

Dealing with Pain

July 17, 2014

If you sit in meditation long enough, you're going to run into pains in the body, and sometimes it doesn't take that long. Ten minutes into the sit, and already there's a pain in your leg, a pain in your knee, pain in your back. You think: Here we are, trying to gain release from suffering, so why are we putting ourselves through pain?

Well, even though the word for pain and suffering and stress is the same in Pali—it's *dukkha*—the Buddha focused on one particular type of *dukkha*: not physical pain, mental pain. And the mental pain is caused by our own actions. We hold on to the body. We hold on to the pleasures and pains that come into the body. That turns into mental pain. So that's what we're trying to figure out.

Notice that we're trying to comprehend it. You don't get past this without comprehending it, and comprehending requires sitting with it for a while. It's good to know there are ways of dealing with pain so that you can understand what this other level of suffering is, the mental pain.

There are three stages in all. The first one is: Don't pay attention to it. Focus on your breath. Focus on the parts of the body that you *can* make comfortable. Ajaan Lee compares this to going into a house where you know that some of the floorboards are rotten. You don't step on the rotten boards; you step on the parts that are good. If you're going to lie down, don't lie down on the rotten parts. Or it's like eating a mango or an apple. You open it up and you discover: Oops, there's a part that a worm has eaten into. Well, you cut that part out, and you eat the rest.

This relates specifically to an important issue, that the mind has a tendency to feed on things. For the most part, we're like a little child who doesn't know what's edible and what's not edible. It crawls across the floor and anything it sees, it sticks into its mouth. It's only after you grow up for a while that you begin to realize that some things are edible and some things are not. You learn how to stop sticking erasers and pencils or dirt and gravel into your mouth. You stick food in your mouth.

So here we're learning how to find something good to stick in our mind's mouth: the pleasant sensations that you can create in the body by the way you breathe. Different people will find that different ways of relating to the breath will make it comfortable. This is something you have to explore for yourself. Some people will actively experiment with different kinds of breathing to see what feels

best. Others find that as they get more involved in the experimentation, they get more tied into knots. That's when you have to say, "Well, just let the breath come in and go out." Each time you breathe in, ask yourself what kind of breathing would feel good now, and see how the body responds on its own. The important thing is that you find a part of the body that can be made comfortable by the way you breathe. It feels refreshed, nourished by the in-breath, relaxed by the out-breath. You can develop a certain feeling tone there that you can maintain through the in-breath and the out-breath; it's not disturbed by either. It's actually nourished by both. Then you can allow that to spread.

If, while you're trying to develop this level of concentration, you find that the pain becomes unbearable, or if it becomes hard to stay focused on your comfortable spot, sit with the pain for maybe about five minutes or so and then shift your position. You're not ready to do battle with the big fighters right now. You're trying to work up your own strength, because it requires strength of concentration to be able to comprehend exactly what it is around the experience of physical pain that becomes mental pain.

So you don't want to take it on too quickly. Develop the qualities of the path—your mindfulness, your alertness, and your concentration—so that they're strong enough to deal with this issue of pain. At the very beginning, that means simply not letting yourself get distracted by the pain. This requires a certain amount of wisdom—the realization that, okay, the pain is going to be there in the leg, but you don't have to be there, too. You don't have to put yourself in the line of fire. Work on the parts that you *can* make comfortable. This is a preliminary lesson in not-self.

We usually think of the teaching on not-self as something you save for the very latest stages of the practice. But actually, the Buddha has you start thinking in these terms right from the very beginning. There's one passage where he teaches Rahula breath meditation. Even before he gets him focused on the breath, though, he says to contemplate how things are inconstant and to contemplate how they're not-self. That gives you some preliminary ammunition to use against the mind's tendency to go out and feed on the pain. You feed on it through fear. You feed on it through hatred, aversion, or whatever, but it's still feeding.

You remind yourself that you don't want to gobble that down. You don't have to gobble it down. It's there, but it doesn't have to be something that you lay claim to, and you know that it's going to change. It's not that it's going to grow and grow and grow, engulf you entirely, and eat you up. If you feed on it, that's when things can start eating you up. But if you don't get involved, it's just going to stay right there. It'll grow and then it'll shrink. It'll do its thing. But you don't have to

worry about it, because you're working on your skills in this part of the body—the comfortable part where you're focused.

Once you can maintain that sense of well-being, even though there may be a pain in some other part of the body, then the next stage is to start spreading that sense of well-being. See if you can make it penetrate and even go to the other side of the pain. Again, Ajaan Lee: He says if you've got a pain in the knee, think of the breath energy going down your back, through your hips, through your legs, through the knee and on out through the foot.

In other words, don't let the breath energy stop right at the pain, because that'll solidify the sensation of pain even more. Remind yourself that the body is composed of atoms, and atoms are mostly space. So breath energy can go right through. The pain is not a wall. It doesn't have a hard surface. It's permeable. Everything in the body is permeable.

Think of the breath energy flowing through, because often the problem is not just the physical pain. We build up tension around the area where the pain is, and that pattern of tension tends to grow and latch on to other parts of the body. It's like an octopus: It grows tentacles. But if you can breathe through it, that dissolves it away. Sometimes you even find that this shell of tension that you build up around the pain was what was continuing the pain. When you breathe through it, the pain goes away.

That's one thing that can happen. The other thing, of course, is that the pain is still there, but there's a sense of ease around the pain. You're not so tense around the pain. This may take time, but it's a good skill to learn. You learn how the breath can become your friend, and you get more confident about staying with the breath. This comes under what's termed *evaluation*: learning how to develop the breath in a way that's comfortable, and then learning how to use that sense of comfort for your own purposes, i.e., settling down, getting the mind in a position where it feels at ease, where it feels confident, and where it doesn't feel threatened by the pain.

This is important because if you're going to comprehend what in there, in that experience of pain, is actually weighing down on the mind, you have to not be afraid of the pain. At the very least, you know you've got a good spot to retreat to when the pain starts getting bad, and you've got some skills to use to penetrate the pain and take it apart. That's the second stage.

The third stage is when you start focusing directly on the pain as your topic of meditation. You start taking it apart. This is where the Buddha's teaching on aggregates comes in. The word *aggregate* is a translation for the word *khandha*. It's not the best, but it's hard to think of anything better in English. It sounds like

piles of gravel; it's not. The Buddha actually was talking about activities of the mind. You create your sense of the form of the body by the way you breathe; that's the first aggregate. Then there's feeling: the feeling of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain. We're talking about feeling-tones here, not emotions. Then there's perception, the labels you place on the pain. They could either be words or they could be pictures. It's the way the mind communicates with itself through very brief and simple signals. And then there's fabrication. This is where the emotions are along with your more complex thoughts. Then finally there's consciousness—awareness of these things.

The Buddha says we feed on these activities. And in fact, these activities are the activities that the mind usually uses in feeding as well. So there are two levels of feeding going on. For example, when you're feeding on physical food, you've got the form of the body. Also, there's the form of the food out there. Then there's the feeling of hunger, the pain that goes with the hunger, and then there's the desire to find something that will give rise to a feeling of pleasure once that hunger is satisfied.

Perception plays the role in, one, identifying what kind of hunger it is, and then two, identifying what out there might be the thing you need to satisfy that hunger. Fabrication is all the plans you make about how you're going to get that food, and what you're going to do with it in order to get it inside. Then consciousness is the awareness of all these things. These are the activities that get involved in feeding on a physical level, and they get involved in feeding on a mental level as well.

In fact, what you're doing, when you're developing a state of concentration, is taking these activities and turning them into a state of well-being, at least in some part of the body. Form is the breath. The feeling-tone you're trying to create with the breath is one of ease and fullness. The perception is the mental label you hold in mind to stay with the breath. Fabrication is the conversation you have with yourself about how to make the breath better and how to use the breath energy when it feels good. And then again, consciousness is the awareness of these things.

So you're giving the mind good food right here with the concentration. Then you look at how it relates to the pain. You begin to realize it's involved. It's using the same activities around the pain. And one of the ways of dealing with the pain so that it's not so much of a burden on the mind is learning how to analyze the experience in terms of these categories. Okay, which part is the form? Which part is the feeling?

Ajaan Maha Boowa has a good discussion of this. He says we tend to glom the feeling together with a sense of the body. In other words, if there's a pain in the

knee, the knee and the pain seem to be the same thing. So can you look at them to see that they're not? There are physical elements. There's the solidity of the body. There's the sense of breath energy. There's the warmth. There's the coolness. Those are not the same thing as the pain. The pain is something else. It's there in the same place, but they're on different levels. They're like radio waves in the same place on different frequencies. Can you tell them apart? Can you ferret out the perception of the pain that says it has this shape, this color, this intention—or whatever?

And then, you have all those stories you tell yourself about the pain: that this is a sign that you're going to be paralyzed for life, or you're going to be crippled for life with this pain in your knee, or just the stories that say, "Okay, why do we have to sit here for another 30 minutes or so?" That's a story you want to obliterate right away. Don't think about how much longer the pain is going to be there or how long it has been there. If you think about that, you're weighing down the present moment with long periods of time. Actually, whatever pain was felt in the past is gone. The pain that's going to be felt in the future is not here yet. All you have right now is the pain in the present moment. If you don't add the future and the past on top of it, it's a lot easier to take.

Then you look at your awareness. Is the awareness the same thing as the feeling, or the perception, or the fabrication? If you can learn how to see that these things are separate, you suddenly find that that physical pain is a much less imposing, threatening, and fearful thing. When you take these things apart, the fact that you're taking the offensive here—taking an active role and not just sitting there being a passive victim through all this—makes it harder for the pain to get you.

You can ask different questions about the pain: Where is the feeling? Where is the sensation of the body? Where is the perception? Where are all these things? Are they the same, or can you see them as separate? This way, you take apart the activities of the mind that are weighing it down. The result either is that the pain will go away, or it's there, but it's not a burden on the mind. You can be right there in the midst of the pain, but the mind is not burdened. That's an important lesson to learn. It's an important skill to develop, because it's that kind of suffering that the Buddha's trying to teach us how to gain release from: the suffering that we've imposed on ourselves by the way we cling to these activities around the pain.

So there are three stages. One, don't pay any attention to the pain; pay attention to the breath. Two, use the breath, what you've learned of the breath energy in the body, to breathe through the pain. And then three, analyze the pain in terms of those aggregates, those activities that turn the physical pain into a

mental pain, so that you can release the mind from that mental pain. You find that when you release it from that mental pain, the physical pain is not a burden. It's just there. It's a fact of nature like the fact that the sky is blue, or clouds move around, or the sun rises and sets. But because you're not clinging to these activities around the pain, the mind is not weighed down.

It's in that kind of understanding that pain becomes a noble truth. It's the understanding that the mental pain is caused by these aggregates, and you see them in action, and you learn how to let them go. That's when you've comprehended pain. And it's only when you comprehend it that you can be free from it.