

Dealing with Problems
Chapter 10
Mindfulness in Plain English

You are going to run into problems in your meditation. Problems come in all shapes and sizes.....The main trick in dealing with obstacles is to adopt the right attitude. Difficulties are an integral part of your practice.

The reason we are all stuck in life's mud is that we ceaselessly run from our problems and after our desires. Meditation provides us with a laboratory situation in which we can examine this syndrome and devise strategies for dealing with it.

So don't be surprised when you hit some experience that feels like a brick wall. They come up again and again. Just expect them and be ready to cope. Your ability to cope with trouble depends upon your attitude. If you can learn to regard these hassles as opportunities...you'll make progress.

One popular human strategy for dealing with difficulty is auto-suggestion: when something nasty pops up, you convince yourself it's not there, or you convince yourself it is peasant rather than unpleasant. The Buddha's tactic is quite the reverse. Rather than hide it or disguise it, the Buddha's teaching urges you to examine it....Look it square in the eye without flinching. The way out of a trap is to study the trap itself....You do this by taking the thing apart piece by piece. The result is freedom.

This point is essential. Those who have studied Buddhism superficially are quick to conclude that it is pessimistic, always harping on unpleasant things like suffering....Buddhist thinkers do not regard themselves as pessimists-quite the opposite, actually. Pain exists in the universe; some measure of it is unavoidable. Learning to deal with it is not pessimism, but a very pragmatic form of optimism. How would you deal with the death of your spouse? How would you feel if you lost your mother tomorrow? Or your sister or your closest friend? Suppose you lost your job, your savings?... and how will you deal with your own death when that approaches?

Pain is inevitable, suffering is not. Pain and suffering are two different animals. If any of these tragedies strike you in your present state of mind, you will suffer. The habit patterns that presently control your mind will lock you into that suffering...A bit of time spent in learning alternatives to those habit patterns is time well invested. Most human beings spend all their energies devising ways to increase their pleasure and decrease their pain. Buddhism does not advise you to cease this activity altogether. Pain should be avoided whenever possible. When you see a truck bearing down on you, by all means jump out of the way. But spend some time in meditation, too. Learning to deal with discomfort is the only way you'll be ready to handle the truck you didn't see. Learning to deal with discomfort is the only way you'll be ready...

Problems will arise in your practice. Some of them will be physical, some will be emotional, and some will be attitudinal. All of them can be confronted and each as its own specific response. All of them are opportunities to free yourself.

Problem 1: Physical Pain

Nobody likes pain, yet everybody has some at one time or another.

Handling pain is a two-stage process. First, get rid of the pain, if possible, or at least get rid of it as much as possible. Then if some pain lingers, use it as an object of meditation. The first step is physical handling. Maybe the pain is an illness of one sort or another, a headache, fever,

brises....In this case, employ standard medical treatmentstake your medicine, apply your liniment, do whatever you ordinarily would do.

Then there are certain pains that are specific to the seated posture. According to where the pain is, there are specific remedies. If the pain is in your leg or knees, check your pants. If they are tight or made of thick materialtry to change it. Check your cushion too. If the pain is around your waist, try loosening your belt. Loosens the waistband of your pants if that is necessary. If you experience pain in the lower back, your posture is probably at fault... Slouching will never be comfortable, so straighten up. Pain in the neck or upper back has several sources. The first is improper hand position. Your hands should be resting comfortably in your lap. Don't pull them up to your waist. Relax your arms and your neck muscles. Don't let your head droop forward.

After you have made all these various adjustments, you may find you still have some lingering pain. Make the pain your object of meditation. Don't jump up and don't get excited. Just observe the pain mindfully. When the pain becomes demanding, you will find it pulling your attention off the breath. Don't fight back. Just let your attention slide easily over onto the simple sensation. Go into the pain fully. Don't block the experience. Explore the feeling. Get beyond your avoiding reaction and go into the pure sensations that lie below that.

You will discover that there are two things present. The first is the simple sensation-pain itself. Second is your resistance to that sensation. Resistance reaction is partly mental and partly physical. The physical part consists of tensing the muscles in and around the painful area. Relax those muscles. Take them one by one and relax each one very thoroughly. This step alone will probably diminish the pain significantly. Then go after the mental side of the resistance. Just as you are tensing physically, you are also tensing psychologically. You are clamping down mentally on the sensation of pain, trying to screen it off and reject it from consciousness. The rejection is a wordless "I don't like this feeling" or "go away" attitude. It is very subtle, but it is there, and you can find it if you really look. Locate it and relax that too.

The last part is more subtle. There are really no human words to describe this action precisely. The best way to get a handle on it is by analogy. Examine what you did to those tense muscles and transfer that same action over to the mental sphere; relax the mind in the same way that you relax the body. Buddhism recognizes that body and mind are tightly linked. This is so true that many people will not see this as a two-step procedure. For them to relax the body is to relax the mind and vice versa. These people will experience the entire relaxation, mental and physical, as a single process. In any case, just let go completely until the awareness slows down past that barrier of resistance and relaxes into the flowing sensation beneath. The resistance was a barrier that you yourself erected. It was a gap, a sense of distance between self and others. It was a borderline between "me" and "the pain." Dissolve that barrier, and separation vanishes. You slow down into that sea of surging sensation, and you merge with the pain. You become the pain. You watch its ebb and flow and something surprising happens. It no longer hurts. Suffering is gone. Only the pain remains, an experience, nothing more. The "Me" who was being hurt has gone. The result is freedom from pain.

This is an incremental process. In the beginning you can expect to succeed with small pains and be defeated by big ones. Like most of our skills, it grows with practice. Please understand: There is no masochism being advocated here. Self-mortification is not the point. This is an exercise in awareness, not in self-torture. If the pain becomes excruciating, go-ahead and move,

but move slowly and mindfully. observe your movements. See how it feels to move. Watch what it does to the pain. Watch the pain diminish. Try not to move too much....The less you move, the easier it is to remain fully mindful. New meditators sometimes say that they have trouble remaining mindful when pain is present. The difficulty stems from a misunderstanding. These students are conceiving mindfulness as something distinct from the experience of pain. It is not. Mindfulness never exists by itself. It always has some object, and one object is as good as another. Pain is a mental state. You can be mindful of pain just as you are mindful of breathing.

You must be careful not to reach behind the sensation and not to fall short of it. Don't add anything to it, and don't miss any part of it. Don't muddy the pure experience with concepts, or pictures or discursive thinking. And keep your awareness right in the present time, right with the pain, so that you won't miss it's beginning or its end. Pain not viewed in the clear light of mindfulness give rise to emotional reactions like fear, anxiety, or anger. If it is properly viewed, we have no such reaction. It will be just sensation, just simple energy. Once you have learned this technique with physical pain, you can then generalize it to the rest of your life. You can use it on any unpleasant sensation. What works on pain will work on anxiety or chronic depression as well. This technique is one of life's most useful and applicable skills. It is patience.

Problem 2: Legs Going to Sleep

It is very common for beginners to have their legs fall asleep or go numb during meditation. They are simply not accustomed to the cross-legged posture. Some people get very anxious about this. They feel they must get up and move around. A few are completely convinced that they will get gangrene from lack of circulation. Numbness in the legs is nothing to worry about. When your legs fall asleep in meditation, just mindfully observe the phenomenon. Examine what it feels like.

Problem 3: Odd Sensations

People experience all manner of varied phenomena in meditation. Some people get itches. Others feel tingling, deep relaxation, a feeling of numbness, or a floating sensation. You may feel yourself growing or shrinking or rising up in the air. Beginners often get quite excited over such sensations. Don't worry, you are not likely to levitate anytime soon. As relaxation sets in, the nervous system simply begins to pass sensory signals more efficiently. Large amounts of previously blocked sensory data can pour through, giving rise to all kinds of unique sensations. It does not signify anything particular. It is just sensation. Watch it come and watch it go.

Problem 4: Drowsiness

It is quite common to experience drowsiness during meditation. You become very calm and relaxed. That is exactly what is supposed to happen. Unfortunately, we ordinarily experience this lovely state only when we are falling asleep, and we associate it with that process. So naturally, you begin to drift off. When you find this happening, apply mindfulness to the state itself. Drowsiness has certain definite characteristics. It does certain things to your thought process. Find out what. It has certain bodily feelings associated with it. Locate those.

This inquisitive awareness is the direct opposite of drowsiness, and will evaporate it if it does not, the you should suspect a physical cause of your sleepiness. Search that out and handle it.