

SPECIAL ISSUE

The Gifts of Illness: A Buddhist Perspective

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This article offers a perspective on illness that is based on direct experiences with illness and Buddhist practice. The thesis is that illness actually provides people with many opportunities to wake up patience, mindfulness, and wisdom. The author asserts that people with illness can choose to see the following gifts of illness: the gift of tolerance, the gift of mindfulness, the gift of moving toward embodiment, the gift of contemplation, the gift of transcendence, the gift of letting go, and the gift of developing compassion. These gifts of illness are often overlooked in efforts to rid oneself of illness as soon as possible. The author gained an important insight while she was simultaneously ill with inflammatory bowel disease and contemplated Buddhist teachings: The suffering from illness can be transformed into awareness, compassion, and love.

Introduction

In our society, people often perceive illness as something to get rid of as soon as possible, whether it is within themselves or in others. Illness can often seem unbearable. Indeed, it can rattle us to the core. The gifts of illness may be difficult to see or appreciate.

I share the following reflections that are based on my past experiences with inflammatory bowel disease and chronic pain. My spiritual practice is Zen Buddhism, and the reflections below echo some of the Buddhist teachings that I have been exposed to over the past decade. I believe that illness gives us opportunities to see who we really are and to develop our patience, mindfulness, and wisdom.

The Gift of Tolerance

In the Buddhist perspective, difficulties and obstacles can help individuals to develop great strengths. When we are ill, we cope with physical pain, discomfort, and other irritations that push us to develop patience and tolerance. Illness can also force us to acknowledge our desires to control our environments, our perceptions of what it is to be a person, and the circumstances in our lives. We develop patience and discipline by having to exercise restraint in not fulfilling every desire of the mind. Bedridden and without a means to continue to function within societal

conventions of school, work, and socializing, people with illness often forgo ego-based desires for recognition. In so doing, we strip away false pride and foster tolerance for uncertainty and fear.

Many writers with chronic illness and disease have noted the similarities between serious illness and death. Kat Duff (1993, p. 61), a writer with chronic fatigue and immune dysfunction syndrome, asserted, “Illness is a taste of death, a practice in dying for the living, a visit to the limbos and bardos usually reserved for the nearly or recently deceased.” Illness gives us the opportunity to look deeply into the fears we may have about losing our bodies and dying. In confronting death through illness, we develop familiarity with death that can cultivate the courage to meet it.

The Gift of Mindfulness

A serious illness can be a kind of mindfulness bell that starts our true practice and gives birth to our spiritual life. So our sickness may contain a positive element, which helps us to grow. It’s a bell of mindfulness for us and everyone around us. (Nhat Hanh, 2009, p. 129)

The symptoms of illness are often quite physically painful and uncomfortable. We may choose to distract ourselves for some hours with books and other media, yet we will likely still experience moments in which we must encounter the raw nature of the pain and discomfort. At this point, we can either choose mindfulness or attempt to numb the pain with further distractions and/or medicines. Indeed, we may alternate between mindfulness and distractions, attempting mindfulness of the pain in some moments and distractions and medicines in other moments. Nonetheless, even a few seconds of mindfulness in the form of acute attention to the pain can allow our minds to forgo habitual patterns long enough to develop a deeper awareness of suffering.

Under the circumstances of intense pain and limitations on physical mobility, we can no longer continue the hectic, busy habit patterns that protect us from being present to the feelings, thoughts, sensations, and consciousness of our minds. Illness makes us pause and gives us the

opportunity to become more aware of what is happening in our bodies and minds.

The Gift of Moving Toward Embodiment

Reginald Ray (2008), the Buddhist teacher and spiritual director of the Dharma Ocean Foundation, wrote:

To be awake, to be enlightened, is to be fully and completely embodied. To be fully embodied means to be at one with who we are, in every respect, including our physical being, our emotions, and the totality of our karmic situation. It is to be entirely present to who we are and to the journey of our own becoming. (p. xv)

In modern-day society, it is acceptable for us to use our bodies simply to accomplish the will of our minds. This attitude prohibits us from truly acknowledging that we inhabit bodies that are very much a part of who we are in totality. Illness and pain bring us right back to the body and help us gain direct experiences in living as a whole person, even if we may also feel at times like we are falling apart.

The Gift of Contemplation

Without the harried circumstances of “the grind” of daily life, people with illness have the time to contemplate the nature of afflictions in ways that we would have not been able to understand otherwise. The Buddhist author and meditation teacher Barbara Brodsky (1997) described how she initially perceived the loss of her hearing as causing her to suffer from intense isolation. Eventually, however, Brodsky reframed her loss as an opportunity to investigate her sense of suffering.

The Buddhist writer Joan Tollifson (1997) stated, “Disability is a gift if we work with it intelligently, as an opportunity to see and question our images, ideals, expectations—our basic desire to be different than we are” (p. 23). Illness can bring about the realization that we humans are constantly striving to alter personal circumstances and dispositions in deluded efforts to go after pleasure and avoid pain. Illness can also bring about the recognition that taking the path to free oneself from mental suffering is now or never because death can come at any time.

Through the contemplation that illness affords us, we can also begin to appreciate all that we took for granted before we developed the illness—the simple wonders in life such as walking, eating, sleeping through the night, and experiencing a day without pain. Iten Sutherland (1997) wrote that we can also see healing in a different way: “Healing not as the elimination of disease, but as a falling in love with the poignancy of being alive: taking

the great injured heart of the world for my own” (p. 3). The gift of contemplation helps us to see our lives in a different light.

The Gift of Transcendence

In speaking of her realizations as a person with rheumatoid arthritis, the author and Zen teacher Darlene Cohen (1997) wrote, “Your body is the only way you can experience the transparency of all things and their interrelationships” (p. 14). Another example is from the life of the Native American shaman, Black Elk, who had a vision of the interconnectedness of all things during a time when he was gravely ill: “While I stood there I saw more than I can tell and understood more than I saw: for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being” (Neihardt, 1932, p. 6).

Illness can give us experiences—moments of clarity—in which we shed notions of ourselves as entities separate from the rest of the world. We may then experience the tender vulnerability of our human forms as being integrated within and integral to the vulnerability of all life forms.

The Gift of Letting Go

Stephen Butterfield (1992), a Buddhist writer living with sarcoidosis, wrote that we continuously meander through life “in a sleepy, anxious cloud of habit and conditioned response” (p. 199). Medicine cannot ensure healing or the avoidance of more pain and discomfort. There is never certainty about what will happen next in life; illness heightens awareness of this ongoing uncertainty and forces surrender, even among those of us who vehemently try to control the fates of our lives.

Joan Iten Sutherland, a Buddhist writer with neurological and immunological medical conditions, allowed herself to go deeply into this process of surrender. Iten Sutherland (1997) wrote, “I’ve let illness kill me, let meditation kill me, so that I might live” (p. 8). Sutherland’s surrender is likely an all-encompassing surrender of both her notions and her desire to control the outcomes of circumstances affecting her. In this way, surrender to illness is a skillful means to dissolve the veil of conceptual thought, a Mahayana Buddhist metaphor for the ways that sensory perceptions and cognitions separate us from reality and feed afflictive states of mind.

The Buddhist author Pema Chödrön (2002) suggests that “holding on to anything blocks wisdom” and thus prevents us from resting in *bodhichitta*, the awakened heart. As people with illness, our experiences of letting go of delusions, letting go of desires to control circumstances, and letting go of addictions to comfort can actually help us to cultivate *bodhichitta*.

The Gift of Developing Compassion

Iten Sutherland (1997) wrote, “Having known pain, it’s pretty hard to be indifferent to the suffering of others” (p. 8). Illness is a training ground for developing compassion. We know what it is like to experience deep suffering, and that experience softens our hearts toward ourselves and toward others.

I have a friend with a health challenge who cofounded a nonprofit organization, EmbodiWorks, focused on integrative cancer care education and advocacy. Another friend with a health condition started CureTogether, which helps patients track their medical conditions and share information. Other friends with illness have started online support groups. My experiences with illness prompted me to start a nonprofit Web site, Patient Corps, for people with illness who want to reduce suffering in the world.

We can choose to make meanings of illness that are destructive to our mental well-being, or we can choose to make meanings that help us to experience less suffering. By seeing the gifts of illness, we begin to open our minds to the possibilities of transforming the suffering that illness triggers into great compassion and love.

Disclaimer

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