Pain

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When you meditate, you have to deal with pain. It’s going to be in there in the body, sitting long periods of time. You’re bound to have some parts of the body where the nerves are pinched, the blood flow is cut off, and there’s going to be pain. And that’s assuming your body is healthy to begin with. Then there are the pains that you’re bringing into the meditation. And there are many stages in how you deal with it. The first one is to pay it no attention. You have other work to do. You have to get the mind ready so that it can be willing to look at the pain and see clearly what it’s doing around the pain. And to get there, though, you have to get the mind to settle down and give it a sense of well-being. Otherwise, it’s going to feel threatened. So find a part of the body that is comfortable. As the jhanli said, if everything in the body were in pain, we’d die. So there’s got to be some part that’s comfortable right now. Focus there. And resist every temptation to go into the pain. It may be seeming to scream at you, “Look at me! Look at me!” The pain doesn’t say anything at all. It says, “Look at me!” as part of the mind’s own early warning system. You have to tell it, “Turn it off for the time being.” The pain can have whatever part of the body it’s got, because you have to gather your strength. And when you settle in, one of the things that’s going to happen is that you’re going to begin to cut off every inclination to go into the pain. Sometimes you have to question it. Like that feeling that the pain is saying, “Look at me! Look at me!” What would make the mind want to think that? It’s anthropomizing the pain, creating stories around it that really have nothing to do with the reality of the pain. So learn how to cut through any inclination to go there. Just tell the mind, “No, no, no, we’re not going there.” And look to see what reasons it gives for going there, and learn to counteract them. That’s a beginning exercise in discernment right there. Then the next step is, once you’ve got a sense of comfort in one part of the body, allow that comfortable energy to go through the pain. Here again, you’re working against a perception around the pain that the pain is like a wall, an obstacle. You want to see it as porous. And one way of doing that is to breathe through any tension around the pain. If, say, the pain is in your knee, think of the breath energy going down the leg through the knee and out the foot. Don’t let it stop at the pain. Resist any tendency to view the pain as a wall, or to think of the pain as being there before you can get the breath there. Actually, the breath has to be there first. There’s some breath energy going through there already. It’s just that you want to open up the channels. So think of the breath as prior. The pain is an interloper. And it’s not the same thing as the body. Maybe it’s the same place, but it’s on a different frequency. Learn how to see that. You’re preparing the mind so that eventually it can actually look directly at the pain. See what is the actual sensation of the pain as opposed to your perceptions around it. Try to tease those out. Because the perceptions are the troublemakers. They’re the bridge by which the physical pain comes in. The physical pain comes into the mind and becomes the mental pain. As I’ve often recommended, think of the pain as going away from you. One, it’s individual moments of pain. It’s not a solid block. And two, as each moment arises, it’s disappearing. It arises to disappear, to go away from you, not coming at you. This way you’re not in the line of fire. You can simply say, “Go past. Go past.” As you hold that perception in mind, it upsets some of the other perceptions you may have had around the pain. There’ll be parts of the mind that say, “Well, no, the pain is actually like x.” Well, look into it. Is it really like x? Remember, where did we get our notions of how to deal with pain? Back in the days when we were little kids, before we could even speak, we had to deal with pain. And so we have a lot of subconscious strange attitudes around pain. And the only way to get to them is to ask strange questions. Is the pain the same thing as the body? Does it have an intention? The rational part of the mind will say, “No, of course not.” But then the part of the mind that’s actually dealing with the pain, there in the body with the pain, it’s got other ideas. So you’ve got to ferret them out. In the beginning, you treat the pain as a distraction. You want to stay away from the distraction. Don’t let the mind go there. Because think about death when it comes. It’s going to be a huge distraction. You’re trying to keep the mind focused and the body’s doing everything it can to fall apart. And you’ve got to maintain that focus. So that first step, it’s not one that you just skip. It’s teaching you an important lesson. You’ve got to maintain focus despite the fact that things are not working. The Buddha talks about the qualities that are needed to have a good rebirth. We usually think of them in terms of the habits you develop as you go through life. And they are habits that you want to develop. Conviction, virtue, generosity. Discernment. But you’re really going to need them at the moment of death, too. Conviction that the Buddha was right. What you do with the mind right now is really going to make a difference. That was one of the insights in the Night of His Awakening. Your past karma throughout life may have an influence on where you may go, but your karma at the moment of death, where you’re making choices, that’ll also have a huge impact. Which means you don’t just surrender to whatever. You try to see what you can do to further your practice. Virtue. You try to keep your mind at normalcy. That’s one of the meanings of the word virtuo sila. It’s the normalcy of the mind. That’s one of the reasons why we had that chant, “We’re subject to aging,” which in the Thai translation says aging is normal. Illness is normal. Death is normal. Keep your mind at normalcy. When death comes, it usually comes too early, but tell yourself, “This is no big surprise. We’ve known all along, ever since we were small, that death was going to come someday.” So treat it as something normal. Don’t get knocked over by it. As for generosity, there are things you’re going to have to give up. You’re going to have to give up your body at that point. You can’t hold on to this anymore. And then there’s the discernment to not get caught up on the pain, not get caught up in all the painful thoughts going through the mind about what you’re going to have to leave, what you’re going to have to give up. Learn how to give those things up with grace. So they don’t pull you around. This way you can use pain as a way of developing your discernment. Use it now to learn how not to get distracted and not to get your focus waylaid by these things. After all, we live in an imperfect world, a world where there are noises, a world where there are disagreeable people. A world where there are things you’ve got to think about. But you have to tell yourself, during the meditation, you don’t think about those things. You have to learn how to maintain your focus despite the distractions. Then you use whatever sense of well-being you can muster to alleviate what you can of the pain. As for what you can’t, then you look into it. Why does this physical pain have to have an impact on the mind? When the pain gets intense, it is possible to be aware of it, to have the sense that the awareness is one thing and the pain is something separate from the awareness, and the body itself is something else too. If you maintain that, then all the Velcro hooks get cut to tie the mind to the pain or tie the mind to the body. It can be a mind well-gone because it’s lived well, meditated well, developed good qualities in the mind. So when the time comes to go, you’re ready.

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