Five Things We Cannot Change

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Reinhold Niebuhr, an American Protestant theologian, composed a prayer that has become the cornerstone of the recovery movement: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." This is a profound aspiration. But what are the things we cannot change?

As a psychotherapist working with clients — and in my own life as a practicing Buddhist — I have seen the same questions and struggles arise again and again. There are five unavoidable givens, five immutable facts of life built into the very nature of things, over which we are powerless:

1. Everything changes and ends.
2. Things do not always go according to plan.
3. Life is not always fair.
4. Pain is part of life.
5. People are not loving and loyal all the time.

Too often we behave as if somehow these givens aren’t always in effect or are not applicable to all of us. But when we oppose these five basic truths we resist reality, and life becomes an endless series of disappointments, frustrations, and sorrows. Once we learn to accept and embrace these fundamental facts, however, we come to realize that they are exactly what we need to gain courage, compassion, and wisdom — in short, to find real happiness.

The Unconditional "Yes"

The word "yes" sums up spirituality and sanity. An unconditional yes to what is frees us from the self-imposed suffering that results when we fear facing the givens of life. Yes is born of trust and heals fear. This is because we are acknowledging that whatever happens to us is part of our story and useful on our path. Our yes to the conditions of existence means getting on with life rather than being caught up in disputes and attempts to gain control over how things play out.

When things change and end, we become trusting of the cycles of life as steps to evolutionary growth. Yes alleviates our suffering by freeing us from clinging to anything at all. When things do not go according to our plans, we stretch our potential for trusting a power beyond our ego. Our ego’s futile and ferocious attempts to make everything come out its own way give way to letting the chips fall where they may. Yes frees us from the suffering caused by the compulsion to be in charge.

When things are not fair, we evoke our potential to act fairly no matter what. This means trusting a power beyond our ego, with all its insistence on retaliation and its petulant demands for equity. A yes to this third given frees us from the suffering that happens when we are caught up in getting back at people and when we hold grudges.

When pain enters our life, we activate our potential for facing it without complaint, and we gain compassion for others who also suffer. A yes to this fourth given frees us from the suffering that comes from useless protest.

When people are not loyal or loving toward us, we enliven our potential for unconditional love. A yes frees us from the suffering caused by our need to hurt or reject those who have disappointed us.
Fear is a "no" to what is. To fear these givens is to be afraid of life, since they are its components. Fear prevents us from experiencing life fully and living in the moment by creating avoidance and attraction. We avoid what is unpleasant and we grasp at whatever makes us feel good. The Buddhist tradition encourages us to take a middle path. The chart above shows the work that installs us in this "golden mean," as the ancient Romans called it.

Each condition of existence equips us with a handy skill. Yes means we are open to the events that befall us, but we are not bowled over by what happens. We are resourceful in dealing with the givens; we do all we can to handle them. Then we let the chips fall where they may. Soon we pick them up one by one and place our bets again. There is a vitality in us, a sparkle — a bonfire, actually — that cannot be extinguished by any tragedy. Something in us, an urge toward wholeness, a passion for evolving, makes us go on, start over, not give up, not give in.