

The Strength to See

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In order to gain release from suffering, we first have to comprehend it. That's a message we don't like to hear. We'd rather get swept straight to nibbana in waves of bliss. But it doesn't work that way. If you're going to get beyond suffering, you have to understand what it is, why it is, and how the mind creates it.

This requires that we sit and look very steadily at two things we don't like to look at: physical suffering and mental suffering. To look at these things requires a great deal of strength, a great deal of determination. Physical suffering—if we're going to watch it, if we're going to understand it—requires that we be very resilient, that we have lots of endurance, that we just sit with it, so that after a while we come to understand it. It's not that you're going to gain Brownie points by sitting with it for x number of hours just putting up with it. You sit with it so that you can see, watch it, and in particular to see how the mind interacts with it.

As for mental suffering, most of us tend to focus on the kind of suffering that comes from when other people have mistreated us. But actually, the most difficult thing to look at is not that. It's the suffering we cause through our own actions. When we've mistreated others, when we've mistreated ourselves, we don't like to admit it. To see that kind of suffering requires integrity: the ability to admit your mistakes, the ability to admit that, Yes, you did that and, Yes, it caused suffering. So a large part of our practice is developing the strength we need to watch these things, to see these things, to admit these things to ourselves.

In terms of dealing with physical suffering, that's where concentration comes in. For most of us, our powers of concentration don't go very far past suffering. Momentary concentration, which is ordinary everyday concentration, tends to get stopped by suffering. Even with just the slightest little bit of displeasure or boredom or dissatisfaction, we're gone. We're off someplace else—to say nothing of out-and-out pain. We don't like being there. It's like throwing a mustard seed into a hot pan. It bounces here, it bounces there. It just doesn't want to stay right within the pan.

But when you can learn to focus on the breath, make the breath comfortable, give the mind a good place to stay that you can create at will, as you get more and more sensitive to the different levels of breathing, the in-and-out breath, the breath that flows throughout the body, the still breath: This gives you a good foundation for looking at pain because you don't feel so threatened by it. For the most part, if you just jump down into the pain, the one thought in your mind is:

How can we put an end to this pain? Which means that you're not trying to comprehend it. You're just trying to get rid of it—because it's threatening.

But if you can come at the pain from a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, you're a lot more likely to look and see what's going on, to see what precisely those sensations of pain are, the way you slap labels on any pain that comes up, without being patient enough to really look at it and see what is the precise physical sensation of pain, and also what is the mind doing to aggravate the pain by the way it labels it, by the way it comments on it, the fear it has about what the future holds with this pain, how much longer it's going to last, how long has it already lasted.

You weigh the present moment down with worries about the future, complaints about the past, and no wonder the pain seems unbearable. But if you can learn to strip away those thoughts, strip away the labels that say, "Here's the pain: It's right there, it has this shape, and it has this quality": Just let those labels go; let those thoughts go. What's left will be the pure sensations of pain. That way, you learn a lot about the mind.

The things you learn about the mind in this way are necessary for gaining awakening: to see how the mind fashions things, and how it fashions pain in particular, in a lot of unnecessary ways. It's only when you see how unnecessary these fabrications are that you can gain release from them.

So that's how you develop the strength you need to look at physical pain.

As for mental and emotional pain: The ability to see that depends on your integrity, seeing that you can't blame your emotional pain on other people. There is an awful lot that, again, the mind is contributing to that pain. To have the strength to see that requires that you be in the right environment. If you're in an environment where confessing your mistakes is seen as a sign of weakness, you'll never see anything. This is why the Buddha, in his instructions to Rahula, said that if you notice that you've done anything that's caused harm, talk to somebody else about it. Talk to somebody else on the path. Don't be embarrassed. Don't feel ashamed to talk. It's only when you talk about these things that you can get perspective from other people who wish you well. And you also don't feel afraid to look at these things yourself. If you're in a bad environment where confessing your mistakes is seen as a sign of weakness, *you* see it as a weakness, and you won't want to confess even to yourself.

This is why when the Buddha taught the Dhamma, he didn't just teach a technique for meditation. He provided the whole context. This is why we have the monastic Sangha. This is why we have the Vinaya. This is why we have the

standards he set down for good human values for people who want to practice, who want to put an end to suffering.

When you develop these two kinds of strength—the strength of concentration and the strength of integrity—you can see things a lot more clearly. You can comprehend the suffering. You can maintain the steady gaze that watches these events as they arise, as they stay, as they pass away, and see what actions you're doing that are connected to whatever pain comes up, whatever suffering, mental or physical, comes up. It's only by developing these strengths that you can get through to the point we're all practicing for: release from suffering.

So these are the things we work on. We work on concentration, we work on integrity, because they're the strengths that enable us to see. And it's in the seeing that we gain freedom.