Pain Body, Pain Speech, Pain Mind

Body, speech, and mind are considered the three doors to enlightenment not just in Bön but in all the major spiritual traditions of Tibet for they are the only tools we have for progressing on the spiritual path. When we know how to work skillfully with them, our own body, speech, and mind offer a constant opportunity to reflect and connect with the joyful, formless truth that is our authentic nature. The physical, energetic, and mental realms of our experience are always with us. Not only are they within us, we are part of them. They are who we are: there is nothing closer to us than the three doors.

I often say that these three doors can be used not only as an entrance but also as an exit. It is easy to observe how the conditions of body, speech, and mind can cloud the awareness. All it may take is a mild head cold, a wrong word said in haste, or a moment of anger to obscure our clarity of thought and divert us farther away from our heart, from our soul, from our deepest wishes for happiness and satisfaction.

In the absolute sense, what we hope to find through the three doors of body, speech, and mind is self-realization: realization of who we truly are. Who we really are is the unconditional experience of being, in the absence of the grasping mind. Who we are not is what we usually identify with, for example, “I am a mother,” “I am a lawyer.” We identify with our roles, our thoughts, our emotions, or other conditions we are trapped in. When we go beyond that mistaken view of self, we can discover who we truly are: the inseparable state of openness and awareness.

But before we can begin to understand this larger self, we need to explore who we are in the smaller sense. Who is the one here, now, the one who is manifesting in this identity through body, speech, and mind?

Sometimes I may have a very positive sense of identity, other times I may view myself as someone quite terrible. Somebody is here, but who is it? Am I the one who appears terrible, or am I the one who perceives the terrible identity? When I speak, am I the words I say, or am I the one who intends to speak? If I feel sick, am I the body that is sick, or am I the one who is aware of the sick body? Who am I?

We can ask ourselves questions like these in order to understand the sense of self we may have at any given moment. Most of the time our view of ourselves causes us pain. We feel the pain of needing and desiring what we don’t have, the pain of fear or anxiety over losing what we do have, the pain of being separated from our loved ones, the pain of encountering our enemies.

The main causes of this pain and suffering are the conceptual mind, karmic conditions, and negative emotions. The teachings speak of an enlightened sense of body, speech, and mind, but for now, in the negative sense we can be said to have a conceptual-karmic-emotional pain body, conceptual-karmic-emotional pain speech, and a conceptual-karmic-emotional pain mind. I refer to these three more simply as “pain body,” “pain speech,” and “pain mind.”
Whether physically, energetically, or psychologically, we experience ourselves mainly through our pain. It is hard to recognize rigpa, the enlightened nature that is our self, the nature that we share with the deities. The small self is more familiar to us. The small self is the one through which we express our pain, and because it is so familiar, it becomes an important door through which we may discover our bigger self—and through this discovery, release our pain.

**Pain Body**

Some years ago on a commuter plane from Charlotte to Charlottesville I found myself sitting near a young couple with their toddler, and this young couple presented some vivid examples of pain body and pain speech. The young woman was very angry and disappointed with her partner because he did not acknowledge or respond to her, and she expressed this to him verbally through her pain speech in a high, emotional tone almost nonstop during the entire flight. The young man was probably as stressed out as she was, but instead of reacting with pain speech, he reacted with pain body: he held all of his stress inwardly and refused to respond, either in word or gesture. At one point he closed both his ears with his fingers—and when he did so, she finally stopped talking. But as soon as he released his ears, she started up again. Her speech was explosive and scattered; his body was closed and rigid. They were both experiencing similar pain, but as far as their awareness was concerned, both seemed totally disconnected from their true thoughts and feelings.

Some people are characterized more by pain body, others by pain speech, and still others by pain mind. The pain body is not just about the physical body. It can also be seen as the foundation, or ground, of our smaller unenlightened self, like a sense of identity. Think of someone who has been through many severe hardships in life but who has never managed to process the accompanying psychological, karmic, and emotional pain.

It is so important for the person characterized by the pain body to recognize the body through which the pain is flowing. Until one can discover the bounded, stuck self, there is no way to realize the deep, vast stillness that is free from pain: the aspect of oneself that is unconditioned and unbounded.

**Pain Speech**

To understand pain speech, think of someone you know who seems always to be talking and talking but never has a point to make. This person does not realize that the pain itself is the one who is talking, and the pain becomes externalized in a scattered or confused way. When you have an internal dialogue constantly running through your mind, this is another form of pain speech: the words go on and on, yet they never get you anywhere.

Anyone characterized by pain speech can benefit from understanding that all these pain-based words are fruitless; for if you are not hearing your own words, why would you expect another to hear them? The first seed of doubt can help recognition to unfold: maybe what you are really trying to communicate is quite different from what you are expressing. With all your verbalizing, for example, you might ultimately be saying that
you feel hurt, unloved, and uncomfortable in yourself.

When you start to connect more with the deeper truth at the source of pain speech, you can find the peaceful, pain-free place that is wordless, soundless, and where there is no expectation that someone must hear you. But first you must realize that your speech is an expression of pain—and the voice itself is what obscures the silence.

**Pain Mind**
The person dominated by pain mind has too many scattered thoughts, too many emotions, too many mental images. Each time the mind moves to yet another emotion, thought, or image, that’s what the mind becomes. When it doesn’t move—when it gets stuck in one place—it becomes dense and dark, sometimes depressed.

The pain mind is convinced it is achieving some purpose by all its activity and imagery. But if you look closer you can realize that all of these thoughts and emotions are mainly an expression of pain. This identification with thoughts is the small self, and in order to discover the big self you have to discover the small self. The pain itself becomes an entryway to self-discovery. The moment you catch yourself in a repetitive thought—for example, thinking over and over, “I hate the world”—in that moment you can realize “This is not me.” In this moment of awareness, the pain begins to release, and something else is allowed to unfold. It is all a question of recognizing that moment.

The racing thoughts and emotions of pain mind—the infinite imaginings of the ego—have at their source the deep identification with pain known as pain body. Pain speech, too, arises from the pain body’s mistaken sense of core identity. Thus, it is natural for a person to exhibit overlapping characteristics of pain body, pain speech, and pain mind—such as a tight jaw accompanied by churning thoughts. Ultimately, once we release ourselves from the pain body, then pain speech and pain mind will no longer be an issue. But sometimes the pain body is not clearly challenging us, whereas pain speech may be quite actively and obviously destroying our relationships, or pain mind may be immediately miring us in destructive thoughts or emotions and leading us to destructive actions. Our challenge is to identify the most advantageous place to begin the process of self-transformation.

Whether it is pain body, pain speech, or pain mind, moving past the small self is a matter of having some clue as to why you are doing, talking, or thinking as you are: deep inside you need a connection to your big self. Deep inside is your source of joy, but you go about searching for that joy in the wrong places and in the wrong activities of body, speech, and mind.

**Effortless Result**

Recently, one of my students in an online workshop wrote to me of a stressful encounter and of how it reminded her to connect to her deeper nature through her pain. She was meeting with the number-one-most-difficult person in her life to converse about her second-most-difficult person; but instead of reacting habitually, she instantly remembered
her meditation practice and brought a sense of open awareness to the situation.

“For the first time ever, I just felt plenty of space and calmness surrounding every moment. And out of this space and calmness arose a tremendous warmth,” she explained. She added that this simple moment of awareness helped her to gain confidence in her ability to dissolve the pain body and pain mind and access her deeper nature, while cultivating more compassion for others.

This example has an uplifting message for us: no matter how stuck we feel in our pain—regardless of our mental condition, no matter how confused we are or how strong our pride, ego, or fear—our more positive qualities are always accessible to us. The door to joy and peace of mind is always there.

-----

This article is for personal use in connection with GlideWing Production’s online workshop with Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche. Please do not distribute or otherwise share it with others. © 2011 Tenzin Wangyal. Adapted from the introduction to Tibetan Yogas of Body, Speech and Mind, by Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche. Snow Lion Publications, October 2011.