

BEAUTIFUL WORK

A Meditation on Pain



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Preface

After a certain age you can no longer avoid the conclusion that the world is not as you thought it to be. This book tells the story of an initiation into a meditation practice. It is Anna's initiation. Anna wanted to investigate the world as she found it, outside of her expectations, but she didn't know how to proceed. That is the work. The story begins in the desert. What is this desert? It is a place where you see clearly, and seeing clearly is shocking. It's disorienting. What follows are three retreats, the first one within a monastic community, the other two at a practice center for lay persons. A retreat is where you take a look at objects closely and *practice* seeing them clearly, and where you try to recognize the difference between seeing and remembering. In the stillness there are voices: voices of the dead; voices that can't be identified; and the voices that can be. Anna listens to what they say so she can separate the voices that teach from the ones that torment. Also, she

must discern what is essential for practice from what is merely formal. Renunciation is elegant, but is it a necessary condition? Can you practice and also love? The periods of formal practice occur over two years: they have beginnings and ends. But what of beginnings and ends that cannot be marked? Anna is astonished. Consolations diminish as she sees more precisely. This is not a hopeful practice. In the course of this practice Anna makes no pretense of gaining any knowledge, except about a direction that tends toward the truthful.

Beautiful Work begins in the desert, but it ends in the world. The world in which it ends, however, is not different from the desert. There are the same elements: what is seen, what is heard, what is tasted, what is touched, what is smelled, what is thought. Those *are* the elements.

Pain is original and pure. It is the first thing. Before language, before thought, and independent of circumstance. Pain is before injury. Arising from no fact, fortuitously.

To be competent to speak of pain is to speak of pain that isn't yours. This requires experiencing pain that is yours. Pain experienced *as if* it were your own.

I speak of the pain that has no cause. This is not to say there are no causes for pain. That would be absurd. But pain need have no cause.

I speak as much for my own sake as for yours. When I first made this discovery, it was like a smooth stone in my throat. Smooth, but unmistakable. Habit is a drug. Only when I speak do I become conscious again of the stone in my throat.

The stone is a mystery. It is great good to know of it. I also speak for that reason.

Of course I have come to see that the subject is larger

than pain. But pain is how the subject was initially focused for me. I had no choice about that.

It is difficult to remember: "Pain isn't mine." But from this everything follows.

It seems that it might be possible to recover a time, prior to the stories that get attached to the pain, when the pain simply *was*. Before it was dreaded and hated, there was a time in my life very far back when pain was innocent of association, when it was neutral, like sunlight or like breath.

Nonetheless, with discipline one can recover, for periods of time, that first state. That is the work.

But what would be the motive? Why would one endeavor to recover just that? Pain is tied up in explanations, veiled by stories about the pain, buried in this and that history. The motive is to extricate the uncompounded thing, free it of entanglement, for the sake of looking at it. If my pain came to be like that, there might be a way to see it.

The stories one tells about pain are deep, are profound ones. Nothing is more legible than these stories. But something is left out of them. If there were no stories, there might be a moment of innocence. A moment before the burden of stories, and the belief in their causes and consequences. There were moments when it was not accurate to say in relation to pain "because of this" or "leading to that." These were only moments. But they were lucid moments. In these moments everything is free.

I know now after what has happened that there is a way to see below ideas, to see without ideas, or (since that is impossible) to see the exact place where the ideas intrude.

To see like that: simply because pain *is* that way.

I began to hunger for storylessness. Before experience had wrapped itself up in accounts.

Moments of such seeing have authority. It is not my au-

thority. It is like bearing witness. I could not say witness to what. There was gravity to this. I had to pay attention. There would be meaning or there would not be meaning. Meaning would not come in expected forms. It might not come at all. Meaning was outside of the task.

I began to hunger for storylessness. But outside of a story pain didn't look like my own. It was the *narrative* of pain that I recognized as mine. I did not recognize the *pain*.

Outside of the story, it made no sense to say pain was mine. Pain was a dense sequence of rapidly occurring sensations. But even to say "Pain was this" or "It was that," to say "was a sequence of sensations," begins another story.

The story is a great solace. I was addicted to the story. Why put it in the past tense? Am addicted to the story. For if this and this happens, then that and the other will.

But if pain were only this burning, this twisting or chill! Pain before injury. Pain without cause. This taste, that hardness, that glimmer of light. When I saw pain in this fashion, saw it unfeatured—I could not even say it was "pain" I was seeing.

What if the word too were wrong? If the word too were subsequent? *It is pain*, but sunlight was in it. Sunlight and breath. Other facts might also add their names to what I saw was original.

But how to do it? How to see pain uncompounded? It would be like tearing down a house.

I would have to start with the foundation in order to determine whether the house was dangerous to work on. Was the house out of plumb?

I would most certainly have to discover the sequence of the house's construction in order to *unbuild* it.

I would need to learn what kind of frame and what kind of foundation, whether a stone-built house or a frame

house. How the house was connected to the foundation. If the house were stable on the foundation.

In which systems was there failure? If the girder were rotted out, I must first support the floor joists from the bottom and then take the girder out. If the corner post were rotted, I would have to jack up the wall to bring it back to level in order to dismantle the house. So long as the house was unsound I couldn't dismantle it safely.

But once the house was stable, I could get to work. I would shovel off the roof shingles. Then I'd rip off the sheathing with my claw hammer. Then the trim boards, the soffit, and the fascia. There might be crown moldings, cornice details I would remove in pieces. Only then could I separate the rafters from the roof ridge.

But now the walls at the gable end of the house would need temporary support. How to brace the walls while taking down the house? How to keep the standing walls from caving in on me? How not to be destroyed by this work?

I could not unbuild the house.

Instead I left the house. I was homeless. I lived in the open.

*

Dharma was in the heat. After the three-mile climb up rocks from the creek; before the steep descent to Thunder River, I came to a valley. I felt the dharma of the heat's relentlessness. By its relentlessness, I recognized the presence of a law.

Grasses were there. They grew five feet back from the trail and were deep, rich green, and long, bent over themselves. There was violence in the insistence of the grasses on growing *here*. They were not the color of the cactus, or of the rocks, or of the flowers. They were not withered by

the heat. They seemed part of another landscape—not the desert.

The grasses seemed to signify: abundance that thrives in spite of the heat. But as I walked, I saw the grasses, the flowers, the Utah century plant, each was ruled differently. The dharma of the heat was indiscriminate: what was lush and what was not lush here thrived simultaneously.

Violence was in the indiscriminateness. There—in the canyon—at the bottom of the world, there was no principle. The *blossoms* of the cactus were fragile. But the *stems* of the cactus were rude and twisted. The grasses grew marvelously, other plants died slowly after a struggle. If the dharma were indiscriminate, how could it be lawful? The answer was hidden.

Violence was in the provocation to look for the logic. It was in the passion to look. I was compelled to look. But no matter how much empty sky there was when I looked up, the meaning was still above.

It was not down here.

The effort to distinguish between up and down was immaterial. I had walked for hours to get to the bottom of the canyon. This valley within the larger canyon which I reached by climbing up was also far from the top. The walls of this side canyon still rose above me to a plateau I couldn't see, and beyond that farther walls rose higher yet, out of sight.

Where I walked it was open. The openness was part of the dharma I could not penetrate. There was nothing to indicate that this object rather than that one was significant. A person could go crazy not knowing where to look. The

openness imposed an obligation. I had to look *at* objects and *past* them, simultaneously. *It was certain: no thing was an end.* Behind this cactus there was another. A rock that stopped my eye one moment became trivial the next. I was obliged to grow indifferent even to a sight I loved. I had to see that the place on which I thought my eyes could rest, they could not rest.

Where I walked it was trackless. If I looked down at the path, I saw only the piece of trail where I was: definite, but incomplete. If I looked ahead, I saw an entire landscape, but I was outside of it. Ahead, everything was visible—the trail across the valley on flat ground, the grasses, the century plants—but it lacked depth. All I could count on was the heat, which I couldn't see. If here was where I had to stop, the heat would grind me into the dust on which I walked. *The heat was beautiful: it had no outside.*

The dharma is a path, a way, something I am walking *in*. (It was not a surface: it contained me.) But I could not recognize this path or say even, “*This* is where I am.” Or “Later on I will be *here*.” I could not think! I was dizzy, and I let my eyes go out of focus. The heat had a sound like the *nada* sound. Like the hum of bees.

I met a man with a pack and a walking stick who had lost his friends three days before. I hadn't seen them.

That morning I saw a rattlesnake asleep beside a boulder. The heat—the dharma—seemed more dangerous than the snake.

A breeze rose out of the heat. It was not a breeze that died down and started again, but was constantly the same. It did not come across the valley from a direction. I was hopeful, until I saw the breeze was only a lesser degree of heat.