Be an Adult around Pleasure & Pain

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There are four kinds of practice. Fast and pleasant. Slow and pleasant. Fast and painful. Slow and painful. All of them get to the same goal. Of course, if we could choose, we’d all want to go for the fast and pleasant. But a lot of this has to do with the state of our minds. Some people are faster than others, others are slower. Some people need a little bit more pain in their practice than others. Although it’s interesting when the Buddha talks about the pain here, it’s not so much physical pain as it is the pain of having to contemplate the body, thirty-two parts of the body. He says that’s for people who have a strong tendency towards passion, or a strong tendency towards anger, or a strong tendency towards delusion. You have to keep reminding yourself that you’ve got this body, and it’s a nest of diseases. We like to think about the pleasures that can come from the body in satisfying its desire for physical pleasure. Although, of course, the body doesn’t desire anything. It’s the mind that desires them. But our desire for physical pleasures has to go through this body, which brings a lot of problems with it. So if you find yourself getting complacent in the practice or don’t seem to have much of a focus, this is a good place to go. This body you’re born with, what have you got? As John Lee says, what do you have in this bag of treasures? Well, you open it up and, oh my gosh, it’s a heart and lungs and intestines and a liver. The contents of the intestines, the contents of the stomach, all the way down. It’s one of those bags that, if you actually got a bag like that and looked inside, you want to close up the bag as quickly as possible. Yet this is what we’ve got. So look at yourself. If your practice is getting off course, you have to force the mind. The mind doesn’t naturally take to this right at first. After a while, it can get easier. But you’ve got to force the mind to keep coming back. This is what you’ve got here. All the things you entertain in the world are based on this, which means that everything’s going to fall apart at some point. But this is what you’ve got to practice with. So what do you want to do with it? There’s another teaching on pain and pleasure. The Buddha says there are two kinds of pain, the kind of pain that’s worth pursuing and the kind of pain that’s not. The same with pleasure. There are pleasures that are worth pursuing and pleasures that are not, based on what happens to the mind as you pursue those pains and pleasures. There are certain pains that are actually helpful, like the pains you put up with when you sit and meditate. You learn a lot from them. If you have the right attitude, of course. Then there are other pains that come from unskillful behavior, unskillful thoughts, words, and deeds. They don’t serve much purpose unless you can use them to remind yourself. This is not to say that you should go out and do some unskillful things to get those pains. But if you find you’ve got them, examine them as noble truths. Use them as an incentive to be more heedful. We meditated here at the monastery, and it’s a very comfortable place. And John Lee says it’s very easy to start taking the comfort for granted. So it’s good to go out and pulverize that pleasure, pulverize the comfort. Push yourself harder than you ordinarily might want to, to remind yourself of what you’ve got here. The balance of health is so easily knocked off balance. The balance of comfort is easily knocked off. Does your mind get knocked off balance when the body’s out of balance? If so, you’ve got a very dangerous situation, a mind that you can’t trust, a mind that needs things to be this way and that way, and loses its virtue, loses its goodness, when things are not this way or that way. So there are some pains that are very useful. If you can sit through pain, you can at the very least develop some equanimity, some patience, some endurance. But if it were just the endurance, as some of the forested giants would say, that’s the endurance of a water buffalo who doesn’t know any better, you want to take it as an opportunity to gain some discernment, to see how you’re messing with the pain, how you’re making it worse—the way you think about it, the way you look at it, the way you conceive it, perceive it, how you relate to it—to call these things into question. That kind of pain is very useful because you start understanding the mind. As I said before, it’s like a waterhole on the savanna. If you want to see the animals in the savanna, you don’t go running around with your binoculars all over the savanna. You just stay at the waterhole. And in the course of the day or the night, the animals are going to have to come. And pain is like that. If you want to know your mind, this is where you see it. All of its complaints, all of its excuses, all of its narratives will come thronging around the pain. That’s a pain you can use, you can get some benefit from. And pleasures you can get benefits from, too. The path isn’t always entirely painful. Even Ajahn Maha Bua, whose path was a very painful one, talks about developing the pleasure of the mind with concentration and being very careful to maintain it. This is your strength. This is what you have to fall back on. And it’s a good strength to have. Because if you can generate this sense of well-being inside, it makes it that much easier to deal with the pains outside. As the Buddha said, we encounter pain and we shoot ourselves with arrows around it. The pain itself is the first arrow, but all our thoughts and everything are the second arrows. And one of those arrows is that we want to keep struggling for sensual pleasure. Why is that? Because we don’t know of any other alternative to pain. This is why we can’t be trusted. But if we have that other alternative, the alternative that comes from the pleasure of getting the mind to settle down, be at ease, feel at home here in the present moment, then you’ve got the alternative. It may not be the final alternative, but it’s a good refuge on the way. It’s one of the most important lessons we can learn as we meditate. It’s learning how to sort these things out. What kind of pain is worth pursuing? What kind of pain is not? What kind of pleasure is worth pursuing? What kind is not? What kind of equanimity is worth pursuing? What kind is not? Equanimity isn’t always a good thing. It lulls you to sleep and gets you very lazy and complacent and unfeeling. That’s not what you want. There are times when you need equanimity in order to deal with difficult situations, but that’s not the whole story. There are times when you have to be more active in the meditation, have a sense of dissatisfaction with where you are and then, rather than just throwing away the meditation out of dissatisfaction, say, “The answer’s got to lie here in making the meditation better. What’s lacking?” So all of these feelings have their uses, but they also have their dangers. There are different kinds of pain, different kinds of pleasure, different kinds of equanimity. And you want to learn how to sort them out. All too often, we go running for the pleasure or we go running for the equanimity, trying to gobble them down because we’re hungry. But as meditators, you want to learn how to feed on the stillness of your mind so you’re not so hungry. And so you can be more discriminating to see which kinds of pains, pleasures, and feelings of equanimity are worth pursuing. It’s part of being an adult. You look around the world, there are very few adults out there. It’s like little kids. They’re just running for whatever’s pleasant. It’s like little kids going for candy bars. They don’t care the least bit whether the candy bars are going to rot their teeth or harm their health. They just like the sweet. But the adults are the ones who can see, “Oh, this is going to be bad for me.” And they can learn to say no, to the point where they would never want to have any of that garbage candy ever again. I think back to when I was a little kid, I used to waste my allowance, hostess cupcakes, Twinkies, three musketeers. All of us, we think back on the things that we liked as children and think it’s pretty amazing. And yet that’s the way we are with our pleasures and pains and equanimity. We run toward the pleasures. We try to push the pains away. We try to push them away, physical and mental, without really having the good sense to sit down and sort them out. Which pleasures are really going to be useful? Which ones are not? Learn to be an adult in your feeding. Then your pleasures and pains and feelings of equanimity will all serve a purpose. One of the things that struck me as my father was approaching death, he had a long period of Parkinson’s dementia. And there were days when he was kind of out of it, but very agitated and in a fair amount of pain. He had really bad, bad sores. One day, as I was helping with the bed sores, I kept thinking, “Boy, this pain is a total waste. It’s just a lot of pain, a lot of pain, a lot of pain, and nothing good is coming out of it.” And for a lot of people, that’s what faces them as life ends. It’s just a lot of heavy and unbeneficial pain. So while you’ve got the chance, learn how to develop some beneficial pain, some beneficial pleasures, so the mind will be in a safe place where ultimately it’s not damaged by any of these things at all.

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