Pain & Distraction

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When you’re trying to get established in your meditation, the two big problems are pain and distraction. It’s important that you learn how to work with them, because they’re problems not only while you’re meditating. Think about the moment when you’re going to die. Pain and distraction are going to be really big problems then. The pain of the body will get so great that you can’t stay with the body anymore. As for distraction, things come up into the mind as you’re leaving the body. Memories of things you did in the past, regrets over the fact that you’re not living longer, and premonitions of where you’re going. The commentary talks about what they call gamma-nimitta, which means seeing things from your past, things that you did in the past, either good or bad. And then gati-nimitta, which are visions of where you’re going. It’s not necessarily that one vision is going to come up. Lots of things are going to come up. You want to be in a position where, if you have to come back or have to be reborn, you want to be reborn in a good place. You want to be in a position to choose. That means you’re not being driven, driven, driven by the pain to just glatch onto anything that comes by, or that you fall for flashy things that come your way. So it’s important while you’re sitting here, while the body is still functioning, things are relatively quiet. It’s good that you learn how to overcome distraction and the problem of pain. Learn how to work with these issues. In the beginning, you establish a center someplace in the body. This is a temporary center. It’s kind of like base camp when you’re going to climb a mountain. It’s a temporary location. You’re not going to be staying here always. At least it gives you a place of relative ease and relative solidity from which you can look at distraction and look at pain and not get sucked into them. That’s the important thing. There’s this process of what they call becoming and then birth. Becoming is when visions appear in the mind, whole worlds. And it’s not just visual visions. It can also be the world of the pain, all the perceptions and ideas you have around the pain can suck you in as a little world of their own. And you’re in a position where you can look at it as a separate thing. That’s why we work on developing a comfortable center in the body, a sensitive spot in the body that you can stay with. And by staying with it, you make sure that it stays relaxed and it stays at ease. And because it’s sensitive, it feels really good being here. You have a sense of being drawn to this spot. The more sensitive you are in dealing with it, the proper way to approach it, the proper way to stay with it, the more it becomes, at least for the time being, a center that you can maintain in the face of whatever comes up. So that when pain comes, you are not immediately drawn into the world of the pain. Or any entertainment comes by in terms of things you might see in your imagination or hear or whatever. You don’t get sucked into that either. So do your best to develop this sense of a center, a place where you belong, your viharadhamma, your home for the mind. So that when pains come up in other parts of the body, you don’t have to get sucked into that part of the body. You have the choice as to exactly how much you’re going to lay claim to. Be like that lizard. If the cat comes up and catches the lizard by the tail, the lizard is willing to let go of its tail. The tail will actually detach. Even though the lizard had held that it was its tail, when the time comes for the choice between, “Is the rest of me going to survive, or am I going to go with the cat?” you’re willing to let go of the tail. In the same way, learn how to let go of parts of the body that are really, really troublesome so that you can establish your center. Once the center is established, then you’re in a position where you can go and look at the pain, because you know you have a safe place to go when it gets too tough. Then you can think of spreading the comfort of that center, the good breath energy you’ve been working on, and see if that can go right through the pain. What that does is it helps destroy that sense of a very solid world around the pain. Or you can analyze the pain. Which part of the pain is actually just the body sensations, and which are the pain sensations? They may occupy the same spot, but they actually are different types of sensations. There’s a sensation of warmth, and there’s a feeling of solidity, movement, coolness. These things are all there in the same spot where the pain is, but they’re not pain. They’re actually physical feelings, rather than feelings of pleasure or pain. If you can learn how to ferret them out, that’s one way of experiencing the pain. You’re not slipping into the world of the pain. You’re trying to take it apart, piece by piece. What are the component factors? When the Buddha talks about suffering, he talks about aggregates. Just cut the problem of suffering down into little bits and pieces, and you find it’s a lot more manageable. Learn how to destroy that world that you create around the pain. The pain is in this part of the body, and it has this shape, and it’s doing this to you. The pain has no intention at all. The bodily sensations are one thing, the pain sensations are something else. When you learn how to make that distinction, then you can turn around and look at your awareness. The awareness is something distinct as well. This is really important, because when you get that sense of a separate awareness, that puts you in a much better position for dealing with things. There’s that position of the calm and cool center in the body. There’s a point when you have to leave that, when you have this sense of your own center, of the observer, being separate from what it’s observing. That’s an important skill that can take you through a lot, even if you haven’t attained awakening. It puts you in a position where, when really strong pain arises, you can be in the midst of the pain but not get sucked into the pain. That puts the mind in a much better position if it has to choose whatever thoughts come up in the mind. Then it’s going to go with it. It can choose a lot more wisely. It doesn’t feel under so much pressure to grab onto something right away. So, as you become better at meditating, it means you also get better at the whole process of dying, doing it well. The same principle applies to distraction. Thoughts come up. If you can distance yourself from the thoughts, either by locating yourself in a particular part of the body or developing that sense of the separate observer that can choose which thoughts to go with and which thoughts to let go, you’re in a much better position. You’re not under so much compulsion to grab at something, because you know you have an alternative. When pain arises, you can watch it as something separate and see which ends first, the pain or the awareness. A thought comes up, a thought world, that you could go into or not. You can develop this sense of separate awareness. It’s your position of safety in all kinds of ways. We’re told that in Ajahn Mun’s counsel, if something comes up and you’re not sure what to do with it, just go with that separate sense of the knower, the observer. Just stay right there. There’s nothing else you have to do. Otherwise, as for whatever is appearing, you can watch it, but have the sense of being separate from it, that you’re not getting sucked in. Then, no matter what it is, you’re safe. After all, the whole purpose of the practice here is to develop purity of mind. Purity of mind means just this, that the mind can separate itself from all kinds of things. It can let go of whatever comes up. It doesn’t have to latch on. It’s not hungry. It doesn’t have to feed. In John Furing’s comment, it was everything else that happens in the meditation, all the psychic powers and the other things that are so intriguing. He said, “Those are just games.” Things to play with. But the real work here is learning to purify the mind, purify the heart. Put the heart in a position where it doesn’t have to feed. When the heart doesn’t have to feed, then you can trust it. It’s like having a worker in an ice cream shop who’s not hungry for ice cream. You don’t have to worry about the worker eating up all your profits by sneaking into the ice cream freezer all the time. It’s the same with the mind. The mind deals with physical and mental sensations. But it’s not hungry for these things, because it has something else that’s much better. Then you can trust it to do the right thing. So this is how purity of heart is attained. It’s by putting the mind in a position where it doesn’t have to hunger, where it doesn’t feel a lack. It’s got its own sense of center. It’s got its own home, and it feels secure and safe and well-nourished there. Once you’ve developed that, then whatever you face, whether it’s in meditation or your daily life or as aging, illness, and death comes, you can face these things in a position of strength and well-being. And in that position, you’ll be able to make the best choices you can.

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