

An Introduction to Pain

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So many people accuse the Buddha of being pessimistic: He starts his teachings with pain. And yet when you first sit and meditate, what do you find after the first five or ten minutes? Pain. You can't avoid it. Or when people just can't sit by themselves, can't spend a whole day by themselves without busying themselves with this, that, or the other thing, what's the problem? It's mental pain, mental discomfort. These are things we live with all the time, and yet we think somehow that if people point them out, they're being pessimistic. Of course, the Buddha's purpose in pointing out pain and suffering wasn't just to stop right there, pointing them out and saying, "Isn't that horrible." He says, "Look. There's a solution." In fact, his approach to pain is extremely optimistic: Human beings can put an end to suffering, in this lifetime, through their own efforts.

So when we sit here, we have to anticipate that there will be pain in sitting still. The reason we normally move around is because we encounter pain in a particular posture, so we change a little bit to get away from it. The Buddha's approach isn't to try to run away from it that way. He says, "Look into it."

As Ajaan Suwat used to say, "We normally take our cravings as our friends and our pains as our enemies. We should switch that around. Learn to look at pain as your friend, and craving as your enemy." The craving is what's really causing all the problems. The pain is just there to teach you something. Of course, it's a difficult friend. Some people are easy to be friends with; you can get along with them with no problem at all. Others are difficult. Pain is definitely a difficult friend, but one worth cultivating. Still, because it's difficult, you have to go about it the right way.

This is why, when we start meditating, the Buddha doesn't have us focus immediately on the pain. He says to focus on the breath instead, because whatever pain is associated with the breath — and it tends to be subtle, but it *is* there — is something you can manage, something you can deal with. He gives you the breath as your tool for dealing with the pain. So when you're aware of pain, don't yet let your primary focus be on the pain. Keep your focus on the breath. In other words, get used to being acquainted with the breath first, because that's the person who'll introduce you to pain properly. It's like

meeting any important person: You first have to get to know certain well-connected friends who can introduce you to that person. And that's the way it is with pain: You have to know the breath first, for it's your well-connected friend.

So get in touch with the breath. Find a place in the body that's relatively at ease, relatively comfortable, and focus there first; get to know that spot first; be very sensitive to the breathing at that spot. When you breathe in there, how does it feel? When you breathe out there, how does it feel? Is there even the slightest discomfort? Can you make it feel better? Can you experiment with different ways of breathing, different ways of conceiving the breath energy in your body? When you find something that feels really good, the whole tone of your body will feel really good. Instead of sitting here tensely trying to breathe in one spot, think of the whole body relaxing into the breath. The more relaxed you are about the practice, the longer you'll be able to stay with it. So think of yourself as just relaxing into the body, relaxing into the breath. Find a way of breathing that feels really good — all the way from the beginning to the end as it goes in, and all the way from the beginning to the end as it goes out. Make that your foundation.

Once that feels good, think of spreading that good breath energy to the other parts of the body. Think of it as going right through the pain. Many times a lot of the discomfort we feel around pain comes from tensing up around it, and the tensing up just makes things worse. So try to breathe through any tension you feel. Breathe right through the pain, all the way on out. Suppose there's a pain in your hip or in your knee: Think of the breath going through the hip, through the knee, all the way out through the toes as you breathe in, and out into the air as you breathe out. As you approach the pain, try to maintain the same mental tone and feeling tone you had when focusing on the comfortable breath. Your primary frame of reference here should still be the breath. There's no way you're *not* going to notice the pain, but ask yourself, "How does the breath affect the pain? How does the pain affect the breath?" Always keep the breath in mind as your frame of reference. That gives you a handle on the pain. Otherwise if you jump right into the pain, you find yourself picking up the energy from the pain that puts you on edge. The first thing you'll think will be: "Make the pain go away." And then there's even more impatience as you get involved in the past and the future of the pain.

But when you stay with the breath, you want to be as much with the present as possible. Don't think about how long the pain has been there or how long it's going to stay. Just, "What's there right now?" That takes one *huge*

burden off the mind right there. So as you go through the pain, make the thread of your awareness stay with the breath. That's what you want to keep track of; that's what you want to hold onto. Learn to relate to the pain through the breath rather than just butting up against the pain head-on.

Now, if you find that the pain just gets worse and worse and worse to the point where you can't stand it, sit with it another five minutes and then change your position. In other words, push your limits a bit at a time and you'll find that you get better and better at staying with the pain, more skillful in maintaining your frame of reference with the breath. As long as you really stay with the breath you'll be okay. Slipping away from the breath is what creates the problems, because the mind then immediately creates stories about the pain, creates issues around the pain: "Why is this pain happening to me?" Or if it's a physical pain that you know you caused: "Why did I do that?" All these questions — "How much longer is it going to last? Am I going to have this pain the rest of my life?" — just drop them right now. Stay with the breath. Deal immediately in the present, because the past and the future are not actually there. They are things the mind creates, and once they're created they turn around and bite the mind. So try to stay with that thread of the breath as it goes through the pain.

Then you'll begin to see why the Buddha focused on pain as *the primary spiritual issue* in our practice, for it teaches you so much about the mind. It's like filming a documentary on the animals in the desert: If you go out and spend the day wandering around the desert, you'll probably miss most of the animals. But if you set up your camera at a safe place near the water hole 24 hours a day, all of the animals in the area are going to have to come there. That's where you get to film them all. It's the same with the pain. If you focus steadily on the pain, you'll see all the mind's reactions around the pain. All its issues will come to the surface and congregate there.

At the same time, if you use the breath as your tool for dealing with the pain, those issues won't totally overwhelm you. It's like having a safe shelter to run to if the lions object to being filmed. You've got a safe place in the breath. You're not totally at the mercy of the pain. You can pull out any time you want, and you've got a handle to deal with it. You've established a feeling tone around the whole body that holds the pain, not grasping onto it, but surrounding it with an energy, surrounding it with a space where you're not threatened by it. *Then* you can deal with it. When you're not threatened, you can really get into the present moment. If you find that you can't yet handle it, you've got the breath to go back to.

But when things get stable enough in the mind, clear enough in the mind so that you can handle it, then you really can start looking at the pain as your friend. You can get familiar enough with it so that ultimately you can understand it for what it truly is, so that ultimately it's no longer a problem. Until that point, it's always going to be a difficult friend, but if you start off on the right foot, using the breath as the basis of your friendship, you'll find that you're in a good position to make the friendship work.