

## *The Complexity of Pain*

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The Buddha's discussion of pain is very complex because it's related to karma, and as we all know, karma is very complex. If we tried to tease out all the details as to why something has happened, how it relates to your past karma and present karma, the Buddha said we'd go crazy. But the basic teaching on karma is the key to understanding pain and illness. Some people think that spiritually advanced people should not have illnesses or pains. But that's based on a very simplistic idea that your pains are totally the result of what you're doing right now: If you change what you're doing right now, then you'll be okay. Well, sometimes your pains are related to what you're doing right now, but sometimes they're related to the past.

There's a passage where someone comes to the Buddha and says he's heard from other teachers that all your pains are dependent on past karma. The Buddha says, "That's not so." He goes through a list of all the different medical explanations for pain that they had in those days: such things as imbalance of the elements, mistreatment of the body, the weather outside. But you look at the list and you realize, if you compare it with the Buddha's explanation of old and new karma, that all the various factors can be boiled down to that: either old karma or new karma or a combination of the two. You're never going to know when a particular pain comes up which it is. So you go on the assumption that there must be something you're doing now, and you try to change what you're doing now.

The Buddha did discover that there are a lot of pains that will not go away no matter what you do right now. But the extent to which the mind is going to suffer from that pain: That *can* be brought to an end. That's what we're trying to figure out, trying to tease out, as we sit here and sometimes endure pain. We can get a handle on it by thinking about the elements. That's one of the ways in which pain is explained: as an imbalance in the elements. The way to bring the elements back into balance is to start with the breath, because of all the elements in the body (here we're talking about the properties of earth, water, wind and fire), breath is the most responsive to the mind. So, you change your perceptions, you change the way you're talking to yourself about the breath—technically, that's verbal fabrication and mental fabrication around bodily fabrication—and you see what happens.

I noticed with Ajaan Fuang: The people who had the most interesting understanding of pain were the ones who had the most pain. They found that you can't have just one way of breathing or one way of perceiving the pain that's going

to help in every case. As I said, pain is complex. This is why we're bewildered by it, and why we search for a way out through the help of someone else—because it's hard to figure it out on our own. So, we look at what the ajaans have to say about pain.

It's interesting. The Buddha talks about how a person who's sick should try to be resilient to pain, but he doesn't say much about how to go about doing that. He does talk about making your mind like earth, or making it like water, wind, or fire. That's using perceptions to deal with the pain. But beyond that, there's not much in the Canon about how to become more resilient.

But the Buddha *does* talk about how to arrange the mind so that you don't suffer so much from whatever past karma is leading to the pain. It's through the development of virtue, development of discernment, development of mind and body, as he calls it: basically, learning how not to be overcome by pain or overcome by pleasure. That's part of the key right there. When we allow ourselves to be overcome by pleasure, then there's an opening to be overcome by pain, too. So, you have to work on that.

To what extent are you overcome by pleasure? You'll notice this when you meditate. Sit down and breathe, and there are times when everything comes together really nicely. It doesn't take a lot of energy to keep them nice. Everything just seems to settle down in its own proper place. But if you start drifting off, it's a sign that you've been overcome by the pleasure. You have to maintain your perception of the breath—"breath, breath"—and the shape of the body. In other words, use enough perceptions to keep yourself alert so that you don't just dissolve into the pleasure. Because the mind's tendency to dissolve into the pleasure—through lack of alertness, basically, and lack of mindfulness—is what makes it easier to be overcome by pain.

Then the Buddha also says you should try to make your mind unlimited. That can be interpreted in a lot of ways. One is just realizing that you're not the only one who's suffering from pain. Everybody born has pain, more or less. The fact that we're beings means that we need to feed, and if we need to feed, that means you're going to be hungry. As the Buddha said, hunger is an illness right there in itself. There's going to be pain right there every day, every day, every day. We don't see it as an illness. As long as there's food around and we can stuff it into our mouths, we seem to be okay. But if we didn't have that food, you can imagine how much we would be suffering. And it's ready to happen all the time.

And you can think of all the people who have severe illnesses. They're everywhere. Thinking about that opens your mind. One, it gives rise to a sense of compassion. But two, it just takes the focus away from "me and my pain." You

don't feel like you're being singled out to be treated in an unjust manner. The question of fairness doesn't come into it at all. Then you make your mind like earth, big like the Earth. Make your goodwill big like the Earth.

This is the other way of making the mind unlimited: by developing the brahmaviharas. Again, use the perceptions that the Buddha recommends. Perceive your goodwill as large like the earth; it's cool like the river Ganges; there's no place for anything to be written on it, just like space.

This is our problem with pain. We have so much commentary on the pain. We inscribe it and we pass that inscription on to the next moment, along with the pain. It just gets heavier and heavier and heavier the more we write. But if you let the commentary go, and think of the mind as being like space—there's no place where the writing could stay—it takes a lot of the weight off of the mind.

Even though the line between physical pain and mental pain is not all that clear—because after all, your experience of physical pain will be related to some extent to your mental perceptions and the way you talk about it—there are some cases where you can talk about it in the most skillful way and your perceptions can be the most skillful perceptions, but there still will be some physical pain. But the less you're adding to that pain in terms of what you're saying to yourself and picturing it to yourself here in the present moment, you begin to see that the Buddha's right: The pain that really weighs down the mind comes from a lack of skill in our understanding. It comes from acts of the mind in the present moment.

We learn this by trying to find a way in which we don't have to suffer so much from the pain. Somewhere in the back of the mind is the desire for the pain to go away. We know that. But you realize that the only way for the pain really not to have an impact on the mind is through trying to comprehend it. And the best way to comprehend it is to experiment with the way you talk to yourself, with the way you picture things to yourself, with the way you breathe, by the way you try to make your mind as unlimited as possible.

The image the Buddha gives—actually, there are several images: One is the river with the crystal of salt as opposed to the cup of water. You put the crystal of salt into a cup of water, and it's too salty to drink. You put that same crystal into a river, and you can still drink the water. There's also the image of the person who steals a goat and is fined for stealing the goat. If he's poor, he's going to get thrown into a jail because he doesn't have enough to pay the fine. But rich people can pay the fine with no trouble at all.

So, make your mind as expansive as you can, as wealthy as you can with goodwill. Try to use your ingenuity to figure out different ways to talk about the pain to yourself, to visualize the pain to yourself, thinking about how your

awareness relates to the pain, until you find something that allows you to see the separation between the pain and the mind, or the pain and the awareness. That way, the pain, even though it's still there, won't weigh down on your awareness.

That's how we go about comprehending pain.

We also do it by working our way through the complexities around pain, keeping in mind the principle of karma: that some pains are there because of past karma. The thing about past karma is that you never know how long the results of past karma are going to last. Sometimes you can just sit there doing nothing at all, and the karma wears out on its own. Other times, it's pretty resistant, pretty persistent, and you can't bank on it ending. But you *can* bank on your ability to think in new ways in the present moment, so that even though the past karma may still be producing results, you're not going to suffer from it.

It's good that in English we have these two words separately. Pain is one word; suffering is another word. In Pali they're the same word: *dukkha*. But here, it's one of those rare cases where our vocabulary actually helps us. Try to see the subtle ways in which that distinction is a useful distinction until you've really mastered it, and you will have learned a lot.