

The "Ouch" that Hurt

Noirin Sheahan · Noirin's Essays · 5 min read

The that hurt!

At a recent retreat I was sitting in meditation when suddenly a little ball of scalding pain started darting all over my chest. I tried to relax and explore this calmly, but inwardly was crying as the pain found one place after another to lodge and burn. My face would screw up in alarm as the ball scalded me again and I would jabber to myself .

This went on for several minutes before I began to make some sense of the experience. If I could relax and be anyway calm and accepting, then the pain would ease. But as soon as I found this state of relative ease, the pain would dart to another part of the chest, and calmness would flare into agitation as I tracked the movement to see could I relax this new area and submit it to the pain. But relaxing these tissues was only possible if I could also relax the fear and dread which drove the tension. I found it was the same fear and dread that were driving me to say my inward . I would quiver on the verge of noting the fervent wish to tense up and groan. The pain would grow as I veered towards groaning and diminish as I veered instead towards an exploration of the heart and mind of dread. But as soon as I felt myself relaxing the pain would dart away and the whole process would start again.

Every now and then I noticed my body leaning towards the right as if being pushed over by some huge force. If I wasn't careful I found myself straightening up in order to give me renewed energy and confidence and for this battle of wits with the ball of scald! But this state of heady confrontation only increased the pain to new levels of excruciation, until I could again relax and admit that this was a battle I could only win by losing. Although it was such a small little ball of scald, it was my complete master! I felt amazed and humiliated at having to submit to its jabbing, but had no choice in the matter. I learned to make a very deliberate intention to straighten up whenever I found myself leaning too far to the right, noticing but not acquiescing to the wish to regain the upper hand by pulling myself upright. I also noticed that the pain played fair here: while I was making the intention and straightening there were no mean little pinches! I began to appreciate the peace and beauty of pure movement as never before. As soon as the spine was straight however, the battle would recommence in earnest!

After some time I made peace with the fact that I was at the mercy of the ball of scald and had no role to play here but relax and submit at every available opportunity. In a moment of clarity that followed this, I noticed that the scalding sensations were actually

quite bearable. It was the that hurt! I felt this as a horrible rejection of the state of suffering I was in. Understanding this brought forth compassion and I found it easy not to groan. A mental state of fear or dread would be felt alongside the scalding sensations. But instead rejecting all this in a groan in anguish, I could now relax and acknowledge the suffering with some tenderness and compassion.

But as soon as I seemed to get the hang of the process it speeded up dramatically, and a much sharper level of awareness was required to reach the before it was empowered. I felt myself (my identification with the need to stop suffering) and awareness in a race towards each . Agitation would search frantically for itself, growing ever more agitated and frantic until it was big enough to recognise itself. Only then could agitation relax into itself and disappear. Hatred at the possibility of self-rejection might then flare but the pain would grow commensurately, and hatred would turn to humility, acknowledging defeat. The pain stuck to the original rules and faded away as each wave of resistance faded. The process kept accelerating and eventually was happening much faster than my normal mind could cope with. Several times each second I found myself in a new mind-state as the pain darted to and fro across my chest. Thoughts were slow sluggish things crawling through a process that was completely beyond the control of thoughts and beliefs. A horror of being so totally out of control slowly evaporated and I was surprised to find myself growing to trust this state of affairs. Gradually I came to enjoy being beyond the help of rational thought, completely at the mercy of anicca (the transience of all experience) and anatta (no-self or the uncontrollability of all experience).

No sooner did I start to enjoy myself than the process stopped, the ball of scald disappearing from view. But at a sitting later that day, it reappeared. Once I felt its first jab I got ready for the chase. I relaxed into the emotion prompting the first but before the next dart of pain I sensed something that stopped the process dead in its tracks. I had felt my anticipation that the pain would grow a fraction of a second before the pain started to grow! Slowly the understanding sank in: anticipation of pain was generating pain! My breath stopped and for a while I was rigid in horror, trying to come to terms with what this implied. The only way out was to stop anticipating the pattern of suffering I had learned to cope with. I had to admit that I hadnt a clue what was going to happen next! The unknown of the next moment loomed large but the option of fearing this had been removed, as I now knew what suffering this fear would bring. Gradually fear, anticipation and the ball of scald all faded and my breathing started again gingerly. Now I had no option but to let go of anticipation, to relax with the complete unknown of the next moment. I found this implied trusting to the potential for ease in the next moment. Amazingly trust in the potential for ease brought forth ease! Each breath came more freely as I stopped looking for trouble and instead explored the possibility that peace could manifest out of the unknown of each

moment. Thus I learned that anticipation of pain leads to pain, while trust in the potential for peace leads to peace. I learned how I create my own experience of life.

So ended a very worthwhile teaching about the peace which lies beyond the self's attempts to manipulate and control. To the extent that I tried to maintain control, I suffered.

Gradually, the agonizing pain persuaded me to forget my pride and trust to the possibility that something other than myself would know how to deal with the situation. And sure enough I was rescued by the truths of anicca (transience), anatta (uncontrollability) and dukkha (that suffering results from opposing the truths of anicca and anatta). To the extent that I could relax and trust to the kindness underlying the true nature of experience, suffering disappeared. What remained was an eager willingness to experience this truth again and again each moment.

How ironic that this willingness soon succumbed to the truth of anicca and changed into a desire to hold on to this very willingness, thereby destroying it! Thus one experiential dhamma talk ended and another began!

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.