

The Web of Pain

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Try to breathe comfortably. Let the breath come in, go out, in a way that feels good for the body. And focus on the comfortable sensations related to the breath. These can be anywhere in the body at all. When you emphasize the comfort like this, you find it easier to stay in the present moment. This is to combat a tendency the mind has, which is to focus on the pains. You may have noticed that sitting here meditating for an hour, a lot of pain seems to come up in the body, whereas you can sit still for an hour and watch a movie, watch a TV show, and there doesn't seem to be much pain at all. Why is that? Because your attention is focused outside, away from the pains in the body. As a result, you don't start knitting together a web of pain.

But here you're sitting with nothing to distract you, except for your own thoughts. It's just you and the body sitting here breathing, and you're going to start noticing that there's a pain here, there's a pain there, or there's a little pain in your leg. Part of those pains is based on actual physical conditions, but the way you knit the pains together, the way you turn them into a web of pain, is something you add. That's the activity of perception—the Pali word is *saññā*: the stories you tell, the labels you put on things, the connections you make between different things.

This is the natural way the mind functions. There are so many bits of sensory information coming into the brain all the time that the brain has its own filtering mechanism to filter out which sensations are the important ones, and it tries to make sense out of them, putting them together in various configurations. And one big configuration, of course, is pain, disease: Something's wrong with the body, and you've got to do something about it. It's the brain's early-warning system. But here you are with nothing to distract you, and sometimes that early-warning system runs amok. What might've been a small pain turns into a large pain, and then it begins to connect with other pains in different parts of the body and has you surrounded.

To prevent that from happening, you have to start out by learning how to focus on the comfortable sensations, the good things in the body, the spots where it feels okay, the spots that you've been either trained or hardwired to not pay attention to. You figure things are okay, you don't have to worry about them, you don't have to give them much attention, so you go to places where it hurts. But now as a meditator you have to learn how to focus on the comfortable sensations,

and try to connect the comfortable sensation to see clearly that there's an awful lot of the body that's feeling perfectly fine. When the different comfortable sensations get connected, that sense of ease can grow. That makes it a lot easier to stay here in the present moment. And then, from that perspective, you can look at the pains.

It takes a while to make this perceptual shift—not only to make it, but also to make it stick. It's so easy to drop the feelings of pleasure when you're running into a pain that you have to keep reminding yourself: Keep coming back to the sense of ease, coming back to the sense of pleasure and fullness that's potentially there in huge parts of the body. This perceptual shift is very important. One, it makes it easier to stay in the present moment, and two, you begin to realize how much you contribute to your experience of the present by the way you put it all together.

So much of the suffering we cause ourselves comes from this. It's not that you're totally free to experience the present in any way you want. There are things coming from your past karma. When there's a disease in the body, you can't simply wish it away. But you can learn to relate to it in a very different way, a way that doesn't add to the pain and stress already there.

So this process of playing with your perceptions or manipulating your perceptions is a very important part of the practice, both in helping your concentration and in giving you insights. We usually think of insight simply as the ability to see things arising and passing away, which is supposed to do away with our attachment to them. Well, it's important to see things arising and passing away, but then you have to realize that you've been sticking them together in a particular way through your perceptions.

But that's not enough. You have to also see what you're adding to these things. Even the perception of arising and passing away: That's your contribution to the present moment. As you look more and more deeply into the present moment, you begin to see how much you are putting it together, how much of it is your own construction. If you've developed bad perceptual habits in the past, you tend to put it together a way that causes suffering. You can stitch it together and torment yourself with all kinds of things.

As you sit here with the breath, part of the mind says, "Hey, here's a great chance to think about this and think about that," and you find yourself wandering off into all kinds of torturous thought worlds. That can happen. But it doesn't have to happen.

The reason you play with perceptions is to give yourself the opportunity to see how much you do have a choice in how you experience the present moment. The way you put together feeling and perception, the Buddha calls *citta-sankhara*: the

factors that fashion the mind, that can create almost any kind of mind state out of almost any kind of raw materials. If you see that you've developed habits of creating suffering out of almost any raw material, it's good to learn some new habits.

So you start with the breath. How you focus your attention on the breath and how you evaluate the breath: That's called verbal fabrication. You can think of the breath, if you want, simply as the air coming in and out of the lungs, but that's very restrictive. You can also think of it as the energy flow in the body, and that can come in and out anywhere. Open yourself to the possibility that it can come in and out of every pore. Think of all the little tiny, tiny muscles covering the body that open and close your pores, and allow them to open. That will change your experience of the body.

As you get more and more sensitive to the breath energy in the body, your powers of evaluation get more precise. You can think of new ways of playing with the breath. If you find, say, that you have a headache, you can focus on your lower back or down in the legs, or in your feet or your hands, and it will change your experience of the headache. If you have a backache, you can focus on the energy in the stomach, or the breath in the front of the body, allowing it to flow in and out smoothly, and that will change your experience of the back. There are lots of possibilities here. The more you open yourself up to these possibilities, the more choices you find that you have. And the more choices, the less you're a victim of your old habits.

If you regard yourself as a victim of a present that's totally given, there's nothing you can do about it. Often we feel as if we have a TV that we're watching and there's only one channel on the TV, so we have to watch whatever comes up. But things are not that way at all. Our experience of the present moment is very interactive. There are lots of choices you can make right now that will have an effect right now. Learning to see that you do have that freedom, you do have that range of choice, can be very liberating, both in liberating you from the physical pain in the present moment—there can be the potential for pain in the body, but you don't have to suffer from it, that's an important lesson—and in liberating you from any pain in the mind, any old habits of thinking, old narratives that you make of your life. You don't have to keep telling yourself the old narratives all over again. You can make up new ones. And the fact that they're made up doesn't mean that they're untrue or more artificial than the old ones, because the old ones are made up as well. It's just that the new narratives focus on different truths, more useful potentials, as their raw material.

So try to develop a sense of the possibilities in the present moment. Even with just the possibilities of the breath, there's lots to explore right there: the possibilities of pleasure that comes from the breath, the things you can do with it, thinking of it connecting up with different pleasant sensations in different parts of the body. It's like grassroots networking. When grassroots get together, they have more and more power. When the pleasant sensations in the body are allowed to connect, they develop more power. The sense of fullness can surround any potential points of pain and keep them isolated, so that you don't have to focus on them or stitch them together. They are there in their potential form, but you don't give them your attention, and so they never really develop into the bad pains they could be. Just this much gives you a lot of insight into the power of the mind, the power of choice you have here in the present moment.