

Vidyamala Burch
Week Four, *Freeing the Mind When the Body Hurts*
December 26, 2016
“Six Steps to Living With Choice”



Welcome back to this online retreat, *Freeing the Mind When the Body Hurts*. My name is Vidyamala and I'm happy to be here with you again. This week we're going to conclude the series, and I'm going to present a six-step model that I've developed based on the core teachings we've covered. But before we do that, I'd just like to recap a little bit of what we've covered so far.

In the first week we looked at the central place of awareness in the Buddhist life, of knowing what's happening moment by moment so you can make choices as to how you respond. We introduced the *Satipatthana Sutta*, which is summed up by the scholar Analayo by the phrase, “keep calmly knowing change.” The Buddha suggests here that this is the whole Buddhist path, to “keep calmly knowing change.”

In the second week we let go of struggle and we looked at the *Sallatha Sutta*, the sutta of “the arrow” or “the dart.” This beautiful teaching says that if you have physical pain in your body, it's as if you're pierced by an arrow. Those of us who aren't awake automatically resist and resent that discomfort, and it's as if we're pierced by a second arrow. Then we have the pain of two arrows. The Buddha suggests that someone who is liberated will still have the pain of the first arrow because they have a body, and the body's going to have unpleasant sensations. But if they don't resist or resent it, they only have the pain of one arrow and that's a very different load to bear than the pain of two arrows, or possibly even more than that, as I suggested before.

Last week we looked at the place of love, and I suggested that like awareness, love is also essential to the Buddhist path and the awakened life. I talked about how enlightenment has two wings: the wing of wisdom and the wing of compassion, and how both are perfectly balanced like the wings of a bird. Then we looked at the importance of kindness and love towards ourselves and others, as well as the deeper implication of impermanence: that everything's changing and that we're much less separate than we usually realize.

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We did a practice where we dropped “beneath” relating to others on the basis of difference towards cultivating a recognition of all that we share with others. I suggested that there's far more that we share than that separates us from one another. The most basic or the most deep of these things is the simple breath, we're all breathing, in and out, all the time. There's also an attitude that we all share: none of us likes to suffer and we all want to be happy. These things are what we're all engaged in, all seven billion human beings on this planet, and through them we can learn to relate to others as fellow human beings rather than as strangers. This is very important for those of us with pain, because pain is so isolating.

This week I want to present a six-step path, which is a way of seeing all these teachings in a progressive way to end up in a place of expansiveness, openness, radiant mind, and choice. The first step of these six steps is awareness. The absolute, essential foundation of any aware, awake life, the Buddhist life, is awareness. The text for that, as we've talked about, is the *Satipatthana Sutta*.

The next step in this practice is to turn towards the difficult. Many of us may be aware, or think we're aware, but there's something that we're editing out of our experience, something we don't want to look at—which means we're not completely aware, we're only partially aware. What we need to learn to do, if that's the case, is to actively turn towards that which we've turned away from. Engage with it. Get to know it. Even embrace it. This is what Sallatha Sutta is teaching us to do. To draw back into our body, drop back towards our unpleasant sensations. To get to know our unpleasant sensations directly before we pile on all the layers of reactivity, which are based on thoughts like, “I don't want to go there,” or “I don't want to know that.” Well, guess what? It's happening. So turn towards it, get to know it, and rest in the basic sensations before reacting to it.

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Living life as somebody with a pained or difficult body, you might think that the path would end there. We're aware, that's good, and we've turned toward the difficult, so we've now got a more open and honest awareness, which is also good. But that would be, at least for myself, a very incomplete path. I might live with my pain a wee bit better, but only awareness of the difficult feels a wee bit one sided. What else is there to be aware of? Well, of course, there are the pleasant things.

So the next step in the six-step process is what we call “the treasure of pleasure.” It’s learning to attend to the fact that there's always something pleasant happening in any moment of life. Even in times of intense suffering there will be something pleasant you can find if you look for it in the right kind of way, with a delicate, curious, receptive awareness.

There was a time some years ago when I was in the hospital. I'd had major surgery and I got an infection. I was very sick, there was tons of pain, and my experience with my body was not pleasant. So I brought this teaching to mind and I thought, “Well, what's pleasant? Can I find anything pleasant in this experience?” I noticed that the sheets on the bed, the clean sheets on the bed, were extraordinarily pleasant. I opened to the sensation of “This is so lovely, I'm lying on a clean bed,” and then my experience changed. Rather than being dominated by the pain, I broadened my awareness and noticed that there were other things too. The sun coming through the window was pleasant. The flowers by the bed were pleasant. It’s very important that we don't only learn to work with our pain in a creative way, but we also learn to value and appreciate a pleasant experience.

This was also taught by the Buddha. He places a lot of value and emphasis on the positive emotions, like joy. He saw that there's a real place for joy in the spiritual life. It's important to acknowledge joy, to notice joy, to learn to cultivate joy. He said things like, “A happy mind is a concentrated mind, and a concentrated mind is a happy mind.” If we're to see into the nature of reality, if we're to really penetrate and reflect deeply on

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impermanence and connectedness, we need to have a concentrated mind. We're not going to be able to do that if we're all vague and fuzzy. We need to have a mind that's steady, poised, and has a clear, incisive quality.

He says that we're going to get that in a better way if we're also joyful and happy. The happiness and the joy bring the mind together and it becomes more concentrated, focused, penetrating. The Buddha placed a lot of emphasis on what we call higher states of consciousness, things like the *dhyanas* where we feel joy, bliss, happiness, and so on. I think that the step of seeking out the pleasant is a way of valuing and acknowledging the place of joy in the spiritual life. If you have a painful body, you can still experience joy, happiness, and bliss. I promise you that.

The next step in this process is gaining perspective. We return from our focused awareness to rest in a broad, receptive field of awareness. We started with broad, basic awareness. Then we focused on the unpleasant, checked for resistance, and softened that resistance by examining the basic sensations. After that we thought, “Okay, what's pleasant in my field of awareness?” Sheets on the bed. Light coming through the window, flowers. Really basic things like this can become the doorway to higher states of consciousness. If we rest there, we tend to these sensations with curiosity, with interest. But that's a very focused kind of awareness.

In the next stage of gaining perspective, it's like we have a wide-angle lens and we broaden and rest with everything within our field of awareness. We allow everything to arise and everything to pass away, moment by moment. We're resting in the flow of life, in ourselves, in the world, in other people. This is what the Buddha is pointing to with Vipassana practice, with insight practice. This is where we directly experience the nature of things.

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We experience that everything is changing and we're no longer fighting it, no longer struggling against it, but instead we're resting inside it, as a direct felt experience, and that can be very deeply satisfying. We can do that even if we're in physical pain. The pain is part of our experience, but it's not everything. We're not pushing it away, but neither are we locking onto or fixating on it. It's just a part of the flow of life, rising and falling. It's as if our consciousness expands. Maybe there's a quality of luminosity, radiance, or love. Everything is taking place within this much bigger experience of consciousness, of the mind, of the heart.

The next step in our process is connection. We've got to this point we're resting in this lovely, soft, fluid awareness of our own experience, all of our thoughts, emotions, sensations, and so on rising and falling. Then it's as if we raise our gaze and we see seven billion human beings on the planet just like ourselves; they are also experiencing the arising and the passing of thoughts, emotions, and sensations. As I said last week, we can then learn to connect with them at the deep level of common humanity and of shared experience: the arising and passing, the dislike of pain, the longing for happiness, the simple breath.

We've got five steps so far. We've got awareness, we've got turning towards the difficult, we've got seeking out the pleasant, we've got resting back in this broad open awareness, we've got connecting with others. Then the sixth step, the last step in the process is the behavioral outcome of the previous five steps is to live with choice. If we're aware, present, and we know what's happening, know what's arising in the moment, then we have this extraordinary capacity as human beings to choose how we respond. This is a really important part of the training that we're involved in.

We can't control life, we can't control the pain in our body in this moment, but we can choose how we respond. We can choose how we respond to anything that comes at us from the world, and anything that comes at us from our internal world, so we're shifting

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away from being habitually reactive and becoming habitually responsive. This is a profound shift that can completely change your life. In the case of living with chronic pain, what we're doing is profoundly changing our relationship to that sensation. We might not be able to make the pain go away, but we can change how we relate to it, and choose a helpful response every single moment, rather than a reactive, contracted response.

What I'd like to do now is sum up everything we've done simply, so you have a few take home points. The buddhadharma is very vast, with many teachings, but in some ways it's also quite simple. It's extremely hard to practice, extremely hard to realize, but the teachings can be put quite simply. The practice we're engaged in and the path we're embarked on is to be in the present moment as fully as possible. Be here now as fully as possible. Be in the body as fully as possible. Really know what's happening in your body. What are your sensations? Come close to them. A very good way to be in the present and be in the body is to simply to be aware of breathing. The breath that you're experiencing now is in the present moment. The past breath is a memory, a future breath is an idea, so by becoming aware of the breath now, we are in the present moment.

As we've discovered through this whole course, breathing is a deeply embodied experience. So as soon as you're experiencing the sensation of breathing, you are in your body. Be present, be embodied, and then the training or the play or the adventure that we're engaged in will teach us to follow release rather than contraction, follow release rather than contraction. Every time we notice a contracted state, we let go, we soften. Every time we notice an expansive state we savor it, we rest there, and allow it to build.

What we're doing is shifting from being a person who is primarily driven by resistance and contraction around pain to being a person who is infused with a sense of openness, expansiveness, softness, release. If we do this moment by moment, our life can profoundly change, and we can begin to rest more deeply in what the Buddha taught, this

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radiant, luminous, expansive, open quality of consciousness, even if we've got a painful body. And that's an amazing thing, isn't it? That this is possible, to have a free mind even when the body is hurting. This is what I'd like to leave you with, this idea of cultivating a new habit of following release and letting go of contraction every time we notice it in our meditation practice and in our daily life.

To conclude this series, we'll finish with another little meditation. What we're going to do now is we're going to have a go at resting first inside breath and the body, and then inside a vast, luminous, radiant mind, which is what the Buddha is pointing towards.

So as always let's just choose a posture. You can do it sitting, standing, lying down—it will just be for a few moments. Give the weight of the body up to gravity, as always. Feel a contact between your body and the floor, the chair, or the bed. See if you can settle a little bit more and rest inside the breath in the whole body. Feel the movements and sensations of breathing in the back of the body, the front of the body, the sides of the body, the inside of the body, and across the whole surface of the body. Rest inside the arising and the passing. Feel the flow of breathing in the whole body, feel the flow of sensations in the whole body, of thoughts, of emotions. If you have any resistance present, greet it with kindness, softness. Breathe with this experience, a kindly breath, a soft breath and allow the resistance to soften moment by moment.

And maybe you've got sensations in the body that have the flavor of expansiveness, release, or openness. Maybe there's a softness somewhere in the body, a release around the heart perhaps. Rest now, inside this expansiveness, inside this openness. Be careful not to grasp or cling. Simply rest, and see if you can get a sense of your mind, your heart, your consciousness. Be like a vast, blue sky, boundless and infinite. As you rest inside, flow, allow everything to expand open, soften, release. Maybe there's a quality of rest, of stillness perhaps.

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If you've got discomfort in the body, allow it to be there and see if it can be there at the same time as this radiant consciousness. Both can be there at the same time. There's not a conflict, it's just the way it is. Now, allow the weight and the shape of the body to come to the foreground of awareness. There's a sense of resting on the earth, breathing. When you're ready, you can open your eyes, bring this little meditation to a close.

I hope you got a sense there of how to have a expansive heart and expansive mind even when the body is hurting. It's not a case of getting rid of the pain, it's a case of living with it, changing our relationship to it, and resting in a much bigger perspective. I hope you can take this with you into your life, and that you can find these moments of peace and ease no matter what circumstances you find yourself in. Go well, and thank you very much.