

Facing Pain

November 30, 2011

Someone once noted that when we sit and meditate, we say that we're practicing. So the question is, when do we get to perform? The answer is, we perform every time we're dealing with stress, pain, suffering. This is what we're practicing to understand. This is what we're practicing to gain release from.

The important thing is to realize that the word *dukkha*, which means stress or pain or suffering, has two basic sorts. There's the sort that comes with the fact that you've got a body, and the body keeps changing. It's dependent on conditions, and when those conditions interact with one another, they don't always lead to pleasure. That kind of pain is inevitable. What's *not* inevitable is that you have to suffer from it. The suffering is optional.

What we have to learn is how to separate the two. It turns out that the optional part of the suffering, the second kind of *dukkha*, is what the mind adds through its cravings. And it's not inevitable.

In the Buddha's image, it's like having two arrows shooting you. The first arrow is the pain. That arrow doesn't have to make you suffer. It's the second arrow that makes you suffer, the arrow that you shoot yourself with. This is what we have to learn how to deal with.

The techniques the Buddha teaches us as we meditate also fall into two main sorts. There's the technique of tranquility and there's the technique of insight. You want to learn how to master both. Preferably, you want to learn how to master the two of them together.

The techniques of tranquility basically come down to realizing that you don't have to focus on the pain, any of the pains in life. You have a better place to focus. This is why you focus on the breath: to create a sense of well-being, to create a sense of your refuge inside, a place where you can go when the pain gets bad, and you can get out of the line of fire. That's your first technique. It's like when you're learning how to box. They teach you how to retreat as the first step, so that whenever anything gets really bad, you have a place to back out to.

If there's a pain in the leg, you don't have to focus on the leg. You can focus on the areas of the body where the breath does feel good. If the pain is more general around the body, you can focus on the space between the atoms or on the breath energy flowing around the body. No matter how much the mind keeps screaming at you that you've got to focus on the pain, you say, "No, I don't have to. I don't have to get involved."

Now, sometimes as you extricate yourself from getting involved in the pain, you begin to see the chatter of the mind that pulls you back toward the pain. As you learn how to let go of that chatter, you begin to realize all the different levels of the ways in which the mind pulls itself into suffering. This is how the tranquility sometimes goes together with the insight.

Other times, you just hide out. Whatever comes up, you're not all that interested. All you know is, "Don't want to go there, don't want to go there, I want to stay right here." If that's all you have the strength to muster, okay, that's fine for the time being.

When you're focusing on your comfortable center, one of your next steps is to think of that comfortable breath energy spreading out and going right through the pain. If there's a pain in the shoulder, think of the comfortable breath energy in the chest spreading out through the shoulder down the arm and out the fingers. That way, you help to break up the sense that the pain is a solid wall. You begin to see that you can infiltrate it, you can get through it, you can get around it.

That's an important perception right there. The question of perception is what creates a lot of that second arrow with which you shoot yourself. If you find yourself facing the pain, you can ask yourself, "Do I really have to face it? I can look someplace else. Or I can think of the pain coming at me from behind, going around me, and just passing away, passing away." Think of that image of sitting in the back of a station wagon, facing back, and you watch the road go past you and go away, go away, go away. Instead of facing forward and watching the road coming at you, you watch it go away. You're less of a target.

It's the same with the pain. When pain comes, don't think of it coming at you. When you're facing it, don't think of your facing it. You've got your back to it and you're watching it going away. Each time it arises, it goes right past and goes away immediately, goes away immediately. Focus on the going away, and you feel a lot less oppressed by it. That can deal with a lot of pain right there.

But there comes a point where you will have to turn around, but when you turn around, you just don't face it as a victim. You attack. You go right in and try to figure it out. A lot of the suffering that comes from pain is that sensation that you're the victim and that there's nothing you can do. Whereas if you realize that a lot of the suffering in the mind actually comes from your own activity, you can get more aggressive.

One technique is to chase the pain to see: Where is it worst? You begin to notice that there's not just one single, stationary spot where it's worst. The spot where it's worst moves around.

You can also try to see the distinction between the sensations of the body and the sensation of the pain. Body sensations are sensations of the four elements or the four properties: There's the warmth of fire, the solidity of earth, the energy of the breath, and the coolness of water. The pain isn't identical with any of those things. The pain is something else.

All too often, we glom the solidity together with the pain to make the pain seem like one big solid wall. This is where that perception of the pain as being permeable is really helpful. You can breathe right through it. It doesn't stop the breath. The coolness of the liquid flowing through your veins—i.e., the water element, the liquid of the blood: That can go right through

the pain as well. This helps to dissolve away any walls of tension you've built around the pain. You begin to realize that the walls of tension can actually be worse than the pain itself.

The big problem is the series of perceptions and fabrications you create around the pain. The things you tell yourself about the pain, the mental images you have of the pain: You can change them, reminding yourself that the pain is not identical with the sensations of the body. They may seem to be in the same place but they're of a different order. So look to see how they're different.

Then notice that your awareness, both of the body and of the pain, is something separate as well. It's the perception that the pain is happening to *you* or that it's *your* pain: That's what connects the awareness with the pain. So as soon as you see that perception arising, drop it. It'll arise again, but you can drop it again. Remind yourself you don't have to believe it. It's something you've added.

When a particular perception comes together with the pain, try to drop it, and you'll notice that the level of suffering in the mind goes way down. There are even times when it stops entirely and goes into the heart and disappears. It's startling the first time it happens. I used to hear the *ajans* in Thailand saying that it would disappear into the heart and I thought they were speaking figuratively, but they were actually speaking literally. The pain goes zipping into the area of the heart and then just disappears when you drop that perception.

So some of the ways of dealing with pain are defensive in the sense that you just don't get involved. Then there's the stage where you take the offense. You probe into the pain, you try to understand it, so that you can see which perceptions are actually causing the problem. Then when you see them in action, you can drop them. You don't have to hold onto them. They may have served some purpose sometime in the past, but they're not serving any purpose now, so there's no reason to carry them around. That way, you can maintain your awareness as something separate.

This the Buddha said is one of the important perceptions in meditation: when you see everything that happens, everything that arises as something separate from the awareness. Sights are separate from the awareness of sights; sounds are separate from the awareness of sounds; and so on down through the senses. When you can see the separation, that's an important step in gaining release.