Pain Messages

March 14, 2023

There’s a gentle rain outside. It’s a good time to focus your attention inside. You may have noticed that there are times when you sit and meditate. It doesn’t take too long for there to be pain someplace in the body. Then it becomes the issue for the rest of the day. You can sit and watch a movie for a couple hours. Whatever pains there may be in sitting in that single position don’t really impinge on the mind at all. So what’s going on? Well, one, you have nothing else to distract you. You don’t have to follow the story of the movie. You create a story out of the pain, and it’s a story you tell yourself and you pass on from moment to moment to moment. Sometimes this is a useful habit. Say you have a pain in your spine, and you know if you move the body in a particular way, it’s going to aggravate the pain. So there’s some place in your body in your nervous system that keeps reminding you, “Don’t move it that way.” But here, as you’re sitting still, all you have to do is breathe and sit still. That habit runs rampant. There’s a pain here, and you keep reminding yourself there’s a pain. It might be around the pelvis, in the knee. Then there may be another pain someplace else. Then you tie them all together, and before you know it, you’ve wound yourself up with whole elastic bands of pain. There are several ways of attacking this. One is looking at what images you hold in mind, what perceptions you hold in mind, that carry the message of the pain from one moment to the next. Learn how to question those perceptions. So the pain being right here or being connected to this other spot over there. Does pain have a shape? As we were discussing this afternoon, it’s not identical with any of the elements, yet it seems to be that the pain and the body become one. So you have to take that perception apart and tell yourself, “Okay, that’s a wrong perception. The pain is one thing. The pain is another thing. Earth, water, wind, fire—these are other things.” It’s all too easy to get them glommed together, especially when you glomme the pain with the earth element. It all seems very solid. If you glomme it with the wind element, you then become afraid that it’s going to flow wherever the breath energies and the body may flow. So you start tightening up around it. You put a shield around the pain to prevent that. Well, the shield is not necessary. What’s necessary is that you learn how to question that perception that identifies the pain with the element. Focus on the fact that pain has certain characteristics and the element has other characteristics. They’re not the same. You can bring in the perception of a knife cutting through all those elastic bands. At the same time, cutting through whatever narrative you may be telling yourself about the pain—how long it’s been here, how much longer you’re going to be meditating. Just think of a knife cutting through those thoughts. Be very careful about what messages you’re sending from one person to another. This is why the Buddha talks about our duties with regard to pain and the causes of pain. Wherever there’s pain, the Buddha says, comprehend it. Ultimately, that duty applies to the suffering of others. The Four Noble Truths, like we chanted just now, are the suffering that’s caused by craving, the suffering that is the clinging. But here again this gets glommed together with all kinds of things. So you’ve got to tease it out. Which is the physical pain? Which is the mental pain that comes from clinging to a particular perception of the pain? Now, to see these things requires that you have some place in the body where you’re able to stay still, with a sense of at least relative well-being, which is why, if you find yourself trying to analyze the pain and things just get worse, you pull out. It’s like learning Thai boxing. The first thing they teach you is how to retreat from your opponent without exposing your flanks. So learn how to retreat from the pain. You have to retreat into a place where you can use the breath to give righteous sense of well-being. Make that your perception. And then think of that well-being as being prior to the pain. All too often, the pain seems to have established itself, laid claim to different parts of the body. And then we try to breathe through or around it, whatever little spaces it leaves us. Breathing through is not so bad, but feeling that we have to avoid the pain to get the breath to go through puts more and more constrictions on the breath. Keep reminding yourself that the breath is prior. In fact, all the elements are prior to the pain. Send those messages from one moment to the next. Wherever the pain seems to latch on and take hold of the body in different places, remember that the breath was already there, and it’s still there, and it can still move in comfortable ways. So what you’re trying to do is dissolve those perceptions away, these messages that the mind sends to itself, from one moment to the next, to the next, to the next. Make sure you don’t build up more and more webs in this web of pain. Try to cut through, cut through, cut through whatever is connecting up in a negative way. And again, change your focus so that you’re focused on the fact that the breath is there and it’s prior. And it should be able to flow right through. If it doesn’t seem like it’s flowing right through, then there’s something wrong with your perception. This way, when you approach pain as an interesting puzzle to figure out, you learn an awful lot about the mind, how the mind talks to itself, how it creates a lot of suffering in the way it talks to itself, and the perceptions that it uses to send messages. All the different aggregates get involved in the pain. And if you learn how to tease them out, you’ve learned a lot. Because they are separate things. There’s a passage where Sariputta says it’s hard to find feelings and perceptions and thought fabrications without one another. But they are separate things. So where’s the feeling? Where’s the perception? Where’s the thought fabrication? And you find, as the Buddha said, that all these aggregates are potentials. And it’s a question of how you shape those potentials into an actual feeling or an actual perception or an actual thought construct. That’s going to determine whether the mind suffers around this or not. And we’re going to ask some strange questions about those perceptions. Because, as I noted today, a lot of our perceptions around pain and how we should react to pain came from when we were young and knew nothing about language. And so they seem to be built into our bodily memory of how you should respond to pain. And the bodily memory, because it’s inarticulate, can have some really strange ideas. And by asking strange questions, you’ll learn to ferret out those ideas, bring them to the light of day, or they just shrivel up. It’s like those ghostly creatures that can exist only in the dark. As soon as you shine a light on them, they shrivel up. So learn to ask questions about your pain, your pains. At the very least, the fact that you’re asking questions shows that you’re not just sitting there being a target or being a victim. You’re getting started on that duty, which is to comprehend it. You use your concentration as a foundation for looking into these things, so that you’re not without some sort of protection, some sort of basis. And you find that the duties of the Four Noble Truths get crushed. They get clearer and clearer, and you get better and better at performing them.

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