Talking about Pain

July 4, 2020

The texts tell us that the First Jhana has directed thought and evaluation. It sounds exotic. It sounds like we’ve got to do something new. Actually, we’re doing it all the time. We direct our thoughts to things and then we evaluate them. It’s on the basis of that that we talk to ourselves and then we talk to others. And we can do it skillfully or unskillfully. Part of getting on the path is learning how to do it skillfully. That’s when you’re trying to get the mind into concentration. You’ve got your topic, the breath, and so you direct your thoughts to the breath. You direct your attention to the breath. And then you ask yourself, “How’s it going?” Does the breath feel like something you could stay with? Is it comfortable? If it’s not, you can try different kinds of breathing. You can think of the breath in different ways. You’ve got lots of things to do, all of which come under the evaluation side. Then when you finally do get the breath comfortable, you can spread it around, that sense of comfort. That’s part of the evaluation as well. It’s all part of the mind’s conversation with itself. We learn to use that conversation to create a state of well-being inside, where the mind can look at its own habits and come to new conclusions, because it’s not so hungry anymore. It’s like giving the mind wealth. When you’re poor, you’ll eat anything. And you’re not concerned whether it’s good for you or bad for you. If it’s going to fill you up, that’s all you care about. But if you have some wealth, you can begin to think about, “This food I’m eating, is it going to be good for me? Is it good for the planet? Is it good for the environment?” You can start thinking in larger terms. You can think about the long term. So we’re taking this habit of ours, which can often get us into trouble, this way we talk to ourselves, and we’re turning it to a good purpose. We do this not only to get the mind into concentration, but as Ajahn Lee put it, the evaluation is part of the discernment faculty in the concentration. The direct thought is more with the concentration itself, when you keep the mind with one topic, and then you add the discernment of your evaluation. This is how the practice of getting the mind into jhana uses both the mind and the concentration. It uses both tranquility and insight, and it provides a foundation for furthering your tranquility and furthering your insight. And as you get used to seeing these habits in the mind more and more clearly, then you can apply them to different things. Number one, pain. Here again, it’s useful to think in terms of dividing your conversation into direct thought and evaluation. You’ve got a sharp pain, a throbbing pain. You’re in the dentist’s chair. You’ve had an injury. First thing is, don’t focus on the pain. It’ll be screaming at you. But you have to turn a deaf ear and focus on some other part of the body. That’s part of the direct thought. You’re not going to direct your thoughts to the pain. You’re going to direct them away. You’re going to direct your attention away. And you create a good foundation inside, with this other spot in the body. Or, if it seems like a lot of the body is in pain, think of the space around the body. I’ve told you that story of Yom Tam. She was one of Ajahn Fung’s students. One night she was meditating and she had this voice come into her head and said, “You’re going to die tonight.” She said to herself, “Well, if I’m going to die, I might as well die meditating.” So she continued sitting. And she felt like her whole body was, as she said, like a house on fire. No matter which room you went into, you couldn’t stay. So then she thought of space. She took thought as her object. That became the topic of her direct thought. And then she just maintained that perception, maintained that focus. And then everything in the body calmed down. And she ended up not dying. But she learned an important lesson. Where you direct your thoughts is going to make a big difference. This is going to be especially true as you die. All kinds of things will come thronging in, and you have to be very selective where you’re going to focus. And what things you’re not going to focus on. And you have to be insistent. You have to be persistent. You have to stick with what you know is right. So whatever practice you get in, maintaining the continuity of your direct thought as you meditate is all to the good when you’re going to be dealing with pain and other things that would ordinarily get you upset. Then there’s the evaluation, the talking to yourself. Do you remember the Buddhist comment about our reaction to pain? One is bewilderment. “Why is this happening?” or “Why is this happening to me?” And then, two, “Is there someone out there who can tell me one way or two to put an end to this pain?” A lot of our normal conversations around pain is just that “Why me? Why me? Why me?” And that’s not helping. You should be asking, “Why does the pain in the body have to have an effect on the mind?” And part of the mind will say, “Well, of course it’s going to have an effect. How could it not have an effect?” Well, it is possible. That’s one of the messages that come from the Four Noble Truths, that the pain that weighs down the mind is not the pain from outside, it’s the pain of your clinging. And you’re clinging to old ways of talking to yourself. Number one. You don’t even have to think in terms of the aggregates. Think in terms of, “What am I saying to myself?” That’s the other part of the reaction. You look for someone else. A lot of times, especially as children, we got attention because we complained. And as we grew older, that became one of our ways of trying to get past pain, was finding somebody who would lend a sympathetic ear so we could complain to them, so they would do something about it. But the pain you feel inside, the pain that you’re creating through your own unskilled habits, other people can give recommendations. But complaining, as I say, is not going to be part of the solution. That’s part of the conversation, part of the evaluation, that you’ve got to cut back. The complaining, the pain is there. And remember that chant we have, “I’m subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death.” Remember the Thai translation, “Aging is normal. Illness is normal. Death is normal.” So the first thing you’ve got to do is remind yourself that pain is normal. John Sawat made a comment one time when he was teaching in the IMS. He said, “The body is ready for pain. It’s ripe for pain in every spot. If you don’t believe me, you can take an iron spike and stick it anywhere in the body, and it’s going to be pain.” Remember when I translated that, people in the audience laughed. He gave me a funny look. I had to explain to him that the whole idea was so outrageous to a Western audience that that was a spontaneous reaction. Because for him it was just a normal thing. The body’s ripe for pain. So when pains do come, it’s nothing out of the ordinary. It’s an ordinary thing we have to live with. If you’re going to learn how to point that out to yourself, accept that fact, then there’s going to be a lot less mental pain around the physical pain. Then you can look deeper into some of the perceptions you may have around the pain, that it’s invaded your body. It’s the same thing as your body. Wherever there’s a sense of the body, there’s going to be a sense of pain. You have to remember that these two things, even though they may be in the same space, same spot, it’s as if they’re on different frequencies. Work with that perception. The body is earth, water, wind, fire. Pain is none of these things. Then your awareness is something else as well, because your awareness knows. The pain doesn’t know anything. It’s just there. It has no intention. Or you can look at the physical perception you have of the pain having a solidity, a shape. Again, solidity, a shape, that’s an aspect of the body. You’ve glommed the pain onto the earth element, and of course it’s going to hurt, because earth is solid. It gives the perception of the pain as being solid, and that weighs the mind down even more. So you’ve got to look. What are the perceptions you’re using as you talk to yourself? How are you evaluating? What’s going on? And try to evaluate in new ways. Number one, remember that complaining doesn’t help. Two, the pain is normal. And three, the fact that physical pain does not have to spread in your mind. Pain doesn’t translate into mental pain. It’s based on choices you’re making. Now, you’re making them so quickly and so habitually that it doesn’t seem like you’re making any choices at all. Pain in the body translates very quickly into pain in the mind. But there is a translation process. We’ve got so adept at it that we tend to forget. It’s like translating from one language into another. When you get really good at it, it’s very quick. But it’s good to go back and remind yourself that these are the steps as you switch from the grammar of one language to the grammar of another, the vocabulary in one language to the vocabulary in another. The territory of each word, you might call it, is not quite the same. There’s a lot that goes into translation. Well, there’s the same thing that happens. There’s a lot that goes into the translating of physical pain into mental pain. And the way you talk to yourself is what makes that go very quickly. So you can change the way you talk to yourself, change your evaluation. So when the pain comes up, ask yourself, where are you directing your thoughts? And two, how are you evaluating it? What are the terms you’re using? Listen to what the mind is telling itself. And see if you can train it to say new things, evaluate in new ways. Come at the pain as something you want to understand, rather than as something you want to get rid of. John Fung talks about how, when he was a young monk, he had severe headaches that sometimes would go on for days. Just lying down on the pillow, as soon as his head hit the pillow, there’d be this pain that would come up. He tried Western medicine, Thai medicine, Chinese medicine. Nothing worked. It got so bad that younger monks would come and stay with him at night, just to see if they could be of help if he woke up in the middle of the night. Well, one night he did wake up. He sat up, looked around. All the monks who were supposed to be helping him were asleep. His first thought was, “Who’s helping whom here? Who’s looking after whom here?” Then he realized that there was no use in thinking about that. So he decided to meditate. And all of a sudden he realized he’d been trying to get rid of the pain when the duty was to comprehend it. That switch in purpose brought about a real revolution in his meditation. So remember, your purpose here, your duty here, as the Buddha would say, is to comprehend the pain. And he’s talking about the pain in the mind. In other words, how is it that a physical pain translates into a mental pain? How are you directing your thoughts around it? How are you evaluating it? Because those are the two factors in verbal fabrication. And those are the ones of the three kinds of fabrication. Those are the real troublemakers. The perceptions may lie deeper, but it’s how you take those perceptions and you stitch them into sentences. That’s what gives the perceptions power. So learn to talk to yourself in a new way around the pain. It gives you lots of ideas how to breathe around the pain, how to talk around the pain, how to perceive it. And you’ll find that when you learn how to change the conversation in the mind, direct your thoughts away from the pain when you have to, and when you do want to focus on the pain, how you’re going to evaluate it. You’ll find that you can make a real difference as to whether you’re going to suffer from the pain or not. It may not go away—oftentimes it won’t—but if you can learn how to live with it without suffering, you’ve learned a skill that’ll be really useful as you continue to learn how to deal with aging, illness, and death.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2020/200704_Talking_about_Pain.mp3>