Insight into Pain

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Pain is a fact of consciousness. It's what distinguishes us from robots. Robots can have sensors, but they don't feel pain. It's our main subjective burden—which is why the Buddha's teachings are such a gift. There's a principle in postmodern thought that every attempt to teach people something is an act of aggression, because you're trying to make them submit to your view of things. But the Buddha's teachings are a huge exception to that. He didn't force anybody to accept his teachings. He offered his teachings as therapy. You can take them and use them, or you can put them aside, pay them no mind. He didn't need anyone's approval. He didn't need to exert power over anyone, because he had already found a true happiness that nothing could change. He simply offered his teachings as a gift to the one problem that everybody shares.

Now, it's true that we don't share one another's pain—I don't feel your pain, you don't feel mine. When a politician says, "I feel your pain," you wonder what he's feeling. But each of us knows what pain is like, and each of us wants a solution to it.

The Buddha says that the primary reaction to pain is twofold. One is bewilderment, not understanding where it comes from or why it's there. The second reaction is a search: Is there anyone who knows a way or two to get rid of this pain? Particularly with animals and young children who can't speak yet, there's not much comprehension of pain. There's the sensation of pain, the definite feeling of pain, but there's a huge question that goes along with it: "Why, why, why? What is this? Why, why is this happening?" That's the bewilderment. As we begin to find that there are other people who can help assuage our pain—starting with our mother and father—we start looking outside. Some pains they can take care of, but a lot of pains they can't. So we look to other people beyond them.

The Buddha is there to fill in that gap, because bewilderment often leads to really mistaken ideas—looking to the wrong people, taking up the wrong ideas about how pain can be overcome. So the Buddha gives us his expert advice. He's like a doctor—but not one who simply gives us a shot and sends us home. He's like an old-fashioned herbal doctor who gives you a prescription. It's up to you to find the herbs, make them into medicine, and take it. And you have to adjust your life: avoiding certain foods, eating other foods, avoiding certain activities, exercising in certain ways. In other words, the actual treatment is up to you. The

same with the Buddha: He's not going to take the pain away for you but he does tell you what you can do to overcome the suffering.

In particular, he talks about two kinds of pain, two kinds of suffering. There's the pain in the three characteristics and there's the pain or suffering in the four noble truths. The pain in the three characteristics is something universal. Wherever there's a process of fabrication where conditions come together to create other conditions, there's going to be stress: the stress inherent in the fact that things arise and pass away, the stress in the fact that their coming together contains tension and can't be permanent.

But that's not the suffering that weighs down the mind. The extent to which it *does* weigh down the mind comes from the fact that we have craving. The craving is what really weighs us down, causing the suffering, the pain in the four noble truths. That's the type of suffering we can do something about. It's optional suffering. The path to put an end to that optional suffering is the noble eightfold path, or the threefold training: virtue, concentration, discernment.

Virtue here starts with our activities in terms of speech and physical activities. But it points to something really important in the mind: that those activities are based on our intentions. There are several purposes for this aspect of the practice. One is that if you harm others, it's going to be hard for you to practice concentration. The karmic retribution creates difficulties. Then there's the regret you feel when you realize you've harmed yourself or somebody else. As the mind is trying to settle down in concentration, that becomes a thorn in the mind, making it hard to settle down. Training in virtue is a way of avoiding those difficulties.

At the same time, training in virtue is also training in mindfulness, training in alertness, training in compassion, all of which are good qualities of mind you'll have to use in meditation. As you do this, you're getting very sensitive to your intentions, because the intention is what determines whether you're breaking a precept or not. We go through life being so ignorant of our intentions and covering them up with denial, especially the unskillful ones. When you ask people why they did something, they often have to stop and think for a little while and reconstruct it. They weren't really there as the decisions were being made. So holding to the precepts makes you more and more present to your intentions, more sensitive to the results of your actions.

Then the same principle gets carried into the mind. When you're practicing concentration, you want to be very clear that this is an action, an activity you're engaged in. You're thinking and evaluating a single object. You're holding a single perception in mind. As the Buddha said, the levels of concentration are a series of perception attainments, all the way from the first jhana up through the dimension

of nothingness. At each level, there's a perception you hold in your mind, a mental label you apply to your object. That's what keeps you in touch with the object, such as the breath. There are many things that you could be sensitive to in your awareness of the body right now, but the Buddha's asking that you be sensitive to the dimension of breath energy: the in-and-out breath and the other breath energies in the body. You try to stay tuned to that level of awareness, that aspect of being sensitive to a physical body sitting here.

When the Buddha talks about being aware of the body, he's also getting you to be aware of the four properties: the wind property, the fire property, the water property, and the earth property. These are all aspects of how you sense the body from within. The wind is the energy or motion. Earth is the solidity, fire the warmth, and water the cool sensations that go with the flow of the blood through the body, for example. As you focus on those aspects of your body, you find that there are also feelings of pain or pleasure. It's important that you learn how to distinguish those feelings from the four properties, because otherwise they get glommed together, especially the earth, the solid aspect of the body. When there's a pain, you tend to glom it on with the solid sensations. That makes the pain seem solid and hard.

Here's an area where you can get some important insights into how perceptions can create problems. The perception of the pain has glued the pain to the solid sensations of the body, making the pain seem a lot more solid than it actually is. To see this, you have to stay concentrated, to stay with the sense of the body. Don't keep flying off to other mental worlds. Then, when you're solidly here, you can start making distinctions: which sensations are the earth sensations, which ones are the water, fire, breath, or wind? And then which sensations are the pain sensations? They're different things.

When you can see that distinction and learn how to apply different labels to those different sensations, you take a huge burden off the mind. Even though there may still be pain in the body, the mind doesn't have to be pained by it. You begin to see that the perception is the bridge between the physical pain and the sense of suffering or being burdened in the mind. How does this perception create craving? Because we lay claim to the body. The whole mass here is *us* or *ours.* As soon as pain comes in, our territory has been invaded. We sense the pain as aiming at us. It's trying to do something to us, trying to move in on our space.

But if you can practice holding different perceptions of what's going on, there can still be pain, but it's not invading your territory. When you're not trying to take possession of that territory, you're not opening yourself up to attack.

So that's another level of perception that you want to be able to distinguish: that when you're aware of something, you also tend to take possession of it. However, it's possible to be aware without having that sense of possession. Just as you're aware of the mountain over there on the horizon, the sun on the mountain, the trees, the chaparral: You look at them and you're aware of them, but there's no sense of possession. They're not yours. As long as mountains and chaparral don't do anything to invade your space, there's no suffering.

But if you were to invade them, there would be. If you went out and tried to take possession of Mount Palomar or Mount Pala, there would be problems with the legal owners. But as long as you don't take possession of them, there's no problem. So learn how to apply that same principle to your sense of inhabiting the body. Your awareness can be here, the body can be here, but there doesn't have to be a *you* inhabiting it. There's just this sense of the body that you're aware of.

Now, to see the movements of the mind as it's applying these perceptions to things, creating the bridges that allow stress to come into the mind: That requires a lot of stillness, which is why the Buddha said that genuine insights really do require strong concentration. You can have insights about other things without much concentration—you see little movements in the mind here and there in a random kind of way, and draw interesting conclusions. But the insights that really go deep into the mind, that really have a major impact in freeing the mind, are the insights that come from seeing how you're trying to take control of something so you can gain pleasure out of it, but it turns around and it bites you. As in Ajaan Chah's image: the tail of the snake looks pretty, and the teeth are way on the other end, so we figure that it's safe to grab hold of the tail.

It's when you realize that the teeth and the tail are all part of the same body: Those are the insights that are really important, that make a big difference. For those you have to be very quiet because the movement of mind that tries to take over something so that you can feel that you're in control of it, convinced that it can lead you to happiness and pleasure: It's so instinctive, so under the radar. There's such an of-courseness about it—of course you'd think that this is your body, of course you'd feel this way, of course you'd have those perceptions—that it's really hard to catch.

This is an important aspect of insight: learning how to question the "of course," learning to see things with new eyes, getting out of your old habits of looking and understanding, and then turning around to really see those old habits: "Oh my gosh, they really do cause a lot of unnecessary suffering and stress."

So an important aspect of concentration practice is learning to get out of your old habits. Instead of thinking about things as you normally do or focusing on

things as you normally would, try to hold on to your perception of the breath regardless. The mind may say, "This is stupid; you're not getting any insights," but you can say, "Sorry, whether it's stupid or not, I don't care. I'm just going to keep on doing this." You're here to learn something new. As the Buddha said, you're practicing to realize what you haven't realized before, to attain what you haven't attained before, and that means you have to do things you haven't done before.

So you stick with the breath regardless of how tempting it may be to go thinking about other things, focusing on other things. You stay right here, right here, right here. Develop the strength of mind that can stick with something regardless. The image Ajaan Fuang used was of a red ant. In Thailand they have big red ants that bite so tenaciously that if you try to pull them off, sometimes their heads detach before their jaws will let go. That, he said, is the kind of tenacity you want as you're sticking with the breath, because it rearranges priorities in the mind. The part of the mind that says, "I'm bored. I'd like to think about something else": You have to say No to it—"No, no, no, just stay right here."

In doing that, you get the mind out of its normal conversations, its normal ways of doing things and approaching things. Only when you get out of your normal ways can you turn around and look at your normal ways and get some perspective on them, to see that even though the pains of conditions are a normal part of the world, the suffering that the mind takes on is totally optional. It's because of our own lack of skill that we suffer.

This is why discernment is so crucial for seeing the distinctions between things we otherwise glom together—glomming the pain on to the solid parts of the body, glomming some *me* onto that pain in the solid parts of the body—so that it's all a big, solid, sticky mess. When you learn how to distinguish things, make distinctions, see the differences—say, that a feeling of pleasure or pain is not the same thing as a sense of solidity, or that being aware of the body doesn't mean that you have to lay claim to the body—there can be a sense of separation between the mind and its object. When you can see these distinctions, that's how release comes.

After all, the threefold training is not the end of the story. The end of the story is the fourth of what the Buddha called the four noble dhammas: virtue, concentration, discernment, and release. These four noble dhammas give a more complete picture of what we're about here than you get from just the list of the triple training. We're here for release. You recognize discernment as genuine discernment by what it does: It brings release. You see something radically different, something you didn't see before. You understand something you didn't understand before, and in the understanding, there's a release from suffering.

That's the kind of insight we're looking for. Other insights may be useful along the way, but you don't want to stop with them.

This is one of the reasons why Ajaan Fuang said not to go around memorizing your insights, because if the insight is genuine, it brings freedom right there. It does something. It's not just information. It's an insight that makes a difference, serves a purpose, accomplishes something. That's when discernment is noble and leads to noble release.