

Feelings of Pain

October 4, 2016

One of the definitions of concentration is a mind firmly established. We firmly establish it in the object of our meditation: in the breath, or in a meditation word, like *Buddho*. We try to make sure that it doesn't fall down. If it falls down, we pick it back up; establish it again. It falls down again, pick it up; establish it again. But if we just keep this up, without having anything else to help us, after a while we get tired of falling down and getting up again. This is why the Buddha said that when you get into concentration, it requires four qualities of mind.

The first is desire. You really want to do this, because you see the importance of getting the mind under your control. Here we are, sitting outside. The weather is perfect. Your health is still good enough. Your mind is still sharp enough. But if you can't keep control of your mind now, think about what's going to happen as you get older: The body begins to deteriorate more and more. You get closer and closer to dying. How are you going to keep control over your mind then? Because at that point, there'll be the pain that's arising in the body, the restrictions of the things you can't do anymore. Sometimes your remembrance of things will be sketchy. And there will be a concern about all the things you'll be leaving behind. You have to be able to cut your mind off from all those things and not let it be affected by them. You need the skills that enable you not to suffer from what's going on at that point. That's precisely what you develop as you're meditating. You develop the skills to deal with pain, to deal with distraction. So this is something good to do. Give yourself a good pep talk as you get started in the meditation, as to why this is an important thing to do; why you want to do it.

Then, based on that desire, you put forth your effort to develop what's skillful; to develop what's even more skillful; to abandon what's unskillful.

Then you pay close attention to what's actually happening, because you want to understand: If the mind leaves its object, why did it leave? When you bring it back, what's the best way to bring it back? When you bring it back, how do you reward it? If you're focused on the breath, give it an especially satisfying breath as a reward.

This comes under the last two qualities, which are intent and analysis. You analyze what's going on. You try to figure out what's going on. It's like being a cook working for a king. The king doesn't tell you what he likes, so you have to notice for yourself. What kind of food does he reach for? Does he like salty food?

Does he like sweet food? Does he like sour food? Does he like hot food? Notice what he reaches for, then provide more of that.

It's the same way with the mind. Sometimes the mind doesn't like the breath, so you can give it something else. You can think about the parts of the body. Sometimes thinking about what you've got in your body right here, right now is enough to give rise to a sense of dismay—the kind of dismay that's not depressing. It's more a maturing process. It just makes you want to give up all your attachment to the body. You become more and more inclined to want to stay with your meditation, to stay with concentration. Or you could think, "*Buddho, Buddho.*" Or you could think thoughts of goodwill for all beings.

See what works in getting the mind to settle down. If you're working with the breath, find what kind of breath the body likes right now; what kind of breath the mind likes right now. Yesterday, it may have liked long breathing, but does it like long breathing today? If you're a good cook, you don't fix the same thing every day. You try to figure out, "What does this person need today?" If you're cooking for someone who's worked hard, you fix one kind of food. The next day, when they've been rested, you fix another kind of food.

So try to keep on top of what the mind needs. You have all four of these qualities: the desire to do it, the persistence, being intent on paying careful attention to what's happening, and using your powers of analysis to figure out what might work.

Ajaan Fuang used to say, with regard to the powers of analysis, that they also include your ingenuity. Sometimes you have to come up with new techniques, new approaches. Be willing to try something new to see what works. This way, the meditation becomes your own skill. It's not just the skill that's in the books. The mind actually does get firmly established.

In the process of getting it established, don't get discouraged by the fact that there may be some thoughts nibbling away at the edges of the mind. Normally, your mind has lots of conversations going on at any rate. So when you start conversing to yourself about the breath, there'll probably be a few conversations off to the side. But you don't pay them any mind. The breath is still here. Your awareness is still with the breath. That's what counts. Whether things get quiet in the mind or not quiet in the mind, that's not your business. Your business is that you stick with your object and gain a sense of solidity and well-being. That's your foundation. That's when you can start dealing with the different issues that come up in the body and the mind.

As I mentioned this morning, there are issues in the mind, or distraction; issues in the body, or pain. Both, however, comes right down to the fact that

whatever the issue, it has to get traced back to the mind. There may be pain in the body, but if the mind has the right attitude, the right understanding, then the pain doesn't have to disturb the mind. The mind that takes the pain and stabs itself with the pain: That's the problem.

This is where it's good to look into what the Buddha had to say about meditating with feeling or contemplating feeling. There are four steps altogether.

The first is to breathe in and out developing a sense of rapture or refreshment with the breath. The second step is to breathe in and out sensitive to pleasure in the breath. The third step is to breathe in and out sensitive to mental fabrication—in other words, feelings and perceptions. Feelings are feeling- tones of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain. Perceptions are the labels you use to identify things. Then the fourth step is to calm mental fabrication. In other words, find a way to breathe that calms the feelings and calms the perceptions.

The ajaans in Thailand have ways of explaining these steps. Ajaan Lee has some good ways of explaining the first two steps. When you're dealing with pain, the first thing to do is not to focus on the pain. He says it's like going into a house where the floorboards have a few rotten spots. If you're going to lie down on the floor, you don't lie down on the rotten spots. You lie down on the good spots.

Or it's like eating a mango. You cut open the mango and there's a rotten spot in the mango. You don't eat the rotten spot. You eat the good part of the mango and leave the rotten spot for the ants and the flies. It's the same way if there's a pain, say, in your knee or in your hip. You don't focus in the knee. You don't focus in the hip. You focus on parts of the body that you can make comfortable with the breath.

For instance, say you focus on the middle of the chest. It feels good breathing in, it feels good breathing out, right there at the middle of the chest. You breathe in a way that feels like it's massaging the muscles around the heart so that the blood flows all around, nice and evenly. And there's a sense of fullness there—not too much; just right. Well, try to maintain that. As for the pain in the hip or the pain in the leg, for the time being you cut those parts of the body off. Don't go focusing your attention there, because otherwise you're going to be right in the line of fire.

Stay in the area where it's safe, where you can gather your forces. Like that story in history when King Taksin needed to drive the Burmese out of Ayuddhaya: He didn't start in Ayuddhaya. He started over in the east, in Chantaburi and Rayong, gathered up his forces there, and then moved into Ayuddhaya. It's the same thing here. You start by developing a good breath here in the chest—a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, of fullness here in the chest.

Then you think of it spreading down your spine, out the leg, past the hip, past the knee, out through the toe. In other words, you don't stop at the pain. You go through the pain. Think of that sense of good breath energy going right through it. If the pain feels like a wall, think of the breath as being more refined than the pain. It can penetrate through the wall—all the way out the toes; all the way out the toes.

Sometimes we have a subconscious habit that when there's a pain in part of the body, we put up a shell. We try block the breath energy from the pain. It's our subconscious way of trying to ensure that the pain doesn't spread. We think that if we put up a wall around it, it's not going to get through the wall. Well, actually, the wall is what's actually creating a lot of the problems. In fact, sometimes the actual pain is gone, but the wall we've created is the new pain. So, if you can dissolve the wall away, the pain may go away. But even if it doesn't go away, you can begin to reclaim that part of the body—but without feeling oppressed by it; without feeling threatened by it, because your main focus is still up in the chest. The good energy from the chest can soothe the pain—making a heavy pain light; making a light pain go away. And even what pain is there, you don't feel overcome by it.

As for the next two steps—breathing in and out sensitive to mental fabrication and calming mental fabrication—Ajaan Maha Boowa has some good suggestions for dealing with your perceptions around the pain. After you breathe through the pain and things are more firmly established in the body, you don't feel threatened by the pain, so you can actually probe into it and start asking questions about it. In other words, you take the pain on. You don't just sit there on the receiving end. You become someone who probes the pain. The fact that you're probing the pain means that the pain can't hit you quite as strong.

The way you probe it is to ask questions about your perceptions around the pain. For example, do you perceive that the pain is the same thing as the body? Do you perceive that the pain is the same thing as the mind right there; your awareness right there? Actually, they're different things.

Your body, or your sense of the body, is made up of four elements: earth, water, wind, fire—in other words, a sense of solidity, coolness, energy, and warmth. But the pain is something else. Even though there may be a hot aspect to the pain, the real part of the pain is the sharpness. And that's not any one of those four elements. It's something else. So hold that perception in mind. The body is one thing. The pain is something else. It's really true.

The same thing with the question as to whether the pain is the same thing as your awareness: It may feel like it's invaded part of your awareness and is

occupying part of it, but the pain isn't aware. It doesn't know anything. It doesn't have any intention. *You* have the intention. You have the awareness. So the pain is something else, which means that the part of the mind that feels that the pain has invaded it, taking up residence in the body—that perception is what's making you suffer from the pain. If you cut through that perception and see that these are three separate things—even though they may be in the same place, they're on a different frequency—then it's a lot easier to live with them.

They're like radio waves in the air. Right now, we've got radio waves from Tijuana; radio waves from San Diego; radio waves from Phoenix; radio waves from Yuma, Los Angeles—all sorts of places coming right through the same spot here in the air. If you put up a radio here, you can tune the dial and you get different frequencies, even though it's all in the same place. It's because they're on different frequencies. And the radio can separate them out.

That's what you want to do with the pain and the awareness and the body. They may be in the same place, but they're on different frequencies. When you see them as something different, then the pain isn't invading your body, it isn't invading your mind. It's just there. It's not you. It's not yours. Then it's a lot easier to live with it. You don't have to suffer from it quite so much.

Another question you can ask is whether the pain is coming at you or going away from you. When there's pain in the body, we feel like we're sitting in the front of a car going down the road, and everything we see is coming at us, coming at us. You have the feeling that the pain is coming at you, almost as if it were intending to hurt you. Well, first you have to change that perception that it's intending anything. Then switch your perspective around. Think of yourself sitting in the back of an old station wagon. The back seat is facing toward the back, and as you're going down the road, everything you see coming in through the corner of your eye is already going away, going away, going away. As soon as you see it, it's already going further away from you.

Think of the pain in the same way. It arises and passes away very quickly—those little bursts of pain. So instead of perceiving them as coming at you, perceive them as going away, going away, going away. It'll be a lot easier living with them.

Or you can ask yourself, "Which part of the pain is the worst part? Which is the strongest part of the pain?" Start chasing it around. You see that as you chase it around, it moves. This helps you see that your perception of the pain as solid was a false perception.

In this way, you take these old perceptions and you question them. You see that they don't hold up to the light of your examination. You replace them with

better perceptions: perceptions that don't make the pain stab the heart. This is how you calm mental fabrication.

You get so that you're not afraid of pain. This is going to help a lot. As life goes on, we get faced with more and more pains all the time. Parts of the body that you thought were never going to hurt start hurting. They don't ask permission first. They don't tell you they're going to break down. You have to be prepared. It's as if you've signed on to a contract to have this body. And then you find out in the fine print that the only way to get out of this body is to die. Before death, there's aging and illness. If you haven't trained the mind, the pain of the aging, the pain of the illness, and the pain of death will be overwhelming.

But if the mind is trained, it doesn't have to be afraid of those things. It's ready. It can go through all those things without suffering.

So make sure that you get your foundation strong and that you understand how to deal with issues around pain. Once your foundation is strong and you've got your weapons well sharpened, you're ready for whatever happens. And you can come out winning.