The Dharma of Pain

Everytime I teach an introductory class (and often in more advanced groups) people ask about how to work with pain in their practice. There is often an attitude that, "If I could just get my knees to stop hurting, *then* I could really meditate." I point out that, although the Buddha listed five hindrances to meditation, pain wasn't one of them.

Many of the core practices in Buddhist meditation use the body as their focus. The Buddha encouraged us to explore physical sensations in a variety of ways, and he also suggested that we should develop a mind that isn't distracted or disturbed by unpleasant sensations.

When I first started to practice, over twenty-five years ago, my teachers seemed more willing to push their students to work with pain than teachers do today. Part of this change has been a skillful way to help people avoid creating struggles and striving in their practice. But what has been lost, it seems, is the power of mind and heart that are developed when working directly with unpleasant sensations. My own practice has been deepened tremendously by this work, and, while it hasn't been easy, I don't see a "softer, easier" way to live in my body than to learn to be present with the range of sensory

experience. In fact, learning to meditate with pain has been a great gift and inspiration in my practice, and I hope to be able to share that gift and inspiration to you.

MEETING YOUR BODY

Moving away from pain is one of the two things that drive us toward addiction. (The other is moving towards pleasure.) Many of us used drugs, alcohol, and other substances to mask the emotional pain in our lives. Others, struggling with physical pain, became addicted to medicines that were supposed to help us. Coming into recovery doesn't mean that we stop feeling pain, but that we change our relationship to pain.

Pain is inevitable. The Buddha's First Noble Truth, the Truth of Suffering, makes this clear. The Buddha talks about all the things that are difficult and painful in life, all the way from the pain of birth to the pain of death—and lots in between. He tells us that we need to understand this truth, and by this I think he means that we need to directly face the difficulties of life, not try to avoid them. Step One of the Twelve Steps is, I think, saying the same thing: we have to admit our powerlessness, our addiction, the pain and struggle we are living in.

When people come to meditation they often see it as a way out of pain. And, certainly, there are ways that meditation can be used skillfully to relieve pain. But it's not the same as taking a pill. It's a process, one that requires commitment, compassion, and understanding.

When I first started to practice Buddhist meditation I wanted to sit like the Buddha, on the floor with my legs crossed. In those days, the early '80's, I rarely saw a chair in a meditation hall. I guess we were more infatuated with the Eastern forms, and

we were younger (and more flexible)—it was rare to see someone over forty in a Buddhist center.

The first Buddhist meditation class I took was at the International Buddhist Meditation Center in Los Angeles. The meditation hall was dimly lit, with Zen calligraphy and Tibetan tankhas on the walls. Just a few of us took that weekly class, sitting on a raised part of the floor in front of the great Buddha statue. The cushions were *zafus*, the hard, round Japanese meditation pillows, and the floor was covered in a thin, bamboo mat. The teacher, an American monk just back from six years in Sri Lanka, would put on a tape of Steven Levine's meditation instructions and leave. There I sat, my right foot on top of my left calf, my back more or less straight, trying to follow the simple instructions. Each week, about halfway into the forty-five minute tape, my knees started to burn. From there on, I stopped hearing the instructions, and I suffered. I hated the pain and just wanted it to stop. I couldn't focus on my breath and I couldn't focus on my pain. I just wanted to move, but I was determined to be a "good meditator" and remain still. I was sure that if I could just get my knees to stop hurting my meditation would be great.

The weeks went by, and I continued practicing—and suffering. In November I signed up for a five-day retreat with the same monk. I was certain that five days of sitting cross-legged would stretch out whatever needed stretching, and I'd have no more pain. I was destined to be disappointed.

On the retreat I tried piling zafu upon zafu until I was sitting like a prince above the rest of the group. But the pain, and my struggle continued.

Through this all I heard the teaching on working with pain, to focus on the sensations, but I couldn't bring myself to really look. I was too scared.

The next retreat I took, on President's Day weekend, I persisted. By Sunday night, while the rest of the group was wrapped in blankets and shawls, I wore a t-shirt and sweated. I was determined to work through the fire in my knees.

It wasn't until my third retreat that something changed. There, in the High Desert of Southern California, I finally was able to relax and just feel the sensations without flinching—at least for a few seconds. And it was in this process that something remarkable happened: my mind went quiet. Holding my attention on the sensations without trying to push them away had refined my concentration to the point that my first experience of meditative stillness came over me. How ironic, it seemed, that the way into the most pleasant of meditative experiences for me had been the most unpleasant.

Does this mean you have to be a masochist to be a Buddhist? Is this some kind of sick joke or some crazy cult? I come to meditation for some psycho-spiritual healing, and wind up meditating on pain.

Of course Buddhism isn't about hurting ourselves. The Buddha said he taught "suffering and the end of suffering," so obviously these teachings are meant to bring us to a place of some relief, not leave us immersed in pain. But pain is part of the process for many people. At the end of one long retreat I was complaining about the difficulty of sitting still with the sensations in my knees, and a friend said, "I wish I had had pain. I kept falling asleep, and a little pain might have helped me wake up." As one teacher says, "It's always something." For some people it's physical pain, for others it's sleepiness; for some it's childhood trauma or depression, for others it's anxiety or stress. And for some it's addiction.

The point is that meditation—and life—involves difficulties. Learning to hold those difficulties with awareness, compassion, and balance is a vital process of the path. Pushing away these experiences is what addicts do. And, in fact, many other people live the same way. Even as we say, on the one hand, that life is the most precious thing, we are trying to avoid certain aspects of it. To be fully alive means to hold the difficulties, to be fully with them, as well as the pleasures. Otherwise we are only living part of life.

WHY WORK WITH PAIN?

While pain is an inevitable part of life, sitting with it, with no distractions can make it seem worse. Somehow, in those circumstances, sensations that ordinarily would be below the radar are thrown into relief and can seem intolerable—the subtle itch, the minor throb, the trivial twinge. Even if we aren't experiencing actual pain, these non-threatening occurrences can make it tough to sit still, much less focus the mind. So even if we don't have a lot of pain in practice or don't see a particular need to address it, working with sensations in a skillful way is often a gateway into deepening our practice, through focusing our concentration, revealing hidden physical and emotional patterns, strengthening our ability to be present with difficult emotions, keeping us awake and alert, and strengthening compassion and the ability to be present for the pain of others. I want to talk about how working with sensations accomplishes all these things.

Concentration

One of the most common complaints from meditators is the difficulty in developing concentration. At the beginning and intermediate stages of practice meditators often express frustration about their inability to hold their minds still. And one of the

main things that helps concentration is keeping the body still. One formula for this says, "stillness of the body supports stillness of the mind." And it's difficult to keep the body still.

Stillness is not a natural action (or maybe I should say, *inaction*). Even when we are asleep we move. If you pay attention to your body through the day, you will see that just about every physical movement is a response to some kind of discomfort or craving, physical or mental. (As I write this, I ask myself if my typing is included in this claim. In some sense, yes, because I am writing this with the inner struggle of trying to communicate something.) Even as we come to the end of an exhalation, there is the slight craving to be filled with air again. This, in the most basic sense, is what the Buddha meant when he talked about *dukkha,* the pervasive unsatisfactoriness or suffering of life which the First Noble Truth describes. Keeping the body still evokes dukkha. This sets up the conflict between our desire for comfort and our desire to deepen our mental stillness. And here we have reached the essential challenge of the spiritual path: to place our search for truth before our search for pleasure. When faced with the task of sitting still in meditation this challenge is set up in the starkest of terms: putting our determination to develop concentration before our moment-to-moment physical comfort.

As we begin to settle into this work, letting the sensations come and go without reacting to them, we counter our innate restlessness. In my experience, at first the restlessness is dominant, sending the mind, and my focus, round and round, never being able to stop and just be with any one moment's experience clearly; but, sooner or later, when I don't react to the discomfort and the restlessness, something happens. My attention draws in closer to whatever is happening, and calm and concentration start to

push back and dominate the restlessness. This describes the most basic way in which stillness helps us deepen our practice. When sensations get stronger, the challenge gets greater, but the rewards also grow.

With intense sensations, we're called on to make an even deeper commitment to practice. Now the pain is undeniable. It's not just a matter of subtle sensations being amplified by stillness, but much more intense burning or tightness or heaviness, often triggered by longer periods of meditation. Trying to ignore these sensations is impractical. We need a strategy for opening to them, and, naturally enough, that strategy means deepening our mindfulness. When we can surrender to this process, we discover the hidden jewel of strong sensations, their ability to focus the mind in the most powerful way. While the sensations of breath (a typical meditation object) are subtle and can be difficult to feel, a strong sensation in the back or knee, or anywhere else, is easy to feel and can hold the attention very strongly. Initially, as was true for me, moving our attention deeply into strong sensations can be quite difficult, but the rewards are great. (I'll talk more about how to work with this process later.)

Equanimity

As we begin to work with pain in our practice, some of our underlying tendencies may be revealed. The addictive habits of avoidance, fear, resentment, craving, and clinging are thrown into relief.

In my late teens and early twenties I was something of a pill freak. For a time I carried a little gym bag stuffed with rattling vials. I enjoyed the mania of amphetamines, staying up all night talking, talking, talking, or playing my guitar for hours and hours. I'd found that barbituates and sedatives like Quaalude mimicked, or even enhanced an alcohol high. I had a stash of tranquilizers and anti-depressants stolen from my mother's

medicine cabinet just for mixing and matching. I also carried any pain relievers I could get a hold of, like Darvon or codeine. I used these, along with pot, alcohol, and various psychedelics to try to maintain a constant, perfect high. Feeling a little sleepy? Pop a dexadrine. Too hyper? Drop some seconal. Bored or dull mood? Mix a few things together and see what you got. This behavior was an exaggerated form of the natural tendency to avoid pain and seek pleasure.

When I started to meditate it was as though I were being introduced to myself for the first time. "So this is what it feels like to be me?" I'd devoted so much time and energy to try to fix my reality, to adjust my feelings, to control my mind/body state, that I'd never really seen my experience directly or clearly.

As I started to look closely at the experience of pain, I began to wonder what it was all about. Certainly it was unpleasant, but why was there such a primal response to it? In group interviews with meditation teachers, I saw that the first thing that always seemed to come up was questions about pain. "How do I make it go away?" "Why does my body hurt?" "Is there something wrong with me?" "Isn't there an easier way to practice?"

I could see that there was some fundamental resistance to actually feeling pain. As I began to let go of that resistance, its source became clearer. In my next retreat, my first teacher interview was with a group of fellow meditators and the same questions as always came up. The teacher, whom I had never met before, took a different tack from the usual one of suggesting people just be present with their pain or relax around it. Instead she asked, "What is the *process* of pain?" This seemed to stump the group, but it was a question whose answer I thought I knew.

"Fear of death," I said.

The teacher nodded, but the rest of the students balked. She explained, as I had come to see, that pain is a protective response for the body which is meant to keep us safe, to protect us from danger. It is a survival tool, one that is trying to keep us alive. Pain is a signal to the mind that death may be near, and, since the main instinct of the mind is survival, this threat triggers fear. If we learn to catch the fear and see it clearly, then there is only sensation, and sensation is manageable. What sends us into a spin of restlessness and aversion, is the fear that our lives are threatened. In meditation we have to train ourselves not to be fearful, or perhaps more accurately, not to be reactive to fear. This is why the spiritual path is sometimes called the path of a warrior. The courage involved in facing the physical and mental demons is like that required by the warrior facing death on the battlefield.

As we learn to hold strong sensations in this new way, other qualities develop as well. The non-reactivity needed to simply be present with the sensations brings equanimity to the mind. This quality of balance is treasured in the Buddhist tradition as the essence of the Middle Way, neither moving towards or away from any experience, neither grasping nor rejecting. Far from being a neutral state, equanimity is exalted. Where there is no fear, there is serenity and faith; where there is no grasping, there is contentment.

When working with pain, we might ask which came first, the equanimity or the letting go of fear and resistance. As I sit with pain—and it's never easy—I watch this process. Before the concentration and equanimity come, there's a restlessness and frustration. I don't want to go through this, I don't want to feel it. I know there is another

side I can get to, but I want it to be there *now*. I try to let go of resistance, I try to breathe into the pain, I try to develop my equanimity, to find my center. And when this transition happens, it all seems to happen at once. It seems that the letting go and the developing happen together. Perhaps they are the same thing, or else they depend on each other. I don't know. This is one of the mysteries of practice for me.

With equanimity, it becomes possible to be more present with all kinds of difficult experiences. When I started to conquer my fear of physical pain in meditation, I thought I was making a lot of progress—and I was—but that success was relatively trivial compared to the next challenge I faced: overcoming my fear of emotional pain. I thought that my practice was deepening, but couldn't understand why there was a certain dullness to it. My teachers quickly recognized that I was holding back from letting emotional pain into my awareness and began to prod me to open to this as well.

I struggled trying to locate these subtle feelings, and as I did I once again felt that I was meeting a part of myself that had been hidden from me for my whole life. Just as with physical pain, I had always pushed away emotional pain. Clearly my drug and alcohol addictions were manifestations of this. That resistance manifested in many other ways as well, such as running from relationships that started to become the least difficult; avoiding professional challenges that might threaten my self-esteem; and viewing depression as tragic and romantic rather than seeing it clearly as a pathology needing treatment.

Introducing myself to my emotions was part of the long, slow process that in the Twelve Step world we call "recovery," and in Buddhism, "waking up." As usual, my expectation was of some quick fix, as though just by feeling my emotions I'd be "cured"

of any dysfunction. Instead I simply gained access to the lifelong process of being present with what is, with what I am feeling. Being present is not a "cure" for life, or dukkha, but it is the beginning of finding wholeness.

UNDERSTANDING PAIN

The first time I experienced pain with clarity on a retreat, when the thoughts and resistance dropped away and I just relaxed into the sensations, I realized that pain wasn't what I thought it was. If these sensations that I'd always thought were bad and unacceptable could actually help me concentrate, and, indeed, could be experienced as something altogether different, then I would have to re-think my understanding of what pain was. And over time, as I explored this question, certain deeper truths came to light, truths that were beyond my personal experience and pointed to some of the universas truths taught by the Buddha, what we can call the dharma of pain.

It's All Relative

The first truth that became evident was that pain is relative. The same sensation can be experienced as an unacceptably unpleasant feeling or as just a conglomeration of tingling qualities. The difference is dependent not on the sensation itself, but on my mind state when experiencing the sensation. If pain in my knee could lead to a calm, peaceful mind state and (eventually) dissolve completely into rapture, then how could I even define it as unpleasant, much less painful?

Before I go any further with this idea, I want to make clear some important distinctions. One way to view sensations is to see them existing on a continuum. The continuum moves from extreme pleasure to extreme pain. At the extremes most of us will not be able to maintain any balance or see the relative nature of the sensations. But as we move toward the middle of the continuum, things become much more difficult to classify.

So, I don't mean to imply that absolutely any sensation should be held with such equanimity. But, I will suggest that many more sensations are ambiguous in nature and potentially less of a problem than we normally think. (Strictly speaking, the early Buddhist texts say that an enlightened one can maintain equanimity even as his/her limbs are cut off, but, even if the Buddha meant this literally, it's a level of mental/spiritual development that is so far out of reach for most of us as to be irrelevant to this discussion.)

To make the relativity of pain more evident, think about the sensations you feel when you eat spicy food. Many people consider this experience to be pleasant, and will go out of their way to get the hottest seasoning available. Now, consider if you had the same sensation in your knee. You'd be complaining about how much it hurt. Sensation in your mouth? Yum. In your knee? Ouch. This is an obvious example of the relativity of pain.

Another great example is the sensations that appear in a rigorous workout. If you were sitting still and your lungs started to burn and your legs started to feel heavy and tired, you would be alarmed. If you were near the end of a five mile run, you would know this was normal, and might even enjoy the sense of stretching your limits.

A final, perhaps strange example is orgasms. The sensations associated with sexual release are considered some of the most pleasurable we can have. But if you felt those sensations in your ear or your toe, you'd call a doctor—maybe even go to the emergency room. If we focus purely on the physical sensations of orgasm there is often, I think, some pain in there.

It's this relativity that leads meditation teachers to refer to "sensations" rather than pain. It makes sense to use a more neutral word—a sensation is always a sensation, but whether it's pain or not can vary.

What does it mean that pain is relative? It means that when there's a sensation in the body, even an apparently unpleasant one, we don't have to react negatively towards it. We understand that our perception of that sensation is conditioned by many factors, and that it might be possible to change that conditioning. In my early days of practice when knee pain would start to appear, my breath would get tight, my body tense and I'd have a sense of dread, even despair as I would pull away from the sensations. Nowadays I often (though not always) find myself drawn right into the sensations. My breath deepens, taking in the sensations themselves, my body relaxes more, rather than getting tense, and my attention deepens into the experience. I'm able to react in this way because fundamentally I understand that sensations are largely what I make of them. They are a problem if I make them a problem. Again, though, I want to emphasize that this kind of equanimity is only possible for me in the milder cases of sensation, and in non-chronic pain. (I'll talk about chronic pain later.)

The Dharmas of Pain

Besides the truth of the relativity of pain, there are three other dharmas of pain relevant to the Buddhist teachings: dukkha, anicca, and anatta, or suffering, impermanence, and no-self. These three are called the "Three Characteristics (or Marks) of Existence." They are also seen as the gateways to insight, the truths that when explored and understood on the deepest level usher in awakening.

I've already talked a lot about suffering, but there are a couple other things worth saying. On the most fundamental level, insight into suffering around pain is the

realization that it is normal, that it is a natural part of life, not an aberration. Often when we feel pain there's the thought, "why is this happening to me?" Of course, pain is often a sign of a physical problem, and that is the obvious answer to the question. But the more accurate answer, as I told someone recently who asked if I knew what had caused some back problems I was having, is "I have a body." If I have a body, I will have pain, that's just the way it is. Seeing that, accepting that, is a huge part of developing the equanimity to be with sensations without making them a problem. Understanding dukkha as a natural part of life allows us to see the world and its sorrows and pains in a different light. This insight actually helps foster the "coolness" that is nirvana. The Buddha went further than just saying I suffer because I have a body, he says that I suffer because I was born. This might seem obvious to the point of absurdity, but it actually opened him to his ultimate goal, not to be reborn. In the traditional teachings the Buddha says that one who is fully enlightened ceases to be reincarnated, and thus gets off the wheel of suffering.

Ultimately, this is the only way to end all suffering. Many contemporary commentators take this teaching more metaphorically, saying that if our ego isn't reborn moment to moment, then we won't suffer. This is a lot more palatable a teaching to many skeptical contemporary Westerners. And maybe that's what he meant. And, indeed, if my level of awakening allows me to have my limbs cut off without suffering, then I may transcend suffering in this lifetime. Otherwise, the Buddha's teaching that the only way to eliminate all suffering is to stop coming back in a body makes a lot of sense.

The second characteristic of existence, impermanence, is the one I apply most in the moment of experiencing strong sensations. One of the first things I learned when I began to explore pain was that it wasn't the solid mass I'd always thought it was. When

the attention becomes refined and we are able to relax and just feel what's going on, pain is in constant movement, constant change. This continual flux is true of all physical sensations. This seemingly solid thing we call our body is really not solid at all, it really has no permanence. When we close our eyes and begin to move the attention through the body what we find is these widely varying sensations. The hands feel one way, the back another, and the face something else entirely. And it's all a roiling mass of effervescent sensation—what we call "life."

On the most obvious level, this insight can help us to hang in when there is pain: "It will pass. I can get through this." This is not an insignificant fact. There is such a tendency of the mind to think that what is happening now will always be happening, that it takes some fairly transforming experiences to break that habit of thought. When we bring the attention over and over and deeper and deeper into awareness of this continual experience of changing sensations in the body, we are chipping away at this illusion of impermanence. The heart and mind are gradually trained to respond to life in a new way, in a way that understands that "this too shall pass."

As concentration deepens in our exploration of sensations, the experience of impermanence opens us to the deeper truth of the insubstantiality of the body--anatta. The body is not anybody. Huh? What I mean is that, if something is in a constant state of flux, ungraspable, not solid, then what is its identity? Identity relies on something solid, something stable that can be identified, but the body is neither solid nor stable. This truth of insubstantiality, of corelessness, is the heart of Buddhist insight. If there is no solid body, no solid self, then there is no one to cling, and since clinging is the cause of suffering, this realization, when it occurs on the deepest level, can end suffering. This is

what the Buddha said. When spoken, or written, this idea might seem frightening or bizarre, or just plain ridiculous. The Buddha didn't expect us to accept this idea because he said it was so. He suggested that we explore our experience for ourselves and see if it aligned with what he was saying. It really does us no good to intellectually accept or reject the teaching of no-self.

WORKING WITH PAIN

I've already described, at least in passing, much of the approach to working with pain, but I want to take you through, as best I can, the specifics in an orderly way. As with all meditation instruction, however, you will have to work with these suggestions yourself to find your own way of dealing with sensations.

In the vipassana practice, one of the most useful techniques is the noting practice in which you make soft mental notes of each experience as it arises, starting with "In, out" or "rising, falling" to note the breath, then noting "thinking, thinking," "hearing, hearing," and with sensations "sensation, sensation." (I'm not sure why it's suggested that we repeat the word, but it does have the effect of both confirming what's happening and making it impersonal.) It's suggested that we *don't* make the note "pain, pain," because that can create more resistance and discomfort, and besides, as we've already seen, the same sensation might be called pain or pleasure depending on our mind state and the cause of the sensation. So, one of the first things we can do when a strong sensation arises is to note it. This doesn't mean we just glance at it or try to dismiss it with the note, but rather that we are facing the sensation squarely.

As we do this, it's important to soften, to relax the body in the area of the sensation. Use the breath, especially the out-breath, to relax. Much of the difficulty with

strong sensations comes from the tightening and tension that occurs in reaction to the sensation. If we can soften, we won't amplify the sensation. The tightening is both a protective mechanism of the body and an expression of the fear that arises with strong sensations. Breathe into the sensations. As we counteract this resistance, we are brought into the direct presence of the sensation—we're noting it, we're not resisting it, we're just allowing it to be.

It is at this point that we begin to apply the central tool of vipassana meditation: mindfulness. We take the attention into the sensation, exploring it with a scientific curiosity. What is this? What does this feel like? Where in the body is the sensation most intense? Where is its center? Its outer boundary? What qualities does it contain? In the traditional teachings, we use the four elements, earth, air, water, and fire, as frames of reference for sensations. Heaviness or denseness is an expression of the earth element; pulsing, tingling, flowing, or any movement is the air element; heat or coolness is the fire element; and fluidity and cohesiveness are the water element. Using the elements helps us to categorize the sensations and to see them as impersonal manifestations of the material world—all physical objects are made up of varying amounts of the elements. We can use these descriptions or whatever works for us. We can make mental notes of the qualities of the sensations or we can just be aware of the changing qualities. The point is to take an objective, non-reactive approach to experiencing the sensations.

As we keep paying attention to the sensations we need to be kind to ourselves. Be careful that you aren't creating a hardcore relationship to the sensations. Keep coming back to the relaxation part. And keep breathing. The breath is an important tool here. If aversion starts to slip in--tension, resistance, frustration, sadness, self-pity--come back to

the breath. Maybe take a deep breath and release—softening again around the strong sensations.

As the meditation period goes on a variety of things may happen. At a certain point, the aversion may overwhelm your mindfulness so that you are just caught in suffering with no space or equanimity around the experience. If you find that you truly can't get centered again, that you don't have the power of mind right then to apply mindfulness and calm, it might be time to move the body. When we move in meditation, what's important is to do so slowly and mindfully. There's no reason that the shift in posture can't be incorporated as a part of the meditation. One way to emphasize this is to put the hands into prayer position for a moment before moving, a sort of bow and acknowledgement that you are about to move. Then, slowly and with great attention on the sensations in the body, change posture. There are some postures that are almost as solid as the cross-legged posture that can be used as your secondary posture. Explore for yourself (beforehand) a good secondary posture that you can move into when necessary. If you just break posture without a stable secondary posture to go to, you are likely to lose the thrust of your meditation.

After you move, check through the body again and see how the sensations have changed. Look at the mind and emotions to see how they have changed as well. Then try to settle back into the body, relaxing, and beginning again to follow the breath. You are starting your sitting again now. You likely will have lost a degree of concentration, so you need to pay attention to any restlessness or disturbance and try to bring calm back. You might also take a moment to enjoy the end of the painful sensations.

DANGERS OF WORKING WITH PAIN

Because there's such a strong tendency to want to move away from pain, to escape it or ignore it or relieve it, I think it's important in meditation to take a different approach, the approach I've been describing. However, pain *is* an expression of some kind of problem in the body, and as such we need to be very careful in working with it. There are a few things I would suggest that you keep in mind as you work with pain.

First, as I mentioned before, people who are very determined in their meditation practice can start to take on a hardcore approach, pushing themselves harder and harder. While this kind of intensity certainly has its value, it can get us into trouble around pain. Physically it can cause us to overburden the body, straining muscles, tendons, and ligaments to the point of injury. Although this is extremely rare, it has happened. If the pain doesn't dissipate during the sitting, and/or if it remains afterward, you may be overdoing it. Ask yourself, and ask your teacher or trusted friend, if you seem to be over-striving in your practice. Try backing off in your effort.

Although it's rare, it is possible to override the body's natural warning systems with mindfulness. One friend who was suffering from a rare blood disease had developed his mindfulness of sensations so deeply that he was able to function in a very weakened physical state. When he finally decided to seek medical help and *rode his bicycle* to the emergency room the doctors told him that, based on his blood count, he should have been flat on his back. They were amazed that he could walk, much less ride a bike. While this story certainly shows the power of the practice—the power of mind over body—it also is a cautionary tale about not listening to what the body actually needs. It's important to use common sense in practice and not become so singlemindedly devoted to a very narrow kind of mindfulness that we lose the big picture of what is really happening.

Mentally, this kind of effort can create more blockage. The striving itself, the competitive attitude, is counter to the meditative attitude of just watching. The Third Zen Patriarch says, "When you try to stop activity to achieve passivity your very effort fills you with activity." So, striving in meditation is a contradiction in terms—and in means. Instead of deepening our practice we can create agitation. Instead of accepting what arises in each moment, we try to control our experience, chasing after some ideal meditative state. Right Effort is not striving and it is not giving up. It is a balance that Suzuki Roshi calls "the secret of practice." And this is a secret that we have to discover for ourselves. It's not a secret that someone is keeping from us, but rather something within us that can only be found through trial and error, through striving too hard, and not making enough effort, swinging back and forth until we find the "Middle Way." And, in truth, even this place of balance will keep changing for us, moment to moment, so that the effort we make needs to constantly be monitored and adjusted to fit the energetic conditions of each moment.

Finally, if we become too focused on painful sensations in practice it can become overwhelming, undermining our confidence in our selves, in our ability to practice, and in the practice itself, making us question the value of a practice that seems to be all about pain. We can lose the joyful part of practice. If this happens, we can develop an aversion to the practice itself and pull away. If these kinds of experiences start to happen, it's important to dial-down our effort and our focus on pain. Find a more comfortable posture; sit in a chair or even lie down; do shorter periods of meditation. Don't let your practice become one continuous grind of fighting with the body. This will only alienate you and weaken your practice.

LIVING WITH CHRONIC PAIN

I've been talking about a particular kind of pain, especially the kind that comes from sitting still with our legs crossed or sitting in a chair for long periods of time. This kind of pain is not indicative of any structural problem in the body or of a disease or illness. By and large, this kind of pain dissipates as soon as we stop meditating and move the body. I think that what I've said about working with this kind of pain is accurate, and I hope, helpful. However, it's vital that we distinguish this kind of pain from the pain that indicates real problems in the body, and especially that we understand that chronic pain is very different from "meditation pain."

I will define chronic pain as difficult sensations that appear daily for a period of at least several weeks. A surprisingly high number of people experience this kind of pain, and very often for much longer than a few weeks. Anything can trigger such pain, over-exercise (many athletes have chronic pain), a car or other kind of accident, a chronic illness like cancer, MS, or Chronic Fatigue, or just plain aging (probably the most common cause). When it comes to this kind of pain, we should be cautious about suggesting simple answers like, "just be aware of the sensations" as we might with meditation pain. When pain is persistent it has a debilitating emotional effect.

One of the first differences between the two types of pain, is that with chronic pain, it *is* indicative of an actual physiological problem. This has broad implications. First of all, it means that the fear that arises with the pain has more of a basis. It's not just instinctive; it is rational. We have to think about solutions. And we have to be very careful. Especially for addicts and alcoholics, this takes us into dangerous territory.

One friend who had been sober for many years began to have severe nerve pain. Nothing he tried helped. As he became more and more discouraged he slipped into

despair and eventually started drinking again. No longer able to work, battling with his wife, his life fell apart. Fortunately he was able to find his way back to a Twelve Step program and overcome the pain problem. Many others are not so lucky.

Sometimes we get into trouble by accident. An older woman friend told me she became addicted to Vicodin when dealing with some pain. “I didn’t know it was addictive,” she said. I recently had my own bouts with chronic pain and used Vicodin for the first time in my life. I immediately saw the seduction. As a recovering addict, a drug like that just made me feel “normal,” relaxed and in a good mood. Although it didn’t take the pain away completely, it did dull it. The temptation to keep taking it was there—I was in pain on a daily basis, so it seemed justifiable. But I could see that what really attracted me wasn’t the pain relief but the pleasant high. I decided that only when the pain got very severe would I take it, which meant that I used it just a few times over the course of a couple months of pain.

One of the difficulties with chronic pain is that everyone you meet will give you advice. I became so barraged with options for treatment that I became confused and frustrated: chiropractor, acupuncture, physiatrist, osteopath, physical therapy, herbs, drugs, injections, operations. It seemed that every practitioner had a different way of viewing my problem and a different solution. I realized that, ultimately, I was on my own. It came back to trusting myself. What made sense to me? What seemed to be working? I needed to be patient and let a treatment work, but I didn’t want to stick with something out of habit or fear or hope. The pain would seem to be getting better, then there’d be a setback. One treatment would seem to help, but I’d find it only took me so far. The fear that I’d never get free of this pain started to grip me. With all of this, I

needed mindfulness. I needed to be mindful of the pain, mindful of my reaction to the pain, mindful of my biases for treatment, my resistance to advice, my illusions about magical recovery. All of it.

Then I talked to a friend who has been struggling with her own chronic illness who said sometimes mindfulness itself didn't seem that helpful, that she needed to take her attention *away* from the pain in order to live with it.

When I talked to one of my teachers, he said that I should open to the fear that the pain would never go away. Just allow that thought in—don't push it away. That suggestion had no appeal to me, although I understood the reasoning. The aversion, the resistance to the pain is just adding a layer of difficulty. Allowing for the possibility that the pain won't go away lets me stop running and just be in the situation as it is.

What's clear about chronic pain is that there's no quick fix and that I'm going to have to bring all my resources, inner and outer, to bear in dealing with it. As I age, my body becomes less and less reliable. Learning to live with this, with the inevitability of sickness, old age, and death is one of the central tasks of the Buddhist practitioner. Not to be overcome with despair and not to live in denial—this is the challenge. Everyday I seek that balance of mind that allows me to be present with ease and awareness. Some days I find it, and some days I don't.

There is more, much more, to be learned from pain. It isn't my goal to explain everything there is to know (even if I knew everything there is to know). I only want to inspire you to engage with sensations—with pain—in a new way. Your wisdom will grow through experience, not through reading or thinking about it. Take the tools of

practice and apply them with faith, with courage, and with careful attention. What you discover will transform you.