

## Struggles: to Have, to Hold, to Let Go

Everyone struggles. This simple statement is another way of saying what the Buddha taught: Suffering exists. If there is a way to overcome suffering, which is the central question that Buddhism addresses, then there should also be a way to give up struggling. To do this, we have to look at how and why we struggle, whether our struggles are worth engaging in, and if not, how to let go of them.

Here is a short list of some of the most common human struggles:

- 1) The struggle to be healthy, or regain health once it is lost.
- 2) The struggle to feel comfortable and secure in ones environment.
- 3) The struggle to get more money and, by extension, wealth.
- 4) The struggle to be loved and cared for by others.
- 5) The struggle to be well known or famous.

Buddhism as a religion does not off-handedly dismiss any one of the above struggles as inherently wrong, but it does compel us to look carefully at them, and look at what we actually experience as a direct result of engaging in any particular struggle. In the case of health, the first one, this is a normal human urge. Presumably, we all need this urge since if we did not have it, we might just let our health deteriorate too easily. Some people, of course, do exactly that; on the other end of the spectrum, there are those who are fanatical about health, are always trying the latest health products, vitamins, wrinkle creams, health foods, and so on—it is a multi-billion dollar business in America. But there is a *Middle Way* with regard to health: to maintain it by refraining from doing things that damage it, to eat not too much or too little, and not to obsess about getting sick or any of the hundred other minor ailments in life.

One of my own struggles at one time was with chronic illness: fatigue and depression. My basic health was intact, but I had little energy and I was always depressed—it was so normal that I didn't even realize it was depression. The road out of this condition was long and certainly not straight, but it began with a decision to fully accept what was going on; prior to that I had fought against it. And this is what tends to make any one of life's challenges a real *struggle*—fighting it. Acceptance turns things around, and usually for the first time, makes it possible to begin to see solutions. Looking back I can see that I needed to be able to listen to other's advice and opinions about what was wrong with me, and not assume that I already knew all there was to know. And patience was also an extremely important part of the process; so long as I wanted a quick solution, that very desire prolonged the actual resolution of my health problems. So it became a matter of learning to train with my condition, and doing the best I could within it. Once I began to make progress back to full health, my confidence that I could actually get over it began to slowly increase.

The struggle to feel comfortable and secure has a physical component, which is an outgrowth maintaining health. Once again, a normal human urge. But do we need luxury? Do we need 3,000 square foot houses for two, three or four people? I don't think so. Next we need to look at the underlying psychological urge for comfort. This is a question often addressed by people writing on Buddhist themes; unless you challenge your inherent desire to be comfortable, you cannot really expose your comfortable little niche to training. You cannot really think in terms of having a self that needs to be looked at, trained and converted. And you cannot really address whether it would be in your best interests to give up some of life's many little distractions—the television, the coffee shop, the internet, alcohol, tobacco and firearms to name a few.

Most people live in a comfortable fog with regard to their own suffering. A basic human tendency is to arrange our lives in such a way that we do not have to really face much discomfort or confront the need to, as my Master used to say, “do something about yourself”, and this is what I mean by speaking of “a comfortable little niche.” Sometimes life itself does a sufficient job of prying a person out of their niche—by means of an illness, an accident, a divorce, a death, or sometimes just a nagging sense, which will not go away, that continuing on in the way we have just isn't working.

Similarly, just about everyone wants more money. It is assumed that money is the thing that can buy us security—access to good medical care, food, insurance, nice things to have in ones home or give as gifts, cars, clothes—an infinite list. This assumption goes unchallenged in normal, everyday society. In our current financial crisis, I have yet to read any opinion which does not center on the basic assumption that money is the solution. There is outrage that money has been mismanaged, outrage that vast amounts of federal money end up in the hands of those who have already squandered millions, but so far no one is suggesting that there is too much money, too much wealth, and too much struggling for it as being the root of our problems in society-at-large. I realize that maybe only a few far-flung people are willing to look at things this way, but in the meantime, even just a willingness to question the veracity of the idea that “more is better” would be movement in the right direction.

Is money actually real? We accept that it is the currency for exchanging goods and services, and that any complex society needs it in order to function smoothly. Without its assigned value, money is worthless. Without anything to buy, all the money in the world would be useless. So, unless we can return to a perspective that money simply flows, that hanging on to it has never made anyone happy for any length of time, we will never be truly happy. Money cannot buy happiness and it cannot solve any problems; those considerations are in the realm of struggle, and only by working on our attitude to struggle can we make any real progress. The struggles for happiness and to solve problems are two of the deepest human struggles.

Should we give up the desire for happiness and to solve problems? Most people have never tried to do either one. It is just possible that if one were to try to give up the desire for happiness, something completely unexpected might happen—by contrast to the total despair we might imagine as being the opposite of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Meanwhile, we all want to be loved and accepted, fourth on my short list of examples. In this area of life, which is of course another normal impulse, we are confused by the outward-looking desire for the love and acceptance to come from other people. Rarely does it occur to anyone that what we really need to do is find and cultivate love and acceptance for ourselves. There are many forms of therapy and self improvement out there which dance around the edge of this, but deep meditation lies at the heart of the matter. We practice “turning the stream of compassion inwards” as the answer to our misguided longings, and the way to find happiness of heart within ourselves.

The struggle for happiness: we just can’t seem to get away from it. In and of itself, it is not a bad thing. To want to be happy is fundamental to being human, and as usual, we tend to go about it in all the wrong ways. For instance, being famous. It has been widely reported that famous people aren’t necessarily very happy with their fame. People are always asking favors of them, wanting their autograph, making demands, taking away their privacy. So why is the urge to be famous still so strong in people? That is another area of study, but in Buddhism, to put down the desires for fame and gain are central to our practice. And just to be aware of how compelling these desires are requires that we practice deep introspection: looking carefully at ourselves via a steady practice of meditation.

The world over, people struggle to have children, provide for them, keep them safe and help them make it into the adult world at a time when they can take care of themselves. This is another strong, fundamental motivation in life. As with every other kind of struggle, having a family can and should be the training ground of our lives, a rich opportunity for learning to help other living beings, nurturing them, and showing them how to be successful in their own lives. Parents of course can go overboard with overparenting, overmanagement of their children’s lives—a manifestation of a struggle to control everything that happens—the basic struggle people have of being in control.

In light of what I have written a few of the most basic kinds of struggle, we can begin to see that life is full of little balancing acts; there are many struggles we are tossed into by virtue of being human—challenges akin to walking on a tightrope—and then we have to learn how to keep our balance. That is the primary challenge. On the left there is irresponsibility and denial, which we use to keep ourselves in the comfortable fog of just not looking at the struggles that we have and cannot avoid. On the right there is the insistence that things be done *my way*, which is inflexibility of mind. The investment of energy into what *I want, the ideal that I have* will surely land me in a place of suffering before long.

After all, the universe is not answerable to my personal will—this is an immutable law of existence.

This is the place to return to constantly: I am not in control. I will do the best I can within the constraints of human life, and there are many struggles that are worth involving myself in, but I am not in control of the outcome. On the scale of human society, I personally think the struggles for gender equality and racial equality are worth engaging in. And having said that, ends do not justify means in any struggle, no matter how noble. The struggle for “freedom and democracy” that politicians often talk about is a perfect example of how tremendous harm can come from blind idealism that may very well have a good motivation at its root, but has become corrupted by a lack of wisdom in carrying out the means of arriving at the ideal.

But most struggles in life are small and private. Often we do not even talk about them because they are too personal or embarrassing. In my life, sexuality has been a constant struggle. Since monks are celibate, they must deal with the normal sexual drive that almost all humans have—but what to do? Because of its power and that fact that it is biologically programmed into all of us, sexuality tends to be a difficult part of life for most people. For me, the wisdom that has been born out of the struggle to accept, embrace, let go of and not indulge sexuality can be described, once again, as an expression of the Middle Path. I can try mightily to repress it, but that doesn't really work—and obviously indulgence isn't an option, either. The delicate balance of neither grasping onto nor pushing away is the answer. It is a tightrope walk, beautiful in nature if one can learn to stay balanced. Falling off the tightrope, in and of itself, is not actually that big of a deal—provided one is willing to simply get back up and keep going.

Falling off, getting back up and learning to keep your balance in any endeavor, no matter how seemingly important or trivial, is how we as human beings learn to grow spiritually. It takes both humility and perseverance to do this, but the alternative, to just sit on the sidelines and not attempt anything of any importance in life, is a waste of the great opportunity of having a human body and mind. Out of gratitude for this huge opportunity that we have, we should make every effort to throw ourselves wholeheartedly into our lives, our struggles, and learn to offer them to that which is greater than ourselves, recognizing that ultimately we are not in control of any of it.