

## **Mark Epstein: quotes from his book “The Trauma of Everyday Life.”**

“. . . the fruits of meditation: balance, ease, joyfulness and humor, seemed to emerge in conjunction with an acknowledgement of suffering. . . While Buddhism taught about no self, my own experience was to feel more connected, more alive, less afraid of myself, and more able to rest in my own consciousness. I was less fraught, less worried about the state of myself, less preoccupied with what was wrong with me, and more able to just be. The feelings of being like a fish out of water were beginning to diminish. . . . I’ve come to realize that this paradoxical strategy was one of the Buddha’s greatest discoveries: trauma happens to everyone. The potential for it is part and parcel of the precariousness of human existence.

Some traumas – loss, death, accidents, disease or abuse are explicit. Others, like the emotional deprivation of an unloved child, are more subtle. And some, like my own feelings of estrangement, seemed to come from nowhere. But it’s hard to imagine the scope of an individual life without envisioning some kind of trauma. And it’s hard for most people to know what to do about it. . . . It’s rare for someone to get through life without experiencing trauma. . . . (My father) did his best to keep it out of his consciousness as long as he could.

The Buddha counseled another way: by learning from the beginning to be with the traumas that constitute us, we can train our minds in the wisdom and compassion that the Buddha is known for.

The Buddha was not a physician, though he was often described as one, at least partly because he gave his first set of teachings on the Four Noble Truths, in the form traditionally used by the doctors of his time to present their cases. Like them, he described the illness, gave its cause, declared that a cure was available, and laid out the components of the treatment.

In so doing, he pushed against the constraints of his culture. An ancient Sanskrit proverb declares: “One should not speak unless what one says is both true and pleasant.” The Buddha rejected this view. There was nothing pleasant about his first noble truth, spoken by him in the form of a one word explanation – “*dukkha*”. The word, generally translated as “suffering”, but carrying the meaning of what we today would call “trauma”, is the Buddha’s emphatic summary of the entire human predicament. . . . birth, aging, sickness, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are inescapable. Being close to those who are disagreeable, being separated from those who are loved, and not getting what one wants are all unpleasant facts of life. Indeed, just being a person in this world brings suffering because of how insignificant we feel and how impermanent we are. Even pleasant experiences carry a whiff of dissatisfaction because of their inability to provide ultimate comfort. No matter how fulfilling, they eventually run their course.

But there was another quality to the *dukkha* the Buddha described, a more subtle description of the unsatisfactory nature of the human predicament. The word itself is a compound with an interesting derivation. . . . “*du*” means “badness” or “difficulty”. . . . “*ka*” can refer to the hole at the center of a wheel into which an axle fits. The word thus connotes a “bad fit” making for a bumpy ride. For me, this image of a poorly fitting axle was another way of describing the sense of not fitting in, of not quite belonging, of being slightly at odds with myself that had afflicted me for as long as I could remember.

It was probably no accident, given the derivation of the word, that the Buddha's teaching of the Four Noble Truths was entitled "setting in motion the wheel of the dharma\*". His listeners . . . would have appreciated the imagery of the Buddha turning a wheel smoothly.

*Dharma (or damma):*

- *The state of Nature as it is.*
- *The Laws of Nature considered collectively.*
- *The teaching of the Buddha as an exposition of the Natural Law applied to the problem of human suffering.*

. . . Questioned years later by a prince about his penchant for delivering "bad news", the Buddha said he . . . would speak of what was true and beneficial even if it was disagreeable. . . but he added one caveat. He would speak the beneficial, if disagreeable, truth only if he knew the time to say it. . . If someone was not ready to acknowledge his or her trauma, he would not force the issue.

From a 5<sup>th</sup> century CE commentary on the Buddha's teaching: "This generation is entangled in a tangle." The tangle refers to the way we only want to hear what is true and pleasant, the way we refuse what is disagreeable. In the Buddha's time, as well as our own, there's a rush to some imagined version of normal, an intolerance of the precarious foundation on which we are perched. . . Most of us refuse to admit (our own traumas) even to ourselves, but live in a state of entanglement with it, nonetheless.

A patient of mine had an image for her suffering . . . "I feel like a person alone in a sailboat in the middle of the ocean, clinging for dear life to the mast." . . . "Its too much. I can't hang on any longer. I don't know what else to do. " An accomplished and beloved professor in her mid-50's, Monica was astute enough to give language to her trauma, one that many people shy away from. . . There was an urgency to her communication, a desperation, but also an honesty. I think it came in the context of her mother's declining health, but I recognized the feeling and did not think it was only about her mother's impending demise. I was too familiar with what she was talking about to attribute it solely to the approaching loss of her mom. . . even if we push natural or manmade disasters to one side and try to stick to normal everyday life, things are still a struggle. Life is beautiful sometimes for sure; in fact it's totally amazing . . . but that doesn't stop things from being fragile and precarious, nor does it stop us from feeling all too alone. Of course the line between normal everyday life and calamity seems extraordinarily thin sometimes. But regular life, even in its glory, is difficult sometimes. The specter of loss is always hovering. And we often feel adrift, unmoored, fearful and out of our depths.

Luckily, I did not relay any of these thoughts to Monica. Something more urgent popped out of my mouth. "But you're the ocean as well." I replied. Several years later, after her mother had passed away, Monica reminded me of my comment. It had had a tremendous impact, she said. . . . There was a Buddhist slant to my retort, I reflected. It hit on something that I had learned from my own experience. Trauma is the way in to the self -- and the way out.

To be free, to come to terms with our lives, we have to have a direct experience of ourselves as we really are. To understand selflessness, the central and liberating concept I was reaching for when I reminded Monica of her oceanic nature, we have to first find the self that

we take to be so real, the one that is pushing us around in life, the one that feels traumatized, entangled in a tangle.

The freedom the Buddha envisioned does not come from jettisoning imprisoning thoughts and feelings or from abandoning the suffering self. It comes from learning how to hold it all differently, juggling them rather than cleaving to their ultimate realities. (*Epstein, when learning to meditate at Naropa Institute, found himself very anxious, so he was taught to juggle; the physical movement, combined with both concentration and surrender, proved to be a key practice for him – a body-centered meditation with physical, mental and emotional benefits.*)

. . . Monica was in touch with herself on a primitive level and this was a real accomplishment. She really did feel alone, adrift and afraid. How ever much I might have wanted to comfort her to show her how her current feelings were conditioned by early childhood experiences of deprivation, and were therefore presently “unreal”, I restrained myself. From my perspective, her willingness to expose her true feelings was a great opportunity.

On one level Monica was in touch with her reality; there she was clutching the mast of her identity. On another level, she was poised for a breakthrough . All around her, just outside of her apprehension, was the liberating ocean of her Mind. I was reaching for this when I was speaking with her. . . I was indicating to her that she was one step away from understanding her True Nature. Her conviction about her predicament was inadvertently summoning its release.

Convinced as she was that she was clinging to the mast of her ship, she was nonetheless painting a picture of the sea. And somewhere inside, when I pointed out the huge part of her internal landscape she was ignoring, Monica let go, just a little.

This rhythm of trauma and its release is one that runs through Buddhism like a great underground river. I say ‘underground’ because even within Buddhist culture, it’s not always clearly acknowledged.

There is a hidden trauma at the heart of the Buddha’s own story, for example. One that is known but not often spoken of. One that I found full of meaning despite the lack of attention it had garnered over the years.

The Buddha’s mother died seven days after giving birth to him. Overtly, in the myths and legends that have grown up around the life of the Buddha, very little is made of this fact. But scratch the surface of the Buddha’s biography, and one can see a metaphor churning away, lying in wait, one might say, for the psychologically minded times we are now living in.

Something was nagging at the Buddha’s heart, something he had no memory of. A taste of suffering so early in his life, that for all intents and purposes, it should not have mattered. Raised by loving parents – his mother’s sister stepped in and took care of him like her own – and surrounded by all the wealth and caring attention his parents could muster, the young man who was to become the Buddha nevertheless felt that something was wrong. Whether the feeling stemmed from the loss of his biological mother or from a later confrontation with the realities of old age, sickness and death, we do not know. But the presence of this early loss in his psyche creates a motif that anyone who’s struggles with inexplicable feelings of estrangement or alienation can relate to.

The traumas of everyday life can easily make us feel like a motherless child.

In responding to Monica, I was making a critical point: It's not as important to find the cause of our traumatized feelings as it is to learn how to relate to them. Because everyday life is so challenging, there's a great need to pretend. Our most intimate feelings get shunted to the side, relegated to our dreams. We all want to be "normal". Life, even normal life, is arduous, demanding and ultimately threatening. We all have to deal with it and none of us really know how.

We're all traumatized by life, by its unpredictability, its randomness, its lack of regard for our feelings, and the losses it brings. Each in our own way, we suffer. Even if nothing else goes wrong -- and it's rare that this is the case, old age, illness and death loom just over the horizon like the monsters our children need us to protect them from in the night.

The story of the Buddha's enlightenment shows him confronting his own trauma and using it to broaden the horizons of his mind. A teacher of mine has a pithy way of describing how the Buddha accomplished this: when dealing with painful emotions, Joseph Goldstein suggests, the way out is through. Emotional pain is as fruitful an object of awareness as anything else. It may even have qualities, like intensity, that make it particularly useful as a means of training the mind.

In exploring the Buddha's life story, we can see him doing just this. He may not have known from whence his feelings of trauma came, but he was able to create for himself the inner environment of attunement and responsiveness that he needed. His success is a model for the rest of us. Confronted with unpleasant feelings that we are often at a loss to explain, we can learn to use those feelings to show us the oceans of our minds.

In a famous statement, the Buddha once said that he taught one thing and one thing only: suffering and its release. . . . To most ears, this sounds like two things, but the Buddha was choosing his words carefully. The clear-eyed comprehension of suffering permits its release. The Buddha, in his role as therapist, showed how this was possible.

The great promise of his teachings was that suffering was only the first noble truth, and that acknowledging it opens up all the others. By the time the Buddha, turning the wheel of the dharma, got to truths 3 and 4, the end of suffering and the 8-fold path to its relief, he had filled his listeners with new hope.

Trauma, he was saying, did not have to be the last word.