

## *Facing Pain Straight On*

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When you give the mind an exercise to do—like focusing on the breath, contemplating the virtues of the Buddha, developing goodwill, or even some of practices that are said to be vipassana practice—they're all actually concentration practices. You tell the mind to do something, you will the mind to do something—that's the concentration—and then you observe it. That's where the insight comes. There's no telling which particular exercise is going to be the one that sparks insight for you—or insights, because there's not just one insight, there are many insights that come as we watch the mind in action.

When the Buddha talks about ignorance, he's not saying that we're ignorant of, say, our true nature, in which case knowledge would be an either/or thing, either you know or you don't know. He's saying that we're not skilled in the four noble truths, not skilled in seeing things in terms of four noble truths, we're not skilled in performing the duties or tasks that are appropriate for the four noble truths. So the insights come in the same way that you gain insights as you're mastering a skill. Bit by bit. You try something and see the results. You try something else and see the results of that. Sometimes you can work at the skill and no new insights come. But then in an odd moment, you suddenly see something you didn't see before. You notice ways in which you're doing it inefficiently or imprecisely: Those are the insights. So you learn how to do things more skillfully, with more ease, more finesse.

Sometimes the insights come as you're getting very, very subtle. The mind gets very still, things are very comfortable, and you notice a slight wavering in that stillness, a slight wavering in that subtle pleasure or equanimity. That's a signal to you that you've got to look into what happened. What did you do just now? Why was there this wavering? In other cases, insights come when you're finding yourself up against the wall. You're sitting and all of a sudden a pain comes up and isn't going away. You've made your vow—as when you're sitting here with the group, you're going to stay here for a whole hour regardless—and you find that it's an hour of pain.

That requires that you gain some quick insights into why it is that the pain pains the mind. You can work with the breath to see if that makes any difference. But sometimes you find that regardless of how you breathe, the pain is going to stay there, so now you're going to take a new tack. Your old way of dealing with pain is either to run away from it or try to push it out. But here it's not going

anywhere, you're not going anywhere. So you've got to look at how the mind is processing the pain. How is it perceiving the pain?

This is where it's useful to ask some questions, because each question is like a frame. You may have noticed that when you take a picture of something, you can frame an object in many different ways, and make it look very different by the way you frame it—either close-up, or move it off to the side, or back from faraway. The mind's way of framing things is by asking questions. An important thing to ask is, "Is there any wavering in the pain? Is the pain one solid mass, or is it lots of little tiny pain bits? What happens if you perceive it as a solid mass and what happens if you perceive it as little pain bits, little sparks of pain here and there?" Ask yourself, "Does the pain move around? Does it stay strongest in one spot? Or does that strongest spot move around? And when it moves, is it reflecting the movement of the mind? Or something in the body? And how do you see the way the pain is coming at you? Does it have to come at you? Can you see it as receding?"

In other words, as soon as there's a moment of pain arising, remind yourself that you're watching that particular moment pass away, pass away, pass away. It's like the difference between sitting in a car facing forward and sitting the same car facing backward as you go down the road. If you're facing forward, everything is coming at you, coming at you, coming at you. With pain, there's a sense that it's coming at you, and you're holding on to it. You're catching it like a ball being thrown at you. But if you turn around and sit facing the back of the car, like you can do in those old station wagons, just seeing things going past, going past, there it goes, there it goes, what does that do to your relationship to the pain?

There are lots of different ways you can question the pain. And again these are ways of setting up a particular way of doing things, a way of relating to the pain and seeing the results. In some cases, you see a difference, in other cases, you don't. But try to detect which ways of perceiving the pain help to alleviate that sense of being burdened by the pain. You can ask yourself: The fact that there's a physical pain in the body—why does it have to burden the mind?

Ever since we were small, we took it for granted that, yes, it is a burden on the mind that there is a pain in the body. But you can ask yourself: Why does it have to be the case? Does it have to be the case right now? Can you see the pain as one thing, the awareness of the pain as something else? And the body as something else? The body, after all, is just earth, water, wind, and fire: solidity, liquidity, warmth, coolness, energy, motion. These qualities are of the body. Is there pain in any one of those? Is it something else? It's a sensation, this biting sensation. It flips around here and there. But if you glom those sensations together with your

perception of the body, they're going to seem a lot more solid, and a lot more oppressive. So can you separate those perceptions?

As you can see, the issue is in the way you perceive things, the labels you put on things, the mental image you hold in your mind. As the Buddha said, there are some people who gain insight with ease, and other people gain insight with pain. The ones who gain insights with ease are in very strong states of concentration, and for them the stress or *dukkha* that comes up is very subtle. But it's enough for them to see it. Something happened in the mind, and they check it out.

Other people are more stubborn. They have to be faced with really serious pain before the mind is willing to get into gear and start asking questions or start getting curious. We can't determine beforehand which kind of person we're going to be. And it's not the case that you're going to be one person all the way down the line, or one sort of person. Sometimes you'll have insights when things are very comfortable and other times you'll have insights when things are very painful.

But it's important that you understand that the insights are about action. You look at Ajaan Lee's analogies for the arising of insight: making baskets and observing what you've made. Making clay tiles and trying to think of new ways of making them. Getting a piece of silver, putting in a smelter, and seeing what things you can do with it. These are all images of skills, activities.

Then, though, he has another set of images: the person going to a mountain and getting out a rock, then putting the rock in a smelter and subjecting it to heat. The heat here is the heat of your effort. You stick with something and you watch it and you watch it, you watch it. You put up with the pain, but you're not here just to endure the pain, although endurance certainly helps. But the endurance is not going to burn away your old karma.

As Ajaan Chah once said, if endurance were enough to gain awakening, all the chickens in the world would have awakened a long time ago. They can sit a lot longer than we can. You want to be able to be with the pain so that you can start observing it. Where exactly is the pain in the mind? That's the pain of the four noble truths. The pain in the body, that's the pain of the three characteristics: Wherever there's inconstancy, there's going to be stress. And whatever is stressful, the Buddha said, is not self. So that's not the issue. The issue is the suffering that comes from your craving, your ignorance. And the ignorance is just your inability to see things in terms of four noble truths and to master the skills that are appropriate to each of the truths.

What that means in practice is that if you've got some pain in the mind, you want to comprehend it. What's the pain in the mind, and what's the pain in the body? How can you tell the difference? Can you see any wavering in the pain in

the mind? When it waivers, ask yourself: What happened? What change in perception happened? As you're trying to maintain your steadiness, as you watch this while holding that question in mind, trying to understand this pain: That's the path.

So we're trying to get at the mind from different angles, to see which angle works in giving you some insight into how the mind, in its frantic efforts to find pleasure, keeps causing itself more and more pain. You also gain insight into how you can train the mind to be observant, to ask questions about cause and effect, and to watch and experiment and become more skillful as you approach the issue of suffering and pain in your life.

This is one of things that was really distinctive about the Buddha's teachings. You look at the teachings that were taught by other teachers at the time. Nobody else focused on the issue of stress and pain. They had bigger ideas, trying to comprehend the world as a whole. They had their scientific worldview, which in some cases was as materialistic as some of the world views we have now, in which everything was determined and there was no free will. But as the Buddha pointed out, if there were no free will, there would be no chance of getting any release from suffering and pain. Then there were other people who said, "You've got to get your soul out of this constant cycling. So you have to put up with the pain so that your soul be released."

But the Buddha's teaching was very different. He said to try to understand the process of how you experience pain, how your ignorance and craving contribute to that, how you can put an end that ignorance and craving, and how there's a release from suffering that follows. Just the fact that that was his big issue: That was framing the question in a very distinctive way, and of course it provided new insights. If you look at other issues as being the big issues in life, you're going to miss this one.

So try to focus on this issue: How does the mind create pain? How does it create suffering? Then you'll find that the insights that arise are very productive in giving rise to a happiness that lies beyond the four noble truths, totally unconditioned. Because that's the earnest question in life: Why do we create suffering when we want happiness? And how can we find a happiness that we can trust? It's probably our most earnest question, and the Buddha's ready to answer that question straight on.

So try adjusting your focus so that you're approaching it straight on as well.