

Pain Is a Noble Truth

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When the Buddha talks about our idea of self, he does it in a very practical way. The things we identify as “us” or “ours” are things that we have some control over. Your hand: You want to raise it, it’ll go up; you want to move it to the right, it goes to the right; to the left, it goes to the left. Sometimes. There’ll come a time, though, when it won’t do that.

This is why we have such a difficult relationship with the body—and all the other things that we claim as “us” and “ours.” We have to keep figuring out when we can control them and when we can’t. Because they change, and when they change, they don’t ask permission.

So while we have use of the body, while we have use of the mind, we should try to get the best use out of these things. We can use the breath to gain concentration. Once we’ve gained concentration, we can try to understand the parts of the body or the things the body does against our will, so that we can stop identifying with it, because as long as we identify with the body, we’re in for a lot of trouble.

Pain is one of the things we focus on. Of course, we don’t go jumping right into the pain. Nobody, without the proper mental skills, can stay with it long enough to see it clearly. Our usual response to pain is that we want it to go away. Either we run away from it or we try to push it out of where we want to be. Occasionally we can succeed, but a lot of times we can’t. We need to be able to come at the pain from another perspective, which is that we want to understand it.

Part of that strategy is to go to another part of the body, a part that’s not in pain. Learn to stay there. It may seem as if the pain is screaming at you, but there are actually a lot of layers of other things between you and the actual sensation.

The sensation is just there. It’s not doing anything. It doesn’t have any intention toward you. But there are a lot of little sensors in the mind that say, “Whoops, there’s a problem here.” There’s something you’ve latched on to as being yours and it’s not the way you want it to be. There are the warning signals, “Oh, this could be dangerous, this could cause trouble down the line, you’ve got to take care of it right away.” All the lights have lit up.

But for the time being, you have to learn how to ignore them because you need to build a foundation. You need a place where you feel at least relatively secure. Once there’s that sense of ease with the pain, you’re not necessarily pulled into it.

You're not there focused on the pain and you learn to let it have part of the body.

Ajaan Lee's image is of a house with floorboards, some of which are rotten, and you're going to lie down on the floor. You don't choose the rotten spots. You choose the good spots. And as I say you're lying on the floor. When we're working with the breath, sometimes we feel we want to make it really comfortable and full of rapture and all these wonderful things, and for some reason it's just okay. We drive ourselves crazy trying to make it really good. But you have to remember: Okay is okay. You're looking for a spot where you can settle down.

It's kind of like Thailand dealing with Britain and France. You may not like the fact that there's a pain in a certain part of the body. You have to be willing to give up your possession of that part of the body—at least for the time being, just like Thailand had to give up parts of Cambodia, parts of Burma to maintain its independence.

You can let the pain have that other part, the part where you're not focused, while you're thrown to a smaller area. Once that area is okay and you're okay staying there, then you can think of spreading some of that okay energy out in the direction of the pain and through the pain.

Don't let the pain form a wall to the breath energy. Remember, the breath energy is prior. Your sense of the body, your sense of what's going on in the body, is always filtered through the breath. Yet sometimes we get things backwards. We think that if there's a pain or if there's a solid feeling of blockage someplace, the breath can't go through. Then we breathe in a truncated kind of way.

So you have to remind yourself: The breath is always going through the body all the way. You want to be in touch with that level of breath energy and keep that uppermost in your mind.

What you're beginning to do is to take an active role toward the pain. Instead of just being the passive recipient of the pain, putting yourself in the line of fire, you're now turning your awareness on it and getting a little bit more aggressive with the pain. Once you've worked with the breath, sometimes that makes a lot of the pain go away, or at least it makes it a lot easier to deal with.

When you're feeling confident enough, you can start probing into the pain, asking yourself questions about it: "What shape is the pain?" We have all kinds of crazy subconscious ideas about what pain is and how it's invaded the body. But your body sensations are one thing, and the pain sensations are something else.

At the very least, don't put yourself in the position of being the sail that's just getting the wind of the pain blown at you. Put your sails down. Try to make your awareness small and, as they say in Thai, it doesn't eat the wind, it doesn't gather up the wind. The wind goes past, goes past, goes past.

If you want, you can think of yourself as watching the pain go away, go away, go away as you're sitting in the back of a car with your back to the front, facing the back. As you see the things going past you on the side of the road, they're going away, away, away: You're not receiving them.

You can ask yourself, "Is the pain a solid sensation or are there little bits and pieces of sensations?" There are lots of questions you can ask about the pain and your relationship to it. That's the important thing: that you're questioning it, you're probing it. You're taking the active role here.

You begin to question the ways you've been picturing the pain to yourself because a lot of those pictures are the problem.

I read a very strange article the other day, someone saying that perception is the least problematic of the different ways we identify with ourselves or our sense of self. Perceptions are neutral.

They're not neutral at all. Perceptions come from our lizard brain and they carry a lot of impact. A lot of them stay underground. What you want to do is learn how to bring them out from underground, to question them.

Some of the questions may seem strange, like the one about the shape of the pain. But sometimes you need to ask strange questions if you're going to see things in a new light. For instance: Which side of the pain are you on? Are you on the top or are you below it? Are you to the left or to the right?

When you ask those kinds of questions, sometimes you find that the mind actually thinks it has a position with regard to the pain. It has lots of these assumptions that you've built over who-knows-how-many years. It's only when you question them that you begin to realize the power they have over you. And in realizing the power they have over you, you free yourself from some of that power. That's the important part.

It's by questioning the assumptions you begin to realize that they're pretty arbitrary, and that a lot of the pain that you've been suffering from has to do with the way you relate to sensations. Even though the sensations in and of themselves may not be pleasant, you begin to realize that that fact does not have to weigh on the mind.

This is an important distinction we make between the stress and pain of the four noble truths and the stress and pain of what they call the three characteristics. The second kind of stress and pain is the simple fact that we have bodies that have pains. It's a natural part of the physical processes and the mental processes by which we live.

But there's another kind of pain that comes from clinging and craving. That doesn't have to be there. That's the pain in the four noble truths. And that's

optional. In other words, it comes from our own unskillful habits and it can be ended by learning how to be more skillful.

As it turns out, that's the kind of pain that weighs the mind down. Without the clinging and craving, the pains in the body have no impact on the mind at all. They're just there, a part of nature, but the mind doesn't suffer.

To see the distinction between those two kinds of suffering, you really do have to probe into the pain. And you have to come from a position where you feel secure in doing the probing. This is why you learn how to deal with the pain for a while and then, when you realize that the mind is tired of analyzing things, tired of questioning things, you go back to your center. Stay there and rest. Let the pain have its area. Then when you're rested, you can come out and investigate again. You go back-and-forth like this.

There have been many, many ajans who've talked about how the really important moments in their meditation came from learning about pain, patiently watching and analyzing it. It's something we all want to run away from, but only through dealing with the pain can we break through to something really important. It's not that you're pushing through the pain, just that the mind itself begins to sort things out.

With Ajaan Fuang, it was a persistent headache. Ajaan Suwat, it was a case of malaria. Ajaan Maha Boowa, it was sitting long, long hours in meditation. In every case, it came from realizing that what the Buddha said in his very first sermon, "pain is to be comprehended," is one of the most important things he said.

So keep this in mind when you encounter pain. We're all going to encounter pain. If we're not encountering it now, it's down the road. As the Buddha said, *dukkha*—pain, suffering, stress—is a noble truth.

I read something else really strange recently, saying that the fact that we're suffering is something to be ashamed of. It's very ignoble because it's a sign that we've been clinging and craving.

That shows a lot of misunderstanding. The truth about pain is noble in the sense that if you really follow the duty with regard to this truth, it opens you up to something really noble, a really noble attainment.

And the truth itself is noble in the sense—this is peculiar to the language of the Buddha's time—that the word *ariya* also meant universal: something that was standard, true across the board. It wasn't just one person's personal opinion or something that was picked up from one culture but wasn't true in another culture. This is something true across the board, in every culture. Everyone experiences pain and we can all get beyond it by comprehending it.

And your willingness to face it and comprehend it is noble in and of itself.