

# Coping with Pain

## ***How Archbishop Desmond Tutu and His Holiness the Dalai Lama Cope With Pain***

“Archbishop Tutu, many people, when they get ill, don’t feel very joyful. You’ve been able to maintain that joy in the face of suffering. How have you been able to do it?”

“Well, I have certainly been helped by many other people. One of the good things is realizing you are not a solitary cell. You are part of a wonderful community. That’s helped very greatly. As we were saying, if you set out to be joyful, you are not going to end up being joyful. You’re going to find yourself turned in on yourself. It’s like a flower. You open, you blossom, because of other people. And I think suffering, maybe even intense suffering, is a necessary ingredient for life, certainly for developing compassion.

“Archbishop, take us with you to the hospital or to a doctor’s appointment, and they’re probing you and prodding you, and it’s painful and it’s uncomfortable. And you’re waiting, and it takes a long time. What do you do inside yourself not to feel angry or to complain or to wallow in your own self-pity? It sounds like you’re saying that you can choose to be joyful even in the face of that difficulty. How do you do that?”

“I think we ought not make people feel guilty when it is painful. It is painful and we have to acknowledge that it is painful. But actually, even in the midst of that pain, you can recognize the gentleness of the nurse who is looking after you. You can see the skill of the surgeon who is going to be performing the operation on you. Yet sometimes the pain can be so intense that you do not even have the capacity to do that.

“The thing is, don’t feel guilty. We have no control over our feelings. Emotions are spontaneous things that arise.” This was a point that the Archbishop and the Dalai Lama would disagree on during the week: How much control do we have over our emotions?. The Archbishop would say we have very little. The Dalai Lama would say we have more than we think.

“At some point, you will be in anguish,” the Archbishop continued. “ We are told in the Christian tradition to offer up our suffering and unite it with the anguish and pain of our Saviour and thus use it to improve the world. It does help you not to be too self-centred. It helps you to some extent to look away from yourself. And it can help make that anguish bearable. You don’t have to be a believer in any faith to be able to say, Oh, aren’t I blessed that I have doctors, that I have qualified nurses to look after me, and that I can be in hospital? That might just be the beginning of moving away from being so self-centred and concentrating on me, me, me, me. You begin to realize, Hey, I’m not alone in this. Look at all the many others, and there may be some who are in greater pain. It’s like being put into the fiery furnace to be refined.”

The Dalai Lama jumped in affirm the truth of what the Archbishop was saying. “Too much self-centred thinking is the source of suffering. A compassionate concern for others’ well-being is the source of happiness. I do not have as much experience with physical pain as you have. Yet one day I was in Bodh Gaya, the place where the Buddha achieved enlightenment, to begin a series of important Buddhist teachings. Bodh Gaya is the holiest place for Buddhists.”

“There were around one hundred thousand people who had come to attend the teachings, but suddenly I had intense pain in my abdomen. They did not know then that it was my gallbladder, but I was told I needed to go to hospital urgently. When bouts of pain struck, it was so intense I was sweating. We had to

drive to the hospital in Patna, the capital of the state of Bihar, which was two hours away. As we were driving, along the road we passed a lot of poverty. Bihar is one of the poorest states in India. I could see out the window that the children had no shoes, and I knew that they were not getting a proper education. Then as we approached Patna, under a hut I saw an old man lying on the ground. His hair was dishevelled, his clothes were dirty, and he looked sick. He had no one to take care of him. Really, he looked as if he were dying. All the way to the hospital, I was thinking of this man, and felt his suffering, and I completely forgot about my own pain. By simply shifting my focus to another person, which is what compassion does, my own pain was much less intense. This is how compassion works, even at a physical level.

“So as you have rightly mentioned, a self-centred attitude is the source of the problem. We have to take care of ourselves without selfishly taking care of ourselves. If we don’t take care of ourselves, we cannot survive. We need to do that. We should have wise selfishness, rather than foolish selfishness. Foolish selfishness means you just think only of yourself, don’t care about others, bully others, exploit others. In fact taking care of others, helping others, ultimately is the way to discover your own joy and to have a happy life. So that is what I call wise selfishness.”

Excerpts from: *The Book of Joy*, by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu with Douglas Abrams, Hutchinson: London 2016, selected by Len Warren.