

Working Through Fear and Pain

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By allowing fear and pain we get to experience what is.

I have no authority other than my own experience, which I will briefly share here. How do we deal with the pain and the fear that may accompany prolonged periods of meditation? Pain and fear often go together, and we tend to evaluate these states as unpleasant, as something to get away from.

Let me give you an example: We're sitting, and we're worrying about the pain we had in the shoulders during the last two sitting periods that we thought nearly killed us – is it there already again? We anxiously check and notice tension building up again, feeding anxious thoughts about how bad it'll get that in turn lead to more tension in the body and to more thoughts, swirling into fear: "It hurts, this needs to stop, what am I doing here?"

We can see how thoughts of pain and fear are often intertwined, can feed off one another and spiral. Does this sound familiar?

Basically, we are all runners: We don't want to be where we are, with what we're feeling. We're running from pain (emotional or physical), from discomfort, from boredom, from any state other than what we want. We may even call the state we crave the **absence** of craving. Have we truly realized how that entire project is driven by our own craving?

We may turn to vicarious satisfactions, and we may do this compulsively, trying to find an external solution for our inner turmoil. We eat, light the umpteenth cigarette of the day, get drunk, pop a pill, have sex, lift weights, go shopping, go running, switch on the TV, listen to the radio, surf the net, go on social media. The things we do to avoid or manipulate the present moment are endless. And exhausting.

Sitting meditation is diametrically opposed to this escapism: It is facing our present reality head on. That's why, for many of us, it gets so uncomfortable. We clash with all we've so

diligently tried to avoid. We find poor little me, with all our baggage, and feel what is actually going on in body and mind. How do we deal with that unmedicated, unmoderated experience?

We taste it. We experience what IS, without rejecting it. Fear and pain are conceptual labels that our discriminating thinking uses for certain kinds of sensations/feelings; they are not the experience itself: The sharp pulling in the right knee, the 'Ouch!' we're feeling when we accidentally touch a hot stove. As soon as we label a sensation as fear or pain we're already separated from it and we're prejudiced; we go into escape-mode. We need to do something about it; we need to somehow FIX that. That is our calculating mind at work: our idea of a fixed, separate self that seeks control of itself by comparing, discriminating, judging, and that almost instantly resists sensations that it categorized as pain and fear, because it feels threatened by them.

And sometimes, this impulse to fix things is right: When we are sick, we go to the doctor. Fine. But usually we would do better to simply STAY with that feeling and NOT do something about it. Simply be with it, become intimate with it. But we were not taught to do this. Our general response is to get as far away as possible as quickly as possible. Is that why addiction, in all of its current forms, runs rampant today? Just to get away FROM WHAT IS.

Sitting Zazen, we're doing something revolutionary. We allow ourselves to stay with our present reality without manipulation, without judgment. We dive right in and learn, maybe for the first time in our lives, to EMBRACE what is present, meeting it with alert compassionate presence, to be comfortable with the uncomfortable. That freedom is needed, on the cushion and off.

What, really, is this fear? Sitting in the midst of a panic attack, for example, it might be heart pumping hard with adrenaline, putting us into fight-or-flight mode, legs restless, ready to run, breath shallow, chest tightening, mouth dry.

That's what it is. Dry mouth, pumping heart. Be with it, or better yet, be it. It will subside on its own, in its own time, once the conditions that led to it have run their course. And it will cease all the quicker the less we resist. Resisting, we're creating separation from it and that separation itself is a big part of the problem.

In my experience, resisting panic attacks doesn't work. We end up being afraid of fear itself, thereby more or less calling forth the next attack, because we are always on the lookout for traces of anxiety that will soon show up. Until we learn to relax into them, lean into them, be with them, be them.

The same applies to pain, physical or emotional. As long as we're resisting what IS, we're in a way preparing the ground for more of the same. Adding resistance to the initial sensation, we multiply our suffering. It's the resistance that creates the suffering, not the initial sensation. The initial sensation is just that: a throbbing pulsation in the head or a sharp pulling in the muscles of your leg – Ouch!

Ceasing to flee from the IS-ness of the moment, there's no room for resistance based on thought-discrimination and our present experience becomes the way: Being pain, being fear, we become free from their bondage: working through them, we go beyond them. I don't want to run anymore. Do you?

To this end, I have found Jeff's statements over the years on this subject helpful. Below I have put several of them together and touched them up. May they serve as a pointer and inspiration for all. Please put them into practice!

During retreat, sitting zazen many hours each day, naturally there is some pain. We are not trying to hurt, of course, but neither are we trying to **avoid** the inevitable pain that we do have. Thus it's important to learn to sit properly. Everyone has a different body, so we must learn this for ourselves. We learn by doing it, although yoga stretches and so forth can be helpful to limber up.

If you're having intense pain because of all the sitting, listen to it. Don't indulge it, or try and pretend it's not there. What is it really saying? Where is it coming from? Do you need to adjust your posture or use a different cushion? Do you need to let loose some emotional turmoil underneath? Or do you need to simply

sit through ?

Once you actually do sit through, things like pain, fear, wandering thoughts and frustrations are no longer a problem. You have seen how they arise. And how they cease. A valuable step on the way.

Otherwise it's like having a high fever: You go to the doctor and he examines you, perhaps prescribes medicine, suggests an injection, or even admits you to the hospital. Would you then say: "But the treatment must not cause any discomfort!" Stubborn illness may require bitter medicine. We certainly don't want to cause discomfort; but neither do we ignore the underlying *dis-ease*. With proper treatment the fever breaks and health returns. That is what we are doing here at retreat. By proper practice, *dis-ease* naturally comes to an end. Is this worth looking into and even tolerating some discomfort? I leave it to you to decide.

As your zazen becomes firmly established, you simply **are** the pain; you don't avoid or deny it. Neither do you **react** against it, which causes it to tense up and become worse. For example, when your left knee hurts, you may try to compensate by moving. This usually works – for about a minute or so. Then what happens? It starts to hurt somewhere else. Then you move again. This is not zazen at all, but the physical manifestation of *dis-ease*, restlessness playing hide and seek with itself.

Instead, **be** the pain. If that is your present experience, let it be your koan of the present moment. If it is there, be it. Then to a great extent the pressure can be relieved rather than worsened. It's no miracle, but this can greatly reduce rather than aggravate the pain. It also allows you to continue the constant practice of right effort by **being** what is actually present at the moment.

It's always right here and right now. It's not something we will attain some day as the result of some superhuman effort. **This** – pain in the legs right now – **is** the mind of Nirvana, if we actually see through it. It's unmistakable. No one can take that away from you; no one can give it to you either.

From there, your very pain and fear are transformed into the Way itself – if you don't separate from them. Instead, enter: Who is suffering? Right there is the end of the self that suffers. Rejoice! Where you are right now is right where you need to be. You couldn't be in a better situation.

Look at the so-called genjo-koan, the koan manifest right here and now, or breathing, the immediate presence of our breathing. Or mindfulness of pain in the knee or of taking a step. These practices are not creating anything. Every one of them simply deals with present experience. You don't have to create anything. You don't have to remember, recollect or even realize anything. Just be aware of what is actually here. Nothing more, nothing less. That's all you need.

Your present condition is sufficient. You don't need to be in some other condition in order to practice. Zazen is freedom from all conditions without eliminating them. Freedom from all conditions. Without eliminating them. Confirm it yourself!