Bewildered

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As the Buddha says, whenever one of our reactions to pain is bewilderment, we can deal with it sometimes and it goes away. And then we do the same thing the next time with another pain and it doesn’t go away. Sometimes it gets worse. And so we can get frustrated at that, or we can take it as an opportunity to explore. How many different ways can the mind create suffering around pain? Because the fact of pain, both physical and mental, is one of those things that the Buddha says you have to accept. This is going to happen. There will be physical pains, there will be mental pains. But you don’t just sit there with them. You’re trying to figure them out. And particularly we try to figure out how they invade the mind and remain. So they don’t remain. And to give some explanation as to why it’s so bewildering, the Buddha points out that there are many places, independent co-arising, where pain can appear. Which means it has different neighbors sometimes. There’s the element of fear, there’s feeling in fabrication, there’s feeling in name and form, and there’s feeling that arises immediately after contact. And then there’s the pain that comes with aging, illness, and death. All the different forms of clinging. So you have to ask yourself, which is it this time? And have that range in mind. Because that helps give you some idea of what you can do. For instance, when it appears in fabrication, it’s accompanied by the way you breathe and by your perceptions. So you can ask yourself, to what extent is the way I’m breathing aggravating this? Can I breathe in another way? And to what extent is the way I’m talking to myself about the pain getting in the way? That’s an element too. Do you think it’s your enemy? Do you think it’s coming together? Can he catch you? This shades into perception. How do you experience the fact of pain right now? Say there’s a pain in your stomach. Is the pain the same thing as your stomach? When you breathe down into the stomach, does the pain get in the way? Try to change the perception. Remind yourself that the breath is there first. The pain came later. So the breath can have priority. See if that switches things around. And after all, the pain is what? It’s not any of the elements. It’s not fire, and it’s not water, and it’s not earth, and it’s not breath. Although we do tend to glom it on to the earth element. Give it more solidity than it really needs. Or deserves. Ask for your conversations around the pain, your inner conversations. Does the mind tell you this shouldn’t be happening? This is not fair? Well, who’s to decide what’s fair in the terms of pain? And who’s to decide what should and shouldn’t be happening? After all, we’ve got this body. And it functions, and it misfunctions. That’s the nature of sankara’s fabrications. So we can’t say, well, it shouldn’t be there. You accept the fact that it’s there. And then the next question is, to what extent are you making yourself suffer unnecessarily? That’s a better conversation you could be having about it. And tell yourself this is your opportunity to learn about the pain. And learn about the mind’s reaction to pain. Because sometimes you may not feel up to it, but that’s what the breath is for. You can use the way you breathe into other parts of the body to give yourself a good place to stand. A place to hide away from the pain for the time being. I’ve noticed it’s good that when you’re sitting in the dentist’s chair, you put attention down to your feet, down to your hands, as far away as you can get from the mouth. So you’re not in the line of fire. Those are some of the lessons you can learn from the fact that feeling is one of the fabrications. Then there’s the feeling in name and form. And its companions there are the different elements of the body. Here again you have the opportunity to see, to what extent is the pain caused by an imbalance in the elements? And to what extent is it actually caused by what you’re doing mentally? And here you can use the breath to bring some new balance into the elements. Or you can focus on your mental parts, what the Buddha calls name. One of those is intention. What is your intention around the pain? Your intention is to make it go away. That just adds more pain on top. Again, your intention should be to see that it’s not going to invade the mind and remain. That’s all. It can be there. But exactly what is the bridge over which it invades? How you talk to yourself. So you’ve got a particularly harsh inner critical critic making you suffer. How do you talk to yourself about that critic? How do you identify the critic? Who is it? Is it somebody who knows anything that really does deserve to take authority in your mind? Why have you let it take over if it’s harsh and unhelpful? Can you identify where that critic got its ideas? I found it helpful to start out, especially when I was first in Thailand, and my mind was telling me I shouldn’t be there. I should be out doing something more for humanity. I asked myself, whose voice was that? One of the voices was my mother’s. Others were voices I picked up from TV, voices I picked up from my time in school. And I asked myself, what do they know? Do they know anything about meditation? Do they know anything about the opportunity? The opportunities that the Buddha left. They discovered and left behind for us to explore on our own. And I began to realize that these voices didn’t have that much knowledge behind them, didn’t have that much authority. So again, that’s how you perceive the voices. Then the question is, what do you pay attention to? Are you paying attention to how much the pain hurts, or are you paying attention to what the mind is doing to fabricate ideas and other things around the pain? Here again, the questions come up that you can be asking yourself. Where is the harshest part of the pain? Where is the point of the most intense pain? Can you track it down? You’ll find often that as you try to track it down, it moves. It gets more elusive. And you begin to wonder, why did you let it have so much power? It was because of your fear. And in your fear, you made it bigger and more solid than it really is. Then there’s the feeling that arises on contact. What kind of contact is happening in your body, in your mind? There’s the contact between ideas, and there’s the contact between ideas and physical properties, and there’s contact between physical properties in and of themselves. Which kind of contact is this? When you look at it that way, you begin to see that it’s a lot more ephemeral than you thought. It may be persistent. In other words, it may keep coming back again and again and again. But the contact lasts for just a little while, then it stops. Then it comes up again, stops again. Can you see those moments? Here again, what’s your perception on those moments? Are they coming at you, or are they just there? Or are they going away as they arise? You’ve got more options than you might have thought. There’s a suffering that comes from clinging, craving. Here again, the question is, do you crave for the pain to go away? Can you just allow it to be there so you can study it? Because you’ll find that if you change your attitude toward it, here again we can think about the critical voice inside. If you think of yourself as a victim of that voice, you’re just kind of lying down in front of it and letting it run all over you. But if you can take a more defiant attitude, that’s going to change the balance of power. So what attitudes are you holding on to? And what would make you want to hold on to them? In some cases you feel that you have to. There’s so much suffering that’s caused by our ideas of what we have to do or what we should do. They really have nothing to do with the duties of the Four Noble Truths. Those are to comprehend the pain, abandon the cause, realize cessation by developing the path. If you’re actually here to comprehend pain, that changes the dynamic entirely. As John Fulton told at the time when he was a young monk, he had headaches. He tried Thai medicine, Western medicine, Chinese medicine, nothing was working. Sometimes the headaches would keep him up at night. It got to the point where they had to have other monks staying with him in case he needed help with compresses or whatever in the middle of the night. One night he woke up and all the monks who were supposed to be looking after him were all fast asleep. And he said, “Well, who’s looking after whom here?” They said, “Well, they can do what they want. I’ve got to do this on my own.” So he meditated. And he realized his problem was that he’d been trying to get rid of the pain instead of comprehending it. So he set himself the task of comprehending it. And he gained some very important insights that night. What role are you clinging to vis-a-vis the pain? And can you change the role so that you’re actually following the duties of the four noble truths? Because those duties are there for your, for the sake of your happiness. They’re not like the duties that other people might impose on you, which are for their sake. Think about the Buddha on the night of his passing away. The issue came up as to what was the proper way to show respect for the Buddha. Devas were singing songs, throwing incense down from the sky, tossing flowers down from the sky. And the Buddha said, “That’s not the proper way to show respect for the Dittāgata. The proper way is to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. That’s how you show respect. That’s what the Buddha wanted. He wanted out of us. He became Buddha not so that people would give him flowers and incense, but so that people would actually benefit from his teachings. So he doesn’t want anything out of you, aside from the fact that you actually benefit from his teachings. Those are the kind of duties he set out. So ask yourself,”How can I comprehend this pain?” And even though dependent co-arising may seem awfully complex, just focus on that issue. Where does the factor of feeling appear in dependent co-arising? And what are the factors around it? That’ll give you some idea of what options you have for investigating the pain. This particular pain, this particular instance of the pain invading your mind. And even though what you find today may not work tomorrow, if it works today, you’ve learned something important. And if you have the attitude that, “I’ll be willing to investigate each new pain armed with that knowledge of the different ways that it can be approached,” then you can face it with a lot more confidence. And you’re developing the right attitude. You’re not here to stop the pain. You’re here to comprehend it. When you hold to that attitude, you find that pain has much less sway over your mind. And you can gain more and more freedom.

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