Pleasure & Pain

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Our lives, for the most part, revolve around pleasure and pain, trying to run away from and avoid pain, and trying to enjoy the pleasure as much as possible. The texts say that if you ever develop the ability to remember your previous life, you will remember them. It’s one of the big issues you’re going to remember. You remember your name, and you remember your food, and then you remember your experience of pleasure and pain—the big pleasures, the big pains, mental and physical. That’s generally the story of your life. We tend to think of pleasure as an end in and of itself, and pain as an evil in and of itself. The main use for pain is to warn us away from dangerous things. But if you look at the actual pains we experience in life, we have a lot of pains that don’t seem to have any relationship to dangerous things at all. We have more than our share of pain. There’s a great scene in Catch 22 where Yoserian is talking about pain. He’s talking to a prostitute and discussing that if God really loved the world, he wouldn’t have invented pain. He would have found other ways of warning us off of harmful activities, placing little lights in our foreheads—a green light for good things and a red light for bad things. No merciful God could create pain. Pain is the big issue. If you try to think that there is a creator out there, someone who designed the world with a purpose of any kind at all, why is there pain? Fortunately, the Buddha never got involved in that issue. He was more interested in what you can learn from pain, what you can learn from pleasure. In other words, instead of seeing pleasure as an end in and of itself, or sensual pleasure as an end in and of itself, he looked at pleasure to see what could be learned from it, looked at pain to see what could be learned from it. And that totally changed his relationship to pleasure and pain. Look at the Four Noble Truths. What’s the duty with regard to the First Noble Truth of stress and pain? Our duty is to comprehend it, to understand it, which is very different from the way we normally react to pain. When pain arises in the body, we do our best to push it away or to try to will it away. All we can think of is how to get rid of it. The Buddha said what you’ve got to do is learn how to comprehend it. If you’re really suffering from it, it’s hard to get in the position where you can be cool and collected enough to comprehend pain, which is why pleasure has its role in the path. That’s a much sensual pleasure, the pleasure of a concentrated mind. As the Buddha once said, “Right concentration is the heart of the path.” One of the main factors of right concentration is pleasure. Another one is rapture. The reason rapture is so important in the path is that it puts you in a place where you can actually look at pain without feeling threatened by it. The Buddha also observed that we tend to be so attached to sensual pleasure because we can’t think of any other escape from pain. This is what right concentration does. It gives us another escape from pain. So we’re not so concerned about indulging in pleasure—sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations, pleasant ideas. We give rise to an inner desire for pleasure. Inner sense of pleasure as we work with the breath. This is why we emphasize this point so much over and over again. You’ve got to get the breath so that it’s comfortable. Notice what way of breathing can maintain comfortable sensations in the body. Then learn how to maintain those sensations without getting drowsy or without blurring out. What so often happens is that once we get a little pleasure going in the body, you just jump into the pleasure and you forget the breath. So it’s important that once you find that there are pleasant sensations, how to breathe in such a way that you’re not harming them, not putting pressure on them or destroying them, allowing them to stay that way. You’re keeping tabs on the pleasure, but your main focus should be on the cause, which is the way you breathe. If there happens to be a pain in any part of the body, focus on the areas that are pleasant or, at the very least, neutral. Allow them to stay pleasant. Allow them to stay neutral. Without pulling the breath in too long, without pushing it out too long, find just the right balance. In fact, if you do it right, there’s that kind of sensation that comes when you’re drowning—a sense of fullness. But you’re not drowning. It’s simply learning to be a little bit more sensitive about how you breathe and then learning how to allow that sense of fullness to expand and flow through the blood vessels, flow through the nerves, to wherever it can go. If you force it or push it, you destroy it. It’s more a matter of allowing it to spread. Then when you’ve allowed it to spread as much as you can, you find if there are still pains in the body, you’re in a much better position to understand them. One of the basic principles of discernment is that you’re going to need a very steady focus in order to understand anything. When you’re trying to understand it, you can’t make your agenda be that you want to make it go away. You want to watch it. You find sometimes that your level of focus is not steady enough. When that happens, you just start getting entangled in the pain again. If that happens, it’s not time yet to focus on the pain. It’s time to focus back again on the breath, on that sense of comfort, wherever it is. In other words, you have to know how to retreat before you start attacking. You have to know where your position of safety is before you start going into dangerous territory. And you have to be able to drop the dangerous territory when you really realize that it’s more than you can handle at this particular time. This is one of the reasons why learning how to let go of distractions is such an important part of learning meditation. Being able to choose your focus instead of simply allowing whatever comes in with the strongest force to grab your attention. Because there’ll be times when the pain is intense and you’re not ready to deal with it yet. What are you going to do then? If you can be very clear, mindful, and alert about where you’re focused and be very consistent in maintaining your focus no matter what, then you’re in a position to withstand the pain, to gather your forces for the next attack. And what is the attack? You want to untangle all the many layers of pain, because it’s not just a physical sensation. There are also perceptions, and there’s your awareness. The perceptions are the labels you put on things. And there’s your basic consciousness, and it’s learning how to untangle these things. The actual physical sensation of the pain, the labels you place on it, and the awareness which is in the midst of these things. All these things get glued together in your ordinary consciousness. What you want to do is be able to untangle the different layers of pain. Threads of sensations in the body, feelings of pleasure and pain, and perceptions. In other words, untangle all the five khandhas that get tangled up in a sensation of pain. There are different tricks for doing that. You might want to ask yourself, “How is the pain constant? Is there any inconstant sensation in the pain? Is the pain infiltrated by other sensations?” Because so much of the pain is taking different scattered sensations, say, in your knee or in your leg or wherever, and connecting the dots and ignoring anything else that’s in there. So you have to ask yourself, “Is there another level or another type of sensation there in the midst of the pain? Can you see it? Can you focus on it?” When you do this, you begin to see how much your way of perceiving things glues things together, creates sensations that otherwise wouldn’t have to be there. In other words, how much your own ignorance adds to the pain. You start untangling all the different layers of pain. All the various threads of pain, perception, awareness, and see them as separate things. Sometimes what this does is actually makes the pain go away. There’s this weird sensation of it getting sucked right into your heart and disappearing. Other times, the pain stays there, but you’re focused on a different level of sensation or a different series of threads going through the pain. So you’re not overwhelmed by it. You’re not harmed by it. This is why this is called discernment. You begin to see the differences between the different aggregates that make up your larger sense of pain, larger sense of suffering. When you take things apart this way, you begin to see that they’re much less imposing. They create much less of a weight on the heart. When pain becomes much less of an issue, it’s very liberating for the mind, because that’s the big thing we’re afraid of. You realize that instead of having to run away, you just simply understand it in a new way and it loses its power. As you begin to take apart all these various strands of fabrication in the mind, you’re going to run across something that’s unfabricated, the part where the mind has no intentions at all to weave things together. When that happens, it’s very dramatic. Things open up in a totally new way. That’s one of the main benefits that comes from learning how to approach pleasure and pain in a very different way from what you normally do. Instead of seeing pleasure as an end in and of itself and pain as an evil in and of itself, you see that they have their uses. You see what kinds of pleasures are really worth avoiding, because they get in the way of the pleasure that comes from concentration. Then you learn to maximize that pleasure from concentration so you can understand pain. You see these things as part of a causal network. You develop the pleasure of concentration. You develop the pleasure of concentration so you can understand the fabrication that goes into pain. That way you learn how to realize the cessation of pain, the cessation of suffering. In other words, you’re doing all the duties, all the tasks, that the Buddha places in association with the Four Noble Truths. It’s all right here in how you react to pleasure and pain, those habits that you picked up even before you knew language at all. It’s in undoing those habits that you learn a lot of valuable lessons, and you can actually bring the mind to freedom. This is the actual Dharma. You’re dealing with very everyday, normal things. It’s not in exalted concepts. It’s one of the reasons why, when the Buddha talked about false Dharma, he used the word sattvama patiruppa, which means “sophisticated Dharma.” It’s very easy for us to get dazzled by intellectual games and fancy concepts. But the real work of the Dharma is dealing with everyday, ordinary stuff, pleasure and pain, and how you react to them. So don’t get distracted by fancy concepts. Look at what you’re doing to pleasure. Look at what you’re doing to pain. And everything you need to know will get untangled right there.

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