

Endurance with a Purpose

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The fact that we're born as human beings means we have to live in a human body and in the human world. Both of those things bring a lot of suffering, a lot of pain. Think about the human body: When we're born, just as our mothers were giving birth, we went through a lot of pain. And there was nobody to explain it to us at the time.

The body has had its pains here and there ever since then. For a while it seems to be getting better and better, stronger and stronger. But then it gets sick here, gets sick there, and starts getting older. There are going to be pains, for sure. When you're sitting here meditating right now, trying to sit in one position for an hour, and the blood circulation gets cut off in this part of the leg, and that part of the back, there's going to be some numbness, some pain. You can either sit here and complain about it, which doesn't accomplish anything, or you can have the attitude that no matter how much pain there is in the body, how much pain there is in the world, you want your goodness not to have to depend on everything being perfect. Because if you're going to wait for everything to be perfect, it's never going to happen.

You want your goodness to be independent. Right now, goodness would be getting the mind into concentration. So you don't take the pain as part of your way of constructing the present moment. After all, the present moment is something we do construct. There's an input that comes in from the senses, but we also have our intentions and our skills in how to put things together. Meditation is basically learning a lot of good skills for putting the present moment together in a skillful way.

There are basically three components to any mood that stays in the mind. The Buddha calls them fabrication, and there are three kinds. There's bodily fabrication, which is the in-and-out breath, then verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself. In technical terms, it's called directed thought and evaluation, as when you direct your thoughts to a topic and then talk to yourself about it, make comments about it. And then finally, mental fabrication: perceptions and feelings. Perceptions are the labels you put on things, to identify this as this, and that as that. The feelings, of course, are feeling tones of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain. What you want to do is to use these fabrications to find the potentials in the present moment for creating a pleasurable place for the mind to stay.

So when we breathe, we try to breathe in a comfortable way. We think of the breath not as the air coming in out of the lungs, but as the energy flow that goes

through the body. You can ask yourself: Where does the energy flow seem to be good right now? Don't focus on any area where there's a pain. Focus on the parts that you can make comfortable by the way you breathe. You can try long breathing, short breathing, fast, slow, heavy light, or any combination of those. See what feels best and stay in the comfortable spots.

It's like eating an apple. As you eat the apple, you discover there's a worm in it. You don't eat the wormy part, you cut that out. The rest of the apple is still good, so you focus on the part you *can* eat. Here you're focusing on the parts of the body that you can make comfortable by the way you breathe.

Then you can think of that good breath energy going through the pain. Say there's a pain in your knee, and there's good breath energy in the torso. Well, think of the breath energy in the torso going down the back, down the leg, through the knee, and down out through the foot and the toes. In other words, don't let it stop right at the pain, because that will give you the sense of having a wall at the pain. That makes it worse. What you're trying to do is to dissolve any shell of tension you may have built up around the pain. At the same time, you're trying to see if any poor circulation, say in the back or the leg, is contributing to the pain. Sometimes that happens. There's a tightness in your neck, and it actually creates a pain in your knee.

So try to breathe in a way that relaxes all the muscles in the back of the neck, down the spine, then out through the pain. When you feel confident enough—the mind is rested enough, nourished by that sense of well-being—then you can actually look directly into the pain. This is where you get more focused on the other two types of fabrication. Verbal fabrications: What are you telling yourself about the pain? And mental fabrications: What are the images you have in mind about the pain?

Maybe you're telling yourself that the pain has a shape, that it's the same thing, say, as the knee. Well, remind yourself that pain is one thing, the body is something else, and your awareness is something else still. There are three things there. It's almost as if they're in one spot with different frequencies. It's like having a radio. You put your radio in one spot, you tune into one frequency and you get Tijuana. Turn it to another frequency and you get San Diego. You get rock, you get heavy metal, you get easy listening, whatever. It's all in the same place. You don't have to move the radio around to get the different stations. It's simply that the different radio stations are broadcasting at different frequencies.

Well, it's the same with this pain in your knee. The pain is one thing, it's one frequency. The body is the feeling of solidity and energy, warmth and coolness. That's something else. Then your awareness of these things is something separate

as well. The pain doesn't know it's pain. The body doesn't know it's a body. But the awareness is what knows the pain and the body and itself.

So there are three things there. When you can separate them out like this, then the pain weighs a lot less on the mind.

Then you can ask yourself further about that mental image you have of the pain. Is it one solid mass of pain? Or is it little bits and pieces of pain arising and passing away really fast? If you look at it carefully, you'll see that it's little sensations arising and passing away, arising and passing away. And the sense of having a shape gets a lot more vague.

Then, as little pain moments arise, think of them going away as they arise. It's like sitting in the back of an old station wagon where the back seat faces back. You're riding along the road, and anything that comes into your range of vision, as soon as it appears, is already going away. So don't think of yourself as being the target of the pain. The pain is not aimed at you. It's going away from you.

Then finally, you can ask yourself: What are you telling yourself about how long the pain has been here and how much longer it's going to be here? You can tell yourself, "My knee has been in pain for the past 10 minutes and it's going to be, oh, for the rest of the hour," but that way of thinking simply adds to the suffering of the mind in the present moment. It makes it harder and harder to endure the pain. You make things easier when you remind yourself that the pain in the past is gone. The pain in the future hasn't come yet. There's just this moment of whatever you feel right now.

Sometimes the mind has a tendency to place a label on the pain that makes it stretch out longer than it is. If you see that label, just drop it. You want to be just with the pure sensation of the little pain moments arising and passing away, arising and passing away, and you'll find they're a lot easier to take. When you can do this, you realize that you can teach yourself to endure pains that otherwise you wouldn't have been able to endure. That means they don't get in the way of the goodness you want to create out of what you're doing and saying and thinking otherwise. In other words, you're not just enduring for the sake of enduring. You're enduring for the sake of knowledge—knowledge that you can use for the sake of your goodness.

If endurance on its own were a virtue, chickens would have us all beat. They can sit on their eggs for hours and hours on end. But you have to remember, we're enduring for a purpose. We want to be able to create goodness in our minds in terms of the happiness that comes from the goodness of our actions. We want that happiness to be independent of other people's goodness. If it's dependent on other people being good all the time, or our body being free from pain all the time,

we won't have much chance to be happy. We want a happiness that's independent. And this is how you do it: You learn how to be wise in how you endure pains.

That deals with the difficulties in the body. Then, of course, there are the difficulties in the world.

We live in the human realm where people who say good things and bad things. They say true things and untrue things. They mean well and they don't mean well. They said beneficial things and useless things—to say nothing of the things they do. And again, if you were to wait for everybody to speak to you in ways you like and do things that you like before you can develop your own true happiness, you're never going to get there.

So you have to learn how to talk to yourself, again, using verbal fabrication and mental fabrication, so that whatever people do or say, you can take it. You're not knocked off the path you're trying to follow. As with other people's words: One way you can think about them is that when people say something that's really nasty and unfair, then instead of commenting on how nasty and unfair it is, you simply tell yourself, "An unpleasant sound is making contact at the ear. And it's going to stay as long as the contact is there. When they stop speaking, that's it. The contact is gone."

The problem is, we don't just leave it there at the contact or at the ear. We bring it in and we make contact at the mind. In other words, we tell ourselves stories about how outrageous it is that that person said that, and how unfair it is, and how you'd like to get back. *You're* the one making the contact now, and it's not a pleasant contact. It's as if you're stabbing yourself. The more you get yourself worked up, the more likely you are to say or do something you're later going to regret. You've got to tell yourself, "Whatever they say, I can take it. It's just noise at the ear, that's all."

There's another passage where the Buddha says to remind yourself, as I said, that the nature of human speech is that some people speak true things, some people speak things that are not true. Things that are well meaning, things that are not well meaning. Things that are useful, useless; fair, unfair. In other words, human speech has all kinds, so the fact that somebody has said something unfair or nasty to you is not unusual. This is just part of the human world. This is the kind of speech you're going to run into—and you're not the only one. Everybody meets up with this kind of speech. And because it's not outrageous that they said it, you don't have any rights to do outrageous things in response.

So you teach yourself not to stab yourself over what the person said. Instead, the question is: What is the appropriate response? What would be the most

effective thing to say or do right now? When the mind has developed its powers of endurance, it can think clearly to get good answers to those questions. If it can't endure pain, the mind won't be able to think clearly. You think of something, and it seems okay, and then after you say it, then you realize, nope, that's not the right thing. And you regret it.

So realize that the question of whether we can endure things or not depends on how we construct our experience of the present moment out of the raw material that comes our way. Think of the skills you've got. You can breathe through things that are getting you worked up, when you feel you can't stand it any longer. A lot of the times, just breathing through the tension allows you to realize, "Okay, I can stand it." Then talk to yourself in ways that are helpful. Hold images in mind that are helpful. Learn how to create a sense of well-being simply by the way you breathe and by the way you talk to yourself. That way, what's hard to endure becomes a lot easier to endure because you're not creating unnecessary difficulties for yourself.

As I've said, this is not endurance simply for its own sake. We endure with a purpose: the purpose of knowledge, the purpose of finding a true happiness, a happiness we can depend on, that doesn't have to depend on things outside being good. There's a passage where the Buddha is giving meditation instructions to his son and tells him, before you meditate, try to make your mind like earth. People throw disgusting things on the earth, but the earth doesn't respond, doesn't react, doesn't get disgusted. In the same way, people pour perfume on the earth and the earth doesn't react, either.

Now, this doesn't mean that when you meditate you just get non-reactive, but it means you that try to have a certain baseline. You tell yourself, "Whatever comes up, I can take it." Then you look at what you do as you get more proactive in the meditation. Figure out how to breathe in different ways that'll let go of whatever is weighing the mind down. And you can see objectively whether it's working or not. If your mind is very reactive, you can't see things clearly.

So work on your endurance. Remind yourself, it's not so much the things outside or even the pains in the body that are causing problems, it's your own way of constructing the present moment around them. If you learn how to construct it skillfully, then things that are hard to endure, as I said, become easy to endure. Things that are easy to endure, you hardly notice at all.

When you can do that, that's when you have your own best interests in mind. You can develop a goodness, a happiness, that's independent of things outside. And only when it's independent is it really secure.