

## *Proactive with Pain*

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Aging, illness, death: These are the things we don't like to think about. And because we don't think about them, we tend to push them out of the mind. But that means that when they actually come, we're unprepared.

One of the Buddha's great gifts was teaching us the skills that we're going to need to face these things, so that we don't have to suffer. We suffer from these things, he said, because we cling; we're trying to feed on things that age, grow ill, and die. Because they slip through our fingers, we cling all the more, and that means we are going to suffer all the more as these things keep escaping from our grasp. So we have to look for a happiness that doesn't depend on that kind of clinging. We have to learn how to let go.

The first part of letting go is to remind ourselves that we're not the only ones experiencing aging, illness, and death. Everybody goes through these things. So when they happen, it's not that we've been singled out for any special torment or any special suffering.

There's a story in the Canon where King Pasenadi is talking to the Buddha, and one of his palace officials comes to tell him that his favorite queen has died. He breaks down and cries. And the Buddha reminds him, "Have you ever known of anyone who was born who doesn't die? Anyone who was born who doesn't suffer from aging, illness, who doesn't experience separation?" It happens to all of us. When you can think in that way—of the larger picture—it helps to take some of the sting away. And then you can focus on how you're going to handle this well.

Two things basically happen: pain comes in, and you feel pushed out by it. You try to push it away, and it just doesn't want to budge, and so you go escaping other places. So the first thing you have to learn to do is not get pushed out by the pain. Meditating is good practice for this. Sit here for a while, and there's going to be pain here, pain there, pain in your back, pain in your legs, a dullness in the head sometimes. The first thing you've got to realize is that not everywhere in the body is there pain. There's going to be some area in the body where things are at least okay. Focus your attention there.

Now, there is a tendency to go immediately back to the pain because you're worried about it, you're concerned about it, you want to keep it under your control. But you have to realize that pain is not under your control. So you want to establish yourself in a place where you have a greater sense of belonging, a

greater sense of being okay, so that you can gather your strength, so that you feel less threatened by the pain.

This is one of the reasons why we work with the breath. Try to find a way of breathing through different parts of the body. If there's a pain in your head, try to breathe down through your hands and your feet. If there's a pain in your legs, focus more on the chest. If you can't find anywhere in the body that's comfortable, think of the energy surrounding the body outside. There's a sense of space, but there's also a force field around the body. Place your attention there. Stay with the space around your head, around your body. Make that your base camp, and then you can make forays into the body when the base camp is solid.

Because, as the Buddha said, if you want to get past pain, you have to comprehend it. First you want to see, well, what is this pain? There's a physical sensation, but there's also a whole series of perceptions around it and permeating it. The perceptions are what create a bridge between the physical pain and the sense of suffering in the mind. Sometimes we give the pain a shape—say, that it's located in the body right here, it's got that shape, it extends up the leg, say, from the knee and down to the shin; it's got its territory.

Well, that's a perception. You want to question that. How accurate is that perception? Does pain really have a shape? And is it really there in the body? Because body sensations are one thing; pain sensations are something else. Body sensations are things like the energy of the breath, the coolness of water, the heat of fire, the solidity of earth. The pain is none of those things. There may be a little bit of heat to go along with the pain, but the heat itself is not the pain. The pain is something else. So can you separate out these different types of sensations?

Or you can ask yourself: Where is the pain the worst? What's the worst spot of the pain? And as you try to track it down, you come to realize that it seems to be in one spot and then it moves someplace else; as soon as you've tracked down the second spot, it moves someplace else. You begin to realize it's not as solid or as intimidating as you first thought it was.

What you're doing is putting yourself out of the line of fire, and you're taking more pro-active approach to it so you're not the victim anymore. You're not the target. You're the investigator.

If you find it hard to do an investigation like that, at least hold this perception in mind: that the pain is not actually coming at you, you're watching it going away, going away. Each time there's a moment of pain, it's going away. It's like sitting in the back of one of those old station wagons where the back seat faced to the back of the car. You're driving down the road, and the things you see are going past you. They're not hitting you, they're not coming at you, they're going past

you and going away, going past you and going away. Think of the pain in that way. If you hold that perception in mind, it's a lot easier to sit with the pain. You realize you can stay here and not get pushed out. If you see yourself as being in the line of fire, it's going to be hard to stay here. You're going to try to run away. But if you realize that the sensations of the body can be there and they're not the same as the pain, your awareness can be there and it's not the same as the pain, then you can stay right here, and you're not pushed away.

The other thing you have to watch out for is, when you're feeling pushed out by the pain, what the mind's going to latch onto. It can latch onto anger, it can latch onto greed, it can latch onto lust—it can latch onto all kinds of desires or worries. One of the worst things you can focus on as you're facing death is worry: either worries about what's going to happen to other people, or worries about what's going to happen to you.

So the first order of business is to remind yourself that as long as your mindfulness and alertness are good, you're safe. Because what will happen is that images will appear in the mind. Sometimes frightening images; sometimes attractive images. You have to keep reminding yourself that you don't have to go into them. You can stay here in the present moment, be fully aware of the present moment, not let yourself want to escape off into those other places, or feel that you're compelled to go to those other places. Learn how just to watch them arise, pass away, watch them arise, pass away.

And as for your worries about the world, your worries about other people, remind yourself that these things have been largely out of your control anyhow. And so there's no reason to want to try to exert control now that your powers are failing you. The world is going to go its own way. Other people are responsible for their own karma.

This is why we try to develop thoughts of equanimity, realizing that no matter how much we love other people, their karma is beyond us. No matter how much we might dislike what other people may be doing, their karma is beyond us. But you also have to realize that you are beyond their karma as well. There's a place deep down in the mind that they can't touch, so to that extent you're safe. But that spot has to be protected, and you're the one who has to protect it. So develop your mindfulness, develop your alertness to stay right with that sense of knowing, knowing, knowing. The knowing can be right here, whatever pains that may arise may be right here, but the knowing is something separate.

It's like radio waves from different stations occupying the same spot in space, but they don't mix. They're separate stations, separate frequencies. Think of the pain as one dimension, think of your awareness as another dimension, the body is

still another dimension. They intersect here, but they're separate things. Try to keep that sense of being separate, separate. Whatever arises, sights arise, sounds arise: See them as something separate from your awareness. You're aware of them, but the awareness is something else. Worries may arise, but try to look at them from the point of view of someone outside the mind. It's just a worry about something you're going to have to let go.

So we practice now letting go now, while we're still strong, so that the attachments won't weigh on the mind as the mind and body get weaker. We want to keep the mind as strong as possible. Learn how to separate your sense of awareness from your sense of the body, so that even though there may be a weakness in the body, the awareness is still strong, realizing that as long as you're with your awareness there's nothing to fear.

So learn how to not get pushed out of the present moment and how not to go running away from the present moment. Realize that there may be some unpleasant things here in the present, but you don't have to identify with them. They're just passing through passing through. You're the screen in a window. The wind comes passing through, the noises come passing through, dirty air, clean air, comes passing through, but the screen isn't affected by those things at all because it just allows everything to go right past.

The image in the Canon is of a net, like a net used to catch birds. Sounds and wind and things can go right through the net, but the net doesn't have to catch anything. Keep the holes in the net as large as possible so that nothing gets caught. That way, you're not pushed out of the present. And when you're not pushed out of the present, there's no reason to go grasping after anything else.

These are some of the skills you need to survive aging, illness, and death. So learn how to develop them now while you can, and they'll hold you in good stead. Because there will come a time in your life where the skills of other people can't help you, no matter how talented your doctors and nurses may be. There comes a point where the body just goes beyond what they can influence. This is why you want to have some control over your awareness, so that you can fend for yourself, and come through without suffering.