Dealing with Pain

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The Pali word for meditation, bhavana, means to develop. We try to develop good qualities in mind. We start with a very simple exercise, staying with the breath. Try to notice when the breath is long, notice when it’s short. When you find a rhythm of breathing that feels good, think of it spreading all around. Spread your awareness to fill the whole body, so you have a sense that the whole body is breathing in, the whole body is breathing out. Then ask yourself, what kind of breathing do you need now? If you’re feeling tired, breathe in a way that’s energizing. Long in, short out. If you’re tense, breathe in a way that’s more relaxing. Short in, long out. Try to find the right balance inside. As you try to stay with the breath like this, two things may distract you. One will be distracting thoughts, and the other will be feelings of pain. And in the beginning, you don’t pay attention to the pain. The mind has a tendency to focus in on any pain anywhere in the body, forgetting the fact that most of the body is not in pain. If you’re going to deal with pain, you have to give the mind a sense of confidence that it does have a safe place to go. So your safe place now would consist of the parts of the body that you can make comfortable. Let the pain have that other part. You don’t have to move in there. And when you don’t move in, then the pain is not invading you. This is the basic principle as we meditate. We’re not here to make the pain go away. We’re here to learn how to live with pain and not have it invade the mind. And one way of not having it invade is that you don’t go invading the parts of the body that are in pain. If it has your knee, you don’t have to invade the knee. It may be in your right knee, but you can focus on your left knee. Focus on your chest. Focus on your head. Anywhere else in the body that feels comfortable. As you breathe in, as you breathe out, you’ll notice that there are some parts of the body that are especially sensitive to how the breathing feels. You try to satisfy those. One common part is down around the heart. Breathe in a way that goes into the heart. Nourishes the heart. Wherever you focus your attention, don’t tense up around that spot. Allow that spot to be wide open. That’s your first step in dealing with the pain. Learning how to give rise to a sense of pleasure. Maybe the pain will still be there, but there can be pleasure in other parts of the body. And that becomes your foundation. Because you will be going into the pain at some point to understand it. But it’s always good to know that you have a good safe place to retreat to when you find that you don’t come to any clear understanding. When you do have that safe place, then you can start looking into the pain. And the first question you have around the pain is, what is there beside the pain? There’s the sensation of the pain itself, surrounded by sensations of the body. And you have to remember that the pain and the body are two different things. The pain comes and goes. The body is there and works permanently. In your sense of the body, the body is made up of four properties. Earth, water, wind, fire. In other words, solidity, liquid, energy, warmth. And the pain is none of those. It’s something else. So when you feel that the pain and the body are one and the same thing, you have to remind yourself, well, no, they’re not. They’re separate. And then you look into your perceptions around that. Do you feel that the pain is a solid block? No, it’s not. It’s actually little moments of pain. So there’s the perception. You can change that perception. Think of it as just moments arising and passing away, arising and passing away. And as soon as they arise, they’re going away. We have this tendency to feel that the pain is aimed at us, coming to us. And we collect it. We sit here thinking, oh, I’ve been in pain now for five minutes. Ten minutes, an hour. And actually, the pain five minutes ago, ten minutes ago, an hour ago, those pains are gone. And you still gather them up, gather them up. In John Lee’s images of someone plowing a field, dirt falls off the plow. And if you’re stupid, you’ll try to take the dirt as it falls off the plow and you stuff it into a bag. And of course, you’re going to get weighed down. You can’t get very far. But that’s our attitude towards pain. We have this constant sense of accumulating, accumulating, storing it up, storing it up. But you have to remember, it’s just this moment’s pain. Everything that’s past is gone. So try to erase your memory of those past pains and focus on what you’ve got right now, right now, right now. And you’ll see that there’s a tendency from one moment to the next to start accumulating again. So again, you have to say no. Let go, let go of those pains. So they’re not coming at you, they’re going away. And you don’t have to store them up. That way you change the way you perceive the pain. You change the way you talk to yourself about the pain. You look independent, cauterizing. The Buddha talks about feeling. It appears in several places. And each place where it appears is one of the possible things that could be a problem around the pain. Under fabrication, it’s there with your perceptions and your internal dialogue. And those are actually the things that make you suffer more than the physical pain itself. So learn how to change your perceptions, change the way you’re talking to yourself about it. That way the pain will become a lot more bearable and it won’t invade the mind. The way it usually happens is you start taking apart your perceptions around the pain and the way you talk to yourself around the pain. Either the pain goes away or else it stays there but it’s not invading your mind. And that’s the important thing. It can be there but you’re not gathering it up, you’re not commenting on it, aside from the fact recognizing there is a sensation there. But you try to erase whatever perceptions you have around the pain that make it hard to bear. So either it’ll go away or else you can live with it. And you’ve learned an important lesson. That you’re not presented with something fully made. The potential for pain was there and then you turned it into an actual pain. But there are other potentials in the present moment as well. Potentials that don’t have to be turned into pain. This is what we’re learning. The lessons that we shape our experience in the present moment. The potentials come from our past karma. What we’re doing with that past karma depends on our level of skill right now. And meditation is basically learning how to develop the skills you need so you can deal with anything that your past karma throws at you and it won’t hit. Because you’ve put yourself outside of the line of fire. To take another analogy, it’s like going to the kitchen. You look in the refrigerator and there are only a certain number of foods you’ve got there. What are you going to make out of those foods? Sometimes there’s good food, sometimes there’s bad food. And if you’re not a skilled cook, you can take good food and turn it into something bad. Or something bad and turn it into something even worse. But if you’re a skilled cook, you can take even bad things and make passable food out of them. It all depends on your level of skill. And the skills revolve around these things. The perceptions you hold in mind. In other words, the mental images you have. This means that, this means this, this means that. It can either be a visual image or a word. And then the way you talk to yourself, in what are called directed thought and evaluation. Vittaka, vittjana. Our inner conversation. Learn to direct your inner conversation so that it’s more helpful. Ask useful questions. Try to come up with useful answers. And as you learn these skills in meditation, then you can apply them in the rest of your life as well. How you talk to yourself about your situation in life will have a huge impact on how much you suffer from it. You can talk to yourself in ways that can really drag you down. And again, accumulate all kinds of stories about how you’re suffering, how it’s hard to bear. And the more you accumulate, the heavier it gets. Like dirt in the bag. You get so you can’t move at all. But if you let the dirt fall off the plow, then it’s gone. Things are a lot lighter for you. So you begin to see that the things that seem heavy in life are very often things that we make heavy because we’re stashing them away. I had a student one time who complained about how when he was at work it was as if he were a trash can and people were throwing garbage into the trash can. Then when he came home from work he’d have to sit and meditate and empty out the trash can. I said try to think of there being a hole in the bottom of the trash can. People throw things in and it goes right through. Learn how not to accumulate. After all, that’s one of the qualities of the Dhamma. It’s for, as the Buddha says, it’s for shedding and not for accumulating. And you’ll find that this tendency we have to cobble things in, take things in, take things in, store them away, thinking that we’re storing away good things, is actually one of the major causes of suffering. Because things, as they get stored away like that, tend to spoil, get rotten. And if you try to feed on them, you’re going to get sick. There’s so many things in the world you can simply let go, let go, let go. Let it pass, let it pass. So you can focus on the things that really are important. Of course, the most important thing is your state of the mind right now. So that the bad things in the world don’t invade. You know about them, you can deal with them, but don’t let them invade your mind. Don’t let them stay. When you’ve learned that lesson, you can be with pain and not be so afraid of it. Your fear of pain is a major weakness. There are a lot of good things you could be doing in life, but you’re saying, “Oh, it would hurt to do that. It would be a physical hurt or a mental hurt.” And there are so many ways that people can drive you around by making you afraid of this, afraid of that. This is what politics is all about, making you fear different things. That’s how people can control you. And inside your mind, this is how your defilements control you. By making you afraid of pain. But if you learn how to be with pain and not suffer from it, then your defilements have a lot less power. And you have a greater sense of freedom.

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