

Vidyamala Burch  
Week Two, *Freeing the Mind When the Body Hurts*  
December 12, 2016  
“Letting Go of the Struggle”



Hi everyone, 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 all.

Let's just recap what we studied last week. I introduced the *Satipatthana Sutta*, which is one of the key texts in the Buddhist tradition, and discusses mindfulness. You might remember that I told you about the way a Buddhist scholar, Analayo, has summed the whole text up in four words. These four words are “keep calmly knowing change.” There's a quality of continual application of balanced effort, letting go of reactivity, a special kind of awareness where you're awake to your present moment experience but never forget your higher purpose or your higher goal, and then an insight into the truth of impermanence: that everything's changing all the time. This is a really gorgeous and wonderful summation of the Buddhist path.

This week I'm going to introduce another Buddhist text from the Pali Canon, which is the *Sallatha Sutta*, sometimes translated as “The Dart” or “The Arrow,” and this is a really fantastic sutta for looking at the relationship between physical pain and mental suffering, or mental freedom. The Buddha talks about physical pain quite explicitly in this sutta and he does it in an evocative way that I find very real. What he says is that if we have the sensations of physical pain—“if we are pierced by a dart or an arrow”—we've got this arrow of the arising of unpleasant sensations in the body. He says for the “uninstructed worldling” or the “ordinary run of the mill person,” i.e. the person who hasn't freed their mind and hasn't yet gained wisdom and compassion—so most of us—he says, “if we have that first arrow of physical pain, we know of no other response than to resist and resent that pain, and this is if we are pierced by a second arrow.” So, we've got the first arrow of physical pain, we resist it, we resent it, and that's a second arrow.

“Now we have the pain of two arrows,” the Buddha tells us. Now of course, if you only have two arrows you're doing well. That's a good day. For most of us we've got the first pain, we resist, resent, and it's as if we've got a whole volley of arrows coming towards us



and we're impaled by all of our reactive approaches or reactive responses based on resistance. You've got the pain and you think, "I don't want this," and then you have so much more pain.

What he says next is really interesting. He says, "the wise person," i.e. the person who has trained their mind and heart and freed it, "they too have the pain of the first arrow." If we've got a human body, we will have physical pain. Sometimes we can think or we can fantasize that if we get enlightenment, or we're a Buddha, we will be completely free of all suffering. No, the Buddha's not saying that. If you've got a body, you will always have some degree of physical suffering, but what he is saying is that we can free ourselves from reactive suffering. The texts says, the wise person has the pain of the first arrow, but they do not resent or resist that pain, and so they are not pierced by the second arrow and they only have the pain of one arrow.

That's quite beautiful isn't it? The wise person has physical discomfort, they have physical pain, but they do not automatically resist and resent. They accept it for what it is and they see into the impermanent and fluid nature of that experience and so they only have the pain of one arrow, as opposed to us poor run of the mill people. We're trying to go about our lives covered in arrows, and it's hard to live a normal life with all these arrows getting in the way. I think it's a brilliant metaphor because it can feel like that when we're really reacting to our pain, we're really resisting our pain. It can feel like you're tight and contracted and so stuck that it's hard to lead a normal life or to lead an even vaguely pleasant life. We can be completely crushed by the experience of difficulty.

What I take from this text as the core point—and I find this very true of my own experience and the people I've taught—is that it's not that experience of physical pain that's the problem, that's the cause of most of our suffering, but the resistance to the physical pain. That's the cause of most of our distress. I really do believe that. What I see from my own experience and the people I teach is that it's this pain of resistance that is



really ruining our lives and causing the majority of the emotional and mental distress that we feel. It's not the unpleasant sensations in the body. Yes, they're unpleasant. We don't like them. They're sometimes quite difficult to bear. But it's this feeling of, "I don't want this, go away, I can't stand it," that's *really* ruining our lives.

I find this a wonderful text. It's so simple and it's so complete. The language that I use around this is primary and secondary suffering. The first arrow is primary suffering, and then we resist, we resent, and then the second arrow is secondary suffering. Of course, most of us have the pain of both those sorts of suffering, and using Buddhism, mindfulness, kindness, wisdom, and compassion, we can learn to let go of the secondary suffering, to let it fade away, to let it dissolve away. We can learn to accept the pain of the primary suffering as it flows through moment by moment, never the same, always changing. We're just resting in that fluid nature of the basic unpleasant sensations in the body.

The other thing that is interesting is to look at how secondary suffering expresses itself in most of our lives. The thing I've seen clearly from my own experience and the people I've taught is that it seems to manifest as one of two broad poles. There's the pole of what I call blocking and the pole of what I call drowning. We have an unpleasant sensation. We resist. We don't want it. We resent it, and one behavior pattern is to go into denial, into pushing it away. This is the behavior pattern of running away. You can't sit still. You can't be with yourself. All sorts of addictions are blocking patterns. We're stuffing things in to try to avoid the pain: workaholism, alcoholism, smoking, all these kind of things. Being emotionally brittle is a form of blocking as well. If you've noticed your voice is getting higher and higher and higher, that's usually a sort of blocking, because you don't want to experience what's happening in the body. Many of us are very good at blocking.

The other pole we call drowning. This is the behavior of feeling overwhelmed. This is where you've got an unpleasant sensation in the body and that's all there is. You don't



have any sense of anything outside your pain. There's no ability to experience any pleasure in your life. You feel completely overwhelmed, completely defeated and you go into kind of a withdrawn way of being. Overwhelmed, drowning behavior tends to come with a loss of perspective, you see nothing but the pain. Blocking behavior is where you're just pushing it away again, and again, and again.

I've noticed that we tend to cycle between these two responses. It depends on your character which one you start with. I'm a blocker myself, so my pattern is that I have the pain in my body, the pain in my back, I'll resist it automatically, and then I'll get into kind of this restless, driven, striving, denying, brittle behavior. Of course that's very tiring. I keep running away from myself, and eventually I'll crash and go into a period of being overwhelmed, and I'll be completely and utterly exhausted, and there will be nothing else in my experience other than my physical pain. Then I'll crawl out from that, have a little moment of choice, little window of opportunity, and if I'm not careful then I'm back to blocking again. I'm just flipping between blocking and drowning. It might be very interesting for you to look at what you do in your own experience, and I would guess that you also block and drown at least some of the time.

To make this a little bit more encouraging, I'd like to share that I've been doing this practice for decades, and my pattern of blocking and drowning used to be quite extreme. I could block for months and then have a big crash. Now, my pattern of blocking and drowning is much more subtle and there are times when I'm really not doing either very strongly, when I'm present to my pain, to my life. Yes, the pain is there, but there's also sense of the wonder of my life, the love that I feel for other people, the beautiful colors and the autumn trees.

The practice is to calibrate. Notice when you're tipping into blocking, come back to your experience. Know that you're tipping into drowning and then broaden, notice other things. We're blocking, we come closer, and when we're drowning, we broaden. The



practice is to continually come back to arrive in the body, in the moment, in the breath, and to soften resistance. The home practice for this week is to really notice the arising of resistance in your experience around your discomfort. Notice your pain of course, but notice its quality of, "I don't want this. Go away," that kind of very understandable, very normal resistance to the difficult.

We're going to do an exercise now, and then we'll do a little meditation together. I would like you to make a fist with one hand. What's happened to your breathing? What you'll probably notice is that you're holding your breath. You've got the fist and then you've got breath holding. Now imagine that you're breathing into the fist. What does the fist want to do? You'll probably find that the fist wants to open. Yeah. This is a really nice little exercise for noticing the way when we're resisting, we're also breath-holding. You've got your discomfort, you've got resistance, and you've got breath-holding. By softening the breath-holding, what happens is we're dropping back into the present moment, we're dropping back into the body and we're coming closer and closer to the basic primary sensations in the body, free of all this reactive secondary suffering.

The practice this week when you're out and about in your life, is just to notice: are you holding your breath? When you're standing in the queue at the supermarket, are you holding your breath? When you're driving your car are you holding your breath? When you've got discomfort are you holding your breath? When you find you are, keep softening down into the body, softening the breath, coming into the body and resting into gravity again, and again, and again.

Let's conclude with another led practice, which will be very short, like last week, to give you something that you can take into your longer sitting practice if you want to. Let's begin by just resting down into the body again, taking a few deeper breaths if you want to, feeling the contact between the bottom and the chair, the floor, the bed, whatever you're resting upon, and allowing awareness to rest deep inside the body.

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Now be curious. Scan your body, and see if you notice any areas of resistance against painful sensations, unpleasant sensations. Maybe there's some part of the body that you notice you just don't want to go, and there's this layer of resistance around it. See if you can edge just a little bit closer. Use the breath to soften the resistance, this tender breath, this gentle breath. Soften on the in breath and on the out breath, respond to your own discomfort the way you would naturally respond to a loved one who was hurting, with this gentle, tender, soothing breath. Allow the whole body to be breathed, broadening our awareness a little bit. Rest inside the whole body. Rest inside the whole breath, allowing it to come and go, sensations to come and go, and resistance to soften again and again and again.

When you're ready we can bring this short practice to a close, open our eyes, leave the body if we want to.

Hopefully you got a taste there of what I'm encouraging, using this kind of very soft, tender breath to soften resistance, letting go of secondary suffering, the second arrows and coming back all the time to the basic sensations in the body as they arise and pass moment by moment, seeing their fluid nature, feeling their fluid nature, and hopefully getting a little more peace and ease through doing that. I look forward to seeing you next week. Thank you.