

## *Physical Pains & Painful Words*

*December 23, 2016*

When you're sitting here focused on the breath, even when you're well concentrated on the breath, you don't have just the breath. You've also got feelings, you've got the mind, and you've got mental qualities. All four frames of reference are right here. The question as to which one you're going to pay attention to most depends on the issues that come up. In the beginning, you do want to focus on the breath and get used to being with the breath, because the ways of working with the breath are going to be essential for dealing with problems that come up in terms of feelings and the mind. But don't expect that you'll master everything with regard to the breath before you have to think about feelings and the mind, because they can come in and intrude pretty quickly.

Feelings are a big issue. You sit here and there's going to be pain in some part of the body. How do you deal with that? The Buddha doesn't say explicitly, but it's implicit in the four steps dealing with feelings. In fact, if you look at them, you realize that the first two—breathing in and out sensitive to rapture and breathing in and out sensitive to pleasure—correspond to Ajaan Lee's elaborations on how to deal with pain. For instance, say there's pain in your knee. You don't focus on the knee. You try to focus on the parts of the body that can be made comfortable.

Ajaan Lee's image is of eating a mango. If there's a rotten spot in the mango, you don't eat the rotten spot. You cut that out and you eat just the rest. Let the worms have the rotten spot—and don't go moving in with the worms. I found in particular, if there's a pain on the right side of the body, it's good to focus on the left. If there's a pain in front, you can focus behind. I used to have migraines and I found that focusing down on the base of the spine not only got me out of the migraine, but also had a good effect on the blood circulation in general. So, this is an area where you can explore. Try to breathe in a way that feels really good and gives you something else to focus on besides the pain.

The next two steps—being sensitive to mental fabrication and calming mental fabrication—correspond to Ajaan Maha Boowa's recommendations for how to deal with pain. "Mental fabrication" basically means feeling and perception. And here the perception is the important element: how you perceive the pain. You might want to ask yourself, "What color is the pain? What shape is the pain?" Strange questions, but the mind has some strange ideas about pain. After all, when did we first learn about pain? Before we knew language, we'd already experienced it. And a lot of our pre-linguistic ways of reacting to pain and dealing with pain

are still there, lurking under the surface. So bring them up to the surface where you can see them, and ask if they make any sense. You can do that by probing around with strange questions. We're trying to get at the perceptions that lurk under the chatter of your mind.

One thing you can do is to bring in some new perceptions. One that I found really helpful is if there's a pain that seems to be fairly constant, try to notice it as discrete moments. And with each moment, as soon as it arises, it's going away, going away. It's as if you're on the back of a train heading down the track. You're not in the engine cabin. You're at the back of the caboose, facing back, watching things go past, go past, go past. And as they're going past, they're going away, so that you don't feel like you're being hit by the pain. The pain isn't coming at you. The pain is just appearing and disappearing, appearing and disappearing. Hold that perception in mind. See what it does with regard to the pain.

Or you can use some of Ajaan Maha Boowa's perceptions, particularly with the purpose of seeing that the pain, the body, and your awareness are three different things. Can you see them as three different things? Start out with that perception and the reasons behind it. After all, your sense of the body is the four elements: qualities of earth, wind, water and fire—in other words, solidity, energy, coolness, warmth. That's your sense of the body. When pain comes, it's something else. It's none of those things. It's in the same place, but it's not the same thing. Can you ferret it out and see that it is different?

And then your awareness: Your awareness is different from these two things, because after all, the pain doesn't know anything. The body doesn't know anything. It's your awareness that knows. So it's a different quality.

We can reason ourselves to see things that way. But to actually see the distinction requires that we look very carefully. Ask yourself: Where do you not see the distinction? Where have you glommed things together? The mind has a tendency to glue all kinds of things together, to make a big mass and a big mess of suffering. Can you use perceptions that cut through that glue? Because the pain, on its own, it is something separate. It is something different. It's a different kind of phenomenon. But when we lay claim to the leg, say, or the knee, as being ours, then anything that moves into our territory is attacking us. You've got to start questioning that assumption. "Okay, is it mine? Do I really want to lay claim to this? Am I really being invaded?"

And here, for the time being, you identify with the awareness so that you don't identify with the pain or with the body. And you see that it really is something different. Then you can be with the pain. It can be there. You can be fully aware of it. But it doesn't seep in. Perception is what creates the bridge.

So, even though the Buddha doesn't give specific instructions on how to deal with pain, you can figure out how to probe around on your own, using his general guidelines. All he basically says is that there are pains you should learn to endure and pains you should avoid. The pains you avoid would come from doing stupid things: going out at night and falling into a cesspool; going out and tripping over a cow. That's one of the examples he gives. In other words, you don't go into dangerous places. You don't put yourself in a position where you invite useless dangers.

But there are two kinds of pains, he said, that you have to deal with. There are physical pains that are sharp. And then there are pains of hurtful words. Those are things you have to tolerate. You have to learn how to develop some resistance to them. Even though he doesn't give specific instructions on how to endure pain, they're there implicitly in his instructions on how to deal with feelings as they come up in the course of the meditation.

The lesson here, of course, is that there's a lot more in the Dhamma than what's just in the texts. You have to take some of the basic principles and work out their implications for yourself. It's good that we have the ajaans. And this is one of the reasons why the texts are written as they are. They were not meant to be known except in the context of people who are actually practicing, because the people who practice can give you all kinds of insights into how they might apply. As long as their teachings are in line with the texts, they're a useful added dimension. But even they can't tell you everything.

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about listening to Ajaan Mun give a Dhamma talk. Ajaan Mun would give long Dhamma talks—sometimes they would go on for four hours—but, he said, Ajaan Mun would be giving you just the trunk of a tree, and you had to work out the branches. Not everything was explained.

So, take some of these ideas about the perceptions that help you endure pain and ask yourself, "What else can I do? What kinds of questions can I ask about my pains so that the mental fabrication of perception actually does get calm?" In other words, you learn to think about the pain and perceive the pain in ways that allow its effect on the mind to grow calm. It's there, but it doesn't have to stir things up. The perceptions can stir things up; and the perceptions can calm things down. Depending on which perceptions you use, it's going to make all the difference. But realize that you do have the freedom to change your perceptions.

The same principle applies to hurtful words. The Buddha gives two prime examples of how to think about hurtful words. One is the perception that "This is normal." He says there are hurtful words and there are kind words. There are true words and there are false words. That's the nature of human speech. So when

people are saying hurtful lies to you, it's not that you're being subjected to anything out of the ordinary. Even then, he says, you have to develop goodwill: for the person speaking to you, for yourself, for everybody else.

And he has you hold a vivid perception in mind. He says even if someone were to pin you down, like bandits would pin you down and start sawing off your limbs with a two-handled sword, you shouldn't let your goodwill be affected by that. He says if you keep that perception in mind, then when people say hurtful things, you should be able to stand them. You realize it's not nearly that bad. That's one perception.

The other perception is when someone says something hurtful, you just tell yourself, "An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear." And leave it at that. How many times have you left it at that? Usually we're all ready to embroider it and add even more knives to what they had to say: "Why did they say that to me? Why are they being disrespectful to me? Why is the person being so horrible? My feelings are being hurt"—the whole gamut of perceptions that you can array around that. You're not calming mental fabrication when you think in that way. The calming perception is, simply, "An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear." It made contact and then stopped.

Our problem is that our minds don't stop. They reverberate like a gong. You hit the gong and it goes on ringing for a long time. In the same way, even though the contact was made a long time ago, it can still reverberate in your mind. You can still dig it up, even though that person may have forgotten when he or she said.

So those four comments about how to breathe in a way that gives rise to rapture and pleasure, breathe in a way that makes you sensitive to mental fabrication, breathe in a way that calms mental fabrication: You can apply them to all kinds of physical pains and to the pains of hurtful words. If you're sitting here breathing in a way that feels really full and pleasant, you're not so hungry to feed off of the nice things that other people might say. That means that when they end up saying harsh things, you're not sitting there with your mouth open trying to feed on what they have to say.

These four principles are useful in all kinds of circumstances. You're dealing with pains on all kinds of levels, so learn how to take these basic principles and work out the branches. In other words, see how they apply to specific issues as they come up. You'll find that in exercising your discernment in this way, exercising your ingenuity in this way, the Dhamma becomes yours. It's not something imposed by some outside authority or from some strange culture someplace else. It becomes a body of principles by which you manage your own

mind, manage your own life in a way that gives rise to a happiness that's really solid. That kind of appropriation of the Dhamma is perfectly fine.