

Endurance Through Discernment

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You've been meditating long enough to know where there are chronic pains in the body, where there tend to be pains as you sit in meditation, or you have pains that have nothing to do with meditation and have everything to do with your posture or your other activities in the course of the day. We've been taught to use the breath to help alleviate our suffering around the pain. We create positive, good, pleasant sensations in different parts of the body by the way we breathe, and then we see if those sensations can go through the pain; help disperse some of the pain—or, at the very least, breakup the patterns of tension or walls of tension that tend to build around the pain.

And even when the pain doesn't go away, we're in a much better position to look at it. To understand it. Particularly, to understand why it is that the pain can lead to suffering in the mind.

But the fact that we're using pleasure as our foundation is sometimes called into question. Ajaan Lee used to get attacked by other members of the Forest tradition for teaching people to be stuck on pleasure. Just the other day, the question came up, "How does his teachings fit with those that say 'simply to sit with pain until it finally goes away on its own, and you learn the lesson of the impermanence of pain?'"

We can't "just sit" with pain. The mind is always doing something actively, one way or another, with the pain. Even when we tell ourselves to just sit, that's a form of fabrication. As the Buddha said, there are three forms of fabrication in all: there's bodily fabrication, verbal, mental. Bodily is the way you breathe; verbal is the way you talk to yourself; mental is the combination of perceptions you hold in mind, images you hold in mind, or words you hold in mind, together with feelings. And as he says, with the things that give rise to suffering in the mind, either you simply watch them till they go away on their own, or you exert a fabrication—because there are some that won't go away simply by your watching them. If you're going to sit for a long time with pain, you have to know how to talk to yourself around it. In fact, that's the whole purpose of sitting with it: to see what you're saying.

Ajaan Chah once said that if you simply had to develop endurance around pain, or if endurance were enough to get us through, then chickens sitting on their eggs would have

gotten there long before human beings, because they can sit for hours with no problem.

You have to bring in discernment, and discernment is a matter of looking into fabrication: How are you fabricating your thoughts around the pain? What are you telling yourself about the pain? And it's perfectly legitimate to bring in the breath as well. Through the way you breathe you can create feelings that enable you to sit with the pain for a longer period of time and feel less threatened by it. Of course, there will be things that will come up in life that you can't breathe through, or when you breathe through them you can't make them go away. This applies to things outside as much as things inside, in fact even more to things outside. When society is in turmoil, you can't simply breathe through the turmoil to make it go away. But you do have the ability to talk to yourself about it, to hold images in mind that enable you to be with something disturbing and not be disturbed by it.

This is a skill you're particularly going to need as illness comes, as death comes. In the meantime, you use all the qualities of fabrication that you have at your disposal—all the opportunities that the process of fabrication in the present moment presents to you—to understand what is it you're doing that's creating the suffering. Because this relates to the Buddha's explanation in the four noble truths.

When he explains the noble truth of suffering, he starts out with things we ordinarily relate to suffering: aging, illness, and death, separation from the things we like, having to stay with things we don't like, not getting what we want. But then he points out the common denominator in all those things: What makes them suffering that weighs down the mind is clinging—clinging to the aggregates.

The point being that if you could stop the clinging, then aging, illness, and death would not be suffering, or you wouldn't have to suffer from them. They would be painful, but the mind wouldn't have to suffer from them.

It's somewhat ironic that you hear scholars nowadays saying that the Buddha didn't really talk about noble truths; the word "noble" in the truths has nothing to do with the truths themselves. It means truths that are true for noble ones. That's what they say. The thing is, though, that for arahants aging, illness, and death are not suffering, because they have no clinging. Aging, illness, and death are suffering for those of us who are not arahants, precisely because we still have clinging.

In the Buddha's analysis of causality, his shortest explanation of his awakening, comes down simply to: There's suffering in the present moment that comes from your present

actions, there's suffering that comes from your past actions, and it's the present-action suffering, that's weighing the mind down, i.e. the fabrications that you're doing.

So you want to become sensitive to your fabrications: what you're doing right now. Learn how to work with the breath. Work with your perceptions around the breath. Work with your perceptions around the elements of the body: earth, water, wind, fire, space. That will give you some insight into exactly what you're bringing to the present moment. Because you're bringing a lot more to the present moment than you're aware of, and you're not going to find that out until you start exploring.

As with any experiment, you have to manipulate the factors to see what difference you can make, so that you can understand what exactly is a factor that's operating right now. So work with the breath, work with your ways of talking to yourself around the breath, work with your perceptions of the breath, and then use the same factors, the same fabrications, to deal with pain. You'll find that you can endure a lot more than you could have otherwise.

But it's not just a matter of endurance. You develop discernment—discernment into the big troublemaker in the world right now, which is your own mind. The media keep telling us other people are the big troublemakers; they divert our attention from where the real work is: the way in which your mind is creating trouble for yourself right now.

And it's not a selfish quest to try to focus on solving this problem, because the less suffering you create for yourself, the less you're going to be leaning on other people.

That way, when the time comes when you are really sick and you are dying, and you can't just breathe through the illness or breathe through the death to make them go away, you'll still have other techniques, other skills around your understanding of what the mind is doing. Those skills will hold you in good stead, because the more sensitive you are to the process of fabrication, the more likely you are to find what's not fabricated. And that's your true refuge.

As the Buddha said, you think about all the dangers that can happen—aging can come, illness can come, death can come, a split in the Sangha can come, social turmoil can come—and you want to learn the skills so that even if these things happen, you can still be free from suffering.

So we don't deny that there are problems in the world. We don't think we can simply breathe through them or wish our way through them. But there is something that we can attain that is safe from those problems, something that's not fabricated at all. So if you want to find that, get really skilled at fabricating your way around whatever issues come.

If it's pain in the body, learn how to talk to yourself about it, learn how to breathe around it. Issues in the world outside: Look at your perceptions, look at the way you talk to yourself, because the solution lies here.

This is why it's so important that you get familiar with fabrications—and get familiar with this process of causality, where some things are coming in from the past that you can't change, but other things are part of what you're doing right now, and there you do have some range of choice. Learn how to make the most of that fact.