

## *Understanding Pain*

*October 5, 2015*

The Buddha said that most people, when they encounter pain, have two reactions. The first reaction is bewilderment, not understanding why it's there, why it's happening. The other reaction is trying to find a way out: "Is there somebody who knows a way to get away from this pain?" So it's bewilderment and a search. That's how we normally respond to pain. The problem is that many of the people we go to for help don't really understand pain. The advice they give can maybe give a little bit of relief, but doesn't really put us past the problem of having to suffer over the pain.

Fortunately, we have the teachings of the Buddha. He begins right there with the problem of pain. *Dukkha*—the Pali term—means suffering, stress, pain. The Dhamma is all about explaining what the pain is, how it happens, and what we can do to put an end to the cause. All too often, we don't deal with the cause; we try to fight off the pain immediately, without looking at what's really causing the pain, especially when it has to do with the suffering in the mind. What's causing the suffering? There may be pain in the body, but the mind doesn't have to suffer from that. As they say, pain is normal, suffering is optional. And it's understanding why that is: That's how we can get past the pain.

The first thing to understand is that the pains we experience come from two kinds of actions or two kinds of karma. There are actions in the past—they gave us this body that we have, they gave the body the shape that it's in right now. Then there are all the things we've done with the body. Part of this, of course, comes from past lifetimes, and part of it is what we've done with the body in this lifetime. Have you exercised properly? Have you fed it properly? That also has an impact on how much pain there's going to be in the body.

But those are just potentials. The actual pain comes from the combination of past potentials plus your actions in the present moment. And it's right here that we can make a difference. Fortunately, the actions we're doing right now are

creating the kind of pain in the mind that's causing the mind to suffer. If we change our present actions, the mind doesn't have to suffer.

So first we have to have this understanding: The fact that there's pain in the body does *not* have to make us suffer. Then we can turn around and look at the problem of what's bringing that bodily pain into the mind.

This is where we see two things: intentions and perceptions. What are your intentions around the pain? For most of us, we just want to get rid of it or run away from it. But the Buddha said that it's something we have to comprehend. So how do you comprehend it? First you try to see what's actually pained here; and then you look for the cause. So instead of dealing with the pain right away or trying to get rid of the pain right away, you have to watch it for a while.

It's like going into a house and finding that it's full of smoke. We know, of course, that where there's smoke, you've got to find the fire if you want to get rid of the smoke. But the way we deal with our pain is as if we're trying to put out the smoke. The more you put out the smoke, put out the smoke, the more smoke there's going to be, because the fire is still burning. So you've got to look for the cause: what's causing the pain to come into the mind.

A lot of it has to do with our perceptions—the perceptions that lead to the craving that makes the pain burdensome to the mind. So the first thing you want to do is strengthen the mind, to give it the courage and strength of morale it needs to try to comprehend the pain. This is why we work with concentration: It gives us the strength we need.

There are two steps to dealing with pain, and both involve concentration, trying to get the mind to be still. First, if the pain hasn't arisen yet, and you know where pains tend to arise as you meditate, work on that area. Let the breath flow through that area. Sometimes you find that the problem isn't right where the pain is—there may be a blockage in the breath someplace else. Sometimes there's a pain right where the leg joins the body, right there in the hip, but it's not due to the lack of circulation there. It's because the circulation isn't going well in the back of the neck or in the middle of the back.

This is why you start up there, at the top of the back, and think of the breath energy going all the way down the spine and out the leg. Wherever there's tension

that tends to tighten up in those areas, allow it to relax, relax, relax. This is the preemptive strike.

The second step is that if the pain has actually arisen, don't go focusing on the pain quite yet. Gather your forces. Find a part of the body that's not in pain and allow your attention to settle there. It doesn't have to be intensely pleasant but just pleasant enough so that you feel at ease settling there. Meanwhile, the mind is going to keep telling you, "There's pain, pain, pain over there, focus over there." You don't have to listen to it; you don't have to believe it. Sure enough, there may be pain there, but you don't have to focus there, you don't have to get in the line of fire. You're in the midst of gathering your strength so that you can have a stable place inside the body where you can stay. This is good to know because there are times when you're dealing directly with the pain, and it begins to get a little overwhelming, but you know in the back of your mind that you've got your safe place to go back to.

Once that safe place is strong, then there's the third step, which is to think of the good breath energy from that safe spot going over and going right through the pain. For example, if the pain is in the knee, think of the breath energy going down the leg and through the knee and continue on down out the toes. In other words, don't stop right at the pain—think of the breath energy going through.

That changes one of your perceptions about the pain right there. Often the pain feels like a wall. But if you think of the energy going through it, you begin to realize that it's porous—it's not as solid as you thought it was. And sometimes when you do this, the pain actually goes away. There was pain caused by tension and by bad circulation, and when you've improved the circulation with the breath and the blood, the pain goes away.

Other pains don't go away that easily. There's more old karma in there. That's when you're ready for the fourth step, which is that once the mind has been strengthened by its concentration, and you've gotten rid of as much tension and tightness around the pain as you can, then you can go in and look at the pain directly and ask questions.

Asking questions here is important because you're going to be trying to uproot your underlying perceptions around the pain. Sometimes those are hard to track down because they're very strange. Many of these perceptions you picked up when

you were a child. Even before you knew how to talk, you were already dealing with pain. The perceptions coming from that time are sometimes buried down inside the mind. So you have to ask strange questions to get those perceptions out into the open.

For example, you can ask yourself: What's the shape of the pain? What's the color? Where is the most intense spot right now? If you look carefully, you'll see that the pain is not a solid thing. It's something that moves around—appears and disappears, back and forth, back and forth, up and down. It's simply because we add the perception that it was the same thing as, say, the knee, the same thing as the body where the pain was: That's what made it seem solid. After all, the body is solid, so the solidity of the body gets glommed together with the pain, so that it becomes solid pain.

Learn how to question that. Is the body the same thing as the pain? The body is something physical; the pain is something mental. They may lie in the same spot, but it's as if they're on different frequencies. It's like the radio waves here in the sala—there are radio waves from San Diego, Los Angeles, Tijuana, Phoenix, whatever. They're all here in the sala. If you put a radio in here, you can pick up the different ones at different times. They are all at the same place, but you learn to tune in to one frequency and you get to hear what you want. Even though they're all in the same place, you can sort them out.

It's the same way with the body and the pain. It's as if they are different frequencies—pain is one thing, body is something else. Pain comes and goes, moves here, moves there. You can ask yourself: Does the pain have an intention? Because, again, as a child you may have thought that this pain came and intentionally attacked you. Well, that's not the case—it's just there. It comes and goes. So why get worked up about it?

Part of us says that evolution has told us to be on the lookout for pain. Well, evolution's purposes are one thing; our purposes are something else. So learn how to question your perceptions around the pain, until you see which perceptions are the bridge into the mind. Learn how to drop those perceptions. You don't have to believe everything you think, no matter how convincing it may be. If it's causing pain and suffering in the mind, you don't need it.

What you're doing as you're questioning here is that you're taking an active and aggressive role in with the pain. And when you're aggressive, the pain has trouble hitting you. When you're sitting still or trying to run away, it can shoot you as much as it likes. But if you're more aggressive and you're probing here and asking there and looking here, you're harder to hit.

Or even better: You can hold the perception in mind that you're sitting in one of those old station wagons, with the back seat faced backwards. If anything comes into the range of your vision, it's going away. As soon as it appears, it goes away. This is good for curing the perception that the pain is coming at you. If you're sitting in front of the car, facing forward, everything seems to be coming at you. But if you can see that as soon as a moment of pain arises, it goes away, arises, goes away, it's not striking you at all; it's just something happening and it's leaving you, leaving you, leaving you: If you hold that perception in mind, it becomes a *lot* easier to stay with the pain.

So what we're doing here is we're changing our understanding of the pain, changing our intention around the pain. We're not here to run away from it. We're here to understand it, comprehend it, and then changing our perceptions and intentions—all of which are our present karma. When you change your present karma until it's more skillful, then you realize that you can be with the potentials of all kinds of things coming in from the past but you don't have to suffer from them. It's making this distinction that allows us to find release from suffering—the end of suffering in this lifetime. After all, people like the Buddha and the arahants still had bodies. They still had physical pains. But they learned to relate to the pain in such a way that it didn't cause the mind to suffer.

So learn how to make that distinction. You realize that the suffering that we impose on ourselves comes from our current actions, so we can change our current actions. This is why we meditate: to change our current intentions, change our current perceptions, so we can reach the point where whatever comes up in the body doesn't have to have an impact on the mind. That's how you realize the cessation of suffering.

So follow the path because it takes you there. And the path is right here—staying with the breath. The concentration gives you the strength and the

nourishment and the courage to deal with pain. So work on making your concentration strong, because that's the foundation for everything else.