Don’t Stop with Acceptance

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When you sit down to meditate, the two big obstacles are pain and distraction. The distraction has to do with our defilements. The fact of pain in and of itself is not a defilement. Recognizing that a feeling is painful is perfectly normal. The question is, what are you going to do with that painful feeling? The Buddha teaches endurance. We hear so much about how we’re supposed to accept things. There are only two things, two or three things, that the Buddha talks about accepting, aside from invitations. One is the fact of pain. The other is the fact that people are going to be saying unpleasant things. And the third is when someone has died, do you accept the fact that yes, they are dead? You don’t try to hold on to them. You have to let them go. That’s pretty much it. Otherwise, when something comes up in the mind, the question is what to do with it. For instance, with pain. The pain itself doesn’t necessarily have to make inroads on the mind. In fact, that’s what we’re training ourselves to do. To allow the experience of pain to be there, but not allow it to invade the mind and remain. Those are the terms the Buddha uses. Interestingly enough, he also says the same thing with pleasure. Don’t let it invade your mind and remain. It can be there, but have it something separate. The question is, what is it that keeps pain in the mind from being separate, or keeps pleasure in the mind from being separate? That’s going to depend on different conditions. If you look at dependent co-arising, you’ll see that feeling is located in several places. And so sometimes the disturbing factors can be in fabrication. Feeling is mental fabrication, and it’s there with perceptions, and it’s there with verbal fabrication, and it’s there with the way you breathe. So any of those things can be aggravating the pain and creating a bridge into the mind. So you can ask yourself, how do I perceive the pain? How do I talk to myself about the pain? How do I breathe around the pain? This is where we get into a lot of pre-verbal experience. Because as children, we first encountered pain way before we learned language. We may have picked up some ideas about how to control pain. One of them may have been to tighten up around the pain to make sure that it didn’t spread, which may have worked sometimes. But it can also create a lot of problems. It has a lot to do with how you breathe, how you relate to the breath energy in the body. And of course, your perceptions. Before we had words as perceptions, we had mental images. So what mental image do you have of the pain? Does it have a particular location? Is it identical with some part of the body? Say there’s a pain in the knee, it seems that the knee and the pain are the same thing. A pain in the hip, the hip and the pain are the same thing, but they’re not. You can retrain your perceptions, retrain the thing. The things you say around the pain. Retrain the way you breathe around the pain, especially how you deal with the breath energy. And John Lee has a lot to say on this topic. Say there’s a pain in your hip. Do you feel that the breath gets stopped by the pain? Is the pain like a wall? If so, change the perception. Think of that wall as being porous. The breath energy going down the back, out through the hip, out through the leg, out through the tips of the toes. Don’t let it get stopped at the pain. See if that changes things. Or you can think of the breath coming in from the other direction. See what that does. So that’s when pain is in that part of the cycle which is related to fabrication. Feeling also occurs in name and form. And there it’s associated with the different elements in the body. That’s part of the form, part of name and form. And then in name there’s perceptions again. There are also acts of attention, acts of intention. What is your intention with regard to the pain? Maybe that’s aggravating the pain. Do you want it to go away? Where is it going to go? And how do you pay attention to it? And here again, there’s the perception. What are the images you have around the pain that solidify the pain, give it more reality than it has to have? So those are some questions you can ask. And finally, feeling occurs between contact and craving. Where does the pain make contact? This is where it’s useful to think of that old Zen question about what is the sound of one hand. If there are two hands, there’s going to be a sound. What’s the pain contacting? Can you allow it to be there without making contact, without clapping, something else? Then of course there’s the issue of craving. What do you want out of the pain? Do you want it to go away? Do you want to push it away? That’s going to do something to the pain, that can aggravate the pain. What about asking yourself, is the pain as solid as you thought it was? Can you think of it dissolving away? Part of the pain, it drives us to the point where we feel we can’t stand it. It’s just part of the mind that’s going to warn the next moment, and then the next moment, hey, there’s a pain right here, watch out. And in doing that, it gives it more reality than it has to have. These are some of the questions you can ask around pain. And because dependent arising is so complex, and because feeling appears in so many places in dependent arising, you’ll find that a technique that works with the pain tonight may not work with the pain tomorrow night. That doesn’t mean tonight’s technique was not good, simply that it was a different kind of pain. So you want to have a wide repertoire of ways of relating to the pain. And in this way the element of ingenuity gets developed. There’s an interesting passage where the Buddha talks about reflecting on your practice, reflecting on different aspects of the practice. How are you in terms of conviction? How are you in terms of virtue, relinquishment, learning, discernment, ingenuity? This is one of the reasons it’s good to read a lot of the Forest of Chants, because they’re very ingenious in how they approach things. And Ajahn Mahamud makes the point that there are a lot of times when you have to come up with your own technique for dealing with something you’ve never found in the texts. But when it works, okay, it’s Dharma. And Ajahn Mun seems to have encouraged that quality in his students, because you read the different Ajahns, and they all have their own take on things. It’s not like there’s a single school of thought and a single vocabulary that applies to all of them. I found when I was translating the different Ajahns that I had to use different vocabulary, in English first, sometimes the same word in Thai, because the different Ajahns would use it differently. Because they’re often in the forest, often alone. And Ajahn Mun would send them off to a cave, send them off to a particular grove. Because he had a strong sense that the location was important, and then they had to deal with whatever came up while they were there. Sometimes they were able to go to him and ask questions, other times it was too far away, too difficult to travel. So they had to come up with their own ways of dealing with issues that came up. That developed their ingenuity. When I was with Ajahn Fung, there were many times when he’d say, “I’m not going to explain this, you have to figure it out on your own.” As if you get used to things being explained to you, you’re used to them being handed to you on a platter. And then where are you going to gain the insight, where are you going to gain the discernment that’s needed, when something unexpected comes up? Yesterday I received an email from a group that wanted to make a Tunisian robot. They’d already made bots out of different Dharma teachers, taking their writings, taking their talks, their videos, and then using AI to search through the library of their writings and teachings. If people had a question, AI would find an answer. The thing with AI is it’s not very ingenious. It just takes what’s there, takes the question at face value, takes the teachings at face value. This is the point that all too often, when there’s a question, you don’t answer the question. You answer the question behind the question, if you really want to be helpful. And sometimes you have to say things in unexpected ways. Because you want the student to start thinking in unexpected ways. So when you’re dealing with pain, remember, you have to think outside the box. There are all too many thoughts we have in the mind that, of course it’s like this, and of course it’s like that, and then it’s going to do this, and then it’s going to do that. And then you force it into that box. When it’s all boxed up like that, it’s going to be stressful, it’s going to be painful. You have to think outside. Use your ingenuity. Whenever the mind says “of course,” you have to ask it, is it really “of course,” or is it simply what you’re used to? The same issue deals with unpleasant words. I received another email from someone who was complaining about how the Buddha was really harsh with the monks and nuns who broke, well, didn’t break the rules, but were the instigators for why the Buddha would have to create rules. And why did he use such harsh language with them? Wasn’t that hurtful to them? Wasn’t that horrible? Harsh language in and of itself is not necessarily hurtful or harmful. So when people use harsh language with you, you have to ask yourself, what can I learn from this? There are two things you can learn. One, you can ask yourself, is what they say true? It may not necessarily be the case that they’re angry at you, simply that they’re very much aware of how important it is that you see the error of your ways. And if it’s true, as the Buddha said, someone has pointed out a treasure to you. If it’s not true, you’ve learned something about that person. It may not be what you want to learn about that person, but you’re learning about the person. You get your sense of offended self out of the way. You can learn a lot. So those are two of the things you learn how to accept. But you don’t just sit there accepting them. You learn how to accept the fact that they are there, but you don’t have to suffer from them. They don’t have to invade your mind. They don’t have to remain. And you’re the one that allows them in, and you’re the one that allows them to stay. It’s like that old slogan they had in Singapore when the AIDS epidemic was beginning to rage. Other people can give you AIDS only if you let them give you AIDS. That’s what they said. Other people can make you suffer only if you let them make you suffer. Pain can make you suffer. Only if you let it make you suffer. Our problem is that we’re so used to letting it happen that we think that’s the way it has to be. The Buddha’s here to tell us, no, that’s not the case. So even when you have to accept things, it doesn’t mean you have to suffer from them. You simply have to learn how to think of them in new ways, breathe around them in new ways, talk to yourself around them in new ways, use new perceptions. Dependent Co-Arising begins with the fact that it’s through ignorance that we fabricate in ways that lead to suffering. Well, the Buddha’s teaching us how to engage in those three kinds of fabrication, bodily, verbal, mental, in ways that don’t lead to suffering. We bring knowledge to them. The three kinds of fabrications are explained in the Canon in two different levels. In the first level, the most blatant level, it’s simply bodily fabrication is any bodily intentional action. Verbal is any intentional verbal action. Mental is any intentional mental action. It’s through these kinds of fabrication that we create the karma that leads to good or bad places in this lifetime and lifetimes to come. I’d say that’s fabrication on the macro level. But then when we meditate, the Buddha takes it much deeper, much more intimately. Bodily fabrication is where you breathe. Verbal fabrication is direct thought and evaluation. Mental fabrication is feelings and perceptions. Now there are some people who say these two types of fabrication or two levels of fabrication are totally unrelated. But how can that be the case? You can’t move your body unless you breathe. You can’t speak unless you have direct thought and evaluation. You can’t think unless you have perceptions and feelings. So as you meditate, you’re right here with the beginning levels of these fabrications. And you can see them a lot more clearly because you’re meditating. You’re getting the mind in concentration. And you can deal with them at the beginning level before they have to make you suffer. So think about that. You’re in a position where you can catch things before they make you suffer. If they’ve made you suffer, you’re too late. But you can be ready for the next time. Remember that things may not necessarily be the way you think they are, so you have to change the way you think in order to be on top of the way things actually happen.

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