

The Pain of Conviction

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One of the instructions in breath meditation is to learn how to breathe in and out in a way that makes you sensitive to rapture, makes you sensitive to pleasure in the body. Now, it takes a while to figure out how to do that. Part of it has to do with the way you breathe, part of it has to do with how you focus your mind. But it's a skill you can figure out.

Part of the problem, of course, is with that word, "rapture." It sounds like Saint Teresa going into ecstasies. And sometimes there is a very strong sense of thrill that goes through the body. But what the Buddha's having you focus on more is the sense of refreshment. You breathe in the way that feels refreshing: It refreshes your torso, refreshes all the different parts of the body where you can feel the breathing process. It starts out very gently, just a sense that things feel okay; they feel like they've settled in where they belong. But if you give this sense of "okay" some space, give it some time, it'll grow. So don't put any squeeze on it. Breathe in in a way that doesn't build up tension inside and you don't hold onto any tension when you breathe out. Just protect that "okay" area wherever you feel it. Things feel full and pleasant. If you give them more time, that sense of feeling full will grow, that sense of pleasure will grow.

Over time, you'll find that you can tap into this more and more regularly. It would be nice if we could say that things will just get better and better in every way and every day as you practice, but they are going to be ups and downs. You'd think that the mind would immediately want to incline to a state like this and do everything it could to protect it and maintain it. But the mind has lots of other agendas as well. So expect that there are going to be some fallow times. You sit down to meditate and the breath just doesn't seem to get comfortable, doesn't want to. Well, it's not the breath. The problem is with the mind, those other agendas.

So you need something to pull you through when things get tough. This is where conviction comes in. There's a passage where the Buddha's discussing the causes that lead to suffering, and then beyond suffering, the next step is conviction, conviction that there's a way out. It doesn't end the suffering, but it actually puts a different cast on it. Because conviction itself has both a pleasant and an unpleasant side. The pleasant side, of course, is that it offers a way out, saying that through your actions you can make a difference in your life. The unpleasant side is that your actions need to change. And there's a part of the mind

that doesn't want to change. Yet if it doesn't want to change, no change is going to happen.

The solution doesn't come from outside. As the Buddha pointed out, one of our responses to pain, suffering, discontent, is bewilderment. And another response is the question: Is there somebody who knows a way or two to escape from this pain? The problem is that we tend to combine those two—the bewilderment and the search for an escape, the search for help—and so our search for help gets bewildered, too. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha tried to give as much knowledge and insight into pain, so that we can realize where the true hope lies. It lies inside. The help from outside is there simply to point out: This is what you need to do to end the bewilderment and then you can focus on what has to be done.

The path itself is going to involve some pain because going against old habits is painful. And to simply realize that there's more work to be done is also a painful thought. But it's pain with a purpose, a pain that takes you someplace beyond the pain. Because if you just believe, "Well, there's no escape from this, we'll just have to accept things the way they are," that closes all the doors. The Buddha didn't teach that kind of acceptance. He taught that you should accept responsibility and then figure out what needs to be done. But the conviction that changing your actions, changing your thoughts, changing your words and deeds will make a difference: That's the fire that propels you, that keeps you going. That's what keeps the door open.

So we work on our conviction, that the solution to the problem lies right here. From there, we try to develop the qualities of the path, because they give more strength to our conviction. This is not a floating kind of conviction, where you simply profess a belief and stop there. It's a conviction that's meant to be put into practice. As the Buddha said, one of the signs of conviction is that you actually practice. At the very least, you make sure that your actions aren't harming anyone, either in your words or your deeds. And then you go beyond that, trying to develop the qualities of taking delight in developing skillful qualities and delight in abandoning unskillful ones.

In other words, talk to yourself in a new way. Talk to yourself in a way that says, "I want to see this go, this pain that I'm causing myself, these attitudes that I'm carrying around that are unskillful." And even if you can drop them only for a bit, learn to take some pleasure in that, learn to take pleasure in the fact that you want to make a change. The Buddha said that simply making the determination that you want to be skillful, even before you act much on it, is, in and of itself, a

skillful thought, and you want to encourage that. And the best way to encourage that is follow through with it.

As for the thoughts that tend to be self-destructive, you have to ask yourself: Why you like them? Well, part of the problem is that laziness likes them, because they say that there's nothing much you can do, you're hopeless, and that seems to somehow to let you off the hook. Well, it lets you off the hook of some things, but you're still on the hook of suffering. And you're hooked really strongly, like a fish with a hook in its mouth.

So the path does require some pain: pain in the conviction, pain in actually following the path. There's an interesting passage where the Buddha talks about how, once you get the mind into concentration, there are many different kinds of pains that don't exist there. One of them is the pain that comes from unskillful mental states. And then interestingly enough, he says it's also an escape from the pain that comes from skillful mental states. That's an interesting idea, that some of the skillful states are going to be painful. But still, they're painful for a purpose. The skillful mental state that says, "I want to have more concentration, I want to get past this," is a painful thought, but it's a good one. But as the mind settles down in concentration, you're going to have a sense that you feel relatively okay right now. You're on the path, and it's going somewhere good. And there is that sense of well-being—once you've learned how to focus properly and have learned how to work with your breath properly—that takes the sting out of the fact that there's still more work to be done. Because when you're in a state like this, you see that if there's more work to be done like this, it's good work and it's work worth doing.

So when things are tough, look for whatever inside you is getting in the way, but also try to nurture the conviction that you can get past this, you're capable of getting past it. And whatever efforts you make are not doomed. After all, as the Buddha said, if we couldn't develop more skillful habits, there would be no point in his teaching us. There would be no point in our listening, there would be no point in our meditating, or doing anything. If we're just automatons, if everything were determined, if we were just material beings, having to feed our desires without any choice, *that* would be hopeless. But, as the Buddha said, the whole point of the teaching is that we are *not* hopeless. We actually have the potential for good habits that we can develop and we can make our choices. We don't have to follow our old ways. It is possible to turn a new leaf.

So think of whatever pain you're experiencing as your opening. We tend to be very tightly closed systems, in the sense that we've got a worldview and, as long as it serves our obvious interests, we're happy with it. We don't want to have

anything mess with it. We're very resistant to change. You can be exposed to any amount of Dhamma, and yet if there's no sense that there's anything wrong in your current state of becoming—the current you in your current sense of the world—you're not going to hear the Dhamma at all. Or what you hear is something else.

I've had it happen again and again, people coming up and telling me, "What you said in that Dhamma talk meant so much to me." And then they'll say what they heard me say, and I know I would never say anything like that. So it's obvious they were in some other world, with some other issue. But it's when you've got the pain and you realize that the pain is coming from something you're doing, that's when you begin to open up. That's why there is that search: Maybe somebody out there knows something, some way to deal with this pain. That's the opening that lets the Dhamma in if you're willing to listen and take it to heart. And part of taking it to heart is developing the conviction that this is a good path.

It's the path that makes you learn how to rely on yourself, and you've got the conviction that you do have the resources inside. Because what do you need to meditate? You need a mind that's aware, and you need a breath coming in and going out. Well, you've got those. It's just a matter of learning how to be more and more observant. How do you focus on the body so that you're not putting too much pressure on it? Without, at the same time, putting too little pressure. There's a certain amount of pressure that has to go with your focus, otherwise the mind just slips away. Too much pressure, of course, though, makes things uncomfortable in the body. Things start feeling clamped down on, and it gets unpleasant, and all you can think about is how much you want to get away.

This is one of the reasons why, once you find a spot in the body that's comfortable, you should immediately try to spread your awareness from that spot. Make that the center and spread out from there. The act of spreading relieves the pressure on that one spot. Then you work with the breath, to see what way of working with the breath maintains that sense of ease. Sometimes you get a sense of ease and pleasure, but then you try to push it out, and then, of course, in the act of pushing it you turn it into something unpleasant. These things can't be pushed. They have to be *allowed* to spread. Learn how to develop that touch.

You find, as you develop these skills, that you're developing a lot of good qualities in the mind. And one of them is that you begin to see that your conviction is well-placed, that you really can make a difference. Just the way you breathe, sitting here focusing on your breath, makes a difference in the mind's sense of well-being. And it's potentially always there. Sometimes you'll find yourself in a mood that takes a while to get back there, but it's there. The more

quickly you can tap into this sense of well-being, the easier it is to deal with unpleasant things coming up inside. You find that you can breathe right through them. And it helps to alleviate that pressure that you sometimes feel, that you've just got to get it out of your system by saying something nasty to someone else, or saying something hurtful, or whatever. The old attitude that "As long as I'm suffering, I might as well make everyone else suffer"—you realize that it doesn't accomplish anything at all. It just makes things worse.

So when the pressure builds up inside, you can tell yourself, "I can just breathe through it, allow it to dissipate." This gives you an immediate handle that this conviction is something you can really hold onto, and it really does make a difference. And you can train yourself to delight in abandoning the things that you used to hold onto, all the old unskillful habits. Like little gremlins you used to raise as pets, but they eat, they bite: You realize you don't have to keep feeding them anymore, you don't have to keep them as pets, just let them go.

It's in this way that the pain of conviction actually turns into pleasure: verified conviction, conviction confirmed, that even though this path does take you through difficult passages, it leads you out the other side.