

A Pain-Processing Algorithm

Ultimate Goals

In order to work meditatively with pain, it is absolutely essential to be clear about two things: the ultimate goal of such work and the specific sensory categories involved.

The goal is twofold:

Reducing the perception of suffering due to pain.

Discovering the “taste of purification” within pain.

This goal can be achieved by bringing a critical mass of clarity and equanimity to pain and pain-related phenomena.

Clarity initially involves keeping track of sensory categories. At a deeper level, clarity becomes a kind of intense and continuous self-knowing, a knowing that seeps *into* and *through* the crevices of each sensory strand, dissolving its somethingness...a knowing in the Biblical sense.

Equanimity means maintaining an attitude of gentle matter-of-factness. Equanimity sounds like a “mental thing,” but at the deepest level it becomes a habit of the body itself. Equanimity is to the flow of sensation in the body as conductance is to the flow of electricity in a wire. Thus the inverse of equanimity might be described as resistance—somatic ohms.

Very roughly speaking:

Suffering = Pain × Resistance

Taste of Purification = Pain × Equanimity

Sensory Categories

In terms of sensory categories, the experience of pain can be looked upon as three concentric spheres. At the core is an area (or areas) of primary physical intensity. Surrounding that may be a spread of subtle physical discomfort, filling some, much, or all of the body or even going beyond the boundaries of the body. The outermost layer consists of a person’s subjective reactions to the pain—the second-by-second pattern of internal talk, mental images and emotional sensations that are triggered by the pain.

Thus in the broadest sense, the experience of pain potentially involves three very distinct classes of *body sensation*:

Local intensity
Global spread
Emotional flavors (such as anger, fear, sadness, agitation)

along with *thought* in the form of:

Mental images
Internal talk

The Algorithmic Approach

When meditating with pain I have found the algorithmic approach to be most effective. “Algorithm” is computer jargon for a systematic procedure that solves a problem efficiently by looping and branching in response to what unfolds.

In daily life, nature is constantly presenting us with doorways to transcendence. The trick is to know how to spot the doors and what to do in order to walk through them. The meditation procedure appearing below is designed to achieve just that with regard to the phenomenon of physical discomfort as it unfolds in real time. It shows you how to infuse clarity and equanimity into each “layer” of the pain experience—working from the outside in. Furthermore, it gives you something effective to do regardless of what direction the pain experience may take.

Unfortunately there is only room in this article to present only the barest outline of the actual process. If you wish to use it, either for yourself or in guiding others, you will probably need further details and clarification. Some of that can be found in my book, *Break Through Pain*.

Overview of the Algorithm

During Step One you observe your subjective reactions to the pain by distinguishing, second-by-second, whether the pain triggers an emotional body sensation, a mental image, an internal comment, or some combination of these. There are several reasons why I like to start off by developing a sensitivity to these Feel-Image-Talk reactions. For one thing, it is not uncommon for a person in pain to “lose it,” become hopeless, and decide to give up. This usually comes about as the result of a sudden eruption of “Feel-Image-Talk.” If a person can detect this as soon as it arises, they are much less likely to be swept away into abject hopelessness.

Step Two sensitizes you to how the primary pain may spread subtle influence through the body. Subtle is significant! Such spreading is typically subject to enormous resistance. Since suffering = Pain × Resistance, wispy little secondary spreadings are often responsible for the bulk of a person’s perceived suffering!

In Step Three you look at the primary pain itself with an emphasis on detecting impermanence (instantaneous rates of change and underlying forces). Strange though it may seem, impermanence can be detected even in very solid pain that doesn’t seem to change at all.

Step Four culminates in the experience of the body becoming like a pool of water with each local eruption of pain propagating as a conscious ripple of energy release.

Step Five allows for various options, including starting the whole process again. It is often necessary to loop through the process several times in order to begin to experience some “taste of purification.”

A Pain Processing Algorithm

Step I: Note your subjective reactions to the pain.

- A. *Second-by-second*, label your mental and emotional reactions to the pain in terms of one of the following possibilities:
 1. Feel (i.e., anger, fear, sadness, impatience, etc.)
 2. Image (i.e., mental pictures – visual thought)
 3. Talk (i.e., self-talk – mental comments)
 4. Image and Feel (i.e., two modalities at the same time)
 5. Talk and Feel (another case of two modalities at the same time)
 6. Image and Talk (yet another case of two modalities at the same time)
 7. Feel and Image and Talk (all three modalities at the same time)
 8. None (i.e., at this second the pain is causing no thought or feel reaction)
- B. *Second-by-second*, infuse each of these eight possible “Feel-Image-Talk states” with gentle matter-of-factness as soon as it arises.
- C. Notice how the sense of “I” intensifies when the Feel-Image-Talk reactions intensify and how the sense of “I” diminishes when they diminish. In particular, notice that in state number eight (“none”) there is pain but no self. This leads to a deep insight: no self, no problem.

Step II: Look for possible subtle spreading of the pain.

- A. Let your awareness freely float in the relatively pain-free areas of your body. There are two possibilities:
 1. You detect that the primary pain causes secondary sensations in those areas.
 2. There appears to be no such spreading influence.
- B. If you detect spread, stay with those secondary sensations, continuously noting their changing locations and infusing them with equanimity.
- C. If you detect no spread, stay focused on the pain-free areas for a while anyway, enjoying any relief this may bring.

Focusing away from the primary pain will require a lot of effort; however, through this effort you are developing concentration power. Concentration power is the single most generic and useful skill any human being can acquire.

Step III: Focus on the primary pain.

A. Infuse all your attention on the primary pain area(s) ignoring any spreading. There are three possibilities:

1. The pain continuously changes (in shape, intensity, quality, etc.).
2. The pain subtly changes.
3. The pain is rock-solid.

If the pain changes, whether continuously or subtly, focus on that change. If possible, become so enchanted with the change that you begin to perceive the pain as a wavy “doing” rather than a solid “something.”

B. If the pain has rock-solid pressure, inquire as follows: Is the pressure coming from:

1. An outward-directed force?
2. An inward-directed force?
3. Simultaneous outward and inward forces clashing?

If the pressure seems to be outward, yield to that expansion as a fundamental force of nature (*yáng*).

If the pressure seems inward, yield to that contraction as a fundamental force of nature (*yīn*).

If the pressure seems bi-directional, allow yourself to simultaneously explode and implode. (Don't be frightened—you'll get to share the experience of quasars and super novas!)

C. This will develop insight into the flow of spirit as “the activity of expansion and contraction.” That is how my teacher, Jōshū Sasaki Rōshi, describes the “Buddha Nature.” (Similar formulations can be found in Kabbalah, Taoism, Heraclitus, etc.)

Step IV: Note local-global interactions.

A. Whenever you are drawn to primary pain *only*, note “local.” Whenever you are drawn to broad spreading effects *only*, note “global.” When you are drawn to local intensity and subtle spread at the same time, note “local and global.”

B. If possible let your internal clock slow down. Get into a timeless rhythm of “splash—ripple—release” throughout your body.

C. This leads to “the taste of purification” You know, tangibly and profoundly:

Past is being digested
and future will cause less suffering
because of
how I am experiencing this pain
in this moment,
Moment-by-moment

Step V: You now have three choices:

- A. Stay with Step IV.
- B. Redo the whole process from Step I.
- C. Wind up this practice session.