

Together but Separate

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It's one of the ironies of the practice that in the practice of right mindfulness and right concentration, we're trying to create a sense of oneness, bringing things together, whereas the function of right view is to see things as separate. But there's a natural progression, and it's not really a paradox at all.

Just think about how you ordinarily try to run away from pain. You try to think about things from the past, things from the future—distract yourself basically. And because you're looking away from the pain, you're never really going to see it. But you have to keep coming back, coming back, no matter what state of becoming you create in the mind, whether it's about the past, about the future, about possibilities, about impossibilities. It's as if there's a rubber band that connects you to the body so that no matter how far away that mental world goes, it gets snapped back to the body. When you try to run away again, it gets snapped back again.

As the Buddha says, you're not going to get past suffering, not going to get past pain, until you comprehend it. That means you have to look at it, observe it. So, his approach is this: You've got those first three frames of reference in the establishing of mindfulness. You've got body, you've got feelings, and you've got the awareness of the mind. You try to bring them together.

You're aware of the breath in a way that gives rise to a feeling of pleasure. If you can't get the whole body pleasant, you try to get at least part of the body pleasant. Find which part of the body responds to the way you breathe, is sensitive to the way you breathe. For a lot of people, it's down around the sternum, or it could be in the throat, or some place in the middle of the head. But wherever you're especially sensitive to how the breath feels, try to focus your attention there and ask yourself, "What kind of breathing would feel really good? What would nourish the sense of well-being at that spot?" As that spot gets comfortable, keep on breathing in a way that maintains the sense of comfort.

Then let your awareness encompass the whole body, and see how the breath relates to the whole body. Wherever there's a sense of ease, let it spread. There are two ways of doing this. One is just thinking of the sense of ease flowing out from that one spot, running along the blood vessels, running along the nerves, out to every pore. Or, if you notice that there are already feelings of pleasure in different parts of the body, think of them all connecting up.

We're really good at connecting up the pains. We can create patterns of tension like bands around our head or bands running up and down inside the torso. But try instead to connect the feelings of pleasure, feelings of ease.

In this way, you've got your awareness filling the body, you've got the breath filling the body, you've got a feeling of ease filling the body as much as you can. That's bringing everything together—what the Buddha calls *cittass'ek'aggata*, singleness of mind. *Eka* means one, *agga* is sometimes translated as 'point,' as in one-pointedness, but the word *agga* doesn't really mean 'point.' It usually means the top of something, or it can also mean 'gathering place'—and that seems to be the meaning relevant here. We're gathering everything together as best we can.

As the stages of concentration progress, there's an even greater and greater and greater sense of oneness. This way, you're bringing everything together, basically with the idea of seeing that when things begin to separate out, they separate out on their own without your trying to pull them apart or draw boundary lines where they don't really exist.

We see this particularly around the issue of pain. Sit down here and try to breathe around the body. You find that there are some parts that are in pain and the pain is not going to go away, no matter how you breathe, no matter how you spread your awareness. But first you focus on the parts that you *can* make comfortable. Then, when you're really solidly there, think of the good breath energy spreading through the pain.

Sometimes that helps alleviate the pain, because pain, in some cases, can be related to patterns of tightness, a lack of energy flow in the body as you tense up around the pain. If you breathe through it, it allows the tension to dissolve. Sometimes you even find that where you'd built up all that tension, there wasn't any pain anymore. Other times, the pain is still there, but at least you're not tensing up around it. You've tested one of the things that might be a cause for why the sense of pain is inflicting the mind. This is where you start taking things apart.

You can hear the general answer: The mind is bothered by the pain because you identify with it. But there are so many different ways that we identify with things, and so many different patterns of identification, that a general answer like that is not going to solve the problem.

You have to realize that your sense of self can be composed of any combination of the aggregates. You can latch on to a feeling. You can latch on to a perception. You can latch on to a thought construct, or just latch on simply to awareness—or any combination of these. And even within a particular perception, it's not always the same perception. Or with a thought-construct, it's not always the same thought-construct. Sometimes you find that you can switch the perception around the pain. You can ask the question, "Does the pain have any bad intention for you?" If there was something along those lines lurking behind the connection between the pain and your awareness, just asking that question can open things up.

But maybe that wasn't what you were identifying with. Maybe it was something else. We have so many senses of self, so many ways of identifying ourselves, that you find that one perception you may apply to the pain will work, giving you a sense of being separate from the pain today. And then tomorrow it doesn't work again, because you're identifying with something else. Sometimes you're identifying with the body, in the sense that the pain has invaded your space. Sometimes you're identifying with the awareness of the pain, the sense that it's afflicting you. Sometimes simply the fact that you've applied any perception at all to the pain forms a bridge between the physical pain and the sense of mental pain that comes together with it. Sometimes there's the assumption wherever there's a sense of physical pain, there's going to have to be a mental pain. You can question that.

Think of the image of the animals in a savannah. If you want to do a census of the animals, you don't go running around the savannah all the time, trying to chase the animals down. You go to the watering hole. At some point during the day, all the animals in the savannah will have to come to the watering hole. Sometimes you'll be surprised at how many come, how many different ones come. One animal comes today, and then disappears for a week. Another animal comes tomorrow—which means that the work of discernment is going to require a fair amount of patience and ingenuity as you try to figure out, “Well, what's the assumption, what's the attachment today? How am I defining myself with regard to the pain? Or what aggregate am I identifying with that the pain seems to be attacking?”

You learn to question things from different angles. When you have the energy to ask question like this, that's half the battle right there. Sometimes you just feel afflicted by the pain and it seems to sap your energy, which is why you have to keep reminding yourself: The pain is one thing. Your thoughts about the pain are something else. The perception of the pain is something else.

Remember the Buddha's analogy for perceptions: They're like a mirage. It looks like water off in the distance, and you assume there's water there. But even if there is water, it's not right there at the mirage. So, the feeling is one thing, the perception is something else. Try to see them as separate.

Or the pain may seem to be in the body. It's located in the same space, but actually, it's on a different frequency.

There are lots of different ways in which you have to learn how to approach the pain. As I said, tomorrow's animals may be different from today's animals. But if you stay at the watering hole long enough, you begin to see there are certain patterns: which animals come when. And as Ajaan MahaBoowa keeps pointing out, our attachments are not so many that they lie beyond the range of our discernment to figure them out. It's simply that there may be more of them than we may have anticipated.

It's easy to get discouraged when a way of perceiving the pain that worked for a while suddenly doesn't work. So remind yourself: It's just that you're dealing a different sense of identification, a different way of putting together a sense of self—or simply the idea that we're here to get rid of the pain. We're not here to get rid of the pain. But we *are* here to learn how to be with the pain and not suffer from it. We're not here just to endure, endure, endure. We sit with it so that we can understand it, so that we can bring our questioning, inquisitive mind to it.

In that way, we learn an awful lot not just about the pain, but also about our different ways of creating self-identities. We can see the suffering they bring to the mind, because pain's going to be there, and it's going to go away, and it's going to come back. It's the nature of the body. There are going to be pains in the body. But the fact that we're making ourselves suffer around it, that's not necessary. Unfortunately, we make ourselves suffer in lots of different ways. So, we have to deal with lots of different identifications, lots of different identities.

But it is possible, as the Buddha said, to get to the point where the mind senses pleasure, senses pain, senses all feelings, *disjoined* from them. This is not the psychological disease they call dissociation. It's a more heightened awareness where you begin to see that you've just been glomming things together when they really are separate. When they're separate, they don't impinge on one another. As Ajaan Lee says, they're not walking back and forth, so they don't run into one another. Everybody's quiet. They don't interfere with one another. Each has its own range.

That's something that we want to see.

So, we're not here just to be with things and accept things. We accept the fact that these problems are there so that we can work at solving them. And we have the Buddha, and all the great noble disciples, all the great ajaans, to guarantee that, yes, these problems can be solved.