Free in the Midst of Pain (outdoors)

October 1, 2018

When you’re sitting here focused on the breath, you’re trying to create a solid space for the mind, a solid space for yourself. The word “self” here is important to understand. We hear so much about “not self, not self” when we read about the Buddhist teachings. It’s not that he says there is no self. And it’s not the case that every sense of self is bad. After all, you want to create a self that you can relate and rely on. That’s a Pali phrase, “atahyato no natto.” The self is its own mainstay. If there were no self, you wouldn’t have any mainstay. What the Buddha is talking about is our sense of self, where we create the dividing line between the things that we want to hold on to, things we want to claim as ours, and the things that we want to let go. And this is a process we’re doing all the time. The Buddha simply wants us to learn how to do it well. Like right now, as you’re meditating, you want to focus on the sense of self that says, “This is something I want to do because it’s for my own good in the long term, and I’m capable of doing it.” You want the self that’s responsible. You want the self that’s confident. If you ask for any thoughts that say, “I can’t do this,” or “I don’t feel like it,” that kind of self you can let go. You don’t have to identify with it. In other words, it’s not the case that everything that comes into your mind is yours. You get to choose. Think of the mind as being like a committee, lots of different opinions in there. Just because somebody’s opinion has been expressed doesn’t mean the committee has to take it as their policy. So as you’re meditating, you’re trying to establish this good, healthy sense of self so that it doesn’t get pushed around. What are the things that tend to push it around? Well, the things inside include distracting thoughts and feelings of pain. Let’s talk about feelings of pain. You’re sitting here focused on the breath and beginning to realize there’s a pain in the knee or a pain in your waist. What do you do? The first thing is you don’t pay attention to the pain. In other words, you don’t focus your attention there. You focus on the parts of the body that you can make comfortable. Because the way you breathe can have an influence on how the different parts of the body feel. So try to notice which parts of the body feel good. The mind tends to focus immediately on the pain, but there may be parts of the body all around it that are perfectly fine. Learn how to focus on those. And when you think of the breath, just think of it as an energy flow through the body. If you’re not sure about where you can feel it, just hold your arm out for a second. How do you know that there’s an arm there? It’s not touching anything at all. There’s a sense of the energy in the arm itself. That’s the breath. Then think of the same energy in the other arm, in both legs, in the different parts of the body. That’ll help give you a sense of the breath. And then you may begin to notice different parts of the body that tense up a little bit when you breathe in or get squeezed when you breathe out. They don’t have to tense up, they don’t have to be squeezed. So think of the breath coming in without any tension, the breath going out without any squeezing. And you’ll find that different parts of the body begin to open up and feel a greater sense of refreshment, a greater sense of ease, right here in the present moment. Okay, focus on those. When they feel solid, when they feel secure, then think of the good energy in those parts of the body going through the spot where there’s pain. After all, the breath can go through anything in the body. Your body’s made out of atoms, and the atoms are mainly space. So don’t think of the pain as a wall. It has its spaces between which the breath can flow. And sometimes when you do this, the whole pain goes away. Or even if it doesn’t go away, then you still feel a lot better around the pain. You begin to see the pain was not as solid as you thought it was. And this is the point where you actually can go in and look at the pain itself. To see exactly what is this sensation of pain that drives you so much as you go through life. The first thing you might ask is, “Is the pain the same thing as the knee?” Supposing that it’s in the knee. And you see that it really isn’t. The pain is like it’s on one frequency and your body is on another. The properties of solidity, liquidity, energy, warmth. In other words, earth, wind, water and fire. But the pain is something else entirely. Even though it’s in the same place, it’s a different frequency. It’s like the radio waves going through the air right now. We’ve got different stations from Los Angeles, San Diego, Tijuana, all going through the same spot right here. And if you’ve got a radio that can make the distinction between the different frequencies, you can pick out whichever frequency you want. So in the same way, try to stay with the frequency of breath or the frequency of solidity. And the pain is something else. Make sure that you don’t equate the solidity with the pain. They are two different things. Solidity is a quad of the body. The pain flits around. When you can see that the pain is not solid, it’s not monolithic, then you can ask yourself, “When these moments of pain arise and then pass away, when they arise, do they come at you or are they going away?” If you think they’re coming at you, then you start gathering them up and you feel oppressed. But if you think of them going away, going away, going away, as soon as you see them, they’re going away. The pain is not so oppressive. It’s like sitting in the back of an old-fashioned station wagon, facing back. As you ride along the road, anything that comes into the range of your vision is going away from you. As soon as you see it, it’s going away. Years back, I was getting a treatment from a Chinese doctor in Singapore. He was going to work on my back. First, he rubbed oil into it. At first, the oil felt good, but he kept rubbing and rubbing until it got a little bit red and sore. Then he took these two bamboo sticks that he turned into whisks and started beating my back. It looked like it wasn’t going to stop. My first thought was, “What bad karma have I done?” Then I realized, “Here’s an opportunity to understand pain.” So I watched it and began to realize that if I had the perception that the pain was coming at me, it felt oppressive. If I had the perception that it was going away from me, it was okay. So I held that perception in mind, and I was able to get through the session okay. We can use the same perception with any pain that’s in the body. You realize it’s coming and going in little moments of pain. They may come very quickly, but think of each moment as going away, going away, going away. You find that the perception that you had that the pain was coming at you, or it might even have thought in some subconscious part of the mind that it had a bad intention toward you, you realize it’s not true. It’s just there. It arises, and as soon as it arises, it’s going, it’s going, going. You begin to realize there’s not that much there to fear. This is an important skill to develop. Think of all the ways that the mind forces itself to do things that it shouldn’t do, or other people force you to do things that you know you shouldn’t do. It’s a lot of fear, fear of pain. If you can train the mind to understand pain in such a way that you’re not afraid of it, that means you’re going to be free from that kind of influence. So we sit here with the pain, but not simply enduring it. You could gain awakening through enduring pain. As the Chan Chahuin said, “All the chickens in the world would have gained awakening a long time ago.” They can sit for hours but they don’t have any discernment. It’s through the discernment that the mind learns how to free itself. You’re seeing how you shape your experience in an unskillful way, and you can learn how to shape it in a more skillful way. It’s like being a good cook. Bad cooks can take good ingredients and make horrible food. Good cooks can take ingredients that are not so good and yet make something good out of them. In the same way, there may be the opportunity for pain, and that’s part of the body. As soon as there’s a body, there’s an opportunity for pain. When we’re born, we started out with pain. And pains have been coming and going ever since, and they’re going to keep on coming and going. And as you get older, they get worse. But if you can understand the pain, you realize that there may be pain in the body, but it doesn’t have to be pain in the mind. It’s the way we perceive the pain that creates the bridge between the physical pain and the mental pain. If you change the perceptions, you cut the bridge. In that way, the mind is freed.

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