

GRATITUDE, PAIN, AND ILLUSION

I remember an old man who said to me, "It took me seventy years to find that if I sat down without thought, there was usually a splinter waiting for me. But if I took some thought to smooth in my mind the patterns in me that were heavy and sharp, then I found that the splinters did not stick."

Take time to smooth in your mind by understanding and lovingness the sharp places around you. Then, where you sit will not be sharp even though there may be stones everywhere.

story from India

There are four topics we need to discuss: the difference between acceptance and fatalism; the use of gratitude; the use of pain; and the illusion in pain. Stories will be used throughout.

There was once an old man who lived quite literally under a tree just outside a small village on the road between Bangalore and Mysore in the south of India. He was a beggar, and although begging was a perfectly acceptable way of life within India at the time, this particular man was a tremendous irritation to the headman of the village.

It seems that in good times and bad, the beggar was always cheerful, kindly, and comforting to those who chose to sit and talk to him by the roadside. The headman, on the other hand, was wealthy, busy, and rarely had the time to talk to anyone about anything except village affairs and business. Yet with all his prominence, the headman's life wasn't filled with the satisfaction he believed was his due. That is why it so particularly irked him to know that just up the road sat an old beggar who had nothing, but who was considerably happier than he.

Things came to a head one hot summer day when a visiting dignitary spent forty-five minutes of the headman's valuable time rhapsodizing about the

delightful conversation he had just had with "that old man up the way." It was just too much. So after the official departed, the headman made his way to the beggar's place and confronted him in a very unpleasant, condescending manner.

"I am respected for miles around," he matter-of-factly stated. "I have wealth; I have influence. In fact, I have everything a sane man could ever hope to have. You, on the other hand, have absolutely nothing except a miserable, dirty dhoti to wrap yourself in and a beat up begging bowl. Yet I am constantly miserable and you insufferably happy. I don't understand why and, moreover, I don't like it. So tell me, oh holy one, what makes you so joyful? What is it that you have that I don't have?"

The beggar had sat at that same spot for over forty years. He was known throughout the region for his wisdom, and because he was sensitive to the needs and spiritual necessities of the people around him he was aware of the headman's frustrations. In a way, he was grateful the crisis had arisen. It gave him an opportunity to talk to the headman, to help him if possible.

As for the question the headman had thrown at the beggar, the answer came immediately and straight from the heart.

"My son," began the old fellow, "If I had to pick one thing that you do not have but that truly gives me joy, it would have to be my abundance."

Listening but not understanding, the headman's face grew red. Thinking himself mocked, years of pent up anger exploded forth as he nearly screamed, "Abundance! WHAT IS THIS ABUNDANCE? I have things. You have NOTHING!"

The beggar sat unmoved by the attack, unruffled by the storm, unpoisoned by the venom directed his way. He could have responded in kind, angrily defending himself as most of us would have done, but he didn't. Lovingness flowed through him and around him just as it always had, and because the thrust of the headman's rage fell as if on deaf ears its destructive edge lost its power just as a burst balloon loses air.

The nature of the beggar's countenance was so caring and kind that, irrationality spent, the headman embarrassingly came to his senses. Tears filled his eyes. He bent down to touch his head to the ground at the old man's

feet, then said in a hushed and most pitiable way, "Forgive me. I just don't understand."

The beggar put his hand on the man's head, then raised him up with a benevolent smile. The two sat quietly with one another for a while, then began to discuss, among other things, the insanity of anger.

After a time, the headman respectfully said, "Holy man, I still don't understand. Please tell me about your abundance and your joy."

The old fellow chuckled and, in three sentences, answered. "My son," he replied, "the One Self, in Its infinite wisdom and compassion, saw that it was my necessity in this life to have *nothing*. And of *that* It has given me an abundance."

"Without my abundance," he continued, "I would never have come to my enlightenment, and without that I would never have known my joy."

When people hear this story, they often jump to the conclusion that the old man was simply being fatalistic. After all, he had accepted his situation without putting up much of a fight, and fatalism does seem to be practiced by many who follow one or another of the Eastern views. But fatalism was not the case with the old man.

Because he had nothing, he had the time to observe the play of life around him. He had time to go inward to see what it means to be a human being. Having *nothing* gave him the opportunity to grow in ways his child-self would never have stood still for if he had been born into a situation of position. It meant freedom from the everyday distractions that keep you and me busy throughout most of our lives . . . and he was grateful for that. Indeed, his child-self probably wouldn't have chosen that life if it had had its way, but he was at a point in his spiritual evolution where he could make a leap of understanding if he was placed in just the right setting. In his own words, that setting was "to have *nothing* in abundance."

Bottom line: Accepting a situation and being grateful for the teaching it brings is not fatalism, it is spiritual sanity . . . which leads me to the next topic, gratitude.

Most people see no reason to be grateful for situations their child-self identifies as being negative or uncomfortable or painful. For instance, when was the last time you were grateful for the symptoms that come when you have a cold? It isn't something you do. But if you think about it, there is a reason why your head gets thick and your sinuses run and you cough and sputter and feel miserable. YOU'RE SICK. The body needs time to cleanse itself; it's urging you to rest it. It isn't something to court, but imagine the fix you'd be in if your body *didn't* let you know there was a problem. Sure, you'd feel great all the time, but you'd also run the risk of not knowing when something was wrong internally, not getting the proper medical treatment, having things build up, even keeling over dead without warning. We are damn lucky the body lets us know when there is a problem so we can take appropriate measures to work it through, yet we rarely look at problems in that way.

People treat uncomfortable experiences as something to get away from. As such, we don't tend to be grateful for them. The Eastern view we are examining does not suggest that you go out and look for situations that are unpleasant--plenty will come in the course of your lifetime as it is. What it does suggest is that there is the possibility of enlightenment at the heart of all experience, painful or not. If that is true, it is foolish to mindlessly mute painful experience simply because the child self doesn't find it pleasant. In short, *painful experiences* are not devoid of meaningful content . . . which cleverly brings us to the next topic--that of pain.

A number of years ago a dark mole appeared on my nose, then grew. I went to a dermatologist who made a mash of removing it (it turned out to be benign, which is more than I can say for the dermatologist). When a second mole appeared a few months later, I went to an oncologist. Being a surgeon, the man was a veritable artist. The mole wasn't too big so he deadened the area with Novocain (or whatever), used a coring device to encircle the mole, then snipped out the offending tissue . . . all in about thirty seconds. Instead of stitches, he cauterized the area, then sealed it with silver nitrate leaving me with a black divot on the end of my nose (silver nitrate stains everything it touches black).

Other individual moles appeared over time, each being treated in the same way. During one of these episodes, the silver nitrate didn't hold and the divot began to bleed after I left the doctor's office. I couldn't get it to stop, so I returned to the doctor's office the next day and had a single stitch inserted. Figuring one needle prick was as bad as another, I waived the Novocain-shot-into-the-wound and had him do the deed without anesthetic--a big, big mistake. Instead of inserting a thin needle that would quickly deaden the area, he inserted a thicker, threaded needle through the skin twice, then pulled the thread tight to stop the bleeding.

The pain was spectacular.

Six months later another mole popped up just west of the previous problem. I went back to the doctors and had it removed. It was so small he cauterized it, then applied silver nitrate.

You can imagine my delight when I woke up around 4 a.m. the next morning to find blood trickling down the side of my nose. If there was one thing that could have brought me to full wakefulness at the time, it was the realization that if I didn't stop the bleeding I would have to go back to the doctor and have another stitch. So there I was, wide awake, applying pressure to the nose, thinking about pain.

Until that time, I had been almost completely oblivious to any wider meaning my proboscian experiences might have had for me. But as I lay there that night, I found myself drawn into an interesting, searching meditation that took me back to India.

In 1987 I had made a trip to India and Nepal. It was quite a sojourn taking ten weeks and covering 22 cities. When I was in Katmandu, Nepal, I made the mistake of taking a nap in an air conditioned room after walking several miles in the hot, humid countryside. The end result? I came down with a cold. I left Nepal, traveled to Calcutta for a night, then went on to Darjeeling.

Darjeeling is in the north of India and was, during the time of the Raj (i.e., when the British were there), a hill station. That is, it was one of the places people went to get out of the summer heat on the plains. It isn't a modern city at all--more like a village on the side of a Himalayan slope.

It was there that my cold sprouted wings and I ended up with a 104 degree temperature. I wasn't the least bit uncomfortable as I lay there in my hotel bed with the rain pitter pattering on the roof. In fact, my only discomfort was from intestinal troubles. Nevertheless, I let the hotel know about the problem and, as a consequence, was visited in the late afternoon by three New York doctors who happened to be staying at the hotel.

Upon questioning me, they learned that I hadn't had any shots before leaving for India and that I additionally didn't have a spleen (the spleen stores extra white blood cells--disease fighters one and all; I cracked mine due to a collision at home plate in a high school baseball game, so it had been removed when I was younger). The New York doctors were alternately horrified and delighted: horrified because, according to them, I was going to die if I didn't leave India immediately; delighted because they all specialized in "tourist medicine" and found my case most interesting. After a brief consultation, they told me that I probably had spinal meningitis and that I needed a spinal tap. They didn't mention that spinal taps are not only extremely painful but also dangerous to the patient, or that the treatment for spinal meningitis was the same as that for any internal infection that might produce a high temperature (i.e., high doses of antibiotics). Unfortunately, I was in no shape to be asking probing questions, so I accepted their pronouncement without much discussion and allowed them to bundle me up, put me in a car, and take me to the Darjeeling hospital.

The hospital was an amazing place. We arrived just at sunset and, as we entered through a dark stairway, I realized that the hallways were lit by candle light--they didn't have electricity (I found later that they *did* have a generator for night emergencies).

I ended up lying on a bed in the middle of a room lit by candles with an Indian doctor scurrying around trying to satisfy the demands of the three New York doctors. The Indian physician did his best despite the fact that the American doctors were acting like American doctors--giving orders, expecting people to jump at the sound of their voices, etc.

"We think he has spinal meningitis," one said. "He needs to have a spinal tap, and he needs it NOW." In all fairness, I'm sure the Americans

were doing what they thought was in my best interest, but they gave the poor Indian doctor a terrible time in the process.

There was one other individual present at the time--a British trained Tibetan doctor. He was quite different from the Indian doctor as he used American slang like an American native (I found out later that he had gone to medical school in England, had been offered several jobs in Canadian hospitals and one in the U.S., but decided instead to return to Darjeeling to work where he was born--he was a pediatrician). While the Americans were consulting with the beleaguered Indian, the Tibetan came over and asked a few common sense questions (i.e., "Can you put your head on your chest?"--patients with spinal meningitis can't do that--I could). He felt around my neck and head, then gave me a hug and whispered, "Don't worry, you don't have spinal meningitis. You'll be all right."

With that, he turned to the Indian doctor and said something in Hindi (I found out later that he told the Indian not to let the Americans push him around; that I didn't have spinal meningitis and should not have the spinal tap). The Indian doctor turned to the Americans and said, "Well, I'd really like to give him a spinal tap but the generator is down and we really don't want to do it in the dark. We'll have to wait until tomorrow morning." Fortunately (thank God), the Americans had to leave early the next morning, so believing that they had convinced everyone that a spinal tap was in order they left (that was when one of the Americans told me that if I didn't leave India immediately, I would die).

I did appreciate what the American doctors were trying to do for me. They knew I was in a foreign land with what could be a serious medical problem being treated in a dilapidated hospital. What they didn't know was that although the hospital was archaic, the doctors and nurses were all well trained and very caring. I got to know the Tibetan gentleman and found him a great fellow with a terrific laugh. We had a number of interesting conversations before I left.

As for the treatment, my veins and their antiquated equipment didn't get along, so instead of giving me antibiotics by drip method they gave me antibiotic injections through a semi-permanent insertion needle they had placed in my arm. The serum was quite harsh and after two or three such

shots my arm burned as though on fire when the injection was given. One young nurse was clearly concerned at my reaction to the pain, so in an attempt to lessen the trauma she began giving me the injection in tiny spurts over a three or four minute period. It quickly became obvious that that wasn't such a good idea. As soon as the first injection entered, the arm would go ablaze. With each successive spurt, the pain would escalate to higher and higher degrees of excruciation.

I had never felt pain like that. It made me marvel at how frighteningly much pain the body could generate when something was wrong.

All this came back to me as I lay in bed at 4 a.m. considering my nose. And by the time my thoughts came back to the present, I had realized something that had never occurred to me, and I realized it in a profound sense: My body is without pain most of the time (this, in itself, is truly remarkable given the body's delicate complexity), yet I had never been the least bit grateful for the peace it afforded me.

How terribly thoughtless!¹

It was the prospect of pain that sent me into my reveries that night, and it was the remembrance of the pain I had in Darjeeling that brought me to my realization. I had always taken my body for granted, never stopping to acknowledge how well it works even under the worst of conditions (when I was young, hormones, athletics, and the ever-present belief of my youthful invincibility led me to beat my body up mercilessly). I had no gratitude for my relatively pain free existence, only irritation when something did hurt.

What I didn't realize until that moment of mini-enlightenment was that a lack of gratitude was caused, at least in me, by self-involvement. And with that observation, I began to better understand something else I had been told earlier. *Gratitude is like a great solvent. It allows karma to open the way to understanding; it allows the High Self to whisper wisdom into the ear of the child.*

¹ This may seem a bit tepid to you as you read about it, but I can assure you it wasn't to me. The enormity of the enlightenment was matched only by the subtlety of what I saw . . . There really are no words to describe it adequately.

How obvious it all became. Self involvement is just that, a constant focusing of attention on the perceived needs of the small self. It allows for little if any introspection (the one thing the child *doesn't* want is a close look at itself), and everything is measured by how much it satisfies the child's desires.

By focusing on gratitude, there is a constant looking outward, a constant acknowledging of the myriad of ways we humans are supported in our efforts on this planet. Exercising it changes the tone of one's life. It allows one to view experience beyond the supercharged emotions of the lesser self. And in that light, pain can be changed into understanding.

. . . which brings me to *pain as an illusion*:

My first real job as a teacher was that of long-term substitute at a high school in Los Angeles Unified School District. The assignment covered the last two-and-a-half months of the year and was weird at best. It seems the basketball coach was extraordinarily good--the school had won the Southern Section CIF title for 4A teams that year² --and had been offered a coaching position at the university level. As a consequence, at the end of the basketball season the coach simply quit and left for his new job.

Along with coaching and teaching Physical Education, the guy also taught three elementary math classes. When I arrived, that was the assignment I was given. I looked over the fellow's records and found that there were kids with a total of 27 points for the year along with kids with 2700 points for the year. That wasn't so surprising; what was surprising was the fact that he had given *everyone* in the class an *A* for the semester. Regardless of work done, this fellow had pulled what I guess was his idea of a *going out of business* sale, grade wise.

When I realized this, I decided I could not overlook the considerable discrepancy between the students who had actually done the work throughout the year and those who had signed up for the course but had never done anything. I informed the deficient students--some of whom were very large jocks--that they would undoubtedly be failing the class unless something

² This is like having an *All State* team in smaller states.

spectacular came my way in the way of make-up work. I was met with a flood of drops. The teachers who knew what I was doing were impressed; my popularity with some of the students couldn't have been lower.

With time, the kids who stayed in the classes found me to be knowledgeable, relatively demanding in an academic sense, and intimidated by nothing. They didn't know it, but as a rookie my greatest fear was to be perceived as soft and easily manipulated. I can assure you, nobody got that idea--I ran my classes with an iron fist.

Unfortunately, this insecurity reflected in an "attitude" on my part, and it took an interesting form of emotional pain to make me see that. About five weeks into my stay, we had a Monday holiday. At the end of the day on Friday I walked to my car, drove out of the teacher's parking lot, and proceeded down the narrow street in front of the school. As school had just let out, there were literally four or five hundred kids milling around out in front of the school. I approached that area just as traffic stopped. Some kids in the car four or five vehicles up from mine had halted to talk to friends who were standing out in the street. The entire caravan sat for twenty or thirty seconds while the kids casually finished their discussion. None of the cars honked during this period, but by the time we began to crawl forward again I was relatively irritated about the hold-up. I'm sure I had a clearly angry look on my face, and just as I passed the spot where the kids had been I heard a boy's voice loudly say, "Get that look off your face, you asshole!"

I almost broke my neck as I swung around like a shot ready to nail the offender. The problem was that I found myself looking at upwards of two hundred walking, talking kids. I was in no position to be making any accusations, so I drove on. But all the way home, I was really, really irritated. "How dare some insolent pip-squeak yell at me that way," I thought. "The little bastard's lucky I didn't catch him--I'd have hauled him into the principal's office on the spot!"

I thought about the incident for most of the rest of the day and by the time Saturday morning came I realized I had pretty well ruined the front end of my vacation. I couldn't stop thinking about the happening, even though it

was beginning to cause me considerable psychological pain. I just couldn't get it to go away.

By Monday, I was not only still irritated about the situation, I was also irritated about being irritated. Throughout the weekend I had periodically stopped the inner dialogue to try to reason with myself, pointing out that there was nothing I could do about anything concerning the occurrence and that I was just making myself miserable. Nothing helped. I couldn't put it out of my mind.

Finally, on Monday night I decided it was time to do something radical. Through a force of will, I calmed the still agitated *child self* down long enough to begin a meditative practice I had recently learned. The rationale behind the technique was simple. If humans are here to experience, learn, and hopefully grow, then there is no experience that doesn't have within it the possibility of at least some form of enlightenment. From the experiences that are drawn to us, and from the way we deal with those experiences, we can learn a lot about ourselves and our understanding of life.

I had spent three days looking at the situation but had gotten nowhere. Why? Because I had done my thinking on the assumption that I was OK--that it was the kid who yelled at me that had a problem. Indeed, the kid may have been out of line, but the situation obviously hit a major nerve in me. Otherwise, why was my *child-self* so indignant?

I began the meditation by asking myself the question, "What is it about the way I'm dealing with life that isn't quite right--that made it necessary for me to be drawn into this experience?"

The answer came like sunlight piercing the gloom of a dark cellar, and it was so simple. I (my *child-self*) had begun to build into myself two things that weren't particularly useful. First, I so wanted to be perceived by my students as a strong, no-nonsense leader that I really wasn't treating them with the kind of respect human beings ought to be afforded. In a lot of ways, I was acting like a bully. Secondly, I was beginning to believe that my students should show me due respect, not because I was a respectable human being, but because I had a title and a position of authority.

In looking back, it is probable that the kid who yelled wasn't yelling at me at all. But because I was beginning to build into my perception of life qualities that were not as they ought to be, the very hint that someone might not be showing me the kind of respect I believed I deserved so infuriated my child-self that it simply could not get over the perceived slight.

This all became evident in a blink during the meditation, but what was really remarkable was what happened as the little enlightenment came. As soon as I understood the experience I felt physically lightened. It was just as though someone had removed two-hundred pounds of weight from my shoulders--so much so that I actually felt like I could float up off the chair if I'd wanted. The gloom and foreboding anxiety vanished and I was left in a state that was so blissful I haven't words to describe it.

And the psychological pain that had been? It was like an illusion. Once it had done its job--once I had found the little giftie embedded in its persistent presence, the experience changed, the pain ceased to be, and I was left with a much deeper understanding of myself.

This was the first time I had seen how illusory the perception of emotionally traumatic experiences can be, yet how useful such experiences can be as a teacher. When the lesson was learned and there was no longer need for the pain, the pain vanished.³

³ For anyone interested in understanding the psychology of the child self, this is VERY IMPORTANT. If there is one thing the child does not want to see, it is another who animates the same selfishnesses that it has built into itself. When it sees even a minor mirror image of itself, it responds with irritation.

Example: You see a small boy being sternly disciplined--abused even--by an angry parent. Inner, emotional friction arises in you (i.e., you get angry at the way the parent is acting).

The claim here is *not* that you are angered because you, yourself, abuse your own child (hence see mirrored in the other parent actions your own not-so-good propensities). That kind of linear relationship between the observed happening and one's own disharmony rarely occurs. Instead, the connections tend to be non-linear. Maybe you see in the parent's actions an individual who is taking his or her frustrations out on someone who can't fight back--something you may do at the office to underlings. Or maybe you see in the parent's actions an unjust estimation of the child's motives--something you tend to do with your spouse.

In short, there could be all sorts of patterns being mirrored in that one situation. What is important to understand is that as far as this view is concerned, if there is nothing in you that is of like quality to at least some aspect of the happening, you will not become angry. Instead, you will observed the obviously bad situation and respond by acting in whatever

At the time I found that remarkable. In a way, I still do.

Life's experiences are not what they appear--they are, in a way, illusions. So far, we have discussed the illusory nature of emotional pain, but in fact illusion is quite literally embedded in the very nature of our physical world. To illustrate, consider the so-called fundamental building block of matter, the atom.

An atom characteristically has a diameter of around .0000000001 meters. Most of its mass is found in the nucleus at its center. The nucleus is composed of *protons* and *neutrons* (there are also a myriad of minor, obscure, sub-atomic particles, but they are usually ignored when looking at a bare-bones model). Around the nucleus "orbits" much smaller particles called *electrons*.

Hydrogen is the smallest atom found in nature. It only has one proton, one electron, and in most cases no neutrons. If we could magically expand an atom until its one electron was the size of a typical garden pea, we would discover some amazing things.

To begin with, our pea sized electron would be moving around the proton at the speed of approximately 150,000 miles per second--close to the speed of light. The nucleus, with its one proton, would be about the size of an over-inflated beach ball, and the distance between the pea and the beach ball would be somewhere around *eight miles*.

That means that after the expansion, we would end up with a beach-ball size proton and a pea sized electron, and in between would be eight miles of absolutely nothing.

Put another way, of the approximately 350,000,000,000,000 cubic feet making up the volume of that expanded spherical atom, only about thirty cubic feet will be occupied by what you and I would call *real matter*.

Conclusion?

Atoms are made up almost entirely of space.

Consequence?

way might ease the problem. You will simply not feel the kind of emotional response the child exhibits when it is seeing its lesser side manifested in others.

Take an object, any object. Take your body, for instance. If we could somehow extract all the space out of your body, what would be left would be a tiny speck of matter that would probably take a microscope to see, and that would weigh one to two hundred pounds (i.e., your original weight).

In other words, your body is almost entirely made up of space, and yet it does not appear to be so. You do not look at your hand and say, "Ah, yes. Space!" That is not what your hand seems to be.

The reality of your physical body is not what it appears to be . . . and in my country we call that *an illusion*.⁴

The point to be made here is that *the universe in general* and *life in particular* are predicated on illusion. A traumatic experience will bruise the child self because that is usually the only way karma can get the child's attention. If the child refuses to look at the situation, refuses to understand the situation, the bruise will not heal. At best, the sore spot is forgotten with time only to be re-bruised by later experience. But when an experience is truly, profoundly understood, the illusion of its unrelenting, sometimes pounding presence is no longer needed as a teacher. With the wisdom extracted, there is no longer any *necessity* for the experience to continue to be a major presence within the individual's world.⁵ With understanding, the emotion and pain acts like all broken illusions and simply goes *whoosh*.

If karma exists, and if karma draws you and me into experiences that are designed to help us awaken into understanding in a spiritual sense, how should one's child deal with pain?

⁴ Appendix II addresses *illusion in the physical world* as viewed through the perspective of Einstein's Theory of Relativity (complete with a painless, qualitative discussion of the more interesting characteristics of Relativity).

⁵ We all know people who just can't let go of a painful experience. I have a friend, for instance, who is Armenian. She was born in the U.S. and is thoroughly American, but her mother was in Armenia when the Turks attempted their genocide of the Armenian people. The mother has since died, but when she was alive you couldn't talk to her for more than five minutes without her somehow turning the conversation to all the pain and suffering she had endured at the hands of the Turks. For seventy years, it consumed her life.

The daughter is now writing a book about the necessity of letting go of old hatreds.

There is a curious dichotomy about this in modern western psychology. In dealing with personal problems, it is assumed that a patient's only choices are to either repress emotion or express emotion.

The former has its place. Screaming at the universe *in general* and anybody in earshot *in particular* is a fairly selfish thing to do. Who likes, for instance, to be around someone who is constantly voicing their personal complaints? Repressing an angry word because you don't want to dump your problems on others is a fairly noble, selfless act. Unfortunately, mindlessly repressing one's feelings and problems can and often does result in the festering of angers, etc., on a subconscious level. Sooner or later, an individual with big, repressed problems is going to blow.

The latter suggests that you can get rid of your problems by simply letting them out. Although people often feel better after having let fly at someone they are angry at, their expression of venom rarely settles the problem. Neither does it diminish within the screamer the tendency to be angry or the willingness to take disharmonious action. What's more, indiscriminately expressing the self does not get rid of anger. In fact, it may *feed* anger. If the East's metaphysical views about *thought* are correct, the exercising of anger is like the exercising of a muscle. The more you work it, the bigger it potentially gets.

What is interesting is that if the East is correct about karma, etc., there is another alternative to the *express it/repress it* choice. When one comes into an UNDERSTANDING of a problem, the problem will no longer be a problem.⁶ There will no longer be the necessity for the circumstance to be a sore point because you have seen what there is to see within it. As such, the illusory nature of the experience becomes evident as the sting evaporates and the individual is able to move on.

⁶ There are some areas of Western psychology that, to some degree, embrace this idea. When a student at my school was killed a number of years ago, the school psychologist immediately convened an all-day group discussion that people could join as they had the time. What was he doing? He was allowing the students to better understand their feelings by having them talk through the situation in the company of friends and supporters. The thrust was to grow into understand, which is exactly what the East believes experience should do.

Lastly, one of the most spiritually powerful disciplines one can follow is that of gratitude. Why? Because it requires the self to see beyond the small self. When one is exercising gratitude, potentially enlightening yet unfortunately painful experiences do not shrivel the child into a ball of self pity. Instead, there is gratitude for the teaching that is involved in the situation.

St. Francis understood this when he instructed his monks who were readying themselves to go into the world to preach. He said (loose quotation), "If they receive you half-heartedly, be grateful that they received you at all. If they refuse to receive you, be grateful that they allowed you to go on your way. If they refuse to allow you to go on your way, be grateful they did not stone you. If they stone you, be grateful they did not kill you. And if they kill you, be grateful that you had the opportunity to die loving those who would kill you, even as Christ died on the cross."

Gratitude. It is something we do not exercise enough. So much upholds us as we exist in bodies on this planet; there is so much for which to be grateful.