



1.12. Dealing with Pain and Unpleasant Sensations

Let us now explore how to deal effectively with pain and all unpleasant sensations that may arise during meditation.

There are a few important distinctions to make.

Avoidable and unavoidable pain

The first distinction we should make is whether the unpleasant experience is avoidable or unavoidable.

Pain and discomfort from sitting posture

This applies especially to physical pain resulting from the sitting posture. Our goal should be to find a posture that suits us personally and allows us to sit for longer periods without pain.

Anyone who sits motionless on the floor will, after about 30 minutes, encounter some discomfort. If you still feel that this posture supports you best, then a certain level of pain may be considered unavoidable.

In my case, I used to sit for 90 minutes daily in a half-lotus posture - despite having torn menisci. While the pain was tolerable during meditation, it was damaging to my health in the long run.

At the latest, when your body starts to suffer damage, it's time to find a new sitting posture.

However, it is normal at the beginning for the body to first have to get used to a new sitting posture. It's about finding the right body tension and letting go of unnecessary muscle tension. This adaptation process can take weeks to months and initially also cause unpleasant sensations, which disappear later.

Ultimately, you have to decide for yourself what you classify as avoidable or unavoidable.

Unpleasant states as a mirror of life

During meditation, we also encounter unpleasant states, emotions, energies, and bodily sensations. Sometimes these are an indication that something in our life is not in balance - we should then look for ways to balance it.

If we're constantly struggling with fatigue or sleepiness, it may be wise to get more sleep. If we find it hard to sit still because we've spent the whole day at a desk, perhaps our body needs more movement.

Much of what we experience in meditation, however, remains unavoidable.

Mental states and spiritual solutions

During the renovation of our house, I was always tired in the evenings when meditating. The only alternatives would have been to stop the renovation or skip evening meditation. So I decided to continue meditating despite the fatigue - sometimes struggling more, sometimes less. At times, the meditation consisted mainly of not falling asleep.

One evening it was particularly difficult. I did a walking meditation with my mantra.

Suddenly, I felt very intensely an energy flowing up through my legs - and I was instantly wide awake.

Experiences like this show that behind even seemingly natural fatigue, spiritual forces may be at work - both positive and negative.

Ascetic aspect

Fighting fatigue is probably more of an ascetic practice than a prayerful one. You could just as well fast or do something similar. Ascetic practices can support spiritual progress.

How much asceticism you employ is entirely up to you.

Fatigue as a spiritual challenge

It is important to keep in mind that there is also spiritually induced fatigue. This cannot be resolved by any amount of sleep.

The Buddha counted fatigue among the five main mental hindrances on the path to enlightenment. Sun Myung Moon often emphasized that overcoming the desires for food, sleep, and sex is one of the core spiritual battles.

If you're actually well rested but still constantly fighting sleep during meditation, you should approach this mindfully - and not give up too quickly.

Over time, you develop a sense for it.

The spiritual challenges we face can vary greatly from person to person.

Discomfort as a forerunner of grace

I have often experienced strong discomfort at the beginning of meditation. My whole body feels tense, almost painful.

I just want to get up and stop.

But I know these states well and have learned that they almost always dissolve during the meditation.

By the end, I usually feel physically and mentally at ease.

This discomfort often disappears shortly before a breakthrough in prayer.

By "breakthrough," I mean, for example, that something opens up inside and suddenly a

light, bright, loving atmosphere surrounds me.

Such phenomena clearly indicate that these are spiritual-energetic processes.

Emotional reparation

I experience something similar when facing emotional challenges. When I feel emotionally unwell - restless, anxious, or burdened by negative feelings - these states often dissolve during meditation or at least become noticeably lighter.

Such states often relate to external life events. There are days when nothing seems to work - and sometimes whole phases where things just don't go well.

Ideally, we should accept such times with calm.

This is where the interplay between our inner state and meditation becomes particularly clear: when, after such a phase, prayer becomes deep and pleasant again, life on the outside often begins to flow once more.

I see these phases as a natural part of both life and the spiritual path.

One might say that we're "paying" some form of reparation - and grace arrives in due time.

Before almost every profound experience of grace I've had, there was usually an uncomfortable phase that preceded it. In a way, one can even be glad when things become difficult inside - because that may be a sign that grace is near.

You need to gain your own experiences and observe these phenomena mindfully.

Gaining insights through experiments

It can be very insightful to experiment with certain behaviors for a while. We can intentionally respond to a phenomenon in a specific way and directly observe the results.

When nothing seems to be going right, for example, we can consciously let go and release our plans for the day. Even if it's difficult, we shift our inner struggle toward letting go, rather than fighting to reach a goal.

Through this mindful approach to specific situations, we gain valuable life experience.

It's about becoming more aware of the spiritual dynamics at work in life.

When we clearly understand what certain states can mean, we learn to deal with them more calmly and successfully.

What else can we do, besides just persisting?

If we have already gathered some experience and are confronted with an unpleasant phenomenon, we can initially continue to meditate mindfully. Much resolves just by staying present and enduring for a while.

Recognizing aversion - and finding liberation

One central challenge we encounter, especially at the beginning of the contemplative path, is our aversion to discomfort.

As soon as something becomes unpleasant, we want to get rid of it.

With physical sensations, we feel the urge to move or stop altogether. With mental states, we start thinking or drifting off. We avoid truly feeling the discomfort by stepping away from mindfulness.

But this only makes things worse.

The suffering we feel is intensified by our resistance to the unpleasant.

As already mentioned, this aversion is one of the major mental hindrances in the Buddha's teachings. We can consciously do the opposite of what our conditioning tells us - namely, to stay present.

Fully surrendering to the moment

When we consciously and wholeheartedly throw ourselves into the present moment, we quickly find our way back to mindfulness. One possible inner attitude might be:

"I want to feel this discomfort fully and intensely now."

When we succeed in doing this, the unpleasant feeling often transforms - either becoming neutral or at least bearable.

Here we experience the Buddha's teaching directly in our own body.

Another method we can use in such moments is to label the sensation using **Mental Noting**.

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