aspire to Buddhahood.

Dzongkaba Losang Drakpa<sup>4</sup> (*tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa*, 1357–1419), the founder of what came to be known as the Gelukba (*dge lugs pa*) order of Tibetan Buddhism, used Śāntideva’s text as his main source in the chapter on patience in his masterwork, *Lam rim Chenmo (The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path)*. In this essay I will attempt to explicate Śāntideva’s thought by way of the commentary of Dzongkaba; I will then

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<sup>3</sup> This translation is from the Sanskrit, which is close to the Tibetan (e.g., verse 21 in the Tibetan ends with “longing for virtue” rather than “longing for the Conqueror”). I have changed the spelling to American standard English.

<sup>4</sup> I prefer to render Dzongkaba’s name, like that of other Tibetans, in a pronounceable form rather than in transliteration, primarily because I don’t think that it will facilitate scholarly exchange to subject non-Tibetanists to consonant-cluster nightmares such as ‘Jams dbyang bzhad pa (Jamyang Shayba). However, because I am citing the recently published translation of *Lam rim Chenmo* (for which I translated the chapters on ethical discipline and patience) in which the editors chose to use the transliterated form “Tsong-kha-pa,” readers of this article should look for that form in my references.

consider it in the context of what Ariel Glucklich has called “Sacred Pain”—the myriad ways in which religious people have found meaning in pain. I will conclude with some observations about ways in which some Buddhist-inspired or -influenced therapeutic movements are helping contemporary people to reconcile themselves to pain or to discover that it may have positive value.

### **Bringing Suffering onto the Path**

Dzongkaba begins his exposition on “accepting suffering” with Śāntideva’s observation that whereas the causes of happiness occur only occasionally, the causes of suffering are utterly dependable.<sup>5</sup> This is as true on the spiritual path as it is in other arenas of life, and therefore, he says, “you absolutely must know how to bring it into the path” (172); otherwise suffering would make us hostile or discouraged. Buddhists do not seek suffering—the Buddha’s way was not ascetic—but the discipline of spiritual practice, particularly if pursued within a monastic lifestyle, will involve difficulties in addition to those that arise in the course of any life, and these must be integrated with the path rather than seen as obstacles upon it.

There is an apparent paradox involved in bringing suffering onto the path, for it is “used up” while it works. It is brought to the path when we resign ourselves to it by reflecting that it is an inevitable product of

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<sup>5</sup> Dzongkaba also gives an exhaustive list of eight types of suffering, which requires too much space to be included in this chapter. They include having poor quality in one’s basic necessities; the nine worldly concerns (of loss, blame, fame, and so on); sufferings associated with postures; suffering associated with seven ways of practicing the teachings; seven types of suffering associated with begging; fatigue; suffering associated with eleven ways of acting for the welfare of others; and suffering associated with the tasks of daily life, depending on one’s station (177–78).

intentional actions or when we contemplate its spiritual value. But then pain diminishes because worry about it, which always intensifies it, is correspondingly reduced. The path also diverts us from committing acts that will lead to suffering. Finally, because the path leads to wisdom, it will destroy suffering's root causes. Suffering can be brought to the path, but the path will eat it up.

Dzongkaba recommends three strategies to develop our capacity to accept or endure suffering. The first is simply not to consider what we experience as unpleasant, that is, not to identify our experience as suffering. Citing the tenth verse of Śāntideva's patience chapter (and sounding more than a little like the "Serenity Prayer"<sup>6</sup> made famous by Alcoholics Anonymous) he says:

If you can remedy a situation wherein suffering occurs, you do not need to feel that it is unpleasant. If you cannot remedy it, it is not helpful to find it unpleasant, so there is not need for, or effectiveness to, your displeasure; there is even a disadvantage. If you are very impatient, a slight suffering is extremely difficult to bear, whereas if you minimize your impatience, you can endure great suffering. (173)

Dzongkaba gives us motherly advice: as much as we can, we ought to refrain from complaining about anything we can fix and be wary of exaggerating the rest.

The second strategy is to contemplate the many benefits that might come from experiencing suffering (as they have been delineated

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<sup>6</sup> "God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other." It is from a sermon delivered in the 1930s by Reinhold Niebuhr but is best known as the confession of Alcoholics Anonymous.



by Śāntideva). First, suffering has the “good quality of spurring you on to liberation (174).” We should reflect that we already have the karmic potentials to suffer immeasurably in this and countless future lives. Because the only way to avoid that tremendous suffering is to become liberated from saṃsāra, any lesser suffering that serves the goal of liberation is a favorable trade-off. Indeed, it would be “appropriate that I accept suffering a trillion times more than before,” that is, in past lives, when we endured pain merely for the sake of “trifling desires and minor needs (174).” We toiled in the fields and in business for the sake of wealth, suffered and died in warfare for the sake of power or honor, and endured pointless ascetic practices such as being impaled on prongs and sitting in the midst of fires for what we thought was spiritual merit. Why not now endure the small deprivations and insults of a simple life that empowers our spiritual practices, which in turn really do lead to liberation? Yes, we will suffer; but we might, Dzongkaba says, find that we are like a man who thinks he is going to be executed but instead loses only his hand and thinks himself fortunate (174).

Second, suffering dispels arrogance. It reminds us that we are mere human beings and that we are not better than others: “it reduces your sense of superiority (174).” It makes us humble. This is a very important benefit for the Buddhist practitioner. Suffering of any kind is subversive to the house of ego, calling into question the mental or physical basis of the conception of self, highlighting its transiency and mutability. Third, suffering turns us away from nonvirtue. Once we experience the painful effects of previous or current nonvirtuous actions, we become averse to them. Fourth, suffering induces us to seek virtue. When we are in pain, we naturally wish we were happy, and our minds turn toward the way of life that would bring us present and future happiness. Finally, suffering enables us to become more compassionate. We aren’t really able to comprehend and enter into the suffering of others until we have experienced suffering ourselves. In sum, accepting suffer-

ing can help in important areas of spiritual practice: it can help to develop the spirit of renunciation, cultivate virtue, and generate compassion.

The third strategy is to gradually accommodate to pain, taking on greater and greater levels of it. Here Dzongkaba cites Śāntideva's other great work on morals, the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* (Compendium of Trainings), which says, "Once you have first grown used to small sufferings, you will become accustomed to the difficult and the very difficult (176)." He cites Śāntideva's example of a warrior who, being slightly wounded and seeing his own blood, is emboldened and fights more fiercely. Once we learn that pain or deprivation is not as bad as we feared or that we have greater resources to bear it than we anticipated, we are girded to take on additional challenges. This is more or less the sentiment expressed famously by Nietzsche: "What does not kill me, makes me stronger."<sup>7</sup>

### Finding Meaning in Suffering

As Śāntideva and Dzongkaba argue, pain need not be disintegrative. It need not entail anxiety and worry. It need not threaten chaos against the otherwise comforting regularity of life. It need not be viewed as a medical problem or an unwelcome guest. On the contrary, it can be deeply meaningful, even helpful, especially in a religious context. As Ariel Glucklich writes:

Pain is not a simple matter: There is an enormous difference between the unwanted pain of a cancer patient or victim of a car crash, and the voluntary and modulated self-hurting of a religious practitioner. Religious pain produces states of consciousness, and cognitive-emotional

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<sup>7</sup> In *Twilight of the Idols*. It has also been the motto of G. Gordon Liddy, who masterminded the Watergate break-in of 1972, and contemporary rapper Kanye West.

changes, that affect the identity of the individual subject and her sense of belonging to a larger community or to a more fundamental state of being. (6)

Pain and suffering are complex matters. The types of pain, somatic and emotional, to which almost all of us are subjected—the cutting blade, the cutting insult, the broken bone, the broken heart—are experienced in widely varying ways according to our constitutions and contexts. Glucklich suggests that the experience of pain would be very different for two men each of whom lost part of a hand, one suddenly and unexpectedly as the result of a car accident, the other in a combat situation in which comrades were being killed and wounded all around. For the accident victim, the maiming is an utter loss, but for the soldier, the wound might be a relief, a relatively small price to pay to be rescued from the killing field (88). It might even be different for people in the same circumstances.

In a religious context, pain can be replete with meaning and purpose: it can be integrative and supportive of the self instead of a threat to it. In *Sacred Pain: Hurting the Body for the Sake of the Soul*, Glucklich surveys the landscape of religion and pain and distinguishes seven models that have been used to interpret pain. Let us consider each of them briefly and then discuss why Śāntideva and his commentators have used particular ones.

*The judicial model.* Pain may be retribution, a deserved consequence. It may be punishment administered by a higher being for sins of commission or omission, or it may be the consequence of impersonal forces, such as karma. It may be what is required to expunge debts. Or it may be apparently unwarranted but within the rights of the higher being (as in the case of the biblical Job).

*The medical model.* Pain is a prophylactic. It protects us against greater pains (for example, it substitutes for eternal punishment). Or, pain cures. Like an antibiotic, it destroys the disease of sin. Often it does both simultaneously.

*The military model.* Pain is simply our enemy, and we may call upon higher powers to help us defeat it. But at least as often, pain is not the enemy but the weapon we use against our real enemy, the flesh, which imprisons our souls.

*The athletic model.* Pain makes us tougher, stronger, and warier; it prepares us for greater battles. Or, the path of asceticism and martyrdom is likened to athletic training and contest.

*The magical model.* Pain transforms us. We become pure, or acquire supernormal powers, or complete the passage from one stage of being to another. In India, the ascetic performs *tapas* (acts of asceticism, literally “heat”) to clear karma or to build spiritual power or both.

*The psychotropic/ecstatic model.* Certain kinds of pain can be analgesic, inducing trance states, euphoria, or altered states of consciousness, giving rise to spontaneous visions.

*The shared model.* Pain bonds people. It may bring together those who suffer similarly. It may unite a family. It may even bring a mob and its sacrificial victim into intimacy.

Śāntideva employs many of these models in the short space of the ten verses we have cited. The *judicial model* is obvious: suffering is the wages of (nonvirtuous) action. We can more easily accept our lot if we know that it is not arbitrary and unfair or even the result of running afoul of some selfish god but rather is the result of certain rules. One rule is that we cannot experience the ripened karma of someone else; another

er is that the fruition of karma is not inevitable but often depends upon our decisions, which establish the conditions in which the ripening can occur. In keeping with this model, suffering encourages us to “stay out of jail”—to avoid unfortunate rebirth.

Śāntideva also uses the *medical model*. The suffering associated with spiritual practice (for example, the homelessness, poor food and clothing, and vulnerability of the prototypical monastic) can inoculate against poor rebirth. If we become even stream-winners (*srotāpanna*), the first of the four degrees of enlightenment, we are protected against poor rebirth and will not be hindered by handicaps that would make life difficult and spiritual practice impossible. On the other hand, suffering does not seem to constitute a “cure,” although it is true that karma once discharged cannot trouble us again in this or future lives.

The *military model* fits in some ways, not others. To an extent it does seem fair to characterize suffering as our “enemy”; it is precisely that from which the Buddha promised his dharma would save us. But it is rare to see suffering characterized as the foe. Rather, that designation belongs to the afflictions (of desire, hatred, ignorance, and so forth). Śāntideva calls for bravery in the “battle” with the afflictions (verse 19). On the other hand, the military model also contains the image of “weapon,” and suffering is the foe of arrogance. It humbles the poseur and makes the mighty fall. It can be, as Jung said, a “sacramental offering of ego” which also amounts to a mastery of ego. (88)

Śāntideva obviously endorses the *athletic model*. By training, we can gradually be acclimated to ever higher levels of pain. To be cyclist Lance Armstrong or swimmer Michael Phelps (or any of the thousands of gifted athletes who competed against them) is to have had a career of high-level pain management on a daily basis: “No pain, no gain.” Sometimes great athletes are celebrated precisely for their ability to perform through their pain. Śāntideva thinks: “There is nothing which remains

difficult if it is practiced. So, through practice with minor discomforts, even major discomfort becomes bearable” (verse 14).

The *magical model* is problematic for Buddhism. Does suffering transform us? Purify us? Buddhists resist openly affirming this. The Buddha’s style is a middle between the extremes of hedonism and asceticism. The deprivations and struggles that Śāntideva endorses are not the acts of Durgā worshippers, who “willingly endure to no purpose the pain of burns, cuts, and worse” (verse 13); they are merely the conditions of life lived simply. On the other hand, Buddhist literature is full of examples of saints who endured tremendous suffering that seems clearly to result in magical purification. Perhaps the ordeals of Nāropā during his twelve tortuous years with Tilopa can be characterized as “arrogance-busters” rather than purifiers, but what of the ordeals of Milarepa? His teacher Marpa makes it very clear that they were meant to purify Milarepa of his evil karma. The magical model may also involve the acquisition of supernatural powers. There does not appear to be a direct connection between this and the forbearance of pain. The pain is brought to the path, but the supernatural powers that come to the Buddhist yogi no less than to his Hindu counterpart are the result of mental transformation rather than mortification of the body.

The *psychotropic or ecstatic model* also seems alien to Buddhism. Is suffering welcomed because it leads to an altered state of consciousness? If so, would not that again be a tilt toward the extreme of asceticism? It is difficult to see how suffering could be justified for the sake of obtaining an ecstatic vision. But what of Asaṅga, whose vision of the Buddha Maitreya followed directly upon an act of self-mutilation? His many years of meditation had borne no such fruit but only his incredible act of kindness: wanting to help a sick and wounded dog but not wanting to kill the maggots in the wound, he cut a strip of his own flesh for them to eat and then prepared to transfer them from the wound to the strip of flesh

with his tongue. Then the dog transformed into Maitreya and brought Asaṅga to the Tuṣita heaven where he received years of teachings. Was Asaṅga's experience an ecstatic vision born of suffering?

Finally, the *shared model* is particularly important, for it is suffering that truly enables compassion (literally "suffering-with") for others. We cannot truly know what troubles someone else without experiencing it ourselves. The most effective comforters are usually those who have themselves suffered similarly. Uninformed compassion runs the risk of being what the late Trungpa Rinpoche so memorably and frequently called "idiot compassion," well meaning but quite possibly counterproductive.

Thus Śāntideva makes his case for the acceptance of suffering by using many of the metaphors or models that religious people have employed across traditions. He gives the most space to what Glucklich calls the "athletic model"—that we will be able to bear greater suffering if we train ourselves to endure small pains and inconveniences. Suffering is inevitable, but its effect on us can be minimized through conditioning; this is obviously helpful in all areas of life, not least in spiritual practice. But the "judicial" model—that we are, after all, only experiencing what we deserve, and if we would like to be free of suffering in the future, we had better change our ways—is also important, as is, of course, the "shared" model because the development of compassion is essential to the bodhisattva.

In this survey of models of meaningful pain, we have not included an aspect of Śāntideva's thought particularly emphasized by Dzongkaba and which is important to the discussion which follows: one ought to learn to accept suffering because anxiety, denial, and worry are all factors that intensify it. Indeed, it is the presence or absence of these factors that leads Bhante H. Gunaratana to distinguish "pain" from "suffering." Pain, he writes, is inevitable, but suffering is not; pain becomes suf-

fering when it is anticipated anxiously and followed by worry (99). Dzongkaba says:

For the time being, you cannot dispel the sufferings definitely produced by the power of former karma and immediate conditions. You must accept them when they arise because if you do not do this, in addition to the basic suffering, you have the suffering of worry that is produced by your own thoughts, and then the suffering becomes very difficult for you to bear. (172-173)

### **Learning How to Make Pain Sufferable**

Jon Kabat-Zinn is professor emeritus of medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical School and founder of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society. A major part of his work has been with people who suffer from chronic pain. In a typical eight-week course, he teaches such patients the oldest Buddhist method for dealing with pain—mindfulness—along with yoga and commonsense advice for lifestyle changes. In their early meditation training, patients are guided through a progressive body scan, focusing on the sensations they find in different parts of the body; later, they participate in sitting meditation, initially focusing on the breath but switching their attention to sensations, thoughts, and feelings that arise over time, classic *vipassanā* meditation of the Therāvada tradition. Upon the completion of the program, the typical student judged his or her pain to be about 30 percent less problematic and reported an average 55 percent drop in negative mental states, resulting in more activity, a greater appreciation for life, and less use of pain-killing medication (288-289).

Like Gunaratana, Kabat-Zinn asserts that there is no necessary correlation between pain and suffering. Pain is not just a bodily experi-



ence, for although nothing can be done to prevent sensory impulses from traveling up the nerves to the brain, they must there be interpreted as pain, and “there are many well-known pathways within the brain and the central nervous system by which higher cognitive and emotional functions can modify the perception of pain (290).” The use of mindfulness meditation and the adoption of an attitude of patient acceptance of pain are two such higher functions.

We recall that the first of Dzongkaba’s strategies (based, of course, on Śāntideva) for dealing with pain was to decline to regard it as “unpleasant,” particularly if nothing can be done to remedy it. Similarly, Kabat-Zinn advises his students to regard their sensations nonjudgmentally, without necessarily labeling them as “pain.” Sensations arise—pressures, tingling, and so forth—but in themselves they are not “pain.” Similarly, a host of thoughts and feelings may arise concurrently—“I can’t take this anymore”; “Will this ever stop?”; “This is ruining my life”—but in themselves they are not “pain (290).” This is not a strategy of denial but of understanding the dependent-arising of pain. Pain does not exist inherently but only in relation to a mind that designates it as such. The patients do not ignore or distract themselves from the sensations and the thoughts and feelings that arise in dependence on them but rather place their attention there. Patients are taught to invite the sensations and so forth into the field of awareness and then intentionally let go of them. Kabat-Zinn calls this a state of “choiceless awareness,” a state of stillness in which it may be possible to realize that “I am not my body” and therefore “I am not my pain (298).” Pain ceases to be an existential crisis in the cool luminescence of vipassana, where it is revealed as sensation, not feeling, not idea, and not a property of “me.”

The second of Dzongkaba’s strategies was to contemplate the benefits of suffering. This too has a place in Kabat-Zinn’s therapeutic approach to pain. He says, “Pain is a very effective teacher”; it teaches us

about the world, about our bodies, and about ourselves (285). The first of the benefits is that we are “spurred on to liberation.” Kabat-Zinn’s patients were not Buddhists and were unlikely to have responded to the prospect of release from *saṃsāra*, but they still understood that they were in need of a kind of liberation. Kabat-Zinn emphasizes that pain is the body (or mind) trying to tell us something important. Usually it is that we are not living well: we eat or drink too much, we abuse intoxicants, we are too anxious about our work, our social status, or our roles. Pain reveals that our habitual ways of acting and thinking are toxic and pushes us to renounce them. The other benefits identified by Śāntideva also accrue: pain humbles us, making us less arrogant; it makes us recognize our limits; it induces us to shun nonvirtue and seek virtue in the sense that it encourages lifestyle changes and rewards mindfulness; and it facilitates the development of compassion for others who suffer similarly.

The third of Dzongkaba’s strategies was to gradually accommodate to pain. Developing higher tolerance for pain is also one of the goals of Kabat-Zinn’s practice. Students “put out the welcome mat” for pain (295). They give their full attention to pain and ask, “How bad is it right now, in this very moment?” He contends that for most people, most of the time, the answer is that it is tolerable; the key is to not indulge in anticipation that the pain will become worse but rather to stay in the present moment (295). A similar approach is used to confront emotional suffering. Instead of distracting oneself from the pain of grief, anxiety, guilt, and so forth, one “puts out the welcome mat” for them. This makes it possible to see more clearly into the nature of the emotional pain. For instance, one might understand how much of it comes from not accepting what has occurred in the past (322). One can build from that into greater emotional stability and strength.

### **Learning How to Be an Optimist**

In the “positive psychology” movement, therapy focuses not on the amelioration of negative physical and emotional states but on the development of their positive counterparts. Nevertheless, much of its philosophy and methodology is relevant to a discussion of how the acceptance of suffering might have positive outcomes. Positive psychology’s best-known advocate is Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania, whose *Learned Optimism* and *Authentic Happiness* have been best-selling and influential works.

Seligman began his work with a study of “learned helplessness”—what happens to creatures who are placed in situations of suffering against which they are helpless. He hypothesized that eventually all of his subjects would lapse into depression and lethargy, but found that about a third of them never gave up (28). He became interested in whether people might be trained to be more optimistic and thereby increase their ability to endure suffering and even to find positive value in it.

Seligman teaches his patients different strategies for the conversion of pain depending on whether the events are placed in the past, present, or future. Regarding the pain that originated in the past, for example, hurtful incidents due to which we may feel guilt, shame, or anger, he sounds like Dzongkaba: if it is not possible to remedy a situation, there is no point in dwelling upon it; if it can be remedied, there is no need to regard it as unpleasant. Two simple but effective remedies are discussed: gratitude and forgiveness. Expressing gratitude to those who have helped us, even if they are no longer alive, is generally uplifting and provides added counterweight to the memories of negative events (70). Expressing forgiveness to those who have hurt or disappointed us removes lingering resentment and regret (75). Practicing forgiveness has the additional benefit of helping us to develop compassion. Forgiveness

is most effective if it is based on empathy and compassion. First, we attempt to understand events from the perspective of the perpetrator of the hurt, and then we attempt to understand the pain of guilt that this person might have felt or might still be feeling and to see that our forgiveness might be healing for that person as well as ourselves.

Regarding the future, Seligman notes that we often intensify our suffering and undermine our happiness by our habitual attitudes of pessimism and anxiety. We can make our situations bearable first of all by “converting the permanent to the temporary.” Pessimists tend to see the causes of negative events as structural or permanent, using terms such as “always” or “never” (“I am always overlooked”), whereas optimists use qualifying terms such as “sometimes” or “lately” (88). We can analyze our responses to present or anticipated difficulties to ascertain whether we tend to overestimate the permanence of their causes and make the necessary mental conversion. Similarly, we can “convert the universal to the specific” by attributing the causes of pain and failure not to large forces over which we have no control but rather to specific causes that have limits (90-91). For example, we might find upon analysis that we are not mistreated by all authority figures but only certain ones, and we need not assume that our next interaction with an authority figure will be negative. Both strategies are aimed at making bearable whatever difficult situations we face because the suffering is minimized in its temporal and spatial scope, which in turn reduces the anxiety and worry that intensify our experience of it. In other words, they take the same approach as the third of Dzongkaba’s strategies; we can endure more challenges if we find ways to accommodate ourselves to those we already face. “Learned optimism” is a way to do this.

From the two briefly examined examples of modern therapeutic approaches to the experience of pain, we see that Śāntideva and Dzongkaba, writing in the eighth and fourteenth centuries respectively, have

advice that is relevant to the twenty-first century. In brief, if we hope to bear our difficulties and even find meaning in them, we must first of all not see any more of our experience than is necessary as unpleasant, and we should guard against exaggerating the extent of the rest. Second, we should contemplate how our pain might actually help us to become better people who are less concerned with trivia and with our personal projects and who are more understanding of others. Finally, we should examine the capacity of painful experience to make us stronger and more stable.

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