

# CHAPTER THREE

## *HOW TO DEAL WITH PAIN*

IN SITTING MEDITATION, after a while, pain and tingling sensations usually appear. These sensations include itching, feeling stuffy, tension and feelings of lightness or heaviness in some parts of the body. All these sensations are considered as meditation objects (*vedana*). The Burmese and Thai word *Vedana* is derived from the Pali word *Vedana*, which means all the different types of sensations, both good and bad, as well as neutral one. However, the Burmese word *wedana* and the Thai word *wethana* does not apply to all kinds of sensation. Instead, it means only the bad feelings or pain, tingling and numbness. Sometimes it also means mental anguish. So, it is important we understand the original definition of *vedana* as in the sutta. Today, we shall discuss how we should deal with them.

### **VEDANA**

Pain is a kind of *vedana*, feeling or sensation. However, there are different types of feeling; pleasant, unpleasant and neutral. Pain means unpleasant feeling. Feeling, *vedana*, exists as a part of a process in the non-stop function of psychophysical phenomena. It can arise from contact through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind provided that there is a corresponding sense object present. In plain terms, you feel in six ways, through seeing, hearing, smelling,

tasting, touching and thinking. *Vedana*, whether pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, is an experience that makes you aware of something. Psychologically speaking, it is a part of a cognitive process. It is more than a mere sensory state.

We do not start meditating on pleasant or neutral feeling, as in most cases they are not as clear as pain. We do not begin with a lesser known object. Compared with pain, a pleasant feeling is less known and a neutral one is the least perceived by a beginner. That is why we talk about the pain that we confront in almost every meditation session. The way to deal with tension, numbness and other unpleasant feelings, even neutral sensations will be covered under this topic.

Pain has a very important message to tell us when it arises. If we received and realized the intended message for what it is, we can become wise. Otherwise, we tend to become impatient and try to reject it outright. We do not have sufficient courage to observe it, and even less to investigate its nature.

## **PERSONALIZING PAIN**

Whether physical or mental, pain always has a cause. Everything which happens is part of a process. When we sit, pain may develop in the legs, back, shoulders and neck. When it develops, we normally identify the pain with ourselves. Out of habit, we start thinking or rather judging ourselves: we say "*I am in pain*" rather than "*there is pain*". Because we have been conditioned to react in this way, we consider this view perfectly normal and justifiable. The first description "*I am in pain*" is subjective and is an outcome of a defiled and distorted

view. The second expression "*there is pain*" reflects more objectivity. It is much more accurate to say that "*there is pain*". There is no self, with which to identify the pain. In the expressions such as "*I am in pain, my ear is painful, my shoulder is aching*" we are already personalising the pain.

Last November, there was a conference on "*How to Deal with Pain*" held at the North London Hospice. I was invited to present a short paper. In this, I stated that pain increases when we identify the pain with ourselves. People there could not understand this view. Someone said that pain was a personal experience. "*When I feel pain*", they said "*you do not feel it. It is personal.*" From an experiential point of view, it is personal. I have a gastric problem and I feel pain. You do not. It is personal to me in that sense.

However, pain is common to all beings. It is hardly proper to personalise it. In the same way, human rights belong to all and we cannot identify them as belonging to one particular person or group. Looking at life as a whole, is there any self to be identified with? Identity is something created in the mind through perception. It is the way we perceive ourselves and things around us. Such perception itself changes and is, therefore, contradictory to the notion of a *permanent* self. The *non-self* tendency has to be explored and realised to detach ourselves from the pain.

## **THE FIVE AGGREGATES**

The Buddha analysed life into two phenomena, physical and mental. Just these two; the physical state which has no ability to feel or experience, and the mental state which does.

When you analyse yourself from top to toe, these are the only two states that exist. This may be further subdivided into the five aggregates with mental phenomena split into four namely feeling, perception, consciousness and other mental associates (about fifty of them). The person identified conventionally as Dr. Leo Kyaw Thinn still has the same five attributes as the person known as Venerable Khammai Dhammasami. This similarity will become clearer when we discuss the meditation technique on the impersonality of the body tomorrow.

What this means is that a feeling arises from causes and when the causes disappear the feeling vanishes. Pain arises because we sit for a long time, or stand for a long time, or because the circulation is impaired. There is a cause or rather causes. The existence of physical and mental phenomena leads to the existence of pain. It comes as a package. That is why we say *khandha*, which means an aggregate indicating things work in a group. From this package, you may wish to leave out the pain; you may want to pick and choose, wishing to have only pleasant feelings. **This is against.**

There are different types of pain caused by various reasons such as excessive work, mental pressure, injury and even kamma. The Buddha said in the Udana Pali that going through pain mindfully with the help of insight meditation burns away some bad kamma.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF SELF AND EGO**

We create "*Self*" out of these five aggregates. We create illusion out of reality. A feeling is just a feeling, it is not "*I*" nor is it *mine*, just like Venerable Dhammasami is only a name,

which has been given by convention. When I was a young boy, I was known as Sai Kham Mai. Now that name has disappeared. If I am given a new name, then my present name Venerable Dhammasami will disappear. If these exist in reality why should they disappear? As this identification of Venerable Dhammasami develops, so does the development of the ego — I, me and my. We create "*self*", an identity out of the five aggregates. What exists is the five aggregates and what does not exist is "*I*". This "*I*" is just a name given by convention to the five aggregates.

Unfortunately, we have been conditioned by these conventions. That is why whenever a pain arises, instead of just accepting the feeling as pain, we identify it with ourselves. This is how the pain multiplies out of ego. When we feel an itch on our face, our spontaneous response is irritation. This irritation makes you restless

If we train our minds using Vipassana meditation, we can learn to observe the itch as just a feeling of itchiness, not personalising it "*I am itching or I am feeling itchy.*" Once we become trained in this way, the itch becomes tolerable; the pain also becomes tolerable. When we have been practising meditation for some time, the pain may spontaneously diminish. Or if it persists, and we accept it as it is, rather than personalise it, the pain does not get worse — it remains as it is. We do not multiply the pain.

## **PROLONGING PAIN**

In Pali, making a thing increase is called *papanca*, which literally means prolonging suffering. When you see these five realities of aggregates or phenomena, as "*self*" (*ditthi* — wrong

view), you become attached to it (*tanha* — attachment). This wrong attitude and attachment are the factors that prolong *suffering*, which is in this case *pain*.

In modern psychology, the term "*narcissism*" would be equivalent to the Buddhist term of *papanca* (*prapanca* in Sanskrit), prolonging factors namely attachment (*tanha*), pride (*mana*) and wrong attitude (*ditthi*). They are the focus of the Second Sermon of the Buddha. In the presence of these three prolonging factors, instead of seeing these five aggregates objectively as they are without creating the "*self*", the five aggregates come to be seen as an identity. A *wrong perception* is developed. This is a wrong approach towards a problem such as dealing with pain in life.

Take the hair on your head; when it is on your head you love it, you take care of it. As soon as it is cut and falls on the floor, you do not identify it as your hair anymore. You do not care now what happens to it. Within seconds your perception changes. Hair is an object. The nature of the hair has not changed. What has changed is your perception of what you have described as your hair. So wrong perception is one of the factors that enlarge the pain we experience.

In the Buddha and the arahants, the pain they experience is regarded as merely an object, looked at objectively. Therefore, although there is physical pain, there is no mental pain attached to it. Mental pain is something we create after physical pain has arisen. No wonder the pain is so great. On top of the physical pain, we add mental pain, we double or triple the pain. When we accidentally trip and hurt our feet, we say "*Oh, my poor foot hurts.*" Instead of paying

attention to the pain, we pay attention to the foot. Consequently, the pain increases immediately. You get a bonus, just like buying one and getting one free, sometimes even more.

That is why it is very important to have the right attitude. When meditating, we should just acknowledge pain as pain. Just say "*pain, pain, and pain*" — not "*I am in pain*". To use "*I am in pain*" is to satisfy our falsely created identity. Pain is being dealt with in the wrong way.

Attachment to the false identity of "*self*" is *tanha*. It also expands and increases the pain. As soon as we identify ourselves as "*I*", we develop pride (*mana*). You are proud of the identity that you have falsely created. You are really hurt by whatever has been said of you. You think it hurts your pride, a pride born out of wrong perception. You fail to see any objectivity in what is said of you. *Tanha* and *mana* damage the reasoning power as well. They help prolong every kind of suffering.

When we meditate, we try to see an object as an object. Of course, this will not happen straightaway as we do meditation. We will still see it as we have been conditioned to. However, we try to see things as they are. We see sorrow as sorrow, repulsion as repulsion, irritation as irritation, an itch as an itch, hair as hair. Just as, the hair on your head is perceived differently from when it is cut and has fallen on the ground or thrown into the dust-bin, this perception is subjective and manipulative, and not objective. We make an effort to get rid of such perceptions that fool us all the time.

To get rid of it we have to first see the false perception as it is. To see things as they are is the ultimate aim of meditation.

## **RIGHT ATTITUDE TOWARDS PAIN**

Pain is common to everybody. It does not recognise colour, nationality, gender, social status or academic status. It spares no one. Pain exists in reality. It does not change its nature of being impermanent. It is suffering. That is what the Buddha said. That is the truth of suffering. Pain is part of life. With the help of Vipassana meditation, what we have to do is *not* to run away from pain but to face it; not to ignore it but to register and accept it.

Life is never far away from pain. We start life with pain. As soon as we are released from our mother's womb, we cry because the hands of the nurse are painful to the touch of a new born baby. The nurse tries his or her best to be as gentle as possible but that is never enough for a child who is encountering the outside world for the first time. Nevertheless, the mother is happy listening to the cries for the first time. There is not much anyone can do except to let the child adjust himself or herself to the situation. He or she has to grow old physically to live with it. As he or she grows older a few hours later, he or she becomes harmonious with pain and does not cry for the same reason any more. We have to grow older now in wisdom to face a greater pain, even a mental one.

We have to find a way to be in harmony with some kind of pain, a way to accept it and learn from it. This does not mean that we have to live with every kind of pain. It is perfectly all right to use painkiller to suppress unusual pain.

Nevertheless, the kind of pain that is very much a feature of daily life has to be tolerated, watched and learnt from.

A moment with pain can make you one of the wisest persons on earth if there is sufficient patience and mindfulness to learn directly from it. Whether you meditate or not, if you sit for more than one hour, you will experience some form of pain. Our body is capable of producing pain, and, potentially, it can remain that way all the time. It is so important *not* to regard pain as a distraction but as meditation object. Vipassana meditation is an all-inclusive technique that leaves nothing, including pain, out as its object.

## **DEVELOPING PATIENCE THROUGH PAIN**

Dealing with pain will help develop patience, another vital quality of mind. Within a set duration of meditation, make up your mind to face and learn from pain. Do not try to change your posture frequently as it would remove an excellent opportunity of learning something from pain. The greatest Pali commentator Venerable Buddhaghosa in his famous work called *Visuddhimagga, the Path of Purification*, said that pain is covered up by a change of postures. Be determined to learn all of the reactions to the pain, such as repulsion, impatience, frustration, anger, restlessness, disappointment and confusion. Only by dealing with impatience and understanding of it can we develop patience. Patience and impatience are the two mental states that exclude each other. Mindfulness of impatience leads to knowledge of impatience. With this knowledge we can uproot it. Impatience is not something you can throw into the dust

bin when you do not like it. It has to be recognised and understood before it can be effectively removed.

Intense pain at one of the process stages indicates that contemplation is making remarkable progress. Sharp pain as if piercing parts of the body with a knife could be experienced. As one stops contemplating, such sensations may disappear, and reappear as one resumes. At this time it is especially advisable to practice under close guidance of a teacher so that each development is discussed and clearly understood. Such sensations are normally present in the body but are obscured when contemplation is not highly developed to observe it. Never be discouraged in the face of such unpleasant feelings. Just proceed with courage and determination until you overcome them.

Once these gross reactions are overcome with continued development of mindfulness, lesser known sensations such as a delightful sensation (*piti*), a gratifying feeling (*sukha*) and a neutral feeling (*upekkha*) will come. They are experienced only at the point when the mind is largely free from sensory contact (*samisa*). Some would say at this stage that they have overcome pain (*vedana*). Gross pain may not be present but some kind of sensation is always there. One looks dignified because pain is no longer agonizing. One can now sit for a very long time without experiencing pain. Such pleasant feelings, too, must be kept under the close watch of mindfulness in order to understand their true nature.

## YET TO UNDERSTAND IT

All sensations, pleasant, unpleasant and neutral have to be treated equally without any judgement. Being non-judgmental is one of the fundamentals of Vipassana meditation. Understandably, we would like to experience a pleasant sensation or at least a neutral one, not an unpleasant one. This habitual expectation blocks the mind from watching and investigating unpleasant sensations like pain and tension. This is how the mind is conditioned to be judgmental and rigid, not free and flexible.

We have not understood the sensations until we treat all of them in the same way and regard all of them through our instinctively just as another object. The understanding of sensation has to come from *directly knowing* the way in which it arises. If we do not, we have not grasped the true nature of sensation, we are not able to sustain the delightful feeling. We also have been unable to prevent the unpleasant feeling from occurring again. This is, simply, because we have not mastered sensation. For that, there is a need to register sensation through bare attention, just as scientists collect data to understand a substance, without any pre-conclusion whatsoever as to the outcome.

We may know from scriptures that sensations are impermanent. However, we must not go into dealing with pain arising at the present moment by influencing our mind in this way. We must not pre-empt the outcome before we see it. Any pre-conceived notion, even if it is true, can prevent one from seeing the whole picture; it does not help the mind to become flexible.

## **PAIN IN THE FIRST NOBLE TRUTH**

*"Bhikkhus, the truth of suffering, in this case pain, has to be fully recognised, accepted and comprehended. Such teachings are unheard of before. By seeing, recognizing, fully accepting and comprehending it, eyes arose, insight arose, wisdom arose, knowledge arose and the light arose."* This is an utterance by the Buddha in the First Sermon.

He fully accepted pain as it is and became sure that it is an ultimate truth with no creator behind it. It works the way it does, and without any one enforcing it upon us. It is the *anatta* teaching. One cannot command pain not to be pain. Pain is pain, and nothing else. The nature of pain is torturous, agonizing and uncomfortable. It is suffering. The Buddha saw it as it was. He no longer reacted to it when facing it.

Our experience of life, in this case *pain*, is taught in Buddhism as the first noble truth. We cannot escape from this truth. It is impossible to walk away from it. The way to get away from it is to be mindful of it, recognise it and comprehend it. Once we understand it and can accept it, the pain seems to become less. We are able to cope better with it. At this stage, the pain has become one of many favourable meditation objects. Strong pain will sustain bare attention, yet it becomes no longer unbearable. The Buddhist way of dealing with pain is not to run away from it but to face it. Of course, physically, if you are in pain, the Buddha was not against taking a painkiller as has been said earlier. What the Buddha was trying to do is to help you prevent the creation of more pain out of the pain that you already experience.

## DEALING WITH PAIN DURING MEDITATION

Now let us discuss how to deal with pain that arises while meditating.

In dealing with pain, there have to be primarily, at least *two meditation objects*. If you have only one (perhaps pain), the pain can easily overpower your mind, and as a result, you may become an agitated person, a frustrated person etc. In order to watch pain with a stable mind, you need two objects. Breathing in and out has been chosen as your *primary object*. When pain arises, (also in the case of numbness, or itchiness, or tension), you should observe that pain, about three or four times and then leave it there. Go back preferably to the primary object, *breathing in and out*.

The pain may get less during this period or it may increase. If it increases, you go back to the pain and observe it again — *pain, pain, pain* — three or four times, leave it there and come back to the breathing again. To be able to watch the pain objectively like this, like watching a film, is fantastic. How nice! I do not need to tell you how great or how happy you should feel when you are not in pain. But just imagine how great it is to be able to stand the pain, work through it, maintain your stability, calm, peace and reason, at the time the pain arises. How great it would be to just watch the pain in that way!

If the pain continues to increase, you have to go there for the third time, and this time you stay longer with the pain.

Do not come back immediately; stay with the pain and watch the pain, focusing your attention on the particular spot where the pain is. Then the pain may decrease or increase, as you are not in control of it. If it decreases, just come back to your primary object. In case it increases, stay with it, observe it with some effort. You may change your posture to relieve yourself from the pain, when it has become unbearable. Make sure that you move only when it is unbearable, and not out of rejection of the pain.

If we can command the pain to stop or increase, then the doctrine of *anatta* (non-self) must be wrong. In the second sermon, the Buddha said, "*You cannot change the nature of pain. You cannot change the nature of happiness or unhappiness.*" These are natural and they only operate according to their own nature, and not according to someone's wishes. This is called *anatta*. So, try to work on the pain and look at the pain. The nature of the pain is just like the nature of any other object. When we look into the pain, it gives us insight and understanding. Regard pain as a meditation object. Be determined to watch and investigate it.

## **DISCUSSION SESSION**

Q: At what stage do you start acting if the pain becomes unbearable during meditation?

A: If after the third cycle of observing the pain and returning to breathing, the pain increases and becomes unbearable, then you may change your posture. But before you do so you have to note your intention to change by observing; *intention, intention, intention* and then change your posture slowly observing the changes at every stage; *moving,*

*moving, moving, lifting, lifting, lifting, placing, placing, placing, touching, touching, touching, etc.* If there is a feeling of relief, please note that as well. Then slowly, return to your breathing. Outside meditation, you can observe pain by giving it awareness once without personalising it or identifying the pain with yourself. Then you can try any necessary measure to relieve the pain.

Q: Can two thoughts exist at one time?

A: When your concentration (*samadhi*) is still weak, you may feel as though two or more thoughts or feelings exist at once. But, that is not true.

Q: Is this because if our concentration (*samadhi*) is strong, our mind will be totally engrossed on one object only?

A: In meditation, there are three stages — a learning, a controlling and a liberating stage. First, we have to learn what it is like to go through pain and learn how to accept it. You learn how to be receptive rather than rejecting. Then, when you become receptive to the pain, you can start to control it. Now, what you have just said is about controlling. You switch your mind on to something else.

When the abbot of the Dhammayatana Monastery from Taunggyi, Shan State, the Union of Burma required a hernia operation, he refused to have anaesthesia. The surgeons did not dare operate on him without anaesthesia. They asked the Director General of Health Department in Rangoon what to do. He knew the abbot. He told the surgeons that if the patient signed a statement refusing anaesthesia, they should go ahead with the operation. It is on record in Sao Sam Toon Hospital, Taunggyi, Shan State that the Dhammaratana abbot

underwent the operation without an anaesthetic. It is possible to control the pain with another object. Some people control it with music. In Vipassana, it is preferred that pain is looked at, even if the mind is to be engrossed in it as only one meditation object. To use concentration power and to avert your mind from pain would bring you a lot of relief but that does not bring an understanding of pain. Vipassana meditation makes use of pain as an instrument to achieve liberation from suffering.

Remember from the time we are born to the time we die, pain is going to be there. The question is "*when will it appear*" and "*whether we will be able to control it*". Pain is part and parcel of our life.

Some meditators have a wrong perception. They try to meditate on the pain in order to do away with it. The assumption that meditation will necessarily get rid of pain is quite wrong. The aim or intention of meditation is not to get rid of pain. The pain is the Dhamma. It is inviting you to come and see it for yourself what it is like. Come and see (*ehi-passiko*) is the nature of the Dhamma.

Q: Should we seek the truth of suffering, *dukkha sacca* while meditating?

A: What we are trying to do is to understand this truth. There is no need to seek it. All the meditation objects belong to the truth of suffering. What is needed here to see it. It is already there. As I have explained before, in terms of practice, mindfulness (*sati*) and clear comprehension (*sampajanna*) are the aims. Being mindful of pain leads to its comprehension. More than that, to be aware of its causes leads to cessation of pain. So, you start understanding more about the pain. You

will understand it as *dukkha sacca*, the truth of suffering. What we are doing is watching the pain and accepting it without any judgement or speculation. We register, watch, observe and later investigate it. We do not philosophise as to what the pain is but rather directly experience it to bring about direct knowing of pain.