Pain & Suffering

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Apart from distraction, pain is probably the first issue we have to deal with in meditation. Sitting in one position for a long time, pain is bound to come up because it’s the nature of the body. There’s a question this afternoon about whether pain was a sign that there was something wrong with your mind. Not always the case. You have to make a distinction between pain and suffering. Suffering is a sign that there’s a misunderstanding. That’s what we’re working on, is to be able to make that distinction, to see what the pain is and to see exactly where the suffering comes in. Pain is natural. Pain is something that’s going to have to happen. Once you’ve got a body, you can’t escape the fact that there’s going to be pain. Suffering, however, is something that you can’t escape. It doesn’t have to happen. It’s because of things that we do that suffering arises. The problem is that suffering is one of the most complex issues that face us. The Buddha’s most complex teaching, dependent origination, is an explanation of how suffering arises. It’s interesting to note that the word “feeling,” or the word “pain,” appears in at least three different parts, or three different steps, in the very steps of dependent co-arising. First, it’s down there in name and form. Even before there’s a conscious delineation of the six sense spheres, there’s pain. But it’s also mixed up with our perceptions. It’s mixed up with the way the mind pays attention. Then, building on that, there’s the six sense spheres, there’s contact at the six sense spheres, and then there’s pain again, along with other feelings, pleasure. Neither pleasure nor pain. And then finally, at the very end, birth, aging, illness, death, pain, distress, despair. There it is again, which should clue us in that there are many levels of pain, functions on many levels. We have to learn how to take things apart. In particular, we have to learn how to watch our own actions. This is why we have to meditate and we have to spend so much time working on concentration, so we get sensitive to what we’re doing. The Buddha says that the questions that first lead you to gain discernment are “What’s skillful? What’s unskillful? What, when I do it, will lead to long-term happiness? What, when I do it, will lead to long-term pain?” It’s interesting that the question is phrased that way. On the one hand, it makes a distinction between skillful and unskillful, which is probably the most basic issue in the Buddhist teachings, which implies cause and effect. There’s no such thing as a skillful action that doesn’t have an effect. And secondly, it’s the sense of agency. What am I doing that’s causing the pain? What can I do that can lead to long-term happiness? There’s a sense of responsibility. In that question, you realize that you’re not just on the receiving end of the pain; you’re also on the producing side. And it’s the way you act that you’ve got to learn how to change. So it’s how you respond to pain that creates suffering. And so you look at these three different levels. First, there’s the level that’s even prior to the conscious distinctions between the six sense spheres, the feelings that are mixed down together with attention and perception, on a very preliminary basis. Scientists have discovered that our experience of pain is not totally physical. The mind has its way of choosing which sensations to focus on. This is where the factors of attention and perception come in. Your brain is receiving all sorts of messages all the time, and there’s kind of a clearinghouse where there are clearinghouses in the brain, in the nervous system, where certain sensations are registered but then they’re blocked out. There’s a decision that these are unimportant. Other sensations are focused on things that are very important, and you tend to magnify those. They suddenly take over your whole sensory field. And so even before the pain registers in the main clearinghouse, it’s gone through a couple of filters already. This indicates that a lot of the pain we feel already is involved in mental activity, which we’ve got to learn how to watch. And then based on that, you actually consciously register the pain and then there’s the craving that builds on top of that, and the suffering that results from the craving. That’s how you analyze it. That’s what we’re given in terms of the tools to analyze the pain. That first level, just the simple sensation of the pain, is something that comes from past actions, past karma. And the fact that that arises has nothing to do with your mind at all. As I say, arahants feel pain as well as everybody else, even though their minds are perfectly pure. There are still these sensations that come in, though, from past actions and from simply having a body. That’s what you’ve got. You’ve got this big lump of past karma here that you’re sitting with. So you’ve got to learn how to accept the fact that these things are going to have to come. As for that preliminary level of filtering things out, for most people it’s totally unconscious. For meditators, though, when your alertness gets refined, when your mindfulness gets strengthened, you begin to see these processes. So this is one of the reasons why we’re working on concentration, working on mindfulness, working on alertness, so that we can get below just the conscious act of registering pleasure or pain and get down to the actual filtering process. So we can learn how to do it more skillfully. That’s one of the important lessons of meditation. You focus on a particular type of feeling, and it’s going to get stronger and stronger because of your focus. We talk about meditation on the elements. You can focus on warmth. You can focus on the cool sensations which correspond to the liquid property. And you realize that simply by focusing, having that perception in mind, focusing on a particular sensation that corresponds to the perception, you really can magnify that perception. Focus on the warm parts of the body, and you can make yourself warm all over. Focus on the cold parts of the body, and you can get cold all over. This is a useful skill to have when you’re out meditating in the cold wind and the desert. Even though there may be lots of cold, cold, cold sensations all around you, rushing in and out, you can choose to focus on the warmer ones and allow that to spread. The first time you see this actually working, it really is revolutionary. You begin to realize how much control you have over which sensations get magnified in the mind, and how important that factor of perception and the factor of attention is. Attention is the agenda setter. In the politics of this committee, it’s like any kind of politics. The people who set the agenda, those are the ones who control things. Like with Thomas Pynchon, the author said, “If they can get you to ask the wrong questions, they don’t have to worry about what answers you come up with.” Once the agenda is set, that determines where things are going to go. You find that this starts on a subconscious level in your own mind. There are lots of these subconscious questions you have, subconscious ways of focusing attention and perceiving things. They really determine what you’re going to physically experience. So you don’t have to wait for what would normally be the conscious registering of a pain. You can get down into the deeper levels of how things are filtered out, and you can change them. That gives you some very interesting insights into cause and effect. So that simple exercise that I recommend many times when you’re sitting here meditating and a pain comes up, you don’t have to focus on the pain. That exercise gets more and more refined as you get more and more sensitive to the role of the mind in determining what your physical sensations are going to be and which ones register and which ones don’t. Which ones come to the fore? Which ones get pushed to the background? You have that element of choice. And as you get more confident in how you use that element of choice, then pains hold a lot less fear for you. And you get more sensitive to which ones mean that something’s wrong with the body that you’ve got to work with and which ones are going to be turned off. You don’t have to focus on them. And this sensitivity, unfortunately, is something that you have to learn on your own. There are no easy rules of thumb. You have to know from the state of your own body which pains are the ones that require looking into, which ones are the ones that you can just let pass. But when you practice in this way, it does give you more of a sense of control. It puts you in a better position because you’re not totally at the mercy of these unconscious assumptions. When a particular pain comes, what does it mean? Does it mean a physical malfunction? Does it mean simply that you’re sitting here too long and the blood is cut off and it’s going to go away when you sit up? You’re going to be in a position to make that decision consciously based on what you’ve learned and the way you deal with different pains, rather than simply based on the assumptions you’ve picked up who knows when. A lot of these assumptions come back from early, early childhood, back when we were first learning how to deal with pain and there was nobody to help explain it to us because we couldn’t understand language. We had to deal with the pain as best we could. Since we’re dealing with it in ignorance, we’ve tended to pick up a lot of ignorant assumptions about pain. So when we meditate, we give the mind a chance to turn and look at it again, more deliberately, more consciously. So when there’s pain, when there’s suffering, we can see distinctly what level it’s on. Is it on that level simply of bare sensation? Is it on the level of a more conscious registering of pain? Or is it the actual suffering that comes from craving that builds on that conscious registering? Because even though craving comes after the conscious registering, the ignorance is there involved in the more primary sensation, how we deal with the primary sensation. That’s what we’ve got to work on. But as long as we keep that original question in mind, “What am I doing? What can I do that leads to pain and suffering? What can I do that leads to long-term happiness?” The long-term happiness here is the ability to live in this human body, but without suffering, and then ultimately be able to go beyond suffering, whether the body is alive or not. But we can’t make the distinction between pain and suffering until we really get to understand pain, be willing to explore it, be willing to learn it. After all, the Buddha said, “Suffering is to be learned as suffering is to be treated with comprehension.” In other words, you have to learn about it. And that involves not only learning the process of how pain leads to suffering, but also how pain is experienced in and of itself. You can’t make the distinction unless you explore both.

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