

Not Pained by Pain

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When the Buddha teaches how to focus on feelings as you meditate, there are four steps: Focused on the breath, you learn how to breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of *rapture* and *refreshment*; that's the first step. The second step, you breathe in and out giving rise to a sense of *pleasure*. The third is that you breathe in and out being sensitive to mental fabrication—in other words, feelings and perceptions. Perceptions, here, are the images you hold in mind. And the fourth step is to breathe in and out *calming* mental fabrications.

Now, his explanation here is focused on how to give rise to a sense of pleasure, and then refine that pleasure in the course of getting the mind concentrated. Give rise to a sense of energy, and then refine the energy to have a calming effect on the mind—to get the mind into good strong concentration.

But you can also use the same four steps to deal with feelings of pain. The first two steps correspond to Ajaan Lee's recommendations that when you have pain in the body, you don't focus there right away. Before you're ready to focus on the pain, you first have to develop a foundation outside of the pain in a part of the body where you feel secure. So you breathe in and out in a way that gives rise to a sense of fullness and refreshment, you breathe in and out in a way that gives rise to a sense of pleasure *someplace* in the body, so you know that you have a good place to run away to when you start to analyze the pain and it gets too much for you. You always have your safe place to go.

Sometimes you find that by focusing on that other part of the body you actually lessen the pain. Ajaan Fuang told me that when he was a young monk he suffered from headaches, and he found that by focusing on the base of his spine, and thinking of the breath going out of the base of his spine down into the ground, reduced a lot of the pressure up in his head.

So, this step can have that effect sometimes. Other times, it's simply giving you a good place to hide out while the pain continues. You stay there until you gain a sense of security there, a sense of solidity, a sense of belonging.

Then you think of good breath energy going from the place where you're focused through the pain. Don't let it stop at the pain. Think of it going through the pain and then out the palms of your hands or the soles of your feet. The pain may not go away, but you can at least relax some of the tension around it. That makes you feel more in charge of the pain, and less of a victim.

That's when you're ready to look directly into the pain.

This is when you go to the next two steps, which correspond to Ajaan Maha Boowa's teachings on how to deal with pain. As he said, the problem with physical pain is not so much

the pain itself, it's the perception you use to pull the pain into the mind so that a physical pain gives rise to a mental pain—which is not necessary.

This corresponds to being sensitive to mental fabrication and then calming it. You look into the perceptions you have around the pain: Is the pain the same thing as your awareness? Do you feel that it's invaded the range of your awareness? Is it the same thing as the body? When there's a pain, say, in the knee, is the pain the same thing as the knee?

You may have a perception someplace in the mind that actually tells you that. If so, call that into question. Remind yourself that the sensations of the body are made up of the four properties—earth, water, wind, and fire—but the pain is something else. It's none of those properties. It's as if it's on a different frequency.

Like the frequencies of radio waves: You can put your radio in one spot and pick up different stations, even though they're all coming through the same spot. The reason you can tell them apart is because you have a radio that can focus on one frequency rather than another. The waves can inhabit the same spot, but they're different.

It's the same with the physical properties and the pain: They may be in the same spot, but they're on a different level—and you can see them as different. If you can also see the pain as different from the mind, and the mind as different from the body—when you can separate things out like this—it's a lot easier to be with the pain.

You can also ask yourself, “Do you see the pain as a solid block?” If you look carefully at the pain, you see that it comes and goes, moment after moment. One of Ajaan Maha Boowa's recommendations is that you try to chase down the spot where the pain is sharpest. In other words, show that you're not afraid. When you're not afraid of the pain and you're investigating like this, you become a moving target—the pain can't catch you. But you also see that the sharpest spot keeps moving around; it's not the same all the time.

This alerts you to the fact that the pain is arising and falling away in very quick moments. When you hold that perception in mind, it's a lot easier to deal with the pain. Then you can ask yourself, “When the moments of pain arise, do they come at you, or are they going away?” If you look carefully, you can see that they're going away.

It's like sitting in the back of one of those old station wagons where the back seat faces back. Someone else is driving down the road, you're facing back, and anything that comes into the range of your vision is *already* going away. Because it's not coming at you, you're not feeling threatened by it, you're not feeling oppressed by it. As soon as you see it, it's already going, going, going away. You hold that perception in mind, again, and it makes it a lot easier to be with the pain.

One of two things can happen as a result: Either the pain actually does go away, in which case your present perception was actually maintaining it, or it doesn't go away, yet you can be with it, but with a sense of being separate from it.

This, the Buddha said, is how you gain discernment—you see things as separate. The things that the mind used to glom together, glue together, you begin to see really are individual moments, separate events. When you cut them down into individual moments like this, they're a lot more bearable.

You're not carrying them around. That's another perception we often have: We think about how long the pain has been going on, and we wonder how much longer it's going to be. That's like taking all the future and all the past and weighing down one little present moment with it. Of course it can't bear up!

Or in Ajaan Lee's image: It's like plowing a field, and you've got a bag. As soon as the dirt falls off the plow, you put it into the bag—and of course you're going to get weighed down. As the dirt falls off the plow, just leave it there. The pain that's there in the past can stay there in the past. It's not oppressing you anymore right now. As for the pain in the future, it's not here yet. Focus simply on the pain right now: Hold that perception in mind, and you find it's a lot easier to live with the pain.

That's what the Buddha's skill is all about: learning to live with pain without being pained by it. After all, the great ajaans lived in the same human world that we live in—the same world, with the same problems, but they didn't carry the pains around.

As in that question that Ajaan Suwat once posed: He pointed over to Mount Palomar across the valley and asked the lay people sitting nearby, "Is that mountain heavy?" Nobody dared answer. They knew when an ajaan asks a question like this, it's not an ordinary question, so they waited for him to answer. And he gave the answer. He said, "If you pick it up, of course it's going to be heavy on you. But if you don't pick it up, it's not heavy on you. Even though it's heavy in and of itself, it's not heavy on you—and that's what matters."

We can't straighten out the world so that there's no pain in the world, but we can learn how to live with the pain without taking the pain on us. Or in the Buddha's image, you're shot with one arrow of pain, and you learn how not to shoot yourself with other arrows, the arrows of worry and concern. The pain of just the one arrow is bearable. And just one arrow is a lot easier to pull out.

If you shoot a lot of arrows, it gets very complicated. So leave it at just the one arrow. That way, you can learn how to live with pain, but not be pained by it.