Lessons from Pain & Distraction

November 15, 2023

Having an object of meditation allows you to be at home wherever you are. You’ve got the breath, you’ve got your awareness right here in the present moment. That’s all you need. And it’s always right here. Even as the body moves around through different places, it’s always right here. Your sense of being centered right here helps give you a sense of feeling at home. So make this a good home. Make it the sort of home where you can do your work. With the pandemic, more and more people are working from home. So think of that as a simile for what you’re doing as you meditate. As you stay with the breath, you know you’re in the present moment, and your alertness to what you’re doing allows you to stay and see how the present moment is constructed. The present moment is not the goal. It’s a waystation. It’s where you’re going to do your work and dig down to find something that lies outside of the present moment, lies outside of space and time. You want to establish yourself here at the center of space and time, right here, right now. If there are any obstacles that come up, don’t feel frustrated by them. The two big obstacles usually are pain and distraction. All too often we get impatient. We read about all the great states of concentration, bliss, rapture, pleasure. We read about singleness of mind. When they don’t come right away, we get frustrated. But the obstacles that the mind places in the way of concentration are actually important obstacles to learn how to understand. And in getting practice in dealing with them, you’re going to learn some very important skills for dealing with more subtle affairs as well. So with distraction, you have to realize that the process of becoming is playing out right here. You’re here with the breath. There’s a sense of you doing the meditation inside the body. That’s a state of becoming. And it’s a state of becoming that you want to encourage, because it allows you to see the processes of becoming very clearly. Through others will come in. Thoughts about the past, thoughts about the future, thoughts about different places. And you want to learn how to see the process by which the mind goes there. In the beginning, it’s hard to see. You’re here and then you’re there. It’s like a wall is shut down, or a curtain is shut down in the mind. When a curtain comes up, you’re someplace else. But the fact that you notice you’re someplace else and you can pull yourself back, that’s a very important skill—the ability to step outside of a state of becoming. Realize this is not what you want. It teaches you some lessons in how states of becoming are formed, because the next time around you want to be more alert to how it happens. When you think about some of the more subtle issues in meditation, like the whole issue of not-self—not-self is a way of stepping out of becomings, too. It’s a perception that allows you to disidentify with something where you’ve been taking on an identity, which is a part of becoming. So you’re getting some exercise in not-self as you step out of a distraction and come back. And then as you make up your mind that you’re going to be very, very quiet for the next time it happens, try to get the mind really quiet. Make the breath as comfortable as you can, because the more appealing the breath is, the more likely you’ll be to stay here. Or if you do find yourself wandering off, the more you’ll be likely to want to come back. Then you’ll begin to notice the way the mind lies to itself. Sometimes it makes up its mind, or part of the mind makes up its mind, that it’s going to go. It’s going to wait for you to be distracted, to have a lapse of mindfulness. And the decision has already been made in just waiting for you to provide the opportunity for it to go. This has been happening all the time. But we tend to disguise it from ourselves. We pretend that it’s not happening. And so this is going to force us to be more and more honest about what’s going on in the mind, which is all to the good. When you catch the mind wanting to go out and then pretending that it didn’t even have that desire, then you can spotlight it. Realize that things are precarious and you have to be extra attentive and extra alert to it. And you find that as you stay with this alert mind state, you become more and more sensitive to the steps by which the mind creates a state of becoming and then takes birth in it. So there’s a lot to be learned here simply with the process of dealing with distraction. This is one of the ways in which the process of getting the mind to settle down will also give you some insight. So don’t get frustrated by the distractions, just realize that you’re going to be learning some important lessons as you overcome them. The same with pain. You notice how the mind has a tendency to focus on the pain, take it as a warning signal. The fact that there’s pain in different parts of the body, some of the pain you’re carrying in from problems that the body already has, and some of the problems come from the posture you’re taking right now. So first check to make sure your posture is good. There’s still some pain caused by the posture. Remind yourself that a lot of that comes from forcing the blood into capillaries. The main arteries are cut off. As the blood goes into the capillaries, it gradually widens them. So you’re rerouting the blood. You’re getting the body more used to being in this posture. So that’s the kind of pain you have to put up with. And because it’s coming from your posture, it allows you to look into it without fear that it’s going to do damage to you. So you can drop your usual attitude toward pain, which is to want to make it go away, and say, “Here’s an opportunity to understand it. After all, the first noble truth, the truth of tukkha, which can be translated as pain, is mainly about mental pain.” But you’re going to learn a lot about mental pain by dealing with physical pain first, because the mind has a tendency to have a lot of chatter around the pain, and it’s the chatter—the perceptions, the thoughts, the ideas around the pain—that are actually making the mind suffer. So you can watch the mind and ask yourself, “What’s the perception that’s making the mind suffer from this physical pain?” It’s good to have some sense of stability in another part of the body. This is one of the reasons why we try to make the breath as comfortable as possible. Even though there may be pain, say, in your knee or in your hip, still there are other parts of the body that are not in pain at all. And you can actually make them feel good by the way you breathe. So here you’re fighting your normal tendency to focus your attention on the pain. Focus it someplace else. Allow that someplace else to be comfortable. And think of the good breath energy in that comfortable part of the body spreading down through the pain. If the pain is in the hip, think of it going down through the hip and then out the leg. If it’s in the knee, make sure it doesn’t stop at the knee. Make sure it goes out through the toes. And some of the tension that we tend to build up around the pain can be dissolved. When you’re feeling more stable, then you can actually focus on the pain directly. But now your attitude is that you’ve got a good place to run off to, in other words, back to your comfortable spot in the body, if the pain gets really bad. So if you’re more confident about looking into it, the first thing you want to see is, what is the nature of this pain? What are the perceptions you have around it? What are the mental images you have around it? Some of them may be very strange, because after all, we had our first encounter with pain when we were first born. There was nobody to explain it to us. We came up with some ideas about pain and how we relate to it, how it relates to us, which could have been pretty strange. And even though we’ve become verbal in the meantime, still a lot of those pre-verbal attitudes are still there. So you can dig them up with some strange questions. Is the pain the same thing as the body? Part of the mind will say, “Of course not.” But check to see. Is there an image in the mind someplace that says, “Yes, they are. The pain has taken over.” Then you can question that perception. After all, the body is composed of the four elements, or the four properties of solidity, liquidity, warmth, energy. The pain is none of those things. The pain is something else. It’s a sharpness. Then you ask yourself, “Where’s the sharpest point of the pain?” Chase it down. You’ll find that it runs away. It may still be there, but it’s not right where you focused. If you find that focusing on this particular issue makes the sharpest point worse, your focus is wrong. Ideally, you should have learned from working with the breath that when you focus on the breath, it’s more comfortable when you can allow your focus to be scattered, diffuse. So any tension that builds up, it gets diffused, and you try to bring that same diffuse focus, apply it to the pain, and it’ll begin to scatter. Then you ask yourself, “Is the pain a solid block, or is it individual perceptions, or individual moments of pain?” If you can see the individual moments, ask, “Are they coming toward you, or are they going away?” God holds in mind the perception that they’re going away as soon as you sense them, so that you’re not the victim, you’re not the target. The important thing is that you learn to take a proactive attitude toward the pain. You’re interested in it. You’re not just trying to hide from it or run away, because this is the only way that you’re going to get beyond it. As the Buddha said, the duty with regard to the pain that comes from craving and clinging is to comprehend it. It requires putting the mind in a place where it doesn’t feel any fear of the pain. You’ll find either, as you engage in this investigation, that the pain actually goes away, or it seems to separate out from the body and hover around outside of the body a little bit. But either way, there’s a sense that your awareness of the body and the pain separate out, like cream separating out of milk or salad dressing. You’ve got oil and vinegar in the bottle, and if it’s allowed to be still, the vinegar and the oil separate out. In this case, the separation comes not just from being still, but also from asking questions. And even as you’re dealing with this very basic problem of pain, you’re learning a lot of insights that will be useful further on. So when you find that there are obstacles settling down, don’t get frustrated. Take them as an opportunity to learn how the mind relates to itself, how it relates to the body. And that way, every meditation session will be a good one. We’re told not to evaluate our meditation, but you do have to evaluate it. You do have to have a sense that you’re accomplishing something, you’re learning something. Then all too often, though, we think, “Well, a good meditation is one where the mind settles down, no problems, feels cool, peaceful.” That’s one way of having a good meditation. But there are other good meditations as well. Meditations when you come to understand something you didn’t understand before, or you learn some patience, you learn some fearlessness in the face of the pain. Those are good meditations too. So if you have the attitude, “I’m here to learn,” then you learn what a still mind is like, you learn what an unstill mind is like. Then you can understand the unstillness, understand the stillness. That’s when the meditation is really good. There are times when the meditation is very peaceful, very quiet, but if you don’t understand how it happened, it’s just been a period of rest. But if you understand when the mind settles down, why it likes to settle down with a particular kind of breath, or when it’s not settling down, what the problem is, then you really gain something from the meditation. It’s becoming more and more of a skill. And the skill is teaching you lots of lessons. Lessons in how to engage in the duties of the Four Noble Truths, and how to test for yourself the extent to which the Buddhist teachings are true. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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