

Cheating the System

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When pain comes, we usually think it's something out of the ordinary. Something's wrong. We want things to get back to the normal way they should be, which is with no pain. We'd like that to be normal: not having pain. But pain is normal. The fact that you have a body, the fact that you have a mind, the fact that you're a being, leaves you exposed to pain all the time. As Ajaan Suwat once said, take an iron spike and you can stick it anywhere in the body and there's going to be pain. What's not normal is learning how to not suffer when there's pain. That's a special ability. That's what we're working on here.

I've been reading a book about an arctic explorer, one who was part Inuit and so was able to connect with the Inuit tribes and villages up in the far north. He was visiting with a shaman, and the shaman took him to see his older sister who'd been suffering from an illness for many years. He said, "If you want to explain something to me with your great Western civilization, explain this. Why is she suffering? She was a good wife. She was a good mother." And he went on to say, "You ask us about our beliefs. It's not that we believe, we fear. We fear long illness like this. We don't fear death so much. We fear long illness. We fear the spirits of the dead: the dead animals that we've killed, the dead people we've known."

Wherever you go in the world this is the big problem. There's pain, there's suffering, and it's bewildering. Pain is something we usually don't think straight about. The Buddha saw that one of his duties as a teacher was to end our bewilderment, to give us a sense of what could be done, what should be done, and shouldn't be done around pain. And what should be done is that we should try to comprehend it, and even further to comprehend the suffering that comes from pain in the mind.

When the Buddha talks about suffering—*dukkha*, which can also be translated as stress—there are basically two kinds. There's stress in the three characteristics, which is a given in the world. As long as things are put together, they're going to malfunction. Things put together tend to fall apart. That's their nature. That's normal.

But then there's another kind of suffering, the suffering of the four noble truths, and that's the problem the Buddha's going to solve. The fact that the body has pain: He says to learn how to accept that. He himself would take medicine when he had to, but there were times when the medicine wouldn't work for the

pain. He said to learn to see a distinction between the pain caused by the fact that things are put together, and the pain caused by craving and clinging and ignorance.

It's that second kind of pain that you can actually get rid of. When we talk about the cessation of suffering, that's the suffering we try to make cease. And when we can learn how to do that, then we're going out of the normal. The normal way of things is that people have pain, and they suffer from the pain, and then they act under ignorance trying to get rid of the pain, and create more causes for the pain, and it just keeps going around and around, on and on.

But to get out of the cycle, it's almost like you're cheating your past kamma. You may have some past bad kamma that leads to pain right now, but the fact that you learn how to not suffer from it, that's pretty clever. That's out of the ordinary. So when we meditate, we're going against the normal, ordinary flow of things. When we feel that the pain has invaded our space and that have to suffer from it unless we drive it out, the Buddha says to try to learn how to relate to it in a new way now. It's there, but it's distinct from the mental suffering around it, and that's something that doesn't have to be there.

When the Buddha talks about ignorance as the cause of suffering, he identifies it as ignorance of the four noble truths. It's not so much ignorance of the words of the truths. After all, we've all heard them, and we're still suffering. Instead, he's talking about not knowing what's going on in terms of the four noble truths while they're happening. When craving comes into the mind, you don't see it clearly. When clinging comes, you don't see it clearly. That's what the suffering is, and yet you don't see it clearly. You're focusing on something else. You have other perceptions around it.

One of the reasons we practice breath meditation is to get really sensitive to how our perceptions affect things. One of the steps, as the Buddha said, is to become sensitive to mental fabrication, which includes your feelings of pleasure, pain, neither-pleasure-nor-pain, and the perceptions around them. But before you do that he says try to breathe in a way that gives rise to rapture, breathe in a way that gives rise to pleasure. That way, you give the mind a good foundation so that you can look into the pain and not feel threatened by it.

This is why we work with the breath in the different parts of the body. Find the comfortable parts and focus there. Find a way of breathing that feels good there, then let that sense of comfortable breathing spread through other parts of the body, so that you feel surrounded by a good feeling. And then you can look into the pain.

Ask yourself what kind of perceptions you have around it. Is it a big monolithic block? Is it the same thing as the spot in the body that's pained? Or is the case that the sensation of body—i.e., the four elements of earth, water, wind, fire—is one thing while the pain is something else? And when you have a perception of pain, is it always there? Or does it come and go, come and go? When it comes, what happens? And when it goes, what happens?

Sometimes it comes and it reverberates for a bit, but there are times when it actually goes, and then you pick it up again, and it goes, and you pick it up again. You notice that the stress increases when you pick it up, so you can ask yourself: Do you have to pick it up? You can try using perceptions around the pain that are a little bit counterintuitive. If you feel that the pain has invaded your space, well what if you've invaded its space? We feel that the pain is coming at us, what if it's actually going away from us? And our perceptions, what are they doing? Why does the mind have to talk to itself about the pain anyhow?

One of the reasons is that you think you've got to keep warning your future mind about the pain that's in the present, so that it doesn't do something stupid around the pain. For example, if you have a wound, part of the mind has to keep reminding yourself, "Watch out, you've got a wounded foot, you can't use it the way you used to." But those warnings that get passed on, from one moment to the next, to the next, to the next: While you're sitting still, do you have to keep passing them on? What if you dropped them for a bit?

There are lots of questions you can ask about the perceptions around the pain, because the perceptions are what cause you to cling, and the clinging is the suffering.

So remember, pain is normal. The fact that the mind is suffering around the pain is normal. There's no question of "why me?" When pain comes, you have to remind yourself that pain comes to everybody. In fact, that's a useful contemplation when you're in pain. Remind yourself that everybody out there has pain to some extent or another. Some people are pain-free for the moment, but pain's going to come. You've got to have compassion for everybody out there who's got pain. That helps you realize it's not just you. You don't feel like you're being singled out. Maybe you have the kamma that leads to that pain. In fact, you probably do. Now, the next question is: How can you cheat that kamma? We may tend to think that the universe is unfair in the way it hands out pains, but maybe it's actually very fair.

But the Buddha's path allows you to cheat the system. You can get out. This path, the noble eightfold path, as the Buddha said, is the kamma that puts an end to kamma. Not only does it stop you from creating new kamma, but it also frees

you from many of the effects of past kamma. The pains may be there in the body, but the mind doesn't have to suffer from them. And that's what matters.

They're like a big rock. The rock may be heavy in and of itself, but as long as you don't pick it up, it's not going to be heavy on you. Our problem is we're picking up all the rocks we can see. That's why we suffer. The Buddha's teaching us how we can just leave them alone.

So you can see that it's not so much that the pain is disturbing you. You're disturbing the pain. The pain isn't invading your territory. The pain is just there. You're the one invading the territory. When you can see things like this, you can get out of the system. At that point, whether it's fair or unfair doesn't matter anymore. You're out. That's the skill the Buddha's trying to teach us. And it's a skill we can all learn.