Pleasure & Pain

July, 2002

Perhaps the hardest part about the practice is that it’s asking us to change our attitude towards pleasure and pain. Ordinarily, when pleasure comes, we like to wallow in it. When pain comes, we like to push it away. We see the pleasure as an end in and of itself. And the pain simply as something that gets in the way. Whereas in the practice, we’re taught to look at them as tools. Both of them have their uses. Pleasure has its uses. Pain has its uses. And so we have to overcome a lot of ingrained habits in order to get the best use out of the pain, to get the best use out of the pleasure. Pleasure, for instance, when it comes in the meditation, it’s important not to just wallow in it. We work so hard to get the mind to settle down. And then once it’s settled down, what happens? We fall asleep. The pleasure gets really nice and we just kind of settle in like it’s a big pillow. We don’t want to think about anything more. We don’t want to do anything more. We just sort of wallow there in the pleasure and hope that it lasts a long time. But instead, the Buddha says, you have to look at the pleasure as a tool. After all, it’s one of the factors of the path. Right there in right concentration, first jhana, second jhana, a sense of pleasure. In the first jhana, it’s the pleasure of withdrawal or seclusion, when the mind pulls away from most of its distractions, pulls away from the things that disturb it. Simply that lack of disturbance gives the mind a sense of pleasure already. In the second jhana, it’s the pleasure that comes from oneness, from a sense of unification in the mind. But in both cases, the Buddha doesn’t say that it’s the end of the path. It’s one of the factors of the path. You use this pleasure to get the mind in the right position to gain insight. In other words, once there’s a sense of pleasure, it’s a lot easier to stay in the present moment. It’s nice being here. But you don’t want to just hang out. There’s work to be done in the present moment. You’ve got to understand what is the mind doing to create suffering for itself. Because even with the pleasure of concentration, there’s always the potential for suffering to come up at any time. The cause is there, hiding. And to understand them, we have to look at a part of the mind where we don’t like to look, which is right there at the pain. Because even in the states of concentration, there’s always an element of stress, a very subtle kind of pain, a subtle kind of suffering. So subtle that pain and suffering really aren’t the words to use. It’s more like just simple stress there in the mind. So we use the pleasure as a basis, as a foundation, so we can look at the pain without feeling threatened by it. And again, you find that there’s a lot of resistance in the mind. You’re just sitting with the pain to study it. The immediate reaction is make it go away, make it go away. If we can’t make it go away, we’re going to go away, run off someplace else. Sometimes the mind threatens, “If you don’t push the pain away, if you don’t run away, I’m going to create all kinds of physical havoc.” Sometimes there’s a sense of nausea. Sometimes there’s a sense of having to get up and run away. You have to learn how to stare it down, not give in to those sensations. Because after a while, they do pass. In other words, you start peeling away a lot of the layers of defense that the mind has built up around the pain. Sometimes those layers are more painful, more stressful, than the actual pain itself. So use the pain as an object of contemplation to see what else comes up in the mind. This is what we’re talking about this afternoon. We said there are good things and bad things that will come up surrounding the pain. The bad things are all the defilements that we’ve woven around the pain. The good things are the things that happen when you unravel those defilements. Sometimes you gain insight. Sometimes the pain actually goes away and you find that behind the pain there’s something that’s really stable and solid, an even greater sense of spaciousness in the mind. But in order to see these things, we have to be willing to look at the pain and take it as an object for study. After all, the Buddha said it is a noble truth. “Something to be comprehended.” When you comprehend the pain, he says, you comprehend all four noble truths. They all get brought to completion. All the duties involved with the noble truths get brought to completion. John Swart was talking one time about all the insights he gained one time when he had a bad case of malaria. He did take the medicine to cure the malaria, but he found that a lot of times the medicine didn’t help with the pain. So he started contemplating the pain. He learned an awful lot about the mind. A lot of things opened up in the mind. He thanked the malaria to this day. Whatever mosquito it was, it gave him the malaria. It gave him something much more valuable than simple recovery from the disease. It opened up a lot of really interesting and really valuable things within the mind. So those are the results of changing your attitude towards pleasure and pain, looking at them not as ends in and of themselves. They’re not the end of the road. They form the road, the things to use. Look at them as part of a causal process. What happens when you develop pleasure in the mind through the concentration and then learn how to use it? What happens when pain comes up in the mind? It’s inevitably going to do that. Either the gross pain of when you sit in long periods of time in meditation and it hurts here and hurts there, or the subtle stress that comes even with very refined states of concentration. You can analyze these things. You can contemplate them. And as you unravel them, you find all kinds of interesting things come up in the mind. So those are the rewards of changing your attitudes towards pleasure and pain. It’s something a lot greater than simply a nice feeling of pleasure and a state of mind that finds that even when pain does come, there’s no real suffering. Someone once said, “Pain may be inevitable.” As we chant every day, aging, illness, and death are inevitable, but the suffering around them is not. If you learn how to train the mind to be skillful, it doesn’t have to suffer from these things. That’s the skill we’re working on.

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