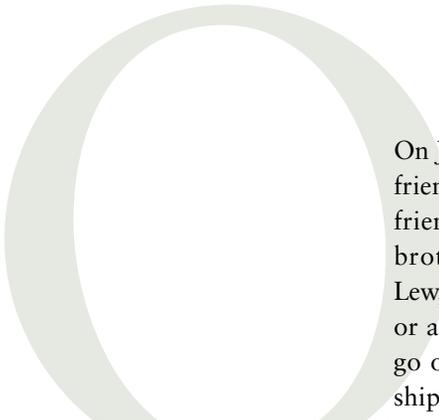


The Real Path

Norman Fischer explains why it's suffering that gives us the incentive, vision, and strength to transform our lives.



On January 12, 2009, my dear friend of forty years, my best friend who was more than a brother to me, Rabbi Alan Lew, died without any warning or any known illness. I won't go on about our long friendship; there's too much to say.

Suffice it to say, we were as close as people can be; we were spiritually linked. We knew each other before either of us had started on our religious paths, and then we began practicing Zen at the same time. We studied for many years together at the Zen Center in Berkeley and went to Tassajara Zen Mountain Center where we were monks together. As time went on, we created our own version of Jewish meditation and together we founded Makor Or, a Jewish meditation center in San Francisco. We practiced there together, side by side, for more than a decade.

So when Alan died all of a sudden, it was hard to take. I'm guessing that I will not get over it, that his death probably holds a permanent place of sadness in me. I'm not so sure that I want to get over it. The sadness is okay. It's not so bad.

About a week before he died, we led a retreat together. At that retreat he gave me what turned out to be his last teaching, although we didn't know it at the time. Alan was really a great person and a great rabbi, but his teachings were often humorous. He would present very profound things in a silly way. It would take you a while to realize how profound his teaching actually was.

For some years Alan had been collecting fountain pens, which he liked to tell me about. I like fountain pens myself. I didn't think much of it until I went over to his house one day, and he showed me his collection. It was an astonishing thing. There were hundreds and hundreds, maybe five hundred, fountain pens that he kept neatly in special binders that are made for such collections. These were rare antiques

that were worth quite a bit of money. Apparently, there's a whole world of fountain pen collectors out there. There are fountain pen conventions and fountain pen websites. There's even a whole kind of stock market of fountain pens; you buy and sell and the prices go up and down. I didn't know this, but it's a huge deal.

A few months before his death, Alan decided he would sell off some of his fountain pens. He brokered the transaction online and sent thousands of dollars worth of pens to some person he found online. While he was waiting for the check to come in the mail, the guy who had purchased the pens from him died suddenly. His widow hired a lawyer to clear the estate, but the lawyer didn't find a convincing paper trail for these fountain pens, so he informed Alan that he was not going to get paid for them.

Alan thought, "Well, I could get a lawyer, and no doubt I would win the case, but by the time I pay the lawyer, it's probably not worth it. So the heck with it." He never pursued it. He said, "You know, I don't mind losing that money, because I learned something that's worth every penny of it." I asked him what he had learned.

"I learned that when you're dead, you can't do anything," he said. "This guy was a very decent person and he would certainly have paid the money, but he was dead, and he couldn't do anything. You'd think that I would have already known this. And in a way I suppose I did. But I didn't really know it. Now, with the loss of all this money, I really know it. When you're dead, you can't do anything."

This is a really profound teaching. When someone you love is gone, that person can't do anything anymore. This means that you have to do something, or that you have to do something differently. Somehow, you, who are connected to that person, have to do what they can no longer do. You have to ask yourself, "Now that this has happened, what will I do, what will I do in place of my friend?" There is always something to be done. This was Alan's last teaching to me.

Alan was really concerned about others. He would get agitated and upset if the people he loved weren't doing well. If his family members were having troubles, he would tell me about it with anguish in his voice. His death made me want to care more for other people. It's not something that comes naturally to me. When my friends are ill or in need of help, I have to put a real intention into thinking about them, calling them, and doing something, instead of just going about my business. I have far to go, but I think of Alan and I keep working at it.

We think we're trying to get rid of suffering. I want more suffering. I want to feel more suffering of the people who are suffering everywhere. I want to feel that suffering more, care about it more, and do something about it more. That's my commitment to Alan and to myself.

The other thing I learned from Alan's death is that love will naturally rush into the vacuum that loss creates. Alan knew a lot of people, and we knew many people in common. Many people loved him, and when he was gone, I felt so much closer to those people. Even though we had been close before, the vacuum caused by the loss created much more love. Love creates love. That feeling wasn't something that came and went in a month or two. With loss, difficulty, and the total overturning of the plan you had for your life comes more love and more depth if you turn your heart in that direction.

Loss, disappointment, and difficulty can be really devastating. They can damage us permanently; they can even destroy our lives. But if we yield to our sadness and turn toward our difficult feelings, we can remember these lessons that I learned from Alan: there is always something to be done and there is always more love. I don't know if you believe this already, but it is certainly true.



DO WE HAVE TO SUFFER?

These are tough times, full of objective difficulties and anxieties. But times are always tough, and even when times in general aren't tough, your time might be tough at

ZOKETSU NORMAN FISCHER is the founder and spiritual director of the Everyday Zen Foundation, an organization dedicated to adapting Zen Buddhist teachings to Western culture. He is also a senior dharma teacher at the San Francisco Zen Center, where he served as co-abbot from 1995 to 2000.

any given period in your life. Nobody escapes tough times. Nobody escapes suffering.

By suffering, I mean pain, whether physical or mental. I suppose a small minority of us might say, "I like suffering; I want more suffering." But most of us don't. When I'm in the presence of something I really don't want, then I'm suffering. Suffering seems to be the opposite of happiness. If there's happiness, there is no suffering. If there's suffering, there is no happiness.

The most astonishing fact of human life is that most of us think it's possible to minimize and even eliminate suffering. We actually think this, which is one reason why it's so difficult for us when we're suffering. We think, "This shouldn't be this way," or "I'm going to get rid of this somehow." I think many of us believe that since suffering is so bad and so unpleasant, if we were really good and really smart, it wouldn't arise in the first place. Somehow suffering is our own fault. If it's not our fault, then it's definitely someone else's fault. But when suffering arises, we think we should surely be able to avoid it. We should be able to set it to one side and not dwell on it. We should "move on," as they say, go on to positive things, do a little Buddhism, meditate, get around the suffering, and go forward. We shouldn't allow the suffering to stop us, not allow it to mess us up. We believe that if only we play our cards right, we could have a positive life without much suffering. We constantly come back to that way of thinking.

It's incredible that we would think such a thing. The more we look around us, the more we pay attention to what we're feeling and what others around us are feeling, the more suffering we see. There is more suffering than we know. Anxiety is suffering, isn't it? There is a lot of anxiety. Not getting what you want is suffering. How many of us don't get what we want? Irritation is suffering. Anger is suffering. Having to put up with things you don't like is suffering. Knowing that you're going to have to die, and you really don't want to—that's suffering. Sickness is suffering. Old age is suffering. Not having enough money is suffering. Losing your job is suffering. Having a bad marriage is suffering. Having no marriage can be suffering if you want to have a marriage. Fear is suffering. Knowing you could lose what you think you have is suffering. Being ashamed is suffering. Feeling disrespected is suffering. Feeling unloved is suffering. Feeling loved, but not loved enough, is suffering. Feeling lonely is suffering. Feeling bewildered is suffering. Being too cold, being too hot, being stuck in traffic, getting in the wrong line and the guy in the front is very, very slow, and the other line that you could have got into is going much faster, and you could have been in the

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front of that line by now, but if you joined it now, you'd be at the end—all this is suffering. Even without talking about the earthquakes, the wars, the deprivation, the oppression, the illness, and the hunger that is happening all over our world, suffering is really common. It's not a special condition. Suffering is a daily experience.

Even if we try to ignore it, we really don't escape the suffering. It registers in our psyche and becomes a conditioning factor in our lives. We may find that we're living in reaction to the suffering that we're unwilling to see and think about. So the idea that suffering is some sort of mistake and a minor problem that we could overcome with a little bit of meditation and a positive attitude is the towering pinnacle of human self-deception.

DUKKHA

Part of the problem might be that “suffering” is such a drastic word; it sounds like a rare thing. The idea of suffering is a central thought in Buddhist practice. The original word in Pali is dukkha, which is most often translated as suffering, but is sometimes translated simply as “unsatisfactoriness” or as “stress.” Dukkha refers to the psychological experience—sometimes conscious, sometimes not conscious—of the profound fact that everything is impermanent, ungraspable, and not really knowable. On some level, we all understand this. All the things we have, we know we don't really have. All the things we see, we're not entirely seeing. This is the nature of things, yet we think the opposite. We think that we can know and possess our lives, our loves, our identities, and even our possessions. We can't. The gap between the reality and the basic human approach to life is dukkha, an experience of basic anxiety or frustration.

Seen in this way, dukkha could actually be another name for human consciousness itself. Dukkha is not a mistake. It is not a correctible situation; it is human consciousness. Dukkha is every moment, every experience of our lives, not just the things that obviously seem to be dukkha, like pain, suffering, and loss. Pain, suffering, and loss are built into every moment of consciousness, even if they don't appear on the surface to be pain, suffering, and loss.

The great and beautiful secret of meditation practice is this: you can experience dukkha with equanimity. Isn't

equanimity the secret of happiness? If you tried to eliminate dukkha, it would be like trying to eliminate life. But if you can receive dukkha with equanimity, then, in a way, it's no longer dukkha. Impermanence could be the most devastating fact of life, and often it is. But impermanence could also be incredibly beautiful, if you receive it with equanimity. It could be peace itself.

If we stop, perhaps for a moment we can see the beauty in this impermanence. But then we go back into our lives in the world of activity and desire. We go back to grasping things that aren't really there and to operating in the world that we want, rather than the world as it is. Beneath our daily consciousness will be this anxiety and fear and this immense longing. Dukkha is this basic fact of our lives. When we are dying, our whole lifetime habit of denying dukkha will end, and dukkha will become inescapable. One way or the other, we're going to have to grapple with it. So it's good to get a head start.

Our culture is so focused on consumerism and youth that we don't have a good model for what aging and dying could be like. All we feel is the lack of things: we're not as youthful as we were, we're not as limber as we were, we're not as this, we're not as that. Almost everything that we hear and see in the media is about how to maintain your youth as long as possible. All this focus on stopping aging implies somebody made a big mistake in the universe. It's as if we should be getting younger instead of older.

But we're missing a very important point. There's something beautiful about quiet and peace. There's something beautiful about not trying to do anything, but simply, in some way, your heart joining the whole world. There's a time in life when we should be running around doing things. We should go out dancing; there's a time in life for that. There's a time in life for building something up in this world, a family, an institution, a business, a creative life; there's a time for that. There's also a time for becoming quiet, a time for slow conversations with people that we love, and a time for reflecting on all the things that we've seen in many years of living. When the time for those things comes, it's beautiful. It's not a terrible thing, it's sweet. There's also a time for letting go of our life, not “Damn, somebody's snatching this away from me,” but “Yes, it's beautiful to exhale after you inhale.” At the right time, when the chest is full, breathe out and let go.

SUFFERING IS NOT A MISTAKE

In Buddhist cosmology, there are six realms: the god realm, the demigod realm, the human realm, the animal realm, the hungry ghost realm, all defined by constant desire, and the hell realm, defined by constant pain and suffering. In the god realm, everything is perfect. There's no pain and no discorporation of the body because there is no body. Everything is sort of ethereal. Sounds nice, right? But this is not the best realm to be born into because in this realm one becomes addicted to pleasure. The best realm is the human realm because in the human realm, there's just enough suffering that we have the incentive to seek liberation, but not so much suffering that we are consumed by it and cannot focus on a spiritual path.

So suffering, if we can relate to it properly, is an advantage for the spiritual path. If we imagine somehow that our suffering will dissolve if we only do such and such, or if we are crushed by the weight of it, then we don't have the energy or resources to understand it as a tool for greater consciousness. This is an improper response to suffering. The question then is not: Can we ameliorate or eliminate suffering? The question is: How will we receive and make use of the suffering in our lives?

Suffering is not a mistake. It's not a problem. It's not your fault; it's not my fault. It's not the government's fault. You and I and the government may make plenty of mistakes, but the question of suffering is much bigger than that. Suffering is pivotal for human life. It's what gives us the incentive, the vision, and the strength to really take hold of our lives spiritually.

Whether or not you have a spiritual or religious point of view, if you're human and if you have language, you know that life could either be meaningful or meaningless. The difference between these two perspectives matters to all of us. None of us can bear a meaningless life. We all need to find some way for life to have meaning. This is part of being human. If we don't have meaning, we become brittle, brutal, and numb. Suffering can reduce us to meaninglessness. So much of the overt suffering in this world is caused by people who have themselves suffered and been crushed by the weight of that suffering. But suffering can also bring us to the deepest possible sense of meaning for human life. We can all likely recall a story of someone who, due to tremendous suffering, found a beauty and meaning in life that they never would have seen without that experience.

In difficult times, the key thing is to turn toward the suffering instead of trying to figure out how to get rid of it or paper it over with all kinds of positive things. We need to learn how to turn toward suffering, really take it in, find the meaning in it, and let it open a path for us to a new life. There's nothing more beneficial than being able to be present with the breath and with the body to what's happening when we are suffering, without flailing all around in resistance. That's the beginning of a new path.

SUFFERING AND POSSIBILITY

Rabbi Lew wrote a great book called *Be Still and Get Going*. In it he discusses the Garden of Eden story, which is essentially about people who have everything that they could want, but want the one thing they can't have. The result, no surprise, is suffering. He writes, "Is the universe essentially deficient and in need of improvement? Is God flawed? Why was this desire, which would prove to be our undoing, implanted in our souls in the first place? Is God a screwup?"

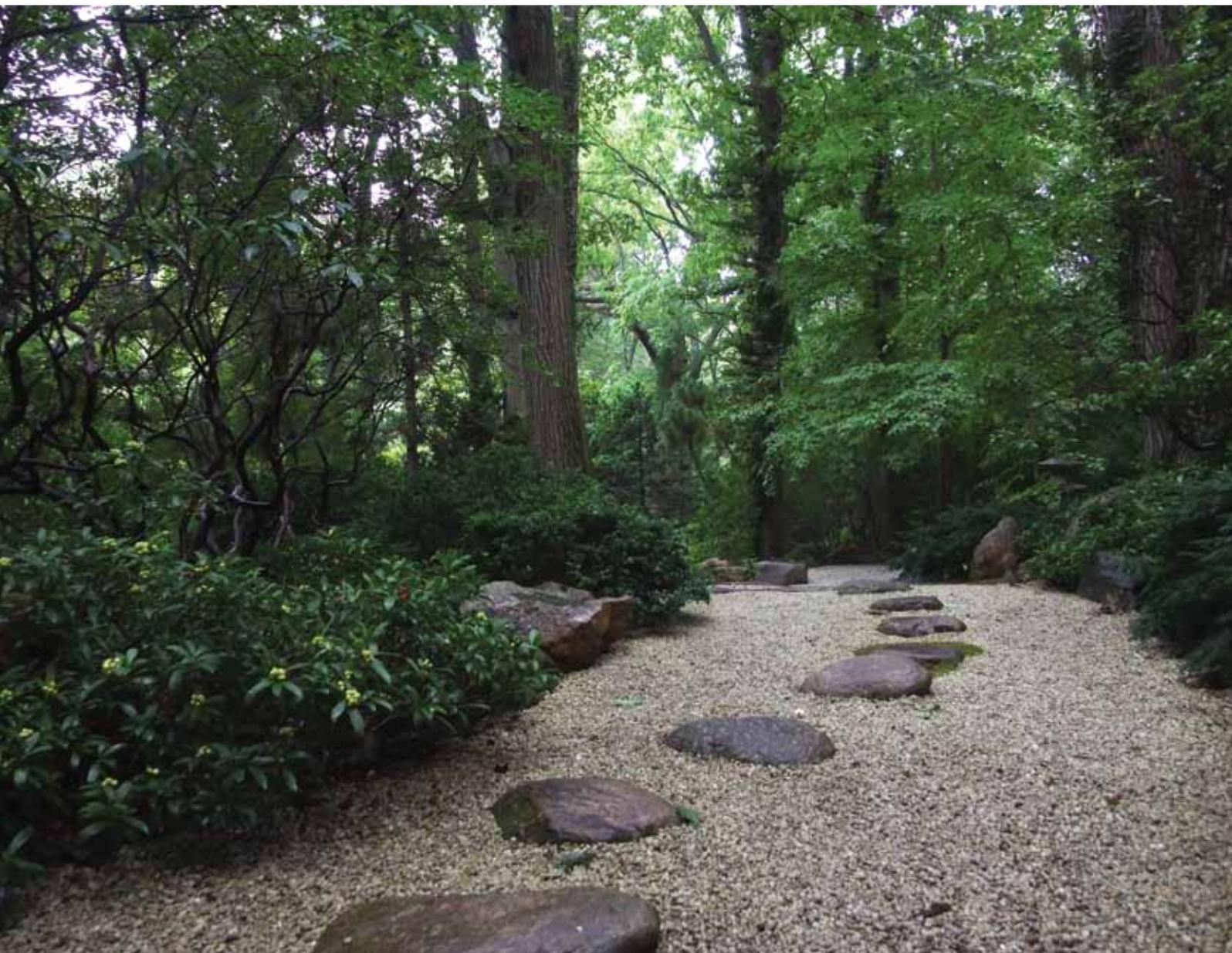
Rabbi Lew writes in terms of God, but if that's not your way of looking at things, you could rephrase it as, "Is there a screwup in the nature of things? This is a horrible mess—what's going on here?" He continues:

Or is there something about the process of healing, of working through suffering and death, of mending a broken world, that is both necessary and good?

I have a friend who was going through a period of tremendous suffering, a complete breakdown in his life; he couldn't work or do anything. I've known him well over many years, and he was very discouraged and ashamed of himself for his suffering. I said to him, "You know, I guess this is just your way of digesting a new phase in your life. The last time this happened to you, you were about to enter a new phase. Perhaps this is just what you do: you go all to pieces, then you pick yourself up and you go forward." He was going through a big reorganization, which is always painful. But then when he was done, he was able to move ahead in a way he hadn't before.

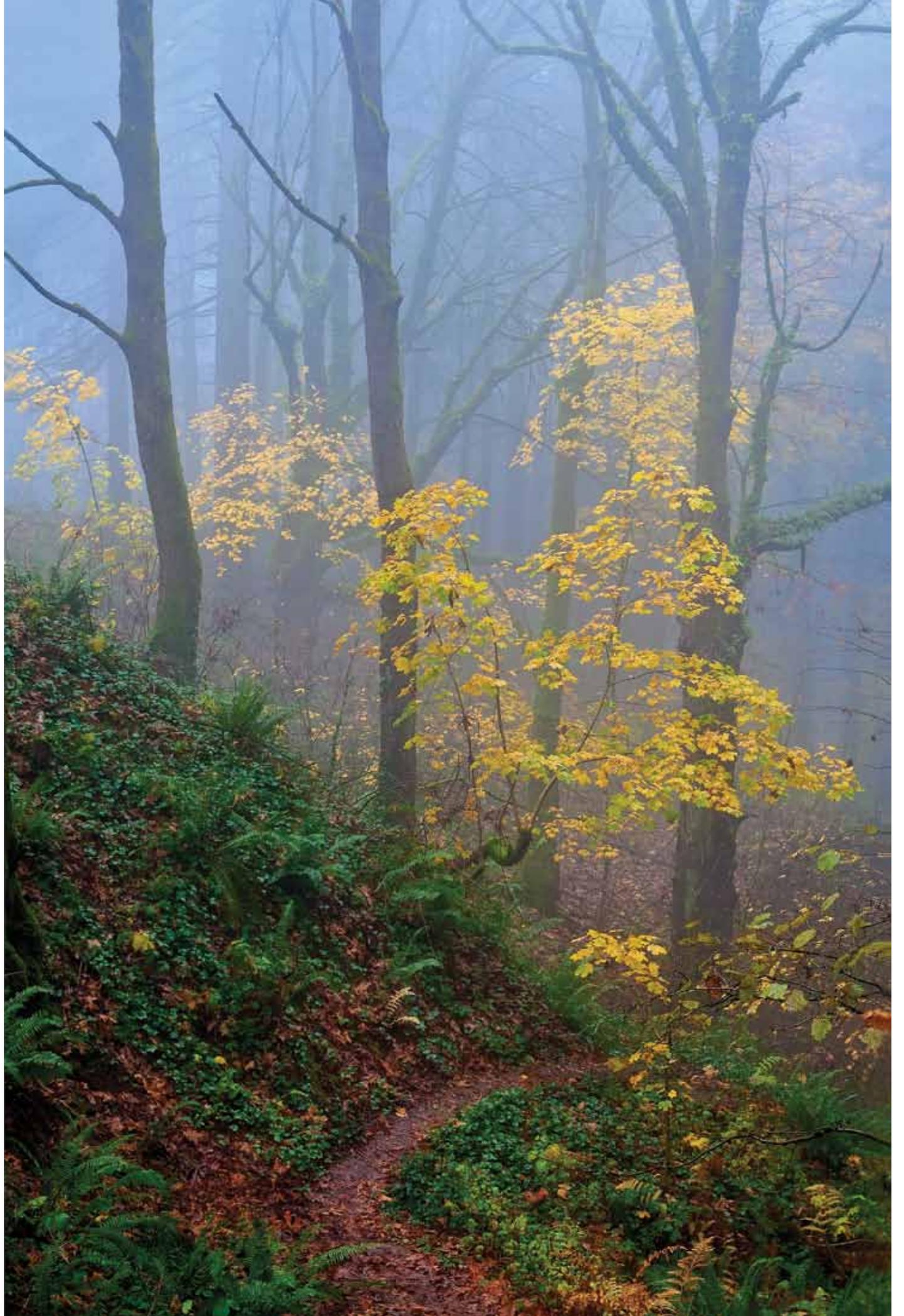
Rabbi Lew is saying that often suffering is needed for reorganization. We're stronger after we reorganize. This raises more questions. Suffering may very well be inevitable, but can

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it also be useful in this way? Is the history we were thrust into after our fall from Eden not only inevitable but also something we needed to go through, something that benefited us more than remaining in a static paradise? We're all looking to get rid of suffering. We're looking for a way to be consistently happy. But maybe that's not actually so good.

Accepting suffering as part of our lives doesn't mean we give up hope or stop wanting some things to be different. For example, if someone you love is diagnosed with cancer, of course you will hope and search for a cure. You can accept the fact of the diagnosis at the same time that you do everything possible to ameliorate it. There is no contradiction between



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acceptance and hope. In fact, acceptance and hope are connected. Acceptance is not resignation. Acceptance is a lively engagement with conditions as they are.

Of course, there is a kind of hope that is really more like desperation: the sense that if something bad happens, you'll be ruined forever, and so you hope desperately that there will be a good outcome. That's the less effective kind of hope because there is only one outcome that is acceptable to you. So you mightily focus on it, shutting out everything else, including all fear and all sorrow. Then there's the kind of hope built on acceptance, with some uplifted spirit, of conditions as they are. Acceptance strengthens this kind of hope. You still do everything you can, including all kinds of objective things such as looking at different treatments and making that person comfortable. You hope and pray for a good outcome. If you do this with the awareness and acceptance of suffering, you strengthen your ability to face with love whatever happens next.

UNNECESSARY SUFFERING

There is suffering that is necessary, and there is a lot of suffering that is absolutely unnecessary. All of us cause ourselves unnecessary suffering. A huge percentage of the suffering that we feel on a daily basis is extra. We don't need it. There's plenty of suffering built in to human life; we can just wait for it. We don't need to add more by unintentionally making choices that cause more suffering. We don't need to add more by getting trapped in our mind's attachment to past or future problems and potential pitfalls.

We complicate our lives and we have a lot of desires. In this way we make more suffering than we need to. If I decide I'm going to accomplish fifteen important things today, and I only accomplish thirteen of them, then I am suffering—I am dissatisfied. But I made this up myself! Why not only ten? Or seven? If I have an idea about how my day is supposed to go, or my life, and my day or my life doesn't go that way, I have a reason, it seems, to be unhappy. But I have created that reason myself. There are plenty of reasons to be unhappy without my creating more reasons. Maybe I could just pay attention to the basic and actual suffering that comes, rather than making more suffering than I need. The basic suffering, the actual suffering, is difficult, but it is useful. The extra suffering is usually trivial: it doesn't illuminate my life; it only makes me crabby.

In Zen we have koans to practice with, stories of the old masters that are sometimes hard to fathom. We can suffer over these stories; we can become miserable if we think we don't understand. But we don't need these stories to give us artificial problems. There are enough real problems to get our attention, like sickness, aging, and death; like loss. When real suffering comes, it gets our attention. We're forced to go beyond crabbiness. If, in the face of suffering, we take up our spiritual practice and use the suffering to strengthen our motivation, then we can find some real benefit in the suffering.

Meditation can help. The more we practice, the more awareness we have. The more awareness we have, the more we can notice when we're creating the needless suffering, and we can decide to do something else. You can see all this quite clearly on your meditation cushion. Let's say a pain comes into your back. There it is—it hurts! And then you begin to squirm, and you begin to complain, maybe about someone else whose fault it is that you are trapped in this body in this moment, or maybe about yourself. Your mind is raging all over the place. And this makes the pain much worse. If you are just willing to sit still and experience the pain, you see that it's not so bad. You can endure it. It can even sometimes disappear. But even if it doesn't, at least it's real. There's a dignity in bearing pain that must be borne. It is much better than squirming and complaining and making matters worse. You actually find that the more you squirm and try to improve things that cannot be improved, the worse it gets. The more you are willing to endure something that cannot be changed, the easier it is.

When we stop creating the unnecessary suffering, we can notice all the real suffering around us. All the fake, unnecessary suffering is actually distracting us, protecting us in a way, from the real suffering around us. The real suffering is much more intractable. It's horribly painful. But it connects us to everyone else in the world, and so in that sense, the real suffering is okay. We become numb and isolated because we want to avoid the suffering, but it's the numbness and isolation that feel the worst. When we break through the unnecessary suffering and connect with others, it's hard and it's painful, but it's also better. When we open up to the real pain of caring for others, we do feel better. **BD**

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