

Friends with Pain

August 11, 2005

Each time you start meditating, take stock of where you are, physically and mentally. How does the body feel? How does the mind feel? Take a quick survey of the body, from the top down to the soles of your feet to see if you're feeling any tension, if you're feeling any tightness, if there are any pains. If you notice any tightness or pain, one of the things you have to do to help get yourself settle down is to focus on how to work with them.

Then look at the state of your mind. What's your level of energy? Is your energy down? Is your energy up? Is there any particular thought that's occupying your mind, either about the past or the future? If there is, try to figure out ways to clear it out.

One of the reasons we have that chant on what they call the four sublime attitudes is that it's a way of clearing out your mind: To begin with, it reminds you of why you're here meditating. It's for the purpose of happiness, for a happiness that goes beyond the normal, everyday kind of happiness that you get from sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, or even ideas. You want something that's more lasting than that.

Then you spread thoughts of goodwill for everybody else. You realize that they want happiness, too. If there's anyone who's wronged you in the course of the day, or anyone *you've* wronged in the course of the day, send them thoughts of goodwill as well. You don't want to carry grudges, any thoughts of remorse into the meditation, because they can mess things up. Thoughts of compassion, thoughts of sympathetic joy: You spread those to everybody as well. In other words, no sense of resentment, no desire for anybody to suffer: These are good thoughts to think.

Then you follow them up with thoughts of equanimity, reflecting on the truth that we all are heir to our actions. The things we experience in life are due to our actions. These thoughts serve several purposes. One is to remind you that no matter how much you may want other people to be happy, there are cases where because of their past actions, there's only so much you can do. Or in cases where you see someone happy, enjoying the fruits of their past actions, a lot of power, a lot of wealth, but they're abusing that power and wealth, remind yourself that you don't have to settle the score. The principle of the fruits of action will settle the score without your having to get involved.

But the purpose of equanimity here is not to make you indifferent to everything. It's here to focus you on what's important in your life, and that's also in that reflection on action: that what you can do right now is important. And the best way to do something skillful right now is to make sure that you're alert, that you're mindful, that you're totally present for whatever decisions are going to be made. That's why you're meditating.

The purpose of all this is to disentangle you from the narratives and other storylines and ideas that the mind can get itself involved in, to pull you out of those narratives and into the proper frame of mind to meditate, to work on developing good qualities of the mind, to give you a sense of confidence in what you're doing.

Then you settle down with the breath. This is where you want to explore how the breath has an effect on the body. If you notice that your energy level is down, how do you breathe in a way that brings it back up? If the energy level is too frenetic, what do you do to calm it down? The rhythm of your breathing will have an awful lot to do with the level of energy in the body, so explore that connection right here. If you're feeling tired, what kind of breathing is going to wake you up? If you're feeling tense, what kind of breathing is going to relax you? You've got a medicine right here. And it's free. You don't have to go to Canada to buy cheaper versions of it. It's simply a matter of learning how to use it, a very basic skill.

This is a lot of what the Buddha's teachings are about: taking things that are right around you—your thoughts, your words, your deeds, your ability to be mindful, your breath, things that are close to hand that we tend to overlook, that we don't really get our full measure of benefit from—and looking into them, developing them, working up skills based around them, so that you have as many allies as possible in the present moment.

Then he even teaches you to take pain as your ally. It's inevitable when you sit and meditate that you're going to run into pain. Even if you're not meditating, you're going to run into pain. So what can you do to make pain your friend?

One way is to have a right understanding about it. The first element of right understanding is to realize just that point: Pain should be understood. All too often when pain comes, all we can think of is how to get rid of it, how to push it away. As a result, even though we've encountered pain throughout our life, we don't really know it. That chant we had just now, "Those who don't discern suffering": You think, "Who in the world doesn't discern suffering?" We know it, we experience it, but we don't discern it. That's the problem. We don't really look into it. The first thing that happens when pain comes is that we think, "How do

you get rid of it? How do you push it away?” Or, “How can you run away from it?” We find ourselves coming, coming right back.

So when the Buddha taught suffering as his first noble truth, his purpose was to remind you that by looking at what’s right here, right now, you can learn an awful lot. If pain is right here, okay, learn from the pain.

First you’ve got to foster the right attitude, not only understanding the problem of pain on the level of theory, but also putting the mind in a good position where it doesn’t feel threatened by the pain. This is why we work on making the breath comfortable, so that you have a sense that at least some part of the body is safe, wherever it may be. If your head hurts, try to find a sense of comfort in your hands or down in your feet. If your back hurts, focus on the front of the body. If the left side hurts, focus on the right.

In other words, learn to pull your attention away from what seems to be the obvious point to focus on: one, to give you a safe place so that you don’t feel threatened by the pain; and two, so that you can notice the mind’s tendency to keep wanting to go back to the pain. It’s only when you learn to question that tendency that you’re going to understand it.

You begin to see how the mind slips away from the point that you said you were going to focus on and goes running over to the pain. There are several steps in that decision. We tend to miss them. We don’t even think there’s a decision. It seems that the mind *has* to go there, but it doesn’t have to. Learn how to question that and you begin to see the arguments the mind presents to you, saying, “Got to go focus on the pain. It’s important. It could get bigger. It can do this, or it can do that.” You don’t have to believe those arguments.

In the beginning, this is difficult, because your mindfulness is weak, your alertness is weak. But as they get stronger, you find that you get better and better at keeping your focus where you want it. Once there’s a sense of ease in some part of the body, think of it spreading to envelop the pain, to go around it, go through it. It helps break up the perception of pain as a solid thing that’s occupied, say, your knee or your arm or whatever. You begin to see that it’s a lot more porous than you thought. The perception that made it seem so solid, you begin to see, is a construct. That’s when you can really look into the pain and go back to focusing on it, to see it from a different attitude. Which part of the pain is physical? Which part is mental? Which part is given? And which part are you messing up?

The Buddha said that normally pain is like an arrow, and we then we shoot ourselves with a second arrow, which consists of all the narratives and worries and other mental problems that we create around the pain. If you look carefully, you can begin to see them as two distinct things. You can see that the second arrow is

the real problem. The actual physical cause, the actual physical pain—if you don't go labeling it, if you don't go making up stories about it, depicting it to yourself with unskillful perceptions—is a lot more bearable. This gives you a really good object lesson in how much your awareness, your consciousness, your perception of the present moment is a construct, something you've put together. And you have this habit of putting together in an unskillful way. That's why the pain gets to the mind.

The more you understand the pain, the more you can relate to it in a skillful way so that it doesn't make inroads on the mind. The pain can be there in the knee but it doesn't have an impact on the mind. The mind is perfectly fine because it's quick enough to see those moments when a perception comes up and makes the pain worse. Or the mental monologue or dialogue that surrounds the pain: how that makes the situation worse. You can learn not to get entangled in it. When you don't get entangled in it, it begins to fall away.

This way, pain becomes your friend. It teaches you a lot of things about the role of intention in the present moment. It's a demanding task master. If you the least bit unskillful, it hits you with a stick. What that means is that you just have to get more and more mindful, more and more alert, more and more discerning, so that you become more and more skilled at being able to inhabit the present moment with a sense of ease, a sense of comfort, even when there's pain in the body. Once you can take a lot of the sting away from the pain, you find that you're much less driven by it. The mind develops a sense of fearlessness: "Okay, there can be pain," it says, "but it's not going to knock you off balance." When you learn to relate intelligently and skillfully to the pain, that frees you from lots of burdens.

This is going to take time. In other words, as you sit here right now and you can't quite relate to the pain this way, it's nothing to get upset about. It's normal. It takes time to develop mindfulness and alertness so that they're strong and quick enough. The issue is learning not to get discouraged along the way, how to give yourself encouragement as you each time you sit.

One of the ways of doing that is to learn how to appreciate the benefits that do come from the meditation. They may be small, they may be incremental, but they're important. One of the most important benefits is that you learn how to inhabit the present moment with a greater sense of really being at home here, really being in charge here, and not being pushed around by every little whim that comes through the mind or every little pain that comes into the body. When you're less driven, there's a greater sense of peace. There's a greater sense of strength. There's a sense that you can really trust yourself.

That right there frees you from a lot of burdens, a lot of limitations, a lot of those second arrows that you used to keep shooting into the mind. You've learned an important lesson: that when you stop shooting yourself with second arrows, the first arrows don't have an impact at all.