

Perceptions Around Pain

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There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha's reporting a conversation he had with some Jains who claimed that through their austerities, they were burning off old karma. The proof that it was burning off was the pain they were feeling. So he asked them: Have you ever noticed that when you don't do your austerities, there's no pain? It sounds a little flippant, but he's making an important point: that a lot of our pain does come from our present actions. This applies both to physical pain and to mental pain.

In fact, if it weren't for our mental actions right now, physical pain would not have an impact on the mind—and there would be no mental pain. That gives you something to think about and something to work with as you meditate. If pain arises while you're meditating and all you do is complain about it, you're not really learning anything about it. You're just being the victim and engaging in the kinds of complaints that a victim engages in.

It's a lot more productive to take a more proactive approach. One of the first things you want to do is check your posture. To what extent is your posture contributing to the pain? Then check the way you breathe. If your breath is constricted, it can lead to pain in different parts of the body and not necessarily in the same spot where it's constricted.

Years back, I was suffering from migraines, and I came to realize that they were often caused by parts of my lower back where the breath energy wasn't flowing properly. Sometimes if I could get the breath energy good there, the pain in the head—if it didn't go away, at least it would be a lot less. I also found that there were times when some very deep breathing would help alleviate the pain—way down into the stomach, way down into the intestines—breathing so deep and so long, expanding the abdomen so much that it was almost painful there. But it helped with the head.

So that's one thing you might want to investigate. And the fact that you're investigating means that you're not a stationary target. The pain can't shoot you, because you're running around, asking this, doing that, investigating this, trying that. This is a really important principle: that if you're proactive, it's a lot harder for the pain to have a negative effect on you because your attitude is better. It's even better when you start noticing what the mind is doing.

You can make up your mind that you'll be equanimous in the face of the pain, that you won't react. The effort put into being non-reactive *is* a type of proactivity,

but there's a lot more that needs to be done to understand the pain. You want to investigate the perceptions you have that contribute to the pain, that create a bridge from the physical pain into the mind. Sometimes you can ask questions. For example, where is the most intense point of the pain right now? Try following it. You'll notice that it doesn't stay still; it moves around. That helps to get rid of the perception that the pain is a solid block.

There's also the relationship between the pain and space. If you lay claim to a certain part of the body, and the pain seems to be moving in on your claim, that perception is going to cause a lot of suffering. There are some different ways you can deal with that. One is to say, "Okay, what if I don't lay claim to that part of the body? I don't need it right now." That gets involved with your perceptions around time, which we'll get to in a minute. But for the time being, you don't need that space; you don't need to lay claim to it. You can lay claim to another part of the body where the breath is nourishing, where the breath is refreshing or, at the very least, the breath is okay. The pain can have its part.

Then you begin to realize that the pain is not the same as the body. Your sense of the body is made up of the four elements. There's a sense of earth, i.e., the solidity of the body; there's fire, which is the warmth; water, the coolness; and breath, which is the energy. These are the types of sensation that make up the sense of the body. Now, the pain is not any of these things, and yet we glom them all together, particularly the pain and the solid part. But if you can learn to question that—"Okay, where is the solidity here, where is the liquidity, where is the warmth, where is the energy?"—then you realize that the sensations of pain are something different. That helps to erase the idea that the pain has invaded the body. It may be in the same space, but it's something different. Your awareness may be in the same place, but it doesn't have to take on the qualities of the pain.

That's one way you investigate the perceptions around the space. Then, of course, may be a sense that the pain has the intention to hurt you. You have to keep reminding yourself that pain is not a conscious entity; it's just something that's there. It's your reading of certain nervous impulses and has no intention at all. It doesn't intend to stay; it doesn't intend to go. It just happens.

Another set of perceptions has to do with time. You're sitting here, your legs are beginning to hurt, and you start thinking: Is this going to do permanent damage to my legs? Or you may be sitting here, there's been five minutes of pain, and we've got another whole 55 minutes to sit. All of a sudden, you've got a whole hour of pain weighting down this one moment, and of course, that will be hard to bear. But if you can lop off those perceptions of the past and the future, you've just got the sensation right here, right now. As for the pain in the future, you'll

deal with that when it comes. And when that pain comes, the pain you're feeling right now will have gone.

The more you can be just on the cusp of the moment with the pain, the easier it is to bear. And while you're there, you might think of the pain as "these moments of pain that come and go and come and go." Don't put yourself in the line of fire. As I've mentioned several times before, think of yourself as sitting in the back of one of those old station wagons with the back seat faced to the rear while the station wagon goes down the road. The pain is not coming *at* you. As soon as you sense the pain, it's going past and going away. Going past, going away: Hold that perception in mind. The pain just missed you, and now it's going to disappear. Another one will come, but it'll do the same thing.

So there are lots of different ways you can investigate the perception that fastens on to the pain, that seems to give pain an intentionality and a directionality, that tells you that the pain occupies a certain amount of space and threatens you with a long time of pain. Learn how to chop those perceptions up, question them, turn them around. See the perceptions themselves as things that arise and pass away, arise and pass away. You don't have to decide that you agree or disagree with them; they're just things that come and go.

And just as you want to hold the perception that the pain is not coming at you, these perceptions are not coming at you. There's no reason that you have to lay claim to them just because they're in your space of awareness. They come and they go, too. They're not the same as awareness. Awareness is one thing; the perception is something else. So attack the perceptions with that same proactive attitude.

In this way, you find that you can't only deal with the pain. You also have to deal with perceptions. When you do, your relationship to the pain changes. It's not so threatening; it's something you can learn from. Ajaan Suwat used to make the comment that we have everything all mixed up. We love our craving and hate our pains. We have to realize that the craving is a problem; the pain is something we can learn from. It teaches you how to observe your mind, look at the ways your mind acts around different issues, and particularly to step back from your perceptions and learn how to question them, replace them with different perceptions. See the connections between the perceptions and the pain. Certain perceptions come, and the level of pain goes up. When they disappear, the level of the pain in the mind goes down. You can tell yourself, "I don't need those perceptions." Other perceptions help the level of pain go down. Use those as part of the path until you can clearly distinguish among your awareness, the perceptions, the pain, the body.

All these things that have gotten glommed together can now get sorted out. In Ajaan Lee's image, it's like heating a rock. There are different types of metal in the rock, and each of them has a different melting point. When you reach the melting point for one type of metal, it melts out and separates away. When you reach the melting point for another one, that particular metal melts, seeps out of the rock, separates and goes in another direction. It's through the effort of the practice, your willingness to be with the pain and yet not to be a victim: That's what helps things separate out.

It's a great lesson in karma, the karma in the present moment: what you're doing right now, what you're thinking right now, the perceptions you apply to things and the perceptions that you hold on to, the extent to which these things are causing suffering or contributing to suffering, creating disturbance in the mind. When you see them clearly, you can let them go because you see they're something different from your awareness. They're different from the pain. They're different from the body.

All these things: When you see the differences among them, they separate and go their various ways. Then nothing has to be a burden on your awareness.