



AJAHN THANASANTI was born in California in 1962. While at university, a class on the Religions of India sparked an interest in intensive meditation retreats. During the first month of the class, she had a vivid image of being a nun. This image remained for the next ten years until she was ordained. Before embarking on a pilgrimage to Asia, she worked as an analytical chemist. A short but very significant time with Dipa Ma, a near-death experience, a meeting with Ajahn Chah, and a visit to Wat Pa Nanachat in Thailand, crystallized her aspiration to be ordained. She requested novice precepts at Amaravati in 1989. More recently, Ajahn Thanasanti has been living in Australia, where she continues to study, practise and teach.

Working With Pain

by Ajahn Thanasanti

Having spent the day speaking with different people and getting a little bit of a sense where people are in their practice, some themes emerge. One of the themes which emerges is pain: how to work with pain, how to be at ease with pain.

A fundamental problem is that we have the expectation that there shouldn't be any pain; and that when there is, something has gone wrong.

Most of our lives we're very good at being able to move and to adjust and to shift around, so that we don't have to feel discomfort or pain. But when we put ourselves in a situation like a retreat, we can find ourselves a little bit stuck. We come into the shrine room and we sit, and the idea is not to move until the bell rings. So there's the pain in the body or the heart; how can we work with that?

There are many skilful means that we can come up with. The skilful means of working with the breath — relaxing in the breath. There's the skilful means of simply knowing where to place one's attention. The experience may be unpleasant, but there are ways of placing the attention that support a gentle embracing of the experience.

Sometimes, one can put one's attention right in the very centre of the pain and discover after a period of time that it's not pain — it's just sensation. The quality of unpleasantness can completely disappear, one's just dealing with the energy. When that happens there's a nice sense of freedom because there is no longer the resistance associated with pain. There is no longer pain. It's just experience.

Sometimes, we can see that the pain isn't actually connected to the body, even though we experience it there. It's actually coming from a place of tightening, of resistance or fear. We can then explore the mind and look and see how the mind is actually manifesting itself into the body and how we're experiencing the mind in the body as pain.

All this we can know, we can discover. In the discovery of opening to something like this, we find a waking up. We wake up and see the relationship between the body and mind, between body and breath. We see the relationship around that which is fearful, or that which we resist.

So a freedom comes with just hanging out with knees that hurt. The freedom is that one doesn't need to be threatened by pain, or to be bullied by it, or to be pushed around by it. It's OK. We can just experience it. It's not a problem. Pain is something we can take as a curse or something we can take as a teacher. It can be an opportunity to open our hearts to something difficult.

When we're meditating we sometimes feel we can

just block out the pain. We can do that, with physical pain and with the pain in our heart. But if we do, meditation can become a way of dissociating from life. So learning how to open up to that which is difficult and that which is frightening and that which is unpleasant is part of the work we're doing. It's not inspiring work. It's not the kind of stuff one gets all jazzed up about but it is very powerful work and very liberating. When we're able to live in the world in a way where we're not frightened and we're not pushed around by fear, and we don't resist pain, we acquire the courage to stand and face whatever it is that we need to face.

That's a wonderful freedom. And there are many times when it might actually make a difference.