

Pain & Distraction

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When you try to get established in your meditation, the two big problems are pain and distraction. And it's important to learn how to work with them, because they're problems not only while you're meditating. Think about the moment when you're going to die. Pain and distraction will be really big problems then. The pain of the body will get so great that you can't stay with the body anymore. And as for distraction, things will come up into the mind as you're leaving the body: memories of things you did in the past, regrets over the fact you're not living longer, and premonitions of where you're going.

The commentary talks about what are called *kamma-nimitta*, which means seeing actions from your past, things you did in the past, either good or bad, and then *gati-nimitta*, visions of where you're going. It's not necessary that only one vision is going to come up. Lots of things can come up. You want to be in a position where, if you have to come back or be reborn, you'll be reborn in a good place, a place where you can continue practicing. You want to be in a position to choose. And that means you're not being driven, driven, driven by pain to just latch on to anything that comes by, or that you fall for flashy things that come your way.

So while you're sitting here as the body is still functioning and things are relatively quiet, it's good that you learn how to overcome distraction and the problem of pain. Learn how to work with these issues. In the beginning you establish a center someplace in the body. This is a temporary center. It's like base camp when you're going to climb a mountain. It's a temporary location, you're not going to stay here always, but at least it gives you a place of relative ease and solidity from which you can look at distraction and at pain, and not get sucked into them. That's the important thing. This is the process of what they call becoming and then birth. Becoming is when visions appear in the mind, whole worlds, and they're not limited to visual visions, they can also be the worlds of pain. All the perceptions and ideas you have around a pain can suck you into a little world of their own. You want to be in a position where you can look at these worlds as a separate thing.

That's why we work on developing a comfortable center in the body, some spot that's a sensitive place in the body where you can stay, and by staying with it you make sure that it stays relaxed and at ease—and because it's sensitive, it feels really good being here. You have a sense of being drawn to the spot. The more

sensitive you are in dealing with it—knowing the proper way to approach it, the proper way to stay with it—then the more it becomes, at least for the time being, a center that you can maintain in the face of whatever comes up. That way, when pain comes, you're not immediately drawn into the world of the pain. Or any entertainment comes by in terms of things you might see in your imagination or hear or whatever: You don't get sucked in to that, either.

So do your best to develop the sense of a center, a place where you belong, *vihāra-dhamma*, your home for the mind, so that when pains come up in other parts the body, you don't have to get sucked into those parts of the body. You have the choice as to exactly how much you're going to lay claim to the body. Be like a lizard: If the cat comes up and catches the lizard by the tail, the lizard is willing to let go of its tail. The tail will actually detach. Even though the lizard held it as its tail, when the time comes for the choice between whether the rest of it is going to survive or is going with the cat, it's willing to let go of the tail.

So in the same way, learn how to let go of parts of the body that are really troublesome so that you can establish a center. Once the center is established, then you're in a position where you can look at the pain because you know you have a safe place to go when it gets too tough.

And you can think of spreading the comfort of that center, the good breath energy you've been working on, and see if it can go right through the pain. What that does is that it helps destroy some of that sense of a solid world around the pain. Or you can analyze the pain: Which part of the pain is actually just the bodily sensations and which are the pain sensations? They may occupy the same spot to begin with, but they actually are different types of sensations. There are sensations of warmth, of solidity, movement, coolness: These things are all there in the same spot where the pain is, but they're not pain. They're actually physical feelings rather than feelings of pleasure and pain.

If you can learn how to ferret them out, that's one way of not slipping into the world of the pain. You try to take it apart, take it apart, piece by piece, to see what are their component factors. This is why, when the Buddha talks about suffering, he talks about aggregates. Cut the problem of suffering down into little bits and pieces, and you find it's a lot more manageable. Learn how to destroy the world that you create around the pain: The pain is in this part of the body and it has this shape and it's doing this to you. Actually, the pain has no intention at all. The bodily sensations are one thing, the pain sensations are something else.

When you learn how to make that distinction, then you can turn and look at your awareness and see that awareness is something distinct as well. This is really important because when you get that sense of the separate awareness, it puts you

in a much better position for dealing with things. After all, even with that position of the calm and cool center in the body, there will come a point when you have to leave that. When you have a sense of your own center of the observer being separate from what it's observing, that's an important skill. That can take you through a lot. Even if you haven't attained awakening, it puts you in a position where, when really strong pain arises, you can be in the midst of the pain but not get sucked into the pain. That puts the mind in a much better position. If it has to choose whatever thoughts come up in the mind that it's going to go with it, it can choose lot more wisely. It doesn't feel under so much pressure to grab on to something, anything, right away.

So as you become better at meditating, you're also get better at the whole process of dying, doing it well.

The same principle applies to distraction. Thoughts come up, and if you can distance yourself from them either by locating yourself in a particular part of the body or developing that sense of the separate observer that can choose which thoughts to go with and which thoughts to let go, you're in a much better position. You're not under so much compulsion to grab at something, because you know you have an alternative. When pain arises, you can watch it as something separate and see which ends first: the pain or the awareness. A thought comes up, a thought world, that you could go into, or not, and you can see which will end first: the thought world or your awareness.

When you can develop this sense of separate awareness, it's your position of safety in all kinds of ways. When unusual things come up in the meditation, we're told that Ajaan Mun's counsel was that if something comes up and you're not sure of what to do with it, then just stay with that separate sense of the knower, the observer. Just stay right there. There's nothing else you have to do. And as for whatever is appearing, you can watch it but have a sense of being separate from it, so that you're not getting sucked in. Then, no matter what it is, you're safe.

After all, the whole purpose of the practice here is to develop purity of mind, and purity of mind is just this: that the mind can separate itself from things. It can let go of whatever comes up. Doesn't have to latch on. Isn't hungry. Doesn't have to feed. Ajaan Fuang's comment was that everything else that happens in the meditation—all the psychic powers and the other things are so intriguing—are just games. Things to play with. But the real work here is learning to purify the mind, to purify the heart, to put the heart in a position where it doesn't have to feed.

When the heart doesn't have to feed, then you can trust it. It's like having a worker at an ice cream shop who's not hungry for ice cream. You don't have to

worry about the worker eating up all your profits by sneaking into the ice cream freezer all the time. It's the same with the mind. When the mind deals with physical and mental sensations but isn't hungry for them because it has something else that's much better, then you can trust it to do the right thing.

This is how purity of heart is attained: by putting the mind in a position where it doesn't have to feel hunger, where it doesn't feel a lack. It's got its own sense of center. It's got its own home. It feels secure and safe and well-nourished here. Once you develop that, then whatever you face, whether it's in meditation, in your daily life, or as aging, illness, and death come rolling in, you can face these things from a position of strength and well-being. And in that position, you'll be able to make the best choices you can.