

The Fabrication of Pain

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There's a peculiar passage in the Canon where the Buddha says that we fabricate feelings for the sake of having a feeling. This applies both to pleasures and to pains as well as to feelings that are neutral, neither pleasant nor painful. You might think it would be strange that we would fabricate pains, but all of our feelings are fabricated. You have to remember that, so that when there's a pain in the body and it's disturbing the mind, you'll ask yourself, "How am I fabricating this?"

This is where it's useful to think about the three different kinds of fabrication. There's bodily fabrication—your breath. Verbal fabrication—directed thought and evaluation, in other words, the way you talk to yourself about something. Then mental fabrication, which are feelings themselves and perceptions. So when a pain is bothering you, ask yourself, "How am I breathing around it?" And here it's good to also ask yourself, "How am I talking to myself about this?" Because the way you talk to yourself about it is going to determine, a lot of times, how you breathe. If you're talking about how horrible the pain is, how much you want it to go away, the way you breathe around it is going to be affected.

This is why it's important to have right view. The pain is going to be there and your duty is not to make it go away. It's to comprehend it.

This is the difference between what the Buddha calls "householder" pains and "renunciate" pains. A householder pain is basically when you're sitting there, you're feeling the pain, and you're complaining about it. Renunciant pain is when you realize, "Okay, I haven't gone beyond this pain, I need to do something more in terms of the practice." And you want to cultivate that renunciate kind of pain. In other words, you remind yourself that there's work to be done. You can't just sit there and wallow in the pain or wallow in your self-pity. There's work to be done to get beyond this. You use that as your motivation. You're here to comprehend pain and you have to hammer that point into the mind, again and again and again. Because our initial reaction, of course, ever since we first encountered pain, was to try to run away. But if you run away, you can't comprehend anything. So you have to be able to sit there and look at it.

This is where you work with the breath. You find a part of the body that's not affected by the pain and you focus there. If the pain is in the knee, let it have the knee for the time being. If it's in the arm, let it have the arm. You're going to be someplace else, where you can develop a sense of well-being, a sense of ease, a sense

of confidence that you do have a place here in the present moment where you can focus and it's not going to be painful. No matter how bad the pain can be in the body, there's going to be some spot that's not in pain.

Maybe you can't find it yet. In that case, think of the cocoon of energy surrounding the body. Focus your attention there for the time being and work with the breath in that area. Then, as the cocoon of energy begins to settle down and smooth out, you can go back to the body and you'll find that there are some spots where you can make a beachhead. In other words, your landing force comes into the body and it's able to secure that part of the body.

Then think of different ways of spreading the good energy through the pain. This is where mental fabrication comes in—the image you have in your mind of how the energy spreads. Make sure you're coming from good energy, because often the desire to chase the pain away will destroy the good energy you originally created with the breath. You have to be always coming from a state of well-being, always coming from a place where you feel, “This pain does not have to make me suffer.”

Then you let the energy flow. The way you picture the energy to yourself will depend on the different kind of pains. Sometimes the energy has to come from the spot where you focus. Sometimes it comes in from the outside. Sometimes it comes from a good place in the body, going out. Sometimes it goes out through the pain. Sometimes it goes down through the pain, up through the pain, left, right. This is going to vary from case to case.

So learn how to play with your perceptions. Because you find that, ultimately, perception is the big problem. There can be a physical pain in the body but it doesn't have to affect the mind. What affects the mind is the bridge that comes through the perception—where you're laying claim to some part of the body but the pain has invaded the spot that you've laid claim to. You picture it as having a particular shape and a particular quality to it.

Sometimes you even invest it with an intention: The pain is there to make you suffer—which, when you think about it in an adult way, doesn't make any sense. But often our reactions to pain date from the time when we were children, when we didn't understand things very well. We often carry around a lot of those buried attitudes, and these are the things we have to question.

You can also ask yourself, “Is the pain coming at you or is it going away? Is the pain solid or is it made out of individual moments?” If you've got a perception of a solid pain coming at you, you've got a big problem. Try to keep the mind as quiet as possible. You begin to see that the pain comes in its moments. They can be very thick and very fast—rapid-fire kind of moments—but they're there, they're

moments. And here is where you can play with your perception. Think of them as going away as soon as they appear. They're not coming at you. They have no intention to harm you. They're just going away—going past, going past—and you're here. And you're not collecting them.

This is another area where we tend to go wrong. We create a perception to pass as a message on from one moment to the next: "The pain is right here, okay, watch out for this pain right here, okay?" And that, of course, weighs the next moment down. So, as soon as you see the mind passing that perception on, from one moment to the next, try to obliterate that, too.

Part of the mind will be afraid. It'll say, "Here I am, naked in front of the pain"—where you think you have your perceptions as a defense. But often the perceptions are actually causing the problem. It's like having a monster bomb. Of course, it makes everybody else want to have a monster bomb to use against you. But if you don't carry any bombs around, nobody's going to throw any big bombs at you.

It's the same with the pain. If you have perceptions about the pain and try to pass them on from one moment to the next, they're going to hurt you. Even though you think you've helped the mind get some control over the pain or be aware of the pain, all too often the perceptions are actually causing the problem. So as soon as a perception arises, think of the perception having its moments as well, if the perception is causing you pain. If you find a perception that helps you be with the pain and not suffer, hold onto that perception, at least for the time being—in the knowledge that a perception that helps today may not necessarily help tomorrow, but at least you've got something that's working right now.

When you get to the point where you really don't need to hold a perception in mind, let it go, let it go, let it go. The perception is momentary in the same way that the pain was momentary.

Lots of different things can happen when you do let the perception go, but the most important things that can happen are two. The first is that the pain will actually go away, in which case the perception was what had a neck lock on the pain. It was actually the cause of the pain—the physical cause of the pain had long since disappeared, but the perception was carrying it on. So when the perception goes and the pain goes, okay, realize that was an area where you just kept things going without you realizing it.

The other possibility, of course, is that the perception drops away, but the pain is still there. It keeps coming again and again and again. But as long as there's no perception to label it—at least, no perception that labels in a way that makes it scary or intrusive, or whatever it is that weights the mind down—the pain can be

there but your awareness is also there and they don't mingle. It's like having water and oil in a bottle, and letting the bottle sit still. The water and the oil will separate out. They're right next to each other but they don't penetrate.

So remember: The pain that's bothering the mind is not just a given. You're doing some of the fabricating.

This is one of the purposes of doing meditation to begin with—to see how much of our experience we're fabricating. We're fabricating a lot more than we think.

“Fabricating” here doesn't mean that you're lying, it simply means that you're creating things, jerry-rigging things together, to make some sense out of your experience, or to get something out of your experience. But the way you jerry-rig can carry lots of problem with it. A lot of things that bother us in life are not simply “givens.” We've taken some raw material from our past karma and have shaped it into something oppressive. That's the kind of pain that the Buddha is focusing on—the pain that comes from craving.

And it's endowed with wrong view, wrong resolve, all the way down to wrong concentration. The way you're talking to yourself about how the pain and the body have interpenetrated, and the pain and the body and the mind are all the same thing: That's wrong view. The resolve to get rid of the pain: That's wrong resolve. The way you're talking to yourself about the pain—the things you're doing with the pain, the way you're trying to find some pleasure in the body that the pain is pushing out—that's all wrong speech, wrong action, wrong livelihood. Wrong effort: whatever effort is that you do to try to get rid of the pain. Wrong mindfulness: You're keeping the wrong things in mind around the pain. And wrong concentration: You're focused on the wrong place, you're focused with the wrong attitude.

All of this is what makes the pain something hard to bear. The simple fact that there will be pains in the body is something you have to accept. They come and they go. But the pain that we create for the mind that doesn't have to be accepted. That's our creation. It's an unskillful creation. And the way we get past it is, basically, to learn some skills in fabrication.

So look at how you're fabricating—your breath, the way you talk to yourself around the pain, the perceptions you bring to the pain. And think about the other feelings that there are in the body. You can create a sense of ease in different parts of the body and use that as a tool so that you feel more confident in approaching the pain. You're not letting yourself simply be on the receiving end, as the victim of the pain—letting it shoot you all the time. You're moving around as you ask questions. Look at it from this angle. Look at it from that angle. And, of course,

when you're moving around, it's harder for the pain to shoot you. Even when you're focused on one spot but you're asking questions about the pain, that puts you on the offensive. That's how we begin to understand why it the mind creates pain like this, why it fabricates pain in a way that causes added suffering, and how we can fabricate in a different way.

That different way, of course, is the path, starting with right view going on through right concentration, focused on the way we're talking to ourselves. As the Buddha said, we spend too much of our time talking to our cravings and believing our cravings. So instead of craving for the pain to go away, crave to understand it, crave to comprehend it. That'll switch you from the wrong path around pain to the right path. And you get a lot more agile in dealing with different pains. The techniques that work today may not work tomorrow, because your relationship to the pain, your misunderstandings around the pain, may be different. But at least you've got the basic principles: how you're fabricating your breath, how you're talking to yourself about the pain. What's the topic of your conversation and what are your comments about it? What perceptions and what other feelings are you bringing to the pain?

If you look at the pain in this way, you can get a handle on it.