

## *Pain Is Not the Enemy*

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A point that Ajaan Suwat made frequently was that we misunderstand things: We think that pain is our enemy, and craving is our friend. We've got it backwards. Pain is not the enemy. The enemy is the craving. And even though pain may not be a pleasant person to be around, still we can learn many important things from pain. And so in that sense it's our friend. But you have to understand it.

Yet here again, we have things backwards. We think we want to abandon pain. Actually, the craving is what we should abandon. The pain is something we should try to comprehend. This is one of the reasons why we get the mind into concentration, so that we can put it in a position where we can watch the pain and not feel threatened by it. And as you watch it, you learn about it. You come to comprehend it.

So, focus on the breath. Get it really comfortable. Give the mind the energy it needs in order to watch the pain, to understand it.

Sometimes, at the beginning of the meditation, there's already pain in your body. This means you first have to focus instead on another area of the body where there's not so much pain and things are more pleasant, an area that may seem just neutral to begin with. But you'll often find that these neutral areas of the body—if you sit with them for a while and give them a little space, let them relax a little bit—can actually become pleasant.

And the sense of pleasure, the sense of refreshment that comes from allowing the breath energy to flow well there can strengthen you. It puts you in a much better mood, so that when the time comes to look at the pain, you're ready for it.

What are you looking for when you look at it? The first thing you want to notice is the distinction between physical pain and mental pain. Because physical pain is not the problem. The problem is the mental pain we create, either around physical pain or around painful emotions. You want to learn to be able to make that distinction because it makes all the difference in the world. After all, when you finally get to the point where the mind is not in pain, that doesn't mean the physical pain is going to go away. It may still be there just as much as it was before, but there's a sense of being disjoined from it. It's in its place; the mind—your awareness—is in *its* place. The

pain doesn't impinge on your awareness with any sense of being burdensome at all.

You want to be able to see how these things actually would normally be that way—separate—if it weren't for all the activity we engage in that pulls the pain into the mind. That's what you're going to be looking for.

And a lot of that activity has to do with the perceptions we have around the pain. Number One being, of course, that the pain is our enemy, or Two, that we want to get rid of it, break through it. Or whatever perceptions you have that the pain is permanent, that it's there lodged in you, that it's not changing: You have to learn how to undo these perceptions. After all, perception is the primary factor that fashions your mind.

The Buddha identifies perception and feeling as mental fabrications, i.e., the things that create your sense of well-being or not well-being in the mind. But it turns out perception is the really big one.

So you want to look for all the different labels you have around the pain. Learn how to see it as impermanent, coming and going, coming and going. And then, even better, just going, going, going, even though it will arise again. You want to focus on its going away, going away so that you don't feel like you're in the line of fire or that you're the victim of the pain. That's one perception that's helpful.

Another approach is to look for what subconscious perceptions you may have about the shape of the pain, or your fear that if you don't clamp down on the pain it's going to spread. You want to bring those perceptions up to the surface. And one way of doing that is to challenge them.

Tell yourself, "Okay, if I step back from the pain, I'll allow the pain to go all over the body if that's what it wants." And something in your mind will scream, and say "No! No, no you can't do that!" Okay, you've found that subconscious perception.

Remind yourself that often, when you clamp down on the pain, you make it worse. Your attempt at control it makes it worse. So you're here just to watch it going away, going away, going away, so that you can notice what other perceptions are going on in the mind. And learn how to detect the level of pain in the mind itself to see how it, too, comes and goes, rises and falls. You want to look for the risings and fallings because those are the things that alert you: Has something important just changed? Something that made the pain more unbearable?

When we talk about mental feelings, it's not necessarily a matter of emotions. Sometimes it's just a thought in the mind: "I can't take this." That thought, in and of itself, places a huge burden on the mind.

Or the simple thought, "I've been sitting here with this pain for half an hour. How much longer is it going to last?" There'll be a little piercing of grief that goes with that, along with a sense again that "I can't take this." If you see those thoughts arising, remind yourself that the pain that you've been sitting through for the past half hour is not there anymore. It's gone. As for the pain in the future, that's not here, either. All you've got is just the pain right here, right now.

Any reference to time, you want to put that aside. Any reference to space, you want to put it aside. The idea that the pain is in this part of the body, the pain is in that part of the body, drop that.

Somehow we think that by locating the pain, we're working toward a solution. That's not the case. By trying to pin it down in this way, you're interfering with the flow of energy in the body, at the same time creating a perception that digs away at the mind.

You can ask yourself, "Exactly what here is painful? What is it that's actually wearing down the mind? What about the pain is so hard to bear?" Simply your ability to question things in this way gives you a little bit of distance from them, rather than just sitting in your old habits of thinking and feeling without questioning, being a burden to yourself. Your thoughts become burdens. You become a victim.

If the pain moves around, you learn how to move around, too, in the sense that you don't sit on one perception all the time. Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about asking yourself, "Okay, where is the most intense spot of the pain right now?" And as you chase it around for a while, you begin to realize that the idea of a most intense spot is in itself something that pains the mind. So you can drop that. Because you see this spot moving around. First you think it's over there. You go running over there. No. It's not there any more. It's over some place else.

Another way to question things is to ask, "Exactly where is the point of being burdened? What is burdening the mind right now?" And as you ask these questions, they open the issue up. Again and again and again, the teachings focus on how our assumptions are creating problems, particularly our assumptions of self: our assumptions that inside this boundary line is our self, whereas outside that little boundary line, that's not self. If we look at that boundary, after a while we begin to realize that it keeps moving

around. This insight allows you to understand a lot more about this process of what the Buddha calls I-making and my-making. It's not what you thought.

And the same with the pain: Sometimes it's just an intense sensation, while our perception is what makes it painful. You see this with feelings of rapture. Rapture is something that affects both the body and the mind. Sometimes the sensations in the body get extremely full, so full that you feel like you're drowning. Then, when the perception comes in that you're drowning, the rapture becomes unpleasant, something you want to run away from. But if you give the sensation some space, you'll see that the sense of fullness can actually be pleasant. You search out what part of your mind or your awareness feels threatened by it and question it. Turn things around.

Or you can ask yourself, if there's a pain in one part of the body or a blockage in one part of the body: "Which side do you think you're on? Are you on the upper side? Or on the lower side?"

Many of us tend to focus our sense of where we are in the body up in the head, and the head is looking at the body as a distant thing. Or we identify with a sensation in the chest or in the heart. But learn how to question that. The center of the knower can be anywhere in the body at all. Your unexamined assumptions are what really weigh the mind down. So you want to be able to catch them, question them, pull back from them. And then you're no longer in the line of fire.

So these are some of the things you can learn about the mind from associating with the pain and learning how to question your cravings and assumptions. In digging these things up and questioning them, you find that you can release yourself from their power. That's how insight happens.

There's no one technique that will guarantee insights. Having one technique is like those big guns they had in Singapore prior to World War II. The British were sure the Japanese were going to come via the ocean, so they pointed all their guns out toward the ocean and set them in concrete. Then, of course, the Japanese came down the Malay Peninsula from behind the guns. The guns couldn't be turned around, and that was it. If you just hope that one technique of noting or one technique of scanning or whatever is going to do the work for you, your defilements are going to laugh at you because they can sneak around behind the technique and take it over for their own purposes.

You want your assumptions to be hard for the defilements to pin down, so teach the mind how to question its assumptions. When it comes to a new insight, learn how to question that, too. You'll be a moving target, hard to hit.

And you learn that a lot of the things you took to be solid and set are simply the results of activities you've been doing repeatedly, again and again and again. When you learn how to stop doing the activity, the things that seemed so solid will begin to dissolve away.

That's how we get to know that third noble truth—the cessation of suffering, the cessation of stress—which you don't have to comprehend beforehand. Just know that it's really good and it's something you can realize. Your duty is to comprehend stress and to abandon the cause by developing the path. The cessation will then happen on its own. That's when you realize it.

So it's by hanging around this issue of pain, particularly the mental pain caused by craving or ignorance: That's when you realize who your true friends really are.