Pleasure & Pain

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The best way to get engaged in the present moment is to make it interesting. In other words, if you feel you’re here simply because you’ve been straightjacketed into the present, you’re not going to stay very long. After the straightjacket is self-imposed and you know how to put it on, you know how to find yourself taking it off very quickly and running off someplace else. But if you regard the present moment as an interesting place to explore, you’ll find it a lot easier to stay here. This is why we work with the breath, because the breath energy in the body is a very complex phenomenon. In a meditation retreat, they reported that they found the breath too complex to stay with. It’s the most complex thing that happens in the body. The author of the article said that this person is eminently muggable. You missed the point entirely, because the way you breathe really is complex. There’s a lot going on here, not just the air coming in and out the nostrils. There’s the expansion of the lungs. There’s the way the different muscles and nerves in your body participate to bring the air in. There’s the general flow of energy, which exists on many levels in the body. There’s the question of how the breath interacts with pains in the body, how the breath is related to a sense of pleasure in the body. There’s lots to explore here. Particularly with the issues of pleasure and pain. Try to work with the breath in such a way that it makes it feel good to be here. And when it feels good, can you make it feel better? Can you make it feel really absorbing throughout the whole body? Can you think of every cell being bathed in the breath and developing a sense of ease? Play over the pain. Play around with the breath. I think I’ve mentioned many times that John Fung’s favorite instruction in meditation is to play with the meditation. See what works. See when you’re playing too much. See when you’re not playing enough. Have a sense of exploring. As you explore the breath, you’re going to start running into issues about the mind as well. You run into issues of all the aggregates, all the khandhas. For example, with pleasure. When you spread the breath, are you actually spreading breath energy or are you spreading the sense of pleasure? John Lee gives instructions to do both, but it’s interesting to note that they’re two separate things. What is your experience of the breath? What is your experience of the pleasure that goes along with the breath? Can you see the difference? Or, on the other side, what about your experience of pain? How does that relate to the breath? Can you see the distinction between the two? Your basic experience of the breath, which is your experience of the body, and the feelings of pain that come on top of it? We have a tendency to glom all these things together. The breath and the pleasure seem to be the same thing. When they’re going well, the breath and the pain and the body and the pain seem to be the same thing when they’re not going well. But the Buddha has us analyze them out in terms of the aggregates as a way of getting a handle on them, so they’re not one big mess. You actually see them as separate experiences, separate layers of experience. Sometimes you see this clearly when you’re working with a pleasure. Sometimes you see this clearly when you’re working with a pain. It really varies from person to person, or from meditation session to meditation session, and the same person. But either way, you find that simply getting the mind to settle down requires some insight into these issues already as a way of creating a more comfortable place to stay. And then as the mind begins to settle down, you can turn and look at them again and see them with more precision, take them apart more precisely. A lot of times this has to do with the pain. When there’s a pain in the body, you want to work with it in such a way to understand it so that it’s not so overwhelming. So that you can sit with it and yet not be pained by it. That idea is attractive. It gives us incentive to take it apart, to see how much of the pain is the actual feeling of pain, and how much of it is the label that we put on it, and how much of it is the series of stories we build around it, and what extent our sensation of pain is actually a sensation of the body, which is neither painful nor pleasant. Can you distinguish the feeling of pain from those four elements? There are different levels of sensation. And when you can, you find that the pain is much less of a massive thing, much less imposing than it would be otherwise. You take it apart and you realize only part of it is actually the feeling of pain. There is a perception of pain, which will add more pain on top of it. And then there are the stories you build around it, either afraid of it or whatever the narrative may be. And as you learn how to take these apart, the pain seems less massive, less overwhelming, something more manageable. It’s like a mountain that you break down into gravel. Once it’s into gravel, you can cart it away. If you tried to cart it away when it was still a whole mountain, you’d never get anywhere at all. But as you break it down into its component parts, you find it’s a lot more manageable. The funny thing is that once you’ve done this with pain, then you turn around and you see that you start seeing the same things about pleasure, the sense of pleasure we have. Don’t take the sense of pleasure and the meditation apart quite yet, but think about other pleasures, sensual pleasures, in terms of things you see, things you listen to, smell, taste, touch. Exactly how much of that is the actual feeling of pleasure, and how much of it is other things, the perception, the thought? The thought constructs that go behind it, the simple sensation of having a body. Pleasure seems such a big thing because we build it up. Again, like we build up pain, we build it out of these components. And when you take it apart, though, you find that the actual feeling of pleasure is much more ephemeral than you might like to think. You’ve clumped it together with your sensation of the body. You’ve clumped it together with the perception, all the stories, all the ad copy that you’ve written around it. When you start taking it apart, you realize there’s not that much there. The actual sensation of pleasure, the actual feeling of pleasure, is a lot more fleeting than we like to think. In fact, you see that a lot of the activity that goes around advertising the pleasure of yourself, trying to make it seem like a really big deal when it comes, there’s a lot of stress that goes into making it seem so impressive. You’ve got to keep that perception going. You’ve got to keep that ad copy, the thought formations, going. You have to keep those going as well. You have to ignore the cracks where the different components show that there actually are something separate. When you begin to see this and the pleasure becomes a lot less impressive, then you think about how much of your life has been spent chasing after pleasure. Then you realize how little of it actually is there. The Buddha gave the image of a drop of honey on a blade of a knife. There is a little bit of pleasure there, but it’s based on a lot of potential pain. Seeing this is what helps get you there. It makes you more and more disillusioned, more disenchanted with the whole process. John Sawat once said that pleasure is the actual cause of suffering. For people who were sticklers for the texts, they would say, “Oh, that’s wrong. The Buddha never said that.” But actually, when you look into what we identify as pleasure, you find all the elements. The craving is right in there. It’s involved in the way we perceive the pleasure. It’s involved in the way we build thought constructs. It’s involved in the way we build narratives around the pleasure. It’s one of the components that keeps all this going. So if you look into pleasure, you will find the cause of suffering, the craving that keeps thirsting after these things and is never really satisfied. There’s that little tiny drop of honey, and it’s gone. So you look for another one. And then it’s gone. To make it seem worthwhile, you’ve got to connect things and put them all together and make them really big and impressive. Of course, what happens is when you’ve learned to delude yourself about pleasure like this, and when pain comes, then it gets treated the same way. It becomes big and impressive as well, overwhelming as well. So what we’re working on as we practice here is getting the mind in a really still, solid place so it can see all these things happening and see them for what they actually are. In other words, we either learn how to take the pleasure apart or we learn how to take the pain apart. Usually it’s working with the pain that’s the first object, because we feel so motivated to make it seem less imposing. But then when you start seeing for yourself the way the mind builds the pain into a big issue and learn how to minimize the pain, then you can turn around. You can’t help but see that the mind does the same thing with pleasure. And if we’re honest with ourselves, we begin to see how much we’ve been deluding ourselves, how much suffering we’ve been creating for ourselves by chasing after that very ephemeral taste of pleasure. And once we see that, this is where the disenchantment begins to come in. This is important. Nibbidha. Without that sense of disenchantment, we keep thinking, “Well, maybe I’ll find it here. Maybe I’ll find it there.” The happiness that we’re hoping for, the gratification that we’re hoping for in terms of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, or ideas. When you take the word nibbidha apart, you realize that you’re not going to find it there. You stop pinning your hopes on those things. This is what inclines the mind inwardly, first to be more devoted to the practice of concentration, and then you start taking the pleasure of the concentration apart. That’s when you realize the only thing left would be the deathless. It’s interesting that the Buddha says nirvana is pleasure. It’s the ultimate pleasure, but it’s not a feeling of pleasure. In order to find out what he means by that, you have to get there yourself. But it’s the one pleasure that doesn’t let you down. So whether you’re dealing with issues of feeling in terms of pain or feeling in terms of the pleasure, the important thing is that you learn to look back on the other side as well. If you can learn how to break down your attachment to pleasure, you’ll find that you’ll also be breaking down your suffering from pain. When you break down suffering from pain, you also break down the illusions you build up around the pleasure. They’re basically the same series of processes, the mental dialogue that advertises the pleasure and writes ad copy for it all the time. It’s the same one that builds pain into a big problem. When you start seeing through it in one context, you’ll begin to be able to see through it in the other one as well. This is what liberates the mind. So it’s not always thirsting after these things, not always craving these things. Once you get dispassionate towards the craving, that’s when the end of suffering begins to open up.

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