

## *Wise about Pain*

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Take some good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Get a sense of where you feel the breathing process in the body. Then, when it's clear, the next question is: Is it comfortable? If it is, you can keep it up. If not, you can change. Try shorter breathing, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. Try to see what kind of breathing feels good for the body right now. Think of the breath as a whole-body process. It's not just at your nose; it's not just at your abdomen. The simple fact that the muscles in the body have to expand and contract to let the breath in, let it go out, creates different patterns of energy that go throughout the whole body. The simple fact that you're trying to maintain your balance as these muscles expand and contract means that the balancing muscles, say in the back, are going to get involved. And they're connected to the muscles down in the legs. Everything's all connected inside.

So what kind of breathing feels good for the whole body? That's something you can explore. You can spend the whole hour doing just that one exploration. But if you find something that you can stay with and it feels good, stay with that breathing. Try to maintain it as long as it feels good. If it reaches a point where it doesn't feel good anymore, you're free to change again.

Now you may find, as you're working on whole-body awareness, that you run into pains. In the very beginning, you don't focus on them. Try to focus on the parts of the body that you can make comfortable by the way you breathe.

But the question sometimes comes up: To what extent do you work with pains or try to get rid of them? And this is where one of the basic principles of wisdom comes in. As the Buddha said, the sign of wisdom is that you know what duties fall to you, what you're responsible for, and what you're not responsible for. There are some pains that are caused by past karma; others are caused by present karma—in other words, your intentions right now, how you're relating to the body, how you're holding the body, how you're breathing.

The ones that come from past karma: There's not much you can do about them except to release the tension around them by the way you breathe. The ones that come from present karma, you can do something with. Change what you're doing; change the way you breathe; change the way you perceive the breath. When you find a comfortable spot in the body, think of the comfortable energy in that spot spreading through the area where the pain is. Make sure you don't stop at the pain. Go right through it. It's not a wall. If you treat it as a wall, you make it more solid than it has to be. Think of the energy

going right through. Sometimes you'll find that by releasing tension in one part of the body, a pain in another part of the body goes away.

So make a survey of all the different parts of the body to see where you're holding onto any unnecessary tension—any tension that's not required to keep the body erect—and see what effect that has. In other words, you learn about which pains you can work with and which ones you can't by experimenting. This was the Buddha's approach to everything he encountered in the course of his quest for awakening. He would try something out. If it didn't work, he would try something else out. He learned that he had to question lots of his assumptions.

You find in meditation circles that there are two extreme assumptions about pain. One is the new-age assumption that every pain is a result of your state of mind right now, so all you have to do is change your state of mind and the pain should go away. The other extreme is the fatalistic vipassana approach, which is that you simply have to accept the fact that the pain is there and not react. It's a given, based on your past karma. It's a past fabrication, and you have to be patiently wait until it goes away on its own.

Neither of those approaches is in line with what the Buddha said about feelings, which is that they come from past actions and present actions together. There are some cases where no matter what you do in the present moment the pain isn't going to go away because it's not caused by what you're doing right now. In other cases, you find that you're living with pains that you don't have to. The way to find out which is which, of course, is by experimenting.

This approach applies to everything inside and out. When you're dealing with other people, one extreme is that you're responsible for their behavior, the other is that you're not responsible at all for their behavior. The middle way is to say, "How about if I change the way I behave to see if that has a change in the way other people behave around me?" It's going to be trial and error, and a lot of us don't like that, which is why we tend to go for the extremes. But going for extremes doesn't solve the problem. You have to try to be sensitive to what you're doing and distinguish, using your own powers of observation, what's skillful and what's not.

This is one of the reasons why we meditate. The three qualities the Buddha says should be brought to mindfulness and concentration practice are mindfulness, alertness, and ardency.

Mindfulness means keeping something in mind. In this case, you keep in mind the fact that you want to stay with the breath. As for alertness, you're alert to what you're doing: Are you staying with the breath? If not, what can you do to get it back? If you are, what can you do to get more sensitive to what's going on? At the same time, be alert to observe how your mind is having

an effect on the breath, how the breath is having an effect on the mind, and how you can improve that effect in both directions. The desire to improve it: That's ardency. You really want to do this well.

Now, notice the focus of alertness here. You're alert to what you're *doing* in the present moment. You're not just aware of what's going on in the present willy-nilly—the sound of the crickets, the sound of the helicopters. You're not simply accepting what's there as a given, and at the same time you're not holding yourself responsible for everything that's coming in right now. You're responsible for some things you're experiencing and not others. Alertness is there to focus on what you are responsible for. There's a boundary between what you are and are not responsible for, what you do and don't have to explore, which is why knowing what you're responsible for and what you're not responsible for is a sign of wisdom.

This is how we gain wisdom, by experimenting. We listen to what the Buddha has to say and we think about it, because he gives us some pointers on where to look and where not to look, so we can save some time. But what we'll actually see, and how sensitive we'll be to what we are and are not responsible for, that's nothing the Buddha can do for us. That's something we have to do ourselves.

So take this principle that you're going to learn through experimentation, not through holding to a particular extreme view and not by following a rote method. We have this idea somehow that wisdom lies in short, insightful statements that you can put in a book: the wise sayings of so-and-so. And the sayings may be wise, but your own wisdom comes from knowing when each saying is applicable and when it's not. Ajaan Lee used to say that this is a good test for any insight that comes up in the course of the meditation. The first question is, is it applicable now? If it's not, you put it aside. If it is applicable, you put it to use to test it. And the second question is, to what extent is this true? To what extent is its opposite true?

You begin to learn that your insights have their boundaries, they have their limitations. That's how you use them wisely. You use them for when they're appropriate; you put them aside when they're not. And you develop a sensitivity to enable you to tell *when* things are appropriate and when they're not. That sensitivity is the wisdom, the discernment, that we're aiming at. It's wisdom in action—that, and the kind of sensitivity that allows you to deal with situations as they come up without having to refer back to books all the time. Because you find that when you meditate, a lot of things coming up are not in the books. And you have to have the attitude that, "Well, I'll test them."

This is the attitude that the Buddha taught to the Kalamas. They had heard so many different teachings that they had no idea who was right and who was wrong. And the Buddha basically said, "Well, ask yourself: 'If I put this

particular teaching into practice, what would it lead to? If I put its opposite into practice, what would it lead to? Which one gives the better results?” That’s the basic principle of wisdom.

So learn how to develop it in yourself and put aside the extremes that would either say that you can’t change your pains or that you’re totally responsible for them. Or on an external level, that you can’t change other people’s behavior or that you’re totally responsible for their behavior. Try to find the middle line, both inside and out. That’s how you stay on the path—and how your sensitivity develops so that you can rely on it more and more.